

Singing Conflict into Peace: Women's Political Agency, Satire, and Social Criticism in Aghem Ufueng Performance

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how women use satire and social criticism in Ufueng performance to respond to conflict and promote peace in Aghem, North West Region of Cameroon. Ufueng, a women's Nyanga dance, is more than a form of cultural entertainment; it provides women with a public space to speak about problems affecting their families and community. The paper focuses on two Ufueng texts, "*Farmer-grazier Problem*" and "*Social Criticism*," songs which address land conflict, political interests, violence, mourning, and the demands placed on women to perform during moments of communal suffering. Drawing on Feminist Peace Theory and Performance Theory, the study reads these songs as forms of political speech through which women expose social problems, question authority, express collective suffering, and call attention to the conditions that produce conflict. The analysis shows that satire and social criticism allow the performers to confront sensitive issues in a culturally recognized form while encouraging reflection on communal responsibility and peaceful coexistence. The paper argues that Ufueng expands the understanding of women's peacebuilding beyond formal political institutions by showing how performance can become a space for criticism, negotiation, and political agency. It concludes that women's Ufueng performances represent an important indigenous form of peacebuilding in which singing, mourning, satire, and social criticism become ways of speaking about conflict and imagining possibilities for peace.

Keywords: Ufueng; Aghem; Women's Political Agency; Peacebuilding; Satire; Social Criticism; Oral Literature; Performance; Conflict Resolution; Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

Women's songs and other forms of oral performance have long provided important means through which women express social experience and contest structures of power. Brian Hogan, in "Gendered Modes of Resistance: Power and Women's Songs in West Africa," describes women's verbal arts as a "crucial medium of political contestation, social unification, and personal expression" (1). His observation challenges the tendency to regard women's songs primarily as cultural entertainment. Hogan demonstrates that women's songs in West Africa can address social inequality, political authority, gender relations, and collective concerns. He further observes that women's oral performances can create alternative spaces of expression when women have limited access to established political institutions (1). Thus, the political significance of women's songs lies partly in their ability to make women's voices audible within social spaces where formal political discourse may exclude them. This relationship between women's performance and political expression is also evident in Cameroon.

Ivoline Kefen Budji's study of women's lamentation in the Northwestern Grassfields examines the 2019 women's Lamentation March during the Anglophone Crisis. Budji argues that the women used culturally recognized practices of mourning as forms of nonviolent resistance and political communication. She specifically rejects the representation of African women as merely passive recipients of restrictive cultural norms, arguing instead that women can "consciously draw from these same norms to achieve their sociopolitical aims" (443). Budji's argument is important to the present study because it demonstrates, within the Northwestern Grassfields itself, that women can transform culturally sanctioned expressive practices into political action. Her study consequently provides an important regional basis for examining Ufueng not simply as a cultural performance but as a medium through which Aghem women articulate social and political concerns.

Hogan's discussion of women's songs and Budji's study of women's lamentation converge on an important point: women's performance can become political without necessarily taking the form of conventional political speech. The medium may be a song, lament, dance, ritual, or other culturally recognizable performance, but its social function can extend into criticism, protest, negotiation, and the expression of collective grievances. This is particularly relevant to the study of peacebuilding. Aili Mari Tripp's introduction to *Women and Peacebuilding in Africa* observes that women have frequently been excluded from formal peacebuilding processes and relegated to informal strategies, even though such strategies enable women to address violence, land, resources, and the protection of their communities. The collection consequently calls attention to forms of peacebuilding that operate outside formal negotiations and state institutions. The present study brings this discussion to Ufueng, the Nyanga dance performed by women in Aghem, Wum Central Subdivision, Menchum Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. Ufueng provides a culturally recognized performance space in which women use song, movement, rhythm, satire, lamentation, and social criticism to address matters affecting the community. Its significance for peacebuilding does not rest on the assumption that women are naturally peaceful. Rather, its significance lies in the political work that women perform through the tradition: they expose grievances, criticize conduct, recall violence, question authority, express communal suffering, and place social problems before an audience.

