

Review Article

The Traditional Roles of African Women as seen through Tunji Ogundimu's *Mountain of Gold*

Sidi Chabi Moussa^{1*}

¹Senior Lecturer of African Literature at the Department of Anglophone Studies, Faculty of Letters, Arts and Human Sciences, University of Parakou (UP), Parakou, Republic of Bénin

Article History

Received: 06.04.2021

Accepted: 10.05.2021

Published: 20.05.2021

Journal homepage:

<https://www.easpublisher.com>

Quick Response Code



Abstract: Nowadays, most African women ignore African values and tightly stick to what they learn from western people under the cover of education, emancipation and equality. So, they think that the only role devoted to women in Africa is childbirth. Hence the necessity to carry out this study in order to reveal the traditional roles of African women and the values given to them in Africa. African women will completely forget about their roles and start acting like western women unless something is done so that they should fully play the roles assigned to them. The phenomenological and descriptive approaches are the methodological approaches used in this paper. The literary theories applied to this research work are the feminist criticism which aims at valorising women's image on the one hand, and the Marxist criticism which is based on class struggle and focuses on power and money in works of literature on the other hand. The study has found that women play an important role in traditional African societies and that the stereotypes which affect them need to be eradicated. The focus of this research work is limited to a critical appraisal of the novel under study with illustrations. The paper recommends and concludes that African women have important traditional roles and that they should play these roles efficiently for the welfare of their families and of society at large.

Keywords: African women, emancipation, equality, traditional roles, values.

Copyright © 2021 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

African people define some roles that women should play for the wellbeing of their families and of society at large because of their cultural and other realities. Women in general and African women in particular, play paramount roles in the household, in the family and by extension in society. These roles are very important and can never be plainly performed by men. So, it is obvious that without women, the real development and welfare of the African society will not be achieved. Hence the necessity to carry out this study in order to pinpoint the traditional roles of African women as seen through Tunji Ogundimu's *Mountain of Gold*. The purpose of this paper is to examine critically and to expose the traditional roles of African women through the novel under study.

The theoretical framework of the research work has to do with the feminist criticism which aims at valorising women's image on the one hand, and with the Marxist criticism which is based on class struggle and

focuses on power and money in works of literature on the other hand. The methodological approaches used in this paper are the phenomenological and descriptive approaches. The pertinence of the theories and methods used lies in the fact that they induce not only an understanding of the traditional roles of African women but also a literary appraisal of those roles through a study of the selected novel. The research work is articulated around three axes: African women's traditional role as wives, African women's traditional role as mothers and educators, and their traditional role as managers of the family income.

African Women's Traditional Role as Wives

According to A. S. Hornby (1989, p. 1096), 'role' is the "function or importance of somebody/something." In the same way, 'traditional' is an adjective which comes from 'tradition' and means "according to or being tradition" (A. S. Hornby, 1989, p. 1359). So, one may define 'traditional roles of African women' as 'the function or position assigned to

African women in traditional African societies.’ K. Sekścińska, A. Trzcińska and D. A. Maison (2016, p. 1) write: “The traditional social role of women is that of the lady of the house, taking care of the family, being focused on children and their happiness.” In the same vein, J. Kelly (1977, p. 20) states: “The relations of the sex were restructured to one of female dependency and male domination.” The feminine gender has no decision to make in front of the male gender. Whether the African woman likes it or not, the only thing she has to do is to submit and obey men, especially her husband who dominates her because she is ‘the weaker sex.’

In traditional African societies, a woman should have virtues or qualities which include docility and submission. Women who have none of these qualities cannot claim to found a home, let alone be mothers of exemplary children. D. Kasomo (2010, p. 128) posits:

Africa’s traditional society was not as fair to women as we would like to think. Often they were used and handled like personal property of men, exploited, oppressed and degraded. In Africa often women have been treated as “second-class” as portrayed in many African proverbs and sayings. In most of these proverbs, women are referred to as stoves, old cooking pots, large wooden stirring spoons, hoes, cows, merino sheep, fields and fires and even dogs usually with a derogatory meaning.

Despite D. Kasomo’s viewpoint according to which men exploit, oppress and degrade women in Africa, there is no hint of women’s unfair treatment, at least physically, in the novel under study. A woman should have a good behaviour towards her husband and be comprehending. For instance, in *Mountain of Gold*, Bushi exemplifies this fact by plainly playing her traditional role as a wife. She knows that as a driver, Kóripé solely depends on his boss for his timetable. So, she worries as she sees him in the home before the usual time because she knows that: “A driver’s job does not end until his boss closed at work and has been safely driven home. Usually, he never closed earlier than seven or eight in the evening. Now he was back by four o’clock” (p. 31). As a good wife, Bushi feels that there is something amiss when her husband comes back from work before seven or eight in the evening. As a result, she tells him with concern on her face: “I hope it was not an accident” (p. 31). She sighs with some relief after Kóripé has shaken his head. As soon as she asks him what the problem is, he answers: “It is not pleasant” (p. 32). However, rather than panicking, she takes her courage in both hands and boldly tells him: “Let us share it. A load shared is light to carry” (p. 32). The novelist makes Bushi sympathise with her husband to show that this is one of the roles of an African woman as a wife. When Kóripé confides in her that he has been rejected again as a driver simply because the person who is supposed to be his boss “Maybe ...

