Redeeming Local Arts for Worship

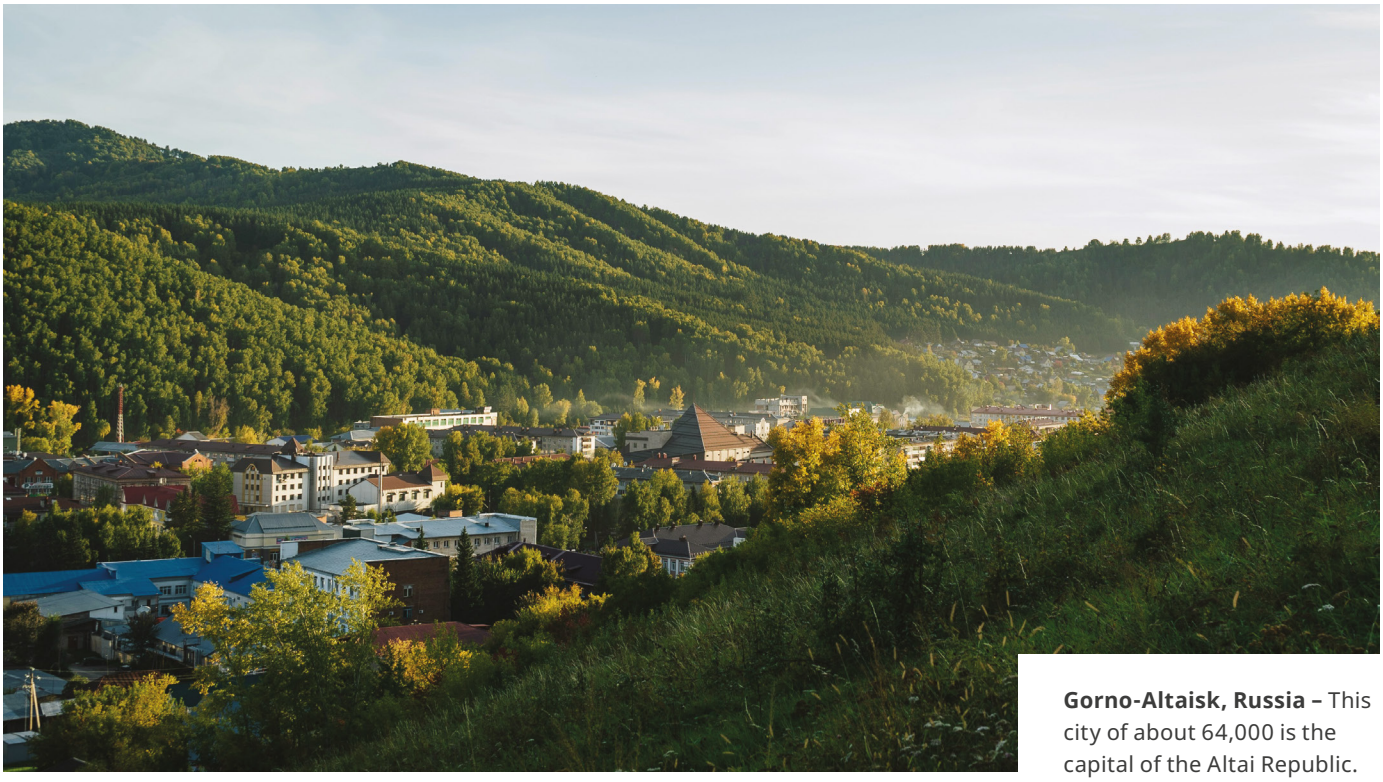
The Altai people of southern Siberia have a rich artistic history. A local Bible translation team studied local art forms to see which ones could be used to convey passages of Scripture from the Psalms and Judges. The result was a worshipful rendition of biblical passages performed using local arts. This deeply resonated with local audiences while also affirming the value of the Altai culture.

The Republic of Altai is the home of the Altai people. It is located in southern Siberia about 4,000 km (around 2,500 miles) west of Moscow. It is in the centre of Asia and borders China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan. The Altai people are estimated to number approximately 76,000.

Our Altai arts project began in 2019 when the Bible translation team gathered for a seminar on how to translate the Bible using oral Bible translation (OBT). This is a method of translation used for oral preference peoples (communities which prioritise oral over written communication).