The political and peacebuilding dimensions of Ufueng become particularly clear in the performance text identified in this study as "Farmer-grazier Problem." The women address the Aghem community directly and connect land and cattle disputes with political interests and experiences of violence:

Oh Aghem people shall forever be quiet
This is our land and we only have to work with intelligence
Spoil it Aghem people, spoil it our cows
They say Aghem Fon has convene a community meeting
Njuh always love money,
Money, come and judge the land—
Njuh always love cows—
Cows come and judge the land
He also loves the Akus—
Akus all of you should come in number—
Your uncle say he wants to judge the happenings of the land.
The military that came here tortured us badly—
Since then, we have been, our bodies does not function well—
Strangers who came here raped our daughter to death—
We have been then till now, our bodies doesn't sound
Oh Aghem people shall forever be quiet
This is our land and we only have to work with intelligence
Spoil it Aghem people, spoil it our cows

The significance of this performance lies in its transformation of conflict into public speech. The women do not merely describe the farmer-grazier problem; they identify the interests, authorities, and experiences of violence surrounding it. The repeated address to "Aghem people" makes the community both the audience and the object of criticism. The reference to land places the conflict within the question of communal ownership, while the references to money, cattle, political authority, military torture, and sexual violence broaden the song into a critique of the social conditions that produce and sustain conflict. The performance therefore illustrates Hogan's observation that women's oral expression can function as political contestation while also extending Budji's argument into another Northwestern Grassfields performance tradition.

The second performance examined in this article, "Social Criticism," turns more directly to mourning, loss, and the expectations placed upon women during communal suffering:

Our father, who alt in heaven—
Hello be thy name.
We beg this our power from God above who watches over us—
Because we have nobody.
They have taken their wives, kept them at home—
And come and taken us out,
That we should come and perform Fembwe.
Did Kwifoy house ever ask that; whose child have they killed in the bush—
For them to perform Fembwe? We have suffered
Did Kwifoy house even ask that how many of us are left—
For them to perform Fembwe— we have suffered
Anybody who still have her corn leftover by cows—
Let the person be cooking fufu let dances eat,
Anybody who still have her children she is laughing with them at home—
Let them be performing,
We are mourning our children
Our father, who alt in heaven—
Hello be thy name.

Here, Ufueng becomes a space in which women question the relationship between cultural obligation and communal suffering. The women are expected to perform, but the performance itself questions whether those making the demand have adequately considered the losses suffered by the women. The repeated question concerning children killed in the bush transforms mourning into social criticism. Prayer, lamentation, accusation, and performance consequently operate together. The women do not withdraw from the community because of their suffering; instead, they bring that suffering into the public performance and make it part of the community's moral and political conversation.

Although existing scholarship has established the importance of African women's cultural performances as forms of political expression and has begun to examine women's sound and protest in Cameroon, less attention has been given to how Ufueng as a specifically Aghem women's performance tradition uses literary and performative devices to address conflict and peacebuilding. Budji's study is concerned with women's lamentation and political activism in the Northwestern Grassfields, while Hogan examines women's songs in West Africa more broadly. Neither study examines Ufueng in Aghem or the particular combination of satire, social criticism, lamentation, and communal address found in the performances considered here. This study therefore locates Ufueng within the wider scholarship on women's political performance while drawing attention to the particular ways in which Aghem women use their own performance tradition to negotiate conflict and communal responsibility. Against this background, this article examines how women's use of satire and social criticism in Ufueng constitutes a form of political agency and peacebuilding. It argues that Ufueng should be understood not simply as dance or entertainment but as a performative form of public discourse through which women expose conflict, criticize social and political behaviour, articulate suffering, and encourage communal reflection. By reading "Farmer-grazier Problem" and "Social Criticism" as performance texts, the study demonstrates that peacebuilding may also take place through culturally embedded acts of criticism, mourning, and public speaking. Ufueng thus provides an indigenous space in which Aghem women transform performance into a means of confronting conflict and negotiating possibilities for peaceful social relations.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Feminist Peace Theory and Performance Theory to examine Ufueng as a form of women's political expression and peacebuilding. The two perspectives are complementary. Feminist Peace Theory helps to explain why women's experiences of violence, exclusion, loss, and social inequality are important to the study of peace, while Performance Theory makes it possible to examine how those experiences are communicated through song, movement, repetition, satire, lamentation, and interaction with an audience. Together, the theories allow Ufueng to be read as both a gendered form of political speech and a performed social action. Feminist

Peace Theory is particularly useful because conventional accounts of peacebuilding have often concentrated on formal institutions, political negotiations, and state actors. Such approaches can overlook the everyday practices through which women respond to violence and attempt to repair damaged social relations. Aili Mari Tripp, in the introduction to *Women and Peacebuilding in Africa*, draws attention to this problem by examining women's participation beyond formal peace processes. The collection demonstrates that women's peacebuilding activities frequently occur at local and informal levels, where women confront problems affecting their families and communities. This perspective is important for Ufueng because the political agency examined in this study does not emerge from formal political office. It emerges from a culturally established performance tradition through which women publicly address matters of communal concern.

