

Utilizing Sounds of Mourning as Protest and Activism

The 2019 Northwestern Women's Lamentation March Within the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon

ABSTRACT This paper examines how women of the northwestern Grassfields of Cameroon transpose and deploy lamentation sounds as a means of nonviolently resisting, challenging, counteracting, and controlling the audio-sphere hitherto militarized through the weaponization of the sounds of war. The main argument is that contrary to the popular narrative of African women as passive recipients of sociocultural norms and traditional political power that propagate female marginalization and oppression, African women can and do consciously draw from these same norms to achieve their sociopolitical aims. Following dark anthropology and the anthropology of resistance/activism that examine politics, power, conflict, and other grim realities of life, the paper employs a multimodal approach to illustrate how through the public performance of the sounds of mourning, the women tap into and make use of sociocultural understandings of womanhood and mourning. These sounds become an instrument that nonviolently opens a more peaceful channel for dialogue with the Cameroonian prime minister within the male-dominated political arena in modern-day Cameroon. The paper centers two integral yet often neglected elements of conflict: women and sound. Also, by examining how sociocultural instruments of subjugation can be pragmatically and ingeniously harnessed, overturned, and deployed by the victims to achieve the opposite of what these norms uphold, the paper provides vital insights about alternative forms of nonviolent resistance/activism from localized contexts within the Global South. **KEYWORDS** sound, nonviolent protest, activism, lamentations, African women, Anglophone Crisis

INTRODUCTION

On May 9, 2019, a multitude of women marched along the streets of Bamenda, the capital city of the North West region of Cameroon (also called the northwestern Grassfields), performing what has been described as a “wailing scene” and “lamentation campaign.”¹ As they wept, screamed, ululated, and sang dirges, one of them explained to the media:

These are the women of the North West region who have been in pain for the past three years, and because we heard that the prime minister is coming here today we decided that we should come out and cry aloud because the flow of blood has been too much. There is pain! We don't sleep! There are incessant killings every day. We think that as women we have to do our own part of the job by coming out to cry, to tell the powers that be that they should try to put an end to this.²

The women's protest was one in a series of demonstrations that have for the past four years characterized the Anglophone Crisis, i.e., the ongoing armed conflict in the anglophone (English-speaking) regions of Cameroon.

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Today's world is rife with violence and conflict, which generally arise from power relations and power performativity manifested in the intention and/or action of holistically dominating and controlling the lives of others.³ In Africa, where armed conflict is the most perilous and lethal sociopolitical occurrence, the realm of power and control is often a man's prerogative and domain.⁴ This is usually enhanced by the patriarchal stance of male dominance and female subjugation in many sub-Saharan African communities, where women have scarcely wielded political power, and their presence within the political landscape has mostly been peripheral.⁵

However, I contend in the present paper that contrary to the popular narrative of African women as passive recipients of sociocultural norms and traditional political power, which propagates female marginalization and oppression, African women can and do consciously and agentively draw from these same norms to mobilize, become more politically active, and achieve their sociopolitical aims. I illustrate this by examining how the women of the North West region of Cameroon (henceforth the northwestern Grassfields women) deliberately drew on sociocultural and indigenous understandings of womanhood and mourning to multimodally, agentively, and creatively transpose and deploy the sounds of mourning in nonviolent protest on May 9, 2019. The result of this public protest was the opening of a peaceful channel for dialogue with the prime minister (the head of the government) within the male-dominated political arena in modern-day Cameroon.

Sound, as a ubiquitous element of daily life, has always been an integral part of conflict and protest/resistance.⁶ Unfortunately, even though a lot about conflict and resistance can be learned from the sensory dimensions of life that include the interconnectivity between the auditory and the ocular, contemporary studies often neglect the sonic and foreground the politics of visibility "predicated on visual presence."⁷ However, sound, or its calculated absence, has been utilized often as a weapon, and sometimes as a means of public protest/resistance and activism.⁸ Public protests are usually multimodal affairs, where demonstrators draw on, combine, and manipulate available communicative resources or modes like speech and other sounds, written texts, proxemics, the body (for example, posture, gesture, gaze, kinesics), and material objects to make and communicate meaning.⁹ In this paper I discuss a multimodal performance that especially utilizes sound as a tool of protest and activism.

