

# A Southern Nigerian Community



A Southern Nigerian Community:  
Case Study Ughelli

By

Frederic Will

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

A Southern Nigerian Community: Case Study Ughelli,  
by Frederic Will

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Dedicated to my wife

With lasting thanks to Tanure

In memoriam: Bigman, David, Edith



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## INTRODUCTION

### A SOUTHERN NIGERIAN COMMUNITY: CASE STUDY UGHELLI

The modern navigators only have one objective when they describe the customs of new peoples: to complete the history of man.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Preface**

I'm a product of the American Midwest, after some twenty years in the U.S. state of Iowa, preceded by twenty years, earlier in life, in the equally midwestern state of Illinois. I know what sunset looks like in those places, how the ground smells after rain, what kind of excitement still accompanies the upburst of crocuses in April. I have traveled considerably, taught in Europe (Germany, Greece) and Africa (Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Chad, Tunisia), but have remained a localist in spirit. My heart belongs to urbane small-town America. Nonetheless, after some experience of marital failure, after striking out in many of the middle class expectations of fatherhood, I decided nearly twenty years ago that I would like to marry an African woman. (The next chapters will explain why Africa was my field of choice.) At first I made some efforts on my own. I traveled to Mauritania, was offered a desert bride, but decided against her when I learned "she would never be able to leave her home village." Then I turned to a good African friend, a Nigerian writer, and asked him to help me find the right woman. He did. I found that woman. We courted long-distance for a year, laid foundations of trust, and lo and behold we were wed in an Iowa courthouse in 1995. The following book is about a community in Nigeria, Ughelli, but more deeply it is about the woman who brought me to that community; she will spread like a creative shadow over every insight I can offer here. Even when I am trying to figure out who I am, she will be part of the figuring out.

And have I gotten smarter and better, from this adventure outside my home town? Was I right to travel so far, seeking the bluebird of happiness? Inside, I feel roadblocks opening up to let a self out. I am better than I used

to be at hearing others; people tell me things. I have shed some of my deaf ear for social organization, and for the way society is put together. (This may seem elementary, but in the following text I will speak of the narcissistic background I emerged from. Hearing others was tightly connected to appreciating what it means to live in a society.) The most important revelations, I am sure, were strewn over the minefield of marriage. I have learned to give and take with another person. Siblingless, spoiled, neurotically art-and-idea centered, I had blown two marriages by bad choices. Without my wife's astounding care I would not be here writing this!

## Religion

I was raised as a sensualist only-child waif without much exposure to the human condition. Never convinced that life has lasting meaning, I nonetheless joined the Catholic Church at the age of thirty-three. That leaves a lot to explain. When I went away to prep school and college I was lonely and sought out areas of nature, embracing cults like the Vedanta temple near Harvard Square, Boston, in which I found peace. That was a step toward the eventual invitation of Catholicism, to which, at my entry into the Church in 1961, I brought my academic study, Latin—little knowing the Church was about to abandon the language—my residence (at the time) in an old-fashioned Hispanic Austin, Texas, and a fascination with devotions which forced the body to testify to the spirit, like the devotions of the Virgen de Guadalupe. (I had been moved, in the Byzantine spirituality I met in Greece as a Fulbright student in 1951, and in occasional glimpses of the cult of the Virgen de Guadalupe, by a lachrymose susceptibility of which my early-in-life experience of Protestant Christianity had evoked no hint. In the process of joining the Catholic Church I gradually realized that I am a natural friend of the archaic, ritualized, non-discursive in religion, and instinctively uncomfortable with a turn, which I take to be central to Protestantism, toward *discussion* with God.)

But that Catholic move was spirituality in name only. As I said, I was a narcissistic thirty-three-year-old waif. I was attracted to the only route I could tolerate, into the treasures of insight Christianity offered me. (Even at that time I wondered constantly whether the ancient Greeks, with their humane mythology, “had it right after all”.) I am still arguing with myself about Hellenism and Hebraism. I try today for a more mature version of the Catholic faith, with less narcissism and aestheticism in it. The results of that effort may someday breed in me a more mature theology. As things

stand at the moment it will be apparent that I find in Ughelli, Nigeria, more than enough of the credent passion lacking in the midwestern Protestantism I was surrounded by in childhood. I have *found* the passion toward which I believed I was fleeing, in seeking the Catholic. True, almost daily in the Ughelli from where I write, I have cause to cry out, *God is not deaf, God's passion is too noisy here*, and yet in the end I like to know that the pain and jubilation of existence are being recognized.