The feminist perspective also prevents this study from presenting women as naturally peaceful. Such a claim would reduce women's political agency to an assumed feminine capacity for reconciliation. The performances examined here reveal something more complex. The women do not always speak in the language of harmony. They accuse, mourn, ridicule, question, condemn, and express anger. Their peacebuilding potential therefore lies partly in their willingness to confront the conditions that produce conflict. In "Farmer-grazier Problem," for example, the performers speak about land, cattle, political interests, military violence, and sexual violence. In "Social Criticism," they speak from the position of women who are mourning their children while being expected to continue performing. Their criticism is therefore part of their political participation.

Performance Theory provides the second dimension of the framework. Richard Schechner's concept of "restored behavior" is particularly useful because it treats performance as something constructed and repeatedly enacted rather than as spontaneous behaviour. In *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Schechner explains that "restored behavior is the main characteristic of performance" (35). The concept draws attention to the fact that performance involves recognizable actions, patterns, gestures, sounds, and behaviours that acquire meaning through their enactment. Ufueng can be understood in this sense as a culturally established performance system. Its songs and movements are not isolated acts. They are performed within recognizable social circumstances and before an audience capable of interpreting their meanings. This understanding is important because the meaning of a Ufueng song cannot be separated completely from its performance. The words, the women who sing them, the bodily movements accompanying them, the rhythm, the occasion, and the audience all contribute to what the performance communicates. A statement that might appear ordinary when written on a page can become confrontational when sung collectively before a community. Similarly, lamentation can move beyond private grief when it is performed publicly and becomes a shared expression of communal suffering. Performance therefore provides the means through which individual experiences are transformed into collective discourse.

The two theories meet most clearly in the concept of political agency. In this study, agency refers to the capacity of women to use an available cultural form to express interests, challenge conduct, question authority, and intervene in matters affecting their community. Ufueng does not necessarily give women political power in the formal institutional sense. It gives them a recognized cultural platform from which they can speak. Their agency is therefore located in the performance itself: in what they choose to say, whom they address, what they criticize, and how they mobilize familiar cultural forms to make their criticism publicly meaningful. The study also treats satire and social criticism as performative strategies rather than simply literary features. Satire enables performers to criticize individuals, institutions, or social practices through ridicule, irony, exaggeration, and indirect attack. Social criticism allows them to identify behaviour or conditions considered harmful to communal life. These strategies are particularly significant in Ufueng because they enable women to address sensitive subjects within an established cultural performance. Rather than presenting peacebuilding as silence or avoidance of conflict, the performances examined here suggest that confronting grievances can itself be part of the movement towards peace. The conceptual position of this article is therefore straightforward: Ufueng is a women's performance tradition; performance provides the medium; satire, lamentation, and social criticism provide important expressive strategies; political agency describes what women accomplish through those strategies; and peacebuilding describes the wider social significance of confronting conflict, exposing grievances, and negotiating communal responsibility. This framework guides the analysis of "Farmer-grazier Problem" and "Social Criticism".

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in oral-literary and performance analysis. It focuses on two Ufueng performances, “Farmer-grazier Problem” and “Social Criticism,” selected because of their direct engagement with conflict, violence, political authority, mourning, and communal responsibility. Rather than treating the songs as isolated verbal texts, the study approaches them as performed cultural expressions in which language, repetition, satire, lamentation, and collective address contribute to meaning. The analysis is based on the researcher’s documentation and interpretation of the Ufueng corpus. The selected performances are examined through close reading, with particular attention to images of land and violence, rhetorical questions, repetition, irony, satire, lamentation, and forms of direct address. These features are interpreted in relation to the social and performance contexts in which Ufueng operates. The study therefore combines textual interpretation with a performance-oriented understanding of oral literature.

