

Dagbe: An Anlo-Ewe Understanding of Salvation

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ABSTRACT

The quest for salvation is at the core of most religious traditions. Understood variously, the concept of salvation may manifest as a union or re-union with a perceived divine, a relative escape from pain and suffering, or an attainment of a higher spiritual state of consciousness. As in most African societies, the Anlo-Ewe of South-eastern Ghana have a conception of salvation known as *dagbe*, which encapsulates the culture, values and norms of the society. In particular, *dagbe* finds expression in the people's traditional religious beliefs, expressions and lived experiences as an overarching sacred canopy of the Anlo-Ewe. This study aims to explore the essence of *dagbe* as the driving force for the total well-being of the individual and the entire community. To achieve this goal, the study used the interpretive phenomenological research methodology to explore the understanding of salvation by Anlo-Ewe devotees as total well-being. The study also draws inference to the fact that *dagbe*, like the traditional *umuganda* concept of the people of Rwanda, can be reconstructed as a viable instrument for the socio-economic development of the Anlo community. Besides the subject of contextualization in the field of African Christian Theology, the study is also relevant to the ongoing discourse of the role of religious beliefs and practices in the socio-economic development of indigenous societies.

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INTRODUCTION

Paul Tillich describes religion as the hold of the "ultimate concern" on the human person and the vital link between man and an ultimate infinite unconditional that manifests and functions in every facet of his capabilities; moral, creative, epistemological, aesthetic, etc. As the "substance, ground, and depth of man's life", religion thus is invariably the embodiment of all that constitutes human existence. To Tillich, religion should not be a special sphere or department of human existence. Rather, as is in the heavenly Jerusalem, where there is no temple, no secular nor religious realms, religion ought to be the all-determining ground and substance of man's life in every given situation.¹

Tillich ascribes the present situation in which religion exists in most cultures as a separate realm from the rest of life to man's estrangement from his ultimate concern.² Hence, though in constant pursuit of the ultimate concern, man is diverted by his present endeavours from that desired unattained state. To Douglas James Davies, the pursuit of the ultimate concern is a quest for salvation, and any measure of its presumable attainment is salvation in many religious traditions.³ Salvation, therefore,

¹ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969),7.

² Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 8.

³ Douglas James Davies, *Meaning and Salvation in Religious Studies* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984), 13.

according to Davies, is that unknown goal that becomes the overarching determining feature of the searching spirit of man towards his ultimate concern.⁴ Structurally, L. J. Bellia has described salvation as a healing process that seeks to move one from a life-impairing condition to a perceived ultimate concern, usually through a numinous experience.⁵

The claims of Tillich, Davies and Bellia above basically resonate with Gaba's view of the Anlo-Ewe understanding and expressions of salvation. According to him:

"Salvation is the ultimate goal of the religious life. The people themselves know it as *dagbe*, which may be translated into English as abundant life ... An acquaintance with the Hebrew *shalom*, as total well-being in body, mind and soul in relation to personal and social issues...gives one understanding of the Ewe *dagbe*.⁶

It is therefore, within this framework, this study explores the understanding of the concept of salvation by devotees of Anlo-Ewe traditional religion.⁷

METHODOLOGY

The concept of *dagbe* is deeply ingrained in Anlo-Ewe culture with both religious non-religious connotations. To be able to explore the concept and arrive at its real meaning to the people, this study employed the phenomenological research methodology⁸ as it made room for in-depth interviews, observations and where possible, this researcher, as a native of Anlo, participated in selected activities within the community to gain a deeper understanding of the concept under study. In addition to these primary sources, the study also involved interactions with the available literature by Anlo-Ewe scholars on the subject. The works of scholars from communities with similar religious beliefs and practices as the Anlo-Ewe were also used in the discussions and analyses as a basis for the conclusion and recommendation of the study.

Salvation as *Dagbe*

As in most African societies, to be saved in Anlo-Ewe tradition is to be accepted first of all in the community of the living, and then in that of the dead.⁹ It must be in accordance with the moral values and norms of the community. A wish for *dagbe* is a wish for:

"... the complete removal of life-negating experiences from the human condition and their corresponding replacement with life-affirming ones... It is a long life that ends in the west, and a visible immeasurable material prosperity. Moreover, it is the totality of existence in the sacred presence where no life-negating forces can dwell."¹⁰

⁴ Davies, *Meaning and Salvation in Religious Studies*.13.

⁵ L. J. Bellia, "Salvation," in *Harper's Encyclopaedia of Religious Education*, ed. V. Cully (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990), 689.

⁶ C. R. Gaba, "The Religious Life of the People," in *The Ewes of Southeastern Ghana*, ed. Francis Agbodeka (Accra: Woeli Publications, 1997).

⁷ Felix K. Ameka, "Ewe," in *Facts about the World's Languages: An Encyclopedia of the World's Major Languages, Past and Present*, ed. Jane Garry and Carl Rubino (New York: The H. M. Wilson Company, 2001), 207–14. The Anlo-Ewe are an ethnic group within the larger Ewe community in West Africa. The Ewe community spreads from between the Volta River in Ghana, eastwards through the Republics of Togo and Benin to the south-western border of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The language of the community is known as Ewe and is spoken by about five million people in the region and beyond. The language has many dialects which include, Tongu, Peki, Gbi, Avenor, Fon, Anfoe Kpando, etc. Although the word *dagbe* is common to many of these sub-ethnic groups and dialects, the Anlo-Ewe have been singled out for this study because of the peculiar religious beliefs and practices that are associated with the concept within that community.

⁸ Emeka C Ekeke and Chike Ekeopara, "Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Religion: A Historical Perspective," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 44, no. 2 (2010): 266–74. Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that allows for the suspension or bracketing of the researcher's pre-conceived ideas, prior beliefs, commitments, and value judgements in order to draw conclusions based on lived experiences and understandings of the objects of the study. Known as "methodological neutrality", the suspension of judgement or exclusion of presuppositions, are believed to make conclusions of the study of phenomena unprejudicial and non-imposing.

