



UNIVERSITY OF  
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COVID-19 ODA Rapid Response Research Report, University of Liverpool

# *Racialisation of the COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact in Ghana*



Photo taken in Accra, Ghana, by Kevin Tucker on Unsplash



Coronavirus (COVID-19) #LivUniCOVID  
Research and response

August 2020

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## *Racialisation of COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact in Ghana*

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August 2020

**Part of University of Liverpool ODA Rapid Response Funded Project: 'COVID-19 and Racialised Risk Narratives in South Africa, Ghana and Kenya'. Principal Investigator: Dr Leona Vaughn, Co-Investigator: Dr Allen Kiconco**

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## Introduction

In Ghana, COVID-19 has mostly been examined in the context of the discipline of the medical sciences, where prevention of the spread is treated as a public health issue. This is understandable; however, the recognition of COVID-19 only as a public health issue has some limitations. As a result, people have not taken the time to observe, analyse and appreciate the racial and racialised underpinnings of COVID-19 prevention narratives and their manifestation in Ghana, where almost the whole population is Black African.

Racism and racialisation are understood as socially constructed. It is not always necessarily about 'bad people doing bad things'. It is about structures, privileges and power. Therefore, these phenomena are not obvious but sophisticated and complex, intricate and clever because it took a long time to create them.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, understanding how racialisation works and how it influences people around us takes time, especially because many people see racism as a strict interpersonal discrimination between Black and white people. In countries like Ghana where the populations are Black, it is easy for issues of racism to go unnoticed or be denied completely.

We, however, acknowledge that there is a structurally racist system in place globally, that ensures that Africans do not have the ultimate decision-making power that controls their lives and resources. Ultimately, this system creates a situation where resources are placed unequally in the hands and under the control of white people, making it difficult for Africans to access it for the benefit of their own countries.

The subtleties of racism in a 'post-colonial' country like Ghana can be understood through the lens of 'Internalised Racism'. To understand internalised racism, it is important to see it as not simply a result of racism but a form of racist systemic oppression wherein 'internalisation' is the *modus operandi*. In other words, it is a racist system which does not require 'racists' to be present.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre, J. (2012). *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

It manifests itself in at least four ways, including decision-making, resources, standards and misnaming.<sup>2</sup> Euro-centric standards are seen as standard and superior, while African values are considered inferior. Consequently, Africans and other minoritised groups often misname the problems that are the result of this racist system. Instead, they sometimes blame each other through for example cross-racial hostility, where one oppressed racial group supports the oppression of another oppressed group by upholding and participating in a social structure shaped by ideologies of white supremacy.

The impact of racialisation on COVID-19 risk narratives in Ghana is thus explored in this report through the prism of colonialism. Racism is situated here as the result of a history of colonial oppression in which the material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional resources of one people are put in service of another through force, deception and disrespect of their culture.

## Methodology

We are social workers, researchers and tourist guides for the historical colonial sites involved in the international slave trade in James Town, Accra. We have also been involved in leading and managing the community, and international development works, including behaviour change workshops on sexual reproductive health rights and gender-based violence. We do all this work via Act for Change, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that uses interactive theatre and other participatory arts-based methods to advocate on social issues that affect women, children and young people.

This report presents the outcome of COVID-19 data collected virtually via the internet, mass media, and government policies. The collected materials are analysed alongside our observations as researchers located within the field of African Studies and Theatre.

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<sup>2</sup> See James, D. (2020). 'Health and Health-Related Correlates of Internalized Racism Among Racial/Ethnic Minorities: A Review of the Literature.' *J. Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 7: 785–806.

Bailey, T.K.M. Chung, Y.B. Williams, W.S. Singh, A.A. Terrell, H.K. (2011). 'Development and validation of the internalised racial oppression scale for Black individuals.' *J Couns Psychol.* 58(4): 481-93.

Biven, D. (1995). *Internalized Racism: a definition*. Boston: Women's Theological Centre.

Finnegan, R. (1992). *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context*. London: Cambridge University Press.

We collected data for this project from various mass media outlets, including social media. To reduce risky human-to-human contact at this time, there was a reliance on the internet, radio and television as a 'virtual project site'. Data was collected explicitly from professional and social media platforms; government information sources; local Ghanaian radio and television stations to reflect the narratives being produced in the country as well as external to it.

We ordinarily sit on various boards and technical working groups in various sectors, who use social media for communications. Therefore, this pool of professional networks in government and non-governmental organisations provided a source of valuable data and information for the research.

In the data collection period, 18 May-24 June 2020, about 80% of the data was sourced from social media. The remainder was from official Government sources (websites) and online news platforms. This was complemented by access to University of Liverpool library sources, which enabled us to locate the research within the existing literature on racialisation theories and concepts within Africa.

The online search terms used via the Google search engine included 'Ghana's response to COVID- 19', 'Media report of COVID-19 in Ghana', 'Internalized Racism' and 'Social Media Videos of COVID-19 in West Africa'. In Ghana, we noted that the official sources use 'COVID-19 ' while on the informal level 'coronavirus' is more popular and so searches linked to social media (Facebook and Twitter) often used this term.

Social Media became the primary source of data because it was the most dominant and active field during this pandemic. This experience, however, comes with its shortcomings owing to the methodological limitations. Firstly, in tracking the original sources of the audio/visuals used to attempt to understand context and meaning. Secondly, in the challenge of translation of various Ghanaian languages, particularly of Ghanaian folk songs which are a cultural tradition of social commentary across the country.

We navigated these shortcomings by utilising our broad local knowledge of the country gathered through previous work in different parts of Ghana. Acknowledging that some meanings are lost in literal translations, we relied on not just proficiency in the local language but knowledge of the history and

cultural nuances that come with the language to explain, interpret and analyse the texts and images.

