

[Article] The Book of Jonah in the Style of Altai Epic Stories



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Introduction

Oral Bible translation and biblical performance in local genres are relevant topics today. I will present the design for a performance in a local genre based on an oral Bible translation, using an example of the book of Jonah, orally translated into Southern Altai and turned into a performance in the style of a traditional Altai epic poem. Initially I will examine the stages of oral Bible translation, and how Jonah was translated by the Altai oral Bible translation team. Then I will discuss the plots of the Altai epics and the context in which they are performed. This is followed by an analysis of some of the oral rhetorical features of traditional Altai epic poetry and a discussion of the role of memorization and improvisation in performance of the epics. I will demonstrate how the Jonah epic reflects some of the features of Altai epic poetry. Finally, I will assess the audience's reaction to the performance of Jonah and draw conclusions for future experience and research. I argue that this is one of the most effective ways of communicating God's message with this oral preference community.

Oral Bible Translation

The translation team in the Republic of Altai began by translating chapter one of Jonah using the method of oral Bible translation (OBT). This is a summary of the steps in this translation. They are in many ways similar to the steps in written Bible translation. After preparatory training, the OBT team goes through a process of internalization of the discourse unit, beginning by listening to an audio version of this unit in at least two translations, normally in the language of wider communication. The main difference between the method of OBT and written Bible translation is this long process of internalization that takes place during the preparation of the first draft. Internalization involves discussion, memory-building activities, and relevant exegesis and development of key terms and concepts. Toler (2020, 63) uses the following definition for internalization: "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." The emphasis is not so much on memorization as on the ability to be able to retell the passage in one's own words and even adapt it to different audiences. Younghans, Madden, and Ross (2019, 34) observe that internalization that includes quality exegesis early in the process is the signature step of developing the most natural translation. Toler (2020, 99) concludes that this process of internalization is the key ingredient in achieving naturalness in the oral translation.

After internalization, the first recording takes place, followed by a team or pastor review. In the case of the Jonah OBT team, several pastors were invited to listen to the recording, and they were asked to make comments on the accuracy and naturalness of the translation. At this point, a community review also takes place, using comprehension testing questions formulated by the OBT team. The team then discusses any changes and does a second recording of the unit, after which the consultant check is conducted. Finally, a third recording is made,

taking into account the consultant's recommendations for improvement. The Altai OBT team went through this process with the book of Jonah.

The Altai Epics

The Altai Republic

The Republic of Altai, Siberia, is an area of 92,600 km, about 500 km south of Novosibirsk, bordering China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan. In the past, the territory of Altai was occupied by various nomadic groups. In the eighteenth century, the Altaians came under Russian sovereignty, and in May 1992, the region became the Altai Republic.



Figure 1. Altai landscape.

The Altai people number about 76,000 and comprise six different groups: Telengit, Altai Kizhi, Tubular, Kumandin, Shor, and Chalkan. A total of about 55,000 people (Telengit and Altai Kizhi) speak the Turkic language of Southern Altai fluently. The vitality of the Altai language is still high and has the possibility of future growth because of an ethnic revival in the region. The language is used in arts, media, education, and everyday life. Most Altai are also fairly fluent in Russian, with the exception of those living in remote villages.

Epics

Epics are long narrative songs celebrating the heroic deeds and adventures of legendary figures. The term *epic* has been used by Westerners since Homer's *epos* (Niles 2016, 255). Reichl (2021, 11) cites Aristotle, who states that the epic is narrative, of a certain length, and is a representation of heroic action. Bowra (1945, 1) defined the epic as follows: "An epic poem is by common consent a narrative of some length and deals with events which have certain grandeur and importance, and come from a life of action, especially of violent action such as war." Such epic songs are not only sung in the region of Altai but have also been in circulation all around Asia for several centuries, in Eastern Turkey, Mongolia, Siberia, and Northwest China.

Oral epics

Reichl (2021, 12) defines oral poetry as poetry recited, spoken, or sung, orally performed and orally transmitted. Oral poetry is normally a song or narrative learned by word of mouth and passed on through a chain of oral transmission. Epic tales were also composed orally. However, the fact that it is oral does not exclude the possibility

of a written text. Finnegan (1974, 57) argues that in reality, the oral and written traditions are interlinked. Reichl (2021, 13) confirms that in the Turkic world, some oral epics were also available in print. In conclusion, then, oral epics are extended heroic narratives performed by singer-narrators, who sing or chant them (Reichl 2021, 19–21).