The discussion draws from the framework of dark anthropology and the anthropology of resistance/activism, both of which provide a more encompassing view of governmentality, politics, and power when kept in "active interaction."¹⁰ Dark anthropology focuses on how power permeates social life, subtly or explicitly leading to domination, exploitation, inequality, oppression, violence, conflict, and other grim realities.¹¹ Similarly, the anthropology of resistance/activism investigates how communities deal with issues of politics and power that pervade their lives.¹² It examines social movements, critical ethnographies, cultural critiques, media products, and other ways through which societies engage in political exchanges.¹³ These political exchanges usually encompass processes, experiences, and instances of accessing and wielding power and control, as well as strategies and methods of resisting these.¹⁴

These are issues relevant to the present discussion about women's political involvement: how they mobilize collectively and bond together as a social movement, using the sounds of mourning to protest, challenge, counteract, and control the audio-sphere hitherto militarized through the weaponization of the sounds of war. This weaponization often occurs when sounds associated with warring parties (like gunshots, bombs, tear gas, shouting of orders, and systematic marching) are propagated to foster atmospheres of terror, caution, anxiety, and uncertainty, thus constructing environments with ominous vibes and creating a "sonic fearscape."¹⁵

The paper makes prominent two integral but often neglected elements of conflict: women (especially African women) and sound. The northwestern Grassfields women's agentive use of the sounds of mourning as protest and activism presents vital lessons about how instruments of subjugation, like patriarchal sociocultural norms regarding womanhood and widowhood, can be pragmatically and ingeniously harnessed and deployed by the victims to subvert the status quo and achieve the opposite of what these norms uphold and propagate. The paper thus provides more nuanced information about strategies of nonviolent protest/resistance and activism from a localized context within the Global South. It is from situated occurrences like the northwestern Grassfields women's protest march that myriad and alternative ways through which resistance or activism transpires are illuminated.¹⁶

Equally, through centering the use of sound in protest, the paper challenges the trend in anthropological studies of resistance that often concentrates on the visual while neglecting the sonic, even though the sonic affects humans just as much as the visual.¹⁷ In addition, focusing on sounds beyond those perpetrated by the warring parties in armed conflict opens up the possibility of exploring other essential but often overlooked or forgotten actors in the search for peace: women and children.¹⁸ Furthermore, women's and nonwhite people's involvement in sound, whether as producers, collectors, or users, is a very limited field of inquiry the world over.¹⁹ By focusing on Black African women, the paper makes both categories (women and nonwhite people) more visible, thus answering the call for anthropology to pay more attention to what has been overlooked or taken for granted.²⁰

The rest of the paper is divided into three major parts and a conclusion. Part I focuses on the event: the northwestern Grassfields women's utilization of lamentations—ululations, wailings, and dirges—in the multimodal performativity of nonviolent protest/resistance. Part II situates the northwestern Grassfields women's march within its politico-historical and sociocultural contexts by describing elements of the Anglophone Crisis and the Grassfields peoples relevant to the discussion. Part III discusses women, grief, and sociopolitical engagement, illuminating how through the sounds of mourning the northwestern Grassfields women evoked a genealogy of female protest and activism within the region.

I. THE USE OF SOUND AS A TOOL OF PROTEST AND ACTIVISM BY THE NORTHWESTERN GRASSFIELDS WOMEN

The Use of Sound in Conflict and Resistance

Sound has been instrumental to the evolution and survival of the human species, and its importance lies in its ability to holistically affect humans—whether positively or

negatively.²¹ Sound is generally “produced in concert with coordinated modulation of body posture, facial expression, and eye gaze.”²² Also, it usually elicits a reaction especially because it is tied to emotion, and it affects not just the ear but the mind and whole body.²³ Thus, the experience of a sound can be pleasant or distressing depending on the manner and context in which it is heard. For example, music meant to give pleasure like rock/pop music and children’s songs became a tool of torture and violence when played loudly by the U.S. military to force the surrender of Manuel Noriega in Panama City, and during their interrogations of the “enemy” in detention camps, especially in the Middle East.²⁴

The military has often weaponized sound by blasting or broadcasting it from loudspeakers and long-range acoustic devices (LRAD) in a bid to disperse protesting crowds as well as to police and control the bodies and minds of perceived opponents.²⁵ This is because loud, prolonged, and/or constant sound can rupture the eardrum and internal organs; can induce hearing loss, mental trauma, nausea, and dizziness; and can diminish well-being in general.²⁶ Also, the characteristic of sound to instill fear and anxiety at certain frequencies has often been deployed in warfare. A case in point is when the Israeli army used supersonic booms to bombard the Gaza Strip in 2005 and 2014, leading to anxiety/panic attacks, trauma, paroxysms, bleeding ears and noses, transient hearing loss, problematic breathing, and hypertension among Palestinians who were exposed to the sound.²⁷