Using Critical Discourse Analysis and Content Analysis as the principal methodology to identify the location and use of power in language and imagery, the study was approached methodologically drawing also on the broader discipline of ethnography of speaking theories, which is useful in social and art projects. The main principle of this theory is that instead of looking at language as a 'cognitive phenomenon', it should rather be seen in its enactment within a social context because cultural symbols and interactions mutually influence each other.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis of literature, audio-visuals, government policies and the notes from our observations of local narratives were triangulated. Finnegan's advice was used as a guide - although videos and audios are easy to gather, they are challenging to analyse owing to the multiple layers under which analysis occurs and its collaborative character.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on professional backgrounds in the performing arts gave us the analytical and interpretive skills needed for this task. Therefore, by combining analysis focusing on the texts and outside the texts, we explored the link between the texts and the cultural/performance element.

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<sup>3</sup> Finnegan, R (1977) *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## Analysis

The analysis is presented here to show how racialisation, often in the form of internalised racism, has influenced COVID-19 risk narratives in Ghana and examine how this systemic oppression manifests. Research findings and themes are presented under two points in time:

- 1) Before recording the first case in Ghana;
- 2) After recording the first case in Ghana.

### Before Recording the First Case of COVID 19 in Ghana

A content analysis of government policies, audio-visuals on social media as well as the mainstream media coverage in relations to COVID-19 before the first case was recorded was undertaken, and various themes were found to emerge.

The data was scrutinized to ascertain the racial patterns within them and the associated impact on Ghanaian society. Most of the earliest audio-visuals that circulated - mainly on social media - emanated from the West. These audio-visuals highlight themes of African-descended people's 'immunity' to COVID-19. These earliest videos depicted how African-descended people have melanin that ensures that their biological makeup gives them immunity against the virus and supported them with some so-called clinical test as evidence. A viral article and video emerged in Ghana worth highlighting here. On 6 February 2020, Dr Daniel Asare, CEO of Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital (the biggest Hospital in Ghana and later one of the most important hospital during the pandemic) claimed that Ghana and tourists were safe from the virus. He stated that:

*"We're very lucky as a country because of the high temperatures [thus] it will be very difficult for the virus to spread. God has blessed us with this sun and the period of harmattan. Coronavirus cannot enter. Viruses don't thrive well under the scorching sun".<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup>Ghanaweb (2020). *Ghana's high temperatures won't support coronavirus*. Available at: <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Ghana-s-high-temperatures-won-t->



As an 'expert' and a high-profile Ghanaian, this statement linked the ideas of resistance to the virus with living in a hot African country. While not explicitly racialised, it fortified the notion of 'Black immunity' already circulating in Ghana.

Similarly, a famous Nigerian pastor, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, circulated a video in May, denying the existence of COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> Having church branches all over Ghana, his pastors re-circulated this video, later translated into local dialects.

Furthermore, Traditional leaders began performing rituals, with the aim of driving away COVID-19 from entering Ghana or their specific communities.<sup>7</sup>

These specific examples illustrate two main themes emerging in the narratives from this era. The denial of COVID-19 existence and the belief in 'immunity' from COVID-19, among African and African descended people.



Notably, it is crucial to understand here the power and influence of Christianity in Ghana and its history. The introduction of Christianity to the African continent was one of the main objectives of the European colonialists; using it both as a tool and weapon to 'enlighten a dark continent' defined by their [Africans] 'unbelief'.<sup>8</sup> Today Christianity, a dominating religion, continues to play this role with

significant impact in Ghana. The church's stance on major issues still holds sway over a large population of Ghanaians. Indeed, religious messages such as one highlighted above circulated on WhatsApp and Facebook, asking

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[support-Coronavirus-Korle-Bu-CEO-858520?channel=A1&fbclid=IwAR3xHYRXv9-eUyuOiPwgBjBbsdewuNvKUnOiU0E61ak2gNtCsia\\_7gMswHk](https://support-Coronavirus-Korle-Bu-CEO-858520?channel=A1&fbclid=IwAR3xHYRXv9-eUyuOiPwgBjBbsdewuNvKUnOiU0E61ak2gNtCsia_7gMswHk)

<sup>6</sup> Clacified (2020). *Pastor Chris Oyakhilome Speaks on COVID 19 and 5G Network*. Available at:

<https://clacified.com/en/religion/news/pastor-chris-oyakhilome-speaks-on-covid-19-and-5g-network>

<sup>7</sup> For example, see 'Ga traditional leaders perform rites to drive away Covid-19'. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heTRzRedWOk>

<sup>8</sup> Matemba, Y. Addai-Mununkum (2019). 'These religions are no good-they're nothing but idol worship: misrepresentation of religion in Religious Education at school in Malawi and Ghana'. *British Journal of Religious Education*. 41(2): p155-173.

people to rely on Jesus/prayers to fight the virus as the main method of prevention.

The period before the reporting of the first positive cases in Ghana points to a situation where the system created by the colonialists and maintained by the neo-colonialists, exposes the nature of the different levels of decision-making processes of the country at the onset of the pandemic.

In the early stages of the pandemic these themes in the social and media narratives about African immunity and resistance to COVID-19 framed the risk of infection both as being externally posed to the country and as being one that Africans, especially those who were Christian, could innately resist. This affected not only the attitudes of Ghanaians toward the virus but also influenced government policymakers towards closing the country's borders and ports on 22 March 2020.

The government's over-reliance on the Western media and its associated social media for information on the virus and the risk posed to Africans influenced the ultimate delay to close borders.<sup>9</sup> Before the closure, there were concerns from some Ghanaians, expressing dissatisfaction with the delay especially through the #CloseBordersNow campaign on social media. Despite earlier calls by some health professionals and experts within the country to close the borders, they did not receive a favourable action until the first cases of COVID-19 were recorded. Indeed, Sammy Gyamfi, Communication Officer of the opposition party in Ghana, stated that:

*"Ghana was sloppy from the outset, as we delayed in closing the borders and airport and allowed an influx of people from abroad into the country."*<sup>10</sup>

Other people from the different professional background also expressed similar sentiments; by the time we closed the ports, COVID-19 had already

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<sup>9</sup> See Bouet, A and Laborde, D (2020). *COVID-19 border policies create problems for African trade and economic pain for communities*. Available at <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/covid-19-border-policies-create-problems-african-trade-and-economic-pain-communities> and Dapatem, DA and Nunoo, C. (2020). *Ghana closes its borders for 2 weeks to fight Coronavirus*. Available at: <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-coronavirus-borders-closed-directive-will-last-2-weeks.html>

<sup>10</sup> Yeboah, I. (2020). *Ghana's Covid-19 situation bleak, not what Prez Akufo-Addo wants us believe – Sammy Gyamfi*. Available at: <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/ghana-s-covid-19-situation-bleak-not-what-prez-akufo-addo-wants-us-believe-sammy-gyamfi.html>

entered the country's corridors, with the resultant impact as Government being seen to close the stables when 'the horses had already bolted away'.

