

## Two Subcultures of Surfers in California and Kanagawa

There are a plethora of subcultures in modern society, and to fully appreciate culture one must understand subcultures. Subcultures range in intensity and socio-cultural influence on their members. Some are loose groups with a weak in-group identity, such as men who gather to play pool as described in *Tally's Corner*<sup>1</sup>; others are all-encompassing groups with a strong identity, like Hell's Angels or *bosozoku* (youth gangs) in Japan<sup>2</sup>. This paper describes a subculture that lies somewhere between these extremes of subculture identity and group solidarity: that of surfers.

Surfing has become popular worldwide, and surfers' lifestyles have taken on an international flavor. Still, cultural mainstays such as language, beliefs, folkways and mores are different cross-culturally, and so are surfing subcultures. To bring out both universal and cultural elements of surfing, this paper studies surfers in two contrasting societies at two different time periods: Shonan in Japan and California in the United States.

Subcultural features such as identity as a surfer, interpersonal relations, status, and surfing's meaning are explored. Not only are comparisons of subcultural group characteristics made, but social class is introduced as a control and shown to be influential for the behavior and life chances of surfers, independent of subculture.

### *Methodology*

A Masters thesis on surfing subcultures in California is utilized as a major secondary data source.<sup>3</sup> Hull, a surfer, engaged in participant observation with surfers in Northern California to describe their lifestyle and subcultural group characteristics. His work acts as a basis for cross-cultural comparisons and matches well with my own field observations.

The main data source consists of naturalistic observations of two surfing subcultures, which proceeded by what John Lofland calls accidents of current biography.<sup>4</sup> That is, from a young age I have been a surfer, and at different times I have been a member of both surfing subcultures. The first subculture, called 'T-Bay surfers', are young surfers who lived in a beach town in Orange County, California, during the 1960s. The second, called 'Reef surfers', are Japanese surfers who live in a beach town on the Shonan coast of Kanagawa prefecture.

While being a member of the two surfing subcultures allowed access to inside information unavailable to an outsider, my activities and close personal ties within the two subcultures carry a natural bias. In regards to the T-bay surfers, there are further problems of recall and limited information about members over a long period of time.

An open-ended questionnaire was designed to explore the subcultural characteristics of the Reef surfers. An old friend and well-known member of the Reef surfers who lives a short walk from the Reef passed out the questionnaire to other members of the group, estimated at 20–25 surfers. Twenty-one Reef surfers received the questionnaire, enclosed in an envelope together with a pen, a beer coupon and a stamped envelope with my address. All except one, or 20 of 21 (95%), of the Reef surfers filled out and returned the questionnaire.

### *T-Bay and Reef Surfers*

The T-Bay group consisted of 11 teenage males who lived in the same neighborhood and surfed at a spot within walking distance of their homes called T-Bay. They were usually the only surfers at this spot and regularly surfed there from the early to late 1960s. Most had been boyhood friends and naturally formed a surfing subculture when they got caught up in the surfing boom around 1962. At this time all but one were secondary-school students. While all members knew one another other well, when not surfing they stratified by age. The five older T-Bay group surfers were high-school students, excepting one high-school graduate. The six younger surfers, all best friends, were in junior high or first-year high school.

The T-Bay surfers also surfed south of T-Bay at Dana Point Pier, Doheny and spots in San Diego County, and they sometimes went surfing up north as far as Santa Barbara at Rincon and Hammonds Reef. Still, T-Bay was where they surfed most frequently because it was so close to home.

The T-Bay surfers fixed their own boards, wore surfing clothes (sandals, T-shirts, jeans, trunks, etc.), read surfing magazines, went to surf movies and talked about surfing. Their lives were

centered on and enwrapped in surfing. Their tight group lasted until after high-school graduation, at which time there was a military draft and the Vietnam War.

The Reef is one of the spots where surfing first occurred in Japan. Surfing occurred there in the 1960s, and a few locals were out surfing when I first surfed there in 1972. The Reef surfers dealt with in this article were surfing there in 2004. Now the spot is crowded, with about 60 surfers spread over its three breaks at a time on summer days of good surf, though most are not local surfers. Still, the Reef surfers are visible as a group since they occupy an area near and around the steps that face the main break.

