

## A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION INTO THE DU-LEGBA CULT OF THE VOLTA REGION EWE

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The aim of this article is to give a concise account of the Du-legba (pl. legbawo) cult as practised among the Ewe of Ghana. (1) The Du-legba (du = town) cult is only one aspect of the rather complex legba cult found among the Ewe of Ghana, Togo and Dahomey. It distinguishes itself from the other legba cults not so much through the outward appearance of its cult figures but through the fact that it is predominantly a cult devoted to the welfare of the whole community. The local Du-legba's chief sphere of activity is to protect the village or town from misfortune, evil, sickness, and such-like and to act as a messenger between man and some of the gods. This cult still enjoys great support and popularity.

The Du-legbawo are found situated at various places within the town or village. The most usual location would seem to be at the original entrance to the settlement. The reason given for this was that a Du-legba must be at the entrance of the town to prevent sickness from entering. In one instance I came across a village which has two Du-legbawo, one placed at each of the two gates of the town. In other instances I was informed that the figures are placed at the centre of the town or on the spot where the founder of the town first settled. When the Du-legba is not situated in any of these locations it is because the Legba itself has determined where it wishes to be erected. The Du-legba's own desires are ascertained by consulting *afa*. (2.) One cannot communicate directly with the Du-legba. One can only establish contact through divination.

The Du-legbawo which I have come across sometimes consisted merely of a roughly modelled head on a more or less conically shaped body without limbs of any kind or at other times they took the form of a seated figure with stumpy arms and outstretched legs, or of a torso with head and rudimentary arms. The figures if male sometimes have a penis though the organ is almost never of a size which could be described as disproportionately large. I did indeed see some Du-legbawo which were claimed to be male and had no organ. Female Du-legbawo are apparently rare in the areas in which I worked. They are depicted with both breasts and female genitalia. There is usually no detailed modelling of facial features. One informant in fact told

me that a Du-legba should not be too realistic. Cowries form the eyes and the figure is often draped from the neck downwards with a white cloth, or has a necklace of palm-ribs. At times the Du-legba has a stick propped up against its side to throw at evil spirits.

Generally these figures vary between two and three feet in height. The Hedzranowo figure is unusually large and stands over four feet high. If the figure is in an exposed place then a little roof of palm thatch is erected to protect it from rain. In more prosperous and "progressive" villages the thatch roof is replaced by one of corrugated iron sheets or of cement which saves the trouble of repairs. In a bowl in front of the figure or simply thrown down onto the ground are usually to be found pennies (often dating from colonial days) cowries, pieces of chalk, palm nuts and kola nuts.

It was repeatedly emphasized to me that a Du-legba must always be male. The statement that a Du-legba can only be male seems to need some revision in light of the fact that at Adafienu there is what was definitely described to me as a female Du-legba. She is looked upon as the "wife" of the male Du-legba. I think that the idea behind the statement is probably that a female Du-legba cannot be the only Du-legba in the village. If there is only one then it must be male. I have not, however had the opportunity of checking this statement out.

Only a high ranking priest is allowed to construct the Du-legba. An individual does not decide that a Du-legba must be erected. It is always a community decision. Before a Du-legba can be constructed permission must be asked from Mawu the Supreme Being and from the earth. The Du-legba figure is always modelled out of clay. It is not fired nor is it necessarily smoothed or polished in any way. The essential substances are first put into a small pot which is then buried and the Du-legba figure is built over and around this. It is not the figure itself which is of paramount importance. The clay figure is said to have been introduced in days gone by to frighten people and to remind them of the powerful substances buried at that particular spot. Usually ingredients such as the skin and blood of wild animals, human hair, parts of a snake, leaves, grasses, maize, beans, fruit and ginger are buried beneath the figure. However, the most important substance is undoubtedly the special *ama* (herb) which ultimately gives the Du-legba its power. In earlier times it appears that human beings were not so much sacrificed to the Du-legba as used as a powerful ingredient in their construction. Other than the clay figure a Du-legba has no shrine and is always to be found standing in the open.

In some districts I was told myths which attribute the origin of the Legba cult to an apotheosized human being. I must, however,



Plate 1 Du-legba with palm-rib necklace.

emphasize that these myths have a very local character and are certainly not common to the whole of Eweland. There was once one in the village of Kedzi, so the story goes, a very ferocious man by the name of Akoli of whom everyone was terrified. Finally the villagers in a joint effort were able to tie him up with an exceptionally strong rope and to bury him beneath the mud. Over the hole the villagers erected a clay figure in the form of a human being. People said in relief "ele egbea" (he has gone to-day) referring to Akoli. From this time onwards clay figures in human form became known as Legba. People swore oaths on this clay figure and when it was realized that it had power legbawo became more widespread.