In the religious communities of Ughelli, I have grown acquainted with areas of Christian praise, sure, for this is a roaringly praiseful community; but also with interfaces between such archaic Christian praise and the dark edges of another planet which circumscribes the praise zone, and whose depths are no less than those of the Black Holes that pockmark our universe. Witches, wizards, peanut shells that fly through the night, baneful spells, charms, sinister glances that cause illness: the bric-à-brac of the dark, the Halloween tale pallidly simulated once a year in American suburban neighborhoods; all this has opened out for me. I have felt links between African “animism” and the Hellenic animism I for decades taught at my students. I have also formed some educated guesses about the differences between the two kinds of animism.<sup>2</sup> I have realized that Hellenic animism works a different territory from the African—more nearly a physics, less a zone of transformative energies—and today it is the “African” animism that leads the way in making sense to me, as a way society and its worldview put themselves together. The African, more than the polytheistic Hellene, lives a life lived into him/her by nature, the environment, and a socially grounded imagination.<sup>3</sup>

## Society

Ughelli has helped me see how society in general is put together, and where its glue is strongest. This has been a disclosure, by a foreign culture, of what society is—what any society is; an intricate and muted set of assumptions brought into existence by a group, deposited together by common interest at a certain point of history.

We are linked to political society by something that somehow escapes our immediate consciousness: by a whole tangled skein of pressures and motives, some rational, many more not so.<sup>4</sup>

A complex of societal strictures and stimuli is palpable in the fabric of Ughelli's Urhobo culture. In my Catholic church, Saints Peter and Paul, I try making my offering with the left hand, and am told it is “an abomination”. (I should have known.) In my own guest house I ask too

many questions of people, about why they believe or dread this or that, and am told not to ask too many questions. (*Editorial note*: the origins of empirical science are related to persistent questioning, the absence of which has for long cut off African tradition from the Enlightenment project, so active in the West since the seventeenth century.)<sup>5</sup> A funeral is held, merry and extravagant and at the same time minutely regulated by the expected offerings, expressions of condolence, and dancing savvy pertinent to the rules of the occasion—rules which are of Byzantine precision, not to be varied, while gloomy old Fred, used to the down-in-the-mouth burial ceremonies of midwestern America, is left gaping on the sidelines, as he is when discovering that funerals are the weekend parties in Urhoboland. In a Nigeria frequently careless about law enforcement, the picayune concern for regulations—just the right forms for the numerous driving papers required, just the precise compliance with chassis numbers and insurance papers—is prioritized by the custodians of public order. Nor is this weave of distinctive practices, which comprise the social in Ughelli, an arbitrary pasting-together of ways things are done. There is an internal logic to the way Ughellian culture plays out which constitutes a “societal weave”. It is that same kind of societal weave, wintered-in Iowans waving pallidly to one another on an ice-covered February street, which at first struck despair into the bosom of my Nigerian bride.

What I discover about how Urhobo society is put together is that great concern for the rules can blend with a society which is *laissez-faire* to the max—limited taxation, no *de facto* rules of the road, no oversight over budgetary practices recklessly carried out by state governors, to whom the federal budget is doled out as their own spending money. The rules, the strict hand of control which reaches back to the ancestors, who are forever supervising the living, and to the evil, who are forever threatening their living fellows—the rules are always there, and leave behind them what is arguably a happy culture, the quirky claim of Essay One, ahead; a culture happy because it gives itself little room to “break the rules”. The essays in this book will indicate the kind of weaving of assumptions that guarantees wholeness to the diverse conditions of Ughellian society—its happiness/sadness moods, its temporal setting, its distinctive kinds of fallibility/corruption, its distinctive recourses toward the security needed to support “happiness”.

The culture *I* bring to this meeting with Ughelli, American culture forged in the white mainstream of the late nineteenth century, and sharply inflected by my private life in a pre-WWII academic family, seems to me like what the German art historian Johann Winckelmann called the “purest water drawn from the center of the well,”<sup>6</sup> transparent and invisible.

Maybe mine is thus the story of all wannabee longers toward the foreign, that they are impelled by a defective sense of what they themselves come from, of any sense of the societal weave in which *they* are so embedded. In any case, it has taken foreign travel in the past, and in the present foreign residence, to help me begin to see the patterns that regulate the social milieu *I* am from: one both stoic and optimistic, like the Urhobo, but far less god-drenched, far more can-do, and far more confident than the Urhobo that it belongs to the direction of “history”; traits marking the American white middle-class of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. (But manifestly no longer valid. Blood-letting wars, financial crises, epidemics of anxiety and depression, tumultuous immigration pressures, the expensive and unprofitable War on Drugs—the direction of history is no longer obvious to us white Yankees.) Seeing this profile of my own world has been sharpened by what I have seen inside Urhobo culture.

## Marriage

From the start of our international marriage, twenty years ago, my wife and I planned to live one another’s worlds. For a long time we lived my world, while she lived both her world and mine. I entered her world only as a part of the travel horizon that has long been pervasive in my life, the occasional visit, the obsessive eye of curiosity. Now my wife and I have attacked that misbalance. I have muddled around in her cultural seedbed. This book is proof of that effort. To reach out in this way the other must have become me enough for me to look for it.<sup>7</sup> Finding even what little I have found has changed my life.