doesn’t want to be driven by a Mallam” (p. 32), she apparently sides with him by saying:

‘Your employers are not serious. They are holding the hand of a willing bride and they want a bed to come with the marriage proposal. They have been spoilt. They have been given chauffeur-driven cars; and they want to choose their own drivers as well. Has Government not done enough by providing vehicles and the people to drive them? Anyway, how did you offend him?’ (p. 32)

The foregoing excerpt is an indication that Bushi is a clever woman who seeks to understand what is happening to her husband. When Kóripé tells her: “They all keep saying that I talk too much” (p. 32) and begs her to tell him if talking is a crime, she sharply replies: “It can become one, if you say things that people don’t like. Why must you continue to talk if they don’t want to hear your voice?” (p. 33). However, Kóripé wonders how he can keep mum when he is not dumb, rather than acknowledging his fault. As a good advisor to her husband, Bushi continues and says:

‘You don’t have to be dumb to keep mum. People say silence is gold. And gold is cheap in this case. Keep quiet if silence will save your job. We are no longer in Mafa here. This is our part of the country. And you know how rigid the people in the West can be. They will quote all sorts of rules to defend anything. Please don’t let them spill our gari. At least we are managing the little they pay you. Or will you go and plead with your former boss?’ (p. 33)

The aforementioned quotation reveals that Bushi is the prototype of women who make men face facts. Through her behaviour, the writer intends to show that a wife has to tell her husband the truth rather than beating about the bush. Of course, Bushi plays her traditional role as a wife very well by giving advice to her husband. However, Kóripé seems to turn a deaf ear to the advice that his loving wife has given him so far. He does not want to go and plead with his former boss as she has advised him. He simply replies: “The Deputy Provost? No. If he had wanted to protect me would he have rejected me himself?” (p. 33). This awkward question leads Bushi to tell her husband what follows: “You caused some of these things yourself. He was kind enough to find you a job. But you ruined the relationship” (p. 33). She draws a conclusion on Kóripé’s predicament in these terms:

‘I know a woman cannot blame a man. But I know the truth and I am not afraid of repeating it. You relate with your bosses as if they were your mates. That is not right. You hardly remember that a horse’s muzzle is a long way from the head. Somebody can help you to get a job. Will they help you to do it well? Your continued stay on the job will depend on your performance.’ (pp. 33-34)

In the above-mentioned quotation, it is clear that Bushi acknowledges the sacrosanct place that a

man occupies in society by saying that she knows a woman cannot blame a man. However, she has the moral obligation to tell Kóripé what goes wrong with his job albeit against his expectation. The novelist makes Bushi appear as a plain-spoken woman who feels obliged to transgress the fact that a woman cannot blame a man by blaming her husband. She denounces her husband's outrageous relation with his bosses as if they were his mates. She thus insinuates that as a driver, her husband should observe the distance which should exist between a boss and his employee. Rather than eating humble pie by acknowledging his fault, Kóripé thinks that nobody is complaining about his job and nobody has ever said that he was not a good and committed driver. He bluntly says: "All they say is that I talk too much or that I talk hasty" (p. 34). This leads his wife to tell him the naked truth in these terms: "What they are saying cannot be a lie; I know you. You don't watch your tongue. Your mouth keeps leaking all the time. I have said it before and I am saying it again: if your mouth will harm your job keep it shut" (p. 34). "Kóripé was overwhelmed. His wife was outspoken and direct" (p. 34). As a result, "[...] he recalled his father's words of caution about thirty-six years ago, 'If you wish to prosper in life you have to watch your tongue'" (p. 34). Needless to say, Bushi has succeeded in making her husband realise that she is right and that people who reject him are right as well. This is a good quality that every woman should have. The writer uses Bushi's behaviour towards her husband to show that a good wife should be a bit inquisitive about what her husband does. She is a proper woman as F. Ebila (2015, p. 147) puts it in the following quotation:

A proper African woman is imagined to exist within an ideal African family composed of a real loving husband or father who is usually the head of household, a supporting wife or mother who is expected to mother the children of the household. A proper African woman therefore aspires to be a wife and a mother.

