Folkloric Tradition as an Epistemology of Environmental Justice

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the connection of Nigerian folkloric tradition to environmental justice through rhetorical analyses of oral traditions. It aims to establish effective approaches to discussing environmental justice in technical communication, focusing on transnational environmental policies and bottom-up interventions. The paper serves as a representative research approach for exploring other non-western traditions and their connection to environmental issues and justice pursuits.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → User characteristics; Cultural characteristics; • **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; Participatory design.

KEYWORDS

Folklore tradition, Environmental Justice, Social Justice, Transnationality

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1 INTRODUCTION

The field of technical communication has evolved from its historical foundation as a necessary medium for communicating the use of war technology to laymen drafted into the military, to a disciplinary squabble that accompanied its transition into academia between English and Engineering instructors [1], to moving across other disciplines, and to the ongoing questioning of what exactly counts as technical communication [2–5]. Technical communication's disciplinary position shifts throughout time as it lends itself to other fields, a consequence of its fundamental link with human subjects and technology [6]. As a result, any field dealing with human subjects, technology, and communication frequently lends its theories and approaches to technical communication. Consequently, because it appears in practically every scholarly and professional quarter, some technical communication scholars and practitioners have moved toward the pessimistic end of defining its authoritative standing as a field and a discipline [7–9].

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Progressively, however, more technical communication scholars are beginning to map out the different critical spaces where it functions and how it does that without necessarily demeaning its autonomy as an academic and professional field [10–12]. One of such ways is the emphasis on the need to take into cognizance the constantly changing theories and methodologies of the field as the conceptualization of social situations continuously evolves and positionalities change [13, 14]. This continuous shift has also required a problematization of the field's data, methodologies, and the knowledge it produces because of those choices. Scholars in the field continue to weigh in on the roles of technical communicators in social construction [15], the dialectics of social contexts [16, 17], the critique of institutionalization [18], and pedagogical implications [19].

Most of these critical evaluations of technical communication research focus on achieving social justice through theories and methods for marginalized or discriminated individuals or groups [20]. Walton, Moore, and Jones [21] describe technical communication as a user-centered discipline preoccupied with achieving social justice through its research designs and the overarching role(s) of context. However, this may lead to a hijacked trend of engagement, potentially denoting emancipation as the true form of social justice. Wilson's [22] paradigmatic research approach calls for sincerity and open-mindedness to achieve true justice. Researchers should understand and respect the ontological, axiological, and epistemological properties of research sites and artifacts, deconstructing dominant western methodologies and reconstructing work towards a more just and inclusive society [23].

Considering research on true justice, therefore, I propose that research on environmental justice can benefit from examining non-western folkloric traditions, which contribute to local and transnational social situations and bottom-up policies for a more sustainable environment.

1.1 The Relationship between Environmental and Social Justice

The concept of social justice is deeply rooted in social work and has social implications [24, 25], emphasizing the importance of fairness in decision-making [26, 27]. It involves distributing social benefits and responsibilities fairly among individuals or groups [24]. However, scholars argue that the answer to the question of fairness is subjective and circumstantial [24, 28]. Hence, to achieve justice, inclusive environmental discussions and policies are suggested.

Rawls' [29] distributive justice theory [30] and moral utilitarian theory both have an impact on social justice [31]. Sen [32] and Nussbaum [33] suggest that rather than needs, resources should be allocated based on people's abilities to manage them. Nussbaum extends the concept of capacities to encompass human integrity, claiming that gauging requirements based on capabilities promotes

selfish attitudes that harm others. In making social decisions in cooperation and reciprocity with others, social integrity is critical.

Nussbaum's concept of human integrity and the relationality of social systems, which helps examine inclusionary and exclusionary justice [34], has inspired contemporary social justice studies. Relationality is a key concept in intersectionality, and it describes how social meanings are produced through interactions between various social structures and power systems [35]. Fairness is achieved by assessing the repercussions of social decisions and their impact on others. However, focusing primarily on safer environmental conditions in transnational places based on Western epistemic norms raises concerns about how much justice can be achieved for diverse populations through a one-directional strategy.

According to Hansel [36] and Schell [37], social and environmental justice are inextricably linked, with environmental implications critical for achieving ideal justice. This study adds to the body of knowledge on social justice by advocating for a non-western interpretation of environmental justice principles based on folklore values.