⁹ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel Press, 1975), 42.

¹⁰ Gaba, "The Religious Life of the People," 99.

The key issues in Gaba's definition of salvation above are: the sense of "total well-being", "long life", and "existence in the sacred presence". Total well-being in Anlo-Ewe tradition is to be in harmony with the divinities, the ancestors, the natural environment and the community in which one lives. It is to be physically fit and emotionally stable. What the Anlo-Ewe traditional religious devotee seeks as salvation, therefore, is a long, healthy and productive life with progeny. Hence, the overriding impulse of salvation is the main purpose and preoccupation of the people's lives—the strife for redemption from ill-health, poverty and childlessness.

The Anlo-Ewe consider ailment of any sort, physical or psychical, as evil with spiritual connotations resulting essentially from *vo*—evil as in a breach of a taboo, disharmony with the community, the ancestors or the result of a magical spell cast by an enemy of the victim. Ailments, droughts that could result in famine, flooding and similar natural disasters are all life-threatening and detrimental to normal human existence and therefore, constitute situations from which divine intervention must be sought. And once life-threatening situations are dealt with and health or the situation is restored to normalcy, *dagbe* or salvation has been obtained. The sense of total well-being applies to harmonious relationships between individuals, families, clans and communities. Conflict in any form is regarded as inimical to human existence and so a social ailment that demands healing--restoration.

Poverty is another life-threatening phenomenon from which people seek salvation. When individuals find themselves in situations where they do not have what it takes to sustain life with respect to the standards of their communities and, therefore, consider themselves poor, they seek salvation from poverty. When they feel deprived of the necessities of life as a result of the lack of money or other means by which such necessities can be obtained, the immediate tendency is to seek divine redress, which must ultimately result in redemption from the state of deprivation. To be saved is to be wealthy or to be on the path towards becoming wealthy by the standards of the community. It is to be able to take care of oneself and one's dependents, and also be able to extend help to others in the community. Poverty is a cardinal evil from which the people seek salvation through hard work and divine intervention.

Fecundity is of great importance to the Anlo-Ewe since, as in most other African societies, having progeny is considered a mark of success in life and an assurance of what Mbiti calls "personal immortality" after one's death. Progeny is a source of pride, fulfilment and respectability for an individual in Anlo-Ewe society. A man whose house is full of his own children and grandchildren is regarded as having the favour of God and the ancestors. Such a man would not only be accorded a befitting burial in death, but also remembered for many years after he is dead and given a place among the ancestors of his clan. On the other hand, the understanding in Anlo-Ewe, as in other African societies, is that "to lack someone close who keeps the departed in their personal immortality is the worst misfortune and punishment that any person could suffer. To die ... without children is to be completely cut off from the human society, to become disconnected, to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind."¹¹ Thus, childlessness for whatever reason is a condition from which that an Anlo-Ewe would naturally seek redemption.

Dagbe is a common word in the Anlo dialect of the Ewe language. The word is used in everyday situations such as in verbal exchange of greetings, bidding farewells and general well-wishes. It is also frequently used in highly significant religious ceremonies, such as prayers and sacrifices, as the people seek to invoke the blessings of God. Gaba, in his attempt to explain the word, has suggested that it has no literal meaning in the Ewe language.¹² However, this study differs from that opinion. It is of the view that the word can be broken into two etymological parts—: *de*, which means to remove, to save or to rescue. The second part of the word is *agbe*, which means life. In both spoken Ewe and normal Ewe orthography, a preceding vowel is omitted when followed by another word beginning with a vowel. Therefore, instead of *de agbe*, the elliptical form of the word becomes *d'agbe* or *dagbe* (lit. save life). Semantically, the term connotes peace, goodwill, prosperity, and total well-being. The term

¹¹ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 11th ed. (London: Heinemann, 1985), 114.

¹² Gaba, "The Religious Life of the People," 98.

is used with reference to the individual and to the community at large. The converse of *dagbe* is *vo*-evil. Whereas *dagbe* is constructive, *vo* is potentially destructive. Effectively, *vo* results in all kinds of malice; disease, poverty, hunger, enmity, natural disasters, and death, which are all inimical to and capable of annihilating human life. Basically, the converse of *dagbe* is a causative for healing—*dagbe*.

The survival of both the individual Anlo-Ewe and the community at large, hinges on *dagbe*. It is generally believed among the people that by living according to the norms of the community, and with the help of the deities, one is living in the divine presence and so must obtain *dagbe*, the indicators of which are the blessing of children, material wealth, influence and a long and healthy life. Thus, the Anlo-Ewe understanding of salvation is Epicurean in the sense that it abhors pain and suffering. This understanding is captured in the following excerpt from an Anlo-Ewe traditional prayer:

... *Nya nayi, ahe nayi, do nayi kekeke*
Ame 'iwo medzina oa, naana woadzi.
Ame 'iwo dzina wonedzi wu.
Ne agbledela yi agblea, tsetse nawu amea.
Ne todela de wu to dzi a, madumaduwo ney to, duduawo nava go nyagaa.
Ne mieyi asia, asigba negatsi ta name o.
Ame adeke megaku kokoe o.
Lamesese dime miele. Miafe lame nano sesie.
Ne ame ade di ku na fome 'ia, ku neli kaba.
Ame vodi, dzoe wonye tsina akla nu akla fana.
Dagbe ne va na mi kata.
Ame ;iwo kata di miawo nyui ha kekeke loo. Agbe ayi loo.