As a proper woman, Bushi is a good wife. That is why her husband finds himself in a dilemma as far as his plan to marry Aisha is concerned. Because of that dilemma, Kóripé realises that he needs advice. So, he approaches Mrs. Odebiyi and tells her: "I need advice" (p. 56). When Kóripé tells her that he needs her advice because he is in love and because Islam permits polygamy, she tells him:

'Don't misinterpret Islam. Islam does not permit nonsense. It does not encourage poverty. Islam is not a barrier to progress. Islam has its rules: if you want to progress, Islam recommends that you love and treat them equally and justly. Can you do that with your kind of income? Besides, Islam insists that you inform the senior wife. [...].' (p. 57)

The foregoing quotation shows that Mrs. Odebiyi is a good adviser. She tells Kóripé about the rules of Islam in order to make him change his mind

about his intention to indulge in polygamy. What is good is that when she asks Kóripé if he has informed his wife and if she is allowing him, he says: "She's protesting in silence. But I think that kind of protest is normal, it should be expected" (p. 58). Although Mrs. Odebiyi tells him that: "Not many women will react mildly; they will fight you head-on" (p. 58), it is clear that the weight of customs and traditions somehow restrict women and makes them play their traditional roles well. D. Kasomo (2010, p. 129) refers to the cultural hardships which limit African women in their traditional roles in these terms: "There are also some cultural hardships that African women experience. In African ethnic groups, there are taboos which restrict women. For example, a woman should not talk when men are having conversation." "In the traditional African imaginary [...], women are expected to be quiet when men speak, respectable by being respectful to men (especially to male leadership), good mothers of the nation and not to challenge authority in general" (F. Ebila, 2015, p. 146).

A real African woman sacrifices her personal pleasure and ambitions, sets a standard of morality, relieves stress, and maintains peace and order in the household. She is a source of inspiration to her husband for high endeavour and great success in life. She stands by him in his hard times and shares with him all his success and attainments. She sometimes takes more care of her family better than her husband does. This is illustrated in the novel under study through what Kóripé says in the following quotation, while referring to his wife, Bushi: "My wife is an honourable housewife. She takes care more of me and my children; indeed better than I can ever do myself. My food is always ready before I get back from work. She works hard for us to survive" (p. 40). The quotation clearly shows that Bushi is an exemplary wife and mother in accordance with the requirements of traditional African societies. The novelist makes her appear as a model African woman who knows her roles well. "A proper woman puts the family interest first before even her own personal interest" (F. Ebila, 2015, p. 146), and that is what Bushi endeavours to do. Kóripé further expatiates on his wife's expertise as a good cook unlike his fiancée, Aisha. The following conversation between him and Aisha after he has tasted her soup is a proof:

'How do you find the soup?' Aisha asked when Kóripé had swallowed the first morsel.

'Excellent!' He stretched his tongue out, licked his upper lip, then the lower. He repeated, 'Excellent.' But, within him, he had some reservation, which he could not give voice to. He knew that Bushi was a better cook. Yet, he refrained from saying so before Aisha. He believed he had to appreciate whatever she offered. She would not like it if he failed to appreciate anything she did. He didn't want to offend her. Anyway, if you love a woman, any soup she cooks is sweet. (pp. 67-68)

The above quotation clearly shows that Aisha does not know how to cook and will not be a good wife. One of the traditional roles that an African woman should play as a wife is providing her husband and children with good food. As such, a woman needs to be a good cook before she gets married. The feminist criticism which aims at valorising women's image is applied here once more. Its relevance lies in the fact that although Kóripé is a man, he valorises women's image by praising his wife and by acknowledging her worth. In the Holy Scriptures, the woman is considered as the helper of the man, the lovable creature, the affectionate being and the one who fills the gap inside the man. So, a good wife is the female person to whom a man returns for love, sympathy, understanding, comfort and recognition. She is the symbol of purity, faithfulness, submission and devotion to her husband. "The women are often the backbone of the family in traditional Africa. The African family has always been characterized by strong women who usually held pertinent positions in the family" (B. Agarwal, 1970, p. 75, quoted by O. T. Afisi, 2010, p. 231).

In *Mountain of Gold*, although Aisha is a girl who seeks to get married to Kóripé, her behaviour towards him clearly shows that she will not be a good wife. She tells Kóripé: "Don't cajole me, Ònigbèni. You may feel proud if you marry anyone. But I will not be proud as a driver's wife; I mean a driver who has no financial muscle" (p. 87). Through the quotation, Aisha insults and rejects her fiancé, Kóripé, simply because he is a poor driver. This behaviour proves that she has not received a good basic education which is capital in traditional Africa. She further insults Kóripé as shown in the excerpt below:

'There is no accident in this matter. Simply put, you don't know what you want and you didn't go for your type of girl. You did not check your pocket before you went randy. Onígchè!'

'Kail!' Kóripé exclaimed, shocked to a standstill. Nobody had ever called him Onígchè.

What did he buy on credit from Aisha? [...]. 'Well,' said Kóripé, 'we have to resolve the main thing between us. Only then I shall quit. I will wait to see my baby.' (pp. 87-88)

The above excerpt shows that Aisha is the prototype of women whom tradition condemns for misbehaving towards their prospective husbands. In Africa, tradition requires that a woman should not insult a man as she insults her prospective husband. The writer uses her behaviour as a forerunner of the bad marital relationship she will have with Kóripé once he gets married to her. She thus stands as the antithesis of Bushi who is an exemplary wife. Tradition recommends that a good woman should respect men in general and her husband in particular. Any woman, like Aisha, who fails to abide by this traditional recommendation is doomed to suffer an ordeal which may lead her to

spinsterhood. Such a woman cannot take care of her family if she happens to have any. There is a class struggle between Kóripé, representing the male gender and Aisha representing the female gender as shown in the above quotation. The Marxist criticism which is based on class struggle and focuses on power and money in works of literature is thus applied at this level. Its relevance lies in the fact that Aisha wants Kóripé to do things that are beyond his capacities as a mere driver because of the power that money has on her.

