

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



EDITED BY KALIA BROOKS, CHERYL
FINLEY, ELLYN TOSCANO AND
DEBORAH WILLIS



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>



©2022 Kalia Brooks, Cheryl Finley, Ellyn Toscano and Deborah Willis. Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapter's authors.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Kalia Brooks, Cheryl Finley, Ellyn Toscano and Deborah Willis (eds), *Women and Migration(s) II*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0296>

Further details about Creative Commons licenses are available at, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Updated digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0296#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 9781800647084

ISBN Hardback: 9781800647091

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800647107

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800647114

ISBN Digital ebook (azw3): 9781800647121

ISBN XML: 9781800647138

ISBN HTML: 9781800647145

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0296

Cover image: FIRELEI BÁEZ for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona, 2018. Oil on canvas. Installation view: 10th Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste (Hanseatenweg), Berlin, 9 June 9-September 2018. Photo: Timo Ohler. Cover design by Anna Gatti

26. Telling the Story of a Global Pandemic

African Wax Prints, Style, Beauty and COVID-19 in Ghana, West Africa

Paulette Young

Textiles, and particularly wax prints, play a multifaceted role intimately tied to significant events in Ghanaian life. Wax prints are colorful, printed cloths that express meaningful messages through their design and culturally significant names, often in the form of a proverb. Women adopt wax prints to mark significant experiences over the course of their life. They have become popular to wear to work as “National Friday Wear” to show solidarity and support local textile related industries. Wax prints are also an important part of the national heritage of Ghana and memorialize key historical events, celebrations and global disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ghana Textile Printing Company (GTP) created a collection of COVID-inspired wax print designs to assist in the global fight to control the coronavirus. The goal was to remind the nation of the government directives to manage the crisis, including washing hands, social distancing and staying at home. There was also the promise that the popularity of the COVID-inspired wax print designs would increase sales and productivity within the largely female-centered Ghanaian textile industry, which had been negatively impacted by the health and economic crisis. This paper examines the impact of the global pandemic on wax prints and women’s lives during this tumultuous time period.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global event that has a significant local effect on the lives of Ghanaians. Women are at the core of the fight against COVID-19 as they face potential job and income loss and shoulder increased demands at home including domestic chores, schooling, and care for children and the elderly. They are overrepresented at the frontlines of the global pandemic, in jobs traditionally done by women in the service sectors, including retail sales.¹ Within the textile industry, girls and women are on the economic frontlines as entrepreneurs in the public market, in brick-and-mortar boutiques and online. The textile industry has been hit particularly hard economically, with women cloth venders, marketers and fashion designers especially devastated. An often overlooked group in the textile community that has been impacted by the coronavirus is the *Kayayee*—female porters—often girls as young as eight years old, who migrate mainly from the northern areas for work in the marketplace and transport heavy piles of textiles, adornment accoutrements and a range of commercial beauty products, often in a large bowl on their head.² With no financial safety net and limited access to water for handwashing or less crowded living and working spaces for social distancing, these workers, essential to the marketplace, are vulnerable to COVID-19.

From the early discovery of COVID-19 in Ghana on 12 March 2020, the government immediately introduced public health and socio-economic policy measures. A strategic plan to combat the spread included limiting the importation of the virus, containing the spread, caring for patients, limiting the social and economic impacts of the virus and expanding the country's domestic capability and self-reliance.³

The coronavirus is spread by human contact and viral transmission; one way to contain it is by avoiding unnecessary touching and thorough

-
- 1 Chuku Chuku, Adamo Mukasa, and Yasin Yenice, "Africa in Focus: Putting women and girls' safety first in Africa's response to COVID-19", Brookings Institute, 8 May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/05/08/putting-women-and-girls-first-in-africas-response-to-covid-19/>.
 - 2 Miriama Awumbila, "Internal migration, vulnerability and female porters in Accra, Ghana", <https://paa2007.princeton.edu/papers/70865>.
 - 3 Jiaqi Zhang, Justice Nonvignon, and Wenhui Mao, "How well is Ghana—with one of the best testing capacities in Africa—responding to Covid-19?", <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/07/28/how-well-is-ghana-with-one-of-the-best-testing-capacities-in-africa-responding-to-covid-19/>.

