

A Cultural-Theological Reflection on “Wacha Niongee Initoke” in Light of Ephesians 4:29: Why Do People Say What They Say?

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore a popular Kenyan apophthegm “*wacha niongee, initoke*”—loosely translated as “let me talk [so that] it leaves me”—in light of Ephesians 4:29: “Don’t use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them” (New Living Translation). The apophthegm proposes catharsis through speech, but this paper questions the insinuations of such speech for Christian living. Should those who follow Christ speak to relieve themselves without considering the consequences? Through observations, unstructured interviews, and real-life narratives, the study argues that God’s people, unlike the general public, should be mindful of the consequences of their words. Drawing from various sources such as the Bible, the paper challenges the church to cultivate speech that is not only authentic but also healing, constructive, and life-giving (see Prov. 18:21b; Eph. 4:15; James 3:6). The church must serve as a *querencia* for those who have been harmed by reckless words and as a prophetic voice characterised by veracity, mercy, and transformation.

Key terms: Church, Christian ethics, communication, speech, tongue, *wacha niongee*.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The church, the people of God, play many societal roles. One of the critical ones is to foster authentic communication that echoes both godly truth and human poise. In Kenya, a commonly used phrase, "*wacha niongee, initoke*", has gained popularity, particularly in digital spaces. Translated loosely into English, it means "let me talk, [so that] it leaves me." Although this expression may offer psychological relief, especially in emotionally charged settings, it raises theological and ethical questions. Does the Bible oppose or support that? Should believers speak just to unburden themselves, irrespective of the content or the impact of their speech on their listeners? Ephesians 4:29 urges believers to ensure their speech is good, helpful, and encouraging. The latter calls the church to deeply reflect on the implications of "*wacha niongee, initoke*," especially when contrasted with biblical teachings on the power of the tongue. This paper inspects the tension between expressive freedom and responsible speech, particularly within Christian communities such as churches and families.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Dangers of the Tongue to Others

A well-known proverb warns that "the tongue has no bones, but it is strong enough to break a heart" (Chilton, 2017). The quote implies that one should always be careful with what they say or utter to someone lest they harm them. The tragic story of Hamed in 2000 vividly demonstrates that. Hamed was a teenage student who died by suicide following relentless verbal bullying from his schoolmates. Hamed was a student at Enver Creek Secondary School in Surrey, Canada. He described the harassment he suffered in a five-page note he left for his family before leaping to his death from a bridge. His note read, "Mom, I was teased at school by my mates, my classmates, even my friends laughed at me. They always called me four-eyes, big nose, and geek" (CBC News, 2000).

Hamed's mom later said that her son was very clever in school, his marks always spoke volumes, and one of his last wishes that he expressed in his suicide note was that people may stop harassing each other and realise that teasing is hurtful. One of Hamed's friends from school said, "Everyone gets bullied. But this went too far. We stood for him, but people couldn't get the hint that this went too far" (CBC News, 2000). Hence, even if the tongue doesn't have bones, it can make things go too far, by breaking a heart or even ending a life. The news about cyberbullying could also be taken into consideration. The comments that someone reads on their posts or the messages that they receive on their phones can ruin or inspire their day. While the author was writing the paper at hand, he spoke to some of his phone contacts, especially young ladies, who shared that they stopped posting themselves or using their pictures on their profiles because of the kind of feedback their viewers give – fat, not beautiful, etc.

Dangers of the Tongue to Self

In Kiswahili, they usually say *ulimi hauna mfupa*. A rough translation in English is 'the tongue does not have a bone.' It is always said when someone makes an unintentional peccadillo while talking. For instance, instead of saying 'the school will not tolerate,' someone may find themselves saying "the school will not 'tolelate' or 'torelate.'" Technically, that is called the *lapsus linguae* or the slip of the tongue. One would hear a speaker saying in Kiswahili, "*samahani, ulimi uliteleza*," implying "I am sorry, the tongue slipped."

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Even the tongue can slide and make someone say what they did not mean to say. Sometimes, one can be laughed at because of that peccadillo or even asked to correct it in case it is a recording being done.

In the Bible, Proverbs 18:20 says, "From the fruit of a person's mouth his stomach will be satisfied, with the product of his lips he will be satisfied" (New English Translation). For some people, it could be possible to meet their needs through what they say. They could be comedians, teachers, orators, journalists, thespians, preachers, emcees, politicians, advisors, singers, etc. From what they say, they may not only fill their stomachs but also the stomachs of their families, followers, fellow countrymen and women.

