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A New Hawaiian Monarchy: The Media Representations of Duke Kahanamoku 1911 -1912

On August 24, 2002, the United States Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp in honor of the man whom Robert Rider, Chairman of the Postal Service Board of Governors, called "a hero in every sense of the word." That man was a figure who is relatively unknown on the United States mainland, but someone regarded with the reverence bestowed upon legendary figures in his home state of Hawaii, Duke Kahanamoku. Bishop Museum archivist Desoto Brown considers Kahanamoku "the most famous Hawaiian person who has ever been, in terms of him being 100 percent ethnically Hawaiian."

Kahanamoku is indisputably one of the greatest heroes that the Hawaiian Islands have ever produced. He is one of only two persons from Hawaii honored with a statue in the halls of the United States Capitol, the other being King Kamehameha the great. However, Brown's comment on the ethnicity of Kahanamoku brings up several rather contested issues regarding Kahanamoku as well as the cultures and sports of Hawaii. What is a Hawaiian and what role does sport play in the construction of Hawaiian cultural identity? The answers to these questions lie in an understanding of Kahanamoku and the era in which he came of age.

Duke Paoa Kahanamoku was born in 1890 and died in 1968. During his lifetime Hawaii moved from an independent monarchy to full statehood in the United States of America. Hawaiian traditions such as surfing and the hula, which had been banned under the puritanical influence of nineteenth century American missionaries, were rediscovered and used as marketing tools for a new Hawaiian culture. The idea of being Hawaiian moved from a standard of bloodlines to one of geographical citizenship. Duke was instrumental in all of these developments, whether by intention or by default. He was the symbol of the new Hawaii, yet he was at the same time a vivid reminder of the old dying breed of pureblooded Hawaiians.