frequent handwashing. The customary Ghanaian practice of shaking hands as a greeting has been particularly challenging to quell. In Ghana, to refuse to shake a person's hand as a greeting is difficult, for as a local proverb notes, "Only enemies refuse to shake hands". As journalist and former Ghana government minister Elizabeth Ohene notes, "Here in Ghana, there are some things that are sacred in our lives and nobody touches them under any circumstance: religion, handshakes and funerals... many people believe they define our very existence."⁴ The fist bump, elbow smooch, the shoulder rub and even the leg kick are becoming a hesitant replacement.⁵ "President Nana Akufo-Addo set the tone for the new rules at the celebrations of Ghana's 63rd independence anniversary on 6 March, when he ostentatiously kept both hands resolutely behind his back when he arrived at the ceremony to greet those seated on the dais."⁶

Social distancing measures were announced on 15 March and international travelers into Ghana were restricted from entry. A week later, all air, land and sea borders were closed. By the end of March, major cities across the country were locked down, including a ban on all public gatherings, for three weeks.⁷

The government took an aggressive approach to managing the pandemic, gaining well-deserved praise locally and globally. From the initial cases, they began contract tracing, launched a COVID-19 Tracker App for assessing and reporting symptoms and locating free health care services. They used drones to deliver testing samples, which significantly controlled the spread. National loans were provided to local companies to produce personal protective equipment, limiting reliance on foreign imports. The government also provided economic assistance to citizens and businesses.⁸ The President issued a nation-wide mandate for public

4 Elizabeth Ohene, "Coronavirus: Why Ghana has gone into mourning after mass funeral ban", *BBC*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52010868>.

5 Elizabeth Ohene, "We might learn some lessons", *The Graphic*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/elizabeth-ohene/we-might-learn-some-lessons.html>.

6 Ohene, "Coronavirus: Why Ghana has gone into mourning after mass funeral ban".

7 Zhang, "How well is Ghana?".

8 Ibid.

face-mask wearing to help control spread of the virus, with violators subjected to immediate arrest.⁹

While the public health measures were admirable and well-intended, the Kayayei Youth Association characterizes the Ghanaian government's assistance as inadequate in the face of COVID-19 challenges. Young members of the textile community were still facing hardship in order to adhere to the public health recommendations. This led to community leaders organizing demonstrations demanding free water for a few months to enable hand washing to avoid the spread of the virus. They also requested government-sponsored transport to give Kayayei the option to return to their northern homes, as well as assistance with housing and food.¹⁰

The government believed that clear communication was key to defeating the coronavirus. A highlight was President Nana Addo Danquah Akufo-Addo's highly anticipated nationally televised weekly addresses to the nation. He shared his knowledge from experts noting that the virus was transmitted by the spread of droplets from person to person through talking, singing, coughing and sneezing and reminded the public to adhere to social distancing and enhanced hygiene protocols.¹¹ Wearing his characteristic round spectacles and shirts fashioned from locally produced colorful textile designs, embedded with culturally significant meanings and messages, the President led the nation through this time of crisis and appealed to public cooperation, highlighting the civic responsibilities as a collective family to help control the pandemic (Figure 1). "Our survival is in our own hands [...] If we are mindful and self-disciplined, we have it in us to defeat this pandemic, and help return our lives to normalcy".¹² Wax prints, and their messaging capability would prove to be integral to this effort.

9 "Wear a mask or risk being arrested—President", *General News*, 15 June 2020, <https://www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2020/06/15/wear-a-mask-or-risk-being-arrested-president/>.

10 Whitney Bauck, "Workers who form the backbone of the second market are especially vulnerable in a time of pandemic", *Fashionista*, 6 May 2020, <https://fashionista.com/2020/05/secondhand-clothing-ghana-kayayei-covid-19>.