However, the proverb following Proverbs 18:20 in the Bible, v. 21 reads "The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences" (NLT). Ross P. Allen commented the following about the verse, as quoted by Guzik: "The Midrash mentions this point, showing one way it can cause death: The evil tongue slays three, the slanderer, the slandered, and the listener" (Guzik, 2020). In other words, the tongue can bring death when it is badly used – it can kill not only the one being spoken against, about or to, but also the speaker.

Many Biblical narratives could be thought of; however, the one about Joseph, the son of Jacob, while he was still young, quickly comes to mind. The first mention of his brothers hating him comes after it seemed that Jacob, their father, loved him more than any of them. And the Bible says, "They hated him and could not speak a kind word to him" (Gen. 37:4c New International Version). The implication is that sometimes someone may be spoken to badly out of jealousy and hate by their speaker(s). Had Joseph closed his mouth about his prodigious and repetitive dreams to his brothers, perhaps they would not have hated him to the point of almost killing him, had it not been for his elder brothers Reuben and Judas, and God working behind the scenes (Genesis 37). So, it is right that the tongue, if not controlled, can hurt not only the one being spoken to or against but also the speaker.

The Tongue in Marriages

The mouth or the tongue has caused even marriages to be broken, or the foolishness of spouses to be seen. The story of Nabal, Abigail and David in 1 Samuel 25 may not be left out. Nabal reviled "hurled insults" at the messengers of David who had treated his shepherds and their flock well (v.7). David did not take that lightly; he wanted to kill Nabal. However, on his way to doing that, Abigail, Nabal's wife, got the news. She did not waste time but rushed to meet David and speak with him on behalf of her husband.

Some commentators say that Abigail made some serious mistakes in her interaction with David because no woman is supposed to speak of her husband as a fool, and that she was not outstandingly submissive or respectful to her husband. Others justify Abigail by saying that whatever she was dealing with was a matter of life and death, and in many cases, like those, someone may always be compelled to make serious mistakes. However, others highly regard her:

Abigail is a marvellous model of "sweetly speaking submission." Many Christian wives have the idea of "silent submission." They say, "I know my husband is wrong, but I won't tell him. Submission means I should shut up." That is wrong, and they should look to Abigail as an example. Other

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Christian wives have the idea of "sharply speaking submission." They say, "I know my husband is wrong, and God has appointed me to tell him. And boy, will I!" That is wrong, and they should look to Abigail as an example. Abigail gives the right example – submission that speaks but speaks sweetly instead of sharply (Guzik, 2018).

Indeed, Abigail spoke with David sweetly, and he changed his mind. The story of him taking her as his wife is another story after Nabal's unexpected death.

Some spouses sometimes wash their spouses' dirty linen in public, as they say, which is unacceptable. It happened that the author of the paper was in Nairobi at his university campus for a short stay. One night, he eavesdropped on a woman arguing with her husband. The husband was requesting her not to shout and to cool down, but she could not. She spoke for hours, although sporadically, mixing Kiswahili with one of the indigenous languages of Kenya. One of the security officers was called by the neighbours who could not sleep. After he arrived, the woman started to cry to the top of her lungs, saying that her husband was almost killing her. She even brought a panga, saying it was on her throat. The husband was taken away, and that is how silence came. The story suggests many things, and one of them is that the tongue has been used to lie and endanger people's lives. Christians should never be found guilty of that.

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overcoming the Dangers of the Tongue

The famous Winston Churchill said, "You will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks" (Churning, 2024). Those who commit suicide because they have been bullied or taunted, as the story of Hamed showed above, and those who start doubting their identity and beauty just because someone commented negatively on their posts may need to consider Churchill's saying at first. A dog may always bark once it sees a 'god' – someone different from it, taller than it, someone who looks like a threat to it. Perhaps the famous African saying that stones are always thrown at a tree that has fruit can also be cited.

In the book of Nehemiah in the Bible, one reads about the infamous opposition that Nehemiah and his fellow Jews faced in their efforts to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Two names among the opponents of the Jews remain infamous – Sanballat and Tobias. The former attacked by not just seeing them as feeble, but also by saying so, and the latter attacked what the people were building. He said "What they are building – if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their walls of stones!" (Neh. 4:3b). The opposition came in many forms, in speeches, letters and messengers but all those did not prevent the Jews from finishing that which they had set their eyes on. Nehemiah and his fellow Jews could not be prevented by the noises of the frogs from drinking water, as they say in Kiswahili *kelele za chura hazimzuii ng'ombe kunywa maji*.