The Altai epic heritage

Көөркий пойы су-алтынды пу кабакту,
 Кысыл марал пу чырайлу
 Толун айдый эм чырайлу
 Солонгды пу качарлу.
 Her seeing eyes—are like blue stars,
 Sweetheart herself, with eyebrows, as if made of gold,
 Her face is like a red deer,
 Her face is like a round moon,
 Her cheeks are like rainbows.

(Altai epic Ochy-Bala in the original Altai; Kazagacheva 1997, 94; translated into English by Bron Cleaver).

This is an arresting description of the heroine from the Altai epic Ochy-Bala. One of the main indicators of the orality of the Altai culture is the people's love of heroic epic stories. The Altai epics are oral masterpieces which have been passed down from generation to generation. Understanding some of the specific features of Altai epics will help identify some of the key features of the Altai oral culture. Pegg (2010, 128) says that "Heroic epics are vital to contemporary Altaian culture and identity." Like other Turkic people groups, the Altai have a rich heritage of such epics, praising the great deeds of heroic warriors. One of the pioneering scholars of Altai epic poetry and folklore was Wilhelm Radlov (1837–1918), who collected large samples of this oral material, including ten epic oral texts, which were published in St. Petersburg (Harvilahti 2000, 215).

Values

In her study of Altai epics, Wood (2005, 10–14) describes Altai heroic epic poetry as a key to understanding the values of the Altai people. Altai heroic epic poetry represents the following values: the respect of the Altai people of the heavens; a unity of the Altai people with the land of Altai and its natural environment; preciousness of family; tolerance and peacefulness; freedom and courageousness in freeing the land of Altai from oppressive enemies; generosity to guests and helping others; a group mentality; a unique expression of beauty as a reflection of nature; and the mastery of art and music.

Harvilahti (1996, 45–46) argues that one of the main tasks of an epic tale is to reinforce people's self-esteem and inspire respect for their history and culture. The hero belongs to the people and is unconquerable; even if he was defeated once, he is ultimately invincible and will return one day. Harvilahti says that use of epics in cultural life has many positive aspects, especially in strengthening cultural and national identity. In an interview, Nikolay Sergetkischev said that the singing of the epics was, and is, a way of passing on Altai traditions, customs, mythology, philosophy, and the Altai worldview. The epic singer is not only able to sing epic tales but also has a wealth of knowledge of folklore and information about the Altai people, their history, and their culture.

Plots of the Altai epic

The plots of the Altai epic are eternal in content, and they talk about the fight between good and evil, light and darkness, truth and lies. The hero always possesses magic powers; the hero's horse knows and sees everything; the wife of the hero can predict the future; and the young girl knows beforehand whom she will marry. The hero is often at war, defending his land, his people, and his love: wars against lords who attack Altai land and property; wars for brides, when there are too many suitors; and wars to regain stolen herds of livestock. The hero always defeats his enemies, and he does so through miraculous deeds. He ascends to the upper world to talk to the gods and descends to the lower world to fight underworld monsters.

The best friend of the Altai warrior is his horse, his loyal, wonderful helper. The hero's horse saves his owner, carrying him through mountain passes and ravines and flowing rivers. Therefore, the old Turkic peoples always buried the horse with the warrior. Gejin (1997, 335), in his study of Mongolian epics, observes that there is no nomadic epic in this tradition without a horse and its assistance. The horse is able to speak and is full of wisdom, magical power, supernatural strength, and speed. The horse often plays a key role in the story and can warn the hero of events or danger that will come. The horse can transform itself into various shapes—typically other living objects such as a bird—in order to help the hero achieve victory.

Throat singing

In the Republic of Altai, epic stories are sung using the throat-singing technique. Throat singing, or overtone singing, is a type of guttural singing in which performer produces more than one pitch at a time. By employing the whole spectrum of their organs of speech—lips, tongue, jaw, velum, larynx—throat singers take full advantage of the throat's resonant capacity to produce a unique harmony. Anokhin said that the Altai people sing heroic epic tales using a tone that is like the buzzing of a flying beetle (Sul'gin 1973, 459). The art of overtone singing probably originated in southwestern Mongolia. In the Altai Republic of Southern Siberia, the indigenous Altai people developed their own variant of throat singing called *kai*; the term for an epic-teller is *kaichy*, "a kai person" (Pegg 2010, 128).

