

[Article] Crying Ukhai: Engaging the Mongolian Church with the Folk Rock Genre



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C. P. Troutman and his family have been serving in Northern Asia since 2013. His work has focused on relational ministry in universities, theological education, and applied World Arts. He has a soft spot for minority groups, and his favorite people are the refugees he and his family have shared life with. As an MK growing up in Africa, Troutman developed a love for local, cultural forms of music; this grew into a passion for facilitating contextualized worship and the work of cultural revitalization.

This article is based on the work of Mongolian pastor and worship leader Nasaankhuu Aduuch, a personal friend who has graciously allowed me to share his story and songs here. Nasaa has developed a Mongolian folk-rock style of worship music, which is an excellent example of *contextualized* music for Christian spirituality with local, cultural artistic forms. In this, he seeks to lead his fellow Mongolian Christians more deeply into worship and help them share Christ's love with their communities in ways that make sense to them. We'll explore his work from three perspectives:

1. The first introduces the artistic genre of Mongolian folk-rock, so we can understand the larger cultural conversations going on around him.
2. The second looks at his work and how it compares to that of his non-Christian peers—what's the same, and what he decided should be changed.
3. Finally, the third explores some of the implications Nasaa's music has for the larger Mongolian church and its participation in Christian mission efforts. Will it be successful in accomplishing his goals? And if so, what will it change?

Part I. Introducing Mongolian Folk-Rock

First, what do I mean by “Mongolian folk-rock?” There are two basic answers. The first is that it's a fusion arts genre which combines elements from Western or globalized styles of rock music, with conventions from *distinctly* Mongolian folk genres. Two things to notice in this definition:

- Though most people would call it a “musical” genre, I want to emphasize that the genre encompasses more than just recorded music. *Visual art* elements (such as performers' clothes or instrument design) are very important, both for live concerts and especially for music videos. Also, practitioners use many folk arts that have traditionally been more *oral-verbal* artforms, closely related to storytelling or poetry. So I argue that folk-rock is a *multi-modal* genre.
- I say “distinctly” Mongolian, instead of “traditional,” because the focus here is on evoking Mongolian identity rather than staying literally faithful to historical formats. Folk-rock bands tend to take the most culturally evocative elements from various



different folk genres and mix them together. This creates something that's not exactly traditional but still feels very *Mongolian* to their audience.

After performing form analysis on a representative sample of bands from both Mongolia and Inner-Mongolia (a province of China),¹ I suggest some elements and conventions as particularly significant to artists in this genre.

In terms of *musical features*:

- *Melody*. Melody is often the key to making songs *feel* Mongolian; even when the harmony is altered in Western ways, the melody tends to retain its Mongolian character. As in all music systems, this is accomplished through an underlying melodic grammar: the intervals used, their organization, whether the songwriter can move from this note from that note, and so on.² Minor pentatonic scales are the most common,³ but these are generally not *strictly* pentatonic, but rather *pentatonic-biased* melodies. Songwriters can use the two extra diatonic notes,⁴ but they're usually limited to transitional and particularly powerful or poignant phrases.
- *Harmony*. In contrast to fully "traditional" Mongolian music, many folk-rock bands have converted their harmony to standard Western chordal progressions. Notably, this doesn't seem to obscure the Mongolian identity. However, some bands prefer to maintain a more indigenous harmonic feel by seeking some musical overlap between Western rock and Mongolian folk music,⁵ allowing them to write passages that are at home in both systems. Much of Mongolian musical accompaniment, for example, has a distinct repeating ostinato⁶ or arpeggiated phrase played over a drone pitch. If musicians play these phrases like rock riffs on their guitar, or (conversely) play rock riffs on their traditional instruments, they can create a fusion that sounds Mongolian but also interesting and fresh. Nomadic music generally only forms harmonies with a fourth or a fifth (similar to Western rock

Ex. 1: Folk Song Composed in Minor Pentatonic Scale. "Hong Galou," by Hanggai, available at the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ch7gi-XEEE>

Ex. 2: Ostinato Phrase on Tovshuur and Electric Guitar. "Wisdom Eyes," by Nine Treasures, available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAQsFN64rEQ>

¹ In addition to Nasaa, these include the Hu, Altan Urag, and Jonon from Mongolia, and Hanggai, Nine Treasures, and Suld from Inner Mongolia.

² *Creating Local Arts Together* discusses this concept in more detail in "Step 4B," in the section "Underlying Symbolic Systems" (Schrag 2013, Kindle Location 3137, 3050).

³ The major pentatonic is not unusual, though it is less common.

⁴ That is, the second and sixth degrees of the minor pentatonic scale.

⁵ The producer and sculptor of the Hu's signature sound, B. Dashdondog, discusses this at length in a televised question-and-answer session (Oyuna B 2019c).

⁶ Repeating phrases of music creating a "background" to be sung over, such as with repetitious rock guitar "riffs."

music’s “power chords”), playing only two or three “chords” (this is not a Mongolian term, though it’s been largely adopted) for the whole song. Both aspects work quite well with rock music, so the common ground can be fruitful for experimentation.⁷

- *Vocal timbres.* Folk-rockers often use certain evocative vocal techniques, such as *hoomei* (“throat-singing”) or the characteristic “tight” yet soaring *urtiin duu* (“long-song”) voice⁸ with many trills, glottal stops, and melismatic⁹ ornamentations. Folk songwriters have also popularized a deep, bellowing chest voice in the past century or so.¹⁰ Another popular, accessible technique is to use long, trailing melodic vocables (sung syllables that have no actual, lexical meaning) as introductions or interludes.¹¹ Some of these, like “zee” and “huu,” have a long history in Mongolian music,¹² while others (like “whoa”) are more modern and Western-influenced.
- *Instruments.* Using national or traditional instruments is almost obligatory, especially the *morin huur* (“horsehead fiddle,” a two-stringed bowed instrument) and the *tovshuur* (a plucked and strummed two- or three-stringed lute); these are nomadic instruments, so they feel very *folk*. The *yatga* (a long, plucked zither or harp) and *yochin* (hammered dulcimer) are also quite common; these were either royal court or Buddhist instruments, so they have a more “Mongolian *classical*” feel.¹³

Ex. 3: *Vocable in Urtiin Duu Timbral Style with Melismatic Ornamentation.* “Eej Mongol,” by Altan Urag, available here (sample begins at time stamp 3:24): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9CA4qnbNu4>

As for *oral-verbal arts*, major conventions worth noting include how bands use rhyme schemes, poetic allusions, common topics, and specific genres (different types of poetry, storytelling, and so forth). For example:

⁷ This is another aspect discussed by B. Dashdondog (Oyuna B 2019c).

⁸ *Urtiin Duu, bogin duu, shorunkhai* uses

⁹ “Melismatic” refers to the practice of holding out a single sung syllable for an extended time, traveling over many different notes. Further discussion can be found in *Creating Local Arts Together* in “Step 4b,” in the category “Performance Features” (Schrage 2013, KL 2994, 3027).

¹⁰ Although I’ve yet to hear it directly stated, it seems logical to posit that the influence of Soviet-era Russian forms of folk singing probably had an effect here, as the similarities between vocal timbres are notable.