Sound has also played an influential role in social justice activism and protest.²⁸ For example, following the murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos in December 2008 in Greece, the spontaneous community that came into existence protested using chanting, singing, and yelling, among other tactics.²⁹ However, when it comes to the literature concerning sound within resistance/protest or activism, music is usually more explored than other sounds. Examples include the investigation of the importance of the performance of protest/resistance music that promotes national sovereignty and a shared identity among Palestinian intifada musicians, and the examination of the persistent writing of antiwar songs for decades in Sri Lanka as a sign of protest and fortitude.³⁰ Nevertheless, a major strategy within which other sounds can be used in resistance/activism, advocacy, or reform is the politicization of a universal human emotion: grief, a tactic employed by the northwestern Grassfields women in their lamentation march.³¹

The Northwestern Grassfields Women’s Utilization of the Sounds of Mourning as Protest and Activism

The northwestern Grassfields women expressed and graphically communicated their anguish to the outside world through the mourning sounds they made—crying, screaming, ululating, singing, yelling—as they marched, sat down, and/or danced while waving the “peace plant” or *nkeng* (dracaena) in the air (*nkeng* is a plant culturally understood in Grassfields communities to signal peace, cleansing, rejuvenation, and fecundity).³² From time to time they yelled out sentences like, “You have destroyed us!” and “We need our rights!” They also sang songs, one of which translates from pidgin (Cameroonian creole) to: “Father have mercy on us, Father, we are tired. We have been carrying a heavy burden.

God our Father help us!”³³ While singing, they lifted their hands and placed both hands, palms down, on their heads, a typical sign within the region of defeat, shock, sadness, tiredness, or anguish. This posture often follows the reception of bad or troubling news and is prominent in situations of mourning. Some of the women carried placards with messages written on them such as: “We cry for our children, we cry for our future”; “Our voices too count. End hostility and let’s talk”; “We long for justice, security, and sustainable peace”; “War destroys, it does not build.”³⁴

When they finally reached the hotel where they had learned the prime minister would be present, in typical Grassfields style upon arrival at a funeral venue, while some sat down on the ground weeping, others started wailing afresh. When the prime minister arrived, the ululations and wails increased as many women screamed at the top of their voices. The prime minister walked to them and after a period of intense lamenting, the women quieted down. They told him they had come out to protest the Anglophone Crisis and the killings in their community, and to call for peaceful dialogue between the warring parties. After listening, the prime minister told them that the president and the government were interested in peaceful dialogue and were calling on the Amba Boys (separatists who have taken up arms against the government) to drop their weapons, leave the bushes they had escaped to, and return to the community.³⁵

In this political performance, the women used lamentation sounds especially to counter sounds associated with the military. Sound is generally confined to specific geographical, psychological, and sociocultural spaces, and how these spaces are controlled is essential to the wielding of sociopolitical power.³⁶ The women took possession of the space by employing a major function of sound, which is to direct one’s gaze away from and/or toward a particular direction.³⁷ Their lamentations alerted and shifted the public’s gaze away from the violence perpetrated by major power wielders (the predominantly male military and Amba Boys) to the nonviolent demonstration of the perceived more vulnerable and victimized members of the society: women, some with children. In this way, the women not only resisted and challenged but also owned and controlled the power hitherto established through the militarization of the audio-sphere—i.e., the territorializing of space through the dominance of sounds linked to the military like gunshots, military shouts and footsteps, and sounds from tear gas, sirens, and military cars.³⁸

Equally, the women’s multimodal use of these mourning sounds in combination with their body movements and actions (like raising their hands and placing them on their heads, wiping the tears from their eyes, dancing, waving the *nkeng* in the air, and sitting on the ground) played a vital role in making and communicating meaning to the wider community. Although these sounds, movements, and actions were localized to the physical space they occupied (the streets of Bamenda), their multimodal enactment testified to the degree of intertextuality and interdiscursivity embedded in the event.³⁹ Within the process of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, where societal understandings, texts, and discourses are decontextualized from one setting and recontextualized in another, performers can access social power while reflecting, influencing, or constructing meaning in sociocultural, ideological, economic, or political spheres.⁴⁰ Thus, through decontextualizing the sounds and practices of mourning and their associated meanings from the context

of funerals, and recontextualizing these sounds and meanings in a political context of resistance, the women creatively imbued the event with new meaning. Their performance became a potent metaphor of the death, both symbolic and literal, of their men (children and husbands), their land (and so their livelihood), and consequently the community.