The singer

A male *kaichy* normally becomes a *kaichy* from childhood, after several years of dedicated training (Reichl 2021, 28). Singers have often listened to epics from an early age—sons imitating their fathers—and some continue to more formal training. A *kaichy* may be chosen by spirits and may be punished by the spirits for making a mistake in the epic performance. In a personal interview with Nikolay Sergetkishev, Sergetkishev said it is the hero of the epic tale who punishes the epic singer if he is not able to finish the tale. In a performance at a festival, if the *kaichy* is stopped before the end of the epic tale, he may leave and finish singing it somewhere else so that he won't be punished. Since the spirit world is listening, as well as the human audience, the epic tale must be brought to conclusion.

The instrument

Throat singing is usually accompanied by the playing of the *topshur*, a small, two stringed, lute, with nylon strings tuned to a fourth, the higher note strung above the low note. Traditionally, the sounding board and the strings were made from the hide and gut of the animal, which then becomes its master-spirit or helper-spirit (Pegg 2010,

130). The instrument is in some sense animated and initially becomes a horse on which the epic-teller rides. It can shape-change during the epic, even into inanimate objects such as a boat.

The environment

Normally a special time is set aside for epic storytelling, and the mood of the audience may be festive, as it could be a feast of celebration. It could be during the turn of seasons or during the waxing moon when evil spirits are believed to be prevalent (Pegg, 2009). Reichl (2021, 54) confirms that traditionally, epics all over Central Asia were told in the evenings and into the night. The atmosphere during the performance is very important. In an interview, Sergetkishev commented that the best place to sing *kai* is in an Altai *ail* (nomadic hexagonal wooden house) around a fire, with the audience relaxing and drinking tea.

Performance during the hunting season, perhaps in the evening round the fire, is characteristic of the Altai peoples. The spirits of the animals to be hunted are soothed or even distracted by the singing and storytelling. In an interview, Kurmanov said that the *kaichy* will go on a hunt to bless the land and ask the spirit of the forest to give the hunters success in the hunt. Some have even reportedly seen the spirits of the forest come and gather around the area during the epic tale before the hunt. In a personal interview, Nikolay Sergetkishev affirmed that the Altai spirit of the forest likes to hear *kai* singing and will reward the hunter with prey.



Figure 2. Altai ail.

Features of Altai Epic Poetry

Examining the features of Altai epic poetry will help the reader to understand more about the performance of the Altai epic. Altai epic poetry is highly patterned and formulaic (Reichl 1992, 4204). This includes the repeated use of a phrase or section throughout the epic to express a particular idea. This is explained by the fact of its oral composition and transmission. The beginning of the epic is particularly formulaic, and the epics are highly predictable in their form and structure.

Parallelism is also a feature of epic poetry (Reichl 1992, 4194); often the idea expressed in the first half of the parallel structure is repeated and varied in the second half. This can be seen in the example below, again from Ochy-Bala:

Кесер келзе—кезе тудар,

Алып келзе—аймай тудар.

If a warrior steps up—he will squeeze to death

If a hero steps up—he will grab an armful.

(Kazagacheva 1997, 92)

Alliteration is used to create an intricate pattern of sound and meaning, also illustrated in the example above. Addition and “summation” (in which point after point is numerated and described) are also common stylistic traits

of Turkic epic oral poetry, particularly in type-scenes such as the arming of the hero and the saddling of his horse. Hyperbole (exaggeration) is another common stylistic trait, seen in the example below:

Пек тен пүткен пелинге
 Пежен айгыр мал жүргедий
 Ак жадандый жардындаа
 Алган үүр кой тургадый.
 On her back, strong from birth,
 The herds of fifty stallions could graze,
 On her shoulder blades, as on a white plain,
 In sixty (rams) the flocks could stand.
 (Kazagacheva 1997, 92)

The Turkic people, including the Altai, have a very close attachment to their landscape and their environment, which influences their poetry. This includes their herding and hunting of animals, their constant moving and nomadizing, and the sounds of approaching horses, wolves, sheep, and wind and other weather conditions. To some extent, the epic singers attempt to transmit the sound of the weather, the animals, and the mountains through the onomatopoeic noises they make by throat singing (Bunn 2018, 558).

These poetic features and images, which are conveyed through narrative, words, sound, and music, invite the audience into the epic tale and inside history, evoking past memories, relationship, and experiences. The epic singer is not just passing on information (Bunn 2018, 580) but also connects the past to the present for the audience, bringing wisdom from the age-old story into the current time.

