

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Edwina Moanikeala Akaka



Edwina Moanikeala Akaka
Photo courtesy of Franco Salmoiraghi (c)
1972

Edwina Moanikeala Akaka, born in 1944 in Honolulu, was among the 32 persons arrested on May 11, 1971, in Kalama Valley, protesting the mass eviction of farmers and Native Hawaiians. This act of civil disobedience by the group Kokua Kalama, later known as Kokua Hawaii, has been identified by historians as the start of the Hawaiian Renaissance.¹ As a native Hawaiian, Akaka was active in a number of civil protests throughout her life, including resistance to the military bombing of Kahoolawe, to the state's uncompensated use of Hawaii Homestead land and ceded lands, and most recently, to the construction of an observatory on Mauna Kea. She was

interviewed by Gary T. Kubota on October 11, 2016, at Zippy's Restaurant in Kalihi and by telephone on January 21, 2017, from her home on the Big Island. Akaka served as an Office of Hawaiian Affairs trustee from 1984 through 1996, supporting efforts to negotiate an agreement with the state for its use of native ceded lands, eventually resulting in Native Hawaiians receiving more than \$15 million annually since 2006. She died of cancer in Hilo on April 5, 2017.

GK: Good morning, Moani. Let's start with your childhood. Where were you raised in Honolulu?

MA: I was raised in working-class Kaimuki across from Petrie Park in a six-bedroom house my father built with the help of friends. As we were growing up, my parents rented out some of the rooms, in order to make ends meet.

GK: What were the names of your father and mother?

MA: My mother was Rebecca Millish Mossman Akaka. She was named after her grandmother who was Rebecca Millish Mossman.

1. "The Birth of the Modern Hawaiian Movement: Kalama Valley, Oahu," Haunani Kay-Trask; Hawaiian Historical Society, 1987.

GK: And what's your father's name?

MA: My stepfather was Kammy Leong Akaka. He was born and raised in Waipio Valley.

GK: What was his family's work? Were they taro farmers?

MA: No. His grandfather had come here from China. Like many Chinese with Hawaiian names, they're really not Hawaiian. The names are Chinese derivative names like Akaka, Akana, Apana. One brother got off one boat and he was named Akana, and another brother got off another boat, he was named Akaka. And so, that's how some of these Hawaiian sounding names evolved.

GK: Okay, so these Chinese men married Hawaiian women?

MA: Oh, yeah, you bet.

GK: Your father was married to a Hawaiian woman?

MA: Yeah, right, my mother.

GK: How did growing up in your family influence your activism?

MA: My father brought us up to question authority. Someone reminded me, even when I was in grade school, I was standing up for kids that were being picked on. I guess I was always for the underdog. I questioned authority and was not one to conform easily.

GK: Why did your father do that?

MA: He really identified with Hawaiians. In fact, his Chinese name was Leong. Everybody in his family changed their name back to Leong, but he kept the Akaka name because he really identified with the Hawaiians.

GK: Was there any incident that affected your father?

MA: He worked for the plantation for a short time over at Kauai. His younger brother was 13 years old, like in the eighth grade. People usually quit school at that age back then. And so, my father supported his younger brother and my uncle so they could stay in school. His brother ended up with a master's degree and my uncle got a Ph.D.

The plantation would tell my family, "You know which side your bread's buttered on—vote Republican. Hawaii was a Republican stronghold. So, my father was independent, went in and voted Democrat, just to be able to, you know, counter that. So, my parents helped start the Democratic Party when I was a kid in the early 1950s.

GK: How did they do that?

Edwina Moanikeala Akaka Interview

MA: We eventually moved to Honolulu. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, my father ended up working in civil service in radio and electronics at Hickam Field. Throughout his life, he worked in civil service for the military.

My mother went door to door in Kaimuki with Herman Lum, who became Chief Justice of the (Hawaii) Supreme Court, knocking door to door, signing up people for the Democratic Party in the early 1950s. My parents ended up being precinct members and precinct president and vice president. My mother was the first Mossman to become a Democrat instead of a Republican. When we were kids, the Democrats had rallies at different parks here in Honolulu. Weekends, we'd go in a caravan to the plantations, set up these PA systems. It supplemented the family income. He was in electronics. So, he had all these PA systems, and he was contracted by the Democratic Party. In those days, you'd have the politicians speak, you would have the hula dancers. At least you'd get to see who the hell your politicians are. You know, I mean that was the beginning, the beginning of the Democratic Party. So, people like Patsy Mink, Daniel Inouye, Spark Matsunaga would come for coffee hours at our house. Matsunaga would play the piano. My parents were very, very, active. I mean, when we were kids, the only time we could go out to our cousins' house and spend the night was on election night when my parents would have to count votes at four in the morning.