The choice of ten performances also permits a focused examination of different dimensions of women’s political agency. “Farmer-grazier Problem” is examined primarily in relation to land conflict, political interests, violence, and communal accountability, while “Social Criticism” is examined through mourning, gendered suffering, cultural expectations, and women’s questioning of authority. The comparison makes it possible to demonstrate how Ufueng can move between satire, criticism, lamentation, and prayer while maintaining its political and peacebuilding significance. This approach is consistent with Brian Hogan’s observation that women’s verbal arts can function as spaces of “political contestation, social unification, and personal expression” (1). It also corresponds with Ivoline Kefen Budji’s study of women’s lamentation in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, which demonstrates how culturally recognizable forms of women’s expression can be transformed into sociopolitical action (443). The present study extends these insights to Aghem Ufueng by examining how women’s singing and performance become a means of confronting conflict and negotiating communal responsibility.

“Farmer-grazier Problem”: Satire, Conflict, and Political Agency

“Farmer-grazier Problem” presents Ufueng as a space in which women can publicly address conflicts that affect the material and social life of the Aghem community. The performance does not treat the farmer-grazier conflict simply as a disagreement between farmers and cattle owners. It connects the question of land to political authority, money, cattle, military violence, sexual violence, and the suffering of ordinary people. Through direct address, repetition, irony, accusation, and lamentation, the women transform the performance into a form of public criticism. The song is therefore political not because it directly participates in formal government, but because it speaks about the distribution and misuse of power within the community. The political character of women’s oral performance has also been observed beyond Aghem. Brian Hogan, in “Gendered Modes of Resistance: Power and Women’s Songs in West Africa,” argues that “the verbal arts are a crucial medium of political contestation, social unification, and personal expression” for many West African women (1). This observation is useful for understanding Ufueng because it shifts attention from political institutions to cultural forms through which women make their voices heard. In “Farmer-grazier Problem,” singing becomes a means through which the performers enter a public discussion about land and communal authority.

The opening lines immediately establish the collective nature of the address:

Oh Aghem people shall forever be quiet
This is our land and we only have to work with intelligence
Spoil it Aghem people, spoil it our cows

The repeated reference to “Aghem people” places the performers and their audience within the same community. At the same time, the expression “shall forever be quiet” introduces irony. The women are speaking while describing a community that remains silent. The contradiction is significant: the performance breaks the silence that it identifies. The women therefore position themselves as speakers on behalf of a community confronted by a serious problem. The statement “This is our land” further introduces the question of communal ownership and belonging. Land is not presented as an abstract economic resource; it is connected to identity, livelihood, and

the continued existence of the community. The phrase “Spoil it Aghem people, spoil it our cows” intensifies the criticism. Its repetition gives the performance a sarcastic quality, especially because the apparent instruction to “spoil” the land can be understood as a warning rather than genuine encouragement to destroy it. The women expose the consequences of irresponsible treatment of communal resources by presenting the destructive possibility in an exaggerated form. Satire here does not merely produce amusement. It makes a serious accusation. By using irony rather than a formal political statement, the performers can criticize harmful practices in a culturally recognizable form.

The song then turns directly towards the question of political decision-making:

They say Aghem Fon has convene a community meeting
Njuh always love money,
Money, come and judge the land-
Njuh always love cows-
Cows come and judge the land
He also loves the Akus-
Akus all of you should come in number-
Your uncle say he wants to judge the happenings of the land.

This song lines demonstrates how satire can become a language of political accountability. The Fon and other actors are brought into the discussion of land, but the performers do not speak about authority with unquestioning respect. Instead, they ridicule the possible interests behind the process of judging the land. The repeated references to “money,” “cows,” and “Akus” suggest competing interests surrounding the land. The rhetorical command that “Money” and “Cows” should come and “judge the land” is especially striking. Objects and interests are imaginatively turned into participants in the political process. Through this device, the performers question whether decisions concerning communal land are genuinely based on the interests of the people. The humour of the song therefore carries a serious political function. The women make political interests visible by giving them a voice in the imagined meeting. The performance asks an important question without necessarily stating it directly: who or what is really determining the fate of the land? The satire exposes the possibility that communal decisions may be influenced by wealth, cattle interests, or particular groups rather than by the broader welfare of Aghem people. Ufueng thus becomes a culturally sanctioned form of questioning authority.