The Reef surfers are considered one of the better groups of surfers on the Shonan coast. More than half of them have been in surf contests, with three taking first place. Nearly all (17 of 20) have surfed outside of Japan. Hawaii is the most popular overseas surf destination, but some have surfed in California, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Canary Islands, Fiji, Costa Rica, Taiwan, Philippines and South Africa. They have surfed at nearly all spots in Japan along both the Pacific Ocean and Japan Sea coasts. Due to locality, surf spots along the Shonan coast and in Chiba prefecture are surfed most often. And, while Hawaii is a popular overseas surf destination, most Reef surfers said that the Reef was their favorite spot of all.

The Reef surfers closely identify with one another as a group. While they have friendships outside of surfing, the great majority reported that more than half of their best friends are surfers. The most popular get-together among Reef surfers is a barbecue party at one of their homes, where they all eat and drink until late, sometimes until the wee hours of the morning. The surfers' families are closely tied in with the group and are a part of the surfing scene during the summer, with wives, husbands and children gathering in the same area near the steps. It is not uncommon to see a Reef surfer teaching his four- or five-year-old child how to surf.

The Reef surfers range in age from 12 to 48, with an average age of 33 and median age of 39. Three of the surfers are female, and this number will probably increase, as more women are taking up surfing these days. Twelve of the Reef surfers are married, and among these ten have children, most not yet in their teens. However, regardless of age, gender and marital status, everyone is equally a part of the group.

#### *Place and Dress*

Along the Shonan coast, locals gather at spots where they are recognized by others as locals and group members. Most Reef surfers live near the Reef, predominantly surf at the Reef and when not out surfing occupy an area on or near the steps that lead to the sand in front of the Reef. Their surfboards, bicycles and motorbikes with surfboard racks, and clothes are strewn on or near the steps. The Reef surfers may be defined as a group by their dress, talk, mannerisms, engagement in the same activity (surfing), frequent interaction with one another, and a sense of identity with and belonging to one another.

The number of Reef surfers gathered at the steps depends on the surf. When there are good waves and it is a nice day, 15 or so Reef surfers will be around with some out surfing and others occupying the steps. The best surfer, a pro surfer, sits in the middle and at the top of the steps. His motorbike with surfboard racks is parked almost next to where he sits. There is a railing about three feet high on either side of the steps, and usually the same surfers stand leaning on the right or left railing watching the surf and chatting with friends.

Conversations as one would expect usually center on surfing, though family and work are also common topics. Personal relationships vary from best friends to acquaintances, particularly so with this group since age, marital status and occupation vary so widely. The youngest members, in their early teens, listen respectfully when their elders, some over 40 years of age, talk about surfing. Still, dress, mannerisms, and demeanor are strikingly similar.

Hull described the physical appearance and dress of Northern California surfers during the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> His profile matches well with the T-Bay surfers and even approximates the attire and appearance of the Reef surfers today:

Active surfers are characterized by shaggy, sun-bleached hair that does not quite reach their shoulders. Crew cuts and Brylcreem are definitely unacceptable. His face is usually clean-shaven, except, possibly, for a mustache. Super long hair or beards are rare among active surfers. His face, neck, hands, and wrists are tan from hours in the water and on the beach, even in the winter months. His neck and shoulders are often muscular, and his arms and wrists are well-developed

from hours of paddling. His dress changes from season to season but his surf trunks and wetsuit are always present. His clothes are not new, and he is often wearing a Hawaiian or T-shirt, Levi's (blue-jeans corduroys), and will be barefoot or have tennis shoes or sandals (slaps, thongs, etc.) on his feet. The T-shirt is rarely plain, and often quite colorful (but slightly faded) with a symbol of surfing printed on it in the form of a wave or a prestigious surfboard manufacturer's name and insignia. His general appearance is one of carefully fostered casual ruggedness. It reflects his physical pride in his body, common among athletes, tempered by the independent, masculine, 'back-to-nature' image most surfers have of themselves.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Surfing subcultures and language*

Subcultures adopt a style of language different from that of the national culture. Among surfers, language centers on surf maneuvers and sea conditions and is only familiar to surfers. Furthermore, although language is different, many Japanese words for surfing are *gairai-go* – foreign words borrowed from American surfing lingo. One reason for this, as one of the Reef surfers said, is that it is easier to take terms for surfing from its place of origin and adopt them into the Japanese language than to figure out what they may mean in Japanese. A few of these surfing words in Japanese are *gettingu ouuto* (getting out), *noozu raidingu* (nose riding), *kuroozu auto* (close out), *karento* (current), *padoru* (paddle), *padoru auto* (paddle-out), *teiku ofu* (take-off), *botomu taan* (bottom-turn), *oobaaheddo* (overhead), *waipuauto* (wipeout), *chopii* (choppy), *gurasshi* (glassy) and *paaringu* (pearling).

