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Freeing Biblical Poetry to Sing

DOI 10.1515/opth-2016-0014

Received January 29, 2016; accepted March 10, 2016

Abstract: This article claims that the cognitive effects of music on the brain reinforce the Biblical exhortation to “Sing to the Lord a new song” (Psalm 96:1, Colossians 3:16). Then it explores how this is borne out in poetic translations of Biblical Hebrew poetry into indigenous song forms in Natügu [ntu] and English [eng]. The numerous positive results of using sung poetic translations support the psycholinguistic literature, and suggest that to achieve similar benefits it should become standard best practice in Bible translation to set Biblical poetry translations to music.

Keywords: music, poetic forms, indigenous poetry, acrostics, translation principles

Introduction

The premise advocated for here is that the musical component in sung poetic scripture contributes numerous advantages over (poetic) scripture without song and that these advantages¹ warrant song-based translation being accepted as a component of best practice in Bible translation theory. It follows from this that not translating into song (where appropriate and possible) can be viewed as less than optimal in that it may be expected to return fewer, if any, positive results.²

The importance of song in scripture is articulated by the verse, “Sing to the Lord a new song,” from Psalm 96:1. See also 1 Chronicles 16:23-33, Psalm 33:3, 40:3. Throughout the Psalms we are told to “sing praise” to our God. There are similar New Testament exhortations regarding song, such as Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” And in fact the book of Revelation creates a picture of worship in song around God’s throne in heaven. In scripture, as in life, song can be seen to be a uniquely human vessel for expressing one’s feelings.

The value of song has also been expressed by others. The quote below has been attributed to Martin Luther, but research to date has been unable to corroborate the reference, and it may actually be a composite from several of his writings. It is instructive to consider the view articulated here.

I wish to see all arts, principally music, in the service of Him who gave and created them. Music is a fair and glorious gift of God. I would not for the world forego my humble foreshare of music. ... Music makes people kinder, gentler, more staid and reasonable. I am strongly persuaded that after theology there is no art that can be placed on a level with music; for besides theology, music is the only art capable of affording peace and joy of the heart. ... The devil flees before the sound of music almost as much as the Word of God.³

1 Boerger, “Domains”, Boerger, “Natügu Advocacy” and Boerger et al., “Sociolinguistic factors”.

2 This article combines, revises, expands, and refocuses several unpublished conference papers. I would like to thank colleagues who have given input at various stages, especially Robert Bascom, Daniel Boerger, Susan Schmerling, Lynell Zogbo and Ernst Wendland. Any errors remain my responsibility.

3 Attributed to Martin Luther.

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Luther is not the only church leader to see the value of music. The importance of music is implicit in John Wesley's *Directions for Singing* (1761) as seen in those selected below:

1. Sing all....
2. Sing lustily, and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of it being heard than when you sing the songs of Satan.
3. Sing modestly. Do not bawl, as to be heard above, or distinct from, the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony....
4. Sing in time. Whatever time is sung, be sure to keep with it. Do not run before, nor stay behind it....
5. Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature....

If we assume some truth to these claims and allusions to the importance of music, it follows that partnering music with the Word of God would be especially powerful. Two points in the Luther quote deserve further comment. First, he considers theology to be one of the arts, which is not a normal consideration in modern scholarship, but happily corresponds to the spirit of this article in this journal. Secondly, he asserts that both the Word of God and music have power in putting evil to flight. Though there is some question about the attribution of the quote, this last statement with regard to the Word of God is reminiscent of the lyrics to the third verse of Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" (*Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott*).

And though this world, with devils filled,
 should threaten to undo us,
 We will not fear, for God hath willed
 His truth to triumph through us:
 The Prince of Darkness grim,
 we tremble not for him;
 His rage we can endure,
 for lo, his doom is sure,
 One little word shall fell him.

This principle of praise—sung or otherwise—defeating the enemy is scriptural. For example, Psalm 8:2 states, "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger (NIV)." This verse is then quoted by Jesus in Matthew 21:16.

Clearly music can affect us deeply. The next section examines how music and language are processed in the brain and how that supports sung scripture translation. Following that, I review ten principles for literary translation⁴ which are applied in the translations presented. Then I present the context for the Natqgu translation work and provide some examples of sung psalm translations in Natqgu. These sections are followed by a discussion of sung psalm translations in English, including a double acrostic and portions from selected psalms. Following the English examples I make a longer presentation of the translation of Psalm 136 using traditional melodies from Natqgu and American English. The penultimate section provides socio-cultural evidence for the effectiveness of sung scripture translations. And the paper closes with conclusions which can be drawn from the evidence presented, in particular that there is significant support for the use of music in translations of the poetic portions of scripture.

