

The Importance of a Native Narrative

Daniel Ikaika Ito, artist and guest contributor

A Native narrative illuminates a historically accurate account of an Indigenous people's identity without the shadowy, geopolitical lens of a colonized nation. It shines a light on the origin of a culture. With the clarity it brings, there is agency for a Native population in today's world.

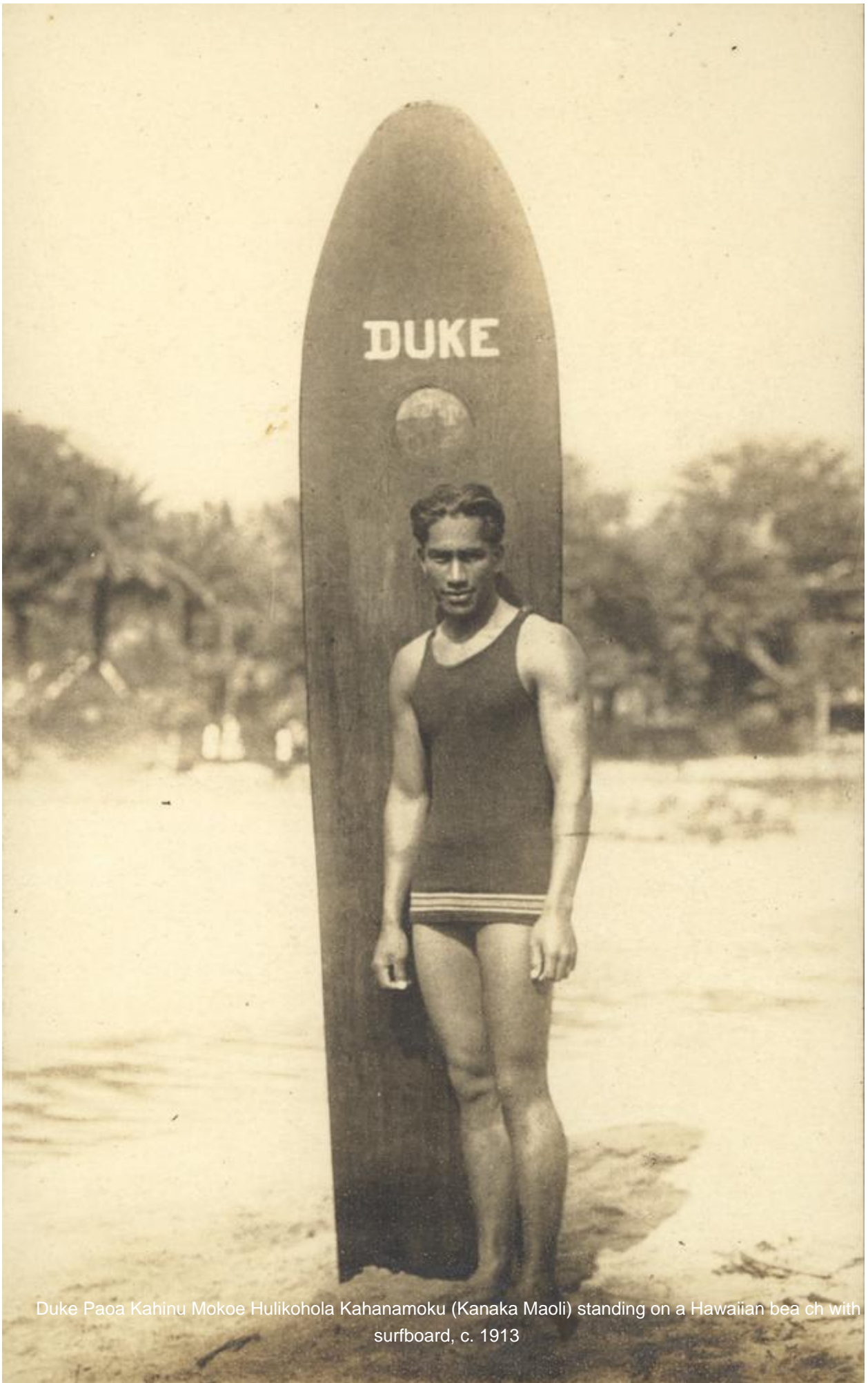
He'e Nalu: The Art and Legacy of Hawaiian Surfing is a visually engaging exhibition of surfing's Indigenous origin, its cultural significance and its influence on extreme sports. This exhibition opened at the Heard Museum in January and will be on display until July. *He'e Nalu: The Art and Legacy of Hawaiian Surfing* is a Native narrative of an Indigenous people's cultural practice that has evolved into a multibillion-dollar industry and multinational pastime.

Today, there are an estimated 35 million surfers around the world, creating an iconic lifestyle sport that is recognized globally and practiced wherever there is a large body of water. No matter a wave rider's nationality or skin color, all surfers can trace their roots back to he'e nalu (wave sliding or surfing) and Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians). The multinational surf industry and its governing bodies—the World Surf League (WSL) and the International Surfing Association (ISA)—control this Hawaiian sport's narrative. For the most part, there is a dangerous trend of Kanaka Maoli marginalization and disenfranchisement when the story of surfing is manipulated to further an agenda or commercial endeavor.

