

Memorial Paddle Out Ceremonies in Surfing Culture – An investigation into the historical and cultural significance.

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Frost, 125 Tahiti Ave, Palm Beach QLD, Australia. (2014).

ABSTRACT

Memorial paddle out ceremonies have become a distinct feature within surfing communities when mourning the loss of a peer. To date very little research or historical evidence has been sought as to how this tradition started and what cultural influences have been influential. These cultural and historical origins may help to provide an understanding of the fundamental intentions and ritual etiquette of the ceremony, thus providing a framework of reference for future generations of surfers. This research aims to provide some insight to this topic by gathering a collective of information and stories from elders within the international surfing community. This is then supplemented by both historical and cultural references.

KEYWORDS - Surfing culture, paddle out ceremony, circle formation, Hawaiian culture, contemporary ritual, bereavement, mourning.

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

During the month of November, 2013, three male surfers died whilst surfing. Kirk Passmore, 32, a big wave surfer from California disappeared, suspected drowned whilst surfing big waves on the Hawaiian Island of Oahu (Herreria, 2013). Chris Boyd, 35, was killed by a shark off the South-West Coast of Western Australia (Dorset, 2013). The other was Zac Young, 18, who was also killed as a result of a shark attack near Coffs Harbour, New South Wales (Lewis and Morton, 2013). Each died in separate incidents in different location. Each of their deaths was reported in both international and regional news broadcasts. One thing that each of these news broadcasts had in common was the visual representation of their memorial services, which showed a paddle out ceremony.

The reports and news broadcasts given for the three surfers showed the following similarities in the ceremonial structure.

- Friends and family gathered on a beach after a traditional funeral ceremony.
- Eulogies and sentiments were given by family members or close friends and spoken to the gathered crowd.
- A large proportion of the crowd then paddled out beyond the breaking waves and created a circle formation holding hands.
- Three cheers were given, water was splashed into the air and flowers were thrown into the middle of the circle.
- Surfers returned to the beach catching a wave in honour of their fallen friend.

(Killer Image, 2013; Pownall, 2013; Sydney Morning Herald Media, 2013)



Figure 1.0 Paddle out memorial service for shark attack victim Zac Young at Town Beach in Port Macquarie. (source: News Limited, 2013)

Paddle out ceremonies are used for a variety of purposes. These include commemorating, protesting and celebrating. This paper investigates the paddle out ceremony for the purpose of memorial immediately after or as part of a traditional funeral service. The most well known paddle out ceremony in the surfing industry is the opening ceremony of the *Quiksilver in Memory of Eddie Aikau* contest at Waimea Bay in Oahu every December (quiksilverlive.com, 2014).

When developing an understanding of the popularity, protocol and purpose of this memorial ritual it is to first integral to examine the historical and cultural significance. This research will aim to address the following questions.

1. When and where did the first paddle out ceremonies occur?
2. What cultural traditions have influenced the ceremonies?
3. What is the meaning and significance of the circle formation used in the ceremony?
4. Why has this tradition become so widely used in the surfing culture?

METHODOLOGY

Written evidence on the origins of paddle out memorial ceremonies is distinctly lacking in current and historical literature. Therefore the majority of information for this research was gathered through interviews and correspondence with significant people within the international surfing community. Suitability was assessed by how much they knew about the history and cultural significance of memorial paddle outs. To ensure the quality of responses each interviewee had to have significant involvement in the surfing culture for at least thirty years.

A total of nineteen interviews were conducted. These were face to face, by telephone and through email communication. To encourage rapport and depth of information the author travelled to Hawaii in December 2013 for face-to-face interviews with several elders within the Native Hawaiian surfing community and with Hawaiians that had been involved in surfing since the 1940's.

The subjects' links to surfing were through the following ways. These are coded into Table 1.0 – see appendix. This was executed to help emphasize the quality of subjects.

Affiliation to surfing:

- a) Author – surfing related published book.
- b) Professional Surfer – Current or past.
- c) Surfing industry professional – Current or past.
- d) International recognition for contribution to surfing e.g. Hall of Fame Inductee.
- e) Editor of a surfing related publication - Current or past.