In Adidome the origin of the Legba-cult is explained rather differently. Here it is said that there was long ago a couple who were forever quarrelling and they decided that wherever they found people capable of settling their dispute there they would stay. Finally the couple reached Eweland where they did indeed come across people who were able to settle their quarrel. Oddly enough the pair were heard quarrelling at night but were never seen during the daytime. Gradually it became clear to the people in the house that the couple were supernatural beings and they began to make clay images of them. This is supposed to have been the beginning of the Legba cult in this area.

In the Anio traditional area another explanation of the origin of the Legba cult was given me. A man whose sheep were perpetually being stolen erected a clay figure of a human being at the entrance to his compound. The thieves mistook the figure for a real person and refrained from stealing the man's sheep.

The Du-legba has numerous and varied spheres of activity. Generally speaking no Du-legba has any influence beyond the confines of its own village.

The chief and the Du-legba are believed to perform the same function, that is, they both look after the welfare of the entire village. For this reason, the chief is responsible for the upkeep of the Du-legba. Then there is the additional fact that the Du-legba was originally erected by the founder of the town to whom the stool belonged and therefore the Du-legba and the stool are connected in the sense that they both symbolize the continuity and social cohesion of the community.

The "spirit" of the Du-legba is omnipresent but if it is not worshipped and "maintained" properly the in-dwelling spirit will weaken. In some places the Du-legba is revived by offering it sacrifice and adding fresh herbs. Every Du-legba has a hole somewhere in its body or head into which the fresh herbs are inserted.



Plate 2 Du-legba in palm-thatch shelter.

No ordeals are performed in which the Du-legba plays a part, though one can take an oath on the Du-legba. The oath-taker must bring a bottle of **Akpeteshie** (locally distilled gin) or an open bottle of imported gin and state his or her oath and when it is to be fulfilled.

It is also possible to ask the Du-legba to punish a malefactor. No legba drinks palm-wine or spirits or eats food with pepper in it so the offended person offers one of these items to the Du-legba and mentions the name of the person to be punished. This procedure is considered to be morally reprehensible. Du-legba punishes by death and for this reason is rarely invoked.

A Du-legba is capable of causing quarrels between friends. If, for example, when pouring spirits some falls on the Du-legba then it will result in friends quarrelling. Also the worshippers themselves can direct Legba to do this.

A person can deliberately employ a Du-legba to harm an enemy. This is done by breaking its taboos such as by smearing pepper on the head of the figure and through pouring libation and offering prayers in which the name of the person to be harmed will be mentioned to the Du-legba. Before a Du-legba can be requested to punish anyone the consensus of the chief, the elders and the person appointed to serve the Du-legba must be obtained. This is because the person to be dealt with must have committed an offence which affects the whole town, as when for example there is litigation over stool land. Probably the most important aspect of the Du-legba's activities is as the protector and guard of the town or village. When evil spirits are desirous of entering the town the Du-legba will invite them to be his guests and dissuade them from executing their plans. It is still very firmly believed that the Du-legba is able to prevent sickness from entering the town. Diseases are envisaged as entering a settlement in the form of spirits. A well-maintained Du-legba should, however, be in a position to prevent their entry. On the outbreak of illness (and I think here contagious disease is meant) the area surrounding the Du-legba is cleared and a small portion of the rubbish is placed in front of the Du-legba. The Du-legba is believed to offer special protection against smallpox. He is offered palm oil and the pericarp of the nut to enable him to bar the entrance to the disease of smallpox, which is believed to be brought by **Sapata** (3) who has a sore under his heel. Pieces of the nut shells are strewn on the ground to discourage **Sapata** from coming to town since by so doing he is likely to further injure his bad foot.

The Du-legba has no authority over witchcraft which is considered to be stronger than itself. All the Du-legba can do is to try and dissuade witchcraft from entering the village.



Before departing on a journey it is customary to inform the Du-legba. This can be undertaken with any Legba and not just with Du-legbawo. In some places corn-flour mixed with water and oil are offered separately to the Du-legba. He is then requested to look after one during the journey. One scuffs one's feet in the dust in front of the figure in the same manner as when wiping one's feet on a doormat. One can promise to make the Du-legba an offering on one's safe return.