GK: Why did they do it?

MA: They knew we needed changes. They knew the Republicans. . . My father raised us to understand that there were miscarriages of justice here in Hawaii.

GK: Did they ever talk about the overthrow as being associated with the Republican Party?

MA: Well, that's just it; we never had it in our history books in Hawaii. When we moved to California when I was in the eighth grade, the history books there had a paragraph about Hawaii.

GK: When you were growing up, was there any stereotype that you faced as a Hawaiian?

MA: They thought a Hawaiian is supposed to play the ukulele, dance the hula, and that was it. We're supposed to be appendages. We are supposed to be the entertainment. . . They wanted us to be the hospitality committee for the Hawaii Visitors Bureau. And make like everything was perfect here in paradise, especially for the Native Hawaiians. The dismal social statistics scream otherwise. Until we started the movement in Kalama Valley, social consciousness was dead.

GK: What school did you attend?

MA: I went to Waialae School. We lived right across the street near Pahoehoe Avenue. During that time, our family had a chicken farm. I mean Lani Moo (celebrity cow for Meadow

Gold Dairies) lived on Farmers Road. In the late 1950s, I went to Kamehameha in the seventh grade. I was in the eighth grade when we left Hawaii.

GK: How was Kamehameha back then?

MA: At Kamehameha, there was a strong military influence, of course— ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps). The guys had to shine their brass belt. Their shoes had to be all shiny. After the eighth grade, there was the separation of the boys and girls. So, it was the boys school and the girls school when I went there.

GK: Did they teach Hawaiian language?

MA: They taught very little at that time. In fact, in the old days, if you spoke Hawaiian, a generation or two ago, they would whack you if you spoke Hawaiian. You know that was common knowledge. So, now you see Kamehameha School—they're out there with the hula. They're very culturally oriented. It only happened after Kalama Valley. So, what Kalama Valley did was to instill a renaissance, a cultural renaissance, and also, a movement for justice for our people, and our aina, and that's its importance. That's the important thing of Kalama Valley.

GK: What happened when you moved to California?

I was in the eighth grade. For the first time we're on the mainland. We were a minority—brown skin, non-white. We were living near a military base, Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, California about 50 miles from San Francisco.

GK: What was your father doing over there?

MA: He repaired flight simulators. My mother was a nurse at the Travis Air Force Base Hospital. Two of my brothers worked for the Navy at Mare Island Shipyard as apprentices. So, I'm from a, you know, Yankee-doodle family. Well, the shipyard provided some opportunities for employment.

GK: When you were arrested in Kalama Valley, what did your dad and mom tell you?

MA: I remember when my father worked for the military, he used to feel, "My country right or wrong," But then later on, I'd hear that he was telling people, "My daughter is the Angela Davis of Hawaii. (Laugh) (Davis was an African American who was briefly a member of the Black Panther Party.) I heard that through the grapevine.

GK: When did you decide to come back to Hawaii?

MA: Well, I didn't want to leave Hawaii in the first place. I mean when you're a kid you don't have any choice. I loved being able to go to Kamehameha School. I mean it was Hawaiian, and you got a good education there.

Edwina Moanikeala Akaka Interview

GK: So when did you come back to Hawaii?

MA: In 1967. I came home and worked and went to UH (University of Hawaii). . . I guess that living on the mainland where the people of color were a minority, unlike Hawaii, was also an awakening for me. In the eighth grade while playing ball at recess, one of classmates called me a “gook” for no reason. I was stunned by that. . .

GK: How did you support yourself in Hawaii?

MA: I worked as a waitress at Queen’s Surf (in Waikiki).

GK: Could you describe Honolulu at the time?

MA: Hawaii was changing dramatically, becoming more like “Anywhere USA” with skyscrapers and desecration of our quality of life and our environment, the aina. Oahu especially was becoming the playground for the rich.

Coming back home to the islands in the late sixties, I learned that many of our Native Hawaiian people were impoverished and becoming more so—strangers in our own homeland, struggling to just get by. I knew something was desperately wrong and that our people needed help. I felt that by working together we could endeavor to create the change needed to make this a better Hawaii, and help Native Hawaiians get some of the justice we deserved for the theft of the Hawaiian nation.

GK: How did you hear about the eviction struggle in Kalama Valley?

MA: In 1970, there was an announcement on the radio: “Anyone interested in helping the Hawaiian people come to this meeting at the Off Center Coffee House near the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

GK: What happened?