The key feature of OBT is internalisation of biblical passages. Kris Toler defines it this way, "Internalization is mentally processing a piece of information to the point that a translator owns it, as if it were his or her own experience."[1] The emphasis is on the ability to retell the passage being translated in one's own words, in one's own language, and even to be able to adapt it to different audiences.

Internalisation allows improvisation with each instance of telling and retelling. It requires more than just intellectual comprehension of the words. Rather, it depends on complete



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Gorno-Altaisk, Russia – This city of about 64,000 is the capital of the Altai Republic.

comprehension of and immersion into the biblical passage so that it becomes as if it were part of the translator's own experience. The Altai translation team planned to translate 15 psalms in this way, one of which was Psalm 133. They also translated the story of Deborah from Judges 4–5.

The translation team decided that jangar would be particularly suitable for performing Psalm 133 because it reflects its values of unity and harmony.

RESEARCHING LOCAL GENRES

The translation project began by researching local arts genres in the Altai community. This initial analysis of local genres in the target language and culture helped the team determine which local genres may be suitable for an oral poetic rendition of a biblical text. Folklore is one of the most important parts of the traditional Altai culture. This folklore is made up of many different genres, including blessings, laments, myths, legends, folktales, epics, and of course songs.

Jangar Song

There is a special type of song in Altai which is both ritual and ceremonial, known as the *jangar* song. *Jangar* songs are one of the most popular and important genres in Altai. This type of song is used at prayer times, at weddings, festivals, family events and at other ceremonies where the song itself is part of the ritual. However, they are not sung at funerals.

Such a song can be dedicated to the homeland, to parents, to a child, or to the newly married. This type of song usually carries positive emotions and aims to encourage, inspire, and give joy to the people. The expression *jangar* has the idea of *making an echo*. The *jangar* song sounds like an echo, when it is sung by a group, because there is a lot of parallelism and repetition.

The subject of Psalm 133 is unity, and the communicative purpose is to inspire and motivate the listeners to a common goal. The Altai *jangar* folklore song is normally sung in unison and has its goal to edify and encourage the Altai people when they are in a community gathering.

The element of unity in the *jangar* song is emphasised by the fact that the song is normally accompanied by a ring dance, where the participants link arms and move slowly in a circular movement, and by the echoing of the lines of the song by the chorus. The translation team decided that *jangar* would be particularly suitable for performing Psalm 133 because it reflects its values of unity and harmony.

Oral Epic Tales

The Altai people have an intense affection for their epic tales. These epics are part of their oral tradition and hold great significance in their culture. An epic is a long narrative which features the heroic deeds and adventures of legendary figures.

Epic songs are not only found in the Altai region but have also been circulated across Asia for centuries, from Eastern Turkey, Mongolia, Siberia to Northwest China. Carole Pegg emphasises the importance of these stories in Altai, claiming "heroic epics are vital to contemporary Altaian culture and identity."[2]

Gallina Wood, in her research on Altai epics, demonstrates how Altai heroic epic poetry provides insight into the values held by this people group. Those values include reverence for the heavens, collective unity with the land of Altai and its natural environment, emphasis on family as an important asset, peacefulness and tolerance, courage in liberating their homeland from oppression, hospitality to guests and assistance to others, communal mindset, unique composition of beauty inspired by nature, and proficiency in art and music.[3]

Lauri Harvilahti posits that one of the primary objectives of an epic narrative is to bolster the self-esteem of the people and establish admiration for their history and culture. The hero, embodying the populace, is unconquerable – even if he suffered defeat once, he is ultimately indomitable and will eventually return. He believes that using epics in cultural life can have numerous beneficial impacts, particularly in reinforcing cultural and national identity.[4]

The themes of the Altai epic are timeless, addressing the ongoing battle between good and evil, light and darkness, truth and falsehood. The hero is endowed with magical abilities. For example, his horse has the ability to see and understand everything. The hero's wife has prophetic powers, and lets young women know who they will marry before the event takes place.

The hero often finds himself at war, defending his homeland, people, and love. The wars are against those who threaten Altai land and possessions, to win over prospective brides when there are too many suitors, and to reclaim thieved livestock. He consistently triumphs in these battles through miraculous acts.

