2
Development in Person

Lives and histories

The 2003 annual board meeting of the Centre for Human Development (CHD), one of the largest Ghanaian NGOs, is held in a newly built hotel in Kumasi, where over an elaborate buffet I sit with a number of the board members. Most have known one another for a number of decades, their friendships originating in university, and the social activism of their youth. Charles (Box 4.1) comments on the excessively lavish hotel and jokes that the air conditioning is making him cold. The group starts to reflect on the changes that have taken place in the country since the early 1980s when the organization was set up: ‘We’ve really been through a lot in this country’, one remarks, a reference to the political upheavals of the past two decades. Others in the group warm to the theme, reminiscing about the days when they started out: ‘We used to travel on the back of shea nut trucks just to get around,’ recalls one. ‘We’d be queuing up just to catch a ride on an articulator – there weren’t even trotros back then!’ Another recollects how he used to take his typewriter around with him: ‘It wasn’t like this,’ he pronounces, casting his eyes around the grand hotel dining room. ‘We’ve come a long way.’

Throughout the conversation, the maturity of Ghana, the nation, resonates with talk about their own coming of age. The very existence of the hotel seems to literalize the political and economic progress of the country, just as their presence there demonstrates their success as individuals. The hotel stands as a demonstration of personal and national development. Yet the progress of their lives and the progress of nation are not seen as simple synonyms. In this, as in other contexts, NGO workers explicitly imagine national development to have taken place
as a result of their own ‘ideology’, ‘commitment’ and ‘sacrifice’ as NGO workers and activists.

Building on the previous chapter, this chapter explores these related ideas as they appear in the life histories of a range of NGO workers. It focuses on the self-identification of NGO workers as ‘activists’, examining the distinctive ideological beliefs that underpin this identity, and the forms of personal ‘commitment’ and ‘sacrifice’ that this gives rise to. By contrast to social scientists who have taken the definition of activism as an analytic problem (Alleyne 2002, Keck and Sikkink 1998), my account explores the ways in which different people understand what it means to be an activist. This is less to do with the normative definition of particular organizational forms, and more to do with a particular kind of orientation towards the world (cf. Andrews 1991). Since informants did not themselves agree on the nature of this orientation, the identity of ‘activist’ was in practice fluid and was at times contested.

Werbner (2004) notes that a general ‘Afro-pessimism’ in the literature on African elites focuses attention on the apparently irrational acts of kleptomaniacs and self-serving bureaucrats, foreclosing understanding of African concerns for the public good. Against this, he suggests that ‘the way forward for public anthropology in post-colonial Africa is through...biographical ethnography, illuminating the study of public man and the forum as process’ (2004: 10). Extending this approach, this chapter foregrounds the self-evaluations and individual choices that Ghanaian development workers privilege in relation to the wider discursive and moral frameworks through which their accounts are narrated. My intention is not so much to extend ‘agency’ to this group of actors, as to recognize how agency is located in their own understandings of the lives they have lived. In keeping with my broader approach, my concern is not to assess the truth or validity of these narratives but rather to understand why people represent themselves in these ways, and why they emphasize the ideas they do (Kaufman 1997). To follow Alleyne (2002: 125), this means asking: to what kind of question or concern could these life histories be an answer? Although there is not one answer to this question, these narratives shed light on the multiple, yet mutually implicated, ways in which ‘development’ inspires commitment.

**Life history as performance**

Ghanaian development workers regard personal histories to be significant in a variety of contexts. During NGO workshops, important