¹¹ These can be sung with any vocal timbre, but often singing uses one similar to *urtiin duu*. This evokes that auspicious genre, resituating it within a popular format.

¹² For example, Carole Pegg discusses the history of using the vocable “zee” to introduce performances of *magtaals* praise songs and *aizam* long-songs (Pegg 2001, 59), and Oyuna Weina discusses the use of the vocable “ne” (Weina 2018, 8).

¹³ Carol Pegg discusses these instruments and their use at length (Pegg 2001, 67–71, 81, 86–90).

- *Alliteration.* Mongolians rhyme with alliteration (of either consonants or vowels) at the *beginning* of lines, rather than assonance (vowel sounds) at the end.¹⁴

- *Characteristic approaches to the senses, emotions, and memory.* Songs about familial or romantic love, the beauty of one's homeland, or epic folk heroes are always popular, but one of the most interesting poetic

techniques is to take a sort of mental “snapshot” of all the sensory inputs (sights, smells, temperature) surrounding an emotionally significant experience. These are often beautifully poignant, and are a sort of “active memory” which lets one visit the people and places they’ve left behind.¹⁵

- *Use of established oral-verbal genres.* In English, if I were to start a poem, “There once was a man from the city,” native speakers would understand what I’m doing; they would know the poetic form it’s going to take, that it’s going to be humorous rather than solemn (an effect known as “framing”¹⁶), and what is and isn’t appropriate subject matter. And if I deviate from that formula, they would notice. So following or breaking

Ex. 4: Front-End, Alliterative Rhyming and Sensory Snapshot Approach. Lyrics from “Baifang,” by Hanggai:

*Khunnai gazart erdem surhaar khuireed irkhed bi chin
Khoigshin buural eej an nurhad garla da
Khoimseg in door nuilmes an buiteen uulaad
hotsarsan ejj deen
Khoikhen duunai ekehn sar daan ochaad jolgana da*

*“To the faraway place, I went to for my learning
I was leaving my old grey mother
Tears fell from her eyes and well wishes as I left
The cuckoo sounded, I saw him early...
Fog remained over a blue-eyed lake and the land
In the rainy early summer I left”*

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNJ_FtYbTtc)

Ex. 5: Resembling Magtaal Genre. Lyrics from “Kukh Holboton (Blue Mark),” by Altan Urag:

*“Throughout its vast steppe exists
Beautiful sound of Morin Khuur strings
Supporting the long song
Melodious singing for the race horses.
The nation with fortune and blessings
Founded by Genghis Khan
With history and culture of a thousand years
Blue Mongols descended from the sky”*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcnymqypPk0>)

¹⁴ In fact, researchers suspect this is the oldest organizational literary device Mongolians have employed, so its importance for connotating identity shouldn’t be overlooked (Pegg 2001, 51).

¹⁵ Theodore Levin summarizes this phenomenon: “The point is not simply to bring back memories, but actually to travel back to that place and experience it again so that it comes alive” (Levin 2010, 33). And as he and Lialiana Carrizo explain elsewhere, depictions of emotionally laden landscapes are often entangled with the emotional significance of life events as part of an integrated experience (Levin 2010, 94–95; Carrizo 2011, 13, 20, 32, 35). Carole Pegg also describes the concept of a “snapshot” in her discussion of *magtaal* praise poetry/song (Pegg 2001, 58).

¹⁶ This concept is also discussed in *Creating Local Arts Together* (Schrag 2013, KL 3687).

those expectations are powerful ways of communicating a message. Mongolian oral-verbal art is expressed through many genres: praise-songs, epic narrative, blessings, curses, riddles, proverbs, jokes, well-wishes, folk tales, introductions for competitors, and more.¹⁷ Some of these, like the *magtaal* (praise poem or song), are especially important when discussing approaches to Christian worship.

Ex. 6: Invocation of Baatar, and Use of Many Visual Symbols. Lyrics from “The Great Chinggis Khaan,” by the Hu:
*“Called by Teb Tenger
 Bestowed to enrich the world
 The bearer of the eternal Tenger
 The lord of the blue Mongol
 The Great Chinggis Khaan”*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pD1gDSao1eA>

- *Invocations.* Names are particularly significant in Mongolian oral arts. If a performer names a particular figure, usually a folk hero or religious figure, they can very powerfully summarize all the arguments, actions, and social values they embodied (besides, of course, having a poetic, descriptive, or religious meaning in their own right). Part of the underlying, shamanic belief structure that helped shape many Mongolian cultural sentiments is that powerful spiritual presences pervade this world; one belief is that the spirits of legendary folk heroes (*baatars*, discussed below) are never fully departed from the world, and that their power could still be accessed by invoking their names in songs or epic poems.¹⁸ Actively remembering such figures allowed a participation in their character, to be invigorated by their strength to face one’s own life struggles. Of course, many contemporary Mongolians would call such beliefs “superstition,” but the cultural intuition that the past can fill you with excitement, energy, courage, and strength is still alive and well, even in secular urban society.¹⁹

¹⁷ While Carole Pegg has perhaps the most complete ethnography (at least in English) of Mongolian music, there are also several other shorter summaries that provide a good survey of the various genres within Mongolian folk music, for anyone wishing to learn more (Pegg 2001; Ormiston n.d.; Powell n.d.; Hays n.d.; Mackerras 1983).

¹⁸ This phenomenon is discussed repeatedly in the context of oral epics in the nomadic cultures of Central Asia (Levin, Daukeyeva, and Köchümkulova 2016, 44–45, 50, 70, 77, 80, 111, 188, 190), by Levin again in his description of how in Tuvan beliefs merely producing timbral sounds associated with significant figures can summon energy (Levin 2010, 77), by Pegg in regard to how hybrid Buddhist and shamanist beliefs create the concept of a collective soul and allow oral epic storytellers to manifest ancestral and other spirits (Pegg 2001, 95–96, 130–31, 166–68), by Jeffery Hays in his summary of the social functions of Mongolian oral epics (Hays n.d.), among many others.

¹⁹ In a panel discussion, author Janice Raymond (who translated and published an excellent collection of Mongolian proverbs) observed: “Proverbs illustrate levels to the culture that people within the culture don’t see. The belief in the unseen world was something [my Mongolian friends] didn’t talk about when they were [directly] explaining the meaning of proverbs, but when I looked at the way they were using them [in everyday life], you could see that their belief here was still very strong” (Raymond 2021). I clearly observed the same phenomenon while researching the Hu; the band, their producer, and those interviewing them on television and via the internet repeatedly made references to concepts such as contributing/conveying “energy” that required a metaphysical component that very few of my acquaintances from similar demographics would have openly discussed (Oyuna B 2019c; 2019b; 2019a; *The Hu: Live Performance and Q&A* 2019; 2019d).”

- And finally, rich and powerful *visual symbols* are everywhere. Clothes are one example; it's common to wear the traditional Mongolian garment (the *deel*), either in a more traditional style or a modified, modern rock style—which signifies the performers' fusion of ancient and modern identities. The armor of ancient Mongolian warriors is also common, symbolizing the strength and pride of the golden era. Spirit banners (white for peacetime, black for war) were said to collect and pass along the spirit and strength from one generation to the next. There are also symbols associated with shamanism (such as the shaman drum, or *ovoos*²⁰), Buddhism (such as the endless knot), and of course, nomadism (the ger, landscapes, herds, horses, wolves, and many others).