11 *General News*, "Wear a Mask".

12 Ibid.



Fig. 1 President Nana Addo Danquah Akufo-Addo in his characteristic round spectacles wearing a shirt fashioned from the wax print “Ahene pa Nkasa”. Image permission: SDG Advocate.

Waxprint Designs and the Fight against COVID-19

The Ghana Textile Printing Company (GTP), a popular and well-respected local fabric company operating since 1966, known for their beautiful, culturally meaningful designs, played a significant role in highlighting the social responsibility of citizens to combat COVID-19 while expressing national unity. Reverend Stephen Kofi Badu, marketing director of GTP, noted (and many agree) that although GTP is currently owned by Vlisco, a company founded in Holland and currently owned by a British private equity company, the brand is synonymous with Ghanaian national identity.¹³

Badu noted that “the company primarily sees itself as a storyteller who uses color, design and titles to relate important ideas”. GTP decided to create a collection of textile prints “as a reminder of the safety measures adopted to protect Ghanaians and to curb the spread of COVID-19.” It is also a creative way to preserve the historical record of COVID-19 in Ghana. A key aspect of the endeavor was self-reliance, as Badu noted, by “developing designs created in Ghana and by Ghanaians.”¹⁴

¹³ Reverend Stephen Kofi Badu, Marketing Director for Tex Styles Ghana Ltd (parent company of Ghana Textiles Printing), Interview with Paulette Young (remote interview, 27 January 2021.)

¹⁴ Ibid.

A marketing campaign ensued featuring the Ghanaian actress and entrepreneur Martha Ankomah enrobed in a beautiful ensemble styled from the COVID-inspired design, “Nana’s Spectacles”, with the motto, “Fellow Ghanaians... Be Safe” (Figure 2).

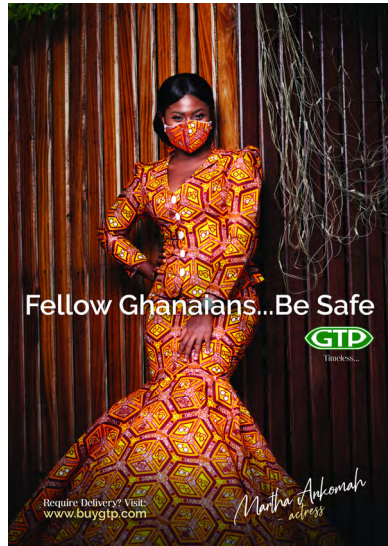


Fig. 2 Promotional ad featuring GTP brand ambassador, actress and entrepreneur Martha Ankomah wearing an ensemble in the coronavirus-themed “Fellow Ghanaians” pattern. Image compliments of GTP.

In mid-June 2020, GTP released two collections, titled “Lockdown” and “Fellow Ghanaians.” Lockdown shows a literal padlock and incorporates key aspects of the shutdown measures including “No flights/No fly zone”, which shows airplane wings and indicates the closure of air and land borders, and “stay at home” (Figure 3).



Fig. 3 Lockdown, Lock and Key and No fly zone. Image compliments of GTP.

“Fellow Ghanaians” references the words habitually used by H. E. Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo to begin his weekly televised COVID-19 update broadcasts as commander-in-chief to the nation. The first of three designs in the collection features President Akufo-Addo’s iconic, small, round spectacles (“Nana’s spectacles”); another highlights the television screen motif, and the last features radio waves, signifying the national broadcasts of his COVID-19 updates (Figures 4 and 5).



Fig. 4 Fellow Ghanaians collection: Nana’s spectacles, television screen, and radio waves. Image compliments of GTP.



Fig. 5 President Akufo-Addo wearing a shirt fashioned from the waxprint “Ahene pa Nkasa” and his iconic round spectacles featured in the wax print, “My Fellow Ghanaians, Nana’s Spectacles”. Image permission: SDG Advocate and compliments of GTP.

