

# Hana Hou!

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**I**an Masterson stands beside the rain-slicked highway a mile from his home, watching the sunrise. 'Iwa birds fly upwind, and rain clouds are riven with dawn colors. "Some people call this place Surf Gate," he says, after the nearby gate across a road leading into the valley at Kualoa Ranch. "It's been in a bunch of movies. It's also called Rainbows. The name of the point, though, is Kalaeoka'ō'io." I recognize the spot from having driven by it dozens of times, but I've never looked as closely at it as Masterson has: He dedicates whole pages of his master's thesis to images of its refracted light, its sea spray and to the small, A-frame wave that breaks offshore. The point is also the boundary between Kualoa and Ka'a'awa, two Windward O'ahu ahupua'a, or ancient land divisions. It's here, says Masterson, that quite possibly human beings first surfed on boards.

We paddle out to the break, me on one of Masterson's favorite boards, a '70s single-fin pintail, and he on an alaiia, a traditional wooden surfboard that he cut from a log, shaped and waterproofed in a manner done for centuries in the Islands. "I made this one in the older style, my own shape but from templates of boards at the Bishop Museum," he says. It's not the

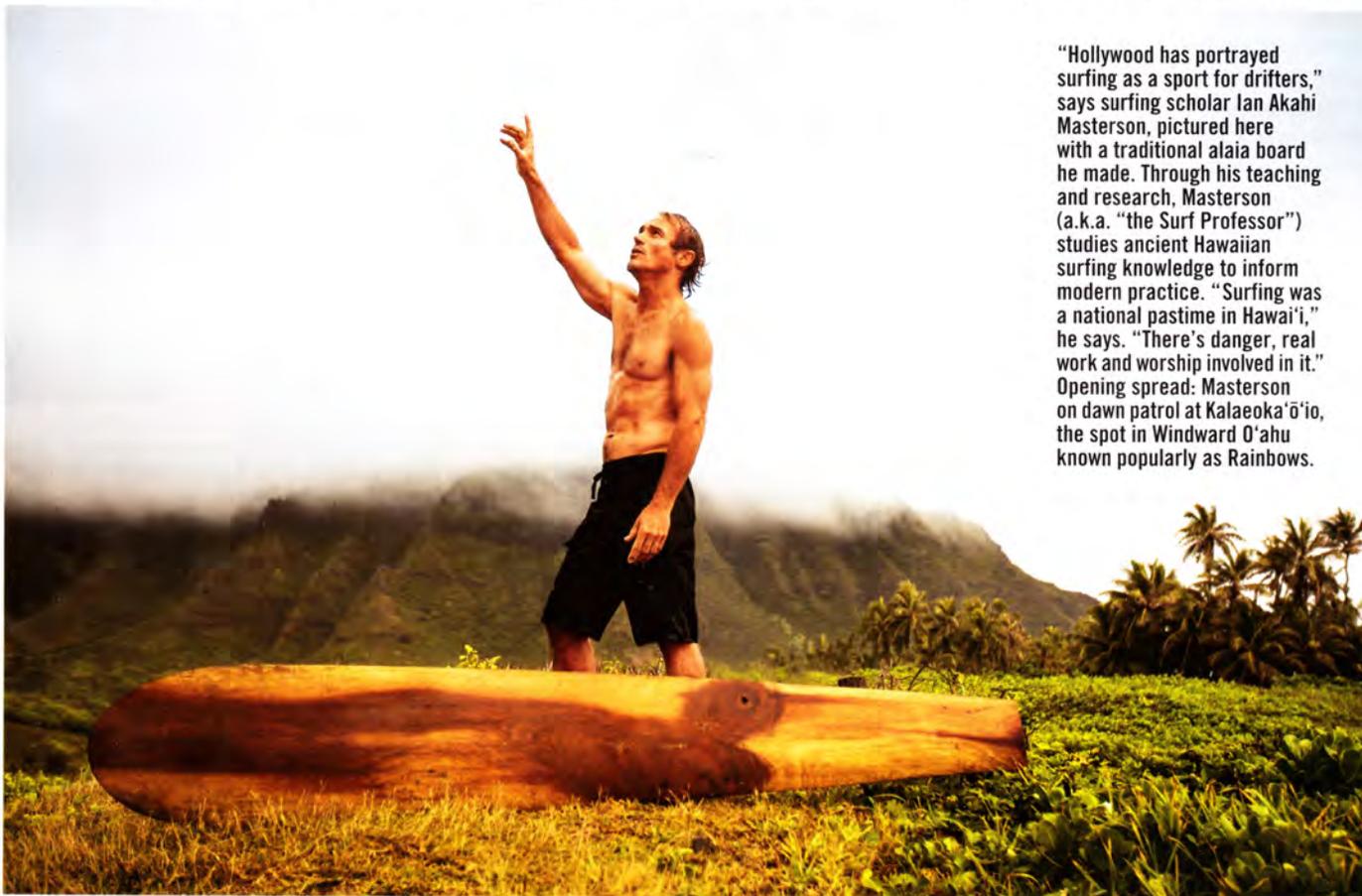
prettiest board in the lineup; it's stained by the kukui nut paste and oil he used to seal it. It's not the easiest board to ride, either: Ask any diehard surfers who've tried alaiia, and they'll probably tell you it's like learning the sport all over again. But Masterson makes it look absurdly easy; he paddles for a waist-high wave and pumps across its face like he's been doing it all his life. Because, mostly, he has.