Hence, through their lamentation performance, the northwestern Grassfields women aroused feelings of pity, sympathy, and empathy as they positioned themselves as women left “widowed” amid a conflict that was threatening societal continuity and well-being. They further rebuked and shamed the warring parties while calling for rapid transformation in the sense of a quick end to the Anglophone Crisis. Similarly, their performance opened an avenue for nonviolent dialogue with the representative of government where the women literally and figuratively made their voices heard. What made their use of the sounds of mourning this effective was their creative way of tapping into sociocultural understandings of womanhood and mourning, and using the chronotopic or spatiotemporal functions of these sounds to bring to mind and create a link with past female activism that had always yielded powerful results in this area of the country.⁴¹

II. SITUATING THE NORTHWESTERN GRASSFIELDS WOMEN'S MARCH WITHIN ITS POLITICO-HISTORICAL AND SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXTS

Politico-Historical Context: The Anglophone Crisis

The fact that the northwestern Grassfields women chose to carry out their nonviolent lamentation protest in the city of Bamenda is telling. Described as “the political nerve-center of Cameroon,” Bamenda has always played a strategic role in the political history of the country.⁴² It was in Bamenda that the present ruling party, the Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM), was named in 1985.⁴³ It was also there that the current main opposition party in Cameroon, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), was launched in 1990.⁴⁴ And most recently, it was in Bamenda that the Coffin Revolution, an instrumental event in the Anglophone Crisis, occurred in 2016.⁴⁵

The ongoing Anglophone Crisis traces its roots to the colonial period. Cameroon, a country that straddles central and western Africa, was colonized first by the Germans in 1884, and then separately by the French and the British after World War I.⁴⁶ Upon independence and reunification in the 1960s, the British-administered part called Southern Cameroons became the two present-day anglophone regions (North West and South West regions), while the French-administered part made up the remaining eight francophone (French-speaking) regions of the country.⁴⁷ Feelings of marginalization and assimilation have always existed among anglophones.⁴⁸ Many of them have grown to resent the country, especially after a decree in 1984 changed the country’s name from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon, reflecting the name of francophone Cameroon before reunification.⁴⁹

In the second half of 2016, a peaceful protest led by lawyers and a strike led by teachers occurred in the anglophone regions against the institution of the French language and the francophone legal and educational systems in these regions.⁵⁰ Then on 21 November 2016, a journalist marched along the busiest street in Bamenda city carrying a coffin,

which he stood in and made a speech protesting the ineptitude of government representatives in Bamenda.⁵¹ This event, called the Coffin Revolution, was pivotal in transforming later protests from more localized and peaceful to more widespread and violent.⁵² Likewise, early in 2017, several female Cameroonian activists used YouTube and other social media to entreat anglophone women to massively protest the vanishing, jailing, and killing of anglophones, especially boys and men, which had occurred in the months following the start of the crisis.⁵³

When protests erupted, the government often responded by cracking down on the demonstrators, and the more the military reacted with physical violence (using gunshots and tear gas, for example) against protesters who usually called for dialogue, the more these protests escalated.⁵⁴ The outcome was the Anglophone Crisis, the present armed conflict between the military and the separatist Ambazonia Defence Force popularly called Amba Boys, who state that they are fighting for the independence and restoration of Southern Cameroons.⁵⁵ This armed conflict has, in the past four years, led to great loss of life and property, razing of villages, massive displacement of citizens as refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)—most of whom are women and children—periodic shutting down of the internet in the anglophone regions, no access to school for many anglophone children, and insecurity within the general population.⁵⁶ It is thus within this context that the northwestern Grassfields women marched on May 9, 2019.

How these women formed themselves into a movement of resistance is similar to the description of contemporary social movements as “an arrangement of heterogeneous elements that fit together in such a way as to give rise to something novel, some activating process that expresses through collective practice.”⁵⁷ These groups usually spring to life in solidarity against the current state of affairs and inequalities propagated by the powers that be, and they are characteristically triggered by an event that appeals to human emotion and ethical concern.⁵⁸ The northwestern Grassfields women hailed from different walks of life, ages, and experiences but had one thing in common: outrage at the violence their community had witnessed, which directly threatened their sociocultural role in the area.