1.2 Folklore and the Environment

This paper highlights the importance of returning to the essence of folkloric tradition in understanding human interactions with their surroundings in order to assess present and future implications [38]. It adds to decolonial discourses about environmental and social justice while also addressing ethical concerns about the use of unconventional sustainable approaches [39, 40]. According to Jones and Walton [41], social justice is the need to reconnect with tradition in an effort to practice more inclusive behaviors, with a focus on how communication may magnify the agency of oppressed people who are financially, socially, politically, and economically disadvantaged.

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency [42], environmental justice is founded on fair treatment and meaningful participation, ensuring that everyone's environmental rights are protected without fear of repercussions from political or economic interactions. Involvement that is meaningful involves everyone in decision-making processes, and original residents of cultural areas should have the right to make decisions that influence their natural environment and cultural values. Spencer et al. [39] underline the significance of acknowledging indigenous viewpoints in environmental tragedies perpetrated by imperialism, capitalism, and white supremacy in order to achieve justice.

Folkloric tradition serves as an identity metaphor for people whose natural environments have been improperly investigated and neglected. It depicts a pure ecosystem that has not been tainted by western appropriation, erasure, or distortion. Nigerian folkloric tradition, the case study used in this research, is a rich and pure history that depicts the people's point of historical reference and identity marker, particularly in their relationship with their settings.

1.3 Decolonizing Environmental Epistemology and Policies to Achieve Justice

Folkloric tradition can be used to achieve environmental justice through decolonial theory, as it represents a cultural essence untainted by western influences and firsthand contact with environmental situations. Decolonial theory emphasizes detachment from Eurocentric epistemic directions and the negation of postcolonialism's ideals of western influences. It encourages a more inclusive approach to achieving environmental justice.

Mignolo [43] argues that modern transnational engagements often conceal colonial inclinations in their rhetoric, justifying colonial actions. This highlights the irony of social justice scholarship, particularly in environmental issues, which often imposes cultural spaces and environmental intrusion without respecting the rights of the people involved. The irony of such practices highlights the need for a more inclusive and equitable approach to global engagement.

Technical communication scholars have used decolonial theory to challenge existing practices, but there are instances of misapplication. Itchuqiyaq and Matheson [44] argue that the field's use of the term "decolonial" and the absence of rematriation in discussions need to be questioned. Although social justice is a goal of technical communication research, does its technique foster actual justice in cultural and individual representations? [45]. Agboka [23] emphasizes that the localization process in technical communication design promotes social justice, but it is essential for researchers to be unbiased in assessing contexts, situatedness, and locality. Achieving environmental justice requires local knowledge systems that can only be discovered and worked on outside of a western positivist mindset. Inclusive engagement in the environmental justice movement through folklore represents rematriation, returning respect and value to environmental and natural habitats that have been abused for political and economic reasons. Decolonial methodologies, according to scholars, are based on the sovereignty of indigenous communities and values.

According to Schell [37], environmental challenges frequently focus on the consequences rather than the core cause. Folklore can assist in addressing the core causes of environmental repercussions and provide rematriation for corrective actions and more effective techniques while discussing environmental justice. Garcia and Baca [46] contend that decolonial philosophy provides pedagogical reform and a new perspective. Exploring folklore as a tool for making better, more defensible environmental decisions can aid in dealing with the effects of environmental exploitation.

2 A CASE STUDY OF NIGERIAN FOLKLORE TRADITION

Folklore, according to Abrams [47], is "the collective name applied to sayings, verbal compositions, and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by word of mouth and example rather than in written form" [cited in 47]. He goes on to emphasize the activities classified as folklore as follows:

> Folklore includes legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles, spells, and nursery rhymes; pseudo-scientific lore about the weather, plants, and animals; customary activities at births, marriages, and deaths; and traditional dances and forms of drama performed on holidays or at communal gatherings. (quoted in [47])

Nigerian folklore is a rich tradition of artifacts and spirituality, deeply connected to orderliness and spirituality. These precolonial

symbols represent the reparative model advocated by decolonization. Elders, or ancestors, are theorists in the Nigerian folklore tradition [48], observing the environment and proposing wholesome interactions for healthier, orderly effects. Therefore, Technical communication scholars must consider rootedness when conducting research on social justice and environmental wellbeing. Rootedness encompasses history, social contexts, cultural values, traditions, and ethics that shape people's identities and structures. Decolonial studies for justice must consider pristine cultural connections to existing realities and what needs to be returned, corrected, or adopted. Ojaide's [49] analysis of Nigerian cultural tradition highlights the importance of diagnosing from the root, emphasizing the historical and cultural exigencies represented by folklore.