#### *Meaning*

Meaning is the phenomenology of subculture. John Lofland provides us with a definition. [Meanings] are the linguistic categories that make up the participants view of reality and with which they define their own and others' actions.<sup>7</sup> Meanings are also referred to by social analysts as culture, norms, understandings, social reality, definitions of the situation, typifications, ideology, beliefs, world view, perspective, or stereotypes. Terms such as these share a common focus on humanly constructed sets of concepts which are consciously singled out as important aspects of reality. Meanings are transbehavioral in the sense that they do more than describe behavior – they define, justify and otherwise interpret behavior as well.

Each surfer identifies with the ocean and being a part of it through surfing. What this means in a phenomenological sense is different for each person. Conceptually, however, looking over responses by the locals to the question 'What does surfing mean to you', two general categories came about. The first category has to do with individual practical concerns, or what a Reef surfer gets out of surfing. Representative responses here are that surfing is 'fun', 'gives me self satisfaction', 'is my favorite sport' and 'is good for my health.'

The second and most popular category (12 of 20 Reef surfers) has to do with surfing as life itself or as a representation of self. Some Reef surfers said that surfing means life itself or that surfing is the most important part of their life. One surfer said surfing means *jinesei* (philosophy of life) and another said that surfing means *zen* (spiritualism or Buddhism).

In Hull's research, California surfers in the 1970s made similar comments on surfing's meaning.<sup>8</sup> The individuality of surfing was reflected in such expressions as surfing means 'being able to enjoy myself in the atmosphere of the ocean', surfing 'gives me a pleasure of mind and relaxes me', and surfing gives me 'a feeling of freedom'.

California surfers also said that surfing is life or the essence of life: surfing is a 'way of being with and expressing yourself through nature', 'a total escape from life's pitfalls', 'a good life', 'being next to the source of life', 'a way of life' and 'everything'.

There are no survey data to describe the meaning of surfing for the T-Bay surfers. However, meanings came through in how they lived their lives through surfing. In this regard they were similar to other California surfers and the Reef locals since surfing was central to their lives, it gave them satisfaction and provided them with characteristics that defined their identities.

#### *Similarities and differences between American and Japanese surfers*

The locals at the Reef were asked about similarities and differences between Japanese and American surfers. For similarities, the Reef surfers cited the ocean and surfers' connection to it: 'they both love the ocean', 'they are into waves' and 'since both love the ocean the way they think is about the same.' For differences, common responses referred to surfing style and the 'physical

differences' of surfers in the two countries: 'American surfers surf more powerfully than Japanese surfers', 'physique', 'power' and 'body'.

### *Status*

Surfing groups in California and Shonan are made up of locals who have shown they can surf. Kooks (beginning surfers) are not considered members of the group until they have proven themselves. The top surfers in the group enjoy the highest status, and this pecking order goes down to the least skilled surfer. The best Reef surfers are the center of attention at the steps, others respectfully greet them, when they talk others listen carefully, and one cannot be considered a member of the Reef surfing group without their tacit approval. These top surfers also earn money by giving surf lessons, and one makes surfboards and another is a pro surfer.

Earl held the highest status among T-Bay surfers. No one could do what he did on a board. Earl was a nose rider who on just about any wave could hang five and his cutbacks on waves were remarkable. His surfing ability was the measure of comparison for the other T-Bay surfers. In the water, Earl had priority on the waves and on the shore his word about the surf condition, surfing in general and almost anything else for that matter was carefully listened to without objection.

### *Class*

Social class relates to behavior regardless of subculture. Surfers come from all classes though most California surfers are from the middle class, and more towards the upper than lower end of middle class.<sup>9</sup> This occurs because most surfers live close to the ocean where the cost of housing is high, surfboards and other equipment like surf racks and wetsuits are expensive and surfing has been a sport of the middle class. For similar reasons, surfing is a middle-class sport in Japan as well. However, a very demanding educational system and strict controls over youth in Japan creates conflict for middle-class adolescents who are a part of the surfing subculture.