Sociocultural Context: Women’s Role Within the Grassfields

The Grassfields, which has harbored Cameroon’s highest rates of intercommunal conflict since precolonial times, constitutes at least 150 chiefdoms or villages in the North West and West regions of the country.⁵⁹ Though diverse in terms of language, pedigree, and political structure, these chiefdoms share some notions, especially regarding women, children, and mourning.⁶⁰ Among these communities, women’s authority has generally been constrained in the public and political sectors and confined to sociocultural norms of womanhood associated with their reproductive role as mothers and their productive role as cultivators of the land.⁶¹

The Grassfields understanding of womanhood as accountable reproducer and producer, nurturer and protector, custodian not just of the community but also of the earth (the major source of livelihood among these peoples) shows that the land and the female body are inextricably linked to each other and to “human origin and continuity.”⁶² In fact, the farm and the womb as the source of female power and authority are central in

and to the mobilization of women's activism in the sociopolitical arena, especially as they are tied to the very survival and welfare of the community through human and agricultural fertility.⁶³

This equation of womanhood with motherhood, which itself is understood as nurturing, protective, and forged on a lifelong and sacred bond of attachment between women and children, is representative of many Black communities in Africa and the Americas. Among these communities notions of motherhood encompass those who birth the children and those who are concerned about and partake in rearing the children, in essence, "mothering the community."⁶⁴ In addition, among the Grassfields people, children (especially male children) play a strategic role regarding security in the sense of economic well-being and the survival of the family and community.⁶⁵ Consequently, the grief resulting from a child's death is usually especially intense for the women, who are intimately bound to them.

Likewise, when a husband dies, his widow becomes a major part of the mourning rituals. Although many cultural mourning practices further subjugate the widow, some of these women have also found strength and hope in traditional and communal solidarity.⁶⁶ In fact, the literature on widowhood practices in the Grassfields, as in many other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, often attests to mourning taken beyond the realm of the individual to the collective—in essence into the public sphere, transcending the family to become the responsibility of the whole community.⁶⁷

When death occurs in the Grassfields communities, close female relatives of the deceased are usually expected to sit on the floor, abstain from bathing, and shave off the hair on their head, and together with other women in the community they sing dirges, dance, and/or "wail, scream, and shout in agony while grieving"; failure to do this leads to suspicion and isolation of the women by both family and community.⁶⁸ This is because mourning and burial of the dead are tied to issues of belonging within the community and solidarity between the dead and the living.⁶⁹ Death therefore establishes a link that signals the community's dependence on and acknowledgment of the otherworld (Supreme Being and ancestors), safeguards communal continuity through the intercession of the dead, and is strengthened through sacred rituals and women's public performances of grief.⁷⁰ Thus, enacting these specific performances of grief out of the context of funerals/burials, like the northwestern Grassfields women did in their lamentation march, constitutes a powerful statement.

III. WOMEN, GRIEF, AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Political Engagement and Grief

The northwestern Grassfields women communicated their grief through their lamentations. This grief, as the female interviewee at the start of this paper explained, had been accumulating and simmering for years and had finally boiled over, triggered by the massive killings, arrests, and disappearances of their sons and husbands. The externalization of grieving as mourning can sometimes be transformed into a form of activism and nonviolent resistance.⁷¹ This happens within the process of acknowledging and merging

personal/individual and societal/collective grief, consciously using this grief as the starting point through which activist strategies are built, and then utilizing these strategies to clamor for positive change.⁷² Grieving women can therefore agentively transfer mourning to the public domain, and in the process become politically involved in activist actions as a means of making sense of and healing the grief through communal support and the empowering sense of control.⁷³

Political involvement “entails commitment to a public cause, strategy and above all action.”⁷⁴ In recent times, this type of involvement has witnessed a proliferation of trends/forms of social movements, resistance, and activism that have led to fresh understandings of community and politics.⁷⁵ These social movements usually embody “a performative politics of protest” as opposed to “institutionalized party politics” and exhibit a combination of intense emotion and practical action or “affect and praxis.”⁷⁶ Examples include the December events in Greece, the Arab Spring in North Africa, the Coffin Revolution in Cameroon, and the recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations following the deaths of George Floyd and other African Americans at the hands of the police in the United States.⁷⁷