The collections were very well received and remain in high demand.¹⁵ Badu noted that at the start of the pandemic in March 2020, local income, business activity and sales plummeted, mainly due to the restrictions on social gatherings in which wax prints play a significant role of fashion and cultural display. Of the projected monthly sales target of 1,000,000 yards, in April, none were sold; in May, only 40% of the 100,000-yard target was sold; by June sales rose to 400,000 yards and have slowly increased since then.¹⁶

Over the summer of 2020, the government eased the lockdown measures, reopened schools, and modified restrictions on public transportation, tourist sites and church services, where attendance was limited to 25% capacity.¹⁷ However some have questioned if science was the sole rationale for the timetable applied to the easing of restrictions and the lifting of public health measures. Political activities like voter registration drives, primary in-person elections, and a desire to satisfy the public's demand to return to 'normal', may have had an impact on the decision to ease restrictions before the 7 December national election of that year.

To mark the early successes in containing the coronavirus, the return to some form of normalcy and the possibility of new opportunities, in early September 2020, GTP launched a limited-edition collection entitled, "This Too Shall Pass (Wei Nso Be Twa Mu)." These are the well-known concluding words of the COVID-19 public addresses of President Akufo-Addo. These words of optimism give hope to the nation and encourage Ghanaians to persevere because good times shall return.¹⁸ No condition is permanent.

The collection comes in three designs: the first shows a tree evolving from barrenness to growth and flourishing; the second highlights a nest of eggs which indicates impending life; the third shows an hourglass, referencing the flow of food, fortune and hard times (Figure 6).

15 An unexpected advantage of the COVID-related marketing and manufacturing environment is a significant drop in illegal counterfeit cloth proliferated by China-based companies.

16 Badu, interview.

17 Zhang, "How well is Ghana?"

18 Badu, interview.

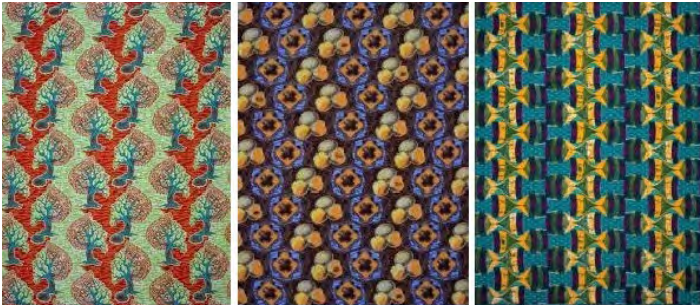


Fig. 6 This Too Shall Pass: Tree from barren to growth; Nest of eggs; Hourglass. Images compliments of GTP.

The most popular and sought-after design was without a doubt the “Fellow Ghanaians” collection and particularly “Nana’s spectacles” which referenced the President’s iconic glasses. Demand began at 90,000 yards and at its peak 300,000 yards were produced.¹⁹ Bismark Adu Asare, Head of Creative Desk at GTP described the hidden meaning of “Fellow Ghanaians/Nana’s Spectacles”, noting that “in Ghana, the story of COVID cannot be told without mentioning our Commander-in-Chief and the various weekly broadcasts he had to the nation. In trying to depict it, we took his most favorite design, that is ‘Ahene pa nkasa’, and put in the glasses that has become iconic for the Commander in Chief, and put the two together to make this wonderful design”.²⁰ “Ahene pa nkasa” refers to the popular Ghanaian proverb, “good beads do not rattle.” In other words, “a good person does not toot their own horn” (or “empty barrels make the most noise...”).²¹ Humility will be a key attribute in winning the fight against COVID-19.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Charles Ayitey, “COVID-19 Inspired Designs: Apparel industry cashes in on new wax-prints – The Market Place on Joy News”, *Youtube*, 8 July 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hG0iyx_JBzk&feature=youtu.be.

²¹ Paulette R. Young, *Cloth that Speaks: African Women’s Visual Voice and Creative Expression in Ghana (West Africa)* (New York: Columbia University, 2004), p. 221.

