

Wearing Leadership

Necklace (*Lei Niho Palaoa*), Artist Unidentified

What do leaders in your life wear to denote their role in your school, state, or country?

The *lei niho palaoa*, or “chiefly necklace,” was a symbol of rank worn in the 18th and mid-19th centuries by *ali'i nui*, the chiefly people of the highest rank in the Hawaiian Islands. *Lei niho palaoa* were worn during ceremonial occasions and symbolized a leader’s ancestral connection to the gods and the leaders who preceded them. *Lei niho palaoa* were typically passed down within a family, as was the role of *ali'i nui*.

The *ali'i* (pronounced “ah-lee-ee”), or rulers, held different ranks and responsibilities, such as directing community projects like building fishponds and water channels, maintaining relationships with the gods, and caring for the people who worked the land. Each island or portion of land had only one *ali'i nui*, the highest ranking *ali'i* with the power and responsibility to make choices that impacted everyone in their rule.

This *lei niho palaoa* is made of walrus ivory, human hair, and fiber. The human hair, given willingly by friends and family of the *ali'nui*, connected them to their ancestors and the ivory to the ocean. Both elements possess *mana*, believed by some Native Hawaiians to be the spiritual energy or power that flows through all things, and is often felt, seen, and experienced rather than described in words. The *ali'i nui* wearing this lei embodied the *mana* of those who wore it before them and of the materials themselves. The shape of the ivory pendant likely represents a tongue, signaling the responsibility of the *ali'i* to speak for and to the people they ruled.

The Hawaiian Islands already had a well-established culture and long history of self-governance when European explorer Captain James Cook arrived in 1778. From that time until Hawaii became a U.S. state in 1959, Native people saw many changes in how they and the land were treated and governed. Traditions such as the hula and the Hawaiian language were banned from being taught, and the land was overharvested and overrun with tourists. Native Hawaiian leadership fought against the agricultural and cultural exploitation of U.S. settlers. The fight for Hawaiian sovereignty still exists, in full force, today.

Challenges for students

Research the history of the Hawaiian Islands. Which Hawaiian traditions that you learn about are still practiced there?

What does it mean to be a leader? What characteristics and qualities should someone possess? Create a self-portrait of yourself as a leader. Would you like to be quiet, strong, a good listener, fair? Include in the portrait attributes you aspire to!

Lei niho palaoa were typically passed down within a family. What would you like to pass down to someone one day? What do these items mean to you? Share your list with your neighbor.



Artist Unidentified. *Necklace (Lei Niho Palaoa)*. 19th Century. Hawai'i, United States. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Alan Wurtzbarger, BMA 1955.251.171

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