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# The Violent Fishermen: A Study of Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* as a Blending of Popular Literature and Traditional Folkloric Conventions

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## Abstract

In one of his finest literary essays, i.e., "Tradition and Individual Talent", T. S. Eliot opined that past works of art forms an order of tradition and this tradition is the foundation of long-lasting literature. Folklore is also a work of art, and it seems that no one knows better how to use folkloric elements in their novels than African writers. Folklore is an embodiment of individual dignity and social justice, explored in a traditional way. Most writers from the African continent including Chinua Achebe, Ngugiwa Thiong'o, Ben Okri etc. have made extensive use of African folklore and folk culture in their novels. In contrast, modern fiction writers across the globe have adopted a new fondness for popular culture in their writings. Popular culture generally refers to the set of contemporary practices, entertainment media including music, films, fashion, politics, use of technology etc. Some social science experts emphasise the importance of considering folk culture and folk beliefs as part of popular culture. However, popular culture commonly refers to modern cultural practices that have influenced a larger group of people. Chigozie Obioma is a writer from Nigeria—an African country with vibrant and rich cultural heritage. In his famous novel *The Fishermen*, he sets out to mix-up these two seemingly different areas i.e., folk culture and popular culture. This article examines how the novelist has blended popular culture with traditional and folkloric conventions, which represent two different poles of time and space.

This article also examines the author's unique narrative style which enables him to combine folk culture and popular culture with extraordinary ease of writing. This study aims to understand the multilayered dynamics of popular culture and oral folkloric traditions, with special reference to their use in this novel. Besides, it will look into how a traditionally orthodox Nigerian society is gradually transforming into a society of modern developments which are being reflected in this novel. The primary purpose of the study is to examine the intermingling of popular culture and traditional folkloric culture in the Nigerian society with special reference to the novel *The Fishermen*.

In doing so, the primary approach of the researcher was speculative and analytical in nature. The study uses the method of closed reading of the primary text for detailed analysis of the topic concerned. The method of analyzing different situations and characters in connection to the concerned topic has been thoroughly used for this study. Apart from the study of the primary text, method of reading connected socio-cultural concepts and theories have also been used for this research article.

It is believed that this article will pave a new path for the study of the intermingling of popular culture with folkloric conventions not only in the texts of the African continent but also encourage researchers to do the same in Oriental fictions which are equally rich in the blending of popular culture with folkloric conventions. This research will help readers and researchers engage in a new area of study where modern developments in the field of literature and folklore can be explored. This study will contribute to the study of Nigerian novels in connection to their very own folkloric conventions. In addition, this study will help create a new ecosystem of knowledge where folklore and popular culture within literature can be easily studied.

**Keywords:** Folklore, Folk Culture, Popular Culture, Violence, Superstition.

## Introduction

The Fishermen by Chigozie Obioma is a unique novel, first published in 2015, which tells the story of four young brothers in a small town in western Nigeria in a folkloric narrative discourse. Nigeria has been the central hub

of African literary developments and here the author aptly follows the traditions of his great predecessors including Chinua Achebe. The Fishermen is set in a small town in 'rural' Nigeria where a madman and his illogical superstition gets into the head of the paranoid adult Ikenna which eventually destroys a family. *Chigozie Obioma* intentionally sets his novel in Akure, a comparatively remote town, to display the clash between superstitious belief and 'new knowledge' among people. This study primarily examines the intermingling of popular culture with folkloric conventions. To examine this intermingling, the researcher conducted a deconstructive study of the narrative style of the novel. This seemingly absurd and nonlinear blending of two different genres can be considered the primary research problem in this study. While dealing with this primary research problem, the researcher has thoroughly analyzed the images, examples and other illustrative literary devices that the author has used skillfully. The study of blending of popular culture with folkloric aspects is very important and essential to understand our roots and our future prospects as a nation or ethnic unity. In an era of revival of new knowledge systems, where indigenous knowledge systems are highly rated, this kind of research article will not only encourage people to concentrate on their indigenous literary conventions but also enable them to cope with modern developments in the field of literature.