May trouble be far away from us, poverty be far away from us,
Sickness be far away from us; death be far away from us.
Bless those who have no children with plenty children
And grant an increase to those who already have them.
Grant good health to the farmer that the harvest may far outweigh his labour.
When the fisherman goes out in his canoe, allow him to catch only the edible (fish) and very
plentifully. Help our traders too to succeed in all they do.
Let no one die a pauper. It is for good health that we pray. Good health to all. Long life and
prosperity to all.
If anyone wishes death to this lineage, may he suffer instant death.
The wicked people are like fire which must be extinguished before the people enjoy perfect
peace. Abundant life to us and all our well-wishers. Long life to all.¹³

As with most traditional African communities, religion and life belong together among the Anlo-Ewe. Life in its entirety is subsumed in the religious life, giving practical expression to Tillich's assertion that the gap between the sacred and the secular can disappear when religion becomes essentially existential.¹⁴ In the words of Tillich:

If religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, this state cannot be restricted to a special realm. The unconditional character of this concern implies that it refers to every moment of our life, to every space and every realm. The universe is God's sanctuary. Every work day is a day of the Lord, every supper a Lord's supper, every work the fulfilment of a divine task, every joy a joy in God. In all preliminary concerns, the ultimate concern is present, consecrating them. Essentially the religious and the secular are not separated realms. Rather they are within each other.¹⁵

¹³ Gaba, "The Religious Life of the People," 101.

¹⁴ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 41.

¹⁵ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 41.

Anlo-Ewe understanding and general approach to religion is existential in form, content and praxis. Anchored on a very strong belief in a Supreme Being—*Mawu*, from whom the gods, ancestors and nature derive their being and power, the religious beliefs and traditions serve as the compass with which the people navigate life in its entirety. The cardinal values and norms of the community are principally drawn from the people's understanding of the likes and dislikes of the main architects of their religion—the divinities, ancestors and nature. Guided by the consciousness of the ever-presence of the transcendent, life for the Anlo-Ewe is a narrow path of moral decency. Any infringement of the norms of the community, be it a breach of a taboo, an injury wilfully inflicted on a neighbour or an act of injustice perpetrated by a member of the community, the divinities are expected to visit the culprit(s) with instant reprobation. Thus, life among the Anlo-Ewe traditional religious devotees is constantly lived in the presence of the “ultimate concern” and therefore, with no distinct dichotomy between the sacred and secular realms. Every stage of life from birth to death has religious undertones; the birth and naming of a newborn child, puberty rites (among certain clans), marriage, work, recreation, leadership and death within the community.

The religious beliefs and practices of the Anlo-Ewe not only provide hope of salvation and a moral compass for life, but also ensure protection from evil and its consequences. Those assigned with the role of ensuring the spiritual sanctity of the community are the *boko*—*Afa* diviners within every Anlo-Ewe community. The *boko* basically serves as intermediary ritual specialists between the people, the divinities and the ancestors. The *boko*, through divination, determines the causes and remedies of any anomaly in the life of a client or his family and clan. There are occasions when they are commissioned to make enquiries into issues regarding the whole community. Known as *dufakaka*, the ritual enables the leadership of the community to seek appropriate guidance for the safety of the community. By following the directives of the *boko* in the community, peace and harmony are restored to the community.

The Anlo-Ewe Conception of Evil

To the Anlo-Ewe, evil is any disruption of holistic life and so constitutes the causative for salvation. Evil can result from violations of societal norms on the part of humans, or from the interruptions of forces that are against human contentment and progress. The results of such violations and interruptions may be mysterious illnesses, deaths, droughts, or other forms of misfortune in the community. Individuals who violate social norms also suffer retribution for their acts of violation. In some cases, the individual may not violate a societal norm, but rather break the vital link in his own person, between him and his *Se*—that vital force of God that indwells the human person and controls his destiny. Evil deeds such as murder, incest and disloyalty to the clan are considered to be grave evils and so are crimes against the community for which the latter ought to seek revenge. Hence, the concepts of *hlododo* and *hlobiabia* among the Anlo-Ewe.

Hlododo is any situation in which an individual or a group of persons commits an act that is considered heinous by the community. There are general prohibitions such as the abhorrence of “witchcraft, sorcery, stealing, murder and adultery; and the harbouring of evil thoughts about one's neighbours.”¹⁶ Witchcraft, murder, incest, disloyalty to the state and similar breaches are considered more grievous than stealing and the harbouring of evil thoughts about one's neighbours and therefore, are regarded as *hlododo*—literally, “committing of a clan”. In the event of a *hlododo*, the consequences of the evil perpetrated fall on the entire clan of the perpetrator, so as a result, it takes the collective effort of the leadership of the perpetrator's clan to seek redress and avert the retribution. *Hlobiabia* is communal revenge. This is evil inflicted on one community by another in retaliation for an offence. Seen as natural justice, *hlobiabia* does not attract the retribution of gods or divinities. The clan or community being attacked is rather expected to perform *nuxe* (preventive) rites to end the affliction.

There are also prohibitions with respect to members of particular clans or religious entities. For instance, people belonging to a particular clan of Anlo may be prohibited from eating certain kinds of food, and priests of some shrines are not permitted to eat food cooked by women on certain occasions.

¹⁶ Gaba, “The Religious Life of the People,” 86.

Once the prohibition is breached, evil is believed to have been perpetuated and an evil consequence ignited. It becomes the responsibility of the ritual leaders of the community to seek the right interventions from the appropriate deity through *Afa* divination. The breach of any such prohibition attracts reprobation either from the particular deity offended, the community or from one's own *Se*, depending on the nature of the breach. Reprobation for a breach can also be in the form of a life-threatening phenomenon, such as illness, recurrence of misfortunes, failure of business ventures, drought resulting in famine, war, abject poverty, etc. In some cases, the consequence of a breach of a prohibition could ultimately result in the mysterious deaths of members of the offender's family or of the offender himself. Thus, the occurrence of evil among the Anlo-Ewe thought is always a result of evil perpetrated within the community.

