Dr. Jonathan Osorio

Professor of Hawaiian Studies at University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa shares thoughts about the 2011 APEC Summit in Hawai‘i.

As a historian and Hawaiian Studies professor, what do you think the impact of the APEC Summit will have on the Hawaiian community and indigenous people?

I think it’s going to have several impacts. One of the things I know is that organizations like the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, the Department of Hawaiian Homelands, possibly Kamehameha Schools and Bishop Estate, the big institutions that work for the Hawaiians welfare in one sense or another will try to see if there is a way of letting APEC know about native Hawaiians and our particular economic issues or the possibility of economic transformation in Hawai‘i; there are several of these institutions that will try to get APEC’s attention.

However, and I stand on firm ground here, that there are a number of Hawaiians that take the position that APEC and organizations like APEC are obstacles to native people in particular and the reassertion of native rights over land and resources and the rebuilding of subsistence and traditional modes of life. APEC stands for not only a continuation but an acceleration of modernity and globalization; that is the language that they know. Those are the kinds of activities that they understand. Their mission is very different from ours and therefore there may be protests at APEC’s presence here. In fact, a group of us are planning a counter-conference to give people here, and also people coming in from other places, an opportunity to talk about a different economic future and to try and construct ways of cooperating with each other so that the global, modernizing movement doesn’t have to basically run without challenge or alternatives.

What are your perceptions of the indigenous community regarding the Summit being held in Hawai‘i?

Some in the indigenous community will see it as an opportunity, while others will see it as a different kind of opportunity. An opportunity not to appeal to “them” necessarily for some kind of consideration, but more an opportunity for “us” to get together and coalesce and discuss different ways of strengthening things like subsistence...
and strengthening access to natural resources here and to get people talking about a different kind of future than the one that most people seem to imagine with more people, more tourists, more development.

I think APEC has begun identifying and adopting other kinds of indicators and criteria, including ones that take into account the environment and sustainability. But I think ultimately it's still based on a model that more has to be produced, as you have a growing population. The native practitioners that live closest to subsistence have a very different understanding of what development means.

**Who are the main groups that are interested in the APEC Summit coming?**

Other than Kamehameha Schools, the Office of Hawaiian Affairs and the Department of Hawaiian Homelands, I think Sea Grant will probably be there and a lot of Hawaiian Civic clubs, but I am certain that most people are going to find it difficult to have access to the meetings, delegates and the leaders. I think mostly they will just want to be present and will demonstrate that presence. There are numerous organizations in Hawai'i that are about economic and environmental planning for the future and I think that they will have a natural inclination to be a part of the APEC Summit in whatever way they can.

**On a lighter note, on my way to your office in the Hawaiian Studies building I passed a beautiful lo'i which I had the privilege of working at. It was such a spiritual experience. It is known that First Lady Michelle Obama is a strong promoter of growing vegetables, having planted a garden at the White House. Would you share your thoughts about this?**

I hope that she visits this one. Part of the reason that it would be great if she visits this particular lo'i is because it really started as a community project. It was created on state controlled land; university controlled land, really, without any official authorization or permission, so it was pretty much a guerrilla activity, which because of its importance and what it represents to the community, not just as a teaching tool, but this is the largest collection of different taro plants created by kanaka over thousands of years. This is the largest archive of different taro plants in the islands. And all of this was done basically by a community that for a very, very long time not only did not receive any support by the university, but outright opposition. So this is the kind of lo'i that she should visit.

In lots of ways I generally believe that we are not going to end capitalist development and capitalist involvement. Even a violent revolution would have a hard time actually ending that. The trends for this global kind of capital development are just too long and pervasive and you can't really end this trend without significant hardship to people. But what you can do is influence and build an alternative economy. I absolutely believe in the numerous spaces that are allowed and the lo'i is a visual reminder of this because you have this whole urban area that consists of the university and this space that was not being used and was basically overgrown that was put to very, very good use. I think that is the model for what the indigenous people have to try and do in order to strengthen and rebuild traditional ways of life. We have to do it in the spaces that the larger society basically allows.

**Can you elaborate on how you see the process of peace particularly between the United States and Hawai‘i?**

The fact is there is a peaceful existence between the United States and Hawaiian people. Many Hawaiians consider themselves citizens of the United States, American citizens. And those of us who don’t, recognize at the same time that the US presence here is so pervasive and buttressed by many things, including its military, that our relationship with the United States, and I’m talking about nationalists, is just a firm insistence of who we are. We've conducted a non-violent opposition to the American occupation of our islands for well over 20 years. This may not be unique in human history but it certainly is an unusual movement. The only thing that can disturb that peace is if Americans decide that they don’t like hearing these voices. Americans have done this before; they have tried to stifle arguments that paint them as oppressors, and they don’t like that. So far, perhaps because they don’t consider us particularly threatening they haven't done that. If it ever gets to the point that they begin to suppress this assertion, I think it could be a very bad thing and I hope they don’t.

**What are your thoughts about President Barack Obama being from Hawai‘i?**

I think Obama would be one of the last people to suppress someone’s expression of themselves and I suspect that at least part of that comes from his own rearing in this very special place. But, Obama’s not going to be the last president of the United States, though I hope he serves 8 years. I have been mystified by the choices that Americans have made with regard to political leadership. Not just in the 8 years preceding Obama, but even in the legislature they just elected in 2010. It’s a mystery to me, unless the answer is that they’re just so afraid of the future America, and so selfish that they wish to maintain their own wealth in a world that is increasingly interdependent, that they’re basically electing demagogues who are promising not to give up American strength. I think it is a very dangerous road. It’ll be interesting to see what happens in 2012, but I did not like the last election. I think it does not bode well for the United States and for its place in the world because it’s based on a misapprehension of reality. The rest of the world sees the United States, I think, increasingly as an anarchonism. It’s a country that has had its best years and now is simply trying to hold on to its privileges. I don’t think the US or anyone can do that.