## Life and Book Style

The foregoing makes an easy segue into the issue of this book’s style. The author is in the text, as he has been in his texts throughout his writing life; being the other as his language, being himself personally doing the other. A good friend, kindly misestimating this author’s limits and desires, suggested a reframing of the present work, taking a clue from the novelist Graham Greene. By this action the author would become a maker of fiction in a sense more formalized than in fact he makes of himself by making this *fiction* of a sub-Saharan community. (Yes, there is here much reshaping of fact.) He is in fact too many things besides a fiction writer, in that formal sense, for the purpose of the present text. He is the same poet he has been, ready always to press certain extravagances out of language;

he is the sociologue recently nursed to strength by the experience of teaching in the social sciences; and he is the face-to-face interviewer he was in *Big Rig Souls* and other books, in which he probed the cross-section between himself and others at work. Can he now say that he is more than all this, that he wishes to be a gift-giver through his work? Yes, he will enlist that possibility, too, aspiring to make a space in language where others can find room to deploy and refresh themselves. Each of these presences of him wants a hearing for itself as style, and aspires to become part of a shifting register of languages, *the site of a kind of fiction*. Best I can do, Graham Greene!

Frederic Will  
Ughelli, 2012–2013

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> La Pérouse, cited in Sergio Moravia, “Philosophie et géographie à la fin du 18<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Studies on Voltaire and the 18th Century*, 57, 1967, 937–1011.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Christopher Gill, *Greek Thought* (Oxford, 2006), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Frederic Will, “Amulets,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 49/50 (Spring/Autumn 2006), 249–60.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*, 1972, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion* (1954). Science is found in all cultures; in the mind of the traditional African when, for instance, he calculates his seeding and ploughing practices to correspond with the observed cycles of the seasons. But the question is, *how* does the African scientific project differ from the Western?

<sup>6</sup> Johann Winckelmann, *Werke*, vol. IV (Donaueschingen: Verlag deutscher Classiker, 1808), 54.

<sup>7</sup> Frederic Will, “Anticipation,” *Dalhousie Review*, 6(Summer 2008), 169–78.



**PART ONE:**

**UGHELLI:**

**THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT**



# UGHELLI: THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT

The influx of the population created a strain on municipal resources which became much graver after independence. Water and power shortages have become part of the pattern of life for many; as have inadequate or nonexistent rubbish collection; congestion and immobile traffic in the streets and grossly overcrowded and insanitary city primary schools. The blame is usually put on management; “NEPA” [Nigerian Electrical Power Authority] has become a cartoonist’s folk villain.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Enlightenment

The Enlightenment project refers to that thrust toward the light of social reform, and toward reason in human affairs, which runs worldwide throughout philosophical, religious, and artistic expression. Plato’s imagery of the cave depicts relatively benighted citizens, who can only see images of the true cast as shadows into their subterranean domain. The light, where the truth rests, is only indirectly interpreted from below. *Le Siècle des Lumières* (“The Century of Light”) was Europe’s turning to reason in the eighteenth century; reason being (it was assumed) the twin to the light. The major religions, often using imagery of light—Buddha is “enlightened” under his bodhi tree, Jesus Christ is the “light of the world”, the winter equinox promises longing hunter-gatherers a return to light and sun—constantly contrast the brilliance of truth and heaven with the darkness of hell or ignorance. Think of the transformation of ordinary light in Chartres’ stained glass windows; the holy is made sensuous. Think of the power of the light in Cézanne or Van Gogh paintings, where the created world is creased with new meaning. Light, with its brother reason, has functioned universally to symbolize the path through and out of human darkness. We will be looking for the light in the streets and hearts of Ughelli, both in the present introductory essay and throughout this book.

We open with vignettes of life in Ughelli, in Delta State. We see traces of Enlightenment in that town, but those traces are flickers of oscillating light, glimpses caught and lost in the turning of an eye. (This chapter’s superscript gives a bird’s eye image of the anti-Enlightenment environment facing Ughelli itself.) If this book has any practical motif, it

is to contribute to the awareness of what life might be, but usually isn't, in Ughelli; and, of course, to the awareness of what life might by extension be anywhere; for to talk of Ughelli is to talk of *mankind* in community.

