
**PRESENTING AND PRESERVING THE ART OF FOLKLORE
THROUGH THE CHILDREN'S BOOK *CHICKEN IN THE KITCHEN* BY
NNEDI OKORAFOR**

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Abstract:

Nnedi Okorafor's *Chicken in the Kitchen* (2015) is a compelling children's book that integrates African folklore and oral storytelling traditions into contemporary literature. The story follows Anyaugo, a young Nigerian girl, who encounters a mischievous giant chicken on the eve of the New Yam Festival. Through supernatural elements, anthropomorphism, and Igbo cultural symbols, Okorafor introduces readers to the spiritual and cultural richness of Nigerian folklore. The book highlights the significance of spirits, trickster figures, and moral teachings, which serve as mechanisms for cultural preservation and intergenerational knowledge transfer in African societies. Central to the narrative is the portrayal of masquerades, symbolic of ancestral spirits and cultural law enforcement in Igbo traditions. By blending fantasy with real-life cultural practices, Okorafor emphasizes the importance of folklore as a tool for teaching values, promoting community bonding, and maintaining cultural heritage. The use of engaging wordplay, rhythmic phrases, and vivid illustrations further captivates young readers while reinforcing cultural and moral lessons. Through its innovative adaptation of folklore, *Chicken in the Kitchen* bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, offering a valuable resource for introducing African heritage to contemporary audiences, particularly young children. This research paper explores how the book reflects the preservation and teaching of African cultural values through narrative and illustration.

Keywords: Folklore, Culture, Nigeria, Nnedi Okorafor, Magical Realism

Introduction

Nnedi Okorafor's *Chicken in the Kitchen* (2015), illustrated by Iranian-British children's book illustrator Mehrdokht Amini, and represents the integration of African oral storytelling traditions into contemporary children's literature. Okorafor, known for incorporating deep cultural roots, oral narratives, and fantasy in her works, has consistently highlighted the underrepresentation of African cultural elements in literature. This picture book reflects the significance of oral storytelling in African traditions, reinforcing its role in cultural preservation and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The narrative follows Anyaugo, a protagonist named after Okorafor's daughter, as she encounters a mischievous giant chicken in her kitchen on the eve of the Yam Festival. With the guidance of the wood spirit, Anyaugo unravels the creature's true intentions. The story incorporates supernatural elements, personified animals, and moral teachings, aligning with the conventions of African folklore. Okorafor's own experiences in Nigeria inform the story, illustrating the interwoven nature of real-life encounters and folklore.

Folklore serves as a communal expression of cultural identity and is a vital pedagogical tool in African societies. In Nigerian folklore, spirits, trickster figures, and supernatural interactions reflect a worldview where the spiritual and physical realms coexist. These narratives function not only as entertainment but also as mechanisms for imparting moral values, history, and social norms. By adapting these elements into a children's book, *Chicken in the Kitchen* extends the pedagogical and cultural significance of African storytelling to younger audiences in a contemporary literary form.

Okorafor's use of fantasy in *Chicken in the Kitchen* parallels the thematic structures of her adult fiction, demonstrating her commitment to preserving African mythology and oral tradition across literary genres. The book's integration of folklore and mythology underscores the importance of cultural heritage, positioning it as an essential text in the study of African literature and storytelling traditions.

Decoding the Folklore Element

In *Chicken in the Kitchen*, spirits and supernatural elements play a central role in shaping the narrative, reflecting African animist traditions in which the spiritual and physical worlds coexist. This theme aligns with broader global traditions, as various cultures such as those in ancient Greece, Japan, Ireland, India, and Indonesia have incorporated nature spirits into their literature, mythology, and religious practices. These spiritual entities often symbolize humanity's connection to the environment and emphasize the importance of ecological balance and protection.

The book represents Igbo cultural traditions, particularly the significance of deities associated with natural and metaphysical forces, including earth, mortality, fertility, thunder, lightning, fortune, and knowledge. Although the names and characteristics of nature spirits

differ across cultures, the underlying concept of spiritual beings linked to the natural world is a shared global phenomenon.

The central conflict in *Chicken in the Kitchen* revolves around a giant chicken disrupting preparations for the New Yam Festival, an important cultural event marking the beginning of the harvest season. The festival is widely celebrated in Nigeria and other African countries as a form of thanksgiving and communal gathering. This type of festival was celebrated in various forms, with distinct traditions and practices observed across different cultures and regions. It involves family reunions, traditional music, dance, and the preparation of yam-based dishes, reflecting the crop's cultural and economic significance. While the festival traditionally takes place at the end of the harvest season, the book presents it as occurring at the beginning, reinforcing the anticipation and cultural reverence surrounding the event.

In Igbo society, agriculture plays a vital role in cultural identity, with subsistence farming focusing on staple crops such as yam, cassava, and taro. The Igbo people, a prominent ethnic group in Nigeria, consider yam cultivation sacred, and the New Yam Festival serves as both a spiritual and social event. The festival includes ceremonial offerings to Gods and ancestors, symbolizing gratitude and respect for nature's bounty. The communal aspect of the celebration fosters social cohesion, reinforcing cultural continuity and intergenerational bonding.

Additionally, the book features symbolic figures such as the Masquerade and the giant Chicken, both of which mirror real-life masquerade performances in the New Yam Festival. These portrayals emphasize the deep-rooted traditions of Igbo culture, highlighting the festival's role in preserving folklore, spiritual beliefs, and collective identity.

Anthropomorphism and Talking Animals

The characters in *Chicken in the Kitchen*, such as the giant chicken and the wood spirit, exhibit human-like characteristics, a literary device known as anthropomorphism. In Nigerian culture, chickens hold both practical and spiritual significance, serving as domesticated animals used in rituals and traditional ceremonies. In the story, the protagonist, Anyaugo, initially fears the presence of the giant chicken in her kitchen on the night before the Yam Festival. Its enormous size evokes a sense of intimidation, a common theme in children's literature where animals often take on the role of antagonists or mischievous figures.