### Aims & Objectives

The Fishermen is a very skillfully crafted novel. In this novel, the novelist carefully combines popular culture and popular culture-related developments in Nigeria in the 1990s with traditional folkloric conventions of African society in general and Nigerian society in particular. The primary aims and objectives of this research article are as follows:

This article demonstrates the author's blending of popular culture and traditional folkloric conventions of the Nigerian society have been successful experimentation in The Fishermen.

- It studies superstitions of the Nigerian society and how it affects the lives of the people of that place.

- This novel also makes a discursive study of place, people and situations in the context of development and advent of modernity.
- It will also make an elaborate study of the novel's narrative in the context of the traditional beliefs and popular culture.

### Methodology

The method of analysing and perceiving notions through the study of society has been primarily used for this research. The researcher has used only one novel by the novelist Chigozie Obioma, i.e., The Fishermen, so the information, analysis and other data provided by the novelist has been primarily used for the better understanding of the novel. Consequently, the overall method used for the scrutiny of this novel is both analytical and speculative in nature.

### Deconstructing the Novel

The novel begins with a sudden change in Mr. Agwu's life and family when he was suddenly transferred from his small hometown in Akure to distant Yola. This transfer suddenly liberates the four young children of the family, Ikenna, Boza, Obembe, and Ben(jamin) (who is also the narrator of the story), from the clutch of their authoritarian father. Now, they were owners of their free will- as their mother had hardly any time to look after them. The four boys, who enjoyed a very brief time as a strong unit, used their free time in different tasks like roaming around the locality and playing soccer etc. However, soon they were fed up with all these and engrossed in fishing in the forbidden local river Omi-Ala. People believed that Omi-Ala was a cursed river, possessed by certain dark energies and caused all sorts of worry to the person whoever went there for fishing.

There was a local madman named Abulu who kept on wandering around the bank of Omi-Ala. One afternoon, when the four brothers along with their friends went for fishing in that forbidden river, Abulu in a fit of madness shouted that Ikenna, the eldest brother would be killed by 'fishermen'. People in Akure believed that Abulu was a madman with special powers to foresee the future. So, when this prediction came out of Abulu's mouth, the younger brothers tried to convince Ikenna that Abulu's prediction was

nothing but absolute rubbish. But Ikenna became very grave and took it very seriously. He now became an adult hermit in his own home- gradually distancing himself from the rest of his brothers. He became a completely different person- constantly fighting with his brothers. He was now constantly haunted by fear of being killed by his own brothers. Later, he began to indulge in physical fighting with his brothers, especially with Boza- the brother with whom he used to have closest bonding. In one such fight, Ikenna is accidentally killed by Boza. Later, Boza was also found dead in their family well. At the death of their elder brothers, Obembe and Ben planned to take revenge on Abulu- the madman. This is because, they believed that the tragedy in the family was just the result of Abulu's prophecy. Obembe and Ben were successful in killing Abulu; but soon they were chased down by police which resulted in Obembe running away from his family forever and Ben going to the prison.

However, the author mixes two different ideas or genres in his unique narrative style. He adopts a folkloric pattern of narration with his frequent reference to the popular culture. First of all, let us examine how *Chigozie Obioma* situates his characters and incidents in a location that is appropriate for a folkloric story or moral fable. He begins his novel with an Igbo proverb: "The footsteps of one man cannot create a stampede." Besides, he constantly refers to Igbo proverbs and quotes in this novel. Such proverbs and quotes automatically bring about an environment of folkloric conventions in this novel. There are certain characters here, who have been developed as either outcast or madmen. Ikenna, the eldest son of Mr. Agwu and Abulu, the madman of Akure are such characters. They are strange from rest of the characters in the novel and there is something eerie about them. Their characters have elements of horror and supernaturalism, which later begin to haunt other characters of the novel. Nigerian folktales are abundant with such elements of eeriness. Obioma also quotes from Igbo proverbs to consolidate the feeling of intervention of paranormal elements. For instance, in the chapter titled "The Madman"- where the author analyses the character, of Abulu, the author quotes from an ancient Igbo proverb to throw light on the madman: "Those the Gods have chosen

to destroy, they inflict with madness." (Obioma, 2015)