When the Anlo-Ewe speak of *vo* (lit. bad) or *nuvo* (lit. bad thing), the reference is to the general conception of evil. This may be a taboo that has been violated by an individual, failure to placate a deity or ancestors, desecration of sacred sites, or the breach of a social norm. *Vo* and *nuvo* can also refer to any catastrophic occurrence, such as natural disasters like flooding, earthquakes and outbreaks of diseases that inflict suffering on individuals and the community as a whole. Diseases can be due to unhealthy relationships among people. Sickness does not just occur, but it is always generated from evil. Other possible causes of evil afflictions among the people may include attacks by evil spirits, witchcraft and people with evil intent and powers, as well as curses. It is from these and many other challenges of life that the Anlo-Ewe constantly seek *dagbe*.

Mediators of Salvation among the Anlo-Ewe

There are several mediators of salvation among the Anlo-Ewe. However, this study shall highlight three of them. These are: *Mawu*—the Supreme Being, *Se*—the personal deity of destiny, and ancestral stools. Perceived as a male deity, *Mawu* is the Supreme Being and the ultimate mediator of *dagbe*. It is from *Mawu* that all other mediators, including the minor deities, spirits, the ancestors and the natural environment, draw their efficacy for the mediation of *dagbe*. The worship of God is universal among the people and does not require any formal membership subscription or ritual specialists such as priests. Anyone can call on *Mawu* at any time and from anywhere, especially in times of emergency, and expect an appropriate response. As Gaba puts it, “*ne adzo tso ame*” or in times of emergency, it is natural for the people to call on the Supreme Being for help.¹⁷ In that sense, although Awulalu claims that God has no priests in African traditional societies, every individual among the Anlo-Ewe is a priest of *Mawu*.

Belief in the existence of the Supreme Being is taken as a matter of course among the people, and no individuals can be found among the indigenous Anlo-Ewe who would claim to be an atheist unless such a one “has been exposed to non-African cultural influences.”¹⁸ The Akan proverb, *obinkyere akwala Nyame*—no one teaches the child God, holds for the Anlo-Ewe as well; each one grows to know God for himself, as the knowledge of God is intrinsic and therefore available to everyone in the society. This view is summed up in Mbiti's observation that; “God is no stranger to African people, and in traditional life there are no atheists.”¹⁹

Etymologically, the term *Mawu* has been explained as *amea wu*, which literally means “the one is greater.” This underscores the Supremacy of God among the Anlo-Ewe. Another understanding of the root of *Mawu* as *ama wu la*—the literal meaning of which is “the one who spreads vegetation”. Whereas the earlier understanding of God as the greater one connotes the transcendence of God among the people. This latter view points to God's immanence. God is thus that great and incomprehensible One who is out of the reach of the people and, in the same breath, within their reach as the source of life-giving vegetation. The Anlo-Ewe do not have primordial divinities. Rather, they believe that God, the Supreme Being, inhabits the spiritual and natural realms with a host of minor deities, all of which are effective mediators of salvation.

¹⁷ Gaba, “The Religious Life of the People,”85.

¹⁸ Joseph Omosade Awolalu and Peter Adelumo Dopanu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonjo Press and Book Industries, 1979),4.

¹⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 29.

Awolalu's view that the Supreme Being does not have temples or priests in any African community holds for Anlo-Ewe as well.²⁰ Therefore, Greene's claim, that the Anlo-Ewe regard Notsie, their ancestral home in the present-day Republic of Togo, as the home of *Mawu*, to which the people conduct regular pilgrimages to offer prayers and sacrifices, is baseless.²¹

Thus, although *Mawu*, *kitikata*, *adanu woto be yewo asi*, *woa fo* is a common appellation for God as the creator of human limbs (for functionality) among the Anlo-Ewe, He does not have any temples or priests among the Anlo-Ewe.

Besides *Mawu*, the Supreme Being, the concept of *Se*, believed by some to have been introduced into the Ewe culture in the eighteenth century from the Yoruba of Nigeria, is the most significant mediator of salvation among the Anlo-Ewe.²² The above claim of the source of the concept of *Se* in Anlo-Ewe is plausible in the sense that the Anlo-Ewe of south-eastern Ghana are believed to have lived together with the Yoruba of Nigeria, hence, the evidence of the many similar cultural traditions of the two ethnic groups, especially in religion and spirituality. A typical example of this is the *Afa* cult of the Anlo-Ewe, which is very similar to the Yoruba *Ifa* from which the *Se* concept is presumably derived.

In Yoruba cosmology, the name for God, the Supreme Being and creator of heaven and earth, is *Olodumare*. Closely related to *Olodumare* and present at the time of creation is *Ori*, the personality of *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being that indwells each person as a personal "deity to which prayers for daily guidance were directed."²³ As the divinity that shaped the destiny of the earth and its inhabitants, *Ori* has since become the embodiment of the destiny of the earth. It is believed that when *Orodumare* created the earth, he sent *Obatala*, (also known as *Orisa-nla*—'the sculptor divinity') to furnish the earth. *Orunmila*, another Yoruba premodial divinity, was asked to accompany *Obatala* as a special assistant and provide guidance when necessary. After the initial assignment, *Orunmila* decided to live both on earth and in heaven. As a result, *Orunmila* gained a thorough knowledge of all that takes place in the heavens and also on earth. He (*Orunmila*) possesses the wisdom of the divinities and, having been present when the fate of each person was allotted and sealed, he can discern the circumstances of individuals and communities and advise on the possible cause and remedy of any ill-fate and communicate the same through the *Ifa* (known to the Anlo-Ewe as *Afa*) oracle.²⁴

Ori in Yoruba is the physical head of the individual as well as that force that is responsible for controlling his fate. He is the inner person with a direct connection to *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being, as it (*Ori*) draws from *Olodumare* to keep each individual on the right path towards his fate on earth.²⁵

Dzobo describes *Se* as the "Creative Power" of the Godhead, synonymous with the *logos* of the Fourth Gospel. In his view, *Se* in Anlo-Ewe thought is the spiritual reality which serves as the source and basis of the whole of creation and of all human existence.²⁶ Thus, the concepts of *Se* and *Ori* are identical in nature and function as the creative essence of God in the human person. *Se* is therefore not the Supreme Being and is also not identical to *Mawu*. As Awolalu rightly puts it, "At best, it is only a part that cannot be equal to the whole."²⁷ This, notwithstanding, *Se*, like *Mawu*, does not have ritual specialists such as priests among the Anlo-Ewe. Each one is the priest of his own *Se*. To both the Yoruba and Anlo-Ewe *Ori* or *Se* "is the personality-soul which is believed to be capable of ruling, controlling and guiding the life and activities of the individual. The people believe that success or failure in life depends on *Ori* and its quality."²⁸

²⁰ Awolalu, J. Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (Essex: Longman, 1981), 4.