Women and Wax Prints and the Fight Against COVID-19: Designers, Fashionistas and Collectors



Fig. 7 Wax Print Textiles Entrepreneur in Kumasi Market, Ghana. Copyright Paulette Young, 2004.

Across Ghana, women are intimately involved in the marketing, purchasing, and fashion design of textiles. They spend great portions of their income on acquiring cloth and rely on the expertise of women distributors to recommend and supply new and desirable designs (Figure 7). Women are significant purchasers of wax prints from which they commission elaborate dresses and stunning ensembles, designed and tailored by highly skilled women entrepreneurs (Figure 8). For these women, dress is part of a conscious, non-verbal system of communication about oneself and is a means of relating that self to others. Cloth protects and shields the body from the physical elements, and selected designs can even shield from malevolent spirit forces.²² The GTP commemorative pandemic fabric, transformed into striking couture robes and ensembles, memorializes the overcoming of a moment of crisis for the nation and the world. The fashion designs uplift and showcase beauty and joy from a potentially devastating global health crisis, expressing hope for the future and marking the resilience

²² Young, *Cloth that Speaks*, p. 169.

of the community while celebrating the beauty, strength, and economic prowess of women.



Fig. 8 “Sunday fashion inspiration” by @quinsera_1, Dress fashioned from “Lock Down” Collection. Image compliments of GTP.

The release of the GTP COVID-19 influenced wax prints provided an increase in sales and, initially, an uptick in work for seamstresses. The excitement of acquiring a new, coveted design had a positive impact on client demand. However, an interesting twist is that most of these purchases were not for dressmaking. The drastic COVID-19 restrictions on social gatherings, including a ban on mass gatherings at funerals, religious services, marriages, engagements and baby-naming ceremonies, culminated in fewer opportunities to wear fashionable outfits and, for some, limited economic resources to splurge on formal attire. Instead, according to GTP, it appears that the majority of sales beyond the initial ‘outdoorings’ period (the local term for ‘debut’) are by textile collectors. Badu notes that while most sales are local, he received orders for the COVID-inspired wax prints from as far away as Germany, where they were being acquired as mementoes.²³

The acquisition of wax prints specifically to be stored is not a new phenomenon in Ghana. In addition to their beauty, wax prints are

²³ Badu, interview.

also prized possessions bestowed at life-affirming cultural events like baby-naming and marriage engagement ceremonies. Textiles are part of a long-standing, recognizable marker of female wealth. They are acquired and accumulated, particularly by women, as a way to build an independent source of personal wealth. As a culturally sanctioned aspect of women's wealth, textiles can be transferred from mother to child without interference from her husband or his family.²⁴ While many will envy a woman with beautiful ensembles crafted from coveted textile designs, possession of cloth in its uncut form is viewed as the action of a wealthy and highly respected woman.²⁵

Wax prints also retain and evoke memories and are collected by a woman over the course of her life. Wax print designs are a means of history keeping and memory making. Six- or twelve-yard pieces of cloth are folded and carefully stored in a chest, closet or wooden box over the course of a woman's life.²⁶ Upon her death, her female kin will inherit her cloth and disburse it on her behalf to family and friends.²⁷ The cloth collection can also be used to address debts incurred by the deceased owner while living, or expenses incurred by family members on her behalf, such as funerary costs. However, not just any cloth worth storing; cloths with names and designs that evoke specific memories in the minds of the owners or the community are preferred.²⁸ The limited-edition COVID-19 inspired designs are certainly categorized as highly desired and collectable wax prints.

Mask Up! Women, Masks and Textiles

Mask wearing in public spaces is critical in the fight to control the spread of COVID-19 and it is mandatory in Ghana—or citizens risk being

24 The matrilineal descent structure, particularly among the Akan-speaking peoples of Ghana, affects conjugal resources. In cases where financial support is weak, women look for ways to prepare for possible financial crises. Because of the high value and costs of printed textiles, accumulating these cloths is a creative and well-established way that will store wealth to meet financial and societal responsibilities. See Young, *Cloth that Speaks*, pp. 174–75.