MA: A handful of us showed up! This was the catalyst. . . The Kalama Valley struggle. . . was a wakeup call for the people of Hawaii. This was the beginning of us questioning the direction of Hawaii’s progress, and what was in the best interest of the people living in these islands—especially Native Hawaiians whose country had been stolen by the United States—and local people, especially working people on the bottom rung of the economic ladder.

GK: Could you describe the importance of the Kalama Valley struggle?

MA: Kalama Valley was important because this was the first time that local people fought back against proposed land-use practices that were wrong-headed, if not downright evil. What was interesting was the land owner Bishop Estate and some of the core group of protesters and supporters attended or graduated from Kamehameha School. In Kalama Valley, Native Hawaiians and local people were kicked out to make way for the expansion

of Hawaii Kai and more subdivisions. Local families—the Moose Lui's family; George Santos, the pig farmer; the Richards' ohana and many others—would be forced out of Kalama Valley. Oahu was becoming more over-urbanized while farmers were being squeezed off the aina. We need farmers to feed the community because the islands have only so much carrying capacity and need to be self-sufficient.

GK: What did you do in Kalama Valley?

MA: My responsibilities in Kalama Valley were to plug in and help out wherever necessary, and to help procure supplies to keep the occupation going. For about a year leading up to the occupation, we worked to educate the community as to what was happening to the residents who resided in the valley. I remember one of our supporters had a boyfriend that was in the Army. He provided us with outdoor showers and other military issued supplies that we made good use of during the occupation. One of my old boyfriends, a certified public accountant, helped dig a trench for an outdoor lua (toilet) for us outside George Santos' house during the valley occupation.

GK: Tell me about the educational aspects of the struggle?

MA: We delivered speeches and had educational talks at (teacher) Setsu Okubo's class at Roosevelt High School and other schools, Church Of The Crossroads, UH, worked with Woody Schwartz at American Friends Service Committee and other churches. . .

GK: Kokua Hawaii leader Larry Kamakawiwoole mentioned that its leadership selected you and Kalani Ohelo to go to the mainland to some conferences in 1970?

MA: Kalani and I, along with John Witeck.

GK: How did that come about?

MA: I guess (through) John Witeck. It was Thanksgiving time. We ended up going with John Witeck. John Witeck's family (lived in the) Washington, D.C. area. His father was a bureaucrat. Nice people. . . He had brothers living around there. Kalani and I stayed at his brother's place. There happened to be—maybe John Witeck knew about it—a Black Panther's conference. . . happening in Washington, D.C. . . So we went over to check it out.

GK: How'd it go?

MA: One kid (with the Black Panthers)—we were talking in this park—said that when the Black Panthers were killed in Chicago. . . (officials) said that the Black Panthers attacked the cops but. . . This 19-year-old kid. . . he had gone there and then he had taken film. I mean, they (police) shot them in their beds. . . They (police) came after him and got that film. . . and destroyed it. So, it was interesting, you know, what (we were) exposed to. . . then we went to New York.

Edwina Moanikeala Akaka Interview

GK: Where'd you go?

MA: So we went out to meet some Puerto Ricans, right, the Young Lords (street gang turned into community activists).

GK: What happened?

MA: We talked story with them (to) find out what their situation was. . . So, we did get some exposure as to what was happening. . . out there in the world. . . to people of color and minorities.

GK: What was happening with the Young Lords?

MA: One of the things the Young Lords' members were doing was fighting an eviction. There was a film about them fighting an eviction. . . in New York.

GK: Where else did you go?

MA: San Francisco. I went to that International Hotel (where tenants were fighting an eviction.) . . . I met this Filipino guy from Hawaii—I know they were trying to evict him from the International Hotel.

GK: I know Kokua Hawaii was influenced by these activist groups on the mainland and at one point wore brown berets during a protest rally at the Hawaii state capitol. Did you wear a brown beret?

MA: We wore brown berets for a day and a half, including a rally (at the state Capitol on March 31, 1971) with Save Our Surf. We were not militant, even during the early days of the movement. . . Peace and aloha and sharp words of truth were, and still are, among our heaviest weaponry.

GK: Who were the supporters in Kalama Valley?

MA: There were many, many more haole supporters there in Kalama Valley than locals, yet we were calling this a "local people's struggle"—in order to activate local people and Native Hawaiians, which was necessary in 1970 Hawaii.

GK: You've mentioned an afternoon news media conference changed Kokua Hawaii's strategy?