Such early narratives suggest that the virus was seen, through the prioritisation of closing borders to foreigners and the emotive language such as 'influx', as something imported by and affecting people from outside of the country which posed a threat to Ghanaians. This experience had a two-fold impact. Firstly, it originally reinforced ideas of African immunity and then when this was shown to be untrue, it blamed the virus on foreign travellers. Secondly, the myths within the misinformation of this time undoubtedly increased the exposure of Ghanaians to the coronavirus.

A form of internalised racism influenced the neo-colonialist system in Ghana and their decision-making process, wherein the Western information is seen as superior to local knowledge. There is no robust system to counter false information from outside Ghana with local scientific facts or knowledge. Even though the government of Ghana issued preventive information on COVID-19, it failed to equally give combative information, busting the earlier myths on the immunity of African-descended people against the virus and addressing the blame on foreigners.

## Reporting the First Case

Predictably, the country recorded its first two cases of COVID-19 on 12 March 2020. The Ministry of Health through a Press Release communicated this development.<sup>11</sup> These were a white Norwegian diplomat and a Ghanaian United Nations staff member, but both had travelled outside of Ghana at the time. The 'imported' nature of Ghana's first positive cases thus affected the

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<sup>11</sup> GardaWorld (2020). *Ghana: Ministry of Health confirms first case of COVID-19*. 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Available at <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/322446/ghana-ministry-of-health-confirms-first-case-of-covid-19-march-13>

popular narratives of COVID-19 - a virus that only infects travellers to or from Western countries and China.

Chinese or Asian looking people in Ghana became the target of discrimination. We offer an anecdotal case to explain this point. A close friend of ours has a Japanese father and a Ghanaian mother. He has never travelled outside the country. However, based on his physical looks, locals discriminated against him whenever he boarded a '*trotro*', a commercial bus. Such experiences are clear cases of horizontal racism, but often not reported in the mainstream media in Ghana.

The theme of the importation of Coronavirus by 'foreigners' or those perceived to be foreign is illuminated in one of the Ghanaian folk group song lyrics seeking to enlighten people about the virus. These lyrics come from the Kane Group based in Teshie, Accra. Their music, *Kplejoo*, a fusion art of dance and music. Originally, this was a sacred art form, which has overtime been secularised. This kind of music has no respecter of anyone in society. It allows anyone or a group of people to observe, monitor, evaluate and report the happenings in the society via songs without fear or favour. It gives praise where it is due and condemns where there is culpability. To wit, it speaks to the power and the powerless and perhaps like the group's name *Kane* (light) suggests, they illuminate the darkness of the ignorance through music:

*Am3 k3 hela eba maamli eei*

*Ats3) l3 Coronavirus*

*Eshishi ji,*

*Koloo y3 olamli*

**Translated as:**

*They have brought the disease into the country*

*Its name is Coronavirus*

*Which means,*

*There is an animal in the blood*

The words in these lyrics demonstrate the manifestation of the notion that Coronavirus is imported. The use of the word 'they' in the first line refers to

‘strangers’ –people from outside Africa—particularly the West and China. The first *Ga* (local language) word in the fourth line *Ko/oo* and the last word in the second line ‘Coronavirus’ have not just been woven creatively to rhyme, but to emphasise and draw attention to the nature of a germ/virus (animal) and how it behaves in the blood. They sung tongue-in-cheek; sarcasm to highlight something serious like ‘Corona’. It is worth noting that in most Ghanaian languages, there are no specific words to differentiate words like germs, bacteria, fungi and virus.

As tourist guides, we had already observed how COVID-19 misconceptions were affecting our tourism work in several ways. For example, in February, as we guided some foreign tourists in James Town, we overheard community members saying, ‘these people should not come here else they will give us coronavirus’. Such statements suggested that some sections of Ghana’s society held a misconception that foreigners were the only people with the virus. This experience caused a concern about the lack of appropriate information to enlighten the masses about the pandemic. As misconceptions rose due to this information gap, the government was reluctant to act.

The pandemic was quickly affecting the Ghana tourism industry. In September 2018, while visiting Washington, D.C., Ghana’s President, Nana Akufo-Addo declared and formally launched the ‘Year of Return, Ghana 2019’ for Africans in the Diaspora. The objective was to give fresh impetus to the quest to unite Africans on the continent with their brothers and sisters in the diaspora. President Akufo-Addo said:

*“We know of the extraordinary achievements and contributions they [Africans in the diaspora] made to the lives of the Americans, and it is important that this symbolic year—400 years later— we commemorate their existence and their sacrifices.”<sup>12</sup>*

Ghana celebrated 2019 as the ‘Year of Return’, marking 400 years of slavery. President Nana Akufo-Addo further encouraged people of the Black race to return to the motherland (Africa) for connections and business opportunities. Therefore, Ghana looked forward to the year 2020 dubbed as ‘Beyond the

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Tetteh, B (2019) ‘2019: Year of return for African Diaspora’. *African Renewal* December 2018 - March 2019. Available at <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2018-march-2019/2019-year-return-african-diaspora>

Return', where there was supposed to be the influx of tourists. Indeed, Ghana had seen an increase in tourists in the wake of the successful celebration of the 'Year of Return', until the first case of COVID-19 was announced and the closure of all borders to foreigners. The experience forced foreigners to exit Ghana.