In traditional African societies, people consider women who get their dowry or bride-price as being married after a traditional wedding ceremony. So, there is no need for an elaborate wedding in traditional Africa. However, Aisha protests as soon as she notices that Kóripé wants a very simple marriage. She laments: "You mean I will not have a proper wedding? What is that supposed to be? Did you pick me up from the gutters? Look, I want a good wedding. I don't want a marriage that we shall begin to patch up from day one" (p. 69). She says further: "I know what a good wedding is; I cannot leave my parents and follow you like an orphan in distress" (p. 69). Through Aisha's awkward behaviour, the novelist once more intends to show that she will not be a good wife as she proves to be materialistic. "A proper woman in the African tradition has always been imagined within the context of the family; she is expected to accept marriage and have children because marriage is assumed to be the end goal for most African women" (W. Maathai, 2007, p. 54). Although Aisha is two-month pregnant, she wants Kóripé to spend fortunes on their wedding. Tradition does not allow a woman to choose how she wants her marriage to take place. The bride-price plays a paramount role in any woman's marital life according to tradition and no woman can be a good wife unless she follows the normal process of marriage. It is pitiful that Aisha has resorted to abortion simply because her fiancé has failed to promise her an expensive wedding. The narrator says: "She had aborted the pregnancy" (p. 90). Through the quotation, the writer shows that Aisha is a bad woman. She has aborted the pregnancy she is carrying without telling Kóripé about it although he is responsible for it. This attitude further proves that Aisha can never be a good wife like Bushi, her prospective co-spouse. In fact, the bride-price is what Aisha should insist on in the polygamous relation she is about to engage in. The United Nations Economic and Social Council (1963, pp. 6-7) refers to polygamy and the bride-price in these terms:

Polygamy and "bride-price" are two other matters which, in one way or another affect the status and position of women in African societies. They have been, and continue to be, subjects of heated debate in which women are found on both sides of the fence. There are those who justify these two practices on the grounds that they are part and parcel of African traditional patterns of living and that therefore, they are

sacrosanct and must not be interfered with. [...]. Another school of thought which is closely related to the first, argues that both these practices, particularly “bride-price”, do in fact, enhance the status of a wife and ensure that she will be treated with respect and care. The argument goes on to say that men would think very little of wives for whom they did not give the “bride-price”. Others argue that the payments are a “thank-you” gift to the woman’s parents.

Whatever the speculations about the bride-price, it is clear that it is very important in any African woman’s marital life. Some women get married and decide to divorce after having one or two children so as to become free. Thus, they fail in playing their traditional roles and prefer living as spinsters. However, A. Cloud (2015, p. 4) posits: “If a woman is single, she is made to move in with one of her male relatives or join a convent and become a nun.” The quotation indicates that a woman is likely to run into trouble if she is not married because people reject spinsterhood and see spinsters as worthless women. A woman without a male companion is therefore fit to be a nun. In traditional African societies, the woman is the mistress of the kitchen. She decides on what people can eat and it is what she cooks that everybody should eat in the family. Bushi is the prototype of a good woman as exemplified in the following quotation: “Bushi and Tóbi were busy in the kitchen, at the back of the house” (p. 96). Although Aisha is idle, she receives her prospective husband, Kóripé, with egusi soup and eba. She says: “I have egusi soup and I can prepare eba in five minutes” (p. 67).

In traditional Africa, everything concerning the tidiness of the house is entrusted to women. Men consider them as housekeepers and trustworthy people who are able to carefully watch over the house. So, the beauty and the tidiness of the house depend on them. They even carry out petty tasks that men can do. For instance, “Bushi came out of the bedroom to clear the plates in front of him [her husband]” (p. 97). It is also the wife’s responsibility to wash her husband’s clothes. In addition, she should get her husband’s permission to go out of the house and to do certain things. The United Nations Economic and Social Council (1963, p. 2) states:

There are many tribes where a wife could not visit in any part of the village without her husband’s permission. She cannot dispose of her property, even of the basket she made without his consent; and her husband has the right and power to beat her if, in his opinion, she has misbehaved or has dared to go counter to his wishes.

In traditional African societies, women play a minor role in decision-making. However, they have some undeniable qualities that make them very important in society. W. T. Ngũgĩ (1990, p. 150)

asserts: “Women are the corner-stones of the home.” He does so to show that women are very important in society.