This is the first answer to the question, “What is Mongolian folk rock?” However, there's a second answer that's even more important: It's an ideological and spiritual conversation taking place within Mongolian culture. The past century has been marked by massive social change, and many Mongolians are still negotiating their communal identity and asking questions about who they are in the modern era. The best way I know to introduce this conversation is by describing how it corresponds to *time*. Generally, there is *pride in the past, discontent with the present, but hope for a restored future*.

First, the past is something to be proud of; it's where one's strength, inspiration, and spiritual power are rooted.²¹ Two legacies are emphasized: the *baatars* (ancestral, legendary heroes) and nomadic heritage (linked to ancestral honor). *Baatars* are generally historical figures who have gained a legendary or even semi-deified status.²² Chinggis Khaan is a perfect example. He's understood to have established Mongolian identity; after being chosen by *Tenger* (heaven) to bring peace and order to a chaotic world by uniting it under his banner, he unified the Mongolian tribes and established what would become the largest land empire in history.

In Western schools, students are taught that the Mongols were, essentially, monsters. Meanwhile, Western history's own ruthless conquerors earn titles such as “Alexander the *Great*” and have prominent cities named after them. Clearly there is some historical bias. As far as imperial powers are concerned, the Mongols could be considered better than most. As long as vassal states paid their taxes, they could keep their own governors, their own religion, and their own languages and cultures. Under leaders like Kublai Khan, the Mongolian empire became quite progressive, establishing a *Pax Mongolica*²³ not unlike Rome's—thousands of miles of safely guarded trade networks, a pony express-style communication system, the first passports, the first implementation of paper money. They brought their best scholars and artisans to the first truly cosmopolitan

²⁰ Piles of sticks or stones set at significant points in the landscape, such as specific points on mountains, that are used for Shamanic prayer and ritual.

²¹ Rebekah Plueckhahn's dissertation is an excellent source on modern expressions of traditional Mongolian cosmology, including the concept of the “ancient” past as a source of spiritual power (Plueckhahn 2013, 75, 253–54).

²² Levin discusses this aspect of Baatars in his look at oral epics in nomadic culture (Levin, Daukeyeva, and Köchümkulova 2016, 43–47).

²³ This term is somewhat controversial, though the basic idea is agreed upon (Hays n.d.; “The Mongols' Mark on Global History” 2021)

capital, Kharkhorin, and spread their knowledge across the empire. In fact, many technological innovations came to the West via Mongol trade routes—including two perennial favorites: bowed instruments and pants.²⁴

To be clear, I have no desire to idealize *baatars* like Chinggis, nor to glorify their violence. Still, it's easy to see why, when Mongolians look back on their history, they don't see them as barbarians but as leaders who were innovative, clever, wise, strategic, progressive, courageous, and strong. These figureheads not only made them a global superpower but also formed the philosophical core of Mongolian virtue.

Perhaps less controversially, Mongolians have a rich nomadic heritage as well. As nomads, Mongolian culture developed close relationships with their natural environment. The vast grassland that exists today is not a purely "natural" phenomenon, but the product of thousands of years of intentional cultivation by nomadic herdsman.²⁵ The land is a common, mutual inheritance that has sustained them for untold generations, so the landscape itself has incredible significance and symbolic meaning for most Mongolians.²⁶

All of this past glory provides strength, but it also entails responsibility. The status of Mongolians as a people with a special election from heaven *and* the inheritance of this generational nomadic cultivation require that people honor where they came from and care for what they've been given—whether their identity and historical legacy or their natural environment.²⁷

That was the past. What about the present? It's not so fortunate. The present is full of *discontent*—the pervasive sense that something has gone terribly wrong. Domination and destruction followed the collapse of the

Ex. 7: Depiction of what Mongolians Cherish. "The Sacred," by Jonon:
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70wUiJVifYc>)

Ex. 8: Listlessness and Discontent. "Memory of Nomadism," by Suld:
"My vast mother grassland
I was told our great ancestors
were here for a thousand years
Wandering soul of ancient nomads
Telling stories of the king of this
land

Hawks are soaring high
Without fully grown wings
How to fly in this colorful world?"
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4zbCCVw6tE>)

²⁴ Jack Weatherford's admittedly revisionist history of the Mongolian empire, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, investigates this entire sequence of events with great clarity (Weatherford 2005).

²⁵ I owe this insight to Liliانا Carrizo's excellent master's thesis on Mongolian long-song (Carrizo 2011, 22).

²⁶ Not surprisingly, this shows up in Mongolian spirituality. Traditionally they believe spirit *ezen* (or masters) occupy geological features like mountains or rivers, which you honor with music, prayers, and offerings, and in return are allowed to inhabit the land successfully (Plueckhahn 2013, 181–84, 195–96, 217–20; Levin 2010, 27–30; Carrizo 2011, 13, 20; Schubert 2008; Pegg 2001, 148–49). This reciprocal relationship has formed Mongolian culture in particular ways, even for those who no longer explicitly believe in spirits.

²⁷ The concepts of spiritual reciprocity's demand on humanity and lyrics explicitly referencing the reality-altering heritage of being chosen by heaven are clearly evidenced in the practices and song texts of Mongolian folk music (Giron 2007, 72–73; Pegg 2001, 97, 130–133, 112–118). However, they become even more explicit in the lyrics and imagery of folk rock bands such as the Hu in their song "Yuve Yuve Yu" (The Hu 2018) and their devastatingly visual depiction of the betrayal of Mongolian values perpetrated by the mining industry in their cover of Metallica's "Sad But True" (The Hu 2020). This last video also contains an amazing number of shamanic visual references and metaphors.

empire in the wake of the Black Plague.²⁸ First the Qing dynasty, then the Russian Empire, then the Bolsheviks, then the CCP, as well as the equally destructive, Soviet-backed Mongolia Communist Party. The homeland was ripped to pieces, and Mongolian culture and society received unbelievable violence. Monks and the literate class were slaughtered by communist regimes,²⁹ who endeavored to bury traditional beliefs and lifestyles. The majority of nomads were forcibly settled and urbanized. And perhaps worst of all, the land was pillaged, carved up and polluted by the mining industry (often by Mongolian companies, which is a source of shame and anger). Then, to make matters worse, the Soviet system collapsed, plunging the region into poverty and leaving them to “pick up the pieces” for themselves.³⁰

Not surprisingly, the result of this level of oppression and cultural violence, especially on a people with this sense of election and responsibility, is a massive psychological and societal burden. Many herders have been forced to move into cities, often because their herds have died due to environmental degradation.³¹ The loss of traditional herding gender roles leaves men, especially, feeling lost, bored, and useless. This is exacerbated by the fact that there are few jobs for them in the city. Young men also frequently encounter this: a complete lack of prospects. The result is that many people carry around a deep sense of anger, despair, and shame. Alcoholism, vagrancy, brawling, and domestic abuse soon follow. All this is compounded as society looks around and sees the environmental damage and lack of political power they’ve inherited—“this is not what Mongols are supposed to be.”