In February, we received an email from our partner organisation in Germany, notifying us that they were arranging to repatriate their [white] volunteer. Usually, a volunteer works with our organisation for a year. Now, the new volunteer was being asked to return home because of the virus. Indeed, within three days, the volunteer and her colleagues were on the next available flight heading back to Germany. Such experience was commonly reported in Ghana, with various embassies arranging chartered flights to repatriate their citizens back home.<sup>13</sup> One of the consequences of the subsequent lockdown is that massive job losses have hit the tourism sector because of the restrictions and ban on public gatherings, including drinking spots, recreational facilities, hotels etc.

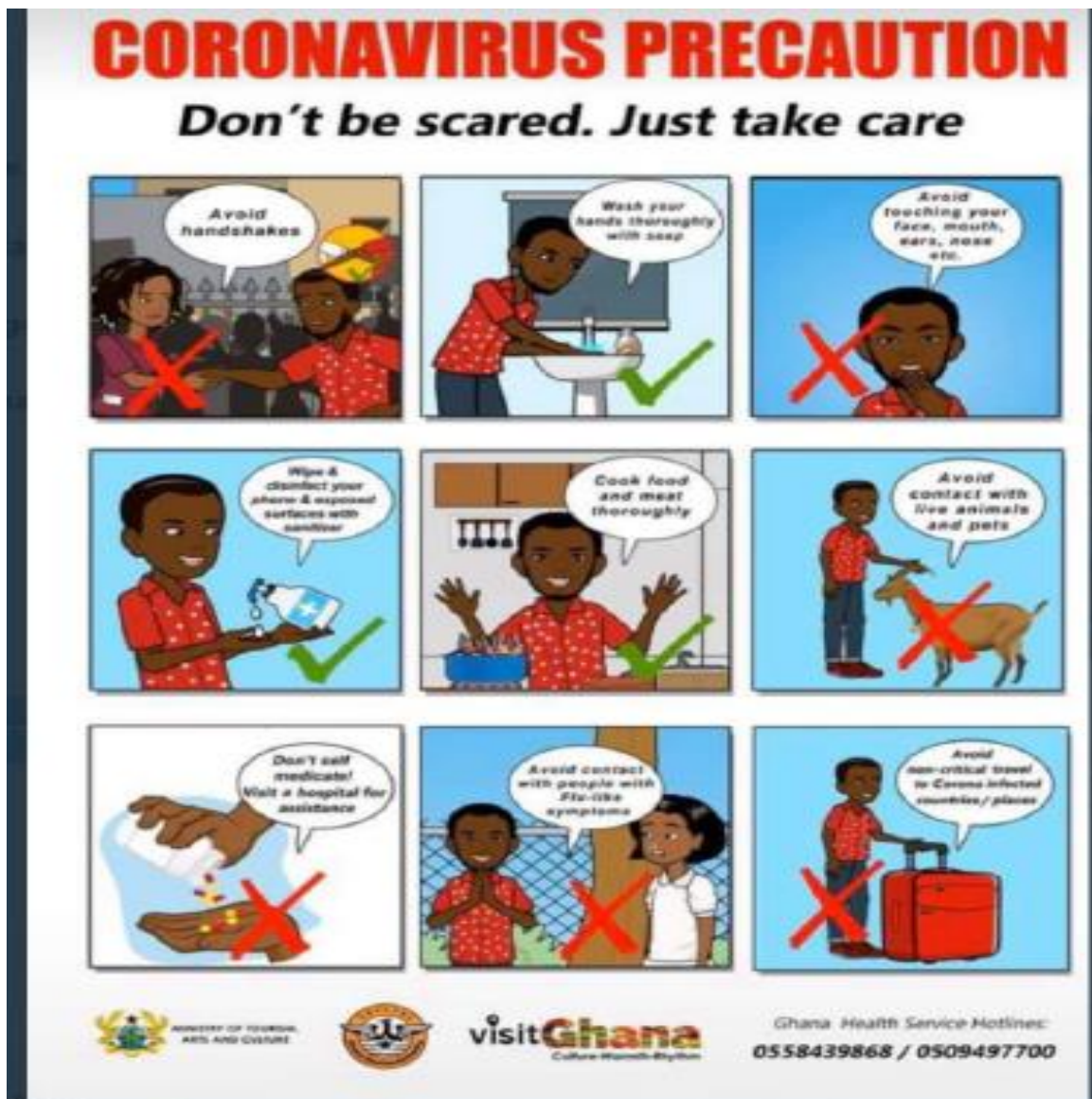
## After Recording the First Case of COVID-19 in Ghana

This section focuses on some of the narratives and events that occurred after Ghana confirmed the first cases, including the treatment of victims, the imposition of the lockdown, its observance and easing. As noted above, the government was initially slow to engage in COVID-19 awareness. However, this improved over time, particularly after recording the first cases, forcing the government to invest in creating awareness such as this public information poster:

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<sup>13</sup>For example, see US. Embassy in Ghana (2020). *Message for U.S. Citizens in Ghana. Travel and Repatriation Assistance*. Available at <https://gh.usembassy.gov/message-for-u-s-citizens-in-ghana-travel-and-repatriation-assistance/>





Similarly, organisations and individuals joined the government to create more awareness. Indeed, we also joined other local organisation to create awareness in James Town. We contacted the Accra Metropolitan Assembly for logistics, to support the cause, including information van, veronica buckets, soap, paper tissue, etc. As part of the coordinating team, we were tasked to organise some local celebrities to participate in this campaign, including entertainers and sportspeople.

We then spent three days in April for this awareness campaign in Old Accra, educating community members on the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, observing protocols, social distancing and the usage of nose mask. The

campaign was carried in *Ga*. Together with staff and volunteers of Act for Change, we distributed locally produced nose mask and hand sanitisers in Old Accra. We demonstrated to people how to wash hands and asked them to do afterwards.

Soon after the first reported cases of COVID-19 in Ghana, the reliance on mostly outside (Western) audio-visual narratives switched to locally produced information. The now robust contents of this information within government, social and media narratives were a mix of messages ranging from preventive actions and information to ‘calm the nerves’, to outright fear-mongering about the Coronavirus.