African Women’s Role as Mothers and Educators

African women also play a great role as mothers and educators for their children. In the African family, the woman carries out the whole burden of childbirth and the greater part of child rearing tasks. She is primarily responsible for the child’s habit of self-control, orderliness, industriousness or honesty. Moreover, she is responsible for the maintenance of utmost discipline in the family. For example, in the novel under study, one of Mrs. Agbájé’s children, Bukky, has become scornful against his father’s driver, Kóripé, who complains that he has no credit to call his fiancée, Aisha, by saying: ““And do you want us to buy it for you?” [...]. ‘You have no credit but you can burn Daddy’s fuel and waste our time? You are playing with your job’” (p. 43). Rather than siding with her son, Mrs. Agbájé cautions: ““Come on, Bukky. Stop it! [...]. Are you his employer?’” (p. 44). She has done so because she wants to tell her son that a child should be disciplined and avoid insulting an older person. Through Mrs. Agbájé’s attitude towards her son, the novelist intends to show that a woman should plainly play her role as an educator. In addition, Bushi, Kóripé’s wife, develops the characteristics of a woman as a mother and an educator when her son, Tóbi, says that his father wants him to call Auntie Aisha ‘Mummy’ and gets angry when he says his Mummy is at home. Full of smile, she tells her son: “People who are old enough to be your mother may also be called Mummy. It is not everybody you call Mummy that is your true mother. Your daddy was only joking” (p. 53). “Although Bushi did not comment on Tóbi’s revelation her silence was harsh and appeared more violent than a verbal assault” (p. 54). Bushi’s reaction to her husband’s unfaithfulness and betrayal shows that she respects her husband as a good wife. Her behaviour does not mean that she is afraid of her husband or supports polygamy which he is about to engage in. Without being too submissive to her husband, she acknowledges his place as the head of the family. In the same vein, she tries to give a good basic education to her child, Tóbi, by sermonising him as a good mother. The United Nations Economic and Social Council (1963, p. 1) refers to women’s roles in these terms:

As in all other societies, women play their significant roles as mothers, and in this position they bear and teach children, are loyal and loving to their families and in many cases subordinate themselves in the service of their husbands, children, families and clans. In this, however, African women are not distinguished from other women in the world. There are, however, certain factors which are particularly true of African women in traditional societies which are of immense importance for a proper appreciation of their role in African societies in general.

The African woman is the child's first teacher, and she transmits social heritage to him. She is the one who gives him basic education. The child learns the cultural values and the first language – his mother tongue – he speaks from his mother. Moreover, mothers teach their children good manners by showing them how to behave in society. S. Leith-Ross (1967, p. 34) emphasises that: "Culturally, African women were the transmitters of the language, the history and the oral culture, the music, the dance, the habits and the artisanal knowledge. They were the teachers and were responsible for instilling traditional values and knowledge in children." For example, in order to give a piece of advice to her son, Oyin, through Kóripé's marital life in *Mountain of Gold*, the character of Mrs. Agbájé affirms as a good educator: "Don't mind Oyin. It is good to love your wife" (p. 44). The writer makes Mrs. Agbájé show her son the necessity for a man to love his wife so that he should love his own wife once he gets married. Children generally follow their mothers' footsteps as far as social behaviour is concerned because they are closer and more intimate to their children. This fact makes them quickly discover their offspring's special traits, aptitudes and attitudes. These aspects subsequently play a key role in the shaping of a child's personality. Alluding to the way the African woman actively took part in the education of children in the precolonial period, O. T. Afisi (2010, p. 231) writes: "Thus, the African woman played a key role in the education and the teaching of children social, ethical and moral values which were part of the cultural standards for evaluating proper societal behaviour."

A well-organised and disciplined household is essential to a normal family life. Women assume this function well in traditional Africa. An African woman is like the executive chief of an enterprise. She assigns duties to children in order to let them learn how to do things. She plays her role as an educator through leadership. O. T. Afisi (2010, p. 230) refers to African women's leadership roles as follows: "The leadership roles women have played in the development of various African societies cannot be underestimated. The contributions of women towards the social, economic, political and educational developments of African societies cannot also be gainsaid."

Though today African women are striving to make men appreciate them not only as wives but also for their professional skills and qualities, there is no doubt that one of their most significant roles is keeping up family values. Every enterprise comes to total destruction without a chief executive. So, the same problem occurs in the family as well, and it is impossible to imagine it without women. Men do not underestimate women in the black continent as such. Even though they are not totally independent, they are somehow well-treated. Their seeming predicament is due to the weight of customs and traditions which place

women at the margin rather than at the core of decision-making. M. M. Kolawole (1997, pp. 204-205) as quoted by M. Sidi Chabi and Y. C. Aguessy (2018, p. 81) corroborates the idea when she writes:

Literature as an imitation of African women's reality and inscription of their values, inevitably underscores gender uniqueness which is encapsulated in cultural difference. Difference or otherness has been manipulated by feminists and patriarchal structures to situate African women in marginal or liminal social positions. [...] African women cannot remain the same within traditions that undermine them. But they need to maintain alterity to resist myths, theories and any reality that erodes their humanity, encourages self-deprecation, and undermines their ability to be their own voices and act for themselves as agents of culture and of change.