Another idea that pulls the novel towards a folkloric telling is its uncomplicated pattern, narrative style and the maintenance of poetic justice. In a nutshell, *The Fishermen* is about four brothers who were very fond of themselves (at least in the beginning). Their father was a rich banker and their mother was a hardworking and caretaking woman. Their lives were indeed very simple and easy-going at the beginning of the novel. Their simple lives and seemingly uncomplicated activities are complemented by the author's use of a lucid, unobscured, and free-flowing narrative style in the first part of the novel. For instance, the novel begins with a very spontaneous and childlike innocence where Benjamin is recounting their life:

We were fishermen:

*My brothers and I became fishermen in January of 1996 after our father moved out of Akure, a town in the west of Nigeria, where we had lived together all our lives. (Obioma, 2015)*

The majority of the folktales are simple and spontaneous, but they contain strong moral advice and a primitive and dark energy within their plots, characters, and incidents. Similarly, *The Fishermen* also takes a sudden turn from a childlike innocence of narrative voice to a description which is full of bloodshed, violence and other gory and disturbing descriptions. The first glimpse of such negative, dark energy among the four brothers could be seen when they stole a rooster from their neighbour, Iyaiyabo. The four brothers wanted to take revenge on Iyaiyabo as she had informed their mother about the four brothers regularly going for fishing in that abandoned river. So, they had stolen the rooster and mercilessly beheaded the unfortunate bird. The way the four brothers had planned to take revenge on the poor lady and the way they had finally executed it, it was indeed a scary description;

*Boja set the petrified cock down on the chosen spot, and took the knife that Obembe had brought from our kitchen. Ikenna joined him and together they held the chicken in place, unshaken by its loud squawks. Then we all watched as the knife moved in Boja's hand with unaccustomed ease, a downward slit through the rooster's wrinkled neck as if he had handled the knife several times before, and as if he was destined*

*to handle it yet again. The cock twitched and made aggravating movements that were restrained by all our hands holding it firmly. [...] Boja severed the cock's head, leaving a trail of blood in its wake. (Obioma, 2015)*

Thus, the major part of the descriptions of the novel is full of disturbing incidents and images of violence and bloodshed. The way Boja and Ikenna indulged in constant fighting, the way Ikenna was finally killed in a fighting in a 'river full of blood', the way Boja was found dead inside the family well with fungus all over his torso and last but not the least, the way, Obembe and Ben had killed the village madman Abulu, constantly fill up the minds of the readers with a sense of hidden dark energy among the four brothers. Many times, the author deliberately transports his readers into a 'primitive Nigeria' with raw passions and paranoid emotions.

Another issue that gives *The Fishermen* a folktale-like perspective is its corrective moral nature. The novel imparts that the tragedies which scatter the lives of the concerned characters are fully justified. This is in the sense that the four boys had violated age old social customs or somehow offended traditional belief system by their audacities. For instance, we can refer to Mr. Agwu, the proud father of the four boys. First of all, he was very rich banker in comparison to most of his neighbors. His wealth became a source of jealousy for his neighbours. Besides, he was father of six kids for which he was sometimes made fun of too. Apart from that he had also accepted the transfer order to far Yola- almost deserting his family. As the African folktales insist, a man should never abandon his growing children in pursuit of money and comfort. Mrs. Agwu was also of the same opinion and expressed her frustration before Mr. Agwu. However, Mr. Agwu went to the new Yola town, and hence a tragic life awaited him and his family.

The four brothers offend not only their parents but also their ancient Yoruba deities. They had been inattentive to their parents' advices; they had frequently gone to the abandoned river Omi-Ala for fishing in spite of regular warning against such activities; all of them had brutally beheaded the rooster from the neighbor's house; Boja and Ikenna had killed one another and Obembe and Ben had

killed the village madman Abulu. After committing so many crimes, a grave punishment and sorrowful life was waiting for them. Chigozie Obioma has also tried to deliver proper poetic justice in this novel, and it definitely provides a folktale-like environment to *The Fishermen*.

