

Can Indigenous Knowledge Save Us From Autocracy?

Article by Tyson Yunkaporta

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Whether imposed from above or the result of bottom-up movements, authoritarian tendencies are on the rise globally. Aboriginal approaches to leadership, based on shared narratives, dynamic power relations and collective land sharing, offer powerful antibodies against the cult of the strongman.

***Green European Journal:* Could you briefly introduce yourself and your work?**

Tyson Yunkaporta: I belong to the Apalech clan from the far north of Queensland, Australia. At the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lab at Deakin University, we apply complexity science systems thinking and Aboriginal inquiry to the intricate issues that we see in the world.

My work over the last few years has dealt with disinformation landscapes and online radicalisation. Disinformation (what I refer to as “con-spirituality” or the spirituality of conspiracy theories) is a problem everywhere, but it is also something I see more and more in Aboriginal communities. This almost spiritual shift towards the strongman, towards authoritarian, dictatorial relations and methods of governance is part of the global fascist turn. This raft of problems is the greatest existential threat on the planet at the moment.

Authoritarianism is a trend seen globally and in many different forms. What do you make of the state of leadership today?

From global all the way to local, all leadership is currently compromised by the fascist turn, which is what occurs when systems move into modes of governance that reflect unilateral control. At this time of history, you can see patterns of dark money, think tanks, political action committees, and lobby groups that are promoting the worst kinds of disinformation to sow public mistrust of institutions and even the desire for people to participate in street violence for political ends. The bully-boy tactics of strongmen and dictators always begin this way, but we should start from the cult dynamics that produce this.

Religion and spirituality, particularly when they form communities and congregations, always follow the same pattern. The core is establishing an in-group that subsumes the identity of its members. Once you've established the in-group and a very strong sense of identity around it, you reinforce that by identifying an out-group. The out-group is usually a minority, around which you start building a narrative of disgust, anger, and unfairness. Once you've established this enemy, you focus all your propaganda on it. Strongmen leaders radicalise and weaponise their followers, and offer solutions that they can grab onto. These tactics work a lot better than good governance.

Why do you say that?

Good governance is based on exposition. Its discourse is built on secular, verifiable facts. Like science or journalism, it explains something without using any metaphors. Its problem is that there is no poetry, no art and no magic in it. Now, this is not very attractive. It's not very effective in hijacking a person's limbic system and setting them on fire with passion.

Strongman ideologies and the narratives that are used to recruit and radicalise people, on the other hand, are spiritual and work through narrative. A good story is what makes these things work really well. You can cherry-pick true facts, but your story is still wrong. Yet when left with a choice between these spiritual narratives and expository secular narratives, a lot of people, particularly if they're not very strong or certain, will choose the spiritual one.

A good example is the "Great Replacement", the idea that white people are being eradicated from the face of the earth by Jews and powerful minorities of colour. The particularities of that story have been around for a long time, drawing on anti-Semitic tropes such as the "blood libel". The mechanism works by way of creating first an illusion and then a moral panic that everything is falling apart, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and brings social upheaval. At that point, your in-group, which you have created and sees nothing but horror in the world, will reach for a solution.

It can't just be that societies turn towards authoritarian leaders because they are being manipulated. Where is this search for answers and spiritual meaning coming from?

Don't confuse correlation with causation here. Vulture capitalists wait for a natural disaster to occur and then go in and buy up the disaster-struck land cents in the dollar. But you wouldn't say that they caused the hurricane.

The global economic system that we're under is becoming more and more difficult. The very rich and powerful have opportunities to extract even more wealth and value from people and land. As things become increasingly difficult for most people and nations, there is a cry out for these billionaires to give something back – at least the same percentage of taxes that we pay – so everybody can be fed and secure. Billionaires want a deregulated world where they are not forced to pay taxes, care for their workers, or adhere to environmental regulations. This is why they always back the Right in politics. But in the last few decades, they've come under increasing pressure. So they must figure out a way to remain the exception and keep their money.

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Their idea is to create as much chaos as possible in human systems and governments. With enough resentment based on fallacious logic, they can install strongmen dictatorships and carry on doing their business.

The subtitle of your book *Sand Talk* is "How indigenous knowledge can save the world". Do indigenous approaches offer a different model of power and leadership?

In the science of leadership studies, Aboriginal governance is most closely aligned with the concept of dynamic subordination, whereby the context in which specialist skills and knowledge are determines who leads. Everybody holds different kinds of knowledge. We're all specialists, but we're interdependent specialists. Depending on the context, the authority of the group will shift from person to person based on their skills and knowledge.

The person with the biggest vote is the land. Where you are in the landscape and season determines the authority, skills and knowledge that need to be applied in that place. I hesitate to call it “leadership” because we belong to a very anti-boss culture. There is power, which is different from authority. Power is distributed evenly throughout the system. Every node in the system is agentic and autonomous but also bound in a relational obligation with all the other nodes and to the bigger system itself. Sometimes you need a statistician. Sometimes you need a janitor.