- f) Contributor to a surfing publication – Current or past.
- g) Religious leadership.
- h) Political leadership.
- i) Educational leadership.

Table 1.0 – Summary of interview participants.

Interviewee	Country of Origin	Interview technique	Age	Affiliation to surfing	Years Surfing
1	USA, Hawaii (Native Hawaiian)	Face to face	53	b, c, d, i.	50
2	USA, Hawaii	Face to face	65	a, b, f, i, c.	58
3	USA, Hawaii (Native Hawaiian)	Face to face	Unknown	d, g	Unknown
4	USA, Hawaii	Phone/email	68	a, b, c, d, h, i.	61
5	USA, Hawaii	Phone/email	84	b, d, f, i.	76
6	USA, Hawaii	email	77	a, b, d, f, i	70
7	USA, Hawaii	Face to face	44	c, i	40
8	USA, Hawaii	Face to face	43	b, c, d, f	40
9	USA, Hawaii	email	55	c	50
10	USA, Hawaii (Native Hawaiian)	Recorded live interview conducted by third party.	61	a, i	Unknown
11	USA, Hawaii (Native Hawaiian)	Face to face	Unknown	c	Unknown
12	Australia	Phone	55	a, c, d, e, f	49
13	Australia	email	57	b, c, d, e, f	50
14	Australia	email	67	a, b, c, d	59

15	Australia	Phone	60	b, c	52
16	USA, Hawaii (Native Hawaiian)	Face to face	Unknown	b, c	Unknown
17	Australia	Email	66	a,b,c,d,f	60
18	USA, New York	Email	46	b,c,e	40
19	Australia	Phone	60	c	51

The central topics that were explored in the interviews were:

- Historical accounts and knowledge.
- Key people that influenced the tradition.
- Cultural influence and significance.
- The significance of the circle.
- Protocols, popularity and purpose.

All interviews were transcribed and a timeline of events was established. Further investigation through literature, books, newspaper articles and photographs was used in the early historical framework to support the lack of interviewee knowledge of this facet.

DISCUSSION

Face to face and phone interviews ranged from thirty minutes to two hour in duration. The most significant and informative interviews were from interviewees' number one and two. Information from interviewee number seventeen was also poignant in that he had personally attended the funeral paddle out for Duke Kahanamoku in 1968 and his father who is currently ninety three years old is one of the last remaining original 'Waikiki Beach Boys'.

Some limitations of the research model were that many of the interviewees found it difficult to stay within the parameters of the focus questions. This was especially pertinent in the interviews of Hawaiians. An integral aspect of Hawaiian culture is the passing on of knowledge through what is known as 'talking story' (Coleman, 2004). This involves sharing stories to illustrate an idea, value or belief. When talking about the topic of grief and bereavement many interviewees would share personal stories and reflections, rather than specific knowledge. More time with the interviewee's would have been beneficial. Face to face interviews tended to gather the most rich and diverse responses. Phone and email contact was beneficial but often lack the depth and clarity found in face-to-face interviews.

History – Hawaii

There is evidence in Ancient Hawaiian burial practices for the body to be disposed of in the ocean. This was achieved by wrapping the body in red cloth in the hope that sharks would devour it. The intention was for the deceased spirit or "mana" to be embodied by the animal deity (Fullard-Leo, 1998). The mana spirit is believed to be within the bones or "iwi" of the deceased. It was important for this spirit to be

protected and therefore bones were also hidden in secret caves (Kaululaau, 2010). For Hawaiians whose livelihood came from the ocean, for example fisherman and divers, it was not uncommon for the bones of the ancestors to be buried in underwater caves in special secret ceremonies. This aimed to keep their spirit within the ocean. The ocean that continues to provide them sustenance, wisdom and livelihood (B.Keaulana, Personal Communication, Dec 4th, 2013).