For example, there is a storyline widely disseminated by the ISA and the surf industry that three-time Olympic Gold Medal swimmer Duke Kahanamoku was the first Kanaka Maoli to share surfing around the world. In the documentary "Waterman" (2020), they call Duke "surfing's Johnny Appleseed"—whitewashing the memory of the great Native Hawaiian surfer by likening him to early American folklore with a Christian undertone. While Duke will always be regarded as "The Father of Modern Surfing," he was not the first to take he'e nalu abroad.



The three Kanaka Maoli princes, (left to right): Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana'ole, David La'amea Kahalepo'o, Kīnoiki Kawanānakoā and Edward Abnel Keli'iahonui, taken while they were attending St. Matthew's military school at San Mateo, California, c. 1886.



Duke Paoa Kahinu Mokoe Hulikohola Kahanamoku (Kanaka Maoli) standing on a Hawaiian beach with surfboard, c. 1913

In fact, it was three Hawaiian princes—David La'amea Kahalepouli Kinoiki Kawʻnanakoa, Edward Abnel Keli'iahonui and Jonah Kʻahiʻ Kalaniana'ole—who introduced he'e nalu outside of Hawai'i when they surfed the mouth of the San Lorenzo River, near Santa Cruz Beach in Northern California, in 1885. Duke would surf in California in 1912 and in Australia two years later. The well-documented historical account of the three Hawaiian princes surfing in Nor Cal does not help further the agenda of Huntington Beach promoting the nickname of “Surf City,” the global surf industry, or the Olympics, which is probably why it's not marketed in the mass media the way the story of Duke is. Another seldom-told Native narrative is the exceptional literacy rate that existed in Hawai'i during the Hawaiian monarchy. Hawaiians—and surfers—come from an oral tradition. The Kumulipo is the Kanaka Maoli creation story that was passed down from generation to generation through oli (chant), and Hawaiian genealogy and history were perpetuated through mele (song) and hula (dance) until the arrival of the Christian missionaries. The written word was first introduced in Hawai'i by the missionaries in 1820. Native Hawaiians marveled at the Westerners' technology of mo'olelo (story) on palapala (paper). From the Ali'i (royalty) to the Maka'āinana (commoners), the Kʻnaka Maoli embraced reading and writing—and Christianity, because the first book printed in 'Ōlelo Hawai'i (the Hawaiian language) was Ka Baibala Hemolele (The Holy Bible).

I wondered how these events would have been covered by the media if the Hawaiian Kingdom still existed; my people maintained the high rate of literacy and the Hawaiian language was never banned in the education system.

The traditions of Hawaiian journalism and he'e nalu have always resonated with me since my days as a boarding student at the Kamehameha Schools in the late 1990s. Life in the dorms on campus was essentially dry dock for a surfer, because you were without your parents to take you surfing, and underclassmen were not allowed to leave campus on weekdays unless it was for a school-sanctioned activity. Therefore, in high school I would

religiously read my dorm advisor's surf magazines (*Surfer, Surfing, Transworld Surf and Longboard magazine*) from cover to cover in order to maintain my passion for he'e nalu. When I noticed there weren't any K?naka Maoli named in the mastheads of these publications or in the bylines of the articles, I made a vow to become the first Native Hawaiian editor of a surf magazine. I was fortunate to achieve this career goal at age 23 when I became editor-in chief of Free Surf magazine. I would go on to cover he'e nalu for *Surfer, Surfing, Surfer's Journal, the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, the Honolulu Star-Advertiser* and ESPN, always striving to bring a Hawaiian perspective to my prose. Throughout my journalism career, I was aware of events in modern surfing history when K?naka Maoli were disenfranchised by the sport that ourkupuna (ancestors) created. I wondered how these events would have been covered by the media if the Hawaiian Kingdom still existed; my people maintained the high rate of literacy and the Hawaiian language was never banned in the education system.

The accompanying gallery of magazine covers is titled 'Ahahui Haku Mo'olelo, which means Hawaiian Journalism Association. I view historical events through the lens of a surfer and journalist—it's how I "associate" the world as a Kanaka Maoli. The kaona (hidden meaning) behind that title also pays homage to my Kanaka Maoli collaborators in this artwork—Art Director Janelle Kalawe and Copy Editor 'Iwalani K?ali'i Kaho'ohanohano—dear friends with whom I have had the pleasure to closely work at various media organizations throughout my career. Furthermore, I offer mahalo (thanks) to haole photographers Don James (via Duke Aipa), Jeff Divine and Mike Latronic for allowing us to use these surfing images for 'Ahahui Haku Mo'olelo. These people supported my vision as an editor-in-chief for the four magazine covers featured here that are in 'Ilelo Hawai'i and provide a Native narrative of historical events in modern surf history when K?naka Maoli were and continue to be disenfranchised in surfing.