Tradition, Innovation, and Hawai’ian Cultural Identity in Lau Hala Papale (Hats)

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Discovery Questions

• How is the weaving and wearing of lau hala papale (hats) connected to Hawai’ian history, identity, natural resources, and culture?

• What research, observation, and analysis tools are needed to study this art?

• How can an exploration of this art build student awareness of other cultures and place-based art forms?

LESSON PLAN

Materials

• Images

• “About the Images” Information Sheet for the teacher

• “Background of Lau Hala Weaving” Information Sheet for the teacher

Preparation

• Study the images and download to project for students.

• Read “About the Images” and “Background of Lau Hala Weaving.”

• Review the resources and activities and adapt for your class.

http://locallearningnetwork.org/guest-artist/dress-to-express-museum-modules
Activities

Part 1

1. Share the images with your class. Summarize the Pele story found in Figure 1.
2. Ask students to make observations (What do you see?) and share them with the rest of the class.
3. Ask students to analyze.
   • What might these observations tell us about the people in the picture?
   • What might these observations tell us about the places these pictures were taken?
   • What might the clothing help us learn about the cultural identity of the individuals in the photos?
   • What might the clothing and hats tell us about the importance of fibers in the lives of those who wear them?
   • What might these images tell us about the techniques and processes used to create hats?
   • What might these images and stories tell us about how different cultures use different ways of learning and teaching?
   • What might these images and stories tell us about the relationship of natural resources to art forms?
4. As students analyze the images as a class, teacher should share information about the image to affirm, encourage, and supportively redirect student analyses.

Part 2

5. Assign students to find and bring to class some clothing item that is handmade.
6. In a class discussion ask students to share just the physical attributes of their examples. What can they tell about the object just from looking at it?
7. Next have the class suggest questions that need to be investigated to really know how the object was made, who made it, where the materials came from, when and where it was made, and the meaning the object has for the owner. What research resources and techniques might they use to answer those questions?
8. After students research their clothing items through the Internet and library, they can expand their knowledge by interviewing people about their items or similar items. They may present their findings in a classroom museum exhibit or multimedia presentation.
Background of *Lau Hala Weaving*” Information Sheet

*We cannot weave without* lau nui [*coconut palm leaves*] or lau hala [*pandanus leaves*] or makaloa [*sedge*], or the aerial roots of the “ie ‘ie [*freycinetia*]. We cannot practice our art without those plants. We are related to these plants. Our legends tell us that when certain of our plants disappear, we too, will disappear.*¹ – Sabra Kauka, 2005

After learning how to gather, clean, and prepare hala, a haumana (student) learns to make a piko, which in *ulana* (woven item) means the center of the woven object but in Hawai‘ian also means the beginning or the place from which life begins.²

*Always remember your hat or whatever you weave is a reflection of yourself.*³ – Michael Nāho‘op‘ī‘ī, 2005

Hula, poi, Aloha shirts, the Hawai‘ian Shaka, quilts, mu‘umu‘u, slack key guitar and ‘ukulele music, surfboards, and li‘au are well known around the world as contemporary symbols of Hawai‘i’s local culture. *Lau hala* weaving is less known outside Hawai‘i but among many Native Hawaiians, *lau hala* is an important symbol of Hawaiian identity and culture. If you visit Hawa‘i, you will see *lau hala* weaving everywhere – from the weaving designs in the tattoos sported by many to numerous tourist items that one can bring back home. If you attend an event that is primarily for Hawai‘ians, chances are that you will see individuals wearing *lau hala* hats (*papale*).

In Hawai‘i the *hala* tree, *Pandanus tectorius*, also known as Screwpine, once formed extensive coastal forests. Land with *hala* became treasured property of families.⁴ The roots and seeds were used in traditional medicines, as food, for cordage, and to make lei. The *lau* (leaves) of the *hala* are long and tapered, varied in width and color, pliable to different degrees, and are the predominant plaighting material in Hawai‘i and the greater Pacific. The weaving of *lau hala* has been historically important to Hawai‘ians. The sails of the vessels that carried early inhabitants to and from the islands were fashioned of woven *lau hala* panels sewn together.⁵ The *lau* (leaves) was used to fabricate sleeping and floor covering mats, pillows, carrying and storage baskets, fans, clothing, and an array of objects that were used in everyday and ceremonial practices.

