

Childrearing Traditions Recalled by Native Hawaiian Elders

What follows are excerpts from interviews of Kūpuna, in which they were asked to describe growing up in Hawai‘i between 1930-1950.

I invite you to read their words in advance of the presentation, and to ponder.

[My ancestor] was a family member of the chiefs of Ka'ū, . . . War . . . took them from the Big Island, to Maui, to Oahu, . . . My ancestor . . . went into hiding . . . because if you lost a war they completely annihilated your entire blood line . . . And in those ensuing years . . . he built a canoe . . . and paddled to Kaua'i . . . He completely dropped his real family name and took on XYZ . . . X means to paddle . . . Y in Hawaiian means to wander about . . . Z means to forever fade away . . .



My mother told me from the very beginning it was my grandmother's name and . . . it meant that I was going to be favored in the heavens. Well, that sounded good. I didn't think too much about it frankly. But . . . changes began to happen for me ... I kept asking my mother, "Tell me about my name." . . . And she'd tell me the same thing. But before she passed on . . . I said to her, "You know, I've been asking you about my name ... I really need to know what it means." . . . She explained that . . . I had a responsibility because of my name. So I said, "But you know, what you just described . . . That's what I do! That's who I am!" And she said, "I know." And I said, "Wouldn't it have been easier for me, . . . if you had told me that a long time ago? . . . Why didn't you?" . . . And she said, "Because you were not yet ready." . . . It reveals to me how the old folks thought.



[The family name] could also be interpreted as . . . 'a spreading of the light,' and because we're all teachers, we like to think it means 'the dissemination of knowledge.' That's the way we have taken it in our family, because . . . by actual count in the last three generations there are more than 600 years of teaching, coaching and counseling by us.



One of the first things I do is when I meet a young person and they have a Hawaiian name . . . I would say, 'Oh, my goodness! That's a famous name! Do you know what the family story is about that name . . . ?' And sometimes the kids look at me, 'I think it just means this.' And I say, "No, no, it's a shortened version of a much longer name that stood for when this family did . . . this important thing at this point in the history of the islands." And they go, "Oh really?" And I go, "Yeah! So, you know, what are you going to do as far as that name is concerned? . . . I'm telling you now because you have that responsibility to your name."



I grew up in the mokupuni of O‘ahu, the moku of Ewa, ahupua‘a of Pu‘uloa in the ‘ili of Ke‘ahi . . . My grandmother never left this area. She was born here, raised here, stayed until she passed away, never left. She loved it, you know. And people ask me “Where is she buried?” I say, “None of your business” cause . . . as long as . . . nobody goes near it, I'm not saying a word. So far, so good.



Teach your children to feel the beach, not just to play at the beach, so that ... when they have hard times they can go to their 'one hānau and feel the place



Nature needs to be preserved because our relationship with nature . . . really kind of makes us who we are. So if we lose some of the things that are important in nature in Hawai'i, we will lose the things which make us important . . . Tremendously important is the natural environment.



This area was known as House of the Seaweed, it used to come up to my knees . . . Now, lucky you find any. Lots of people, instead of just picking the top, they pull the whole thing out. We never went get plenty; we just go get what you need . . . and that's it.



*We had a good diet, very
nourishing.*

Poi was the staple.

Dried 'ōpēlu was a treat!"



Tūtū would give me dry fish, poi, not plenty, only so much . . . Then she would go out get some more . . . I know my tūtū papa and tūtū mama, they never gave me food where you eat and eat and eat. You eat only so much, whatever they give and that was sufficient . . . 'cause when you overeat, you get sick.



*The oldsters had so much love
and warmth for the little kids;
they would take any child.*



The concept of the Hawaiian child being the kamalei, the gift of heaven, the lei that is given to you. The baby puts their arms around your neck and that's your lei . . . A lei is a gift. A lei is something that you take responsibility for and not just simply possession of.



“We always ate together, Hawaiian style, bowl of poi in the middle of the table.”

“Did you eat out of the same poi bowl? Many of my generation did. I rather suspect your generation never did.” .



My grandparents . . . lived in a grass shack.
One where we slept, nice and clean with the
moena . . . When it was time to go to bed, I
lay down . . . I'd hear my tūtū mama and tūtū
papa talking about the day's activities and
tūtū mama would talk . . . about me and the
kolohe things we did, you know . . . and I'd
laugh until it was time for me to go to sleep.