Still, though, the *baatar* fighting spirit has not vanished. The present is a source of discontent, but it’s also where the battle is. It’s *here*, in the present, that they will make a stand, *here* where they will fight for change. Some people may have lost hope, but as a whole, Mongolians

Ex. 9: Calling and Frustration. “Yuve Yuve Yu,” by the Hu:

“You were born in our ancestors’ fate
 Yet sleeping deeply, and can't be awakened
 How strange, how strange
 Blindly declaring that Only Mongols are the best
 How strange, how strange...
 ...Why is it so hard to cherish the Ancestors' inherited
 land?
 How strange, how strange
 Why are the priceless virtues of our elders turning to
 ashes?
 How strange, how strange”
 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4xZUr0BEfE>)

²⁸ I owe this insight about the role of the black plague in the collapse of the Mongol empire to Jack Weatherford (Weatherford 2005, KL 179–227, 2718–2786).

²⁹ Unfortunately, I have not been able to find an image of it, but in a history museum in Dund-Govi Province I once saw a moving and disturbing painting depicting the tossing of executed monks’ remains into a mass grave; this seems to have left a perceptible scar in the Mongolian psyche. These events are also discussed in the volume *Buddhism in Mongolian History, Culture, and Society* (Wallace 2015, 193).

³⁰ This process has been investigated in detail by Baataranary Tsetsentsolmon in her article “Music in Cultural Construction: Nationalisation, Popularisation and Commercialisation of Mongolian Music,” and by Peter Marsh in his book *The Horsehead Fiddle and the Cosmopolitan Reimagination of Tradition in Mongolia*. Pegg and Levin include shorter, but still excellent and insightful, summaries of the implementation of Soviet music and cultural policies in Mongolia and Central Asia (Pegg 2001, 249–51; Levin, Daukeyeva, and Köchümkulova 2016, 19–21).

³¹ There are many reports on this subject, but the article “Risk and Vulnerability of Mongolian Grasslands under Climate Change,” by Banzragch Nandintsetseg, has especially reliable data: (Nandintsetseg et al. 2021).

are not fatalistic. They intend to pick themselves up and reestablish their name, bringing that honor from the past into the present.

This brings us to the future. The future is the realm of restored hope. It's not simply that things are going to work out; it will take familiar shapes, though these change depending on your perspective. For some, this is political freedom and economic security. Many Mongolians continue to suffer political and cultural repression—for example, recently Mongolia was banned from high schools in Inner Mongolia.³² For others, hope is a matter of internal mastery—often facilitated by Buddhist concepts of peace and contentment, learning how to resolve the endless internal listlessness and wandering that plagues them. For many, there's an urgent need to reconcile

their past and present identities, to learn how to reestablish Mongolia on the global stage—politically and culturally, artistically—in a way that pays homage to the past without becoming “stuck” there, and that can sustain itself economically without destroying their environmental heritage.

For many, these battles can be illustrated by a well-known mythological hope. It has been said that one day, Chinggis *baatar* will return to the world and lead his people to victory once again. Everyone knows about this belief, but it's come to represent different things to different people. Some see it literally, that he's been deified and will come back with a vengeance. However, many see it more in spiritual terms, that his essence or “spirit” will be reincarnated into another person who will accomplish something amazing (actually, some believe this has already happened multiple times and will happen again).³³ But even urbanized Mongolians, who might scoff at traditional beliefs, still find meaning here. It represents an ingrained historical and cultural truth, an aspect of Mongolian identity that's been driven into their very bones: “we'll figure it out, Mongolians always come out on top.”

Ex. 10, 11: Two Renditions of Contextualized Buddhist Faith. “Samsara” by Hanggai and “Bodhicitta” by Nine Treasures:

“Last year's sun shining still from skies heavenly.
Last era's songs singing still in the present days.
Our finite life passes the torch of glory,
In a changing world, unchanging faith.”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJFq-a9-oyc>)

“Yet the wisdom is flashing in front of you
Can you seize it and grab it?
Follow the light of enlightenment,
March forward with valor
We wish for everyone to keep on going
We wish for everyone to chase the eternal”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyMszGI1M3k>)

³² This issue has also been the subject of numerous news reports, with one reliable source being NPR. Their coverage can be viewed at this link: <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/16/912623822/parents-keep-children-home-as-china-limits-mongolian-language-in-the-classroom> (Feng 2020).

³³ Vesna Wallace's two articles in *Buddhism in Mongolian Culture* (chapter 10, “How Vajrapāṇi Became a Mongol,” and chapter 11, “What Do Protective Deities, Mongolian Heroes, and Fast Steeds Have in Common?”) are excellent investigations of how such beliefs are merged syncretically with Buddhist spiritual concepts, such as reimagining the Khans as Buddhist deities (Wallace 2015, 179–221, 188–89). Chris Powell's brief article on “Buddhist Music in Mongolia” offers a shorter summary of the concept (Powell n.d.).

Part II. Nasankhuu Aduuch: Worship Pastor and Folk-rock Musician (and Former Hooligan) from Darkhan

At this point, we might ask: If someone wanted to use this genre in Christian worship and mission, how would they do so, and do it *well*? How would they make it both fully Christian and fully Mongolian folk-rock? It would seem reasonable to say they would need both of these elements: the artistic features and the participation in the cultural conversation. This is what Nasaa has been doing (intuitively, of course, without all the technical analysis written above).

I met Nasaa at a gathering of Christian worship leaders and musicians. Having heard about my recording and arts development work with local young musicians, he approached me to introduce himself. Wearing a smile, black hip-hop clothes, and a backward cap, he said simply, “Hey man, we need to be friends!” Over lunch, Nasaa shared his story with me. When he was younger, he told me, he’d been a hooligan (his word). By that, he’s referring to a category of young men with few prospects and much anger, who often wander around town getting drunk, breaking things, and getting into fights. “Dark days,” he characterized it. He was also a very talented musician and a member of a reasonably successful rap group, but his music was antithetical to his current evangelical Christian values. After becoming a Christian, his character was utterly transformed. Eventually he became a youth pastor and a worship pastor.

Before long, Nasaa decided to try using his musical talents for God. He felt rap was ruined for him, so instead he played his guitar and began to write Christian worship songs. However, he soon discovered what he considered a major problem: his melodies and lyrics always sounded “too Mongolian.” That’s not what he was hoping for; he wanted to write songs like those of Hillsong or Jesus Culture. He became frustrated with God, asking, “Why did you give me this gift? No one wants to hear this!” He decided to give up, and for a few years wrote no songs at all.

This hiatus ended, however, when Nasaa attended a worship conference in Ulaanbaatar and heard the testimony of a woman named Ganaa, one of the preeminent worship songwriters in the Mongolian church, with most churchgoers knowing at least a few of her songs. Nasaa listened as she shared a vision she believed God had given her, that it was through the Mongolian “traditional arts” that God was going to “have victory” in Mongolia.³⁴ In that moment, Nasaa recounts, he was certain God was calling him to be a part of that vision, and that his Mongolian-sounding songs were to be instruments of God’s mission. He describes how that night, he was so excited he couldn’t sleep; he felt God was calling him to get up and write a song, right then. So he got out of bed, went to the living room, and began to play his guitar. At that moment, he says, a song simply “poured out of him,” from beginning to end—every chord, every note, every word, without a single mistake. Since that time, he’s written dozens more.