African women's marginalisation is inherent in traditional societies where customs and traditions set women as people who have little or no right to make decisions. Men therefore impose everything on them as the sole decision-makers. The United Nations Economic and Social Council (1963, p. 8) argues that "the position of the woman in African traditional societies as a wife and as a mother has generally left much to be desired." The reason for this is that "She is subordinated, not only to her husband's will, whims and fancies, but also to the will and power of his kinsmen" (The United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1963, p. 8). E. Boserup (1970, p. 87) is therefore right when she writes: "Today, the complementary roles of women to men no longer exist in Africa, but Africa's women subordination to men and gender inequality in various forms." In the same vein, a childless woman is not considered as a good person. So, motherhood is highly regarded in traditional African societies. D. Kasomo (2010, p. 129) corroborates the idea when he writes:

Motherhood is a "traditional" way of defining the woman status since a woman is woman only if she is a mother. Women experience of being persons primarily in relation to others – as a mother or as a wife predominates in Africa. A woman's social status depends on these relationships and not any qualities or achievements of her own.

The above quotation shows that there is a close link between womanhood and motherhood. No woman can therefore pretend to be a real woman unless she is a mother and has a home where she lives with her husband and children. People do not take a spinster seriously in traditional Africa.

African Women's Traditional Role as Managers of the Family Income

African women play an important role in the management of the family income. They act as the humble managers of the family income. A good woman has the responsibility to secure the profits of the family

and to watch over its expenses. She judiciously distributes the income on different aspects such as necessities, comfort and luxuries. Women's role as managers of the family income is a very precarious one in traditional Africa where men want to see them but do not want to hear them. The ideal women are to be prim and proper. People expect low-class women to be housewives and caretakers of everything which has to do with the house. Men expect women to be housewives and to do whatever their husbands want them to do. Polygamists do not generally know women's value and mistreat them in the financial field. For example, in *Mountain of Gold*, Yellow's character is an irresponsible polygamist who does not know a woman's worth. He accuses his fellow driver, Sunday, of letting his wife know how much he earns per month because "[...] she keeps asking for more money" (p. 39). He tells Sunday: "Telling her how much you earn is the beginning of the problem" (p. 39). Unlike him, Sunday thinks that there is no problem at all if his wife knows his take-home pay. For Yellow, however, "[...] once she does, you are finished. You will be like those acada people who cannot urinate without telling their wives. You will be led by the nose. That is the undoing of many couples" (p. 39). When Sunday tells Yellow that he does not believe in hiding anything from his wife, he goes on to declare:

'Then, [...] you will always be in the soup. Once your wife knows your pay packet, she will prepare the family budget on your behalf and help you to implement it. It suits a woman if she takes your earnings from you. She will spend it and nothing will happen. You may trek to work and back, as far as she is concerned. The headache is not hers, but yours; provided all her needs are met. Since Abèké is the only wife under your roof, she may complain or blackmail you. She believes she has every authority on you. She sees herself as the person in charge; your boss ...' (pp. 39-40)

What Yellow has said in the foregoing quotation is not true, and this is a token that he is not a good husband. Through his awkward viewpoint about women, the novelist intends to reveal how some men can be self-conceited. Since the wife is her husband's advisor and the caretaker of the household, there is nothing wrong with her knowing how much her husband earns per month. So, Sunday is right when he replies: "That's not my wife. Abèké is a loving, gentle and reliable wife. Maybe she's asking for more money because everything is becoming expensive in the land. Otherwise, she is very conservative and there is perfect understanding between us" (p. 40). Because Yellow does not want to face facts, he states: "If a woman is allowed to have her way in the house, she will pretend to submit to her husband totally. That's common sense, isn't it? After all, what does she want? Once she can direct your affairs for you she is okay" (p. 40). The quotation shows that Yellow is negative and seems to hate women. Kóripé is right when he accuses him of

often being negative. The writer thus portrays Yellow as an antithesis of Sunday and Kóripé, the former being against women's managerial role in the family and the latter being in favour of it.

In traditional African societies, women greatly contribute to the family income. They occasionally earn something through their personal activities. For example, in the novel, while referring to his wife, Bushi, Kóripé proudly says: "Even my wife has a job. She sells *fùfù*. She is well known in our area" (p. 59). Bushi starts selling *fùfù* to solve the lack of food issues in her area and becomes well-known. Kóripé refers to this fact by saying further: "My senior wife is very popular in our area now. They call her Mama Oní *Fùfù*, the *fùfù* seller. Teachers, chiefs, big people all buy *fùfù* from our house" (pp. 72-73). He so proud of her that when Aisha insults her by qualifying her as a '*fùfù* vendor', he declares: "For goodness' sake don't insult my wife to my face. She's a *fùfù* vendor quite all right! But she's a good wife. I am proud of her. In fact, she's better than you in many ways" (p. 87). The novelist makes Kóripé be proud of his wife to incite men to be proud of their wives and to acknowledge their important role as the managers of the family income. In the same vein, he invites men to avoid having stereotypical attitudes towards women. Referring to the stereotypical portrayal of the social role of women in African societies, C. Klaa (2020, p. 6) writes:

Studies show that still there are major social challenge of unequal sharing of family levels between men and women, where women are expected to take on the bulk of childcare and family responsibilities, due to the stereotypical portrayal of the social role or social status of women in African societies.

