

TACTIC LAMENTATION

Public mourning as protest.

CONTRIBUTED BY

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"MOURNING DOESN'T HAVE TO SURRENDER TO HOPELESSNESS AND DESPAIR. IT CAN ALSO BE A PROACTIVE MOVE AGAINST INJUSTICE."

"The politics of our time is the 'politics of the brokenhearted.'"
—Parker Palmer

Lamentation is the ancient practice of public tears or wailing. Especially in the Global South, it has retained its timeless power to name violence.

Mourning doesn't have to surrender to hopelessness and despair. It can also be a proactive move against injustice, especially extreme injustices that affect a broad segment of a community.

Lamentation is most often used as a *response* to a grave injustice, such as killings, war, or other forms of extreme violence. It garners publicity and evokes empathy. The wails of vulnerable people are heard by those who feel the day-to-day struggle of living under violence or other forms of injustice. This tactic is often most effectively used by women.

When women grieve in public and demand that their cries be addressed with action, they do so with undeniable moral authority and emotional power.

In August and September 2018, Anglophone Cameroonian women gathered in the towns of Buea and Bamenda to sit down together in lament of the civil war pillaging their land and causing the injury and murder of thousands. These interventions reduced the scope of attacks. In May 2019, lamentations were again conducted in these two towns, confronting the Prime Minister who conceded to the lamenters' demands for a peace dialogue.

POTENTIAL RISKS

Lamentation on its own usually achieves very little. It is designed to spur on subsequent action by those with the institutional power to bring about the desired change (e.g. a peace agreement, ceasefire, or reduction of brutality). Campaigners should be prepared for a long-term, persistent effort to achieve their overall goal. All hope should not be placed in this tactic alone (see: PRINCIPLE: Choose tactics that support your strategy).

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Lysistrata Project
- Panty power
- Round Dance Revolution
- Stripping Power in Uganda

Tactics

- Artistic vigil
- Forum theatre

In many African societies, women take public action only as a last resort. When they do so, it is recognized as an extreme measure, and the entire public, men included, are expected to do something to restore peace or address the injustice at hand. To disregard this responsibility can be understood as deliberate neglect of those in crisis.

Lamentation has been used across Africa with far-reaching results. In 2007, the indigenous Yatui community of the Mt. Elgon moorlands wailed, "Our children are dying" from their mountaintop for eight consecutive hours. Shamed into action, the Ugandan government designated land for their temporary relocation and promised them a permanent settlement, having been previously displaced when their land was included in a new national park.

The tactic of lamentation isn't limited to a one-off eruption of emotion; it can also be applied in a more ongoing and regular way. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, whose loved ones disappeared during the Videla dictatorship, have held weekly vigils (see: TACTIC: Artistic vigil) every Thursday since 1977, becoming a force to be reckoned with in Argentinian society and helping to bring down a dictatorship and expose human rights abuses.

Lamentation is used in times of extreme violence or injustice, particularly when innocent and vulnerable lives are lost or affected. It offers a space for mourning while simultaneously calling upon the community to take action against persistent injustices.

LEARN MORE

Injustice at Mount Elgon
Shua Wilmot, Solidarity Uganda, 2018
<http://solidarityuganda.org/injustice-at-mount-elgon/>

- Mass street action
- Sex strike
- Visibility action

Principles

- Anger works best when you have the moral high ground
- Bring the issue home
- Challenge patriarchy as you organize
- Give voice to those that can't speak
- Know your cultural terrain
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Seek common ground
- Show, don't tell
- Use the power of ritual
- Use your cultural assets

Theories

- Al faza'a (a surge of solidarity)
- Ethical spectacle
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- The social cure

Methodologies

- Hardship to grievance
- Pillars of power
- Story of self, us, and now

TAGS

Dictatorship, Human rights, Nonviolence, State violence, War and peace, Women's rights