In the Republic of Altai, heroic epic tales are sung using a technique known as throat singing or overtone singing. This type of guttural singing enables singers to produce more than one pitch at a time by taking advantage of the resonance capacity of their vocal organs – lips, tongue, jaw, velum, and larynx. It has been compared to the buzzing of a flying beetle! It is believed that this practice originated in southwestern Mongolia.

In the Altai Republic of southern Siberia, the native Altai people created their own type of throat singing called *kai*. Their traditional term for a storyteller is *kaichy*. The *topshur*, a two-stringed lute with its nylon strings tuned in a fourth and the upper notes strung above the low note, is typically played to accompany throat singing.

An animal's hide and stomach were traditionally used to make the sounding board and the strings. The instrument is believed to be endowed with a life-force of its own, initially transforming into a horse on which the epic teller can ride. It can further adapt and take the form of various inanimate objects, such as a boat, throughout the course of the epic.

The Altai oral epics were performed as shared events, with the *kaichy* combining memorisation of the epic and spontaneous improvisation. The delivery of these epic narratives facilitated the sharing and reinforcement of moral values within the Altai society.

These epic stories showcase artistic elements such as alliteration, addition, repetition, parallelism, and hyperbole. The plot and structure are both predictable in nature. These features assist the *kai* singer in the memorisation and the transmission of the texts.

In recent years, the presence of *kai* singers in Altai has decreased. However, there is currently a revival of epic stories being performed by young throat singers. This revival appears to be gaining popularity. It is clear that the epics remain an integral part of Altai culture and are highly significant for understanding its history and people.

The Altai translation team decided that the genre of Altai oral epics was the appropriate genre to perform Judges 4–5. They proceeded despite the fact that a small minority among Altai Christians consider the genre of throat singing as inappropriate for Scripture material because of its connection to shamanism.

One of the main Altai epic tales, *Ochy-Bala*, is about the land and people of Altai being saved by a heroine warrior Ochy-Bala, and in this way, it is similar to the story of Judges 4–5. Overall, it seemed to the team that the genre of telling epic stories is culturally suitable for telling the story of Deborah, Jael and Sisera, with the focus on the two female heroines saving the people of Israel.

TRANSLATION OF PSALM 133 AND JUDGES 4–5

In the case of Psalm 133, to internalise the psalm, we acted out the psalm using gestures and discussed the emotions that the psalmist was feeling when he wrote the song. We talked about the metaphors of the oil and the dew in the psalm and the importance of these in Hebrew culture. The team listened to several Russian translations of the psalm, before attempting an oral-lyrical translation of this psalm as a worship song in Altai.

With help from an exegetical advisor, the team created the initial first draft of the psalm as a *jangar* song. Then the team visited several areas of the Altai Republic to test the draft. During the testing, it was suggested making a video clip of the psalm with subtitles so that people can follow the meaning clearly. This video clip could be done in the countryside, potentially on a low mountain, with the Altai group singing in costumes standing in a semi-circle, swaying in *jangar* style.

Another idea was to include an oral introduction to this song, telling the audience that the psalm is about God's people living in unity, in order to make the message of the song more understandable. The Altai translation team, after a final meeting with the translation consultant, prepared a final recording of this psalm: https://youtu.be/uE9mZMnIh7Q.

Gorno-Altaisk, Russia – The Altai Bible translation team and Bronwyn Cleaver performed 10 concerts as an ensemble. They used local music styles to perform 15 psalms and an epic story from Judges.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRONWYN CLEAVER.

To internalise the story of Deborah from Judges 4–5, the Altai translation team drew the story in pictorial format and performed an amateur drama. This helped them engage with and experience the passage more fully.

As the team began to draft the first translation of these two chapters into the receptor language of Altai, the team discussed the characters in more detail, describing each one and what emotions they may have felt during these events. As it did with Psalm 133, the team tested the translation working with the consultant.

The Song of Deborah poem in chapter 5 is constructed from snapshots of scenes of the battle, the killing of Sisera, and the waiting in vain of Sisera's mother, which are presented in intensified detail. The death scene is vivid and emotional. The poem ends with a dramatic contrast of the two women, Jael and Sisera's mother, and the contrast of a curse for the Lord's enemies and a blessing for those who love him.