Leadership and power are often conceived as top down. But from what you are describing, indigenous approaches seem to draw on community, the land, and the relationship with the land. Is that the basis for an alternative?

Yes, but you can't just be grounded in a collective of people who all think the same. Because even if it's bottom up, that's also a cult and you're going to end up with totalitarianism anyway. The base for true leadership has to be land. Landless people are literally dirt poor, which is what that phrase means: that you're poor and you have no land. Your authority comes from the land, your governance model comes from your bioregion and biotope. It comes from the practices that you develop in collectively caring for and being custodians of a place that you hold and protect collaboratively.

If it's just a group of like-minded people who is building a movement on placeless ideologies, then that can only go one way because these things only exist in the abstract realm, which is ultimately spiritual.

In Aboriginal governance, magic is magic and ceremony is ceremony, but life is life. There is an intense secularism in Aboriginal cultures and communities. Spiritual knowledge is only held by senior initiates who can care for it. We only access spirituality in moments of ritual and ceremony, because you can't have that leaking over into your daily life. When you are in a spiritual state, you're malleable and you make stupid and bad decisions. You have a lens that can see the big picture, but you can no longer see the fine detail.

This division between the sacred and the mundane is one of the checks and balances that we have in place. The rest of the world does not have that supposedly strong division of church and state. European empires had a very thin, permeable membrane between the state and the church. They were a terrible tangled web, and those double standards were the bread and butter of fascism.

The kind of understanding that you are talking about is rooted in the land and in tradition. Are these indigenous approaches relevant for communities that lack those deep place-based ties, say a working-class Paris suburb or a teeming Global South city?

Our traditions are ancient, but they are also processes, and paths of adaptation. The leadership model is about shifting with different contexts. Any community design can have adaptive processes built into it. We've always been changing and moving in response to our relationships with place and context. That's what we do. So people would have to become agile enough to do that. There are some pretty exciting developments in urban design (and various design methodologies) that are moving towards being more anti-fragile and adaptive, and less brittle.

Modern humans are still limited by this lens of separation from nature. By naming nature and having a word for it, we pretend to become separate and stand out of that system, but we are not. The endpoint that people would have to reach would be to reinvest themselves back in nature, but this brings us back to the problem that most of us are landless. We do not hold lands, and if we do, we hold them individually as tiny little patches that we are encouraged to speculate on.

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separation from nature.*

We need a shift towards people being collectively together on land and managing it. The only problem is that the way that's been managed so far is by creating intentional communities, aka cults. In the 1960s and '70s, some members of the Boomer generation tried to escape authoritarian and patriarchal control, and rightly so. They wanted to go back to nature, to escape the controls of family and all the culture and state institutions. They wanted to experiment and be free, and to organise together – but in placeless ways – around new and exciting ideologies. They tried, but they very quickly felt bereft. You had cults starting up, and many horrendous cases of abuse occurred under these little regimes.

Scientific understanding increasingly mirrors what many indigenous communities have long believed about humans being part of nature. The microbiome that we are made of is made up of 50,000 different species. Could that understanding be the foundation for a different kind of power and governance?

I might sound negative because I focus on bad actors and bad behaviours, but that's what good law and good governance coming from the landscape do. Every large rock, every hill, every geological formation in Australia are evil people who've broken the law at some stage and then been transformed into a geological feature to keep and remind us of this law. Most of our Dreamings are cautionary tales about people who have violated the sanctity of the commons, right speech, or the right protocols in community dynamics and economies of sharing rather than accumulation. The land can be read as a map of the evil things that you should not do.

The first thing that any community or movement needs to do is to develop good narratives and cautionary tales, showing what has been done and is being done in the world by evil people. From there, you can know which laws should be put in place, which checks and balances. And everybody shares this story.

I can't emphasise this enough, because this is the psycho-technology that the Right is using. They are using the wrong story though. We need a story and a spirit to ground an ethics of distributing control rather than concentrating it in the hands of one glorious leader.

Everybody will tell you that you're being negative, and they will want to steer you back towards hope. "What do we want our community to look like?" "We want equality..." No, that's not what you do. For the law, you have to accentuate the negative and make sure people know what evil behaviour is. That's good government and it is something that the Left does badly. It stammers over facts and statistics.

We need to stop not choosing the ground of battle because we have nothing that we're holding on to or standing in. So secular and so reasonable, we have no land on which to build our tradition. But never respond to a debate if you are fighting on the ground of your enemy's choosing. Anti-fascist people in every region of the world need to develop a tradition of cautionary tales and a set of principles on what not to do. Then carry that fight forward.

This conversation is part of a series of essays and interviews dedicated to the crisis of political leadership and the alternatives Green thinking has to offer. Read all contributions [here](#).



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