## 2. Ughelli Profile

The Ughelli on which we reflect is a rough-looking place, 700,000 or so souls, located near the Niger Delta in southern Delta State. That places it not far from the areas of Western offshore oil-extraction and militant indigene rebellion, which have for twenty years—say since the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995—attracted the horrified attention of the Western media.<sup>2</sup> While Ughelli itself is little known, except to itself, the Niger Delta, thanks to the intrusions of Big Oil and the rapacious exploitation of the indigenous areas lying in the midst of oil country, is known worldwide. While we will be concentrating on the “case study of Ughelli”, which is already a stretch for the competence of the author, we will be regularly referring out to the larger unit of Delta State as a whole, which involves not only the Oil region but a considerable landmass (17,600 square kilometers), a population of some eight million, and a number of ethnic groups—Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, and a slice of the North Ibo (in Anioma). The people of Ughelli themselves are predominately speakers of Urhobo, a Niger-Congo language spoken by a dwindling ethnic minority (four million) among the more than 200 distinct ethnic groups in Nigeria as a whole.<sup>3</sup> (But the Urhobos are surrounded by smaller tribal groups, as we have said—Ijaws, Itsekiris, Isokos—who follow their own customs and speak their own languages, though they share with the Urhobos, and with most peoples of West Africa, a common pidgin language, not to mention *broadly* similar tastes in food, dress, style of worship, and outlook on destiny.)

This Urhobo city of Ughelli, which is only one of the several sizeable cities of the State—Warri, the commercial center, Asaba, the state capital, Sapele, a commercial city on the west border of Delta State—lies roughly in the center of Delta State, is a market center, and supports a few commercially successful enterprises—glass (Delta Glass Factory), pressed rubber for export (Imonyami Rubber Plant), some wrought-iron industrial machine parts (Alcon Construction). There is also work here servicing the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA)—as there are any number of much less highly organized enterprises: semi-skilled labor available for any kind of work, from plumbing and painting to roofing. There is employment at schools, churches, and a few upscale small hotels and guest

houses. There is administrative/clerical employment at two Local Government agencies—Ughelli Local Government Area (ULGA) North, ULGA South—which employ civil servants for the expected series of assignments—licensing, city planning, accounting.

Despite this range of local jobs, there is a severe problem with unemployment, currently pegged at 60 percent, and with other plagues—terrible (but recently improving) roads, irregular (but incrementally improving) electricity supply, serious crimes like kidnapping in the streets (in a state of flux, dreadful one month, controlled the next), and a brutal (and almost equally dangerous) vigilante system to combat the crime. The unemployment figure, as I said, hangs around 60 percent for the residents in general, though it mounts to 80 percent for college graduates, whose aspirations for “suitable employment” are almost certain to be frustrated here in Ughelli—and not only here, for Nigeria as a whole is plagued by the challenge of effectively using its natural or human resources.

And as if these frustrations were not enough, Mother Nature herself has been sacrificed to the mercies of this Ughelli community. Not only is the air quality degraded—air filters rare on vehicles, gas flaring byproduct-depositing particles in the air, the quality of petrol frequently diluted and toxified<sup>4</sup>—but the environmental setting here trembles between devastating heat (February), an equatorial rainy season (April to October), and the dusty dry season (December to March) which includes the *harmattan*, a dry wind which can lower the temperature into the sixties Fahrenheit over night, while depositing a half-inch of Saharan dust on your writing desk.

Yes, Ughelli is rough-looking, though it is bustling and dotted with small industries and abundant self-employed labor; and here and there the city is flavored with up-scale and nouveau riche houses. These Afro-Tudor domiciles conflict with the predominately cement-block, zinc-roofed structures that line the main commercial streets of the place. It is those streets which set the down-at-the-heels visual tone; monotone, colorless buildings, rusted zinc, dusty vacant lots, hardly a blade of grass, let alone a park.

Ughelli as a whole remains rough-looking even though it has recently undergone improvements such as extensive new Federal road construction that has opened a heavily used route through the north of town, joining Benin City and ultimately Lagos in the West, to Port Harcourt, Igbo country, and Kaduna in the northeast.<sup>5</sup> The very construction of this Federal route has not been easy, having been hampered not only by swampy calcareous soil that resists asphalt, but also by the harassment and kidnapping carried out for months against the road workers; attacks by

Niger Delta militants who, though backward and poor themselves in their devastated riverine hideaways in the southeast of Delta State, no more than 100 miles to the south as the crow flies, represent marginalized militant groups, who resent the road worker recipients of Federal money which properly (they think) should belong to themselves, oil-victimized tribes.<sup>6</sup> Thus the Niger Delta oil-exploitation issue in one way or another expands actively into Ughelli, and is at the time of this writing an adjunct disruption to the anyway unstable social jell of Ughelli.<sup>7</sup>

Without dispute, however, this road construction has brought with it benefits envisaged by a constructive Federal government project—Nigeria being a Federal Republic administered from the capital Abuja, through the governments of thirty-six states. These benefits (in this Delta area) include relatively easy local transport, the acceleration of long-distance heavy lorry traffic, and on the whole a reduction in (the very numerous) road accidents. So there *is* a whiff of the Enlightenment, capital letters, in this small city. And there are other whiffs; an incremental improvement in electrical service, a gradual *diversification* of business enterprises, an enlargement of venues for entertainment or civic night life, largely in the new hotels.

