

Dany Adone

Interview with James Smith on Indigenous Worldviews and Resilience

Preface: James Smith, also known as Uncle Jimmy, has visited us at the University of Cologne and gave a lecture titled 'Land, Sky & Waters'. The following interview has been recorded after the lecture in October 2024.

Dany Adone: Well, good afternoon, everybody. Could you tell us what Indigenous worldviews mean? What do they consist of?

James Smith: First of all, thank you very much for having me here. Dany, you too, Anna and the Australian unit up there. It's so great to come across the other side of the planet here and to meet likeminded people, it is so welcoming, and to have the opportunity to lecture here at Cologne Uni, it is a great milestone in my world and my career, and I feel so welcomed, and I need to say these things because this is part of our worldview, but we need to acknowledge this kind of acceptance and good manners from people here and indeed, back where I'm staying at Bonn. I'm having an awesome time here. We are altruistic people, we are giving people. We are not colonisers. We do not take. Our world view is a deep respect for nature and a deep respect for human life as well, and that our knowledge bases, they are ancient and through those it's always been my view that we have so much to offer the world, because our track record speaks for itself, 60 000 to 100 000 years, there aren't many people who can say that across this planet. Being altruistic people, we are more than ready, willing and able to share so much of our ways of knowing and doing because we have a great voice that we want to tell the world there are better ways. There are different ways, and they have nothing to do with colonialism. They have the world to do with helping each other, altruistic ways and that of a better system of education that is inclusive, that is about lifelong learning, and that everybody is included and not excluded. So, there's a powerful knowledge basis that the world really needs to very least to listen to. There are plenty of people that we wouldn't tell that to, especially the political right. They just want to dominate. But there are good people across this planet and in Australia as well, who are prepared to listen because they understand the way it's going is not going to benefit nobody in the long run, let alone the Indigenous people, the native plants and the native animals, let alone the land itself. So, we have powerful knowledge bases, and we're more, as sharing people, giving people, we're more than ready and able to do this kind of work.

Dany Adone: Can you say something about the deep respect for Country?

James Smith: Absolutely, yes. Because the land nourishes us, and just as important, we have been charged with looking after the land. And as you can see in

this map that's behind us here, these are all the countries that are across Australia. They're not in states. There's 200 plus languages, and you add the dialects to those languages, and the number starts to skyrocket. And, you know, it's an amazing world, pre-European, and just as important, it is still there. Maybe the colonisers went out of their way to try and destroy much of it as possible. But we're still there. And we still have this altruistic nature about ourselves. We have not conformed to the way of the West, and that is so much about what makes Indigenous people acceptable to a lot of people, like in the media and the hand-me-down British ruling classes who occupy Australia and who want to dominate everybody. We don't want to dominate nobody. We just want to share a better way that, a more sustainable way, and that we all, that the Country, first of all, sees another 60 000 years, which is in the hands of the wrong people is not going to see anything like that, but we have the capacity to share these knowledges with the right people who want to listen.

Dany Adone: There is a lot of discussion on how Indigenous knowledges and Western worldviews can fit each other. Are they compatible?

James Smith: I don't know so much whether they have to be compatible. What it is, it's about survival more than compatibility. And the right people have already said it. David Suzuki, David Attenborough, have said it that the Indigenous peoples of the planet had the knowledge bases to save the planet from this incessant plunder, this incessant taking from the Country, whereas this is unsustainable, and somewhere in this people need to wake up and go, goodness me, what have we done, before they get around that same what have we done? Listen, listen to what people are offering. And we are not domineering people. We just want to save the planet, save the country of Australia, and indeed, Indigenous peoples all over the planet want a better way, and then we can share again. We don't want to dominate; we don't want to control people. We do not want to watch them. We're not going to sit back and watch them destroy the land. So that's a big part of that whole process.

Dany Adone: In some efforts to listen to Indigenous voices, we've seen, for instance, in the North of Australia, there are collaborations, collaborative work on the use of fire management to do controlled fires. I mean, it seems as if they are listening.

James Smith: And just as important farmers, not all farmers, but there are farmers who are listening and even mining companies, and not a lot of them, but there are mining companies who are listening and realise that there's a better way to do this. And up there on Groote Eylandt to the east of Arnhem Land, the traditional owners there have gone into a big agreement with the mining company that's gone in there, and they're working together on not only the health and the wellbeing of the community of Groote Eylandt, but that the mining company can mine their lands with their permission, so they don't have to go through this aggressive process of imposition, that if they communicate with the communities, you'll find that you can come out with a better outcome for the community and for the mining companies as well. All you need is the right people in control.

Dany Adone: We often speak of the two-way methodology when referring to genuine collaborative work between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Is such a collaboration realistic?

James Smith: Well, that's a good example on Groote Eylandt that it does work. All you need to do is communicate. That is the core of it. And you know, this goes right back to the early days of the settlement in Sydney, where the colony was verging on famine, because there was no food, and they wouldn't eat any food. So, what the Colonials would not do was to ask the Indigenous people, where do you get your food from? They lacked that humility to ask, and in that big disconnect, that disconnect continues today, 230-240 years later, it is still there where so many people don't have that capacity to want to communicate. I don't understand that at all, you know, and it's a great anathema of Australia, this lack of communication, and that colonials know better, that's basically arrogance, stupidity, and that we are better people. You couldn't be further from the truth. You know, you should be talking to the Indigenous peoples about, how do you do this? Just like asking them in the early days of the settlement there, where do you get your food from? Is it not a big ask. They were sitting there at a place called Yurong, they renamed it Macquarie's Chair, and waiting for ships to come in from England or from Indonesia to bring them European food. We've lived for 60 to 100 000 years there without worries about where food was going to come from, because we are part of nature. We don't want to see nature be destroyed. We don't want to see ourselves destroyed as well.

There is another point to mention: it is about listening. This capacity to listen, and Indigenous peoples even talk about it's called deep listening. People listen for and they don't listen for all sorts of reasons, assuming parliament, the other side's listening, until they see something they don't like, and they jump. They're not listening at all. They wait for the opportunity to attack. So, there's forms of listening and communication, and time has a lot to do with it. Our perspective in time is seasonal, so it's not a nine to five, this capitalist way, where the propaganda was put out there that time is money. You know, no, it's not. Time, it comes, and it goes and it's not going to come back, so you utilise it while you have it.

Dany Adone: Thank you very much.