The performance becomes more serious as it moves from land and political interests to violence:

The military that came here tortured us badly-
Since then, we have been, our bodies does not function well-
Strangers who came here raped our daughter to death-
We have been then till now, our bodies doesn't sound

At this point, satire gives way to lamentation. The shift is important because it shows that the farmer-grazier question cannot be separated from the wider experience of violence. The repeated reference to the body establishes a connection between political conflict and lived experience. “Our bodies does not function well” presents violence as something that continues beyond the moment in which it occurs. Torture leaves physical and psychological consequences, while the rape and death of “our daughter” turns sexual violence into a communal wound. The use of the first-person plural pronoun “we” is equally significant. The women do not describe violence as something suffered by isolated individuals. “We” converts individual pain into collective testimony. This is one of the ways in which Ufueng can function as a peacebuilding practice: it creates a public space in which experiences that might otherwise remain private can be collectively voiced. Ivoline Kefen Budji's study of women's lamentation during the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon is particularly relevant here. Budji observes that women can “consciously draw from these same norms to achieve their sociopolitical aims” (443). The significance of this argument for Ufueng is that culturally recognized forms of mourning need not be politically passive. Lamentation can become a means of making violence publicly visible and demanding recognition of suffering.

The reference to “our daughter” also gives the performance a distinctly gendered dimension. Sexual violence is not treated merely as another consequence of conflict. It is presented through the loss of a female member of the community, and the women claim the right to speak about that loss. Their performance consequently challenges the separation between the private suffering of women and the public politics of conflict. The family, the body, the land, and political authority become connected within one performance.

The final repetition returns to the opening:

Oh Aghem people shall forever be quiet
This is our land and we only have to work with intelligence
Spoil it Aghem people, spoil it our cows

The repetition does more than provide musical closure. It returns the audience to the central problem after the performance has exposed its consequences. The land remains, the conflict remains, and the question of communal responsibility remains. The repeated “Aghem people” again makes the audience part of the problem. The women are not merely blaming an external group. They are calling upon their own community to recognize what is happening to its land and its people. The performance therefore illustrates an important dimension of women’s political agency. The women do not wait for a formal political institution to authorize their speech. They use Ufueng itself as a recognized cultural platform. Their agency lies in their ability to name problems, ridicule questionable interests, expose violence, mourn victims, and address the community collectively. Hogan’s observation that women’s verbal arts can function as a medium of “political contestation” (1) is particularly applicable here. The political force of the song comes from its capacity to make conflict speakable in a public cultural space.

“Farmer-grazier Problem” also complicates a simple understanding of peacebuilding. The women are not offering a direct formula for reconciliation between farmers and graziers. Instead, they first make the sources and consequences of conflict visible. Their criticism suggests that peace cannot be achieved by asking affected people to remain silent while the conditions producing violence continue. The performance creates a form of social pressure by bringing land disputes, political interests, violence, and communal responsibility before an audience. In this sense, Ufueng functions as a form of preventive and dialogic peacebuilding: it confronts grievances publicly and creates an opportunity for the community to reflect on the practices that threaten its social cohesion. The song consequently demonstrates that women’s peacebuilding may take the form of criticism rather than conciliatory speech. The performers challenge authority, expose competing interests, and give collective expression to experiences of violence. Their satire is therefore not a departure from peacebuilding; it is one of the ways through which they attempt to create the conditions in which peaceful social relations might become possible. By turning a communal performance into a space for political commentary, the women make Ufueng an instrument through which conflict is named, suffering is remembered, and communal responsibility is negotiated.

“Social Criticism”: Mourning, Gendered Suffering, and Social Mediation

While “Farmer-grazier Problem” focuses strongly on land, political interests, and physical violence, “Social Criticism” turns attention to women’s own experience of communal suffering. The performance is particularly significant because it places mourning and cultural performance in tension. The women are expected to perform, yet they are themselves affected by the violence that has damaged the community. The song therefore questions the assumption that cultural obligations can continue normally when members of the community are grieving. Through prayer, irony, rhetorical questions, and lamentation, the performers make their suffering part of the public conversation.

The performance opens by adapting the familiar Christian prayer:

Our father, who alt in heaven-
Hello be thy name.
We beg this our power from God above who watches over us-
Because we have nobody.

The opening immediately establishes a tone different from the direct satire of “Farmer-grazier Problem.” The invocation of God suggests helplessness and the search for protection beyond human authority. The statement “Because we have nobody” is especially important. It expresses a sense of abandonment and exposes the vulnerability of women who feel that the institutions or individuals expected to protect them have failed to do so. Prayer consequently becomes more than religious language. Within the performance, it becomes a vehicle for expressing a political and social grievance.

The next lines introduce the problem of performance itself:

They have taken their wives, kept them at home –
And come and taken us out,
That we should come and perform Fembwe.