There are no metaphors or similes, but instead dynamic repetition, where one emphatic word or descriptive phrase is repeated, either unchanged or slightly altered, to give emphasis and passion. Such a dramatic and passionate victory poem provided the ideal text for the Altai translation team to design a performance-based oral Bible translation in Altai in the light of their traditional epics.

CONCERTS

The Altai team and I performed the psalms and epic story from Judges as an ensemble. We had two rehearsals followed by 10 full concerts, some in the main town of Gorno-Altaisk and some in other more remote regions of Altai. After each concert we conducted evaluations in focus groups with the local audiences.

After the two rehearsal concerts, the audiences made recommendations which were implemented into the 10 concerts. Here is a link to the performance of the second rehearsal concert and discussion afterwards: https://youtu.be/8ZrNNzosEDc.

The comments by the focus groups about the concerts in general were overwhelmingly positive. Everybody agreed that the quality and beauty of the hand-made Altai costumes contributed to the overall impression of the concert. As one person said, "I am very thankful for this great project, and I am very impressed with the costumes and with this musical group of performers. You are very talented, and we expect more and more of you. We hope you will tour round the Altai Republic and even round the world."

It was agreed that showing the Altai texts on the screen during the performance helped the audience. It made it easier to understand the content of the biblical passages, especially during the throat singing Altai epic on Judges 4 and 5.

Many people commented on their enjoyment of the use of different Altai national instruments, some people seeing them for the first time. One person said, "It was like being in a theatre. I loved it. You are the first people who have attempted to translate the Bible into Altai and perform it in this way." Another reported that the experience was "Mind-blowing!"

There was some confusion occasionally about the use of the Altai drum, which is linked to shamanism in the Altai culture. However overall, the opinion was that it is allowable to use this instrument in worship and Christian performance.

People found the psalms joyful, inspiring and encouraging to listen to, and in some concerts the audience joined in by dancing, clapping and singing. The response to the epic tale was varied, but more positive in the regions of Altai that were remote and further away from the main town where Russian is spoken.

Many said that the Altai epic tale based on the story of Deborah is appropriate for non-Christian audiences. Some suggested that stories from the New Testament could also be expressed in the epic tale genre, especially the life of Jesus. The audiences agreed that they came to a deeper understanding of the biblical passages and themes through the multimedia presentation.

"I was happy that God was worshipped at this concert, and I felt unity here among the people," explained one concert attendee. "It was very powerful that God's word was performed in the Altai language and using the Altai style of throat singing, and I was happy to sing psalms from the Bible in the Altai language."

The multimodal performances were appreciated greatly by almost all the audiences. The lyrics, the musical syntax, and the associated visual and multimodal cues all worked together in the Altai performances to effectively convey the meaning of Scripture to the Altai audiences.

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> “Singing this psalm, we understood that God is a God of the whole world, and all the nationalities of the world can worship him with their own language and their own instruments.”

PHOTO BY NICK NIGHT, UNSPLASH

Republic of Altai, Russia.

LOCAL ARTS REDEEMED

After the project was finished, I returned to the Altai Republic on holiday and attended a Sunday morning church service with a local Altai congregation. I was encouraged and filled with joy to witness Psalm 150 sung during the worship, and the Altai church clapping, dancing, and singing along, using this psalm to worship God.

The idea of redeeming local arts for worship is summed up by a quote from one of the Altai worshippers, “Singing this psalm, we understood that God is a God of the whole world, and all the nationalities of the world can worship him with their own language and their own instruments.”

Amen! ■

1. Kris Toler, “A Key Ingredient in Achieving Naturalness in an Oral Translation,” MA diss. (Dallas International University, 2020), 63.
2. Carole Pegg, “Re-sounding the Spirits of Altaian Oral Epic Performance: Kai Throat-singing and Its Repercussions,” in *Language Documentation and Description, 8: Special Issue on Oral Literature and Language Endangerment*, ed. Imogen Gunn and Mark Turin (London: SOAS, 2010), 128.
3. Gallina Wood, “Mudrost Naroda v Epose Altaja [Wisdom of the Altai in Epic Poetry],” MA diss. (Masaryk University, 2007), 10.
4. Lauri Harvilahti, “Epos and National Identity: Transformations and Incarnations,” *Oral Tradition* 11, no. 1 (1996): 45–46.

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