Today, many of the historic groves have been destroyed by human encroachment; buildings stand where *hala* once thrived, and existing stands are on property that is now private and rendered largely inaccessible to those weavers who want to care for *hala* and harvest the *lau*. Ironically, some *hala* palms grow in urban settings or alongside some roadsides but the pollution from cars creates blackened, pockmarked leaves. *Lau hala* weavers are careful and concerned stewards of plant resources. They have a deep and abiding respect for the land and extensive knowledge of how to harvest and care for plants to sustain healthy growth and ensure the availability of these precious resources far into the future.

Before the coming of the first foreigners to the islands in 1778, Hawai‘ians wore hats, usually of conical shape, only when working in the sun for long periods. With the introduction to western clothing styles, Hawaiians became acquainted with and incorporated hats into everyday and special occasion attire.⁶
The tradition of making and wearing lau hala hats (papale) continues today. Dedicated master teachers (kumu) teach students (haumana) how to gather and prepare lau, then weave the lau into hats of both traditional and innovative styles. Most teaching takes place among family and friends, but several organizations have formed to ensure that the knowledge of lau hala weaving is passed on to future generations.

NOTE: Michigan State University Museum (East Lansing, Michigan) and the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, in collaboration with the Hawai‘inuiākea School of Hawaiian Knowledge, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, and Hawaiian kumu and haumana, documented the history and traditions associated with lau hala in Hawaii. Members of this team contributed to publication issued by University of Hawaii Press and an exhibition opening at the Bishop Museum in 2015. The exhibition will draw upon collections of lau hala held by the Bishop Museum and the MSU Museum as well as items lent by kumu and haumana. See examples of lau hala in the collections of the MSU Museum by going to http://museum.msu.edu/?q=node/1221 and searching for lau hala "Hawaiian Lauhala hats and accessories" in the dropdown under the "Browse the Collection" tab.

References


About the Images Information Sheet

[FIG. 1] "Dispersion of the Hala by Madame Pele" linoleum block print by Dietrich Varez. When Pele, the volcano goddess, first arrived in Hawai‘i, her canoe became entangled in the roots of the hala. Pele was so angry that she tore the roots into many pieces and threw them as far as she could; wherever the pieces landed, new trees then grew. Permission to use from the artist.

[FIG. 2] "A Canoe of the Sandwich Islands, the Rowers Masked." Graphite, ink, wash, and watercolor drawing by John Webber, ca. 1778. Webber was an artist aboard Captain James Cook's ship. Permission: This image (or other media file) is in the public domain because its copyright expired. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Priests_traveling_across_kealakekua_bay_for_first_contact_rituals.jpg

[FIG. 3] Photos of the hala palm. Photos by Marsha MacDowell.


[FIG. 5] Papale tools and papale weaving in process. Photo by Marsha MacDowell.

[FIG. 6] Piko (center) of a papale. Photo by Marit Dewhurst.


[FIG. 8] Kumu Aunty Gladys Grace is showing haumana Patricia Goo something on her ‘ipu’...hat block. Photograph by Marcia Omura. Permission to use by the photographer.

Images

[FIG. 1] "Dispersion of the Hala by Madame Pele" linoleum block print by Dietrich Varez.
[FIG. 2] "A Canoe of the Sandwich Islands, the Rowers Masked."
[FIG. 3] Photo of the *hala* palm.

[FIG. 5] Papale tools and papale weaving in process.
[FIG. 6] *Piko* (center) of a *papale*. 
FIG. 8  Kumu Aunty Gladys Grace is showing *haumana* Patricia Goo something on her ‘*ipu*’...hat block.
FIG. 9 Kumu at the 2006 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.


5 David Young, Nā Mea Makamae: Hawaiian Treasures, Kauila-Kona, Hawai‘i: Palapala Press, 1999, p. 37. Olana or sennit is a type of cordage made of plaiting grasses.