The giant chicken can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of large creatures, such as elephants and rhinoceroses, that may appear intimidating but are not inherently dangerous. This aligns with the traditional function of oral storytelling, which historically transmitted moral values to children. Today, picture books serve a similar role in preserving cultural narratives and imparting ethical lessons.

Similar themes appear in global folklore and mythology. For instance, in Japanese storytelling, the Studio Ghibli film *My Neighbor Totoro* features Totoro, an enormous nature spirit who initially instills fear in the protagonists but later becomes a guide, helping them overcome their anxieties. This narrative structure mirrors *Chicken in the Kitchen*, where the seemingly fearsome giant chicken ultimately serves a meaningful role. Giant figures in folklore exist across cultures, symbolizing wisdom, protection, or the necessity of confronting fear.

African folklore frequently employs familiar animals, such as hens and cats, as vehicles for conveying moral and cultural values. These stories reinforce communal knowledge and social teachings, ensuring that traditional wisdom is passed down through generations. By incorporating anthropomorphism, *Chicken in the Kitchen* modernizes these storytelling techniques, making them accessible to contemporary audiences while preserving their cultural essence.

Wordplay as an Element of *Chicken in the Kitchen*

Nnedi Okorafor, in many of her books, incorporates catchy phrases and words rooted in Igbo culture, to which she belongs. In some of her novels, she uses the Igbo language to emphasize the emotions and feelings of her characters. In *Chicken in the Kitchen*, she employs several rhythmic and engaging phrases to captivate young readers, encouraging their involvement in the story. Expressions such as “Buck buck peh-CUCK”, “Wood Wit”, “Chickenese”, and “Sunniest, shiniest, sweetest smile” (Okorafor) enhance the book’s appeal while also reflecting the naturalness of sounds and cultural values.

Research suggests that children who engage with rhymes develop strong reading skills. Listening to rhymes helps them distinguish sounds, aiding in the development of auditory skills. Repetition also enables children to recognize phonemes and understand syllable patterns (“Did You Know How Beneficial Nursery Rhymes Are for Your Child?”). Additionally, children often mimic actions performed by adults, reinforcing their learning. *Chicken in the Kitchen* serves as a guiding light for African children, introducing them to mythology and cultural values through an engaging and educational narrative.

Illustrations in the Picture Book: Detailing African Culture

The picture book intricately details various elements of African culture. For instance, the cat and the girl, Anyaugo, often share similar body positions and facial expressions in the scenes they appear in. This resemblance highlights their innocence and meekness, making them more relatable to young readers. Additionally, this visual connection fosters a stronger emotional bond between children and pets, encouraging them to see cats and dogs as companions rather than dangerous or harmful beings.



Fig 1 : Comparison of reaction and appearance of Anyaugo and her pet cat in *Chicken in the Kitchen*

Figure 1 illustrates how Anyaugo's expressions and reactions symbolize courage, bravery, and cleverness when confronting strange and fearful situations. The book also explores the duality of life, represented through two faucets in the washbasin symbolizing light and darkness, good and evil, fear and hope, cleanliness and dirtiness, as well as the past and present. This imagery reinforces the idea that humans have choices in life. Anyaugo could have remained in bed, paralyzed by fear, but instead, she chose to confront the unknown, demonstrating the significance of decision-making within the story.

Additionally, the book presents a blend of modernity and tradition, visible in architectural elements and clothing. The New Yam Festival scenes depict people in traditional attire such as Isiagu, George (Jorji), Akwete, and rapper (Ogodo, Isiagu aka Chieftaincy), showcasing the cultural richness of the Igbo heritage.

Importance of Masquerade in Igbo community

Before the advent of Christianity, masquerades played a crucial role in maintaining law and order in Igbo society. They were regarded as impartial enforcers of justice, ensuring truthfulness and social harmony. Although they are directly referenced in Nnedi Okorafor's

Chicken in the Kitchen, masquerades hold broader cultural significance in Igbo traditions. Often believed to embody ancestral spirits, masquerades serve as a bridge between the spiritual and human worlds. Historically, they functioned as law enforcers, upholding societal norms and preserving order. Beyond their role in social control, masquerades contribute to cultural preservation, social integration, and entertainment through festivals that celebrate unique traditions. Typically reserved for men, masquerades symbolize spiritual power, ancestral connection, and cultural heritage. In Igbo society, they are central to both celebratory and solemn occasions. In *Chicken in the Kitchen*, Anyaugo ultimately perceives the giant chicken as a masquerade during the New Yam Festival, reinforcing its cultural and symbolic importance.



Figure 2: Presence of Masquerades in *Chicken in the Kitchen*

As depicted in the image above in Figure 2, the presence of chickens as masquerades symbolizes deities, ancestors, or natural forces. In *Chicken in the Kitchen*, these masquerades serve as protectors of Anyaugo, highlighting the significance of spirituality, respect for elders, and cultural traditions. This representation reinforces communal bonds, ensuring that cultural values remain relevant even in the modern world.

Conclusion

Nnedi Okorafor wrote this picture book to highlight Africa's deep-rooted folklore and the oral tradition of ancient storytelling. It successfully represents folklore grounded in the real cultural and moral values of the Igbo people, emphasizing the importance of their heritage. Okorafor has stated that the book offers a glimpse into West African masquerade culture through the perspective of a young Nigerian girl. Her aim was to warmly introduce children to the rich cultural traditions of Nigeria. The story follows a brave young girl who

protects the customs she holds dear, drawing inspiration from Okorafor's own Nigerian heritage.

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