



STATE OF HAWAII
OFFICE OF HAWAIIAN AFFAIRS
560 N. NIMITZ HWY., SUITE 200
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96817

November 16, 2020

Dr. Miguel Moreno, Speaker of Faculty Senate
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi
6300 Ocean Dr., Corpus Christi, TX. 78412

Re: Review of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Mascot and Associated Traditions

Welina me ke aloha:

Mahalo nui for contacting the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) for an opinion and evaluation on the current Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC) mascot, "Izzy the Islander", as well as the associated traditions related to the mascot's backstory. The OHA Administration appreciates the efforts to reach out to us as an organization that advocates for Native Hawaiian interests and culture and actively collaborates with other indigenous organizations throughout the Pacific on similar issues. For the following reasons, we conclude that the TAMUCC mascot "Izzy" inaccurately portrays and stereotypes Pacific islanders, including Native Hawaiians, and appropriates their cultural traditions in its attempt to display the TAMUCC moniker, the Islanders.

As background, OHA is a constitutionally-established body of the State of Hawai'i responsible for protecting and promoting the rights and interests of Native Hawaiians.¹ OHA has substantive obligations to protect the cultural and natural resources of Hawai'i for the agency's beneficiaries.² Accordingly, OHA is required to serve as the principal public agency in the State of Hawai'i responsible for the performance, development and coordination of programs and activities relating to Native Hawaiians; for the assessment of the policies and practices of other agencies impacting Native Hawaiians; and for conducting advocacy efforts for Native Hawaiians.³ It is with this kuleana (responsibilities) in mind that we submit to you the following clarification and comments.

¹ Haw. Const. Art. XII, § 5

² See Haw. Rev. Stat. ("HRS") Chapter 10 (2009).

³ HRS § 10-3 (2009).

Attachment 1 references the mascot “Izzy” to which our comments follow. The mascot, “Izzy”, displays traditional tattoo and a mask in the shape of a sacred ki‘i, which wrongly appropriates traditional Pacific islander cultural knowledge and expression. Additionally, past iterations of “Izzy” included a grass skirt, shell belt, a spear, and a shield, which are highly offensive characterizations most closely associated with colonialistic assumptions and cultural appropriations. In its current appearance, “Izzy” inaccurately portrays culturally relevant practices and elements still considered sacred today, such as *kākau uhi* – traditional tattooing reserved as a sacred connection to express ancestral relationships and personal *kuleana* (responsibilities); *ki‘i* – images otherwise known across the world as *tiki*, which represent the honoring of ancestors, traditional gods, and connection to the environment; and *mo‘ai*, which represent ancestral connections specific to the Rapa Nui culture. These sacred expressions by Native Hawaiians and other Pacific islanders, hold tremendous meaning and value and their associated traditions are still in use today by knowledgeable cultural practitioners. The representations of these expressions through “Izzy” are highly insensitive and caricaturizes the actual practitioners who carry on these traditions.

The portrayal of “Izzy” also conflicts with international and Native Hawaiian statements regarding indigenous intellectual property. The United States supports the United Nations Declaration on the Rights Of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which confers upon indigenous peoples the right to maintain and control traditional knowledge, cultural traditions and intellectual property relating to their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions and manifestations.⁴ Additionally, in 2003, the Native Hawaiian community developed the Paoakalani Declaration, which provides a framework for Native Hawaiian intellectual property and its use.⁵ The Paoakalani Declaration affirms the right of Native Hawaiians to exclude the use of cultural expressions for those who would exploit, privatize, and unfairly commercialize our traditional knowledge, cultural expressions and art forms, natural resources, biological material, and intellectual properties.⁶ Both UNDRIP and the Paoakalani Declaration emphasize the importance for indigenous people to control their own cultural expressions. The characterization of Pacific islanders through “Izzy” inhibits these efforts made over the years to remove such distinctions and negative connotations and is seemingly the type of expression that these declarations attempt to prevent.

The use of *shaka*, *lei*, and other university traditions related to an “islander tradition” may also be seen as a form of stereotyping Native Hawaiian culture. When evaluating the *shaka*, it is not a highly offensive act in itself as it is a more relatively recent local tradition of greeting in Hawai‘i and is now widely used similarly around the world. In contrast, *lei* have long been a sign of endearment and decoration within Hawaiian culture, although there are

⁴ UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ART. 31.

⁵ PAOAKALANI DECLARATION (2003).

⁶ Id. ART. 4.

more traditional uses depending on the practice. Similar to the shaka, the giving of lei has also become widely used in many areas beyond Hawai‘i as its intended purpose of endearment. However, when combined with the characterization of “Izzy”, both may be seen as a form of stereotyping Native Hawaiians and their culture and indicative of cultural appropriations. The same can be said of university traditions such as “Aloha Days”, which clearly is pulled from Native Hawaiian language and culture though there is no noted connection between Hawai‘i and the TAMUCC.