Ojaide argues that culture is geographic, symbolic, and offers a continuum of possibilities. Folkloric traditions, which often involve gods and goddesses, promote a sense of reverence for nature and the environment. This promotes awareness and intentional approaches to respecting cultural identities and saving the environment. Schell [37] recounts how Kenyan environmentalist Dr. Wangari Muta Maathai's interest in the environment was influenced by the sacredness of migumo trees and the community's symbolic spiritual reverence. This rewarded the environment by holding the soil together and reducing erosion and landslides.

Nigeria's precolonial society practiced traditional religions, including Christianity and Islam. With over 371 ethnic groups, Nigeria's multi-cultural heritage informs its interrelated folkloric traditions. This paper focuses on major tribes like Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, promoting environmental sanctity and healthier environmental ethics. This decolonial method of discussing environmental justice is crucial.

2.1 The Yoruba Folklore Tradition as a Practice of 'Iṣẹ̣ṣe for Environmental Gratification

'Iṣẹ̣ṣe refers to the origin of tradition and cultural practices in the Yoruba tradition. It is closely connected to spirituality and deification, which also influences its folklore. Yoruba tradition is heavily animistic [50], based on sacred beliefs that objects, places, creatures, and natural phenomena have symbolic spiritual essences and consequences.

Yoruba mythology, like western faiths' ideas about the almighty God, admits the presence of a supreme being who was not born or made by anybody and who oversees creation. They believe that this supreme entity is at the head of the divine hierarchy yet uses gods and goddesses for earthly duties. This being is thought to have three manifestations: Olodumare (the owner of the source of creation), Olorun (the overseer of the heavens), and Olofin (the ruler of the ground) [51]. Orisa are the gods and goddesses who serve as the ultimate being's hands. Odùduwà, the god associated with the creation of the earth, is prominent among them.

Yoruba mythology claims Oduduwa usurped Obatala, the oldest orisa, to create the earth while the latter was drunk. Obatala is credited with bringing life to bodies through Olodumare's breath. Oduduwa created the earth using dirt from a gourd, a five-toed chicken, and a palmnut, creating the first dry land and planting the palmnut, which later became a mighty tree. As represented in the new materialist ontology, the creation story highlights the agency of human and non-human objects in creating life. The Yorubas cherish water and trees as symbolic artifacts that promote environmental preservation and benefit the inhabitants of these spaces. This approach is consistent with environmental justice rhetoric.

The Yorubas, Igbos, and Urhobos tribes in Nigeria revere the Iroko tree for its longevity and sturdiness. The Iroko tree is tough, durable, and could survive drought. An iroko tree could survive every situation and live up to 500 years [52]. It is thought to be the portal between the heavens and the earth [53], spreading over the four corners of the planet. However, western influences such as religion, education, and economic activities have stripped the Iroko tree of its sacredness, rendering it increasingly vulnerable due to continual exploitation.

Osun, the river goddess associated with cleanliness and fertility, is also mentioned in Yoruba folklore. She is the only one among the seventeen orisa sent by Olodumare to complete the creation process. She is worshipped at the Osun-Osogbo sacred grove, which is protected as a national monument under the Nigerian Cultural Policy of 1988 and its Land Use Act of 1990. The grove is protected by international organizations such as the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) [54]. Traditional rites and spiritual dedication are also used to protect the grove from threats.

2.2 Sacred Animals in Igbo Culture for Environmental Preservation

Kanu [55] contends that addressing environmental problems like pollution, soil degradation, global warming, overpopulation, and resource depletion requires addressing the spiritual essence of environmental artifacts. He suggests that while physical solutions are necessary, they also involve addressing the spiritual essence of these artifacts. For example, the Igbo tribe attaches sacred animals to ancestral symbols and deities, implying their preservation and sustainability. By focusing on these aspects, we can work towards a more sustainable future for our planet.

Popularly referred to as Eke among the Igbos, pythons are regarded as Nne Anyi (our mother) among some Igbo clans, who believe it is a symbol of wisdom and connected to their deities. While each group has its own historical connection to this practice, the legend of this culture among the Umuohi people is attributed to the hospitality of the ancestors of the Igbo people and how they accommodated a mysterious elderly widow who had been maltreated by her in-laws. The Umuohi people took very good care of her, and her parting gift to the community before turning into the eke was to assure them of protection, especially for their married young women. According to Igbo History [56], this python is referred to as "eke ogwugwu-mili... the mother of all the pythons that litter the length and breadth of Igboland" (quoted in [53]).