**Reef Surfers' Social Class.** The Reef surfers did not remain in the same class as their parents: they went downward, as their completed education and occupations were lower than that of their parents. Reef surfers had a lower occupational status than that of their fathers. Fathers' occupational status was middle leaning towards upper class. The occupational status of sons, the Reef surfers, was at the lower end of middle class. While one Reef surfer was a researcher and five were businessmen, the others worked in jobs that are of lower status and are less mainstream than their fathers'. Two of them worked in the surfing world, one as a surfboard manufacturer and the other a pro surfer. The other four included private English language tutor, cameraman, boat assistant, and carpenter.

The locals at the Reef are 'mavericks' in Japanese society, with their loose, carefree lifestyles. I would argue that their downward social mobility is a result of the conflict between the surfing subculture and the dominant national culture, particularly in regards to adult expectations and strict controls of youth.

Pop culture portrays surfers as laid back, natural, fun-loving, and as doing their own thing. The meaning of surfing for Reef surfers as noted above fits these popular images. These values contrast with Japanese mainstream cultural values, particularly 'obligation' (*on* or *gimu*), 'one must adhere to one's place' (*honbun* or *bun o mamoru*), and the strong emphasis on conformity.<sup>10</sup> A surfing way of life conflicts with dominant adult expectations and norms of adolescent behavior such as compliance with strictures forbidding youth misbehavior, 'hard study', adherence to school regulations and rules aimed at suppressing individuality, and active participation in conventional youth activities. Furthermore, the Reef surfers identify strongly as local surfers distant from mainstream culture and society.

Asked what they thought were the defining features of their surfing group, the Reef surfers were in strong agreement that 'close bonds or ties' with each other were what the group was all about. They commented that the group provided their very identity as 'locals', meaning resident Reef surfers, who were members and belonged in the group. As if in opposition to the national culture, they said, 'As "locals", we have our own way of life,' or, 'We surf and have parties and barbecues, we are natural, easy-going and free, we respect and are a part of nature, and we are positive thinkers.' None mentioned that there was some kind of uniqueness that distinguished Japanese surfers from surfers in other countries. To the contrary, they identified as 'local' surfers, and the surfing subcultural values and norms played a dominant role giving them direction in life and a sense of their identity and relations with others.

Nearly all Reef surfers who began surfing at an early age experienced downward social mobility. The minority or four surfers who as adults remained in the same middle social class as their fathers, all of them college graduates, began surfing at a relatively older age: three of the four began surfing in their late teens. In contrast, all eight of the Reef surfers who experienced downward social mobility, or as adults had a lower education and occupational status than their fathers, began surfing at a young age (12–15 years old). Reef surfers who either did not graduate from high school or ended their education after high school showed signs of early youth rebellion.

Coming from a higher class, when young, Reef surfers had every opportunity to achieve academically, get into high-ranked schools, properly prepare for college entrance and go on to college, but most decided not to. They had a class advantage to achieve while other lower working-class youth do not. In something of an irony, Reef surfers made a decision to reject getting ahead through education, even though in the usual course of events the educational system would reject such lower-class students.

Quite simply, as an adolescent in Japan you cannot both conform to a mainstream way of life and be part of a surfing subculture. The Reef surfers' downward social mobility, then, reflects on the dire consequences of adolescent non-conformity in Japan. Surfing as a subculture in Japan goes against adult expectations of mainstream adolescent behavior, and active participation in surfing makes it near impossible to keep up the levels of academic achievement necessary for college entrance. There are no open admission programs for high school or college; that is, if you don't get into a higher-ranked secondary school it is very unlikely that you will go on to college. The Reef surfers who experienced downward social mobility were surfing and not studying during their middle-school days, and as a part of a local surfing subculture they placed themselves outside the mainstream and only route to a higher education and the conventional middle-class occupational status of their fathers.

**T-Bay Surfers' Social Class.** The T-Bay surfers came from working-class and middle-class families made worse by living in a wealthy coastal city of Orange County. The parental social class of the T-Bay surfers was much lower than that of the Reef locals. Half the T-Bay surfers came from single-parent households at a time when divorce rates were low in the United States and stigma was attached to single-parent families. Not one of their parents was a college graduate. Parental occupation was working or middle class. For those in a two-parent family, fathers' occupations were working class: maintenance worker, gardener, truck driver, handyman. Most mothers worked full-time and held working-class or middle-class jobs: cafeteria worker, bakery worker, office worker.