Japanese immigrants began to arrive in Honolulu in 1885 to work as contract labourers, mostly working on sugar plantations (Clark, 2007). Many of the Japanese immigrants were Buddhist. By 1889, the first Japanese Buddhist temple was established in Hawaii (Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji Ha, 2002). It is believed by many that the Buddhists brought the concept of cremation to the Hawaiian Islands (Clark, 2007). Rowe (2003) comments that scattering of cremated ashes and remains has been a funerary method in Japan since the Nara Period (710-794). The first crematorium in Hawaii was built in Honolulu in 1906 (Schmitt & Ronck, 1995).

A large majority of the Hawaiian interviewees cited that the original paddle out ceremonies for surfers started as ash scattering services at Waikiki Beach. It is believed to have been initiated by Native Hawaiian surfers that had formed a group called the Hui Nalu meaning “Club of the Waves” (Nendel, 2009). The Hui Nalu first started in 1908 and was led by Duke Kahanamoku. They aimed to keep strong ties to their Hawaiian heritage, which was under threat from the recent political annexation of the United States (Walker, 2012).

It was deduced by one interviewee that it was the influence of cremation combined with the Hui Nalu’s connection to the ocean that the paddle out ceremony was developed. The same interviewee also believed that the maritime industry, which was

increasing at a rapid rate in Hawaii in the 1920's and 1930's, may have been influential. Many Native Hawaiian surfers used their knowledge of the ocean to work on whaling, shipping and commercial fishing vessels. This may have introduced them to the concept of sea burial. Witnessing an ocean burial from a sea vessel was not an uncommon experience for seafarers in that era (Nakayama, 1987).

There does not seem to be any written documentation of when the first paddle out ceremony occurred or how it was organized. Surfer Wally Froiseth arrived in Hawaii in 1925. Although not Native Hawaiian, Froiseth spent much of his time surfing at Waikiki with members of the Hui Nalu. He recalls first seeing a paddle out ceremony at Waikiki some time in the 1930's (T.Froiseth, personal communication, 4th Dec 2013).

Two other international locations that surfing was having a rapid increase in popularity from 1920 onward were California and the East Coast of Australia. Similarly, there is limited written record of the original paddle out ceremonies performed in these settings. However, the first photo records of paddle out ceremonies in both Hawaii and Australia appear in the 1940's.

Hiram Brandon Kekuhinaonalani Anahu was a Native Hawaiian who spent much of his time at Waikiki beach working as a fisherman and playing his ukulele to entertain tourists. He was a member of the Hui Nalu. His death in 1949 was followed by a traditional 'Waikiki Beachboy' funeral (Timmons, 1989). Pictures viewed on Ancestry.com (2014) show the lead outrigger canoe manned by Duke Kahanamoku taking out ashes, leis and flowers to the deeper water to be spread upon the ocean.

History – Australia

In January 1941 a funeral service was held for a shark attack victim at Stockton Beach in Newcastle, Australia. This was followed by the Stockton Surf Lifesaving Club's boat paddling out beyond the breaking waves to scatter the ashes (No heading, 1941). It is unknown whether this was influenced by what had been happening in Waikiki in relation to paddle out ceremonies. A fifteen-member lifesaving team travelled to Waikiki in 1939 to tour and exchange ideas about surf craft and lifesaving methods (Baker, 2014). Baker (2014) records "H.Scott (Newcastle)" (pg. 79) as one of the team members. Further investigation of this link is required to formulate any substantial discussion. Further records of surf lifesaving boats performing paddle out ceremonies continue throughout the 1940's. Similar to the Hawaiian ceremonies they were mostly led by canoes (surfboats) and surfers often paddled out on boards as well. What is different from the original Waikiki ceremonies is that instead of throwing leis and flowers, in Australia the boats oars would be raised to signal the release of the ashes.

In terms of memorial paddle outs for surfers, evidence and representation does not seem to exist in the Australian setting until the late 1970's. In the film "Puberty Blues" surfers paddle out to release the board of their deceased peer. The board is set alight and left to drift out to sea (Scott, 2006). Australian based interviewees all referred to the burning of boards as some thing they had witnessed in paddle out ceremonies in the 1980's and 1990's in Australia. Again this association requires further investigation.