There is a famous word in Kiswahili called "*mapepe*." It is a noun and designates someone who speaks and does things in a haphazard manner (*Kamusi Ya Karne Ya 21*, 287). They would never sleep or settle down until they have uttered that which they heard or eavesdropped. In traditional African settings, many young

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people may have heard or been warned against the dangers of being a *mapepe*. For instance, an aunty would warn her niece when she seems excited about a young man who has approached her in the village expressing his love for her that can lead to marriage "Don't tell it to your friends. They will start telling the young man negative things about you or make a coup d'état" the aunty would say. Therefore, sayings like a fish with a closed mouth never gets caught comes to mind. One of the ways to avoid the dangers of the tongue from ruining either self or others, as it has been shown above, is to keep the mouth closed.

Sayings such as *kikulacho ki nguoni mwako*, which translates into that which eats one is ever in their clothes, may also be scratched on. In his international bestseller, *48 Laws of Power*, Robert Greene speaks of "always say less than necessary" as law number 4 of the 48 laws of power. He narrates the following story to amplify the law:

In 1825, a new czar, Nicholas I, ascended the throne of Russia. A rebellion immediately broke out, led by liberals demanding that the country modernise – that its industries and civil structures catch up with the rest of Europe. Brutally crushing this rebellion (the Decembrist Uprising), Nicholas I sentenced one of its leaders, Kondraty Ryleyev, to death. On the day of execution, Ryleyev stood on the gallows, the noose around his neck. The trapdoor opened – but as Ryleyev dangled, the rope broke, dashing him to the ground. At the time, events like this were considered signs of providence or heavenly will, and a man saved from execution this way was usually pardoned. As Ryleyev got his feet, bruised and dirtied but believing his neck had been saved, he called out to the crowd, "You see, in Russia they don't know how to do anything properly, not even a rope!" A messenger immediately went to the Winter Palace with news of the failed hanging. Vexed by this disappointing turnabout, Nicholas I nevertheless began to sign the pardon. But then: "Did Ryleyev say anything after this miracle?" the Czar asked the messenger. "Sire," the messenger replied, "he said that in Russia they don't even know how to make rope." "In that case," said the Czar, "let us prove the contrary," and he tore up the pardon. The next day, Ryleyev was hanged again. This time, the rope did not break (Greene, 2010).

Someone's mouth may cause them to miss a pardon even when the offender has considered forgiving them. Had Ryleyev kept his mouth shut, as the quote above shows, after surviving his first execution, perhaps he would not have seen the second execution, since Nicholas I had started to sign his pardon, but it was torn up, and he did not survive the second execution.

***Wacha Niongee, Initoke* from Different Contexts**

The apophthegm above became famous in Kenya around the close of 2024. It is in 'Kenyan' Kiswahili. Its rough translation in English would go "Let or leave me talk for it to leave me." Someone else would say "*wacha niongee ile kitu, initoke*", implying "Let me talk so that *that thing* can leave me." It could also be used in the third person of singular, even plural "*wacha aongee* or *waongee [ile kitu] imutoke* or *iwatoke*" to mean "let him or her or them talk so that *that thing* can leave him or her or them." Sometimes, people are not only impeded from speaking out about things but also from getting a chance to speak.

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Many times, even those who get a chance to speak, speak so fast lest their chance is taken away or may need to beat about the bush lest their loose lips sink their ships. On national televisions, such as Citizen TV in Kenya, one would always see people fighting for opportunities to speak into a journalist's microphone, once in their neighbourhood, to report on something. In that case, the speaker may say " *wacha niongee [ile kitu], initoke.*" Let me talk about *that thing* to leave me. The *hoi polloi* (general public) may always have something shared that disturbs them.

During the days of former Tanzanian President, Dr. John Pombe Magufuli, who passed on in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, those who used to watch the news, sometimes saw his cortège stopping in villages around roads, not just for the president to greet the villagers but also to listen to their shared issues and find fast panaceas to them. Some people could fear to *say everything* against their 'local' oppressors, who happened to be government officials in many cases, in trepidation of what would happen to them or their family members after the president had left their village. The president was always seen and heard, encouraging them to *say that burning thing* and *everything* without fear, warranting their wellbeing even in his time off. One of the videos that trended in 2019; which has more than 4M views as of today was of an albino's prisoner called Thomas Nyamboge requesting President Magufuli to leave their prison with a guard who was oppressing them after saying all his wrongs (Barmedastv, 2019). In that way, the thing disturbing the prisoners not only left their representative, Nyamboge, but also themselves, and their prison in Mwanza following the president's unprecedented visit and assurance for safety. Hadn't Nyamboge said and let everything about their mistreatment in prison leave him, he couldn't have been a good representative and their issue would not have been resolved.