The characters in these epics are recognized cultural archetypes, and their actions and feelings are archetypal and idealized (Reichl 1992, 3599). Each figure typically has a clearly defined function (the hero, the opponent, the helper, and the heroine). The heroine is defined in relation to the hero as his beloved, wife, bride, or sister. An older shamanistic world and influence are believed to form the basis of Altai oral poetry. Heroes often have shamanistic powers which they use against their underworld opponents. Shape-shifting and other shamanistic traits are common—for example, horses can change in appearance into stars. The epics are highly predictable in their form and structure. Diction is formulaic, the plot determines the development of the story, and the figures appearing in the epic are, on the whole, two-dimensional rather than fully rounded.

I have shown some of the narrative units which occur repeatedly in the epics, which function as building blocks from which the singer can construct his epic. The singer then strings together these ready-made narratives and links them with spontaneously composed lines. Bunn (2018, 575) comments that it is these patterns, imagery, and poetic effects which help the epic singer remember the poem; and they also have effect on the audience, helping them bridge time and experience and drawing them inside their own memories and past.

Memorization or Improvisation?

This leads to a discussion of the roles of improvisation and memorization in the oral performances of Altai epics. Discussing the epics of China and Central Asia, Niles (2016, 256), suggests that the more able and confident

performers can improvise each new performance of the epic. There is, therefore, no single original text or version of these epics, and each epic can have an infinite number of different variations, according to the creativity of the singers. Much of the art of epic singing and improvisation is learned by apprentices who spend time cultivating the skill from master singers (Reichl 1992, 261–70).

Research by Parry and Lord in the early 1990s suggested that Homer was a semi-literate master poet who was very skilled at joining together multiple oral legends into epic poems like *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* (Parry, 1971; Lord, 2017). They proposed that these classical texts must have originally arisen as oral forms, because they have so many characteristics indicating they were originally told and retold rather than being composed by one individual and immediately written down. In their field research in the Balkans, Parry and Lord discovered similarities between Homer’s performances of such epic poems and oral storytelling performances in Yugoslavia. They found patterns in the oral epics, such as the use of formulas and repeated themes, which enabled the performers to remember and recite the epic more easily, although improvisation was also involved. Such master poets learn set sections of the epic poems but are able to improvise in the ways they join those sections together. Lord (2017, 4) asserts that an effective performance of an oral epic depends on the ability of the epic singer to join building blocks together to create the poem, rather than reciting it from memory. Ong (1982, 34) used Parry and Lord’s research to interpret characteristics of the epics, such as formulas, themes, vivid imagery, repetition, and larger-than-life characters, as mnemonic devices that help the singer remember the long poems.

When Kurmanov, from Gorno-Altai, was asked whether the *kaichy* knows the epos by heart or whether he improvises, he replied that both memorization and improvisation are important. The *kaichy* knows the skeleton or framework of the epic tale, but he is able to shorten or lengthen the epic. Every performance of the epic is different, but the framework will always be the same. *Kaichy* Anatoly Turulanov, who lives in Kosh-Agach, commented in an interview that as the *kaichy* begins to sing the epic tale, the rest of the epic comes to him gradually. He will not remember it word-for-word, but he can improvise the details, and each time it will be slightly different. Nikolay Sergetkishev, Sergetkishev affirmed that there is always improvisation in epic singing, especially when the *kaichy* knows several different epic tales. The plot is always the same, but the *kaichy* may expand it and add details to make it more beautiful. As the *kaichy* begins to sing, the words will come by themselves.

Analysis of the Jonah Epic Poem in Altai

Each Altai epic begins and ends with a formulaic introduction and conclusion praising the *topshur*, the instrument of the epic singer. In the Jonah epic, this has been slightly adapted by the Altai translation team to include a blessing from God. However, the Jonah epic’s introduction and conclusion are still very similar to other Altai epics, so when an Altai person hears the Jonah epic, they immediately recognize the genre.

Introduction to the Jonah epic

Жойгон агаш бу тӧзинен

Жонуп эткен бай топшуурым.

Жорго малдын жараш кылын

Толгоп ирей кылдай соккон.

From silver-fir tree

cutting my holy lyre,
 With beautiful stallion's hair
 the strings being touched, is playing.

Эмил агаш бу төзинен
 Эптеп эткен бай топшуурым.
 Эрјине малдын кылынын
 Кылдай соккон бай топшуурым.
 From cedar tree
 carefully made my holy lyre.
 With holy stallion's hair
 playing the strings, my holy lyre.