How Psycholinguistic Research Supports Sung Scripture Translations

There is not space in this section to adequately summarize the vast literature on music, language, and the brain. In fact, Patel⁵ devotes over 400 pages to the topic. Even so, it is important to highlight some of the findings here.

⁴ Boerger, "Extending".

⁵ Patel, "Music, Language, and the Brain".

First, it has become evident that by the time an individual reaches adulthood the right and left hemispheres of the brain are specialized in function. The Broca's area, located on the left side of the brain, is the main locus for the production of language and the right hemisphere of the brain is the main locus for the production of rhythm and processing semantics, as well as the melodic components of language and of music⁶. Some of the linguistic and musical effects on the brain overlap and some do not⁷.

To illustrate some interrelationships between music and language, a New York Times article⁸ tells the story of a man who had a stroke in 2003 which caused aphasia—the inability to come up with the right words and use them properly in sentences. As part of his therapy he was asked to sing along when his therapist sang “Happy birthday,” and he was able to do so. In melodic intonation therapy patients are asked to tap out rhythms of language and to sing a sentence to a familiar tune. Another study⁹ showed that such on-going melodic intonation therapy activates parts of the healthy right hemisphere of the brain which are not normally used for language functions as the brain adjusts and compensates for the loss.

The effectiveness of memorization has also been linked to both the melodic and the rhythmic components of music, which one should recall are right hemisphere functions. Music has also been linked to long term memory, for example, when multiplication tables are set to music or when young English speakers learn the alphabet song or the books of the Bible set to music. In order to confirm these findings, quiz yourself by comparing how many songs as opposed to poems you have memorized both in your first language, as well as in any languages learned subsequent to it. For most people it is the material learned with both a melody and lyrics that is retained longer.

A number of studies find that musical ability has beneficial effects on language, in both first and second language acquisition¹⁰. In fact, when compared to individuals with no musical training, it has also been shown that individuals with musical training respond more quickly and with more brain response to both auditory and audiovisual stimuli. Pitch perception was also enhanced in musicians over non-musicians dependent on the length of musical training. The results show that musical practice enhances response time to auditory and audiovisual information¹¹.

Furthermore, a 2014 study suggests that playing a musical instrument¹² contributes to “more rapid cortical thickness maturation within areas implicated in motor planning and coordination, visuospatial ability, and emotion and impulse regulation”¹³. That is, studies had shown that anxiety, depression, attention problems and aggression corresponded with lessening of the thickness of the cortex of the brain. The authors found that learning an instrument at even a rudimentary level served to increase cortical thickness, which involves brain functions like memory, attention control and organizational skills. And such musical training can also lead to children being more civic-minded. So the effects of improved emotion and impulse regulation, as well as civic-mindedness point to sociological advantages to music, in addition to individual developmental advantages.

These four factors—differences in brain processing of music and language, benefits of music on memory, benefits of music on acquisition and auditory processing, and sociological enhancements—are all consistent with the advantages of translating Biblical poetry as song, in particular the Psalms, which are said to be the hymn book of the Jews. As applied to Biblical poetry set to music, the potential advantages are the following:

⁶ Saville-Troike, “Second Language Acquisition”.

⁷ Ozdemir et al., “Neural correlates”.

⁸ Barrow, “Sing to Talk”.

⁹ Gaab et al., “Plasticity and pitch”.

¹⁰ Slevc and Miyake, “Second language proficiency” Patel and Iversen, “Music, Language, and the Brain”.

¹¹ Musacchia, “Musicians”.

¹² The study only looked at the correlations between playing an instrument, mainly through receiving instruction in the instrument, and the benefits mentioned. But it follows that perhaps similar benefits could come from any means of producing music oneself, such as playing an instrument by ear or singing by ear or through reading music, even perhaps through listening to music. These hypotheses would need to be tested.

¹³ Hudziak et al., “Cortical thickness”.

- a) Psalms texts with melody engage the whole brain, giving better access to content;
- b) Musically trained brains will respond more quickly to the text;
- c) Scriptures learned through song will be memorized more easily;
- d) Sung scriptures will be held in long term memory for longer periods of time; and
- e) Since those who participate in music have been seen to show better self-control and to be contributing members of society, then it might be expected that they would also be the ones who apply the sung scriptures in their lives, modeling a biblical worldview.