Despite historical focus on men’s roles in political engagement, across the world women have been activists, protesters, and/or reformers in political, social, and economic spaces, including armed conflict, inequalities, greater visibility for women, and land and housing issues.⁷⁸ In addition, Black women in both Africa and the diaspora (such as the Americas) share experiences of pain and immense grief due to violations of their bodies and rights, and to the loss of their menfolk—fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons—often at the hands of those in power. Sometimes this grief has been converted and used for advocacy, resistance/protest, activism, and a call for reform.⁷⁹

A case in point is African American women’s use of grief right from slave trade through the civil rights movement to the present, as seen in the example of Mamie Bradley Till.⁸⁰ After the lynching of her son Emmett she found solace, healing, and purpose through becoming a powerful voice of the civil rights movement, speaking against the violence meted on Black male bodies.⁸¹ Her transformation of grief in this way parallels the situation in many sub-Saharan communities, as seen in “political widowhood” in South Africa during apartheid.⁸² There, at the killing or incarceration of a male leader, the whole process of grieving and mourning would be transformed into a communal affair of activism and a statement of resistance, with the widow (real or symbolic) at the center.⁸³

As mentioned, African women have often been portrayed as silent and stoically accepting of the state of affairs that propagates exclusionary politics and fails to satisfy citizens’ fundamental needs.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, these women have actively sought to make their voices heard and to carve a niche in the political sphere they inhabit. The few existing writings about them show their resourcefulness, cunning, and flexibility in the face of adversity, whether in precolonial, colonial, or postcolonial times. Cases can be found among the Aba of Nigeria, Pare of Tanzania, Mau Mau of Kenya, Itsekiri and Ijaw in the Niger Delta, Anlu and Takembeng of the Cameroonian northwestern Grassfields, and other women’s movements in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and South Africa.⁸⁵

Sub-Saharan African women involved in protest and activist ventures have weaponized their bodies especially through nudity/disrobing; employed incendiary language and songs; produced offensive gesticulations and behaviors; used symbols drawn from their local communities; withheld sexual intercourse with men; engaged in mediation and alliances (especially through marriage); and employed sit-ins, massive nonviolent demonstrations, and face-offs that have sometimes resulted in physical violence.⁸⁶

Women's Political Engagement in the Northwestern Grassfields

Through the sounds of mourning, the northwestern Grassfields women made use of the powerful spatiotemporal or chronotopic function of sound that comprises blurring the divide between the present and the past and linking political action to place or environment, thereby establishing context based on space and time.⁸⁷ Examining the spatiotemporal aspects of performance indexes the interrelationships between space, place, time, and wider discourses at play within the event that are integral to the meaning-making process.⁸⁸ The women's mourning sounds evoked past activities of women's political engagement within the northwestern Grassfields, especially female voluntary organizations like the Anlu in the 1950s and '60s and Takembeng in the 1990s. This evocation firmly ingrained in the minds of the present community those past, dark phases when women subverted the status quo while making a firm statement about the urgency and immensity of the northwestern Grassfields women's current plight.

Within the northwestern Grassfields societies, men as possessors of political power are usually responsible for taking decisions concerning war and peace and are often the key actors in conflict and fighting.⁸⁹ Very rarely do women wield power, albeit limited, mostly in advisory roles like queen-mothers.⁹⁰ Sometimes the women have encouraged or compelled their men to go to war, or partaken in the fighting themselves—as seen with the women of Kom in the 1900s; Bafut in the latter part of the 1960s; and Bambili, Babanki, Bambui, and Finge in the 1990s.⁹¹ Women have also played strategic roles as architects of peace within these communities, often through marriages, oaths, mediations, treaties, and public apologies.⁹²

Equally, there have been times when the women have overturned the social order and temporarily seized political power, even though this path of female activism has been fraught with dangers. The military has been known to use violence or force—which sometimes results in the detention, arrest, and even death of some women—but usually these armed forces are more lenient in their crackdown on women than on men.⁹³ Thus, the women know what they risk when they go out to protest, but they also know what they risk when they do not. When their limited power as reproducers and producers is threatened through issues regarding human reproduction, land ownership, and crop production, then women's traditional voluntary associations have at times come to the forefront in resistance. Two such groups that are instrumental to the understanding of the women's march of May 9, 2019, are the Anlu and Takembeng women's associations.