Улу кайым үргүлјиге
 Улалып ойноп угулып турзын.
 Улу байрам бу күнин
 Улу Кудай алкап салзын.
 Let my great guttural singing
 be heard forever.
 To celebrate this holy day
 May the Great God bless it.

Conclusion of the Jonah epic

Узун чөрчөк учына јетти,
 Улу кайым эм түгенди
 Кайлаган менин сөстөримди
 Улу Кудай алкап салзын.
 This long tale has come to an end,
 My great guttural singing has ended.
 May the Great God bless all the words
 I have said in my guttural singing.

Ochy-Bala introduction

It is helpful to compare the introduction and conclusion of the team’s Jonah epic with a section from the introduction of Ochy-Bala, a well-known Altai epic, noting their similarities:

О-о-о! Жойгон агаш тӧсинен

Жонуп эткен топчуурым,

Жорго ло малдын жараш кылын

Ээп, кылдап ойного-н-н...

O-o-o! From silver-fir tree

cutting my lyre,

With beautiful stallion’s hair

the strings tightly tuned, is sounding.

(Kazagacheva 1997, 86)

Features of Altai epic poetry in the introduction and conclusion of the Jonah epic

Three main characteristics of Altai epic poetry were included in the Jonah epic’s introduction and conclusion. There is extensive alliteration of *j* in the first verse, *э* in the second verse, and *y* in the third verse of the introduction. In the conclusion, there is also alliteration of *y*. This alliteration occurs at the beginning of the lines, which is typical of Turkic poetry. There is also the repetition of key phrases, such as бай топшуурым (“my holy lyre”), occurring three times in the first two verses of the introduction, and Кылдай соккон (“playing the strings”), which occurs twice in the first three verses of the introduction. Third, there is parallelism between the first verse and the second verse of the introduction—for example, Жойгон агаш бу тӧзинен (“From silver-fir tree”; first line of first verse) and Эмил агаш бу тӧзинен (“From cedar tree”; first line of second verse).

Features of Altai epic poetry in the main body of the Jonah epic

Эмди (“now”) was used more times in the epic than in the translation, which gives immediacy and adds to the dynamic nature of the epic (in the first four verses it is used seven times in the epic and only once in the translation). Эмди болзо (“now let it be”) is also repeated often in the epic, to give it a poetic rhythm, and ол болды (“and so it was”) is added at the end of lines for the same reason. Several times, a strengthening particle was added, making the epic more poetic and reinforcing some of the main ideas. In the epic, the Lord is called Улу Кайракан (“the Great Lord”), adding to the weight of the significance of God’s actions.

In the Altai epics, verses are also combined to form clusters, usually consisting of two to ten verses, which are thematically related (Harvilahti 2003, 84–85). The epic singer usually sings each cluster in one breath, pausing between the clusters to continue singing кай but without words. These pauses signal a marker for a new theme or episode in the epic, and perhaps time for the epic singer to recall the next section. The epic is also begun with a specific кай introduction which signals the beginning of the performance. The Jonah epic was also arranged in clusters of verses, and it opens with an introduction of кай singing and continues with breaks in between clusters which include кай.

Contextualization

Despite the fact that Altai *kai* singing clearly contains spiritual elements, I believe there is no link to shamanism. Whereas a shaman shouts and plays the tambourine to go into a trance, throat singing is not used to communicate with the spirits of nature or ancestors. Yura Chendeyev, an “Honored Artist” of Russia, leads an ensemble of Altai ethnic music. He has composed many Christian songs and occasionally uses throat singing in Christian worship. In an interview, he confirmed that despite certain spiritual elements of throat singing, *kai* is not connected to shamanism. According to Chendeyev, the storyteller was always a bringer of joy, peace, and rest. Today, the use of this time-honored art in a Christian context can very powerfully communicate a message of joy and peace.

Aidin Kurmanov, whom I also interviewed, wrote and produced an Altai-style epic story outlining the message of the Bible from Creation to Revelation. Kurmanov has also presented this Bible epic at various throat singing festivals in Altai. Chendeyev and Kurmanov are not alone in their use of throat singing in Christian music and storytelling. Many Altai Christians are very positive about using *kai* as a way of communicating in line with their own traditions. In view of this, although the team met some minor opposition, overall the Christian community was very positive about experimenting with this method of contextualization. The team chose the young epic singer Bair Turlunov because he is well-known in the Altai community and is a Christian and a regular churchgoer in the regional center of Kosh-Agach, where he lives.