Apart from the changes in terms of persons with pronouns "I" which is represented by "ni-" in the apophthegm, or "him" or "her" which is represented by "a" *wacha ni/aongee [ile kitu], imutoke*; the verb *kuongea* meaning to talk can also be changed. So, the apophthegm could be *wacha ni/alie [ile kitu], ini/mutoke* to imply let me or him or her cry so that *that thing* can leave me, him or her. That shows that someone may cry, having something inside of them that is pushing them to cry, and after crying, they may feel light and relieved. Perhaps that is what some psychotherapists foresee when they always tell people to leave him or her, let them cry. The verb *kulia*, which means to cry, can also be changed into *kufunga*, meaning to close.

In Kenya, for instance, where the apophthegm resurged, some content creators make use of it in a reality that is so unfortunate in many towns in Africa. They would depict a landlord, a landlady or even a caretaker closing one of their tenants' doors due to overdue payments. In that scenario, a tenant can be heard saying to their spouse or children *wacha aifunge, [hiyo kitu], imutoke* let him or her lock it [my door] so that *that thing* can leave him or her. Some landlords, ladies or caretakers would even go as far as to lecture their tenants in public, washing their dirty linen before everyone on the plot in case they failed to fulfil their promises. In that case, *wacha aongee, imutoke*, which implies let him or her talk so that *that thing* can leave him or her, can again be said.

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Other Kenyans have started to write the apophthegm *wacha aongee, imutoke* on their president's posts, for instance, recently, when he was furiously warning them against the misuse of social media and the misconduct of many young people on the internet. They would write that in the comment section, not just to mean "talk until what is grudging you leaves you", but also "we do not care, talk and finish." That is an unfortunate state to be reached in a state where the general public no longer cares about what their leaders say, even their president, or commander in chief of the army. And even if they say that by throwing a stone at every dog that barks, one may miss their destination, leaders should never miss the opportunity to listen to the people.

Although sometimes they are considered like dogs; and their leaders, especially presidents, like gods; when all the dogs bark, 'gods' may do well not just by listening to the barking of the dogs but also by stopping whatever they are doing, finding out what made all the dogs bark and solving the issue before it is very late. In countries where freedom of expression is a right and the people know it, their issues may fail to leave them or their cities as they demonstrate, but they can also make one of them mighty and remove the 'gods' almighty from their thrones to thorns in the twinkling of an eye. They say in French that *la voix du peuple c'est la voix de Dieu* the voice of the people is the voice of God and *la masse n'a pas d'âme* the crowd never has a soul. Those declarations may have some defects, but history has proven them true, especially in matters of politics.

The author spoke with one of his Kenyan friends while he was working on the editors' feedback on this paper. She extended *wacha niongee initoke* in the context of relationships. A young lady would give a young man a chance to express what is in his heart, but the latter fails. She could also give him a chance to speak to her, and he overdoes it. He could find himself boasting or answering questions in a manner that is not expected or responsible, causing the young lady to reject him. That was captivating.

Implications to the Church

The apostle Paul in his letter to God's holy people, the church at Ephesus, asked them to live as children of light (Eph. 4). It could be possible that people talk to vaunt, complain, gossip, threaten, please, lie and deceive as shown in the sections above, however, Paul, the apostle reminded the church not to do that. People should talk to encourage, explain, and tell the truth. Talking may not be bad, but what one talks about may be bad. Asking for a chance to be allowed to speak what is in the heart without thinking about the consequences of that to the listeners is not encouraged. We have all been in meetings where people would request opportunities to speak, some use it to abuse others, others to bring others down and appeal for support, and others flaunt their big vocabularies, proverbs and knowledge but all those are futile if the speaker's aim is not to encourage, explain, clarify, unite as occasions fit.

Preachers and pastors should never fail to recall that as they preach, but also acknowledge that not all the sheep are bold and forthcoming to say what is in them; some are always timid and in trepidation, "What will they say if I talk?" In their small Christian groups or Bible studies, people like those should always be encouraged not only to speak but first and foremost to show up; sometimes they should be given a chance to pray when their meetings start, and if at all they shun from that, they should not be forced.