While we acknowledge that the creation of “Izzy” may not have been intended to purposefully portray Native Hawaiians and other Pacific islanders in a negative light, there are many facets of this mascot which indicate racial insensitivity, settler colonialism, and cultural appropriation, all of which OHA and other indigenous peoples across the world strongly disagree with and continue to fight against. The continued use of the primitive, cartoon-like “Izzy” and associated traditions – depicted from the characterizations of Pacific islanders – are currently being shared to over 10,000 students⁷ annually as well as university supporters and faculty by your institution of higher education. This perpetuation creates a derisive dialogue seemingly sanctioned by TAMUCC that feeds into the harmful rhetoric placed on indigenous peoples by colonizers; a rhetoric that many have spent years trying to undo.

Therefore, OHA *strongly urges* that TAMUCC change its mascot and traditions to an icon more closely associated with the university, its own historical origins and foundations as well as its geographical location, that does not appropriate native cultures or perpetuate stereotypes such as those currently portrayed in “Izzy”. We look forward to continuing this discussion with you to create greater understanding.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact OHA staff Specialist, Brad Ka‘aleleo Wong, at kaaleleow@oha.org. Mahalo for your attention to this request.

Me ka ha‘a ha‘a (with humility),



Sylvia M. Hussey, Ed.D.
Ka Pouhana, Chief Executive Officer

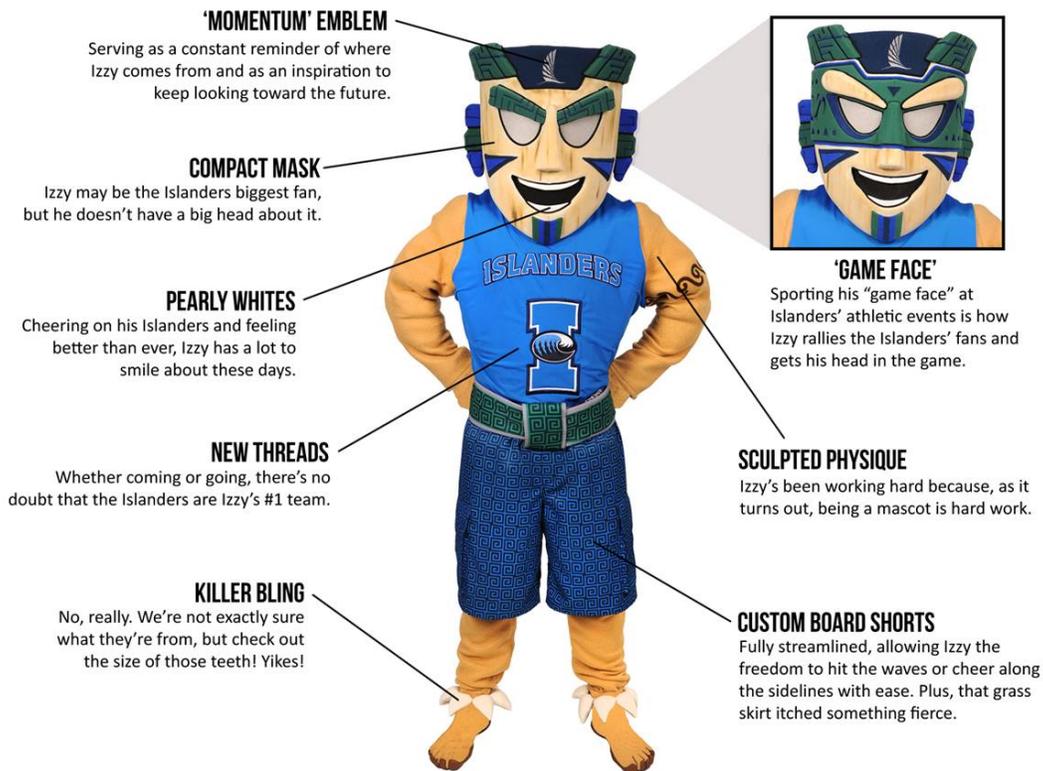
SMH:bkw

Attachment 1 – IZZY Reference

⁷ <https://tamucc.edu/>

- Reference story: <https://islandwavesnews.com/1380/2016-archive/the-history-of-izzy-the-islander/>
- Reference story - controversy: <https://islandwavesnews.com/7212/opinion/izzy-a-mascot-appropriating-cultures-since-2004/>
- Press: <https://www.caller.com/story/news/education/2018/04/26/tamuccs-izzy-islander-ranked-sixth-weirdest-college-mascot-buzzfeed/555787002/>
- Official explanation of the costume: https://www.tamucc.edu/marcom/news_releases/2011/december/izzy_newfeatu res.jpg

↑IZZY THE ISLANDER: FULLY RECHARGED!



LEANER. CLEANER. PACKED WITH ISLANDER PRIDE.