Some mainstream musicians and folkloric artistes also complemented the efforts of government and civil society organisations through songs, mostly produced in local languages<sup>14</sup>. This example, translated below, is from the Akro Group, belonging to the same music genre as the Kane Group above. Akro is the name of an area in Teshie, Accra where this group comes from:

*“Ghana!*

*W) kw3) ojogban, w) kw3) ojogban eei*

*W) man Ghana w) kw3) ojogbaa y3 hela he*

*Hela n)ni eba w) k3ka fee shw3m) kwraa*

*K3 ak33 aka je kpo3 sani w) nu*

*Ni w) ye n) ojogbaa*

*K3ji oya je Italy*

*Aagbo, aagbo y3 hela he*

*K3ji oya je China*

*Aagbo, aagbo y3 hela he*

*K3ji aya je Germany*

*SouthAfrika f33*

*Aagbo, aagbo y3 hela he*

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<sup>14</sup> See for example Covid-19 Folk song. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJS83-Ff\\_N4&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR1dHlv\\_bT1Txpzg7vzP5Q9tGPnOwmtghTsHKWexyHLcp2r-tNti7KqLxps](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJS83-Ff_N4&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR1dHlv_bT1Txpzg7vzP5Q9tGPnOwmtghTsHKWexyHLcp2r-tNti7KqLxps)



*K3ji oya je Nigeria  
Aagbo, aagbo y3 hela he  
K3ji onyi3 ni ots3 fioo  
You must wash your hands with soap under running water  
Or sanitiser  
B)ni afee, b)ni afee ni w) k3 wol3 foi  
Ghana! W) kw3) ojogbaa"*

**Translated as:**

*"Ghana!  
Be careful, be careful of this disease  
This novel disease is not be toyed with  
When they say "Don't come out, don't come."  
And follow all the instructions prescribed  
If you go to Italy  
People are perishing because of this disease  
If you go to China  
They are dying, all because of this disease  
If you go to Germany  
They are dying because of this disease  
The whole of South Africa is perishing because of this disease  
If you go to Nigeria  
They are perishing because of the disease  
When you go out to town,  
You must wash hands with soap under running water  
Or sanitiser.  
This is how we can drive it away  
Ghana! Ghana! Ghana!  
Be careful"*

It is clear from the lyrics that the focus remained on foreigners or those who had travelled posing a hazard to local people. Such compositions show how groups and individuals took ownership of the messaging by translating and interpreting the preventive messages from official sources. Akro group was effective in its simplification of public health communication by bringing complicated jargons from the cold room of clinicians to the doorsteps of the ordinary in a language and medium that they do not only understand but also can engage with.

Since Ghana recorded its first case, several people have tested positive, ranging from ordinary citizens to high profile cases<sup>15</sup>—at the time of writing, 2 August 2020, confirmed cases stood at 35501, recoveries, 32096 and deaths 182. We found that as infections rose in the country, the government took on vigorous measures to slow the spread of the virus.

For example, the government designated some hospitals or sections to quarantine COVID-19 patients. However, the government increasingly received criticism concerning pandemic management. There was criticism in the social media space about the shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and test kits for health workers in the various health facilities. About ten days after the President's national address about the lockdown, the Ghana Medical Association criticised the government directly and attributed the rising infections among health workers to poor distribution of PPE.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See GhanaWeb (2020). *List of high-profile personalities who have tested positive for coronavirus*. Available at <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/List-of-high-profile-personalities-who-have-tested-positive-for-coronavirus-997546>

<sup>16</sup> See Kuulpeeps (2020). *Meet Nora Bannerman: The Woman Producing PPEs in Ghana*. Available at <https://kuulpeeps.com/2020/04/meet-nora-bannerman-the-illustrious-woman-whose-factory-is-producing-ppes-in-ghana/>

Dapaah, E. (2020). *KNUST, Incas develop rapid diagnostic test kit for detecting COVID-19*. Available at <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/04/knust-incas-develop-rapid-diagnostic-test-kit-for-detecting-covid-19/>

MC Modern Ghana (2020). *Covid-19: GMA Worried Over Lack Of PPE, Shortage of Test Kits*. Available at <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1013109/covid-19-gma-worried-over-lack-of-ppe-shortage.html>

James Town Tv (2020). *Citizen producing affordable face masks*. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/103917977961424/posts/105763724443516/>

## Coronavirus: VIP patients to be treated at Bank of Ghana hospital after cases surge to 195, Health Minister Kwaku Agyeman-Manu reveals

One criticism particularly stood out. On April 1, 2020, Kwaku Agyeman Manu, Health Minister, said the government and Bank of Ghana hospital had agreed to use their facility to treat banking staff and Very Important People (VIP).<sup>17</sup>The minister received lots

of backlash and verbal attack from ordinary citizens and journalists. Such statements from government officials demonstrate how notions of neo-colonialism borne out of racist thoughts in relation to human hierarchy and importance, intersect with the class struggle in Ghana.<sup>18</sup>

### *Government Interventions & Policies*

The government rolled out lots of interventions, measures and policies to curb the spread of the pandemic and to ease the resultant pressure on the poorer citizens of Ghana.

Government heeded to the call about financial pressure by announcing to cover utility (water and electricity) bills of low-income consumers and 50 per cent to other consumers from April to June. The President stated that “I urge all Ghanaians to exercise discipline in their use of water and electricity.”<sup>19</sup>

These measures were aimed at cushioning the public, especially the poor and the vulnerable from the effects of COVID-19. This policy went a long way to easing pressure and stress from the citizenry. For example, water was considered as crucial in fighting against the pandemic. Therefore, the news

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<sup>17</sup> Entsie, B. (2020). *Coronavirus: VIP patients to be treated at Bank of Ghana hospital after cases surge to 195, Health Minister Kwaku Agyeman-Manu reveals*. Available at <https://www.pulse.com.gh/bi/strategy/coronavirus-vip-patients-to-be-treated-at-bank-of-ghana-hospital-after-cases-surge-to/458c8zs>

<sup>18</sup> Nkrumah, K (1970). *Class Struggle in Africa*. International Publishers: New York.

