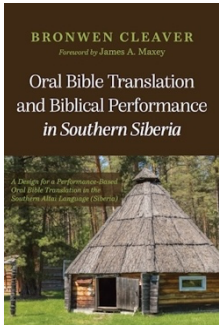


[Review] *Oral Bible Translation and Biblical Performance in Southern Siberia*, by Bronwen Cleaver



CHARLES MADINGER AND DANIEL BAKER



Chuck Madinger (PhD, DMin) is CEO/Founder of the Institutes for Orality Strategies. He has served 27 years in pastoral/missions ministry and communication strategies, with experience in more than 30 countries. IOS retools schools, churches, and mission organizations through education, research, collaboration, and training in holistic communication (orality studies). He and his wife, Rocelyn Anog Madinger, live and work in Metro Manila, Philippines.

Daniel Baker (PhD in Orality Studies, Asia Graduate School of Theology) and his family served in the Middle East from 2018 to 2025 and now live in Boston, Massachusetts, developing resources and training for cross-cultural ministry and holistic discipleship. He is passionate about people, stories, and good food.

Cleaver, Bronwen. *Oral Bible Translation and Biblical Performance in Southern Siberia: A Design for a Performance-Based Oral Bible Translation in the Southern Altai Language*. Wipf and Stock. 322 pages. ISBN 9798385236398.

In *Oral Bible Translation and Biblical Performance in Southern Siberia*, Cleaver presents an in-depth study of how to design and implement performance-based Oral Bible Translation (OBT) in the Altai language while integrating traditional Altai oral genres. She documented a multi-year project in which an Altai translation team translated and performed selected biblical passages, including Judges 4–5 and Psalms 1, 100, and 133. Together, these provide a framework for exploring how OBT can move beyond translating words alone to engage local forms of communication and performance.

1. Orality, Translation, and Performance

Cleaver's work explores the global significance of orality, the differences between oral and written communication, and the specific needs of oral-preference communities like the Altai. It surveys how orality has shaped both the transmission of the Bible and contemporary translation practices. The author goes beyond some classic views of Ongian orality to offer a more holistic approach. Bible translators often examine the Scriptures primarily as text, from a linguist's perspective. This book rightly sees orality as communication and the Scriptures as more than text.

This holistic understanding of communication shapes the study's theoretical grounding. Cleaver draws on functionalist translation theory, complexity theory, multimodality, Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC), and hospitality theory. Functionalist translation theory goes beyond a word-for-word approach by prioritizing the overall communicative purpose and audience needs. Complexity theory frames translation as a dynamic, adaptive system that considers the complex parts that give substance to the whole. Cleaver points to one piece of that whole: textual skills cannot fully render emotion. She uses extralinguistic and paralinguistic notes to provide a practical way to attend to features such as emotion, vocal delivery, gesture, and movement as part of a performance's communicative meaning.

The framework of multimodality calls for integrating multiple forms of media, as shown in Cleaver's use of indigenous music and various visual arts. At the same time, hospitality theory emphasizes a dynamic, exchange-based respect and reciprocity between source and target cultures. Together, these theories provide the foundation for a holistic, performance-based approach to Bible translation.

As Cleaver describes the project, her target audience seems to have advanced literacy skills, even though their cultural context leans toward high orality-reliant tendencies. This frames the project as a hybrid approach that can accommodate both textual and artistic expressions of the truths revealed in Scripture. It also raises a question about the model's broader applicability: can it be extrapolated to audiences with higher orality-reliant tendencies? At the same time, Cleaver makes a solid case for this approach to Bible translation.

From Internalization to Indigenous Performance

Internalization is a core practice of OBT, referring to deeply comprehending and "owning" the biblical text before translating. It requires group exercises, storytelling, drama, memory devices, and emotional resonance. In one sense, the translator must leave their own world and enter their hosts' world. Cleaver provides a detailed survey of OBT teams worldwide, highlighting best practices for internalization, especially when moving beyond narrative to genres like poetry or epistles. A key contribution of the book is its focus on how OBT works for passages beyond prose, especially poetry, which she shows require more time, creativity, and genre awareness for effective internalization. Embodiment becomes central to the process, as personal performance aids exegesis. Performance shifts from a tool for communication to a means of discovery and meaning-testing.