“Perhaps the board burning is reflective of the Irish and Viking bloodlines we have in Australia”

Significance of the circle formation

All interviewees made reference to the circle formation of surfers hold hands when discussing the paddle out ceremonies. It is interesting to note that the circle formation is not an essential element of the paddle outs performed on outrigger canoes (Waikiki) or Surfboats (Australia). This is undoubtedly due to the logistics. Additionally, the boat paddle outs are also not distinctive to surfers but are more designed for anyone who loves the ocean and wants a memorial service in that location.

The first documented circle was for big wave surfer and deep-sea diver Jose Angel in 1976. Jose Angel commenced a deep-sea dive off Maui in search of black coral and never surfaced. The paddle out ceremony was held at Waimea Bay, Oahu (Coleman, 2004). All interviewees that were present at Jose Angel’s funeral recall it as the first time they had seen a circle in a paddle out ceremony.

“To make a circle seemed a natural and very Hawaiian thing to do”.

Jose Angels ceremony was organized and run by Eddie Aikau who was a lifeguard at Waimea Bay and Peter Cole, a big wave surfer and teacher at the Punahou School in Honolulu. Surfers paddled out into the bay and made a circle by joining hands. Two years later a similar ceremony was held at Waimea Bay to honour Eddie Aikau who in 1978 also went missing at sea whilst trying to paddle ashore to save the crewmembers of the Polynesian voyaging vessel the ‘Hokulea’ (Coleman, 2004).

The life and legacy of waterman Eddie Aikau has particular significance in regard to the circular paddle out ceremony. In 1985 a memorial contest was held at Waimea Bay in honour of Eddie. The opening ceremony was a paddle out circle comprised of family, friends and competitors. Many Australian interviewees recall it as the first time they saw a paddle out ceremony. An opening ceremony with a circle paddle out is performed each year for the Quiksilver in Memory of Eddie Aikau and receives substantial media attention.

The interviewees from Hawaii made extensive reference to the symbolic meaning of the circle. For them it represents family, life, values, connection, and unity. The lei also represent the circle, which is a circular garland of flowers. This is a traditional Hawaiian symbol of the circle of life, and eternal life. Many believed that life begins and ends in the ocean. This meaning enabled some closure for the bereaved.

The linking together of hands while in the circle was expressed by many interviewees as a natural thing to do. Many interviewees said the splashing of water, cheering and throwing lei's as a form of release, allowing the soul to move on. One interviewee expressed that it may have been influenced by the Hawaiian Legislature in the State Senate, who close each session by forming a circle with joined hands to sing the unofficial anthem of Native Hawaiians, 'Hawaii Aloha' (J.Clark, personal communication, 5th December, 2013). This tradition started during what is termed as the 'Hawaiian Renaissance'. This renaissance which started in the early 1970's was marked by increased cultural pride and consciousness. Perhaps this is what inspired Eddie Aikau to create the circle at Jose Angels memorial.

Popularity and purpose of the paddle out.

All of those interviewed made comment on the healing process that the paddle out ceremony provided. This is aided by the sense of unity and community that is felt. It brings together people who have a common bond of the ocean and surfing.

“Having all your friends and family gather to one place that you really loved. That would be an honour”.

The ceremony involves active participation in the familiar and somewhat sacred space. This active participation also provides an outlet for emotions. Many interviewees regarded the water as cleansing or healing during a paddle out ceremony.

“For surfers, the on land stuff is fine but they need the ocean, the church of the sea”

The ocean brings the aspect of familiarity and comfort, but for one interviewee it also enabled him to put grief into perspective.

“The ocean can make you feel small. It’s so vast it makes you realise you are a small part of a big picture”

CONCLUSIONS

As the first known study on this particular mourning process it is essential that further investigations be carried out. Rituals require structure and when performed in large groups there needs to be leadership. Due to the location of the ceremonies and the

reliance on Mother Nature, it is essential that this structure is flexible to accommodate the varying needs of the group. However, all of the Australian interviewees commented that they had been to paddle out ceremonies that had lacked planning and organisation, and consequently the sacredness and sense of connection was compromised. Perhaps an understanding and acknowledgement of the cultural and historical origins may help to establish these protocols and ritual etiquette. Additionally this may assist in giving direction, meaning and significance to contemporary memorial paddle out ceremonies.

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