The Anlu women's voluntary association is one of the earliest female groups in the northwestern Grassfields to have been written about. This group paved the way for increased public female activism, especially against administrators' excesses in

Cameroon.⁹⁴ Anlu is a longstanding postmenopausal women's military association in Kom, one of the three most populous ethnic groups in the northwestern Grassfields.⁹⁵ In the Kom language, Anlu literally means "to drive away."⁹⁶ This name reflects the group's objective, which includes discipline, punishment, and redress regarding crimes committed by men against womanhood: insulting one's mother's genitals, beating up pregnant or nursing women, and/or threatening women's control of land, whether through trying to sell it, introducing novel/untested land reforms, or allowing farm crops to be destroyed by cattle.⁹⁷

The Anlu association was so influential during the transitional period from colonialism to independence in British Cameroon (between 1957 and 1961) that their help was sought by the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP), a political party that sought reunification with francophone Cameroon upon independence.⁹⁸ In their quest to wrest control from the then-popular party in Kom, the Kamerun National Congress (KNC), the KNDP convinced the Anlu women that the colonial administrators and the KNC would not protect their crops against Fulani herders and their cattle.⁹⁹

The KNDP's persuasion—coupled with the institution of the British colonial administration's agricultural laws, which the women perceived as detrimental to their traditional systems of farming—led to the Anlu women's revolt of 1957.¹⁰⁰ The women protested by interrupting major economic and administrative activities, using graphic sexual language, and generally relying on traditional strategies linked to "shaming, restitution, and compensation."¹⁰¹ These women seized and held political power for two years, until the KNDP won the KNC at the 1959 elections.¹⁰² Even though the protest occurred in a rural setting, the Anlu women's contribution to female militancy and activism by subverting the social order in the public sphere was so esteemed that it was emulated over 30 years later by the Takembeng in the 1990s.

Arguably the most widely documented women's voluntary association in the northwestern Grassfields, the Takembeng (also Takumbeng) comprises mostly postmenopausal rural women farmers from about 15 Ngemba-speaking villages within the northwestern Grassfields.¹⁰³ This group is usually instrumental in funeral and mourning rituals, where they dance and sing dirges.¹⁰⁴ Like the Anlu, the Takembeng come together when they perceive a threat to their reproductive and productive rights and act in ways that violate the established sociocultural norms of behavior expected not just of women but of the whole community, like defecating and disrobing in public, making bawdy comments, and generally acting "uncivil."¹⁰⁵ Supernatural powers are often attributed particularly to their act of disrobing, which intimidates men and can render the men who see the women's bared genitals and breasts confused, sick, traumatized, or even dead.¹⁰⁶ The public display of women's genitals and breasts in the Grassfields is a dreaded omen because these organs are representative of womanhood and motherhood, and of women's responsibility toward societal well-being and continuity.¹⁰⁷

The Takembeng has existed since precolonial times but rose to prominence in the 1990s.¹⁰⁸ What propelled the Takembeng to the limelight was their role in protecting a key male actor in the Cameroonian political scene. Following the forceful launching of the SDF on 26 May 1990, these women surrounded and protected party chairman Fru

Ndi's house to prevent his deportation to Yaounde (the political capital of Cameroon) by armed forces.¹⁰⁹ The immediate trigger of their involvement in the 1990s protests was their rage when six people, whom the Takembeng referred to as their children, were killed by the military during the SDF party launching.¹¹⁰ In an interview one of the women explained that "children belonged to all mothers and 'are fruits of the same womb' without any distinction, so any attacks on them invited their wrath as it was an attack on humanity."¹¹¹ Seeing this killing as a pollution of both the land and community, it therefore fell on them as custodians of both production (land) and reproduction (community) to cleanse the land and restore it.

