

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Maivan Clech Lam



Maivan Clech Lam
Photo courtesy of the Lam family

*Maivan Clech Lam is a professor emerita at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York where she served as the associate director of its Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies. Maivan has taught and written extensively on the rights of indigenous peoples under U.S. and international law. Her article “The Kuleana Act Revisited,” and book *At the Edge of the State: Indigenous Peoples and Self-Determination*, are widely read in the field. She was invited by Dr. Kekuni Blaisdell in 1984 to participate in the Kanaka Maoli movement for independence. After moving to New York in 1992, she volunteered as academic advisor to the American Indian Law Alliance, an NGO that played an important role at the United Nations as it moved to adopt the historic 2007 “Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” Born in Vietnam and now a U.S.*

citizen, Maivan and Kokua Hawaii met soon after her arrival in the islands in 1971. Gary T. Kubota interviewed Maivan at her home in Waimanalo on June 30, 2016.

GK: Good afternoon, Maivan. Do you recall your first contact with Kokua Hawaii?

ML: I believe that occurred in the fall of 1971.

GK: What were the circumstances and how did that happen?

ML: My husband at the time, Truong Buu Lam, was recruited to teach, beginning that fall, in the history department of the University of Hawaii at Manoa. We arrived with our baby the preceding summer from New York where we had actively participated in the anti-Vietnam War movement. As the fall began, I received a call from Alice Beechert whose husband, Ed Beechert, was a colleague of Lam's. The Beecherts were dedicated progressives in Hawaii and knew that we opposed the U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. Alice said to me: “Kokua Hawaii, a progressive organization here, is organizing a march against the war that will culminate with a rally in front of Hickam Barracks. I told them about you and they immediately asked me to invite you to speak at the rally

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and explain why you oppose the war.” OK, I said. She continued: “Just go to their office and they’ll tell you more.”

GK: So what happened?

ML: Alice spelled out “Kokua Hawaii” for me. I knew very little about Hawaii then and certainly did not know what kokua meant. I then asked her for the organization’s address which it turns out she did not have. Like all Oahu old-timers, however, she assured me that it will be easy to find Kokua Hawaii’s office as it was near Tamashiro’s Fish Market in Kalihi-Palama. “Please spell all those names too,” I asked. Soon after, baby in tow, I drove to downtown Honolulu for the first time in my life. With the help of several passersby, I finally located Tamashiro’s where I parked my car and entered the shop. No, the folks inside said, we don’t know of a Kokua Hawaii’s office here. Stumped, I sat down on what grass I could find in the empty lot nearby to figure out what to do. Soon enough, a man poked his head out from a shack on the lot. “Do you know where I can find Kokua Hawaii’s office?” I implored. “It’s right here,” he said pointing to the shack.

GK: (Laughter) That’s right! We met there. The shed, near a friend’s home in a boarding house, was across the street from our office. I remember meeting you there for the first time and leading you across the street to our office, which was a mess. We’d just moved in and we had electricity but no plumbing or telephone. The building was old, termite-eaten, and speckled with peeling paint. The floors were of concrete. We had no couch, only two chairs maybe. Friends eventually plastered the interior walls, rewired electrical circuits, and donated carpeting.

ML: I didn’t care. I was just happy to find Kokua Hawaii and get to know you guys: you, Soli Niheu, Kalani Ohelo and others .

GK: That sounds about right. What was your impression of us?

ML: (Chuckles) Well, the office was ragtag. However, having worked inside the anti-war movement on the East Coast, I felt right at home in your low-end office.

GK: (Laughter)

ML: So, I certainly was not expecting carpets on the floor or a secretary to introduce me. I just felt wonderful that I got to meet an anti-war group so early in my stay in Hawaii. You all were so young that I was overcome with admiration and gratitude. None of you were Vietnamese, or had been to Vietnam, or were priests like Daniel Berrigan whom we knew on the East Coast for whom compassion is their calling. All I thought then was: “Wow! These people are acting out of a really principled concern for Vietnam.”

GK: I helped to organize that march to Hickam. We had discussions within Kokua Hawaii regarding the concept of self-determination and generally supported communities as

well as countries moving in that direction. How did you become an anti-Vietnam War protester?