What’s Nasaa trying to accomplish with these songs? Several things:

³⁴ Just as with Nasaa, I had the privilege of meeting and conversing with Ganaa directly; these phrases are hers.

First, he's hoping to "Mongolian-ize" the church for both worship and mission. As in many Buddhist and post-Soviet countries, in Mongolia there is a strong perception that Christianity is a foreigner's religion—the figure of Jesus doesn't, *can't*, look or sound Mongolian. Certainly, many Mongolian congregations strengthen this impression by conducting services in Western meeting formats, with Western sermons and Western songs. This often does appeal to many younger, urbanized Mongolians (if the worship is polished enough), but it leaves other people untouched and uninterested. Even for those who do believe, their faith doesn't challenge their fundamental worldviews but becomes more of a Christian nominalism.

For Nasaa, this situation is unacceptable, and he intends to change it. His songs, while Western enough to appeal to young Mongolians, are unmistakably Mongolian—not just in their sound, but in how they speak to people. His hope is that by communicating in powerfully Mongolian ways, these songs will penetrate into and entirely transform Christians at a fundamental level. Ideally, then, if visitors come to churches, hear these songs, and witness those singing them, they will understand that one can truly be fully Christian and fully Mongolian, in the deepest mode of "being" possible. Some songs are specifically written with this sort of sung spiritual formation in mind. Others are intended more for non-Christians, to describe the figure of Christ in a way that they've never heard before—a Christ in "Mongolian skin."

And though the Mongolian church has done an impressive job of living out their faith with respect to working lovingly with the poor, addicted, and spiritually distressed within Mongolia itself,³⁵ they want to do more. Nasaa believes that Mongolian Christians have a special identity, that God has chosen and formed them for a special missional purpose. Mongolia is politically neutral, so its citizens can get passports to countries other nationalities can't. Furthermore, various Mongolic people groups (remnants of the Mongol empire) are scattered all over Asia. Like most Mongolian Christians, Nasaa believes this is God's providence—a culture-wide missional calling to challenging assignments they're uniquely suited to engage.³⁶

Second, Nasaa wants to honor God's gift of culture, and fully living into his Mongolian identity is a part of this. Looking at the troubled history of his people, Nasaa sees God's hand at work in preserving them until today. To his mind, if our cultures are God's gift, then how can Christians ignore them? There's a strong continuity here with the very deep cultural concept of inheriting identity and culture, but rather than rooting this in ancestors or *baatars*, Nasaa roots it in the intentions of God. To disregard God's gift of Mongolian culture is actually to dishonor God, rather than ancestors.

One of the complicated dynamics here is the large generational split in the church, with older and younger Christians having very different ways of seeing the world and enacting worship of

³⁵ This aspect of the Mongolian church deserves a paper in its own right; besides Nasaa's church, I have had the honor of working together with many others involved in such work, including a church leader whose congregation works with communities formed around the Ulaanbaatar city dumps; a former homeless alcoholic who now runs an orphanage; a member of a clown troupe that volunteers with homeless children; the coordinator of a community center in a yurt district; and a pastoral couple engaged in multiple forms of poverty-focused work.

³⁶ I am not yet sure where this articulation originated, but it has become commonplace in many parts of the Mongolian evangelical church.

God. One of the fascinating aspects of Nasaa's folk-rock worship is it can appeal strongly to both young and old, speaking in a sort of common language—a feat that many, including myself, have considered impossible. I have seen him do it.

Third, and very important for Nasaa, he desires *unity* in the wider Mongolian church. Thanks in part to prior missionary practices (with many scattered approaches and groups vying for territory), the current church is fragmented. Many groups have little or no contact with others, and many sharp disagreements exist between foreign-led denominations and more indigenous, independent churches. Besides being a personal burden, this is viewed by Nasaa as one of the main obstacles hindering the church's witness and growth. In fact, Nasaa's own independent church has banded together with a number of other congregations in their town (*Darkhan*) to form an alliance called *Khaanii Orshikhui* ("Presence of the King"), which meets once a month to publicly worship together as a statement of unity.

Nasaa is aware that his songs have great potential for ecclesial unity by bringing different groups together through their common cultural bond, and by expressing Mongolian-style theological arguments that transcend these barriers and help them to reconcile. But he's also aware of its potential for *disunity*. Many in the church are suspicious that contextualized worship entails "syncretism" and a compromised gospel, or see it as a "Pentecostal attack" on their spiritual authority. Some have launched sharp attacks on the character of Ganaa and other leaders; Nasaa has witnessed these events firsthand. Because of this, he's committed to treading carefully and moving slowly toward change.

With this perspective in mind, how does Nasaa's version of folk-rock compare to that of his non-Christian peers? Interestingly, despite the fact that he wrote all of these songs without having listened to anyone else's work, there are a number of similarities, but also some clear (and intentional) differences.

His verbal arts are a true fusion of his Mongolian identity and Christian thought. For example, he very frequently uses Mongolian poetic style, with alliterative rhyme scheme, moment-in-time reflections, and references to familiar genres. He creatively integrates aspects of *magtaal* ("praise songs"), a traditional genre systematically extolling the virtues of something or someone. He doesn't reproduce the genre exactly but uses enough resemblances that others can understand his unspoken purpose. In his song *Hurai*, he lists the virtues of Christ in a sort of suspended-in-space meditation on Christ's goodness. At the same time, he also manipulates the listener's expectations, naming virtues like *compassion*, which is decidedly *not* the way you'd talk about a Khaan or *baatar*. He clearly enjoys this kind of "twist."

Ex. 12. "*Hurai*," by Nasankhuu Aduuch (song begins at time stamp 1:12):

Are You the Lord with a slow heart
Who bundles me on the horse when I fall
Are You the Lord with compassion
When my heart seeks grace

Are You the Jesus who shoulders our sin
Like the pillar bearing up the yurt
Are You the lord who always calls me
To Your house, even when I don't deserve it

*Hurai, Hurai, Hurai, Great Lord
Hurai, Hurai, Hurai, Lord Khaan*
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ng3qj8Xj8JA)

Musically, his sound is nearer the Western end of the spectrum (for example, he relies on chord progressions much more than ostinato), but folk influences are still discernible. He often uses the aforementioned Mongolian style, pentatonic-bias melodies (after singing a song, he sometimes pauses to tell me, “That’s a Mongolian melody”). He also frequently uses the very Mongolian-feeling vocal techniques mentioned above: all vocalists perform long, trailing vocables, and he specifically has his female vocalist do long-song ornamentations to add extra cultural flair. He has also been developing and incorporating aspects of traditional instruments into recordings and performances, with the horsehead fiddle and the *yatga* (plucked zither) the first instruments on his agenda. He has also been able to incorporate recognizable traditional melodies into the instrumental sections of two songs (something I’ve seen at least one non-Christian folk-rock artist do as well, although not, in my opinion, as skillfully or creatively as Nasaa).

