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Local Knowledge

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Amid the heightening bustle of the expanding and diversifying city of Honolulu, it becomes increasingly difficult to find a ritual or belief that is widely subscribed to without resorting to the investigation of trite and rather inconsequential practices. On the island of Oahu, however, there remains a group that is prevalent but scarcely explored. Though affected by the vast development and changing values of a new generation, this community retains some convictions of old, perpetuating rules of respect for one another and for the ocean. The circle of people of which I am speaking is the crowd that shares the waves, sitting together in the water until their toes shrivel and teeth chatter, there after the sun has retired and the sharks have come to feed. In this paper I seek to make manifest this culture, and show how a group of surfers reenact and perpetuate the social structures and hierarchy prevalent in Hawaii today.

When Captain Cook discovered the Hawaiian Islands in 1778, he found men, women and children riding waves on carved wooden boards, enjoying their free time in a strange and innovative manner. Little did he know how risky this pastime was. Claims for waves were battles for prestige, for beneath the recreation of the Hawaiian people lay a social hierarchy that, if breached, could end in death. Courtships were played out and jealousies arose, inevitably forming bonds and divisions in the community; wild tricks were attempted and large waves mounted with the full knowledge that a scratch from the reef could lead to infection, illness and even death. Nothing would deter them from entering the water, for adding to the danger only heightened the prestige. It was with special pride that the Ali`i, or chief, rode the waves. Given the privileges of surfing chants, private surfing areas kapu (forbidden) to everyone but his queen
and himself, and premium leisure time, he was required to gain the highest level of proficiency of surfing in the community. Surfing embodied the basic culture of the Hawaiian people; under the guise of sport it reinforced one’s social status in a complex hierarchy.

The mutuality of surfing and culture was made clear as both faced slow decline with the rise of a new way of life. With the arrival of the missionaries came the demise of the ancient religion and a revamping of the social structure. Consumed both by disease and by the bizarre and rather attractive aspects of Western culture, the Hawaiian people abandoned their traditions. Busied either with adapting to or combating this new way of life, leisure time dropped steadily, and the popularity of surfing accordingly declined. By the end of the nineteenth century, only dolphins could be seen riding the swells of the sea.

Surfing was renewed in the early 1900s by Hawaiians on Oahu. Though the skill level had regressed, the growth of the sport remained promising, as perpetuating the art of he’e nalu—riding the waves—became a legitimate concern. Throughout the century the popularity of the sport grew immensely. What began as a concern for the revival of Hawaiian culture became an avid pastime by the mid-1960s and an absolute craze by the 90s. Prospects of a boosted economy resulted in the increased commercialization of surfing, the images of the “local boy” and “island girl” promoted widely in showcase windows of stores throughout the island.

Attempting to adopt this identity, children, teens and adults alike sought to augment their fashionable appearance by salt-licked skin, battlescars, and stories of surf. On any given weekend, breaks would be packed with glistening bodies bobbing to the wind-licked face of the ocean, feeling a little more local, a little more “Hawaiian at heart,” just by being out in the water. But those who were there to deepen their tans or collect fantastic stories were missing the sport’s most precious aspect—the companionship of the surfing community.

Back in the mid-60s when my father was a teenager, surfing was enjoying a resurgence of popularity. It was not, however, the easiest sport to enlist in because, of the enhanced division between races in the water. My father recalls situations where he was made to feel uncomfortable
for Hawaiians would claim breaks as their own, angry at the infiltration of “their” islands—
“their” ocean—by other races. As a Japanese male, entering the surfing community was difficult,
but it was nearly impossible for a haole (Caucasian) to surf at a spot where s/he was not already
known or respected. Racial tensions were so prominent because there was less diversity in the
population, and people were much less educated—and hence more focused—on difference.

At that time there were definite rules of etiquette that were shared by the students of the
ocean: if you breached one of these rules it could lead to fights or general bad feelings with the
hui in which one surfed. Agreeable relations, on the other hand, increased one’s chances of
getting a good wave, a good ride, and was important simply for a good time. Thus a tacit code
was developed to lessen the probability of a conflict.