From internalization, Cleaver moves toward incorporating local genres and performance. The project analyzes Altai epics, particularly the heroic epic *Ochy-Bala*, and local song genres for poetic features such as parallelism, repetition, alliteration, and metaphor. The project adapts these features to make oral Bible translations culturally resonant and memorable for Altai audiences. Rather than merely borrowing local artistic forms, the team asks which features of Altai oral genres can perform functions comparable to those found in the biblical texts.

BPC further framed this process by approaching biblical passages as performances rather than static texts. This changed both translation and community engagement. Performance became a means of collective translation, interpretation, feedback, and ownership. The Altai team worked through internalization, exegesis, translation, poetic composition, and public performance. The process included community feedback loops, with performances in various venues and iterative refinement of both translation and presentation. In this way, performance became part of the translation process itself rather than simply presenting a finished translation.

Audience Response and the Altai Context

Audiences responded enthusiastically to the performances, valuing the use of Altai language, music, and culture. The performances enhanced understanding, made the Scriptures more accessible, and fostered cultural pride and community unity. For Cleaver, these responses highlighted the important role of Scripture engagement during translation. Public performance and exploration provided an opportunity for community testing, allowing audience response to provide a clear feedback loop in the translation process.

The study underscores a critical aspect of translation: engagement. Engagement does not fully take hold until the local community expresses the revelation through its own art forms such as music, dance, visual arts, poetry, humor, cuisine, and other material culture expressions. The Altai performances are one concrete example of the connection between translation, the arts, and community engagement. At the same time, responses were not entirely uniform, and Cleaver acknowledges both methodological limitations in gathering feedback and differing reactions to particular cultural and performance elements. This finding emphasizes that contextualization is an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a simple adaptation of concepts to local forms.

Significance for Oral Bible Translation and Ethnodoxology

Cleaver's book offers practical guidance on internalization, extralinguistic and emotional exegesis, and integrating local genres into translation and performance. The research advances BPC, especially in Old Testament texts and in non-Western, non-written contexts. It also proposes a model for OBT that other oral-preference communities worldwide can adapt.

The study is limited by the number of teams interviewed and the types of genres explored. Cleaver recommends further research on non-narrative OBT, emotional exegesis, and expanding BPC into more genres and contexts. Because the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cleaver could not observe OBT teams in person as originally planned and instead relied on remote interviews with nine teams and one trainer. The performance research itself was also relatively limited in scale. These limitations are significant, yet the study remains relevant beyond the immediate Altai context.

More broadly, the book calls for competencies in culture, language, and translation; audience literacy practices; networks for learning and sharing; memory tools; the arts and performance arts; and mediating the message, including electronic and digital media. It shows that when Scripture is translated and performed in a community's heart language and genres, it can have profound spiritual, cultural, and social impact. This book can serve as a model for twenty-first-century principles and practices for the Bible translation community.

Cleaver's work also reminds us that Bible translation ministries have historically lived within a framework of textuality. This is good. At the same time, textuality can constrain translation when the text itself is treated as the entirety of communication. Scripture points to the voice behind the text, which

cannot be reduced to rules of grammar, phonology, and the needed domains of linguistics. Oral performance and BPC offer another way to engage the essence of a story or didactic portion of the Word. Just as no two textual translations completely agree, drama and performance can also seek to capture the essence of a passage.

Conclusion

Cleaver's work provides an important contribution to the field of OBT by extending the translation process from a narrow focus on linguistic transfer to a holistic understanding of communication. The study demonstrates how multiple components such as internalization, embodiment, performance, and the use of local artistic forms combine to allow the translation and experience of Scripture to engage the unique language and culture of a community. The Altai project particularly highlights the value of indigenous music, poetry, and performance in fostering engagement with Scripture and local ownership. While the study's scope and setting should be considered, it provides a valuable foundation for further exploration and potential application in other contexts. Cleaver's work is an important resource for those working at the intersection of Bible translation, orality, Scripture engagement, and ethnodoxology.