<sup>19</sup> As quoted in GhanaWeb (2020) ‘Use free water and electricity wisely – Akufo-Addo ‘begs’ Ghanaians’. 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020. Available at: <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Use-free-water-and-electricity-wisely-Akufo-Addo-begs-Ghanaians-920365#:~:text=%E2%80%9CNevertheless%2C%20I%20urge%20all%20Ghanaians,%2C%20April%2C%20May%20and%20June.>

came as a relief when there were several complaints of water shortage and lack of portable clean water in cities.

The government implemented this intervention by periodically distributing water in various communities, free of charge. Further, it mounted temporary water tanks at vantage points for community members to fetch water, free. The Sanitation Minister, Cecilia Abena Dapaah, worked 'with the Ghana Water Company (GWCL) to ensure that there is water in all parts of these cities to ease their burden as they stay home to curb the spread of COVID-19.'<sup>20</sup> Veronica buckets with water, soap and paper tissue were extended to community members to wash their hands frequently, as one of the safety precautions in tackling COVID-19.

The government also brought another relief to health and frontline workers across the country by increasing their basic salary by 50 per cent for three months to motivate and encourage them to work through the pandemic.

Furthermore, in March, Augustine Collins Ntim, the Deputy Minister reported that 'We [the government] have had extensive discussions with managers of the various markets, and they have given their consent for the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD) to carry on with the [fumigation] exercise.'<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it was estimated that about 1000 big markets across the country were identified, closed and fumigated.<sup>22</sup> Even though this intervention received global plaudits, the fumigation exercise came with its funny comments with citizens joking that the exercise was being carried out to kill rodents in the markets. However, the Mayor of Accra intervened and debunked that notion, stating that 'The Chlorine is for killing viruses and bacteria and not rodents and cockroaches.'<sup>23</sup>

Despite these interventions, infection rates spiked in a slow but sure manner. The experience urged the government to enforce aggressive interventions, including the imposition of lockdowns.

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<sup>20</sup> As quoted in Myjoyonline (2020) 'Government to absorb water bills for all Ghanaians for three months'. Available at: <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/government-to-absorb-water-bills-for-all-ghanaians-for-three-months/>

<sup>21</sup> As quoted in Business Ghana (2020) 1000 markets to be fumigated across the country. 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Available at: <https://www.businessghana.com/site/news/business/209037/1000-markets-to-be-fumigated-across-the-country>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

## *Lockdown*

On March 30, 2020, the government announced a three-week partial lockdown in the cities of Accra and Kumasi, Ghana's principal cities.<sup>24</sup> The measure bought the government time to slow the spread of the virus in the country of approximately 30 million people. The move also helped the government to start extensive testing, contact tracing and providing adequate PPE for health workers.

We found that the content of circulating audio-visuals focused on the reality of the lives of a society that is communally built with its strength in the philosophy of collectivism. Yet, the mainstream narratives showed that Eurocentrism informed the lockdown of social distance/ physical distance versus 'Stay Home/Stay Inside' during a lockdown.

Historically, the white European colonialists built enclaves of bungalows that were separated from the indigenous African to 'inoculate' themselves against diseases believed to be associated with the African. In Ghana, the areas, which evolved from this apartheid system of housing, are commonly known as *Ridge*.

After the independence, the ruling and middle- class Ghanaians moved into *Ridge* neighbourhoods. This movement of 'elite' Ghanaians demonstrated their desire to move away from the 'pagan and unsanitary' elements of Ghanaian society into the 'high class of enlightenment.'<sup>25</sup> The experience shows a colonial mentality manifesting itself in internalised racism that has disenabled the societal 'leadership' from appreciating the realities of ordinary lives in Ghana during the pandemic.

Due to internalised racism, the government prioritised and implemented Euro-centric standards of lockdowns of 'Stay home/Stay Inside', with the imposition of a Western concept of home. Yet, the government understood that ordinary Ghanaians were not able to live up to these standards of physical

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<sup>24</sup> APAnews (2020). *Covid-19: Ghana goes on partial lockdown*. Available at <http://apanews.net/en/news/covid-19-ghana-goes-on-partial-lockdown>

<sup>25</sup> See Yankah, K (2019) From Jamestown to Jamestown: Letters to an African Child. Habari Afrika: USA and Nunoo-Amarteifio, N (2015). *History of James Town British Accra*. Ade Sawyer blog. Available at: <https://adesawyer.wordpress.com/2015/11/10/the-definitive-story-of-james-town-british-accra-by-nat-nuno-amarteifio/#:~:text=The%20story%20of%20Jamestown%20began,miles%20from%20the%20Dutch%20fort.>

distancing styled after ideals, which do not reflect their lived reality. Policymakers missed the reality that while they could live like the colonialists, many ordinary Ghanaians could not:

*“You live in a multi-bedroom home with over one hundred meters square of walled compound around you... Your kitchen is fitted with huge freezers and fridges all stocked with more than six months supply of food and drinks of various kinds... Do you know what home is to me? Do you have the slightest idea how it feels to stay locked up within those four bare walls of space smaller than a fifth of your car garage? With a single window that opens over a putrid and stagnant neighbourhood drain? Can you show me how to stay locked in when my front door opens directly onto a busy pedestrian pavement beside a highway? Do I keep it shut and suffocate in that prickly and putrid air within those walls or do I open it and expose my shame and embarrassment to passers-by”.*<sup>26</sup>

Such experiences show precisely what happens when Eurocentric messages, designed to fit their particular contexts, are promoted unscrutinised in an African setting. Predictably, this situation and divide have had a negative impact on not just the rise in the infection rate, but on both the individual and the collective in Ghana. Media and government narratives focused on promoting ‘Stay Home/Inside’ in settings where several people reside in a home of single rooms, with no room for physical distancing. Yet, more than six million people residing in congested and informal settings, lacking access to decent housing facilities.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, people in such contexts perceived the ‘Stay Home/Inside’ as the main strategy to combat the spread of the virus as inadequate. Indeed, Kwame Morgan found that social distancing ‘has become an unattainable goal for the majority of slum dwellers and the homeless in

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<sup>26</sup> Nii Lantei Mills (2020) Survival. Blog available at: <https://www.africaglobalradio.com/survival/>

<sup>27</sup> Abu-Salia, R., I. K. Osmannu, and A. Ahmed. (2015). ‘Coping with the Challenges of Urbanization in Low-Income Areas: An Analysis of The Livelihood Systems of Slum Dwellers of the Wa Municipality.’ Ghana. *Current Urban Studies*. 3 (02): p105– 118.