Translation Principles Supporting Sung Scripture Translation

Before turning to examples of psalms set to music, it is profitable first to review the translation principles that I have used in my own English translations and which I taught to the Natqgu [ntu] translation team in their translation of the Natqgu Psalms. In the pre-field translation training I received, I was taught that our translations should be accurate with regard to the meaning as determined by content and intent, linguistically natural, and essentially clear. We were also advised to find a local poet to help when translating Biblical poetry. But little was conveyed in that beginning course about how to apply the parameters of accuracy, naturalness and clarity to the translation of Biblical poetry. Nor do I recall that any examples were provided.

While we were translating the Psalms into Natqgu, I also worked on an English poetic Psalms translation, *POET Psalms*, in which ‘poet’ stands for **Poetic Oracle English Translation**¹⁴. My goal was to have my efforts at translation serve as a basis for guiding the Natqgu team. As I worked in both languages, it became important for me to identify and justify the principles being used to make the adjustments required for poetic translation¹⁵. I argued that not representing the poetic forms of the Bible might just as legitimately be considered inaccurate, as failure to capture the lexical meaning, since part of the meaning of a literary work rests in its genre.

Table 1. Ten extended principles for literary translation

The Principles

Accuracy includes:

- 1 representing source language (SL) genres by target language (TL) genres; i.e. poetry by poetry and even song by song
- 2 incorporating SL rhetorical devices when compatible with TL

Naturalness allows for:

- 3 borrowing of literary forms between languages in contact
- 4 modifying borrowed SL devices and forms to conform to TL structures

Poetic license may lead to:

- 5 combining TL literary devices with borrowed SL ones
- 6 augmenting, altering or adding imagery, while preserving meaning
- 7 applying conventional translation principles, including reordering, across a broader range of verses than conventionally practiced in non-literary translation
- 8 making reciprocal adjustments in phrasings and form, that is, adjusting phrasings to fit the literary form and adjusting the form to fit TL linguistic structures
- 9 augmenting or adding literary devices to compensate for times when fewer than the stipulated number are used or to reflect the frequency of their presence elsewhere

Clarity means:

- 10 giving precedence to SL accuracy and TL naturalness over form or aesthetics, when form or aesthetics make the text inaccessible for a majority of speakers
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¹⁴ Boerger, “POET Psalms”.

¹⁵ Boerger, “Extending”.

In the years since that article, I have refined the principles so that they refer not just to poetic translation, but also to literary translation in general. The current articulations of these principles are listed in Table 1, which groups them under the translation categories of accuracy, naturalness, and clarity, with the addition of a fourth category, poetic license. These literary principles assume a familiarity with general translation principles as they have conventionally been applied to Biblical texts. The principles are only briefly discussed here, since they were developed with accompanying illustrations in my earlier work referred to above.

Principle 1. Representing Source Language Genres by Target Language Genres

As intimated above, principle 1 was the starting point for our decision to attempt to translate biblical poetry as target language poetry. The national translator, Mr. Simon Meabr¹⁶, had already been active in translating hymns and in writing new lyrics to traditional Santa Cruz tunes. Neither of us wanted Biblical poetry to look or sound like prose, especially since the target language had a song form that could sometimes be used to represent the source language genre of poetry.

Principle 2. Incorporating SL Rhetorical Devices

Natqgu has only been a written language relatively recently, so there is no long literary tradition. Given that, along with the desire to know what biblical poetry was like, the translator and I explored incorporating some of the biblical Hebrew devices like wordplay, alliteration, and metaphor into the Natqgu translation, which led us to principle 2. It was important to at least consider whether we could effectively use the Hebrew devices, as well as applying our normal practice of looking for Natqgu devices with equivalent functions.

Principle 3. Borrowing Literary Forms, when Languages Are in Contact

Through the activity of Bible translation, Natqgu comes into contact with the literary features of Hebrew and Greek. Throughout human history languages in contact have borrowed from each other, so borrowing a form—like the acrostic—seemed a legitimate and even desirable thing to do. In fact, since one function of the acrostics may have been as an aid to memory, the same function could be carried over into the oral context of Natqgu speakers.

