Chapter 1

Taking It All Apart

In the early evening of July 8, 1997, I found myself sitting in the courtyard of a house in Dominase, a small rural village in Ghana’s Central Region. I was there to pay a social visit to some of the people who were kind enough to share the history of Dominase with me. It was pitch dark, and my 24-year-old Ghanaian research assistant, Francis Quayson, and I had walked about 500 meters from the slightly larger village of Ponkrum, where I was staying. We had used a flashlight to navigate the overgrown, uneven remnants of a dirt road between the two places. As per “official” local custom, I had brought a bottle of (appalling but cheap) local gin with me as a gift. This was accepted by Kwame, one of three brothers of the only family still living in this village. We sat and talked by his wife’s cook fire for a while, drinking the gin and discussing everything from the history of Dominase to the cost of living in the United States.

It was my first trip to Ghana, and I had been in the country only 28 days. Like Francis, I was 24 years old. I could not speak Fante, the local dialect of the Akan language, in any meaningful way and so was nearly completely dependent on Francis for translation. His translations were halting, at best, and my struggle to comprehend his limited English was compounded by the fact that any resident of the village within earshot—roughly a dozen people—felt free to contribute shouted questions and comments from across the courtyard. He had great difficulty deciding whose comments to translate at any given moment or what to do when two or more people were talking at once.

After spending about an hour there, Francis and I prepared to make our unsteady way back to Ponkrum. As we stood up, Kwame asked Francis to
translate something for him. Kwame spoke quickly, and Francis tried to keep up, giving me this translation:

“Once, the government had to build a bridge over a river. They hired a Ghanaian contractor to do the work. Before he was halfway done, the bridge fell down. The government hired another contractor. This new contractor began to build the bridge, but it fell down before he could finish. The government went and got a white man. He came and bottled the river gods, and his bridge stood.”

Kwame then looked directly at me, and as he spoke, Francis translated: “How did the white man do this?” Completely taken aback by the question, I beat a hasty retreat to Ponkrum without answering.

My discomfort was not the product of an inability to explain what Kwame was describing. Of course, the white contractor had not “bottled the river gods.” Instead someone had seen the contractor, or one of his workers, conducting some sort of hydrologic analysis necessary to properly design and plan a bridge. However, with no understanding of hydrology as a science, the person who saw this measurement incorporated this event into his or her worldview to create an explanation that referenced local cosmology.

My visceral reaction was to the implication of his story. Kwame described an infrastructural development project, probably designed to better connect various parts of the Ghanaian economy with the global economy via improved transportation access. It was intended to improve the well-being of the people living around the bridge, likely via the benefits of economic growth. In its implementation, however, this project had produced a local understanding of a technology that identified one group of people (generalized as whites) as having control over at least the minor gods of another group of people (generalized as black Africans). Something had leaked out of this project, this engagement with the global economy, that was neither intended nor understood by those who designed and implemented it. This leakage could not be measured through conventional means, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but it mattered greatly. It called into question most tenets of development, as I understood it. How could people who translated the construction of a bridge into a clear statement of their own inadequacies feel comfortable offering their advice and opinions with regard to the design of future development projects? How can someone benefit from participation in the global economy if one considers oneself as somehow subordinate to the other actors in that economy? If development