Always spend time with your children . . . together as a family . . . I like to see parents with their children. I think that is more important than anything else, because it starts from the house, just like the tree [from] the root, and the kids are the branches.



And us children . . . if [our mothers] went to church, we sat outside. If they had women's meeting, we played out in the yard. If they went to dress the dead, we stayed outside. Wherever our mothers went, we went. So they were always involved in our lives.



[My mother,] all her children were born at home. When she was ready, she would send somebody, and [my father] would . . . tell them, “Put the hot water on!” so he can clean the scissors . . . “Fix her bed! Put clean linens on! Give your mother a bath, clean her up! I’m coming home.” . . . All the things we used to have to run around and do!



From when I was the littlest, I listened to everything. No subject was taboo. They would say, “never mind, you’ll find out when you’re older.” They didn’t try to hide things. If it was not for children’s ears . . . it was soon forgotten.



The world is so busy that they don't even have time to spend with their children.

"Hurry up! Hurry up! Get your things ready!"
And then they're dragging the things . . . How are they going to know who they are, if as a mother or as a father you don't talk to them, you don't share with them . . . what you want them to become?



My mom had 10 children altogether . . . So that meant I had to get up every morning and . . . make 10 cups of tea with 1 teabag. Go down the line and made tea for each one . . . I would make lunches . . . 20 pieces of toast, [two] for each of the kids, and then 1 piece of bologna or 1 piece of luncheon meat is all we could [afford] . . . and then we would sit on the porch and from the oldest going down . . . they would pass it . . . down the line.



Besides us, we had cousins that we had stay with us . . . Lots that [my dad] took from off the streets around our neighborhood . . . children that my mother brought home from the hospital to raise. Our house was always filled with children . . . never empty . . . one bathroom in the house with 20 something people . . . and, because I was the baby, somebody's combing your hair; somebody's checking your clothes: "Ah, come here. Let me put on your shoes for you." . . . It was amazing how wonderful it was . . . I miss those things.



*My mom and dad were Pied Pipers to lost people.
At night, there were 4 of us for a long time and
then they adopted my brother during the war . . .
And so we used to joke, 'cause we'd go to bed,
there'd be 4 of us. In the morning when we woke
up, there's 6, there's 8 . . . But you know, that was
the way we grew up.*



I asked [my son] “Would you like to come to Honolulu and take care of tūtū?” He said, “Oh, I'd love it!” . . . He came and stayed with her the whole time. The stories they tell are just priceless. She was not able to bathe herself; he did. He carried her to the bathroom. He carried her to her bed. And at night, he would curl up next to her and they would talk. So tūtū said to me, “I used to do that for him and he's doing it for me.”

Betty Kawohionalani Jenkins



My dad, I call him a procurer. He said, "You wanna learn how to fix cars?" He don't know, but he knew people that could teach us, and he would bring them over the house. And, well, they'd teach us . . . And then he'd say, "What kind equipment you need?" "We need one acetylene torch." "Fine," he said . . . "I'll get it in a week." . . . He always wanted fish for us, so he bought a boat for one of his friends who was a fisherman and he tell him, "The boat is for you. When my wife wants this kind fish, you bring 'em." . . . My dad was the type of guy who would look around and say, "Okay, this is what my family need. Doesn't necessarily mean I gotta provide it. But I help other people."



My father had a great influence on me. He would tell me . . . "You take care your family. And in order to take care your family, you take care yourself first." And "You gotta work as a group but you gotta stand alone." It sounds like a dichotomy but it's not. In other words, you gotta excel if you want to pull your family along . . . or else you're a burden on somebody . . . He was teaching me how to be a man: responsibility



In the Hawai'i of my childhood . . . the whole village was your family; their sorrows became yours and yours, theirs. We felt we were all related and could not help loving one another. As a child, I called our neighbors “uncle” or “tūtū” or “auntie,” a practice still observed by Hawaiian families today. We called it a calabash relationship, a word derived from the tradition of always sharing a great big calabash of poi that everybody dipped into, strangers and all. Eating from the same bowl, the same calabash – that is aloha

Nana Veary 1989

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When I go into the family courts and I have to meet with the judges . . . I'm known as "Dr." But as soon as I meet with the families, the kids, then I'm "Uncle." And that cuts through the ice . . . Now we're part of an 'ohana and . . . I'm going to do everything to help you, but by the same token, you have to bring something to the table also. Why? Because we're 'ohana, I'm Uncle.