Such African cities as Ughelli are every year acquiring a more westernized profile. Yet as I said, Ughelli is rough by any standard, and I don't have to go far to see that. From where I observe this Federal road, night and day on my guest-house balcony with a small troupe of lizards for buddies, I see an endless blend of *okadas* (motorbike transport for local passengers), heavy lorries, battered passenger cars, battered and heavily crowded private buses, and frequent emergency or high-priority (politicians or police, that is) vehicles, topped with screaming blue lights and driving hell-bent through the scattering of pedestrians and cars.

The negative twist to Ughelli's Enlightenment is always evident: chaos reigns on the highway. Yet what I see from my guest-house balcony reveals more than such routine chaos as passes *here in front of me*. From that same balcony, east along the same road, I can see a half-mile almost to Afisiere Junction, one of four nodes formed around the Highway as it passes through Ughelli. At Afisiere Junction the new Federal Express road divides into a dual carriageway, at a point where roads branch off (north) to the village of Afisiere and (south) into the center of Ughelli. At that point, despite the smoothness of certain parts of the surface of the Express, all hell breaks loose. Automobile and pickup drivers; *okadas* with up to three rotund passengers; pedestrians crossing; brahma bulls crossing: all these agents, moving in a counterpoint of conflicting directions, explode in chaos and mindless me-first-ism which is a living metaphor for the chaos

of Ughellian society, a society without a truly functioning government on any level, without any *we* to interhatch with the abundant *me*. (The confusion of this nation as a whole is implicit at Afisiere Junction: a nation eaten through with graft and tribalism, both of which work at cross purposes to order and discipline.)

And yet the road *does* go on ferrying its loads from early morning to evening. From the guest house balcony you get caught up in the pressure of the flow. You feel the life of this place becoming your life. You know that though there is a breakdown of order at Afisiere Junction there is huge energy right in front of you. Then, as you begin to feel that this highway flow is the flow of life itself, blood stream and toxins blended, the flood begins to slow. Your rumination stops. It stops at 10:00 p.m. and recommences around 5:00 a.m. There is a period of seven hours when you are surprised to be hearing yourself breathe. You are so at ease you ask no questions. But your body knows that the pulse of this road artery is also the artery in your arm, and that it has slowed.

Those seven hours of what is to you silence, peace, withdrawal into sleep, belong to what remains of the bush (Urhobo *aghwa*), out there in the night lining the pitch-black distant Federal road; it belongs equally to the evil forces that roam such a bush. (Evil, *eshu* in Urhobo, is the name of the key enemy in this culture; banning the diabolic is *everyone's* project, and the night, in which spirits travel, owls hoot, and witches plot, is the content of the fear inside every Urhobo I know; a fear of the darkness closing in around your face and eyes and sense of touch; not an existential fear at our problematical condition, for *it* is dark, but rather a smooshing squushing-in fear, the fear that accompanies the sense that you are being constricted by witchery.) The evil counter-universe, out there and keeping the vehicles off those unpatrolled, dangerously potholed highways, beyond the reach of the Federal project, is not only the evil of the spirits but is also the evil of real armed robbers-cum-killers, highway assassins who take money and lives with almost equal ease, then vanish into the bush of a Delta State impenetrable to police or military investigative powers.

What locals think of the wider spiritual evil, out there in the night, I have no idea. (Twenty years of marriage to one of those locals has only made the mystery more impenetrable.) The spirit world of the Ughellian is made out of internalized fears which must be allayed or if possible prevented by any variety of medicines. The pharmacopeia targeting such dangers is rarefied and consequential. Do I find these complexes picturesque? I used to. But that was a patronizing and insular attitude. Could I explain to *any* Ughellian *my* culture's fears of *cancer*, of a *lonely old age*, or of the loss of our children to *depression* and *suicide*? *What*

*unspoken fears haunt us!* The Ughellian mindset has let Christianity replace the bewitched world only on conditions of extravagant compromise: a theology built on mountains of miracles, a world bathed in the blood of the lamb, overnight absolution the door-price for a Pentecostalism which will try, perhaps even then in vain, to extirpate the unnamable horror underlying the silence. In light of all which, naturally, the traffic knows just when to leave the highway frontier alone. Hence the slowing of the pulse at 10:00 p.m. Hence the relief when the first cars pass the house at six in the morning.

### 3. The Federal Express Road

As a part-time resident of this small city, I have struggled to square its increasingly Enlightenment tastes with a darkness and entropy that banish anything like order or common sense. The Federal road, for sure, springs from the Enlightenment care; mankind taking its collective destiny in hand, settling down to shape its own world. This taking control is not at all a novelty on the African continent—certain contemporary states like Ghana, Malawi, and Botswana far surpass today's Nigeria in this regard, committing to infrastructure, transparency in supporting it, and citizen benefits; while already *pre-colonial* Nigeria, for centuries before occupation, had given effective civic form to its values, through both the agencies of the family and the kingship/clan polity; there was an abundance of social organization and welfare. (Whole African nations—like Sierra Leone, turned into a refuge for freed slaves, 1792, and Liberia, established as an independent nation in 1841 for freed slaves from the United States—were founded on the premise of their value to human well being.) Yes, though this Federal Highway seems to have been built from out of the grip of demonic forces, it is nevertheless a contribution to both culture and economy in Delta State.