Principle 4. Changing Borrowed Devices and Forms to Conform to TL Structures

Similarly, when languages borrow from each other, the borrowed item or feature often changes to conform to structures in the language which borrowed it. For example, English speakers pronounce borrowed words, like *smorgasbord*, using the vowel inventory of English, and not with the vowels *smörgåsbord* has in Swedish, the source language. So an application of principle 4 allowed us to make similar adjustments to SL Hebrew devices and forms to make them compatible with the structures and norms of Natqgu.

Principle 5. Combining TL and SL Literary Devices

It was just one step further to principle 5, when we saw that it could also be effective to combine SL and TL literary devices. In our Solomon Islands context an application of that would involve adding alliteration to a line drafted according to the indigenous Santa Cruz song form.

Principle 6. Augmenting Imagery while Preserving Meaning

Principle 6 arose when the SL imagery did not communicate to Natqgu speakers, but a substitution of a different image did communicate. Other times we found that symbolic language was more natural than the non-symbolic language of the SL text, and we translated with a metaphor or simile. We reasoned that adding imagery in such contexts would also help preserve their presence in the SL. The strength of this is that often the pictures in symbolic language are easier for the audience to process and remember than non-symbolic language.

¹⁶ Mister is a title given to school teachers and by convention is used with their English language first names, rather than their Natqgu language home names, which are reserved for family and friends.

Principle 7. Applying Principles across a Broader Range of Verses than in Non-literary Translation

Our expression of principle 7 came about through working on the acrostics. We found that by combining multiple verses we were able to accommodate both the semantics and the target letter of the alphabet. This was justified because it allowed us to maintain the form of the Hebrew SL which would not otherwise have been possible.

Principle 8. Making Reciprocal Adjustments in Phrasings and Literary Form

We found that there had to be give and take between the desire to maintain a literary form and the ways the semantic content of a line were expressed. This led to two kinds of adjustments. In one we adjusted the placement and implicitness of the semantic content and word choices to accommodate the literary form being used, while in the other we adjusted the literary form to accommodate the semantics and structures of the TL. For example, in my English work, if a particular form stipulates seven syllables per line, but occasionally I use eight, I view this as a legitimate departure from the form. Similarly, if we needed to make some information implicit or to move it elsewhere in a poem in order to achieve those seven syllables or some other poetic feature, this was also justifiable. So, we continually balanced the needs of the form with the needs of the semantics and linguistic structures of the TL.

Principle 9. Augmenting or Adding Literary Devices

We also encountered times when we could not duplicate the SL devices at exactly the same verses as in Hebrew, but we could include a different poetic device to compensate. For my English translation, this meant including an extra rhyme or cross-rhyme in a form which did not require it. Principle 9, then, allows for some stylizing of the structures and devices in a particular poetic setting.

Principle 10. Giving Precedence to SL Accuracy and TL Naturalness over Form or Aesthetics

I think of principle 10 as the common sense principle, in that we do not want the artistry of our metaphorical language and stylized expressions to obscure or distract from the meaning of the text. When they do, the translation needs to be revised to let comprehension, naturalness, and accuracy hold a higher value than artistic expression.

The ten principles discussed above will be referred to further in the discussions below, where I present psalms portions set to music. It can be said here that the overarching principles of both accuracy and clarity come into play in support of sung scripture translation.

Background for Natqgu Examples

Natqgu Language Project

Natqgu [ntu] is spoken in the Solomon Islands, South Pacific, about 1,000 miles northeast of Australia. For nearly twenty years I lived there with my family on the tropical island of Santa Cruz in Temotu Province, several hundred miles east of the national capital, Honiara. During that time, my husband and I served as advisors to the Natqgu Language Project, which eventually grew to a team of around fifteen Natqgu-speaking colleagues. The core of the team was retired school teacher, Mr. Simon Meabr, mentioned above, who became my mentor in all things regarding the language and culture of the people from Santa Cruz Island. We worked under the auspices of the Church of Melanesia (COM), the Anglican Church organization in the country. Our mandate was to promote vernacular literacy and facilitate New Testament translation. But since the Anglican liturgy includes readings of the Psalms twice daily, the Natqgu team decided that we also needed to translate the Psalms and the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, which we did in the *Book of Worship*¹⁷.

¹⁷ Meabr, “Book of Worship”.