²¹ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 2-3.

²² Sandra E. Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 17.

²³ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 8.

²⁴ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 233, 23.

²⁵ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 140.

²⁶ N. K. Dzobo, "Melagbe Theology: A New Perspective in African Theology," in *An Unpublished Paper Presented at the 1st Theological Consultation of the Norddeutsche Mission Family of Churches at Berthania* (Togo, 1986), 9.

²⁷ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 9.

²⁸ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 9.

Closely connected with *Se* in Anlo-Ewe cosmology is *dzogbese*, which Dzobo identifies as “the creative power of God in each person.”²⁹ It is what the Akan of Ghana call the *nkrabea*, the personal destiny of each individual. Therefore, whereas *Se* controls the destiny of the individual, that destiny is *dzogbese*, which is also known in the *Afa* as *kpoli*. *Dzogbese* is the determinant of human destiny. In the midst of life’s challenges, some individuals are directed by the *afa* oracle to alter their *dzogbese* (destinies) by the construction of a physical *Se*. Once the right rituals are observed and the directions followed, the troubled soul is re-aligned with his reconstructed destiny to guarantee a numinous experience which invariably results in *dagbe*—the reversal of his fortunes.

The ancestors and ancestral stools are other significant mediator of salvation among the Anlo-Ewe. Like God and the minor deities, the ancestors are responsible for keeping watch over their living descendants and saving them (the living) from any threat to *dagbe*. As Awolawu puts it, to be an ancestor, one “must have lived well, attained an enviable old age before dying, must have left behind good children and good memory.”³⁰ The role of the “good children” in ensuring that one becomes an ancestor is to accord the deceased a befitting burial and provide him with regular offerings. Thus, those who die young, childless, or die “bad deaths” through fire accidents, drowning, and of unacceptable diseases such as leprosy, epilepsy, and the like, cannot join the rank of the ancestors. In any case, people who die in such circumstances traditionally do not receive proper or befitting burial rites. What constitutes a befitting burial varies from one community to another. In all cases, however, among the Anlo-Ewe, the “soul” of the deceased, which comprises his nails and some hair strands, must be buried in a designated ancestral homestead on the fifth, sixth or seventh day after the burial of the body.

As an ancestor, the deceased becomes a link between the physical world of men and the spirit world. Prayers are offered to the deities, spirits and the Supreme Being through the ancestors, and they are believed to be keenly interested in the welfare of their living descendants. They exercise protective and disciplinary influences on their children and thus, serve as guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities of their living descendants.³¹

Common to the fifteen Anlo-Ewe clans and family lineages is the ancestral stool—*togbui zikpui*. Although the origins of the stools are shrouded in mystery, they are believed to have been passed on from one generation to another as far back as the 16th century and constitute the embodiment of the souls of the ancestors.³² Each stool is housed in a designated ancestral home in Anloga, the State capital of the Anlo-Ewe, with clan appointees who are responsible for regular prayers and sacrifices to the ancestors. Apart from specific petitions from individual clan members with issues that need the intervention of the ancestors, the ritual appointees regularly solicit special favours from the ancestors for the entire clan. The primary task of the stools is to save clan members from the misfortunes of life and continuously guide them towards *dagbe*. The stools also serve as symbols of clan fidelity and solidarity. The ritual appointees to the stools are normally good orators and very knowledgeable of the history, philosophy and development of the clan. They express in very significant ways the deep impressions of the people on various subjects. As such, they serve as a repository of indigenous epistemology. The reverence for the stools and the ancestors is often portrayed in the prayers of the ritual appointees to the stools. As demonstrated in the following, the stools are metaphorically “powerful”, swords that save. They are as fearsome as a “snake that crosses the path” and yet are ironically protectors from danger and providers of game; capable of killing both the snake and the antelope for protection and food. The stools are also old thickets that provide shelter to the people.³³ In sum, the people look up to the stools for the sustenance of life.

Kpokposu, amedehe.

La mabimabi fua tsra; da vo tso mo mozolawo kahle do gbe.

La woada zo gbe dzi gbea bo; woe wua da kple zi nami

Gbe ade do xoxo daklawo be de eme.

²⁹ Dzobo, “Melagbe Theology: A New Perspective in African Theology,” 11.

³⁰ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 54.

³¹ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 54.

³² Agbotadua Kumassah, *The Migration Saga of the Anlo-Ewes of Ghana*. (Keta: Photo City Press, 2005), 64.

³³ Gaba, “The Religious Life of the People,” 101.

Togawo nu mado abla do.
Nu mexlea fi o.
Nyanye kple manyemanyewo kata meyo mi.

Powerful stool, the sword that saves.
Raw meat from which the bones are very easily removed;
A fearful snake that crosses the path and the travellers are frightened into the bush.
A wild animal that walks on the grass and the grass remains bent forever.
It is you who kill both the snake and the antelope for us.
An old thicket which provides shelter for the aged snakes.
Mighty rivers which can never be dammed.
(At this point the ancestors are called by name)
Humans can never remember everyone to whom they are indebted
Those who are known and those unknown to us, I invoke your presence.³⁴

Basically, the prayers of the people evoke a sense of awe, mystery and reverence for the ancestors through the stools—a clear indication of their trust in the efficacy of the ancestral stools as mediators of *dagbe*.