Adolescent deviance and future socioeconomic status in the United States closely tie in with social class.<sup>11</sup> A 'stigma' is attached to the lower class, family finances and class culture severely dampen hopes for college education, and job opportunities are hampered by exclusion from mainstream social circles and low levels of education. Social control agents (police, teachers, etc.) expect trouble and keep a close watch over lower-class youth. Labeling encourages lower-class youth to adopt the identities of 'bad boys' or 'bad girls' and eventually leads to isolation from conventional youth activities. Early trouble at school and with the law coupled with limited opportunities to make it in middle-class society result in a social reproduction of class. The T-Bay surfers fit this pattern well.

The T-Bay surfers were a rowdy group nicknamed and identified by others as the South Gang. They had fun during adolescence, none expecting to go to college or to succeed in middle-class society. The T-Bay surfers began smoking and drinking in their early teens, played cat-and-mouse with security guards and the police, trespassed on private property, went joyriding, got into fights, engaged in minor theft, and so on. They were 'outsiders' at high school and looked down upon as social misfits from the bad side of town.

Two T-Bay surfers did not finish high school, most of the others graduated in the lower part of their class, and only two are college graduates. The latest I have heard (and some of the information is dated) is that all but one have worked in working-class or middle-class jobs: gardener, fisherman, truck driver, maintenance man, tree cutter, house painter, boat operator. The one exception is in academia. The consequences of active youth deviance and lower-class background also showed in conflict with authority and trouble as adults.

A little over half of the T-Bay group surfers have been arrested for criminal offenses as adults, and four of them served from six months to three years in prison. Only five T-Bay surfers ever

married, and of the three marriages I know of today only one remains intact. Finally, tragically, two T-Bay group surfers died early, one after contracting AIDS and another committing suicide.

### *Conclusion*

Although the Californian and Japanese surfers described in this paper are from different time periods, classes and cultures, they had surfing in common. Sugimoto (2003:25–27) argues that individuals from the same subculture but different societies have more in common with each other than they do with individuals from other subcultures in the same society.<sup>12</sup>

The downward social mobility of the Reef surfers suggests that early involvement in a surfing subculture is an impediment to 'getting ahead' in mainstream Japanese society. This is not only the case in Japan: Hull demonstrated that downward social mobility was common among Californian surfers in the 1970s. Conflicts that occur because of downward social mobility, for example, in the family or with adult authorities, need attention. A future longitudinal study of adolescent surfers could address these issues.

Our understanding of the role between class and surfing subcultures would benefit from research focused on class and its relation to the lifestyle of surfers. The youth deviant behavior and troubled adult life of the T-Bay surfers was more tied in with their lower-class background than with belonging to a surfing subculture. It may also be that surfing subcultures have a class dimension and that behavior of surfers varies according to class background. Differences of behavior in surfing subcultures by class, conflicts, social mobility, and cross-cultural similarities and differences would benefit from future research.

— Robert Stuart Yoder

<sup>1</sup> Elliot Liebow (1974) *Tally's Corner*, Boston: Little Brown and Company. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Greenfield (1994) *Speed Tribes*, New York: Harper Perennial; and Ikuya Sato (1991) *Kamikaze Biker: Parody and Anomy in Affluent Japan*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Hull (1976) 'A Sociological Study of the Surfing Subculture in the Santa Cruz Area', unpublished M.A. thesis, San Jose State University.

<sup>4</sup> John Lofland (1986) *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, Second Edition, Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

<sup>5</sup> Hull, 1976

<sup>6</sup> Hull, 1976: 94–95

<sup>7</sup> Lofland, 1984: 71–72

<sup>8</sup> Hull, 1976: 73–74

<sup>9</sup> Hull, 1976

<sup>10</sup> John Condon (1984) *With Respect to the Japanese: A Guide for Americans*, Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press Inc; and Takei Sugiyama (1976) *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*, Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>11</sup> Chambliss, William J. (1975) 'The Saints and the Roughnecks', in Friedman (ed.) *Annual Editions: Readings in Sociology*, Guilford, Connecticut: Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc.

<sup>12</sup> Sugimoto, Yoshio (2003) *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, Second edition, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.