The contrast between “their wives” and “us” is central to the gender politics of the song. The women suggest that those making demands upon them are protected from the conditions under which the women themselves must perform. The women have been brought out to perform Fembwe while others remain at home. The performance thus exposes an unequal distribution of cultural responsibility. Women are expected to maintain communal cultural practices even when they are experiencing the consequences of conflict.

This contradiction becomes sharper through the rhetorical questions that follow:

Did Kwifoy house ever ask that; whose child have they killed in the bush-
For them to perform Fembwe? We have suffered
Did Kwifoy house even ask that how many of us are left-
For them to perform Fembwe- we have suffered

The repeated questions function as accusations. The performers ask whether those demanding the performance have considered the number of children killed or the number of women who remain. The repetition of “Did Kwifoy house” emphasizes the absence of recognition. The women are not simply saying that they are tired of performing; they are questioning whether the social authorities demanding their participation have acknowledged the human cost of the conflict. This is where social criticism becomes political. The women use the performance to question the priorities of those exercising authority. The repeated phrase “For them to perform Fembwe” exposes a contradiction between cultural expectation and lived suffering. A community may desire the continuation of its cultural practices, but the performers ask whether culture can be separated from the conditions in which people live. Their questions force the audience to consider whether cultural continuity should require women to suppress their grief.

The song's rhetorical structure is therefore important. Instead of presenting a formal argument, the women construct a sequence of questions to which the audience is implicitly required to respond. The questions make the audience participants in the moral evaluation of the situation. This is consistent with the wider political potential of women's oral performance identified by Hogan, who describes women's verbal arts as spaces of “political contestation” (1). In the Ufueng context, political contestation is achieved through the public questioning of social expectations and authority. The statement “we have suffered,” repeated after the questions, further changes the function of the performance. It is both testimony and accusation. The women speak collectively, making individual losses part of a shared experience. The repetition gives suffering a rhythm that can be heard and remembered. It also prevents the audience from moving too quickly from the problem. The women insist that their suffering must remain part of the conversation.

The song then introduces a striking contrast between those who still possess the possibility of celebration and those who are mourning:

Anybody who still have her corn leftover by cows-
Let the person be cooking fufu let dances eat,
Anybody who still have her children she is laughing with them at home-

Let them be performing,
We are mourning our children

The reference to corn destroyed or consumed by cows connects the song to the wider farmer-grazier conflict. However, the performers move from agricultural loss to the loss of children. The progression demonstrates that the consequences of conflict are not limited to property. Livelihoods and human relationships are both damaged. The rhetorical contrast between those who can “be performing” and “we” who are mourning makes the women’s position unmistakable: performance cannot be understood separately from the losses experienced by the performers. The line “Anybody who still have her children she is laughing with them at home” is particularly powerful because it defines survival itself as a condition for celebration. Those who still have their children may perform, but those who have lost theirs have a different social reality. The women consequently reject the idea that all members of the community experience cultural obligations in the same way. Their criticism is rooted in unequal experiences of violence.

This use of mourning as public communication has a strong parallel in research on women's performances in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Ivoline Kefen Budji, studying women's lamentation during the Anglophone Crisis, shows how mourning sounds can become forms of nonviolent sociopolitical action. She argues that women can draw upon culturally established practices to pursue sociopolitical aims (443). “Social Criticism” demonstrates a similar process. Mourning does not remain confined to the private sphere. It becomes public speech through which women communicate loss, question expectations, and demand recognition. The final return to the prayer—“Our father, who alt in heaven— / Hello be thy name”—creates a circular structure. The performance begins and ends with an appeal to God. This structure can be read as an expression of limited human power. The women have spoken, questioned, criticized, and mourned, yet the circumstances producing their suffering remain larger than any individual performer. The prayer therefore does not cancel the political criticism. Rather, it frames the criticism within the women's search for protection and justice.