ML: As you might know, all who were colonized by the West were taught far more Western history than that of their own countries. You had to ferret out that information if you wanted to know it. I was raised Catholic, middle-class, and anti-Communist. As such, I was particularly ignorant of colonialism's impact on the countries I grew up in: Vietnam, Thailand, and India.

GK: What happened?

ML: I remained that way until I went to Yale for graduate studies in Southeast Asian Studies and, later, in Anthropology. Then only was I academically, and brusquely, awakened to the horrors of French colonialism and U.S. imperialism in Vietnam. The jolt I received happened in my very first semester in New Haven—fall 1965—when I attended a campus showing of a film produced by a notable Australian journalist named Wilfred Burchett who was communist and a close friend of Vietnam's President Ho Chí Minh.

GK: Hmmm.

ML: Burchett lived in Vietnam for long periods, and made several films. The one I saw dramatically showed the life of civilians under the massive, relentless, and murderous bombing that the U.S. rained on rice fields where peasants toiled everyday, and on densely populated cities like Hanoi, where non-warring civilians—mainly the young, the old, and their caretakers—remained.

GK: How did you feel about that?

ML: I was shaken to the core of my being by the sights and sounds in the film of all the mothers, old folks, and children who lived in Hanoi. As American bombers shrieked overhead, the film showed crowds of Vietnamese on Hanoi's narrow streets running helter-skelter, yelling to and yanking up little kids from the streets to dive with them into manholes. "Quick. Quick. Quick. Child, over here, over here, take cover," I heard as I understood the language of the targeted. My westernized mother and Catholic teachers had told me that communists were very bad. Period. They killed Catholics, had children spy on their parents, banned religion, and otherwise robbed you of all freedom. The film catapulted me beyond all that. I came out instead repeating to myself: "Nothing, nothing, but nothing can justify this assault, this terror, this killing." There and then, I became an anti-war partisan who read more and more of the history of Vietnam, Southeast Asia, and colonialism.

GK: Besides being against the Vietnam War, did your beliefs change as far as Vietnam being divided into North and South?

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ML: I eventually developed a second reason for opposing the war, which is that I switched from the side of the privileged to that of the people who worked and fought to re-unify Vietnam and reinstate there a politics of equality, respect, and substantive justice for all.

GK: How did you become involved in the Hawaiian movement?

ML: In my first two years here, I spent a lot of time at home with our child. But I managed to combine childcare with what you might call justice-care. There was a lot of anti-war and pro-justice activities in Hawaii at the time in which we participated. They included support for union strikes, for the establishment of Ethnic Studies at the university, and for communities resisting eviction from Chinatown, Ota Camp, Waimanalo Village, and Waiahole-Waikane.

GK: What was the activist atmosphere in the early 1970s?

ML: When we arrived in 1971, the epic Kalama Valley resistance to eviction, to which Kokua Hawaii prominently contributed, had essentially ended. But the exemplary acumen and energy that marked it went on to ignite several other resistances to eviction. The message Kalama Valley sent out throughout Hawaii was: "It is not acceptable to chase people off their lands and away from their homes and livelihoods at the mere say-so of rapacious and politically connected developers."

GK: Yes, I remember. I was living in Ota Camp with two other Kokua Hawaii organizers at the invitation of the Camp's president Pete Tagalog. The residents still talk about the support they received from university students and some faculty at that time.

ML: Yes, it was a time of considerable turmoil. Within a year of our moving to Waimanalo in 1973, I became involved in the Waimanalo Village's resistance to the government's plan to demolish their old plantation homes and scatter their community.

GK: Wow. How'd that go?

ML: For about two years, the residents there would meet every evening to plan and organize their resistance. I attended the meetings and saw a very vibrant community at work. Multi-ethnic and local to the core, their ties to one another appeared to have been laid down in plantation days. Folks there variously identified themselves as Filipino, Hawaiian, Japanese, Portuguese, Chinese and, once in a while, haole, but usually also added "I also get some X (naming another ethnicity)." The Filipino contingent appeared the largest, and counted several veterans of past epic strikes against plantation owners in the outer islands. Yet, no one ethnic group claimed or exercised priority over the others. The spokespersons who emerged tended to be Hawaiian or Filipino. Disputes arose, of course, but were as often resolved. All in all, the community presented a passionate, dedicated, and united front in opposing the state's eviction plans.