Dagbe and Afa Divination

Afa divination is the main link between the people and their salvific mediators. It plays the same intermediary role that *Orunmila*, the all-knowing primordial deity, plays in Yoruba tradition—the most dependable means of seeking to discover the unknown and guidance for the future from supernatural sources.³⁵ Like the *Ifa* divination, *Afa* is freely used to determine problems confronting enquirers and to ensure that predictions of good fortunes are fulfilled as misfortunes are averted. One does not need to be a member of the cult before subscribing to its services. The oracle first determines the cause of a problem confronting the enquirer and then follows it up with the necessary directives for resolution. The *boko*, diviner, would normally take the client through the prescribed rituals to seek relief from the problem. In some cases, refer him (the client), to the appropriate ritual specialist.³⁶ In the case of *selili*—installation of a *Se*, for instance, the *Afa* diviner would refer the client to an *amegashie*—another category of ritualists who would prescribe the required accoutrements and do the actual installation of a reconstructed *Se* as a “destiny controller” for the client to turn his fortunes round.

Afa is also consulted before the commencement of state festivals, economic ventures, travels and before engaging an enemy in a fight. In fact, whenever people want to know the divine will and to be assured of longevity, prosperity, increase in life, and success in enterprise, they turn to *Afa* for direction. By far, *Afa* remains the most common and popular means by which the Anlo-Ewe discern the divine will. It is also the most widely consulted system for determining cures for many ailments of life. *Afa* plays key roles in almost every situation that people find themselves in. “If the situations are unpleasant, men will be required to offer sacrifice to change things for the better; and if they are pleasant, sacrifice will still be offered to retain and improve upon the good fortune.”³⁷ “There is hardly any situation in which a person is said to have prospered without making a sacrifice and the mediation of *Afa*.³⁸ The principal functionaries of *afa* among the Anlo-Ewe are the *Toboko*—chief *Afa* priest, and other *boko* who serve as the guardians, counsellors, philosophers and physicians of the respective Anlo communities.³⁹

³⁴ Gaba, “The Religious Life of the People,” 101.

³⁵ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 120.

³⁶ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 132.

³⁷ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 126.

³⁸ Osmade, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, 131.

³⁹ Kofi Anyidoho, “Ewe Verbal Art,” in *The Ewes of Southeastern Ghana*, ed. Francis Agbodeka (Accra: Woeli Publications, 1997), 145.

Mediation of *Dagbe* among the Anlo-Ewe

Prayers and sacrifices constitute the direct means through which the people attract the favours of the divinities towards the attainment of *dagbe*. It is believed that the petitions of the people are directed to the Supreme Being through the divinities and the ancestors, who are believed to have a foot in both the physical world and the spiritual are, therefore, closer to the former.⁴⁰ The ritual of prayer takes the form of libation. Water, hard liquor and sometimes corn flour, guinea corn flour is offered to the deities and ancestors. The accompanying element for sacrifice depends on the type of prayer that is offered. In thanksgiving and general votive prayers, water, liquor, corn, or guinea corn flour are the main elements required as sacrifices. These may also be required in mediation for minor offences. The offender would be required to pay a fine or undergo a prescribed punishment to be fully accepted back into the community.⁴¹ Propitiatory, preventive, and substitutionary prayers may require more costly sacrifices. In particular, *nuxexe* or *vosasa*, involves practically everything known to man as sacrifice. Ranging from food and drinks to living and non-living things, the object to be sacrificed is normally determined by the deity concerned through *Afa* divination.⁴²

Sacrifices for *dagbe* take two forms among the Anlo-Ewe—*nuxexe* and *dzadodo*. The first kind, *dzadodo*, is essentially a votive sacrifice which involves the presentation of gifts to one's object of worship. *Dzadodo* is either occasioned by a need for which the worshiper makes a *dza* to seek divine favour, or in appreciation for a favour already granted. The latter is known as *dzatutu*.⁴³ Individuals give *dza* in their day-to-day worship of their objects of worship whereas whole communities would do this on very special occasions, such as annual festivals or in ancestral stool cleansing ceremonies. On the other hand, *nuxe*, also known as *vosa*, is a kind of sacrifice that is essentially meant to avert impending danger. As Gaba rightly points out, the *nuxe* sacrifice is occasioned by situations in which:

... a barren woman desires a child; when a man wants to win the love of an obstinate maiden; before starting a new venture; to alter an unhappy destiny or ensure a good one; when a person is sick; when one wants to show his gratitude to his object of worship; at birth of twins; at funeral and mortuary ceremonies; when famine threatens life; and when human blood is accidentally shed.⁴⁴

In cases of personal misfortunes through self-abuse in alcoholism or prostitution, the individual is identified as both the perpetrator and the victim of the evil and its consequences. In such situations, special rituals known as *nuxe*, the propitiation rites, are performed to placate the gods and ancestors to restore the relationship between the individual and a particular deity or the ancestors. In extreme cases, the victim may be required to reconstruct his personality through *selili*—the reconstruction of his “destiny controller”.

Another very important religious observance on which *dagbe* hinges among the Anlo-Ewe, is *nugbidodo*; a reconciliatory ritual that ensures peace and harmony within the community. The ritual is normally carried out after disputes are resolved between feuding parties in the community to avert any consequences of the breach or animosity that caused the dispute. The ritual involves libation prayers and the use of herbal concoctions with which participants wash their hands, feet and faces. When an individual is afflicted with an ailment as a result of the conflict, he or she is forced to bathe with the herbal concoction over a period of time. The *nugbi* ritual may also involve animal sacrifice. In such cases, after the symbolic spill of blood as a sacrifice to the mediating deity, a ritual meal is prepared with the immolated animal for the feuding parties to partake as a symbol of their reunification. Part of the food may be served to a particular mediating deity and or the ancestors as witnesses of the event. Each year, before the annual *Hogbetsotso* festival of the people, a state *nugbidodo* ritual is performed to ensure that any life-inhibiting phenomenon within the community is removed to pave the way for *dagbe* in the ensuing year.