"This whole place is made of waves," Masterson had told me a few days before as we stood at the boundary between Kualoa and the ahupua'a just south of it, Hakipu'u. It took me a moment to understand that by "whole place" he meant not just the ocean, but the land, too. I expected a New Age sermon on stardust and vibrations, but he instead pointed to a shallow ribbon of whitewater a hundred yards offshore. "That wave breaks no matter what the tide or swell is doing," he said. "It's a natural guidepost." He went on to explain that swells from all directions gather and break at the spot because of rocks just under the surface, possibly remnants of an ancient fishpond. (Kualoa, Masterson had told me, is likely where Polynesian navigators first landed and settled on O'ahu—as early as the third century ACE.) "One day I was surfing Waimea, and it came to me:

'Hakipu'u' is an old Hawaiian way of saying 'gathering and breaking.' Then I came here and saw it. Even the formations of the mountain behind us—this whole valley has forms that fold in on themselves. It was surfing that helped me make that connection: This is the valley of waves."

Reviving centuries-old knowledge, board-shaping and wave-riding techniques is just part of Masterson's philosophical and holistic approach to surfing. In his role as "the Surf Professor," he teaches surf-related courses to grade-schoolers and to students at three O'ahu colleges. As a practitioner, Masterson has charged Waimea bay on days of consequence, ridden many of O'ahu's breaks on a variety of the pre-contact-style boards he's made and even once, after a particularly nasty wipeout, set his own broken fibula while underwater.

It's only recently that surfing has gotten attention as an academic subject. Surfing and academia mix like kukui nut oil and saltwater: They're usually antithetical, as any surfer who's tried to finish a paper during an inviting swell knows. But Masterson is one of the few people bridging that divide, pioneering surfing as a legitimate academic subject and rediscovering the daily practices of those who surfed Hawai'i's waves before Western contact.



**"Hollywood has portrayed surfing as a sport for drifters," says surfing scholar Ian Akahi Masterson, pictured here with a traditional alaiia board he made. Through his teaching and research, Masterson (a.k.a. "the Surf Professor") studies ancient Hawaiian surfing knowledge to inform modern practice. "Surfing was a national pastime in Hawai'i," he says. "There's danger, real work and worship involved in it." Opening spread: Masterson on dawn patrol at Kalaeoka'ō'io, the spot in Windward O'ahu known popularly as Rainbows.**