My father learned the rules of the water from more experienced friends, rules they had
picked up from their older brothers or fathers. One of the first precepts he was taught was
priority of position on the wave. When a wave breaks, all parts of it do not crumble to
whitewater at the same time. Instead, it breaks in sections, beginning at the peak, and
subsequently moving outward. Waves will usually break cleaner on one side, offering a longer
ride, and are thus distinguished, referred to as “rights” and “lefts.” Correct position depends on
being a certain distance from the proper side of the peak. If the wave is a right, for instance, the
person who is a moderate distance from the left side of the peak has position—meaning that s/he
will be able to enjoy the initial tube and the face of the wave after s/he emerges. Someone with a
good deal of knowledge and dexterity can adjust himself or herself to the peak and appear in
position, even if not formerly so. Not only will that person be insured a better ride but s/he also,
presumably, has enough experience to have known where the spot would be.

Thus skill has a great deal to do with the hierarchy in the water as well. After one
paddles out and chooses the break at which s/he will surf, s/he must soon prove his prowess in the
water if s/he expects to obtain respect, and be granted waves. The most skillful members of the
crowd judge your proficiency and treat you accordingly. The first thing they watch for is how
easily you engage with the wave, whether you know how to position yourself to ensure the best possible ride. Repeated success in catching the wave assures them that it will not go to waste. After they are convinced of this, they look for skill, like spray off the top of the lip, the snap of a cutback, or the slant of the physique behind a wall of water. It only takes a few rides for them to judge, so initial performance is crucial in determining where you lie in the pecking order of the ocean.

Because waves are sometimes scarce and always determined by the ebb of nature, one must take full advantage of each wave that is pulled in by the moon, held up by the wind. If one is deemed "skillful," s/he not only creates opportunities for him/herself (i.e. by getting in position), but also will be given opportunities by others in the group. Out of respect, recognition that another is better than oneself, the waves are dealt. Attention to the rules of the game helps breed good feelings among the group, where skill ordains the concealed hierarchy.

These rules, however, are not set in stone. For one, they change according to the size of the waves. When there is a swell, someone of skill and experience has the right to overlook a younger or less experienced person if and when they want a wave, regardless of position, for the surfer with superior ability can presumably make better use of it. They must choose with discretion, however. for monopolizing the waves is considered poor conduct, especially for a person that has spent enough time in the water to become reasonably accomplished. Implicit with skill is knowledge, making a breach of contract all the more threatening to the prescribed hierarchy. If the waves are small, that same person of greater skill and experience should know to relinquish the wave to an inexperienced surfer, so that s/he may practice and gain proficiency. It is a complex web of give and take, as people examine their standings within the hierarchy and the roles they must play to perpetuate it.

My brothers and I were inducted into this new realm—with its intricate and convoluted methods of determining order—at an early age, because my father had access to a small beach house on the northeastern shore of Oahu. called Laie. Near that area we learned to boogie board.
playing in the ocean with fins and a flimsy foam core after we grew tired of building sand castles or jumping in the waves. I remember being about 11 when my family began to regard “going to the beach” no mere picnic. It would be two hours or more in the water, paddling, surfing, and sometimes shivering. As we got older and more skillful, we deemed the hour-long commute to the gentle breakwater a waste of time, and began to frequent the reef breaks of the south shore. Frustrated by the large crowds and the seeming insolence of tourists, we sought to find a place where the waves were consistent and the crowd friendly. This, we found, was no easy task.

Through our respective friends we discovered, explored and eliminated a multitude of south shore spots. We started a little east of the crowded waves of Waikiki, at a place called Publics. where the left offered a good two-minute ride, sometimes even longer. At low tide the wave broke clean and hollow, due to the imminent and unavoidable presence of the reef. Too many painful sessions and nights of putting hydrogen peroxide to open wounds drove us away. Eliminating Diamond Head because of the domineering windsurfers and Portlock because of a shore of broken beer bottles and soggy cigarette stubs, we headed back west to check out the breaks Ala Moana had to offer. As expected, each spot differed slightly, but the crowds differed enormously, a factor important because of its control over the amount and quality of the waves it allowed us to enjoy.