“Social Criticism” consequently expands the meaning of women's political agency in Ufueng. Agency does not always mean confronting a political authority through direct accusation. It can also involve refusing to allow grief to be hidden behind cultural expectations. By publicly articulating their suffering, the women claim authority over how their experiences should be understood. They insist that those who demand cultural performance must also recognize the human circumstances of the performers. The performance also demonstrates why peacebuilding should not be reduced to reconciliation alone. Before reconciliation can become meaningful, grievances and losses must be acknowledged. The women’s lamentation creates such an opportunity. It brings private pain into the public sphere, challenges the normalization of suffering, and reminds the community that peace requires attention to the experiences of those who have been affected by violence. In this respect, the performance becomes a form of social mediation: it places women's experiences before the community and invites reflection on the responsibilities of those who organize, demand, or participate in cultural life.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, “Farmer-grazier Problem” and “Social Criticism” demonstrate that Ufueng provides women with more than an artistic space. It provides a culturally recognized means of entering conversations about problems that might otherwise be difficult to address directly. The two performances, however, do so from different directions. “Farmer-grazier Problem” moves outward from land conflict and political interests toward the violence experienced by the community, whereas “Social Criticism” moves inward toward the women themselves and the expectations placed upon them during periods of suffering. The distinction is important for understanding the relationship between performance and peacebuilding. In both texts, the women first make conflict visible. They identify land disputes, competing interests, violence, loss, and social expectations. They then give these problems a public voice through collective singing and performance. Finally, they invite the community to reconsider its responsibilities. Peacebuilding therefore emerges not as a simple message of peace but as a process of public criticism, recognition, and social negotiation.

The performances also demonstrate the value of an African feminist approach that takes indigenous cultural practices seriously. Women's political participation does not have to resemble participation in formal institutions before it can be recognized as political. Ufueng allows women to exercise authority through a cultural form that the community understands. Their songs can criticize political interests, question authority, express anger, mourn the dead, and challenge social expectations without abandoning the cultural form through which they speak. This is also why satire and lamentation should not be treated as contradictory. Satire exposes what is wrong through ridicule and irony, while lamentation exposes what is wrong through grief and testimony. Both can produce social reflection. In "Farmer-grazier Problem," satire makes political interests visible; in "Social Criticism," lamentation makes human suffering impossible to ignore. Their common function is to transform experience into public discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Ufueng as a form of women's political agency and peacebuilding in Aghem. Through the analysis of "Farmer-grazier Problem" and "Social Criticism," it has shown that women use performance to speak about issues that extend beyond the immediate occasion of entertainment. Land disputes, political interests, violence, loss, mourning, and cultural expectations become subjects of public discussion through song. The analysis of "Farmer-grazier Problem" demonstrates the political force of satire and social criticism. The women question the interests surrounding land, ridicule competing claims to authority, and expose the consequences of violence. The song therefore challenges the idea that women's cultural performances belong only to the private or ceremonial sphere. By speaking publicly about land and political power, the performers participate in the moral and political life of the community. "Social Criticism," on the other hand, demonstrates the political significance of mourning. The women question the expectation that they should continue performing when they have lost children and relatives to conflict. Their repeated questions and lamentation turn personal and collective grief into public criticism. The performance therefore gives women a means of demanding recognition of their suffering while questioning the social structures that expect cultural performance to continue despite communal trauma.

The two performances also demonstrate that peacebuilding does not necessarily begin with an explicit call for reconciliation. It can begin with the recognition of conflict and the articulation of grievances. The women's performances create a space in which suffering can be named, authority can be questioned, and communal responsibility can be negotiated. Their criticism is therefore not opposed to peacebuilding. Rather, it forms part of the process through which the conditions necessary for peaceful coexistence can be imagined.

Ufueng consequently expands conventional understandings of women's peacebuilding. Women do not need to occupy formal political positions before their cultural practices can become politically significant. Through performance, they claim a public voice and use an established cultural form to address matters affecting the community. As Hogan observes, women's verbal arts can provide a medium for political contestation (1), while Budji's work demonstrates that women's culturally grounded performances in the Northwest Region can become forms of sociopolitical action (443). The significance of Ufueng therefore lies not only in its preservation of Aghem cultural heritage but also in its capacity to provide women with a recognized space for political expression. Through satire, criticism, lamentation, prayer, and collective singing, women make conflict visible and place communal responsibility before their audience. Ufueng should consequently be understood as both an artistic tradition and a form of indigenous peace-oriented political practice.