But perhaps the most remarkable aspects of his songs are the many cultural *images* he transforms into Christian metaphors.³⁷ Repurposed (or “redemptive”) language is everywhere, often augmented—or even legitimated—by his use of Mongolian poetic forms. For example, one song references the *gurban chuluu* (“three stones”); on the hilly steppe, when one wants to build a fire and place a pot over it (for cooking, making tea, etc.), they collect three stones to set into the earth to provide a level surface to set the pot on, so it won’t tip or spill. Nasaa uses this to assert that God is like these three stones—keeping us rooted, stable, and level, and preventing us from being upended by this world. Moreover, he draws a clever connection to the three persons of the Trinity.

His song *Hurai* is perhaps the most impressive example of this technique. The verses are saturated with cultural images evoking nomadic culture. In one, the Mongolian practices of binding a sick or wounded person onto a horse (for travel) mingles with the biblical story of the Good Samaritan. In another, he refers to Christ as the pillars at the center of the *ger* (yurt), a structure which bears all its weight—in the same way, he seeks to remind us, Christ bears all of our burdens.³⁸ But as the song shifts into the bridge/ending, the intensity of the images and energy increases. Language traditionally used to praise *baatars* like Chinggis Khaan is appropriated to praise Christ instead,³⁹

Ex. 13. “Uukhai” [A Battle Cry], by Nasankhuu Aduuch (song begins at 3:08):

The sound of “Uukhai”
reaches the heavens
Holy Warriors are approaching
from the mountains
Oh, Wake Up!
The murderous enemy
won’t take a step in my
hometown
We are protected
by the blood of Christ
Oh, Unite!

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVmJHgNn8aQ>)

³⁷ These are primarily *explicitly* accomplished through his lyrics, but I suggest that his pairing with musical devices plays a key role in the creation of the mental (or even kinesthetic) “image” he performs. For example, many horse-based metaphors are accompanied by a rhythm on the guitar that mimics a horse gallop—an established technique in Mongolian national music (Levin, Daukeyeva, and Köchümkulova 2016, 35)

³⁸ With all of this praise language, it’s clear that Nasaa is evoking a *magtaal*, extolling the virtues of Christ. Though it doesn’t quite fit the exact structure of a *magtaal*, it is sufficient to bring the suggestive power of the form to bear on the situation.

³⁹ Recall that to invoke the name of a *baatar* is to enlist their spiritual power; though Nasaa has not made this explicitly clear (preferring language similar to the Pentecostal worship language his peers use), I suspect that an

and thus *Christ* becomes the victorious hero who is worthy to be recognized and celebrated. Finally, the word which gives the song its name appears: *hurai*. For Mongolians, this word is a deeply cultural, powerful exclamation.⁴⁰ It's used when you're receiving a blessing, capable of expressing deep peace, joy, contentment, hope, and energy. It's traditionally repeated three times, and the hands are placed palms up and moved in a circle through the air with each repetition of the word. In a move I find quite beautiful, Nasaa repeats *hurai* in threes, resolving the song with a powerful cultural image that pierces deeply into the heart.

In many songs, Nasaa very consciously makes use of the same historical and mythical allusions that his non-Christian peers do, something that's necessary for any proper cultural discourse in the larger society. But again, he always surprises. Take, for instance, his frequent use of the martial imagery popular in Mongolian popular culture.⁴¹ Non-Christian folk-rock bands such as the Hu combine numerous references to heroes, warriors, and the Mongol "fighting spirit" with rock music's inherited tendency toward bravado; it's a large part of what gives them so much energy and youth appeal. References to battles and victories harken back to the golden age of Mongolia—a past in which they can relive the endurance and ferocity of heart and mind which they value so much. For the Hu, awakening the strength "within" is their way of helping Mongolians face the challenges of the present.⁴² But Nasaa takes it in a different direction.

When Nasaa encourages Christians to get on their horses, or speaks of battling the "darkness," he is purposefully illustrating what he sees as the Mongolian church's special missional calling. In some cases, this is envisioned within Mongolia, as he pleads for God to lead them in defeating spiritual enemies. In others, it's a call to spread out into the world and engage in missions. In fact, his very first song, "*Uukhai*," relates to this. The term *uukhai* is a special term that Mongolian warriors would shout as they charged into battle (the closest English translation is "Charge!" but that clearly loses something in translation). The term is layered in the Mongolian psyche in a powerful way, as it seems to stir even urbanites' hearts in a primordial way, instilling in them a deep sense of energy.⁴³ In this way, they are galvanized for mission efforts.

underlying worldview with such values helps inform the feeling of immense energy, passion, and transformation people feel as the song culminates.

⁴⁰ Some Mongolian Christians will translate it as "amen"—but it would be a very deeply held and passionate "amen."

⁴¹ This is something many Westerners (myself included) find a little distasteful, but he assures me everyone understands that it's just a metaphor, not literal. It can't be denied: it's definitely a Mongolian way of speaking. It's helpful too to recall that Mongolian history did not include the crusades, and *they* were the ones most recently subjected to colonialism, rather than the perpetrators, so they have an ability to use such metaphorical language without the cultural and emotional baggage Westerners associate with it.

⁴² The Hu have been very frank in their discussion of this, both in song lyrics and in multiple interviews (Oyuna B 2019c; 2019d; *The Hu: Live Performance and Q&A* 2019; 2019a).

⁴³ As previously mentioned, energy has powerful spiritual connotations in Mongolian culture, though it has also been secularized in a variety of ways.

Finally, it's in the conceptual and ideological framework of the wider cultural identity conversation that Nasaa is both most like, and most different from, other folk-rock artists. When it comes to the past, he agrees that Mongolians are chosen, blessed, and have a special role and responsibility in this world. He agrees that these roots are a source of real strength and a means by which they can learn to effectively exist in this world. But he's also constantly re-centering the source of this strength and identity. According to Nasaa, it wasn't *Tenger* that birthed his people, nor Chinggis Khan who made them who they are, but *Yahweh*. All the other ancestral heroes possessed strength only because God allowed them to—the same as any other leader, ruler, or government.

He brings that same sensibility to the present. He is also dissatisfied with the current state of Mongolian culture. He believes Mongolians have lost their way and defaulted on their heroic calling. As a former “hooligan,” he knows firsthand the discontent and hopelessness that

consume so many. He then declares, without hesitation, that it was Yahweh who saved him and pulled him from the darkness. Christ himself reconciled Nasaa with his culture and heritage, taught him how to be a good man, and also how to be a good Mongol. Clearly he's not shy about making the claim that this is what his people need, this how they'll overcome the darkness.

And so again, this conviction pushes into the future. Nasaa is also searching for a restored, hopeful future and elusive peace; the difference is what characterizes it. For him, it's faith in Christ that will redeem his nation and people from darkness, not the ideals of Buddhism or a return to shamanism. Mongolian chosen-ness isn't for their own benefit; it's a missional calling. For Nasaa, respecting one's ancestors is good, but ultimately they're not the ones you're responsible to. Rather, you must honor God's claim and call on your life. And most powerfully, the anticipated restored golden age of the future is not going to be brought about by Chinggis Khan but by the “Kingdom of God.” For him, this what the legends of past glory were always pointing forward to: the reign of God, in which can be found peace for every shattered family, healing for every addict, and dignity for those living under oppressive regimes. In his understanding, all of Mongolian history points Nasaa to this one thing.