In Idemili Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria, the Umuoji people believe it is forbidden to kill a python due to its connection to the land's deity, Idemili. This fosters mutual friendliness between people and pythons, who are often seen in personal spaces. In the case of an accidental python killing, the responsible person must make grand burial plans and bury the python as an important member of the community. In contrast to other parts of Nigeria, these regions have a strong cultural belief in preserving

these animals. Other revered animals among the Igbo tribe include Ikwikwi (owls), Udene (vultures), Icho-Oku (parrots), and Mbekwu (tortoise).

2.3 You Take Serious Care of What You Consider Valuable

The Hausas, as one of the major tribes in Nigeria, have a proverb thus: "In da aka san darajar goro, nan a kan, nema masa ganye" which translates to "whatever is considered valuable is seriously looked after". In the same vein, Hausa communities, according to Etkin [57], have the custom of conservation, though they are challenged by drought due to variable rainfall throughout the year as well as other challenging situations including epidemics, locusts, cattle epizootics, the Islamic jihad, interethnic warfare, etc. Regardless of these challenges, they have been able to devise means of sustaining their environment through soil preservation. According to Milich [58], the practices of intercropping nitrogen-fixing legumes, ridging, bunding, adjusted planting, indigenous granaries, etc. have helped in the management of soil degradation.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

3.1 The Colonized as the Marginalized

As previously stated, most folkloric traditions existed in Nigeria prior to the arrival of colonial masters, which began with the arrival of missionaries and, as a result, promoted western ideals that usurped these practices and beliefs that had helped the people sustain their environments. Colonialism and current neocolonialism are anti-environmental in many countries, causing additional harm through exploitation. The much-publicized Niger-Delta pollution in Bayelsa caused by oil spillage is a well-known example. The people of Bayelsa are noted for their riverine culture. But what was once a beautiful ecology where people thrived on the benefits of fresh produce is now a horror. The oil industry, driven by transnational corporations, has transformed these places into environmental disasters through its exploitative economic operations.

It is worth noting that the measure of what the First World considers civilization is based on technological inventions. However, because western epistemology was designed to reject other types of civilization, they were labeled as witchcraft and barbarism. In other words, the history of colonialism and cultural injustice is linked to hegemonic Western technological designs that were thought to be all-sufficient [59, 60]. Unfortunately, technology does not operate in a vacuum; it is always interacting with cultural settings that have not been considered. To correct past mistakes, Haas [60] calls for reassessment and transformative access. In the context of environmental concerns, reassessing entails comprehending knowledge heterogeneity and making room for multiple alternatives and ways outside of western epistemology.

3.2 Environmental Justice and Cultural Inclusion

Consider an outsider infiltrating the Hausa agrarian society, acting as if they knew more about this people's culture than they did. How does that ecosystem want to survive in terms of soil degradation, and how do they intend to handle the various environmental consequences that result from that hijack? Some of these traditional traditions have been labeled as worthless by Western epistemology since they are not built on scientific logic and tests. Science does not emerge solely from a Western empiricist approach or worldview. What has been labeled voodoo or magic may have been science that has been conveniently dismissed since western epistemology does not explain it. Nonetheless, we continue to face environmental issues that do not appear to be abating. We continue to approach these difficulties on the surface when we need to strip off our epistemic ego and get down to the heart of the matter.

Though challenged by western ideas, Agbozo [61] conceptualizes the Mafi-Eve taboos of the Eve ethnic group in Ghana as a technique for societal sustainability. Also, Schell [37] echoes Maathai's emphasis on the significance of inclusive heuristics for a healthy environment and the importance of ecological literacy in Kenyan culture. She quotes Orr [62] as follows:

> The ecologically literate person brings to the table an understanding of the earth's "physical system," ecology, its "vital signs," human ecology, the "natural history of one's own region," and how to "restore natural systems and build sustainable communities and economies. (quoted in [37])

To underline this, the Nigerian folkloric examples used in this analysis are microcosms of other traditional cultures and values that are fundamental to how people valued, interacted with, and cared for their environments prior to western displacements. The accumulation of localized ways adds to transnational stability in what Maathai refers to as "transnational connective processes" (quoted in [37]). In other words, to achieve worldwide environmental justice, regional, non-western approaches must also be validated.

3.3 Pedagogical Implications for Technical Communication Scholars

Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) is a rapidly growing field that is critical in the discussion of environmental justice as a transnational dilemma. As researchers and professionals, we must be intentional about how we design our study and the kind of arguments we present to the public as socially just [5, 63]. Technical communication scholars are, therefore, tasked with repositioning and recontextualizing. These can be accomplished by developing new, interpretivist, and customized educational frameworks to match contemporary exigencies.

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