Always had one person in charge and that was my Auntie . . . She the one who took care of all of us. If she didn't, we would all be put in orphanage . . . She kept all her sisters' kids, watched them and raised them, made sure they ate . . . She worked as a taxi driver to make money for us . . . What she says goes . . . no matter what . . . because it was her hard work that kept us together



They were very fussy. When the grandchildren came, they never kissed them on the mouth, always on the top of the baby's head. When asked, "Why?" "Well, our mouths are dirty." . . . They knew in their own way . . . how to avoid illness.



My parents, I've got to give them credit for this, they never swore, never. I never grew up in an environment where they were mean to or cussed each other. A bad, bad word for us was to say "shut up." And if my mother heard us say that, she wanted to know where we learned that. And I mean she would come and put chili pepper in our mouth. That was punishment.



“They laid the foundation of what we should do, why we do it, who we do it with.”



“We knew who was the boss. Not me, the child, my parents. And they laid the law.. .



“We had certain rules and you never questioned it”



These are my ancestors. Who are yours? You have the responsibility to know who they are and what your kuleana is all about.



My father was a man of few words . . . he would look at us and [tap the temple]. And we understood what he said, "Use your head! Behave yourself!" And it amazes me that we understood it. Today, you do this to one kid, [tap the temple] they going, "What that? What you said?"



“Don't talk loud. ‘A‘ole. We don't do that to you, so you don't talk loud.”

. . . . They never screamed at me

My tūtū papa would come put his arms around me and talk to me, and then, “Ō hele ana oe I ka wa‘a.” [Let's go for a canoe ride.]



I never heard my mother say 'I love you,' but she said it with the stick.



*You can have them listen to you
without yelling, putting them down,
but by encouraging, being positive, . . .
making sure that what you say
has worth to it.*



We learned respect because my father always talked properly to my mother, to my next door neighbor . . . If you're exposed to it, it's easier for you to learn respect. We always paid respect to my mother by telling her thank you for a delicious meal, the food was 'ono. That was how we learned respect.



It was such a big thing in our day to respect our [elders]. They always ate first. Now we're saying, "Oh the children should go first."



“Sometimes I hear parents telling kids, “Oh you stupid kid.” It bothers me. My parents never told us that”.

“[Children] need to have good and strong parents. Not parents that will argue and allow the children to argue and nag and cry and stomp their feet and slam the door. That's what parents do today, a lot of them. They act just like the child.”



So, you know, there were things that they wanted me to do . . . they taught me how to oli, when to oli. We do oli every morning . . . We took a bath and pule before we had our dinner. And after we were done, we would sit down and have scriptures.



Another thing is that my mom was an excellent housekeeper. Just excellent. My mom was always cleaning. I mean clean, clean, clean, clean, clean, clean. Like 24 / 7. Our house was immaculate.



My tūtū mama wanted me to be neat and clean . . . If I took a bath, they always check see everything's clean. Check my nails . . . and always, always, always told me "A'ole kāpulu! Make sure down by the wāwae all the way up clean." "All right, tūtū." And I gotta show the feet, . . . under the knees



My mother was an excellent cook . . . there are some foods I will not eat because it wasn't made by my mother and I knew the care she put into it. Like for instance, raw fish. There was never a bone in it . . . not a single bone. My mother was just particular about stuff like that. If we ate octopus . . . she would never allow us to eat the ink sack. That was not for us to eat . . . My mother comes from a family whose grandfather was a priest in the Hawaiian religion. He raised her. That's why she is the way she is.



As I got to be 3 or 4 years old . . . I have to work feather lei. These take years to make, you know. I only go one [row] across . . . because I was young. Tūtū was already older. She cannot see. “Oh, pau, tūtū.” I give to her. She’d feel. “Auwē no ho‘i e! Oh take it off!” . . . I’d say “Tūtū, it’s all right.” She said, “No, anytime you do anything, you do it right the first time.” . . . And sure enough, I still have [those lei]. So I know that what my tūtū said is right.



You had to get up like 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning. You ate your breakfast and at the crack of dawn you were working in the taro patches. By about 8:00 or 9:00, it started getting hot. But by that time, you were through.