Engineer Abubakr, nursing a few inches of Jack Daniels Black Label, describes the levels of asphaltting, the variations in the water table under the road bed, and the budgetary allocations coming out of the capital Abuja, that have put him, a small corps of engineers, and thousands of local construction hands in the midst of an ambitious project. (Abuja, the seat of the Federal Government, has instituted this national road building project with the support of the World Bank, and the stretch of busy road below our guest house balcony is a very small segment of the result.)<sup>8</sup> This project is Enlightenment if anything here is, and in some ways it belongs to a larger pattern in the renewing Nigeria of our moment, a Nigeria fondly vilified by any and all, in and out of the country, but not *totally* stuck in its



problems, and in some ways looking for openings into a richer communal life. Good roads, greater safety, more jobs, ultimately a more vibrant economy: people of larger vision reach to these hopes throughout this country which does what it can when it can to apply such useful thinking.

We all know what this “apply” can mean. Since the time of the Roman Empire good roads have been the key to civic growth, and anyone walking the Roman roads of northern Britain today will inwardly respect the good sense and purposefulness of the first-century Feds in the Capitoline. Road building was a crucial upgrade of the new American government’s effectiveness in the early nineteenth century; roadways were the path of communications, trade, adventure, exploration. Yet it has not been easy to bring contemporary Nigeria—the country has only been “a nation” for fifty years—to the point of undertaking such efforts on its own behalf. In the decade from 1910 to 1920, the British were responsible for substantial developments of transportation infrastructure in Nigeria. (Their interest was self-interest, to strengthen export communications to Britain, but the byproduct of this self-interest was a rare developmental spurt for Nigeria.)

Engineer Abubakr, savoring a break from the Islam to which he usually adheres, takes another sip, and has to conclude his assessment of the value of the road he is charged with supervising with an admission that the government is sharply cutting back on its support of the project. (As of the current rewrite, more than a year later, the road construction is underway again, and with good results. Trying to write history once and for all, on the spot, is like trying to stop intense pleasure, which is passing as you savor it.) In fact the continuation of the whole project—the date of this writing is February 2011—is in question; while at the date of *this* writing, March 2013, the project is advancing.

Why has this Setraco road part of the Enlightenment project stumbled, or why is such a commendable Federal project as this not an absolute shoo-in? There are many reasons, and I will isolate one, non-economic, as it happens, for it fits my theme; though of course economic corruption on the Federal budgetary level has also to be at the root of any observations on the present issue. (The money allotted for the road may have been “diverted”, as are many federal subventions allocated either by Abuja or by the thirty-six state governments, and every Nigerian I know would quickly expect an explanation along those lines.) There is a darker-than-economic answer to the question of why the project is stumbling, and that answer allies to the mindset that peoples the night hours bush with evil. I just alluded to part of this darker answer in terms of Niger Delta militancy. A tribal *anti* was at work obstructing the road project. The Federal

supervisors from the North, who were sent down to the Delta to arrange and manage this road project, are ethnically alien to the residents of the areas through which the road is passing. The locals are Urhobos (or possibly Ijaws or Itsekiris). They are only easy with *local* road workers. But Engineer Abubakr, to whom we have referred, is from mid-Nigeria's Ekiti State, and is a Muslim Igbara tribesperson and speaker. There's the face of the other for you! There's a basically non-economic reason why the continuation of the highway isn't a certainty!

Furthermore, making the administrative blend richer and more foreign, there are *white* supervisors in this northern-Nigeria-based contract operation. The locals are alienated by *this* unfamiliar component. At the same time—in addition to this issue of ethnic and even racial unfamiliarity introduced by the roadwork team—the road has created the inevitable dislocation of private lands and road crossings, for which, though some compensation has been paid, there is resentment. (Enter rapacious local “boys”, a richly operative code word for “area boys”, thugs who represent local regions or interests, and who rise up to scrap dangerously for their territory.) Road workers have been harassed, kidnapped and murdered. Huge ransoms have been demanded. The locals have fought hard *against* what we are calling Enlightenment. Why exactly? I will leave the answering of this question, to which we will return, for the overall Ughelli picture which will be sketching itself in this book. We will find, in this quasi-city, forces of anomie, darkness, incompleteness, which can and do thwart almost any social project. (There are as well sources of light, which can generate unexpected undertakings of personal kindness and mutual support.) The dark forces are one reason I'm under virtual house arrest these days, in the protection of my compound; I don't want to become a statistic. Like the road workers I am a sitting duck for locals who resent the intrusion of the other into their urgently needy environment.