25 Ibid., p. 176.

26 Ibid., p. 179.

27 Ibid., pp. 180–81.

28 Six yards is the amount required for a traditional kabba top, slit skirt and wrapper stole. Young, *Cloth that Speaks*, p. 183.

arrested.²⁹ To protect their families, essential workers, and themselves, women in Ghana have sprung into action. Designers, entrepreneurs and creatives collaborated with global networks to create protective, reusable and culturally significant facemasks. They use meaningful new wax prints created by local graphic artists, with designs incorporating cultural signifiers, to contain the virus. GTP provided the Ministry of Health and public schools with 'bleach cloth', the base cotton fabric from which to sew cloth masks.³⁰

Other NGOs are collaborating with international networks to create fabric face masks for their communities. Global Mamas, an NGO that helps women support themselves by creating artistic goods in Ghana for the international market, switched its production from colorful household goods and clothing to African print masks. Bead-makers and weavers were retrained as seamstresses to sew masks. This enabled women to still receive an income and thus to continue to support their families during the pandemic.³¹

Conclusion

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had a tremendous impact on the livelihood, social life, health and overall welfare of Ghanaians, and particularly women. Textile manufacturers, distributors, fashion designers and clients have taken the threat to the survival of their communities to heart and developed creative strategies to survive. The GTP COVID-inspired collections of beautiful, message-bearing wax prints remind us of the fragility of life and also enrich and highlight the beauty and joy of living, inspiring us to hope for better days ahead. The power of symbols, translated into revenue, is all the more important since the pandemic began. For GTP, in selling these prints, every Ghanaian owns a part of the story.³²

29 *General News*, "Wear a Mask".

30 Badu, interview

31 Stacey Knott, "Global Effort Under Way to Create African-Print Face Masks for Ghana", *Voice of America*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/global-effort-under-way-create-african-print-face-masks-ghana>.

32 Ayitey, "COVID-19 Inspired Designs".

Bibliography

- Awumbila, Miriama, "Internal migration, vulnerability and female porters in Accra, Ghana", Princeton University, <https://paa2007.princeton.edu/papers/70865>.
- Ayitey, Charles. "COVID-19 Inspired Designs: Apparel industry cashes in on new wax-prints – The Market Place on Joy News", *Youtube*, 8 July 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hG0iyx_JBzk&feature=youtu.be.
- Bauck, Whitney, "Workers who form the backbone of the second market are especially vulnerable in a time of pandemic", *Fashionista*, 6 May 2020, <https://fashionista.com/2020/05/secondhand-clothing-ghana-kayayei-covid-19>.
- Chuku, Chuku, Mukasa, Adamo, and Yenice, Yasin, "Africa in Focus: Putting women and girls' safety first in Africa's response to COVID-19", Brookings Institute, 8 May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/05/08/putting-women-and-girls-first-in-africas-response-to-covid-19/>.
- General News*, "Wear a mask or risk being arrested—President", 15 June 2020, <https://www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2020/06/15/wear-a-mask-or-risk-being-arrested-president/>.
- Knott, Stacey, "Global Effort Under Way to Create African-Print Face Masks for Ghana", *Voice of America*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/global-effort-under-way-create-african-print-face-masks-ghana>.
- Ohene, Elizabeth, "Coronavirus: Why Ghana has gone into mourning after mass funeral ban", *BBC*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52010868>.
- Ohene, Elizabeth, "We might learn some lessons", *The Graphic*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/elizabeth-ohene/we-might-learn-some-lessons.html>.
- Young, Paulette R., *Cloth that Speaks: African Women's Visual Voice and Creative Expression in Ghana (West Africa)* (New York: Columbia University, 2004).
- Zhang, Jiaqi, Nonvignon, Justice, and Mao, Wenhui, "How Well is Ghana—with one of the best testing capacities in Africa—Responding to Covid-19?", *Brookings*, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/07/28/how-well-is-ghana-with-one-of-the-best-testing-capacities-in-africa-responding-to-covid-19/>.