In the above-mentioned quotation, C. Klaa denounces the stereotypical role or social status of women in African societies. She incriminates men for expecting women to take the bulk of childcare and family responsibilities. In *Mountain of Gold*, Bushi does petty business in order to contribute to the family income. However, Kóripé may ruin this good management of his wife by getting married to Aisha. So, his friend and fellow driver, Sunday, is right when he advises him to avoid having a second wife. "He then predicted that Bushi would change if Kóripé insisted on having a second wife; no matter how patient and supportive she might have been hitherto. If she used to bear some costs over domestic needs; she would stop. That was why he believed that Aisha was going to be one wife too many" (p. 65). Anyway, the way he has met her for the first time in the rain is a forerunner of what will happen if he gets married to her. He does not have enough time to study her and thinks that by seeking advice from people, he can marry her. That is why Sunday once more tells him: "Before you seek advice, remember one elder's saying: If you marry a woman at a carnival she will disappear on a tour. So, I

will advise you to end the relationship the way you started it: through the telephone” (p. 66). Through the quotation, the novelist clearly shows that Aisha will not be a good wife, let alone a good mother, if Kóripé gets married to her. On the contrary, she will ruin his family as she has proved it by being not only materialistic but also idle. Her idleness lies in the fact that when Kóripé advises her to indulge in petty trade so as to get money, she categorically rejects the idea as revealed in this quotation: “Since Bushi is established in her *fìfù* business I suggest you begin to sell pepper and tomatoes. [...] There is nothing wrong in selling vegetables. Anything food is good business; it is money” (pp. 71-72). Kóripé goes on further and declares: “You have to start somewhere and I believe that selling vegetables is a good start” (p. 72). In traditional Africa, a lot of women establish cool start-up small businesses. Many of them appear to be successful enough to boost the economy.

The financial empowerment of women can help to reduce poverty. Referring to the poverty reduction of petty trade as far as his sisters are concerned, Kóripé says: “Many are housewives, some petty traders [...]. Others are jobless. But there is a lucky one who makes and sells *moin-moin* at Arígbajó” (p. 59). Kóripé incites Aisha to start a business and to avoid idleness. The writer uses this as a preliminary condition for her marriage with Kóripé and for its success. Her refusal to abide by her fiancé’s advice mirrors her chaotic role as the manager of the family income as soon as she gets married. Although “African women live under severe psychological and economic pressures because they bear the brunt of family affairs, with almost complete absence of men to improve their families’ standard of living” (C. Klaa, 2020, p. 4), African women in entrepreneurship emphasise women’s importance in society. Despite the fact that a number of gender-based issues make it hard for a woman to establish her own business, some of them succeed through their personal commitment. An instance of this occurs in *Mountain of Gold* through what Kóripé has told Aisha in the following quotation: “[...] do you know Ìyá Alámàlà in our family house? She sells àmàlà, ògùfè and fine ewédú. Nothing more. And she is making it. Within two years in the business, she has built a house. Again, she has bought a taxi. She wrote at the front of her house Àmàlà lódù. [...] Àmàlà is a good bet. She made all the money from selling food. So let us start with the tomato trade and you will see. It will grow. Little by little, you will save enough money to buy okada. Hence, if we get a good rider, the okada will bring in money to buy a taxi. (p. 72)

Through the aforementioned quotation, the writer shows that women can get rich by dealing with petty trade, especially through the selling of food. So, women should be positive contributors to the family income through the work they perform on the account

of the family. For instance, in *Mountain of Gold*, Mrs. Odebiyi is a civil servant, more precisely a secretary. As such, she gets money from her job to contribute to the financial issues of her home. In addition, when the irresponsible man, Yellow, gives up his duty as the head of the family, his wives fend for themselves through their own work and their children’s endeavour. “Although some progress has been made in some African countries to improve the social and economic conditions of African women, they still face obstacles and challenges to their participation and economic empowerment” (C. Klaa, 2020, p. 5). S. R. Whyte and P. W. Kariuki (1991, p. 180) provide an instance where the husband gives his wife the power to decide on what the family needs in the quotation below: “When we met Penina she was chatting with a relative who had come to see her. Her husband was living at home; they both made papyrus mats which she sold in the market, using the money as she saw fit to buy what the family needed. ‘I just live peacefully with my husband’, she said.”

