

**MO'OLELO: OR WHY WE (THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR INDIGENOUS RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, KUMULAU FOUNDATION, AND NIUL'I FOUNDATION) THINK INDIGENOUS FILM IS SERIOUS STUFF**

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September 8, 2018. Jennifer Casani and Lynette Asperin, two co-founders of Kumulau Foundation having a back porch "talk story" with Jeanne Rubin, director of IIRM's Indigenous Film & Arts Festival.

Hawaiian soul, how could you leave us?  
You've not been lost at sea, you're only wandering  
Hawaiian soul, we sing your melody  
And send them out to sea, you know the harmony

They say before you left,  
To seek your destiny,  
The older voices called  
And drowned your laughter  
But I believed you knew  
Just what you'd have to be,  
A beacon in the storm  
To guide us after.

*Hawaiian Soul* by Jon Osorio and Randy Borden in honor of George Helm.

*Mo'olelo* is the Hawaiian word for a story, a legend, an article, and a piece of literature. More than that, *mo'olelo* is our history as Hawaiian people. Within each *mo'olelo*, stories are told of how our ancestors lived, how they worked, how they leisured, how they fought, and how they loved. *Mo'olelo* provides the link between those of us living today to our ancestors who have come before us and because of all of this; a *mo'olelo* is much more than just a story or a legend. Like many Hawaiian terms, *mo'olelo* carries meanings that are sometimes better felt than explained.

The Monthly Indigenous Film Series is a collaborative effort of the International Institute for Indigenous Resource Management, Denver American Indian Commission, and Denver Museum of Nature & Science, that aims to share the *mo'olelo* of Hawai'i and its people, as well as the *mo'olelo* of other Indigenous communities. On September 11, 2018 we screened ***Hawaiian: The Legend of Eddie Aikau*** at the museum's Phipps Theater. The film is part of ESPN's prestigious 30 for 30 documentary series.

The ESPN website briefly introduces the film this way: “Director Sam George chronicles the remarkable life and times of the late Eddie Aikau, the legendary Hawaiian big wave surfer, pioneering lifeguard, and ultimately doomed crew member of the Polynesian voyaging canoe Hōkūle‘a.”

Two Denver-based Hawaiian foundations co-sponsored the event: Kumulau Foundation (founded by Lynette Kaimimoku Asperin, Lisa Kelekolio, and Jennifer Casani) and Niuli‘i Foundation (founded by Cynthia Kahakui).

It’s worth taking some time to do a bit of a case study about how we work with folks from indigenous organizations such as the Kumulau and Niuli‘i Foundations to contextualize the film screenings and to frame the post-screening discussion and Q&A sessions to mutually support our institutional goals.

A good starting point is to explain who we are and why we launched a film festival in the first instance. The International Institute for Indigenous Resource Management is a law and policy research institute. Established in Denver, Colorado in 1997, the Institute’s cadre of internationally-based legal scholars and researchers work on projects designed to empower native peoples by examining the role the law can play in establishing and enhancing indigenous peoples’ control over and management of their lands and resources. We “do” the annual Indigenous Film & Arts Festival and the Monthly Indigenous Film Series because film, especially good film, and especially film written, made, and directed by indigenous peoples, is perhaps the most expressive medium we have for communicating messages about who we were; who we are; and who we are striving to become. These messages undergird all the work we do whether it’s examining the societal impacts of genetic research, or looking at roles indigenous peoples can play in warning and educating the public of long-lived environmental contamination, or developing different approaches for protecting native intellectual property rights.

Like the Institute, Kumulau and Niuli‘i foundations were founded by folks from Hawai‘i. Both organizations are committed to preserving and perpetuating traditional Hawaiian culture through community engagement, and see their support of the Indigenous Film & Arts Festival and Monthly Indigenous Film Series as a vital space for educating a broad audience of the particulars and centrality of Hawaiian culture. Furthermore featuring films by and about Hawaiians is crucial for addressing the misrepresentation of Hawaiian history, culture, and identity that is perpetrated by the Hollywood film and Hawai‘i tourism industries. All three organizations are involved in defining and carrying out the roles and responsibilities diasporic Hawaiians have in building the Hawaiian nation. And all three organizations reject the notion of the exercise of cultural practices as entertainment.

On September 8, 2018, Jeanne Rubin and Merv Tano sat down with Lynette Asperin and Jennifer Casani to set out a framework for the post-screening discussion and Q&A session. We knew from experience, as Brandy Nālani McDougall states in her *Finding Meaning: Kaona and Contemporary Hawaiian Literature*, how the *mo‘olelo* that surround us shape perceptions, values, and beliefs about ourselves, others, and our world. Accordingly, we were most concerned that the *mo‘olelo* that we shared after the screening were not other people’s *mo‘olelo* of who Hawaiians are or who Hawaiians aspire to become, but *mo‘olelo* that are connected to our *kūpuna* (elders, ancestors), our *‘ohana* (family), and our *‘āina* (land). So it should not come as a surprise to learn that our back porch “talk story” was replete with references to, among other topics: nation building; diasporic nations; self-determination; identity; erasure; colonization; and Hawaiian concepts like *kuleana* (responsibility), *aloha* (love), *lokahi* (unity), and *malama ‘āina* (to care for and nurture the land) .

Eddie Aikau was indeed a legendary big wave surfer and pioneering lifeguard. But a doomed crew member of the Polynesian voyaging canoe Hōkūle‘a?—we thought not. We thought it was important to remind the audience that the film is **HAWAIIAN: The Legend of Eddie Aikau** and it was Eddie’s “Hawaiian-ness” that made him much more than a surfer and lifeguard.

After the Hōkūle‘a capsized and with his fellow crew members in the direst of straits, “Eddie would go.” And it was his Hawaiian-ness—the depth of his *aloha* and his powerful sense of *kuleana*—that compelled him to set out for help on a surfboard in stormy seas and, for us and for many, cast him forever as a legendary Hawaiian.