Apart from poetic effects, the throat singer performed in an Altai costume, and the epic was filmed in a traditional Altai *ail*. In the production of the epic, the team used photographs from the Altai region and contextualized pictures drawn by a local Altai artist featuring the story of Jonah.



Figure 4. The team filming the Altai epic.



Figure 3. Bair performing the Altai epic.

Audience Reaction

Here is a link to the Jonah epic recording: https://www.altai-obt.ru/?page_id=386 (the second video on this page).

The team were unable to show a live performance to an audience. However, they showed a recording of part of the epic to six different audiences—one audience of a hundred people, and the rest between five to twenty people. They were all Christians, and mostly women. Here are some of the reactions to the team’s Jonah epic:

- The words of the epic in Altai are very clear.
- Throat singing (кай) is in the blood of the Altai people, so this recording would be especially appropriate

for men, for example—on a hunting expedition, round a fire in the evening they could play this recording, or on a remote farm in the summer with the cattle.

- Better for one person to listen to in the forest rather than for an audience.
- Suggestion to include a short introduction explaining that this is a story about a man called Jonah from the Bible.
- Mixed feelings; throat singing can be connected to shamanism, but still enjoyed.
- Difficult for me to accept this genre as God's Word.
- When I heard the topshur, my Altai spirit started to respond.
- Suggestion to change the introduction to have less praise to the topshur, and more praise to God who has given us the instruments and ability to play.
- Very beautiful.
- Good to give as a present to non-Christians, who may respond to the gospel being told to them in a familiar way.

Lessons from this first experience of relating local arts to biblical text

In the case of the team's Jonah epic, the Altai throat singer was not originally involved in the translation and internalization of Jonah. In the future, if possible, the epic song writer will be involved in the translation and internalization from the beginning of the project. I noted earlier on that internalization with high-quality exegesis is the signature step for developing a natural translation, and so the epic would be improved if the singer is a part of this process.

The Altai epic of Jonah does not differ as much as I would have wanted from the oral translation. This is partly because this section of the project was quite rushed, as the team were running out of time. In the future, the team would like to include more features of the Altai epics in the biblical epics. Altai epic poetry likes to use parallelism, where the second line parallels the first. Parallelism may consist of verse couplets, or a cluster of verses (Harvilahti 2003, 84). Words which can be synonymous, analogous, or antithetical are repeated to create a symmetric structure. The principle of contrast is also important in Altai epics; the positive hero who has supernatural powers is pitted against the negative characters. Alliteration is also very common in Altai epics. This is the repetition of the same vowel, consonant or syllable at the beginning of two or more words in the same verse. Other features included epithets, word pairs, and hyperbolic descriptions of the characters and often the horse. The resulting biblical epic will be a Scripture product rather than a translation, as it should differ significantly from the original oral translation.

Suggestions for Further Work

In recent years, fewer *kai* singers have performed in Altai. Currently, however, there is a revival of the epic stories performed by young throat singers, and they are growing in popularity. These epics are still alive in the Altai culture and are very significant in the history and culture of the Altai people. The performance of these epic stories helped communicate and reinforce moral values within the Altai community.

Altai oral epics were performed as communal events in a natural environment. The epic stories themselves include alliteration, addition, repetition, parallelism, hyperbole and predictability in both plot and structure. These features assist the *kai* singer in the memorization and the transmission of the texts.

A team of Altai people is currently tapping into their rich heritage of throat singing with a unique project: they are translating some key Psalms using the traditional Altai format of epic poetry and setting them to the *kai* style of music. The group is waiting with anticipation to see how these Psalms will be received by the Altai people.

I am working on a PhD thesis about developing a design for a performance-based oral Bible translation in Altai in the light of their traditional epics. The next epic to be prepared by the translation team will be based on the story of Deborah in Judges 4–5, as a model in the future for allowing local cultural forms to influence translation and the communication of the biblical message. This biblical story features two female heroines, Deborah and Jael, who save Israel from Sisera; they will be compared to the female heroine in the Altai epic Ochy-Bala who saves Altai from a fierce enemy. Features of the epic Ochy-Bala will be included in the Deborah and Jael epic. It may also be possible to include the helper horse in the biblical epic. We plan to show this epic performance in ten regions and locations in Altai, including in the traditional *ail*, to assess audience reactions.

The audience feedback from the Jonah epic suggested that presenting biblical content using the epic genre is especially relevant for a male non-Christian audience. The reaction of the Altai audience was overwhelmingly positive, and it is clear that this genre successfully communicates to the Altai people, and that this approach should be explored further.

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