MA: That afternoon, the press and TV news cameras were focusing on the many haoles that were there. . . We were very glad for that support. People were hiking into the valley with food, and their tents, with plans to stay until we got arrested. . . Many had come from the mainland where they had witnessed what poor planning, destruction of the

environment, and urbanization had done. They realized how important it was to help support these residents, and their local lifestyle. . .

GK: Tell me about the decision to ask white supporters to leave Kalama Valley before the arrest? I know at one point, the leadership of Kokua Hawaii was displeased with TV coverage giving the impression the protest was being caused by non-local, mainland people.

MA: This action was necessary in order to get more locals and Hawaiians involved. . . Remember, this was the beginning of a movement that continues to this day. . . There were understandably some hurt feelings because of that action, but we had no choice. The movement was at embryo stage; we knew that initially local people had to be the face of Kalama Valley. This was not a racial issue. This was a strategic political decision. We were calling this a local people's struggle—Hawaiian people struggling for justice, and I looked around and there were hundreds of other (non-locals) (chuckles). . . You know, the media. . . all the TV cameras started focusing in on. . . all the non-locals that were there. . . The core group of us made the decision. . . If this was to be a wake-up call to local people, it had to be local people arrested when police came in. We asked (non-local) people to leave. . . seeing how the media reacted and knowing that it's really important that we waked the local people about what's going on, and that they (local people) could be very confused by seeing all these others. . . So at eleven o' clock at night, we had to tell them (non-locals), "Go home." . . I was crying. . . That was just heart-breaking, and I cried. . . I cried as we told these brothers and sisters, some of whom had supported us for months and months even before the occupation, that they had to leave.

GK: How did the core group take it?

MA: Linton (Park, the Kokua Hawaii public information officer) was there because I remember he was standing next to me. . . We felt secure, you know, we felt good about the fact that they (the news media) couldn't throw that at us. . . We occupied the valley for three weeks before the police came in.

GK: Was Larry Kamakawiwoole there?

MA: No, Larry wasn't there that night. . . He came in afterwards the next morning.

GK: What happened on the day after the decision?

MA: At dawn the next morning, though our numbers were small compared to over a hundred the night before, standing on the side of the road, on the edge of George Santos' pig farm, across from Moose Lui's home, we knew we had made the right decision. (It was) pretty lonely there but we were secure. . . in the fact that look, we're all locals. . . In spite of the fact that our numbers had dwindled, we realized, we had done the right thing. Even though it felt very lonely standing out there. . .

Edwina Moanikeala Akaka Interview

GK: What do you remember about the Kalama Valley arrest on May 11, 1971?

MA: We awoke that morning to hear that the police were on their way into the valley to arrest us. . . We decided we weren't going to make it easy for them and most of us decided to get a ladder and climb up on George Santos' house roof and wait for the police to come to arrest us. . . At least 20-25 cops were on the ground below us. One officer with a bull horn asked us repeatedly to "come down off the roof," which, of course, we ignored. We had a connected water hose on the roof with us (in case we were tear gassed), and a couple of bags of poi—those were our only weapons. We never resorted to using those things. I guess we tried to make light of the situation, since we weren't quite sure what was going to happen.

GK: What was the police reaction?

MA: I think the police felt a little foolish (during) those first few hours since they had no way to get to us while we ignored their order to "get off the roof." Most of the police were Hawaiians, of course, some Kamehameha School grads that a few of us on the roof had gone to school with and recognized. . . We would call out to them telling them we were doing this "for their kids. . ."

GK: What else happened?

MA: At one point, Dr. Willis Butler's wife Barbara was walking out of the valley with a case of beer over her shoulder. She later said she would be damned if she was going to let the cops get the beer. She and her husband were there to support us throughout the occupation.

GK: Anything else?

MA: I didn't know this confrontation was being covered live over the radio. We were on the roof. (Kualoa-Heeiea Ecumenical Youth project organizer) Randy Kalahiki and (Kahuna Lapaau) Sam Lono—they were on the ground. At one point Sam starts speaking loudly in Hawaiian. . . "pules" (starts praying) in Hawaiian. They (the police) didn't know if he (Sam) was putting the "heebie-jeebies" on them. . . what the hell he was saying. Radio announcer Ed Michelman who was doing a live show says, "The police just stepped back one step," thinking that maybe they were "ana'ana-ed" (Hawaiian cursed) by Sam. (Laughter) Later on, I asked Sam, and he said he was saying, the Lord's Prayer in Hawaiian. However, the police didn't know that.

GK: What else?