Ghana, owing to the absence of standardized housing conditions and basic services that support such a practice.’<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, some government actions contradicted their message to ‘Stay home/Inside’. For example, it was reported that over one thousand slum dwellers in Old Fadama were left homeless after the government demolished their shack houses to pave the way for a developmental project. The move left this population stranded, increasing the numbers of homeless people, and jeopardising the move to reduce the spread of the virus:

*“What has happened here [Fadama] is not good at all, because we have been informed about coronavirus and government has asked us to stay home and they have demolished our shelter so now where will we sleep?”<sup>29</sup>*

It was our observation that adopting lockdown, as an ultimate action to manage the spread of the virus in Ghana did not reflect the reality for majority populations, mainly residing in congested informal settings. Yet, in such contexts, it was easy for the population to infect each other. The populace began to misname the problem of not being able to socially or physically distance or to stay at home. They blamed themselves without seeing the racist system built over the years, which meant they could not meet these lockdown measures. This experience mirrored the horizontal racism between some Ghanaians and Asian-looking people in Ghana early on in the pandemic.

As participants in the lockdown, we observed that instead of targeting specific neighbourhoods with relevant messaging, the government sent a fits-all message of ‘Stay Inside’, enforced even in areas where it was almost impossible for this directive to be observed. A case in point is the situation of homeless people who sleep in front of stores at night<sup>30</sup> as well as densely populated communities. One would have thought a more creative approach to finding alternative spaces like schools, churches, and even constructing

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<sup>28</sup> Kwame, M, A. (2020). *Making COVID-19 prevention etiquette of social distancing a reality for the homeless and slum dwellers in Ghana: lessons for consideration*. Local Environment. 25 (7): p536–539

<sup>29</sup> A displaced resident, as quoted in MyJoyonline.com (2020). *Over 1,000 Slum Dwellers Homeless After Demolishing Exercise at Old Fadama*. Available at <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/over-1000-slum-dwellers-homeless-after-demolishing-exercise-at-old-fadama/>

<sup>30</sup> Graphic online (2020). *Begging in lockdown: the homeless take over Accra’s streets*. Available at: <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/begging-in-lockdown-the-homeless-take-over-accra-streets.html>



makeshift spaces as temporary accommodation. However, such populations were left to face their precarious situations by themselves.

These experiences show that COVID-19 has revealed the depth of economic and social inequalities within the Ghanaian society. The government sought



to put up measures to remedy this inequality. For example, for three days, the government distributed food items to some vulnerable communities in the lockdown regions. However, the government received criticism from the public for not doing enough with this food intervention. There were also allegations that food was distributed to sympathisers or supporters of the ruling political party.

Indeed, some members of parliament took it upon themselves to distribute food in their various constituencies. Some traditional leaders, particularly Queen Mothers<sup>31</sup>, also came together and distributed food items to the needy, the aged and the poor in the Greater Accra region. These selected Queen Mothers purposely distributed food items and nose mask in Old Accra (Ga-Mashie and James Town). Individuals and cooperate institutions around the country also made donations and distributed food items in various communities.

### *Police brutality to enforce the lockdown*

Soon after announcing the lockdown, the preventive measures pleading with people to 'Stay Home/Stay Inside' within the narratives of Government and

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<sup>31</sup> Queen Mothers are selected from the royal family of each town and village in Ghana. See for example The Telegraph (2015) Meet the Queen Mothers. 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2015. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/meet-the-queen-mothers-10000-amazing-women-taking-back-power-in/>



media changed to the brutality of the police-cum-army enforcement of the directives among the populace. Videos emerged, showing the police and army relying on extreme force and violence to enforce the lockdown regulations. Police intervention ended in the killing of one person and various degrees of injuries to others. The content of the audio-visuals shows police-cum-military going around poor and working-class neighbourhoods to enforce the directives mostly in violent ways. Victims of these brutalities were branded as recalcitrant because some of them only came out to look for food. Interestingly, we did not locate any video of police-cum-military enforcement from the middle-class settlements to enable comparison.

Police brutality is a significant fallout of the 'stay at home/inside' policy. The experience indicates that today's Ghana police is an old colonial institution that has seen little change in its relations with civilians. The videos sparked social media discussions among Ghanaians, some of which are included in the reflections. This particular cartoon below (sent via WhatsApp) depicts the killing of a civilian by a military officer in the Ashaiman area of Accra on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2020<sup>32</sup>:

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<sup>32</sup> See Ghana Web (2020) Probe killing of civilian by a military officer. 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020. Available at: <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Probe-killing-of-civilian-by-a-military-officer-Group-918097>



## *Lifting the Lockdown*

On April 20, 2020, the President lifted the lockdown, stating that:

*“This decision to restrict movement has occasioned a number of several difficulties for all of us across the country, especially for the poor and vulnerable.”<sup>33</sup>*

However, people received the news with mixed feelings. Some were relieved to resume work, stating that ‘It was a war-like situation. We had no money and

we couldn’t step out to work to earn some cash. God bless our president.’<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, another section of society expressed concern about the move, due to rising infections.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, ‘We just recorded over 1,000 positive cases of COVID-19 and suddenly the



president decided to lift the partial lockdown.’<sup>36</sup>

To address these concerns, the government announced policies and directives for a gradual move into normalcy. The mandatory wearing of a nose

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<sup>33</sup> A citizen quoted in Aljazeera (2020) *Ghanaians welcome end of three-week lockdown with mixed emotions*. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/ghanians-week-lockdown-mixed-emotions-200420183840310.html>

<sup>34</sup> Another citizen quoted in Aljazeera (2020) *ibid*.