The Du-legba cult does not give the impression of being very highly organized. There are no priests who are concerned specifically with the Du-legba cult in the same way, for instance, that Yewe(4) priests are associated with their gods. The cult of Du-legba can be the responsibility of any number of different people who perform the acts of worship on behalf of the entire community. In some areas the rites are performed by the elderly people of the town and by the chief. These elderly people must be deeply knowledgeable about Du-legba and already possess gods in their own households. In other areas local priests or selected people in the community perform the rites. These people are descendants of the founder of the town and this ancestor will himself reveal to them in a dream knowledge of the rites. In yet other instances it is the Du-legba itself who chooses the person to perform the sacrifices. The person chosen need not necessarily be a priest but must then undergo training in how to serve the Legba.

The Du-legba does not everywhere have a specific day of the week on which sacrifice is offered. Apart from the regular sacrifices there are also times when the Du-legba is offered special sacrifices. Whenever sacrifices are made to the stool on behalf of the entire community then Du-legba will also receive sacrifices.

A wide variety of sacrifices are offered to the Du-legba. When it is functioning satisfactorily it can be offered a he-goat. It will also accept cockerels, porridge, beans, corn, maize, yam, rice, **dzenkple** (maize porridge mixed with palm oil) and **nubake** (mashed yam and palm oil). Only male animals can be sacrificed to the Legba. Generally speaking a woman may not sacrifice to Du-legba. I was told that male and female Du-legbawo do not receive the same food as offerings. Apparently it is of no consequence whether the sacrifice takes place during the day or the night. Anyone who wishes may attend including women and children. No menstruating women, however, may be present, since menstrual blood is considered to be polluting.

A Du-legba has neither special festival nor dances. Neither does it have special prayers, but it does have a series of praise-names which must be mentioned before sacrifice or before swearing an oath. The Du-legba cult also has a number of songs.

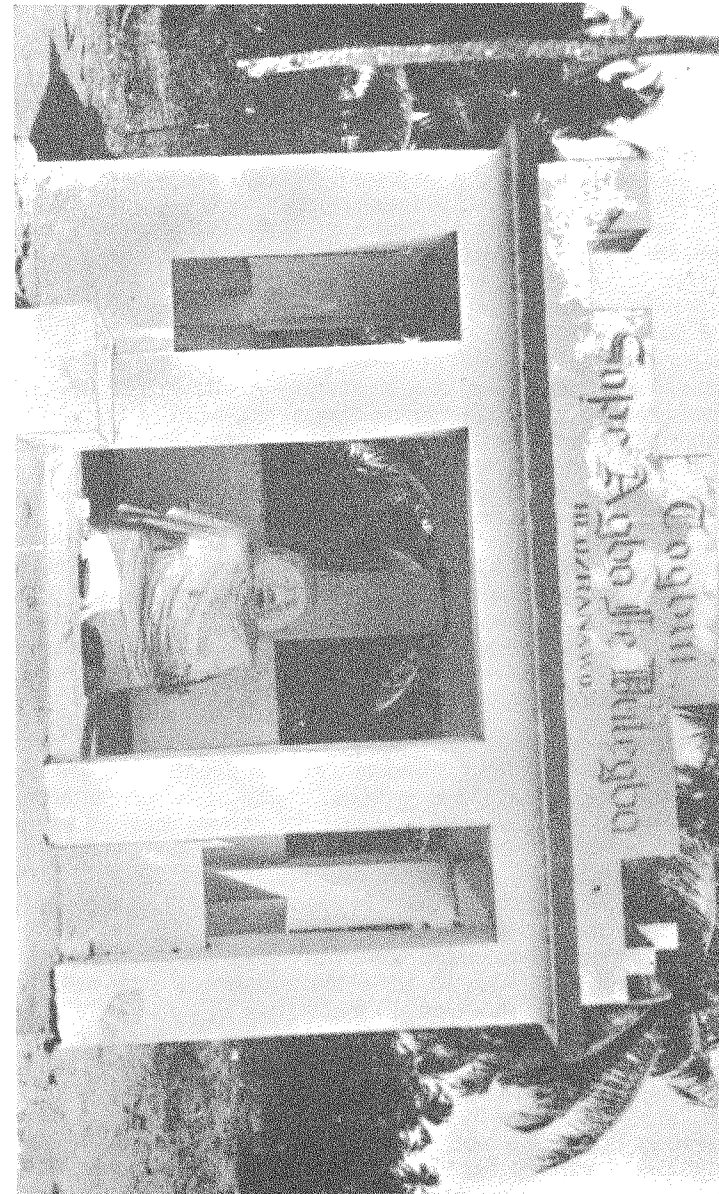


Plate 3 Du-legba in cement shelter at Hedzranawo.

