

The Technological and Cultural Determinants of Surfing

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This paper analyses the impact of beach culture on the development of surfing, the art of standing upright on a board and maneuvering it across the face of a breaking wave. Orthodox social histories locate surfing's development in technological changes after the Second World War. Conspicuously absent from these histories, however, is the role of beach cultures.

Throughout this century technological advances in surfboard design and materials helped transform riding style, from rigid statue-like stances, to graceful body deportment, to compact, shock-absorbing postures associated with gravity-defying aggressive maneuvers. However, historians should not ignore the influence of beach culture on riding styles. It is no coincidence that aggressive surfing first emerged in Australia, with its highly competitive militaristic beach culture and at a time when social relations at the beach were in turmoil.

Similarly, improvements in transport provide the script from which orthodox histories describe the development of surfing as an alternative subculture. The mass-produced motor vehicle allegedly freed Australian surfers from the fetters of the authoritarian lifesaving association in the 1960s. "Liberated" surfers subsequently abandoned competition for so-called "soul-surfing." But this does not explain the concomitant development of competitive surfing. Any understanding of the development of international professional surfing must take cognisance of Australia's competitive beach culture and the peculiar social relations on Hawaiian beaches.