⁴⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 84.

⁴¹ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 42.

⁴² Gaba, “The Religious Life of the People,” 91.

⁴³ Gaba, “The Religious Life of the People,” 90.

⁴⁴ Gaba, “The Religious Life of the People,” 91.

Dagbe as the basis for Anlo-Ewe Societal Values and Norms

Scholars are not in agreement on the source of African moral values and norms. For some, African morality is religious morality. This implies that the moral beliefs and principles of the African people derive from those of religion, that religion provides the necessary justification for moral values and beliefs, and that moral concepts, such as good, bad, right and wrong, are defined (or, must be defined) in terms of religious prescriptions or commands.⁴⁵

Other scholars, such as Kwame Gyekye, hold a contrary view. To them, religion does not form the basis for African moral systems because wrong behavior in many African communities is not the flouting of some divine law but is regarded as a breaking of some specific rule of social conduct.⁴⁶

These rules, in the view of these scholars, are primarily social principles and norms that guide the conduct of people in a society and are not religious directives. Gyekye cites his own Akan community as an example of an African society where morality is not based on religious prescriptions.⁴⁷

In the case of the Anlo-Ewe, whereas there are no claims of divinely revealed directives on morality, there is ample evidence of religious prohibitions that are closely linked to the ancestral stools of each of the fifteen clans of the community. Good behavior is always associated with *Mawu*, the benevolent Supreme Being and the ancestors while evil and all forms of wickedness are believed to be from malevolent spirits--*gbogbovowo* in the community. All moral infringements, such as stealing, adultery, incest and disrespect for authority, are believed to stem from malevolent spirits and the perpetrators are seen as people who have yielded themselves to the influence of such forces. Invariably, the core values and norms of the community—the sanctity of human life, communalism, hard work, truthfulness, and respect for authority, for instance, are all deeply rooted in the religious beliefs of the people in relation to outcomes of *dagbe*. Taking the life of a fellow human being is a grievous offence not only against the victim and family, but against the larger community, including the ancestors. Hence, the concepts of *hlododo* and *hlobiabia* among the people.

Just as retributions for wrongdoing among the Anlo-Ewe are closely associated with the divinities or displeased ancestors, so are the resolutions. Religion plays a very key role in the restoration or healing process of any breach and its consequences among people. In the resolution of conflicts, for instance, *nugbidodo*, which is essentially a religious activity, plays a key role in the restoration of harmony between the feuding parties even after the elders have settled the matter. No feud in the community is considered fully settled without the *nugbi* ritual. And when the chiefs and elders fail to deliver justice, the deities and ancestors promptly act in support of the victim of the injustice. Thus, religion, especially the aspirations towards the attainment of *dagbe* seems to undergird all facet of life among the Anlo-Ewe. A close examination of the history, traditional educational system, philosophy, economics, governance, medicare, ecology, science, technology, arts and entertainment (which is beyond the scope of this paper), clearly points to the immense role of religion in their lives.⁴⁸

As the core of most religious persuasions, the search for salvation, *dagbe*, is key to the unravelling of morality among the Anlo-Ewe. While good behavior is believed to engender *dagbe*, bad behavior, on the other hand, is inimical to the prospect of the good life of total well-being expected from *dagbe*. Thus, personhood, which connotes good behavior based on the character of an individual, is conceived as a measure of the inclusion of an individual in the community. The Ewe word for person is *ame*. And to say he is a good person and therefore, acceptable to society, one would say, “*ame ma amee*” (to wit, that person is a person). On the contrary, any person who is immoral and consistently disrespects the values of the community and breaches its norms would be referred to as not being a person—*menye ame o*. This understanding is akin to that of the Akan of Ghana, where “... when an

⁴⁵ Kwame Gyekye, “African Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://Plato.Stanford.Edu/Archives/Fall2011/Entries/African-Ethics>, 2011.

⁴⁶ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (FEP International Private Ltd., 1978); Joseph Boakye Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (Routledge, 2014).

⁴⁷ Gyekye, “African Ethics.”

⁴⁸ Gaba, “The Religious Life of the People .”

individual's conduct very often appears cruel, wicked, selfish, ungenerous or unsympathetic, it would be said of that individual that, “he is **not** a person” (**onnye onipa**).⁴⁹ This does not mean that such a person would be excluded from a census. Rather, although being counted among the living, he is excluded from the community metaphysically because he has fallen out with the values and norms of the community as established by the divines and the ancestors. To desire to remain human and therefore, acceptable within the community, one has to strive and live according to the moral tenets of *dagbe*. As Gyekye explains further:

The Akan statement **onnye onipa** and the Yoruba statement **Ki i se eniyan** both underline a conception of moral personhood. The two statements are significant in two ways. The first is that, even though that individual is said **not** to be a person, he is nonetheless acknowledged as a **human being**, not a beast or fish. It is pretty clear that the statement implies a distinction between the concept of a human being and the concept of a person: **an individual can be a human being without being a person**.⁵⁰

Pursuance of *dagbe* thus provides the moral compass with which the Anlo-Ewe navigate the labyrinths of life to ensure right conduct, social cohesion and good neighbourliness. To remain human among the Anlo-Ewe is, therefore, to strive to be morally upright.

At the state level, *dagbe* constitutes the basis of Anlo-Ewe political and social organization, as the values and norms of the fifteen clans of the Anlo state are wound around the ideals of the concept. Each clan is assigned a specific role within the community. The Adzovia and Bate clans are responsible for the provision of an *awoamefia*, the overlord of the community at any given time on an alternate basis. The Agave clan is responsible for the *kaklaku* or war-stool, while the Dzevi serve as the spiritual guardians and custodians of the state deity, *Nyigbla*. This social arrangement is essential to ensure peace and harmony, which are the bedrocks of *dagbe* within the community. The total well-being, promotion of human dignity and the flourishing of each person in the community largely depend on the elders of the clans and the *bokowo*—*Afa* diviners who serve as watchdogs in the community to make sure that wrong behavior is promptly sanctioned to maintain the sanctity of the community and avoid the wrath of the deities and the ancestors.