The Takembeng played leading roles in encouraging civil disobedience, enforcing ghost towns, and, during nonviolent protests, marching at the front with a pot of traditional medicine meant to protect them while the rest of the demonstrators (who constituted a mixture of men and women, young and old) followed about 300 meters behind.¹¹² These demonstrations were in protest of the abuse of state power seen in unlawful arrests and killings, the marginalization of anglophones, corruption, false promises the state had made to the population, and the physical mistreatment of community members.¹¹³ Usually when demonstrating, the Takembeng would ululate to signal their arrival, sing loudly, or maintain solemn expressions and extreme silence by holding a blade of grass or a leaf of the *nkeng* between their lips.¹¹⁴ This silence, or lack of sound, was a tremendous force that added an element of unease to everyone watching them and signaled that all was not well in the land.¹¹⁵

Hence, about 30 years later, when the northwestern Grassfields women marched in Bamenda on May 9, 2019, they emulated the Takembeng, who had expanded the scope of female activism by moving from localized/rural environments to wider/urban networks and contexts, thus moving "from an indigenous female secret society to a modern protest group."¹¹⁶ By using the sounds of mourning, the northwestern Grassfields women indexed wider discourses at play, issues related to political strife, power, traditional norms regarding womanhood and mourning, historical legacy, resistance, and activism, among others. These issues reverberated with the wider community that shared sociocultural understandings of the notions the sounds of mourning connoted: women's role as reproducers (here mourning the violence meted against their children) and producers (here mourning their land that had been desecrated by human blood and other abominations and so required cleansing). So, through the sounds, the women justified and validated their involvement in the public and political sphere: It was their duty to do so as custodians of the community.

CONCLUSION

Generally, people actively decide how to react to sociopolitical conflict, and so political engagement goes together with the affective and agentive role of its enactors.¹¹⁷ The choice of mourning sounds was not a random occurrence but a well-planned, systematic, and creative calculation of the women to achieve their goal. Sound was deployed as a means to tap into the tacit understandings of the wider community—i.e., pertaining

to womanhood (reproducer/producer/custodian of community), male children (imperative to the continuity and survival of the community), death (uniting the living, linking the living to the dead), and mourning (as communal practice, predominantly the domain of women). While multimodally deployed with body movement and other actions, the use of sound was prominent and an indispensable source for understanding or making meaning of the event.¹¹⁸

Equally, contemporary trends in social movements are a rich source of information regarding developments in political consciousness and involvement built on agency, affect, and relationality and how these feed into social imagination of future possibilities that usher in a more egalitarian society.¹¹⁹ The northwestern Grassfields women did not identify as any of the already long-established and functioning women's voluntary associations within the northwestern Grassfields. They had come together, as social movements typically do, because of a shared rage at the state of affairs. The women's agentive performativity of nonviolent protest/resistance mostly through the use of sound was one way of intervening in the current Anglophone Crisis to open up an avenue for more peaceful dialogue, and hopefully through that, a more peaceful, just, and egalitarian society.

The women tapped into local sociocultural resources to achieve their aim of carrying out nonviolent and meaningful dialogue and advocating for an end to the Anglophone Crisis on behalf of the whole community. Because of their cultural role as custodians of the community, women can offer valuable and indispensable insights regarding issues of conflict and peace, moving from the local and individual to the more global and collective, relying on tactics known to and understood by the communities they live in, voicing the concerns of a wide variety of community members and not just a few prominent voices, and pointing out how the various sectors of society (such as sociocultural, economic, political, and health sectors) can be addressed for a more encompassing and long-lasting peaceful solution.¹²⁰ However, despite being constantly affected by political conflict in their communities, women are hardly ever involved as indispensable actors in conversations about armed conflict and peacebuilding, but sadly, are often pushed to the role of observers, especially in Africa.¹²¹

The Anglophone Crisis still rages on, and now with the presence of COVID-19 in the anglophone regions, life is harder. Because the violence has not stopped, it would seem as if the women failed and the warring parties did not listen to their pleas. However, the women's lamentation march achieved greater success than many other instances of protest in the anglophone regions in two ways. First, the women effectively carried out public protest, along the streets, without the firing of a single gunshot either from the military or the Amba Boys, and so without the loss of a single life. Previous protests within the Anglophone Crisis had often resulted in gunshots, tear gas, and burning tires. Second, their demonstration led to face-to-face dialogue with the representative of the government. Few protests had been this effective in opening nonviolent channels of communication between civilians and the government.

Consequently, there are important lessons to be learned from this form of protest, which arose in response to an emotional trigger (rage at the jailing and killing of their children and husbands and thus the pollution of the land), used what was already

available in the locality, and culminated in the communication of their desires in a non-violent way. Thus, examining localized nonviolent ways of protest like the women's can provide innovative and nuanced insights. These insights can reveal effective ways through which grassroots political organizations and actions dismantle war and conflict in favor of nonviolence and peace, especially within the landscape of changing social movements currently on the rise in the world. ■

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NOTES

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