#### 4. Prostitution and Law

The thought pathway by which this discussion enters Ughelli is clear: in the interests of laying down a perspective, we reach for the new, the Western, the organized, in the citizen drama that is this quasi-country, this blend of more than two hundred ethnic groups, and of at least three super-tribes—Yoruba in the Southwest, Ibo in the East, and Hausa in the North—this chaos of the natural diversities we in the industrialized West so pride ourselves on striving *for*.<sup>9</sup> We enter Ughelli by way of a Federal Highway, well laid out and for the moment smooth, which at one end runs out into a Delta State bush which is fear and at the other end into the

labyrinth of Federal Budgetry and local hostility. We don't start with the Federal Highway project in the Marxian conviction that material advancement and civic construction will solve the problems of a people. But we don't *have* to subscribe to such an ideology in order to look favorably on this road project, which at best simply promises to bring a bit of Nigeria to the point where it can live its communal life more comfortably. Comfort of movement is important, in a society increasingly empowered by the internal combustion engine; even more important is the saving of lives, in a Nigeria where fatal road accidents (the fraction recorded) are almost at the global peak, while unreported road accidents are frequent. Many people drive without training, indifferent to traffic signs, blending drinking and driving with a cool machismo which makes the texting-and-driving epidemic, about which we fret in America, look like kindergarten play.

Exactly while I am writing this, I am being forced to cope with what I am analyzing; the conflict of Enlightenment with the retrograde. My wife and I have returned to Ughelli after a two-year absence, and have settled down in a comfortable guest house, in fact have just brought our rooms to spic-and-span order, cleaned and bleached, and have started to feel at home, in what to her is/was home, and what to me is starting to feel that way. We have swept away the dust, and are settling. Just as we are gaining breathing space, a new reality breaks open a half-mile or more down the road toward town; deafening Igbo pop disco music, "palm-wine music" my friends will later call it, somehow still close enough to tear apart the guest-house walls, our ears, and our sanity. (An engineer friend will come by, long after the need has slowed, and explain that we are sitting in an acoustical pocket, into which the lateral boom boxes, far down the road on either side, contrive to pour their deafening products.)

Of course the noise had doubtless been there for several days, mounting in gradual crescendo from 6:00 p.m., orgasming out around midnight; but we had been, if not too busy to hear it, at least in the first days after our return, too busy to pay attention to it. (There is a psychological component to hearing, no?, which means that at times we are swamped by noises which at other times we can shut out.) Friends, though, had already been aware of the "drinking parlor". My friend Margaret had described the place this way. A small tortoise car circulates through the streets of Ughelli, proclaiming the news of the town. One day, as she and her husband Stephen are passing our house, they are themselves passed by the tortoise car, proclaiming the opening of a new "*Ashau* (whore) quarter", a "place to rejuvenate your penis", as the loudspeaker proclaims. It seems the new facility is what we have just found to be our

down-the-road neighbor, the home of blaring palm-wine music. Now we are *really* noticing. The music is all over us; we can't eat, sleep, make love (ha ha), or read. In the following days, up at seven, we find ourselves bleary and headachy. And at that we don't yet realize the full degradation of the attack. The "nightclub"—I still fumble for the right word—is a metal-roofed shack with wood pilings for support, and twenty narrow bedrooms lined up over the beer parlor; a whore house, bringing in Kwale girls from up country for those brave local souls who are willing to risk what little life they have for a few seconds of sperm. The prostitution industry, and the associated human trafficking, have been thriving in West Africa since the advent of European interests in the fifteenth century; prostitution currently thrives in this part of Delta State, as it does in Benin City, next door in Edo State, which exports prostitutes to Mali and Burkina Faso, not to mention Italy and on beyond into countries like Greece and Spain. We are, no doubt, not far away from a feeder colony.<sup>10</sup> God have mercy on these girls whose traditional village cultures will one day reject them with scorn—if they don't return home in high style; though if they do so return they may rapidly ascend the social ladder, their dubious pasts a matter of indifference to jealous competitors.

The decibels seem to rise, night by night, or is it only my blood pressure? The call of my rational self-defense system grows louder by the night. A brother-in-law, studying for a law degree, drops by and drops a hint; it sounds like a page out of Rawls, and rests on the axiom that we all have rights, up to the point where we intrude on others' rights. Locke, Jefferson. That *is* the Enlightenment project. The whoremasters down the road, this argument would go, are free to blast away the night, up to the point where they are robbing me of the right to sleep. Thomas drops that truism and leaves. The next morning I lay the nobility of the perspective before my wife and propose consulting a *lawyer*. What derision I arouse! But I'm not easy to deride, this time. I'm *tired*. So we agree on a compromise. She takes a cab down the road to the whorehouse and "speaks with the whoremaster in charge." An ex-soldier turned Bakassi boy, he proves "subtle", her term, and reassures her that the situation will be kept under control. Just what he said I don't know. Maybe just a way of getting her out of his face.