In the days when we had not yet settled on a specific spot, we searched numerous beaches and found various crowds. One of the experiences stands out among all others—one that occurred at Rockpiles, a beach right outside of the Ilikai Hotel in Waikiki. Despite its central location, it does not attract many tourists because of the steepness of the wave, and, as we were to discover, the aggressive surfing style of the locals who frequented the break. When we entered their circle it felt like we were intruding on a private ceremony. As the waters fell quiet and the dark-skinned locals, mainly Hawaiian and Filipino, turned their heads. The waves were not especially big or especially scarce, but as they rolled in the men “took off” on me, catching the wave regardless of our respective positions. They deemed breaching the tacit contract “fair”
because I was inherently unworthy of the respect that it granted. They would call me off on waves that were clearly not theirs, and in order to avoid conflict I complied silently, paddling back out to wait for the next set to roll in, whereupon the same scenario would be re-enacted. Their actions were contrary to everything I had been taught, but there was nothing I could do because of my low level of skill (and quite possibly my gender) placed me outside of their circle of respect, outside of their code.

We never returned there. Through my brother’s friend we learned of a break where the waves broke clean, hollow and consistent. It offered an inside section that allowed an extensive ride, and despite the mere three-inch cushion of water before reef and the occasional mossy pipe, the spot was paradise. Located in Kewalo Basin, a haven for fishing boats and evening cruises, this place called “Shallows” soon became our refuge. We’ve been frequenting that spot for years now, and have finally discovered the camaraderie of “da hui” (the group) that my father enjoyed in his youth.

Though there are countless numbers of beachgoers today, there are still only a handful of hardcore surfers who frequent the water without the incentive of a large swell. But we had grown up in the water, and soon found that the weight of the outside world would be lifted off our shoulders once we entered the sea. To us it was not a matter of shredding every time we went out, but it acted as a release, a quiet time, a safe haven. Because of the constraints of work and school, we visited Shallows at many different times of the day, and came to recognize other locals who did the same.

Acquaintances are made with a simple “hi” or “howzit.” Conversations between surfers are not usually deep and exposing, for voices ring clearly over the stillness of the water. Instead, talk about waves or rides or local happenings fill the lulls between the sets. But it is understood that conversation is not the primary reason for being out in the water, so leaving mid-sentence to paddle for a wave is authorized and quite common. The willingness of people to speak depends solely on the people themselves: at Waikiki I enjoyed conversations with near strangers, but at
Shallows my brothers and I did not speak to other surfers for months, save a nod of hello, though their faces were as familiar as friends. Speech may be surface level, but confirms one’s localness, by the pidgin dialect that is used and subjects about which are spoken. Sometimes relationships develop from these daily greetings and extend outside of the water, sometimes they do not. But always, the relationships fostered help to maintain a good environment for learning to surf and for enjoying all the ocean has to offer.

Different conditions brought different crowds to our spot. A hurricane, earthquake, or tropical storm on the weather report could send my brothers into a flurry, as natural disasters would often induce a swell. If the swell came on a day when there was school or if the news was widespread (which would draw large crowds), they would plan to “dawn patrol.” This meant arriving at the beach just as the sun peered up over the edge of the earth, enough to illuminate the backs and tops of the waves and enable surfers to recognize and catch them reasonably safely. The water, not yet warmed by the sun, is chilly and invigorating, and usually the air is still, which makes the wave—and hence the ride—notably smooth. Just by virtue of the fact that most anyone will follow a swell, this crowd is usually the most random, though the rules are followed quite the same.