Ex. 14. “*Yurult Undesteng* (Blessed Nation), by Nasankhuu Aduuch (song begins at 1:52):

“Many centuries ago

There was a people who conquered the world

In their vast homeland

They emerged and lived in peacefulness

By the name of Steppe Mongolia [they would be]

Forever distinguished from all the earth's peoples

A blessed nation that received favor from The Lord in heaven”

Uu! Hee!

Blessed Nation

By the beautiful long song

By the beautiful horse-fiddle melody

Praise the Lord of the Blue sky

By the beautiful folk dancing

From the bottom depths of our hearts

Praise the Living Lord.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tutfGpah4mU&t=115s>

Part III. Implications for the Mongolian Church's Practice of Faith

This brings us to our final question: What will happen when Nasaa is finally able to release his first album, making folk-rock worship more visible as it spreads via social media? It's hard to predict. Many things are happening in the church and society in Mongolia, and for the genre's practitioners there are both many encouraging signs and indications that it could provoke conflict. The question is whether enthusiasm or opposition will triumph.

Past reactions. It's important to realize this isn't happening in an emotional or political vacuum. Nasaa is not the first person to attempt contextualized Christian worship in Mongolia, and as I've assembled the story of the practice in modern Mongolian church history, I've identified several obstacles that have worked against it:

1) *We Don't Know How.* Some of the first contemporary church planters to arrive in Mongolia (who worked with YWAM) explicitly taught contextualization of worship forms to their disciples.⁴⁴ Today, many of the independent, indigenous Mongolian churches trace their lineage back to them. As a result, their leadership is generally in favor of such worship practices, but over a decade ago this emphasis simply faded away. When I broach the topic with their church leaders now, they often react by musing, "Oh! We were supposed to be doing that, but now we don't really know *how*." This, then, is the first obstacle facing proponents of folk-rock worship: lack of knowledge of the mechanics—the *how to*.

2) *Apathy from Urban Young People.* When I inquired about contextualized worship practices within young churches in Ulaanbaatar—which are often associated with nondenominational evangelical megachurches or are at least *modeled* after them—their reaction, from members and leaders, is apathy. There is simply no interest or desire. They are content to pursue a Hillsong or Bethel aesthetic; it's young, exciting, and stylishly Western, and it's also associated with success, power, and money. In this case, the foreignness of Church worship—which young people simply identify as "modern," rather than "foreign"—is part of the appeal. It unconsciously represents the glamorous, urban lifestyle they want to attain for themselves.

Many Christians don't see this as a problem, provided that it's not a barrier to faith itself, but others disagree. In their view, besides dishonoring God by neglecting one's cultural heritage, such practices can also create a steadfast age and socioeconomic barrier. It's easy to see their point: Western-associated churches in Ulaanbaatar (with their electrified worship bands) are populated almost exclusively with middle-class young people. In contrast, Nasaa's church has a full age range of middle-aged and elderly attendees, who are often visibly poor. This, then, becomes the second

Ex. 15. "Tenger Gazariin Khaan (King of Heaven and Earth)," by Nasankhuu Aduuch (song begins at 2:15):

*"King of heaven and earth,
My Almighty God
Save my people of Mongolia
Put Your bridle on a lost
people
Pull them out of the
darkness*

*Steppe Mongolia will kneel
In worship before You
My God, lead my people,
For Your sake, against evil
Mongols will forever shout!"*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF1T5JaubxU>)

⁴⁴ These events are recounted in the missionary memoir entitled *There's a Sheep in My Bathtub*, by Brian Hogan (Hogan 2008, 207), but I also was able to discuss these events directly with one of his colleagues and one of their disciples in the Erdenet Church, Bayaraa, who is now an influential leader in the Mongolian church.

obstacle to developing a widespread practice of contextualized worship: provoking enthusiasm for hybrid identities and worship genres among younger, urban Mongolians.

3) *Outright Opposition*. When discussing this topic with interdenominational church associations, such as the Mongolian Evangelical Alliance (which represents a number of both independent and denominational church bodies), I've observed an abundance of caution and trepidation. There is a deep fear that such practices will lead to syncretism with traditional worldviews and religious beliefs—or, perhaps, of being *labeled* as syncretistic by other church groups—especially in denominational churches with a great deal of foreign influence. The message that a Mongolian spiritualistic worldview is utterly corrupt and must be completely purged seems to have been driven deep into their collective psyche, as has the unspoken message that if one's Western or Korean superiors suspect them of syncretism, funding and other forms of support could be suddenly withheld.⁴⁵ So, this becomes the third obstacle: reassuring the *gatekeepers*,⁴⁶ the people of influence in interdenominational associations and denominational leadership, that folk-rock worship can be done without syncretism.

4) *The Fear of Potential Church Conflict*. Among worship leaders themselves, those who are open to such contextual worship still have an understandable reservation: it could cause division, both between and within congregations. Understandably, no one wants to be the cause this, or to receive others' ire. This makes the whole project of contextual worship proceed very slowly, as innovation and adoption of new contextual forms happens reluctantly.

We can see all these dynamics at work in a public incident from 2016. Ganaa and the *Levites* (a Mongolian worship leaders' association she founded) decided to mark an important cultural anniversary by using one of Nasaa's songs as part of a choreographed song and dance presentation celebrating Mongolian Christianity's cultural and missional identity. They used a song (*Uukhai*, his first) which consists of mostly martial imagery, punctuated with a bridge that chants a passage from the book of Isaiah (verse 6:8, "here I am, send me") as a metaphor for their unique, cultural missional calling. The performance contained a great deal of cultural content: the dancers were dressed as Mongolian warriors, their dance movements—while mostly modern choreography—did still incorporate motions reminiscent of traditional dance, screens behind the platform displayed Chinggis Khan's army enacting battle formations, they opened with a Christian *urtyн duu* ("long-song") singer (a genre considered to be a spiritually significant

Ex. 16. A Choreographed version of Nasaa's "Uukhai," Performed at the Levites' 2016 Conference, including additional lyrics performed in the *tsol* praise poetry style (begins at time stamp 5:44).

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1s6-DTb2hdY>)

⁴⁵ This is a fear that people are reluctant to say out loud, for obvious reasons. But if you develop close relationships with Mongolian church leaders (especially the ones who are beginning to chafe under foreign control), you will eventually hear it voiced.

⁴⁶ Brian Schrag offers a concise definition of this term: "Gatekeeper: A person who exerts significant influence on whether a community accepts an innovation or not, who has a personal or social stake in its success or failure" (Schrag 2013, KL 7539).

artform—and very representative of Mongolian identity), and had an interlude where a caller performed *tsol* (a genre used to introduce a competitor at events such as horseracing, wrestling, or archery, in which the caller recounts all the impressive things the competitor has done—but in a twist, they listed all of Christ’s accomplishments). And of course, there was the cultural content of the song itself—besides the *uukhai* “charge” terminology, the song is full of calls to “unify” and “rise up.” These are reminiscent of calls throughout history for warring Mongolian factions to come together, rid themselves of their regional complacency, and focus on engaging the larger world—a strong, pointed message to the divided Mongolian church.