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Before verse 29 of Ephesians 4, Paul spoke of the need for unity and maturity in the church, verses 1-16. He finished verse 16 by emphasising how growth and maturity in the church should never leave anyone behind, both the leaders and the members and for the sake of this paper, those in the church who are outspoken and those who are not, mute people and eloquent people, the Jews and the Gentiles, etc.

A hamartiological note could be trussed here. There is no shop or industry for tongues. Only God creates them, the way he makes other body parts. However, the tongue is corrupted, like the whole body on which it belongs, following the fall of man. Not only do God's holy people, the church, live in a world where everyone's tongue is corrupted, but their tongues too are not made of gold. Their tongues also do not have bones; they may slide too, and they may say things to boast, complain, discourage and ignite opposition within the church based on doctrines, people and their tribes. That is not fiction, it has happened and it is happening. In that way, the church's light may not bring light to the society or its salt to be of taste in their milieu. The general public will also start writing on their posts *wacha waongee iwatoke* as they preach what they do not live. That would be the last stage of a dead society. A society in which the church's prophetic voice is no longer, not just because they have always been criticised, insulted, opposed and judged, but because they failed to use their tongues as Paul urged the church.

Therefore, the message of Psalm 141:3 should always be the church's prayer as the Lord gives them the tongues to speak and what to speak not just for things to leave them but also to correct, guide and build up – one another in the church and the society at large, they should also know when not to speak and let God speak "Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips (NIV)." It is also a sign of maturity and growth when someone, especially a follower of Christ in a society, is not just able to speak well but also knows when to tie and when not to tie their mouth well, as they say in the Eastern part of Congo. Even a fish would not get into trouble if it kept its mouth shut.

There is a Roman Catholic priest from Tanzania called Faustine Kamugisha. He could be found on YouTube by the very name. He always says that the tongue is the only organ that God created and built two fences for it – the mouth and the teeth – yet it always breaks the fences and causes havoc in the society. James, the apostle, wrote that it is like fire to the body on which it belongs (James 3).

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The church is called to be both a place of worship and a witness—a place of healing and a voice of truth. How the church speaks, both internally and externally, directly affects its ability to fulfil this calling. If believers adopt the secular mantra of "*wacha niongee, initoke*" without discernment, they risk compromising their witness and wounding others in the process.

Recommendations: First, church leaders must model redemptive speech. Pastors, elders, and ministry leaders should be examples of how to communicate truth with love, especially during conflict or correction. Harsh or careless language from the pulpit, in counselling, or online can alienate and injure rather than edify. As Paul commands, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt" (Col. 4:6). The words of leaders carry spiritual authority and emotional weight. Second, the church must foster spaces for healthy expression. People often default to "letting it out" destructively because they lack

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environments where they feel heard and understood. Small groups, counselling ministries, and peer support structures can offer believers the chance to process pain without harming others. Emotional honesty is vital, but it must be guided by spiritual maturity. Third, the church must recover its prophetic voice. In a culture of online outrage and verbal violence, the church can stand apart by speaking truth without cruelty, by confronting injustice without slander, and by lamenting without cursing. This is not silence or passivity—it is Christ-like restraint and wisdom. Proverbs 17:27 says, "The one who knows uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered." A prophetic church does not mirror the culture's speech patterns; it redeems them. Fourth, the church must disciple believers in the ethics of speech. Just as we teach prayer, stewardship, or service, so too must we teach speech. Sunday school lessons, Bible studies, and sermon series can address topics such as gossip, slander, encouragement, correction, and online conduct. When speech is treated as a discipleship issue, not just a personal preference, it forms believers in the image of Christ. Finally, the phrase "*wacha niongee, initoke*" reveals a deep human longing: to be heard, to release pain, to find relief. Yet, when placed alongside Ephesians 4:29, it also exposes tension. The Bible does not oppose expression, but it reframes it. Speech, for the believer, must not only serve the self—it must serve others. The church is called to cultivate speech that heals, builds up, and reflects the character of Christ. In a world that is drenched with noise, outrage, and reactive speech, the church must recover its role as a prophetic and pastoral community. This begins with the tongue—with the words spoken in private and in public, in person and online. Christians are not simply called to speak—they are called to speak *well*. If the church truly embraces the ethic of Ephesians 4:29, it will not only become a safe place for those hurt by words but also a transformative voice in a fractured world. Words can wound, but they can also heal. May the church choose the latter.

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