Around mid-afternoon, an influx of students rush to the beach, filling the time before dinner with a surf session. Usually the crowds are biggest at this time, and because the crowd is young and large, it is easy to see a breakdown in the traditional rules. In the olden days it seemed as though there was a higher level of respect for elders, a heightened awareness that when entering the water one had to abide by a new set of rules. Nowadays, groups of friends splash and call loudly to each other, take off on waves that are clearly not theirs, and effectively monopolize the break, not because of their prowess, but by the sheer size of the group. Their presence makes it difficult to enjoy the water, as the break becomes not an escape from the world but a microcosm of it.
On weekends and in the summertime, my brothers and I usually went to the beach in the late afternoon, just missing the rowdy milieu of unlearned youths. At Shallows, this is the best time to go. The sea has been warmed by the day's heat and welcomes you gently into the water; nature promises a spectacular sunset any day of the year as the last of the sun's rays disappear behind the distant finger of Honolulu Harbor. Not only is it beautiful, but the crowd, consisting primarily of men just off from work, is skillful, kind, and consciousness of proper etiquette, making the hours spent in the dipping sun all the more enjoyable.

Perhaps the great disparity in the friendliness of crowds can be traced back to the age-old delineation of race. In truth, however, I think it is more subtle than race differences, and enters into varying degrees of “localness.” At Rockpiles, for example, it seemed as though my brothers, father and I were rejected not only because we were Japanese but because we did not appear local enough. Being “local” goes beyond dark skin and Hawaiian blood; it a presence that one exudes, a manner of speech and action. Within the ocean, localness can be determined by how much you understand the rules of the water. Allowing them to take off on me probably confirmed, in their minds, my ignorance of the code, in a sense justifying their disrespect.

But “understanding” of the code could be interpreted in different ways. At Waikiki, among tourists, I found a small right where a Hawaiian man, Filipino lady and a Chinese girl were longboarding. All of them were more skillful than I, and almost unconsciously I yielded to them, following the rules, giving them a wave if they were in position, and not paddling for the larger sets, showing them that I understood the code of conduct. And it worked for my benefit. I was regarded “local;” they not only gave me waves, but also coached me and cheered me on. The rules at this break stemmed from an older tradition, where people respected one another and worked together to maintain and improve the level of surfing.

Besides “localness,” age also plays a part in the large distinction between general attitudes of crowds. In my father’s time, the groups of youthful surfers were smaller. He recalls that paddling out to join a hui of Hawaiian men was intimidating, and he and his friends were
forced to pay careful attention to the "proper" surfing etiquette, so as not to initiate tensions or ill-will. With the increased popularity of the sport, however, surfing no longer existed as a passing down of tradition but as a teenage “fad,” a trend which proved detrimental to the preservation of customs. It was almost as if newcomers were acutely aware that they were entering a different realm, but, afraid to admit that learning and adaptation were necessary, they set out to create their own code. Surfers who followed since could form no conception of what was proper, and they too struggled to form a new system, one that encompassed the varying rules they had witnessed. With only the companionship and wisdom of equally naïve friends, and the unwillingness of anyone to coach the youths, they are destined to never learn. The numbers of true old timers are waning, and it seems as though a new order, with rules pushing surfing to a competition rather than a pastime, is arising.

As surfing has become more popular, the level of etiquette has significantly decreased. Many of the old timers complain about how the water is always crowded, and does not offer the same quietude that it did ten years ago. Today, there is a lot less respect for the peace that the water brings, as the younger generations come in groups of six or seven to overtake a break, rowdily splashing and yelling at each other. Often they do this to prove their localness to the old timers, or the crowd that is already gathered. They project their voices using heavy pidgin and swearing profusely, complaining about the size of the waves with false bravado and often hogging the waves, a direct breach of contract. This makes the entire experience less enjoyable, when one has to consciously think of surfing as a competition for waves, rather than the sharing of the sea.

Still, there are people who know and practice the lessons of the old school. It is because of their shared understanding that relationships are forged and strengthened. The common knowledge of what it feels like to be a surfer contributes to the group’s cohesiveness—the anticipation of the swell, the take off, the drop, the bottom turn, the sharp scraping of the reef, the breathlessness of being held under. Without a word, differences of heritage, background and
experience are washed away, leaving only traces of salt crystals on deep brown skin. Because
surfers of a single spot endure the fickleness of Mother Nature together, because they know that
they share the same set of rules, it becomes easier to overlook difference and find commonality.
This is the spirit of surfing, of Hawaii; this is what it means to be local.