The performance was undeniably powerful and was received with enthusiasm by most who were present. But within days, there was a severe backlash. Ganaa and others were accused of syncretism—especially by denominational leaders, but also by others. Rather than provoke further anger and conflict, Ganaa and her allies decided to withdraw and allow things to quiet down. The whole of the Mongolian contextual worship movement (at least in the mainstream church sphere) came to a halt. Today it continues to progress slowly.

Present Approaches. This leads to our last question: How do Nasaa and his colleagues address all these challenges? I summarize their approach as adhering to a few key guidelines:

When addressing *apathy* and the *lack of knowledge*, they respond by presenting a visible and aesthetically appealing example. As a general cultural rule (one I learned from my closest Mongolian friends and confidants), most Mongolians learn better by imitation than abstraction. Nasaa perceives that explaining a theory or mental concept of what contextualized worship *might possibly* look like simply doesn’t provoke excitement or inspiration, and it gives no basis for experimentation. Instead, what is needed is (and this is my term) an *imitational drama*—someone who can enact the concept visibly and directly before people so they can see, understand, and digest it. This is how learning, openness, and enthusiasm generally occur, and there is good reason to assume that folk-rock worship will succeed through this approach.

In the past two years, the folk-rock band the Hu has become popular on the internet, provoking surprise among many with how enthusiastically their artistry was greeted by Mongolian urban young people. At one point, between recording takes, I was surprised when a teenager began to absentmindedly play one of their bass lines. How had they appealed so successfully to such a strongly anti-folk demographic group? I believe there are two key reasons. First, they cleverly sought international fame (first via social media, then foreign tours) *before* trying to break into the Mongolian music scene.⁴⁷ Once Mongolian young people saw Western audiences enthusiastic about this fusion genre, that allowed them to engage it without the fear that they were being “backward” or “unmodern.” This approach has been referred to as “status development,” and it’s been recognized as a particularly effective device in the arts development field.⁴⁸ Second, the internal identity conflict—having pride in your past but feeling that it’s disassociated from your

⁴⁷ It’s important to note that this was an intentional decision, not happenstance (Oyuna B 2019c).

⁴⁸ Michelle Petersen articulates this in her article “Arts Development for Scripture Engagement,” which applies knowledge from SIL International’s language development projects to develop strong theory for community development through applied arts (Petersen 2017, 63–64).

modern present—is a more ubiquitous and deeply felt crisis than many (including myself) initially realize. Even if they're unable to verbalize it, urban young people want to account for their Mongolian heritage in some way. The Hu provided a visible, reproduceable model not just of fusion *music* but a fusion *identity*. They themselves were the imitational drama.

Similarly, every time I've seen Nasaa perform his folk-rock songs, Mongolian Christians—especially young, urban ones—have reacted with visible enthusiasm and passionate participation. In the past year, I've come across YouTube videos of small-town congregations singing *Uukhai* while accompanied by a single guitar, youth groups performing it as “special music” numbers, and other instances of its performance.⁴⁹ This indicates that to produce passionate practitioners of such contextual worship, Nasaa and others mostly need a visible example of someone doing it well. Such exposure opens new imaginations for what indigenous Mongolian Christianity and worship practices can be. Additionally, *quality* is important: excellent artistry and professional recordings are necessary if folk-rock worship leaders are to compete with the aesthetic polish of Western worship bands—which is why Nasaa has spent much time crafting them carefully. This is also a key aspect of the Hu's approach; they spent several years in pre-development before releasing their first album.⁵⁰

As for *opposition* and the *fear of conflict*, it seems these are best countered by focusing on developing good relationships with the gatekeepers and those with strong communal influence. Nasaa, Ganaa, and others feel the burden is on *them* to demonstrate respect for these gatekeepers, thus indicating that their hearts—and their theology—are sufficiently orthodox. This requires extra considerations, such as arranging for the leaders of other groups to be present at worship arts crafting events, so they can see for themselves what is taking place. In this way, they can satisfy their own doubts first, before the new material is introduced to members of their congregations. This approach avoids provoking defensiveness and lends itself to more favorable consideration.

And naturally, if Nasaa and others are able to demonstrate that this approach works (in the sense of contributing to church growth, or increased spiritual development among congregations), that itself will satisfy many objections. In general, Mongolians tend toward practicality, and there is growing concern among many leadership bodies that church growth is rapidly slowing and spiritual fervor diminishing. Anything that's proven to reverse this trend will likely be welcomed. From this point of view, all that's really needed is for folk-rock worship to be given a chance.

Future Potential. Although still at the beginning of a long process, I believe there is great potential for Christian folk-rock to make significant changes to how Mongolian Christianity embodies its missional identity and engages with its social context. If Mongolian society begins to perceive Christian faith as an affirmation of their cultural identity, an ally against all that is threatening it, it may well win Christianity a hearing in broader society. This could change society's mindset toward church and succeed in communicating via deeply cultural means to individuals who strongly value their cultural identity. Even within recent Mongolian history, this has happened

⁴⁹ This is possibly due to the fact that *Stepping Stones*, one of the more popular Mongolian worship bands, produced a cover of it. However, the appeal of the song is undeniable.

⁵⁰ The band has acknowledged this in a variety of settings (Oyuna B 2019b; 2019a).

before on smaller scales (such as local city governments⁵¹); there is no reason to believe it could not become habitual.

There is also potential for a strengthening of the Mongolian church's pursuit of social justice—or as they would render it, *biblical justice*. Focusing on the art of Mongolian culture rather than on globalized, Westernized, consumerism-driven media entertainment honors and empowers the smaller, minority voices which value unique cultural heritage. Moreover, it's a genre that will likely appeal more to the poor (the “hooligans”) than the rich and will serve to empower many by allowing them to recontextualize their cultural identity within their Christian faith, rather than seeing the two as inevitably opposed.

Finally, there's potential for this movement to facilitate similar creativity beyond the borders of Mongolia. For example, Nasaa has already developed a relationship with an independent church in Siberia, whose members belong to an ethnic subgroup of Mongolians. This church wants to reclaim their cultural identity, which was brutally repressed by Soviet violence. Presently, power structures in most churches in that region are dominated by majority voices rather than Siberian minority ones, which discourage them from creating such worship forms. This church seeks to break free of the status quo, seeing in Nasaa someone who can help them to overcome prejudice and practice faith on their own terms. According to many conversations I've had, this sentiment is present all across Siberia, in both Mongolic and Turkic cultures. But again, there are obstacles, such as a lack of clear vision for how to do it, what it *looks like*. Figures such as Nasaa provide a dramatic embodiment of how to implement such creativity. In this way, success in growing the Christian folk-rock movement in Mongolia could, I believe, have significant effects on many churches in this region and beyond.

⁵¹ Brian Hogan again presents a good example of this as a principle climax of his narrative (Hogan 2008, 206–9).

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