GK: Who were the spokespersons?

ML: There were several, men and women. One was Tata Frank Calbone. He was a tall, thin, flinty elder who was solid as a rock. He generally was also the first to smell a fish in the government's proposals and the last to compromise. Indefatigable, he walked day after day, from house to house, explaining issues and soliciting unity. He told me a story that I cherish to this day about a historic plantation strike on Maui in which he was involved. A number of workers had up-and-walked off the plantation to protest wages and conditions. The rest all soon followed. But as wages vanished, so did food. The workers asked Tata Frank, "How we going to eat, Frank?" His answer: "You fellows go fish where it says kapu to fish. They then going throw you in the kalabus (jail in Cebuano) where you get kaukau (food) three times a day."

GK: (Laughter) There you go. So he had a plan.

ML: Yes, he always had a plan. It apparently worked beautifully in that strike. I hugely admired Tata Frank's critical mind, obstinacy, and total lack of fear. But countless others also brought unique skills to the Waimanalo resistance which eventually prevailed. The people were not evicted, and the community lives on in the village surrounded by their usual plants and animals. The old houses were demolished by the state which, however, replaced them with new ones that were designed with community input to safeguard the residents' desired life-style.

GK: That's great!

ML: These experiences to which Kokua Hawaii first introduced me shaped my later years in Hawaii. After the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam, I became more and more engaged in local struggles having to do with Kanaka Maoli rights, and environmental sustainability.

GK: As editor of Kokua Hawaii's newspaper the *Huli*, I know that we featured your speech at the anti-Vietnam war rally at Hickam, and the several anti-eviction struggles you speak of. In both cases, we felt it important to promote the international law concept of self-determination.

ML: I, too, see local and global struggles as interrelated.

GK: How did you come to concentrate on Kanaka Maoli rights?

ML: When my son turned pre-schooler, I had more time and we needed more income. So I began to teach anthropology at Hawaii Loa College in Kaneohe. While there, I inherited a course on Native Americans that an ailing professor had to drop. This forced me to give myself a crash course on Native American history, culture, and present circumstances. The course opened my eyes wide to the subject of American settler colonialism which both Native Americans and Kanaka Maoli suffer. I consequently concluded that while

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anthropology offers a valuable approach to the understanding of culture, it does not directly enable the change that indigenous peoples sought. So I then chose to obtain a law degree, all the more so, as the U.S. usurped Kanaka Maoli lands through legal rather than military maneuvers.

GK: You're referring to the Bayonet Constitution, I guess?

ML: Yes, that and more. Even before Americans imposed the 1887 Bayonet Constitution on King Kalakaua, they had already dramatically disrupted Kanaka Maoli's traditional land tenure by urging two key laws on Kamehameha III: the Great Mahele and the Kuleana Act.

GK: Interesting.

ML: While in law school, I began to study how Kanaka Maoli lost their land. The first thing I did was to take a class on traditional Kanaka Maoli land tenure taught by the most knowledgeable expert on the subject: my mentor and friend Marion Kelly. My study led me to write "The Kuleana Act Revisited. . ." which concludes that every piece of land in Hawaii has a "cloud" on it inasmuch as Kamehameha III made it very clear that: 1) if collective land tenure was transformed into private property tenure, the makaainana or commoners must end up with possession of 1/3 of the land of the kingdom; 2) they must also never be deprived of their traditional rights in the land except by the express, i.e. not implied, provision of law. His two commands have been unlawfully disregarded, hence the "cloud."

GK: Very interesting. I guess the division of land under the Great Mahele wasn't that great. What is the path you see for Kanaka Maoli to arrive at self-determination?

ML: That is a huge question that needs to be discussed in its own right, however the land issue evolves. I will say only that Dr. Kekuni Blaisdell (longtime organizer of the Hawaiian sovereignty movement) discussed the matter of self-determination repeatedly with me as he wished to understand its international law contours, and that he firmly intended to honor the informed and considered decision of Kanaka Maoli on the subject, whether the decision pointed to: 1) incorporation with an existing state; b) association with such a State; 3) independence from any state beginning with the United States. He personally favored the last option.