People think that all women are inferior to men. But the expectation of working-class women is a little bit different. Low-class women are expected to work for their husbands and help them run their business. They should work alongside their husbands in farms and then go home to take care of the household because there is no other option for them. However, upper-class women may have servants and workers working for them even though women are expected to take care of the household. Buttressing the idea about the different classes of women, A. Cloud (2015, p. 3) declares: “In accordance to different classes of women, the only women that are allowed to express themselves are upper class women, but not sufficiently.” Women’s existence is a marginal one in most traditional African societies. Referring to women’s plight in West Africa, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (pp. 4-5) declares:

In West Africa, the legal and social position of women is generally the same as for most African countries. The women are legal minors; the social conventions are all in favour of men; in marriage they must accept polygyny and all that this system of marriage entails. However, West African women have had much economic power concentrated in their hands due to the considerable incomes that they make by trading, and this has given them an important leverage against the dominance of the male. Because of this, they wield considerable power and responsibility in the household.

The quotation shows that West African women wield considerable power and responsibility in the household even though they still face a number of hardships. The dominant ideology in Africa conceives work only in terms of remunerated activities. However, women are responsible for all kinds of household chores, with the use of rudimentary instruments to perform their daily tasks. Women’s role in the

production chain does not stop there. In the field of nutrition and food security, their role is essential, especially in food production. The commercial activities of women in rural areas are organised around fishing and agriculture. The United Nations Economic and Social Council (1963, p. 5) refers to African women's responsibility for earning a living in the quotation below:

Foreign observers have made statements to the effect that African women were used as beasts of burden and that they are in a state of servitude. This is, of course, a gross exaggeration. What it does underline, however, is the fact that for most parts of Africa, women have been the people most burdened with the responsibility for earning a living. The production unit in African societies is a household which is headed by the woman. She must provide feed for the household and is often away from dawn to sunset labouring in the fields while the husband attends to some less strenuous tasks.

The above-mentioned quotation reveals that African women play an important part in the household. Without their diligence, traditional African households may find it very difficult to survive.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to examine critically and to expose the traditional roles of African women through the novel under study. It has dealt with three axes, namely African women's traditional role as wives, African women's traditional role as mothers and educators, and their traditional role as managers of the family income. The research work has disclosed the different traditional roles that women play in the African society, starting from the family nucleus. The study has found that women play an important role in traditional African societies and that any marginalisation or stereotypes which hinder them need to be eradicated. The novelist has used many literary techniques, including the use of pidgin English, Yoruba words and songs, to convey his message. He has succeeded in impacting his readership by drawing his readers' attention to women's roles in the traditional Africa. The findings of the study clearly show that women play important roles in traditional African and hence need men's support.

REFERENCES

1. AFISI Oseni Taiwo, 2010, "Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation," in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 6, pp. 229-238.
2. BOSERUP Ester, 1970, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 283 p.
3. CLOUD Amanda, 2000, "Gender Roles of Women" in *The Renaissance*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 82-96.
4. EBILA Florence, 2015, "'A proper woman, in the African tradition': The construction of gender and nationalism in Wangari Maathai's autobiography *Unbowed*," in *TYDSKRIF VIR LETTERKUNDE*, 52 (1), pp. 144-154.
5. HORNBY Albert Sydney, 1989, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Fourth Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1579 p.
6. KASOMO Daniel, 2010, "The Role of Women in the Church in Africa," in *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 2, No. 6, pp. 126-139.
7. KELLY Joan, 2006, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?," in *Women, History and Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 275-291.
8. KLA A Cherifa, 2020, "Role of African Women in Development and Economic Life: Reality and Challenges," in *International Journal of Inspiration & Resilience Economy*, 4(1), pp. 1-9.
9. LEITH-ROSS Sylvia, 1967, *African Women: Study of the Ibo of Nigeria*, New York: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 367 p.
10. MAATHAI Wangari, 2007, *Unbowed*, New York: Anchor Books, 326 p.
11. NGŪGĪ Wa Thiong'o, 1990, *Matigari* (Translation), Nairobi: Heinemann, 175 p.
12. OGUNDIMU Tunji, 2017, *Mountain of Gold*, Abeokuta: Campus Publications Ltd., 103 p.
13. SEKŚCIŃSKA Katarzyna, TRZCIŃSKA Agata and MAISON Dominika A., 2016, "The Influence of Different Social Roles Activation on Women's Financial and Consumer Choices," in *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 7, pp. 1-13.
14. SIDI CHABI Moussa and AGUESSY Yélian Constant, 2018, "Gender Relations and Women Abuse in Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*," in *Les Annales de l'Université de Parakou*, Série "Lettres, Arts et Sciences Humaines", Vol. 1, n° 2, pp. 79-91.
15. United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1963, "Women in the Traditional African Societies," in *Economic Commission for Africa Workshop on Urban Problems: The Role of Women in Urban Development*, 4-14, 8 p.
16. WHYTE Susan Reynolds and KARIUKI Priscilla Wanjiru, 1991, "Malnutrition and Gender Relations in Western Kenya," in *Health Transition Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 171-187.

Cite This Article: Sidi Chabi Moussa (2021). The Traditional Roles of African Women as seen through Tunji Ogundimu's *Mountain of Gold*. *East African Scholars J Edu Humanit Lit*, 4(5), 228-236.