The Anlo-Ewe have an ancient community ritual cleansing known as *dodede*—removal of illness. The ritual is closely associated with the daily sweeping and cleaning that is supposed to take place in every home within the community. In recent times, the *dodede* ritual has become an activity that precedes the annual *Hogbetsotso* festival of the chiefs and people of the Anlo state. In the afternoon of the day of the ritual, the people first sweep their homes thoroughly and then collect the rubbish and all undesirable items such as broken pots and pans and run out of their homes and in their pathway amid shouting and hooting at the evil spirits believed to be responsible for illness. The rubbish is dumped before the shrine of a public deity—*dulegba* in the absence of which a place is specified for the purpose. The exercise normally takes seven days to run through thirty-six towns of the state. The observance of *dodede* is to ensure the spiritual and physical health of the community. It is to ensure that the mystical bonds of the people and the divines are maintained and that all “life-negating” phenomena are completely removed for the attainment of salvation.⁵¹

Any casual observer of *dodede* could easily interpret it as a mere environmental cleaning exercise. However, to the people, the ritual has very deep religious and spiritual significance with dire consequences for those who refuse to partake in it. It is similar to the bush beating cleansing ritual of the Kikuyu of Kenya, in which the people get together to fight against the spirits by beating bushes amidst shouting and dumping the sticks with which the bushes are beaten at the river bank.⁵² *Dodede* carries the same weight of spiritual significance as the ritual of path clearing of some Akans communities of Ghana during the celebrations of festivals such as the *Akwasidae* of the Asante and the *Aboakyiri* of the Efutu of Winneba. These traditional practices, besides the immediate gains of ensuring environmental cleanliness and thus the prevention of certain diseases, are primarily

⁴⁹ Gyekye, “African Ethics.”

⁵⁰ Gyekye, “African Ethics.”

⁵¹ Gaba, “The Religious Life of the People .”

⁵² Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 90.

undergirded by the value of communalism in African societies. The traditional practices can therefore become the rallying point for communal action against any challenge within the community.

In Rwanda, a similar age-old tradition known as *umuganda*, has been successfully reconstructed into a monthly socio-political activity involving the whole country, including the president and his ministers. As succinctly described by Umimbabazi, *umuganda*:

... a traditional practice and cultural value of working together to solve social and economic problems for mutual benefit. This practice was notably extended to those who were very poor or incapacitated from taking part in collective action. The activities of the then *umuganda* included, for instance, farming for those who were unable to do so due to either physical handicap or old age, building houses for the poor and providing transportation to medical facilities to those who were in need ... A group of households used to come together to share the burden of the work, making sure that everyone in the community had shelter and had their farms ready in time for the planting season. This played a significant role in protecting human security and increasing household income.⁵³

In the current post-genocide era, *umuganda* has become an omnibus for the implementation of government policies on environmental hygiene, social cohesion, and community development. With the exclusion of the invalid and elderly, every member of a given community is mandated to take part in the exercise. Failure to participate attracts sanctions prescribed by the State. Whenever there are conflicts in any community, the *Abunzi*—literally, men of integrity, a committee of elders sit to resolve the dispute after the accomplishment of the assignment for a particular *umuganda* day. Generally, the effects of *umuganda* in the areas of conflict resolution, social cohesion and community development are all geared towards healing and reconciliation, which in Anlo-Ewe thought is *dagbe*--salvation. Understanding salvation in its holistic sense should make the reconstruction of religious and cultural values and norms, such as *dagbe*, into viable functional development tools as *umuganda*.

As Muzerwa rightly observes, “Salvation is an African spiritual mechanism that works through any agent, including historical reality, to rescue or save an endangered life...Salvation is not only spiritual; in the African context, salvation must be holistic.”⁵⁴ It is this holistic understanding of the concept of *dagbe* in Anlo-Ewe thought that makes it an over-riding factor of life in general, with very great potential for community development.

CONCLUSION

This study has so far amply demonstrated that the simple but complex over-arching religious concept of *dagbe* is the live-wire that holds the traditional Anlo-Ewe of south-eastern Ghana together. The people’s understanding of the sublime Supreme Being, known to them as *Mawu*—the greatest or *ama wu la*-the giver of vegetation that provides food and healing, constitutes the framework for *dagbe*, the summation of their purpose on earth and ultimate aspiration in the hereafter. To attain *dagbe* is to be in good health, surrounded by one’s children and grandchildren in old age and to live a long and wealthy life. Guided by the tenets of their beliefs, the traditional Anlo-Ewe religious devotee is thus able to live a holistic and purposeful life in the presence of his ultimate concern, devoid of any apparent dichotomy between the sacred and the secular.

Though deeply ingrained in religion, the concept of *dagbe* unarguably has non-religious connotations and is widely accepted and used as such among the Anlo-Ewe. Beyond the many positive expectations of the people from *dagbe*, the concept renders itself as a ready tool for reconstruction as a vehicle for social and economic advancement of the people. As a concept that touches on almost every facet of people’s daily lives, it can certainly play the transformative role desired of religion in every society—personal and community development, social justice, societal cohesion and the building of social capital for the common good. Taken through an intentional reconstructive process,

⁵³ Penine Uwimbabazi, “An Analysis of Umuganda: The Policy and Practice of Community Work in Rwanda” (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2012).

⁵⁴ Gwinyai H. Muzerwa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985).

as has been done to the *umuganda* traditional concept in the Republic of Rwanda, *dagbe* can become that transformative tool for social and economic advancement of the Anlo-Ewe of south-eastern Ghana.

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