<sup>35</sup> See Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu (2020). *Ghana has become the first African country to lift its coronavirus lockdown*. Available at <https://qz.com/africa/1841212/ghana-lifts-coronavirus-lockdown-as-testing-ramps-up/>; My news Gh.com (2020). *Lifting lockdown: Doctors are dying, your decision is unfortunate – Doctor cries Akufo-Add*. Available at <https://www.mynewsgh.com/lifting-lockdown-doctors-are-dying-your-decision-is-unfortunate-doctor-cries-akufo-addo/> and Starrfm (2020). *Akufo-Addo didn’t consult us before lifting lockdown – GMA*. Available at

<https://starrfm.com.gh/2020/04/akufo-addo-didnt-consult-us-before-lifting-lockdown-gma/>

<sup>36</sup> Another citizen quoted in Aljazeera (2020) *ibid*.

mask in Accra was introduced, as one of the efforts to slow the spread of the virus in the country. Notably, the Greater Accra regional minister collaborated with the Security Council to enforce this policy within the region. Directives were issued to all public places to display “NO FACE MASK, NO ENTRY” at vantage areas where everybody will see. Indeed, it is our experience that without a facemask, a person is not welcomed in the facility.<sup>37</sup>

Once again, the lifting of the lockdown came with audio-visuals and media coverage that facilitated discussions, which shaped the attitudes, and behaviours that affected Ghanaians. Of particular interest in the era after the lifting, are the audio-visuals and media content that highlights the debate on the number of people that should be present at public gatherings such as religious service, funerals, and political activities among others. The contents of these audio-visuals show a clear disconnect between the impositions on restriction on the limited number of people at church services by policymakers who flout their directives without recourse to their directives at political party activities. At the last time of data collection, this debate was still lingering.<sup>38</sup>

In terms of social narratives, there was huge jubilation among a section of the population in Ghana, particularly in Accra articulated through song and music. For example, the Kolomashie group defied the heavy rains during the week of the lifting, as well as the COVID-19 protocols and burst out in songs like a people who have been released from bondage. *Kolomashie* is a *Ga* word, which means ‘Colonialist must go’. This music genre became popular during the independence struggle of Ghana and was often used politically. It has since been associated with political activism and a medium for social commentary. It is a processional music and dance borne out of the syncretisation of the local/folk tradition in an art marriage with Western forms

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<sup>37</sup> See CNR (2020). *Wearing of face masks made mandatory in Accra to stop COVID-19 spread*. Available at <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/04/wearing-of-face-masks-made-mandatory-in-accra-to-stop-covid-19-spread/>

; AllAfrica (2020) *Ghana: Mandatory Mask Wearing Starts Tomorrow in Accra to Curb Spread of COVID-19*. Available at <https://allafrica.com/stories/202005050551.html> and Graphic online (2020). *Failing to wear facemask can land you 10 years in prison or GH¢60,000 fine*. Available at <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/failing-to-wear-face-mask-can-land-you-10-years-in-prison.html>

<sup>38</sup> See Myjoyonline.com (2020). *If pastors are being jailed for flouting Covid-Protocols, politicians must be jailed as well*. Available at <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/if-pastors-are-being-jailed-for-flouting-covid-protocols-politicians-must-be-jailed-as-well/>

of music. If this music and dance succeeded in defeating colonialism, perhaps it might as well be able to defeat the 'Colonial virus' - implying that the virus has been brought or created by colonialists - in the words of the lyrics below that went viral on WhatsApp:

*"Colonial virus,  
K3 otee 'Blue Gate'  
Obaa na eko eei"*

Translated as:

*"Colonial virus,  
If you go to 'Blue Gate'  
You'll get some"*

The name 'Blue Gate' is the name of the particular area this video was recorded and not because it is a hotspot. In the tradition of a processional music and dance, the name of every place the group gets to is incorporated into the music so that the audience can relate and thus become part of the procession in a carnival fashion. This is how this kind of processional music and dance snowballs and collects its performers for action because there is no proscenium arch that separate the performers from the audience as in the Western theatre. The audience is a 'Spect-Actor' who does not just spectate but acts as well to change the plot of the stories. This notion, perhaps, should be the approach to the pandemic.

## Seeking External Intervention

It is worth noting that we identified themes of resource (un)availability in Ghana regarding COVID-19 in our collected data. The decision, diametrically opposed to the current Government political mantra 'Ghana Beyond Aid' (Government of Ghana), to go to the European and American financial institutions to aid the country were central to this. This situation lays bare the global inequalities in the distribution of resources to tackle the pandemic on the African continent, and Ghana as a country, all of whom have been

occasioned by years of wealth extraction, exploitation and under-development.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See Ghanaian Democrat (2020). *Publish names of donors into COVID-19 fund on Info Ministry Website – NDC Youth Organizer demands*. Available at <https://ghanaiandemocrat.com/publish-names-of-donors-into-covid-19-fund-on-info-ministry-website-ndc-youth-organizer-demands/>

CBN (2020). COVID-19: *Ghana gets \$500 debt repayment freeze from World Bank*. Available at <https://citibusinessnews.com/covid-19ghana-gets-500m-debt-repayment-freeze-from-world-bank/>

## Conclusions

This report has explored the racialisation of COVID-19 narratives about the risk of infection within the Ghanaian context, and has shown how it has specifically influenced the lives of people in the country.

The report has demonstrated that some of the audio-visuals, media coverage as well as government policies contain within them themes of internalised racism, which has an impact on COVID-19 in Ghana.

It is argued that Ghana is a country almost made up of Africans so the racism and racialisation of narratives for risk prevention here are manifested in terms of 'internalised racism' and not direct white and Black racism. We observe that this social construct is systemic within the narratives and played out in the areas during the pandemic in Ghana, namely; decision-making; resources; standards; and misnaming of problems.

In conclusion, data collected and analysed within this short research project during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates some of the subtly racist character of the narratives of prevention and risk of infection that still exists in a predominantly Black country. The COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana has been shown in this research to be much more than addressing a health issue; by analysing the content of the narratives of risk and prevention, it is simultaneously challenging the notion of racism in a Ghanaian context.

It has addressed a host of factors which make an impact on the society when observed in its racialisation. Developing recognition and appreciation of the country's systems, however, the neo-colonial model upon which it is based is thus significant as a foundation for making claims both as a pandemic and as a racial issue in the community of Ghana and wider society.

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