MA: We had the only ladder in the valley. . . There was some anxiety not knowing how this incident was going to end. The police finally called the Fire Department to bring a ladder so they could get us off the roof. We thought, "Great, more Hawaiians" (are coming). I heard later that they warned the firefighters that if they saw anyone they knew

on the roof they should stay in the background. It appeared as though we embarrassed the police when we called out their names from the roof.

GK: What happened next?

MA: Placing the fireman's ladder against George Santos' house, the police climbed. . . up the roof to arrest us. We didn't resist and climbed down the ladder on our own. . . One officer offered to carry . . . (large, ex-football player) John Saxton down the ladder if he liked, but that offer was rejected. We were all in good spirits. Some of us were arrested on George's porch and front yard. Main thing is health and safety—no one got hurt! As I recall. . . (we) were driven off. They put us in several jail cells. . . The chief of police, (Francis) Keala, came by and peered in at us in our cells. He tried to make us feel as if we had done something wrong. No way he could intimidate us. Our attitude was, "Enough already!"

GK: What made you decide to run for the state Office of Hawaiian Affairs?

MA: Well, as a former leader in the Kalama Valley, it was only natural. When the Office of Hawaiian Affairs came into being, even after Kokua Hawaii, I was active in protests. One of them was at the Hilo Airport and the use of ceded lands and state Department of Hawaiian Homes Lands (DHHL) for airports.

GK: Tell me about it?

MA: The state had been using ceded lands and DHHL lands for decades without benefiting Hawaiians and providing homes for Hawaiians. Past governors of the territory scooped up DHHL lands for other purposes. I grew up across the street from Petrie Park land, confiscated from the DHHL in 1931.

GK: What happened at the Hilo Airport?

MA: When we closed down the Hilo Airport runway on Labor Day in 1978, we were the landlords who had come to collect the rent. Past governors had illegally taken DHHL lands in Waimea, Molokai and Hilo Airport. . . when Hawaii was a territory. . . without asking the DHHL Commission. As a result, over \$600 million was due to the DHHL at \$30 million a year for the past 20 years. Now we shouldn't have to risk our lives at the Hilo Airport runway or at anywhere else—or on. . . Mauna Kea in order to get the justice that people deserve.

GK: So, let me ask you. . . As a result of the state Constitutional Convention forming the. . . State Office of Hawaiian Affairs, you ran for an OHA seat?

MA: Yeah. I was elected in '84. I was an elected member of OHA for 12 years.

GK: Okay. So, what was your role in OHA in regards to the ceded lands issue?

Edwina Moanikeala Akaka Interview

MA: I was on the negotiating committee. And I negotiated the money, the ceded lands money that OHA is receiving which amounted. . . to over \$100 million. . .

GK: So, that was the settlement.

MA: That was, that was yeah, 20% of the revenues in the ceded land. . . You know, you have the right combination of people at the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. Five is a magic number, majority rules. You can do all kinds of things to make the situation better for the Hawaiian people. . . including getting ceded lands, which our people rightly deserve.

GK: Were you satisfied with the settlement?

MA: No, I wanted land. I didn't just want money, I wanted land. I didn't want to have to buy our own land.

GK: So, what else have you been doing?

MA: Well, I've been consistently on the front lines. . . We stopped the bombing of our sacred island of Kahoolawe. . . However, Kalama Valley also inspired a Hawaiian Renaissance in identity and culture. Before Kalama Valley, it was not "in" to be native Hawaiian. I remember my grandmother, who was pure Hawaiian, saying she was part-haole to be acceptable to her husband, my grandfather's hapa-haole family—the Mossmans. Participation in canoe races had been declining as was the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival in Hilo. After Kalama Valley, a growing pride blossomed and a noticeable desire for the people of Hawaii to identify with and respect the first culture of the islands. Today, thousands of all nationalities in Hawaii participate and revel in canoe races, hula, language studies, and Hawaiian history. And for decades, it has been almost impossible to get tickets for the Merrie Monarch Festival unless you reserve tickets on December 26th, months before the April Hula Festival. . .

GK: What do you think should happen at this particular juncture in terms of the Native Hawaiians? What should the government be doing and what should the Native Hawaiians be doing?

MA: I think we should have hundreds of thousands of acres of the 1.6 million acres of ceded lands set aside. For the whole Native Hawaiian people. Not OHA.

GK: Okay.

MA: Like the creation of the Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission, we need a grass-root entity coming from the community—coming from the bottom up, not from the top down. . . I was and yet am proud to be part of an effort to create needed change to work for pono (the righteous way). As one kupuna from Milolii stated before the first OHA election—"If not for Kalama Valley, there would be no Alu Like and no OHA."