Appendix I: Transcribed Ufueng Texts in Aghem

"Social Criticism," : Zənlòna'esè

Ì Ghêm ghò a, Ghêm ghò a. · A lo ezuw ko mən. · Wo zən lò na' e sè. · Sə ki ko alefwà' a lo kətuw. · bonlo a Ghêm ghò · bonlo a mbòn ta'a to. · Wo ghe la'a so dən kə Aghəm kən so e sa' kəbe. · Wo Ndzughu ləghaa tsəghà ùkua · Kua wo, bughò sa' be ko. · Wo Ndzughu ləghaa təmbòn, wo mbòn tò, kwən sa' be ko. · Ù nyò'ò ləghaa Àkuw, Àkuw ghè tənjo kwən wo a dzəm. · Numsəzùghù u mò' mò dzè nyəa e so e sa' kəbe. · Gbele təlā tə fə nyə fē, ghe m bu boon ghà' ma. · Ghà' fē lò tsəgha êzən, tuw wa'a u fē fwà'à yò. · Tūu təla tə

fə nyə fē, ghe n nūn wī gha' ā wè ma. · Ghà' fē lò tsəgha êzəŋ mò ghue za'a e fē laan yō. · Ghâm ghò, Ghâm ghò, Ghâm ghò, a lo e zuuw ko mən. · Oo zən lò na' e sè, sè ki ko alefwà' alo kətūw. · bonlo a Ghâm ghò, bonlo a mbòn ta'a to a. · Hù wo ghe la'a so dən kə Aghəm kən so e sa' kəbe. · Wo Ndzughu ləghaa tsəghà ùkua, kua wo, bughò sa' be ko. · Wo Ndzughu ləghaa tàmbon, wo mbòn tò, kwən sa' be ko. · Û nyò'ò ləghaa sùghò, Àkuw. Wo Àkuw, ghè tənjo kwən wo a dzəm. · Numsəzùghù u mò' mò dzè nyəa e so e sa' kəbe. · Gbele təlā tə fə nyə fē, ghe m bu boon ghà' ma. · Ghà' fē lò tsəgha êzəŋ, mo tuw wa'a u fē fwà'ā yò. · Tūu təla tə fə nyə fē, ghe n nūn wī gha' ā wè ma. · Ghà' fē lò tsəgha êzəŋ mò ghue za'a e fē laan yō. · Ghâm ghò, Ghâm ghò, Ghâm ghò, a lo e zuuw ko mən. · Wo zən lò na' e sè, sè ki ko alefwà' alo kətūw. · bonlo a Ghâm ghò, bonlo a mbòn ta'a to a. ·

"Farmer-grazier Problem": Ghà'ncəkəda'a

· Ghà' dwa'a wən ncək k'ə nduw ko ā Zə ka'a kəlā kə leēn gha' maa. · Nu ghà' ki yo ghùw. · Ndò' nì kò' yí á ghēe, · naŋa tà'ā tsūghū alo təndūghū bughò sè sē wò ghà' · Nyəa a bughò sə nzəgha. · Ndùghùkwífəe ma fə bvū tsughu enyəa ghe wī wē ù ndughò aŋ ngwən a ghè səā zughā wō ā? · Ghà' nge fala nù. · Ndùghùkwífəe ma fə bvū tsughu enyəa ghè bû' dò'òdò'ò a sò' ghè səā zughā wō ā? · Ghà' tso ki yo ghùw. · Ghùw wəlà ù kí sum u wən wo mbòn to mà pfū sə na tò ù lo e nāa nduw gbe wō zəghà mò è zəa nduw. · Ghùw wəlà ù kí wē a wən gho, ù tso'ò ghèe ghee an ndughu, ù lo e səa nduw zəghà mò. · Ghà' fē dīnlò àwē. · Ghà' dwa'a wən ncək k'ə nduw ko ā Zə ka'a kəlā kə leēn gha' maa. · Nu ghà' ki yo ghùw. · Ndò' nì kò' yí á ghēe, naŋa tà'ā tsūghū alo təndūghū bughò sè sē wò ghà'. · Nyəa a bughò sə nzəgha. · Ndùghùkwífəe ma fə bvū tsughu enyəa ghe wī wē ù ndughò aŋ ngwən a ghè səā zughā wō ā? · Ghà' nge fala nù · Ndùghùkwífəe ma fə bvū tsughu enyəa ghè bû' dò'òdò'ò a sò' ghè səā zughā wō ā? · Ghà' tso ki yo ghùw. · Ghùw wəlà ù kí sum u wən wo mbòn to mà pfū sə na tò ù lo e nāa nduw gbe wō zəghà mò è zəa nduw. · Ghùw wəlà ù kí wē a wən gho, ù tso'ò ghèe ghee an ndughu, ù lo e səa nduw zəghà mò. · Ghà' fē dīnlò àwē.

Appendix Ii: Images Of Live Performance



Researcher participating during performance in a mourning ceremony

Source: Field work in Aghem-Wum 2026



Ufueng Performing during Social Activities

Source: Field work in Aghem-Wum 2026

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