For a day or two the decibels shrink; then the following Friday they spike, with a vengeance. Til 3:30 a.m. I *really* get the idea. So there's *no* plateau to rest on. I feel an Anglo-Saxon Common Law build-up; I am determined to exert my rights, decide to call Mr. Akboji, a friend of ours and a bailiff with the district court, and I inform my wife. But she is not happy with my decision. She is not sure, I suppose, how to retail my

darkening situation to me; she wisely urges me to consult Augustine, my most traveled and insightful Urhobo friend, and a regular visitor to later chapters of this book. Augustine, anciently a local mechanic apprentice, was early recruited and trained by Shell, whose human resources insight had brought him up the ladder of corporate success to wealth and a wide purview onto life. My wife's suggestion of Augustine is persuasive, and soon he and I are sipping some Tennessee Mash and talking Realpolitik. What he lays out is lucid, changes my thinking, and digs deep into the Enlightenment project issue in Ughelli. After this talk, as after the talk with brother-in-law Goodman, to be explored at the beginning of the first essay ahead, I viewed the Enlightenment and my Nigerian life differently.

Reader, you knew what I was talking about before I did! I sit there in Ughelli with this next-door problem, and I suppose that I can go to the local police, or to a lawyer. What was I *thinking*? I was recurring to abstract principles of law, the *kind* of principles the American citizenry, no matter how benighted, is accustomed to invoking at every moment—Second Amendment gun rights are the rage as I write—relying as it does on the “sacredness” of private property, and on the presumed rights of the individual. (*Presumed* is of course the word, for sometimes even in the Land of the Free the hovering abstract pulls back to reveal...the raw meat of practical turf wars, the cops or the judges playing their own version of judicial gamesmanship, but without the cunning of the African.)<sup>11</sup> What are those abstractions but the working values of the Enlightenment shapers of our own Revolutionary perspective; values highlighted by the dramatic thinking of such as Locke, Voltaire, Jefferson, men forwarded to us in the Constitutions of the great Western democracies, and whose thinking was deposited like a genetic marker in pre-WWII liberal Americans like this author?

So, reader, you see what I was up to in my Anglo-Saxon ardor, as well as what would have happened, if I had “brought the whorehouse matter to court.” I was doubtless the only one who “couldn’t see.” The scenario, Augustine explained, would be predictable; the police will already have arranged a deal with the whorehouse owners for monthly payback. (The creation of an Ashau quarter contravenes written Nigerian law, and it has to be kept under wraps.) The police will have “met with” the accused party, arranged to tolerate the status quo for a further fee, and left in the hands of the whoremasters the convenient job of getting rid of the plaintiff. (After all, he was easy to find, his color was “white”, and there would be no way of winning redress for the disappearance of such an unexpected visitor.) The conclusion Augustine left with me was obvious,

that I had to keep my nose out of the whorehouse noise issue, my earplugs screwed in tight, and my impatience under the care of Lorazepam.

## 5. Is the Enlightenment Abstract?

The eighteenth century in Europe was a time of major social change—the decline of agriculture as the foundation of society, the development of a middle-class economy, the opening of the religious perception to critical analysis, even the beginnings of social science. Those societal changes, which create the cultural climate of the world we in the West now inhabit, cannot have *felt* abstract from the inside, any more than change in any other age can have felt abstract. Social-cultural movements, like those accompanying the Western Enlightenment, tangibly realigned the intimate conceptual habits of people. (The concrete actualities of the Enlightenment can have been no less compelling in the culture of Black African communities in 1780. There has, however, long been a difference between the West and Africa in the areas of historical self-consciousness, especially in the notion of historical *progress*. The sub-Saharan African in 1780 will have been less governed by the notion of linear time, and thus of *direction* in history, than were his Western counterparts of the time; the eighteenth-century sub-Saharan African will have been living in a *relatively* hierarchical/agricultural/ritual climate, which provided its own social satisfaction, as well as its own satisfaction of the basic needs of survival.)<sup>12</sup>

The distillate of the new *Western* social climate, starting to prevail by the mid-eighteenth century, settled into certain high-culture phrases—the *rights of man, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*, a Shaftesburian or even a Goethean *im ganzen gut und wahr und resolut zu leben*—which in their banner content fairly rapidly helped to remove old governments and shape new sensibilities—ours. These banner concepts, in other words, may have been abstract but they had muscle. Whether or not we are better for our “progress”—a notion coined in nineteenth-century England—is still out with the jury,<sup>13</sup> and nothing in the above line of reasoning is intended as a taking of sides on the sensitive “third-world issue”.

Our modern Western abstractions-working-through-history were empowered by a West with a cultural history available for large-scale opinion formation, a history to which the Greco-Roman had centuries before given impulse. Plato and Aristotle, long before Locke, had parsed the connections between thought and social action, and imagined the state that might be, aerated by the principles latent in thoughtful men interacting. The *politeia* Plato and Aristotle envisaged, like *The City of*