Invocative praise-names and phrases include **Legba agbo**, **Legba** the gate, that is, a power who can both keep and break the gate. As far as I could discover the Du-legba cult does not have a wide selection of songs. One which appears to be common and which is sung by all the worshippers in unison is: **Legba medua nukukuo; vu tsre tsre Legba du na.** (Legba does not eat dead things, it is fresh flowing blood he eats). This is a reference to the fact that Du-legba will only accept living animals in sacrifice.

The Du-legba cult has a very strongly emphasized community character which finds constant expression. It does, however, as already mentioned, also have an individual aspect. A person can, for example, swear an oath on the Du-legba and ask for its personal protection before undertaking a journey. Here the individual is entering into a direct and personal relationship with the Du-legba, which has nothing to do with the community at large. The Du-legba cult does not have the effect of categorizing the villagers according to such matters as status and sex. A villager, in a certain rather loose sense, "inherits" the local Du-legba in so far as he is a member of the community under the Du-legba's protection. He can, however, choose to ignore the cult completely. It is not possible for an individual to acquire a Du-legba. Ownership of the cult is communal.

It has not been sufficiently emphasized that the Du-legba acts as a messenger only to those gods which are worshipped by the entire community. However, in Eweland the emphasis appears to be on Du-legba's function as protector of the town and not on his function as messenger. The Du-legbawo are not connected with natural phenomena.

Despite intensive questioning of informants I still do not feel that I am on very firm ground in trying to define the place of the Du-legba cult within the Ewe theosophical system. The terms for the different categories of supernatural powers such as **tro** (plur. **trowo**) and **vodu** (plur. **voduwo**) are often employed interchangeably and seemingly at random. The **voduwo** are believed to have originated in and been brought from Dahomey. They function mainly by means of **ama dowona** (working with herbs). I was told that those gods which were adopted from "outside" are often referred to as **voduwo** while the indigenous gods are known as **trowo**. A **tro** is acquired spiritually, that is, through inheritance or possession by the god. These are the only ways in which a **tro** can be acquired. A **vodu** on the other hand can be "bought". It does not have to be inherited nor does it necessarily call a person to its service by possessing him or her. The **vodu** can be acquired by anyone who has the financial means to establish its cult. This is not the case with **trowo**. Gods which are considered to be **trowo** are never represented by wooden or clay figures as are the **voduwo**. Objects such as pots, certain trees and bundles

of twigs symbolize the presence of the **trowo** in the shrine. As will be remembered the Du-legba has no special priesthood which is specifically devoted to the cult, although he has an attendant, nor does a Du-legba ever "possess" anyone.

**Dzo** which like the **voduwo** is believed to have originated in Dahomey consists of various combinations of items from the vegetable, animal, human and mineral world used to form the desired paraphernalia. To my question as to whether the Du-legba is an object with magical powers, that is, when a person observes his taboos and sacrifices to him regularly he then functions automatically, I was told that the Du-legba does indeed function automatically but cannot be referred to as **Dzo**.

On one or two occasions I was informed that the Du-legba could be regarded as a **vodu** but most certainly not as a **tro**, because he is a messenger to the gods and a messenger can never be a **tro**. My enquiries as to whether any Legba is worshipped as a god drew a negative response, only one informant maintaining, albeit very hesitantly, that this was the case. Apparently one does not kneel down when worshipping a Du-legba which is the case when worshipping an actual god. Also one cannot worship only legba to the exclusion of all other gods.

The whole Legba cult must perhaps be classified apart from the **tro** and **vodu** cults and from **Dzo**. The Du-legba cult has contact and is interwoven with all three categories but seems nevertheless to remain a distinct entity apart from them.

#### FOOT NOTES

- (1) This article contains part of the results of an investigation into the Legba cult carried out under the auspices of the Ghana National Museum.
- (2) **Afa**, a means of divination using palm nuts, known amongst the Yoruba as **lfa**.
- (3) **Sapata-Soponna** (Yoruba), An earth deity who punishes people by inflicting on them smallpox and other contagious diseases. Pierre Verger, *Notes sur le culte des orisas et vodun. Memoires de l'institut francais d'Afrique Noire*, no. 51, I.F.A.N., Dakar, 1957 p. 239.
- (4) The **Yeve** cult was adopted from Dahomey and is devoted to the worship of several "man and wife" gods such as **So**, the god of thunder and lightning, **Agui**, So's wife and **Vodua**.