There is no doubt that Chigozie Obioma has constructed the plot, incidents and the characters in *The Fishermen* in the manner of a moral fable with a folkloric taste. However, the author has mixed up his folkloric narrative with many ideas, images, tropes and other ingredients of popular culture. This amalgamation of modern popular culture with traditional folkloric treatment has created a completely new taste for readers. Among the images from popular culture that strikes us in the beginning of the novel is the narrator's reference to several cartoon characters and characters from television commercials. For instance, Ben informs his listeners that their father Mr. Agwu- who had six kids- was often mocked by people with the moniker Baba Onile. Baba Onile was the principal character of a popular Yoruba soap who had six wives and twenty-one children.

Another reference to popular culture in *The Fishermen* is the reference to 1993 presidential election from the point of view of the four brothers. In the presidential election in 1993, M.K.O. Abiola was the presidential aspirant of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). The narrator records some minute observations of the presidential election. M.K.O. Abiola was hailed by the Nigerians as the "Man, the savior". It seems that the mood of the people of Nigeria was in favor of Mr. Abiola. He had glued banners, flags and stickers of different shapes and designs in his name and distributed them all over Nigeria. In one of the political rallies, the four fishermen brothers were successful in getting hold of a 'precious' M.K.O Calendar directly from Mr. Abiola. The calendar was a treasure to all the boys and they had kept it in their wall as a token of proud beholding- until it was destroyed by Ikenna in a fit of his paranoid mood.

Apart from the M.K.O. calendar, there is also a reference to contemporary election-related slogans. We are told that Mr. Abiola had tried to capture the attention of the people with lucrative slogans like

“Hope’93: Farewell to poverty.” Ikenna and his three brothers also sang in favor of Mr. Abiola. Ben informs the readers that when Mr. Abiola approached them, then all the four brothers had sung at the top of their lungs:

*M.K.O., you are beautiful beyond description.  
 Too marvelous for words.  
 The most beautiful of all creatures.  
 Like nothing ever seen nor heard.  
 Who can touch your infinite wisdom?  
 Who can fathom the depths of your love?  
 M.K.O., you are beautiful beyond description.  
 Your majesty is enthroned above. (Obioma, 2015)*

In this way, Chigozie Obioma has very carefully mixed up details from contemporary popular culture with typical narrative patterns. Although folktales and popular culture do not go hand in hand but the author has skillfully amalgamated them to bring out his desired effect. He refers to a whole lot of popular items from popular culture ranging from politics, T.V. Commercials, animated characters, popular songs, names of books, and movies. For example, he refers to the television program Economic Matters. There is also direct reference to W.B. Yeats’ poem ‘The Second Coming’ and Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart in the chapter ‘The Falconer’.

However, the most important reference from popular culture of Nigeria is perhaps the reference to Nigeria’s craze for soccer. In 1996, when Nigeria’s soccer team reached the Olympic final by defeating tournament favourite Brazil, people went mad with excitement. Finally, Nigeria defeated Argentina to win its maiden Olympic gold in soccer. The author has captured the mood of the nation in precise but appropriate words:

*It was the week in August when Nigeria’s Olympic “Dream Team” reached the final of the men’s football. In the weeks before that, marketplaces, schools, offices had lit up with the name of Chioma Ajunwa, who had won gold for the ramshackle country. [...] The country was mad with joy. (Obioma, 2015)*

A reference to popular footballers of the national team including Okocha and Emmanuel Amuneke also brings out the popular cultural elements which have been aptly used by the author.

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#### **Conclusion**

Thus, Chigozie Obioma has smoothly mixed up folkloric conventions with elements of popular culture in *The Fishermen*. It is the author’s superb narrative expertise with which he successfully describes people from the Yoruba community (who believed that river Omi-Ala possessed dark energy) and characters like Mr. Agwu (who believed that madman Abulu’s curses does not come true) on the same scale within a society moving towards modernism with their love of soccer, T.V. commercial etc.

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