My sisters-in-law are very fortunate . . . because my brothers can take care of their own children: change their diapers, feed them, bathe them and get them ready for bed. Besides cleaning, they wash clothes, cook, because we were taught that by my mom.



Before I went to elementary school, [my grandfather] . . . was the park keeper, so he would take me to work with him . . . and I'd help him clean up the park . . . and when we were done, he'd take me fishing. He taught me how to squid, how to spear fish, and all of that.



I remember 9, 10 years old, I had to go sell paper . . . I had a corner. My other three brothers had different corners . . . Well, they would get rid of all their paper and they would come and help me. Then the money we collect, first thing we do is turn it over to Dad. We had no allowance. Dad needed to take care of the household. So the value of working I was taught when I was young.



And it was a very unforgiving world. If you make mistake, you drown. If you walking up Waimea Canyon looking for goats and you no pay attention, you fall, you die There's consequences when you don't pay attention, when you don't listen to the elders. They not gonna drill it into you. They going tell you one time and you better pick it up. "Don't, this time of the year, don't go over there." "What?" They not going tell you again.



The Hawaiian values that are espoused - there's a standard list – Pono is on there. Lōkahi. Aloha. The list is not wrong for what's on it, but for what is not on it. How did they get here? Koa, courage. 'Ike, knowledge. 'A'a, daring. Ho'okupu, innovation. How did they relate to each other? Oratory. Protocol. How did they live? Pa'ahana, hard work . . . Why is Ho'okūkū, competition, or Lanakila, winning, not on the list? In Makahiki, they're so competitive, they might kill each other . . . You want to be Hawaiian? Po'okela, excel! We must preserve for our people values that arm them to be successful in the future. Aloha is not on the top of my list. Other survival values are.



During school hours, I was punished for speaking Hawaiian in the schoolyard during recess. Before school was finished, the teacher reminded the class, “When you go home, don’t speak Hawaiian, speak English only”

Emma Kauhi 1996



My father was not one to share a lot of his Hawaiian knowledge. When we asked, he always said it wasn't our business, "Just leave it alone." My parents spoke fluent Hawaiian but we were taught that we had to speak English



I was ashamed to be Hawaiian. We were put down . . . , "Oh you Kānaka are so stupid, lazy, good for nothing" . . . And it does something to you. Of course, when . . . I learned my culture . . . I've come to know how excellent our people were . . . All of a sudden, the light comes on and it changes your whole life, . . . I'm a changed woman . . . I'm so proud to be a Hawaiian.



We want to preserve our language. That's important. Our culture. Whatever you've learned that is good, pass it on to the next person, share with them because it will help in the future When I do, I say, "Well tūtū, where ever you are, I hope that what I did, you'll feel good about what I did."



*If we haven't prepared them for our leaving,
then what? Then what?*

Betty Kawohionalani Ellis Jenkins



*“It behooves us in our age to share with our
young people, or they will not have it tomorrow”*

Edith Kanaka'ole



With my family, they wrap it up in the lā'ī and then . . . put it in the niu . . . bury it. And tūtū would say, "This will help you to grow . . . You have to understand that you don't just sit, you are going to spread out. Whatever you have, . . . share with people, because it will help not only you . . . but children that will be coming, your children." And I'd laugh at her, cause I was young . . . not knowing that when I get older, it will affect my children and it will affect their children and on



*There are kukui trees . . . special ones . . .
And since I have grandsons, I buried the
'iewe with Kū fish: ulua, pāpio. I have a
new grandson and this next full moon
that's coming up, we're going to bury
his . . . afterbirth there.*



The Statistical Hawaiian

Bottom of the list in every category that you want to be at the top of, top of the list in every category you want to be at the bottom of. This is not what it means to be Hawaiian.

I believe that in order to change the behavior of our people . . . we have to redefine what is Hawaiian . . . What image does that raise in you right now? . . .



The prototype for me is a young male, physically fit, powerfully built, slender, genealogy tattooed on his leg or his arm . . . the javelin thrower . . . and before he gets up . . . [he's] calling down the gods . . . “Come, stand with me.” . . . He's chanting his genealogy . . . because he's not throwing alone. Before he throws, he awakens the javelin . . . Leleikalewalani, “flies up to the highest heights” . . . We have to . . . resurrect these sorts of things.



What Themes stood out for you?

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