Writing System

Before looking at Santa Cruz song form proper and examples from the Natqgu translation, a brief explanation of the Natqgu writing system is in order. Natqgu has ten vowels, including the expected five vowels *a, e, i, o,* and *u,* as well as the symbols *c, q, r, x* and *z* which represent five further vowel sounds as illustrated in Table 2. Previously, Natqgu used a writing system with diacritics, such as umlauts on the vowels. But this system was later modified in order to use only the letters available on an English typewriter (or computer keyboard). This change made it easier to typeset Natqgu within the Solomon Islands and fortuitously, it also makes texting easier on mobile (cell) phones today. Natqgu has a total of 23 consonant and vowel graphemes, one of which is not found word initially. Thus, Natqgu has 22 word initial graphemes available to fill the slots of the 22 Hebrew graphemes, a fact which was especially felicitous when working on the acrostics.

Table 2. Natqgu Vowel Equivalents

IPA	orthography #1, linguist-friendly	orthography #2, speaker-friendly
æ	ä	x
ə	ë	z
ɔ	â	c
ø	ö	r
ʉ	ü	q

Santa Cruz Song Form

One of the first things I learned from Mr. Simon was the Santa Cruz indigenous music form. This song style is used in conjunction with the *nelc* dance, which is the most significant dance on Santa Cruz¹⁸, in part because it serves as a cultural identity marker which unites the four related language groups on the island—Natqgu, Nalögo [nlz], Engdewu [ngr], and Noipx [ISO 639-3 pending]. Dusk to dawn *nelc* dances are “the most-enjoyed social occasions and display distinctive Santa Cruz art forms—the lyric poetry and the elaborate costumery”¹⁹. The significance of dance is seen in the idiom, *my neck is dancing*, meaning *I am joyful*.

Even before I started working with Mr. Simon, he and other men of his generation had been setting Christian lyrics to traditional melodies, to create songs for various seasons of the church year—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and so forth. The lyrics to these songs were included in the hymnal section of the Natqgu *Book of Worship*, along with hymns and choruses translated from English.

These so-called “custom” songs are sung during the *nelc* dance; the *nelc* being a carved shell nose piece threaded through a pierced septum, as shown in Figure 1. The hired dancers also wear a *temz* ‘moon’ shell breastplate and other decorative pieces.

The rhythm is maintained by the percussion of rattles tied to the legs of the male dancers while they stomp their feet and pound sticks on the ground of the dance ring. The major beats of the syllables fall on the pulses of the percussion, approximating 4/4 time.

The song form has a number of indigenous melodies, while its lyrics always form a quatrain in which the first and last lines exhibit verbatim repetition in the words, but not the melody. Given that repetition, the form requires that the clause of the first line also be able to function syntactically as a final clause in the fourth line, or as an independent sentence. And because the lines of the quatrain are rather short, it involves a distillation of the message into one or two short sentences. The number of syllables in each set of two lines is usually in the 12-15 syllable range, with the line final *e*, as in lines one and four below, added to fill out the meter.

¹⁸ Boerger, “Grace Note”, Boerger, “Domains”, Boerger, “Trees”.

¹⁹ Davenport, “Lyric verse”.

Figure 1²⁰

A song leader introduces a song by singing it all the way through once by himself. Then the following times he and half the group sing the first couplet, while the rest of the group responds with the final couplet. The lyrics in Table 3 were written by Mr. Simon for the advent season, using a traditional tune. The identical lines are italicized.

Table 3. Natqgu Song Forms

Natqgu	English back translation ²¹	lyric pattern
<i>Nabzm oliqlrpx e</i>	<i>Your-sg heart must be ready</i>	<i>a</i>
Natakitrde King	To be fitting for the King	b
Kc navzom mz Bongavz.	Who will come from Heaven.	c
<i>Nabzm oliqlrpx e.</i>	<i>Your-sg heart must be ready.</i>	<i>a</i>

²⁰ Photo by Tim Hall, used with permission. www.tileawealth.com.au

²¹ When a consultant who does not speak Natqgu will be checking the translation, s/he is provided with an English back translation which is a literal portrayal of what the Natqgu translation says.

This traditional song form became the framework for all the Natqgu Psalms translated into song form, several of which are illustrated in the examples below.

Natqgu Examples of Psalms in Song

This indigenous song form ended up being quite effective when translating Hebrew parallelisms, especially those having significant repetition. The parallel lines of Hebrew have been discussed extensively in the literature, but very simplistically, parallelism describes a number of relationships which a sequence of two (or three) lines can have to each other. The most common relationships²² are illustrated in Psalm 148: (a) the second line restates the first, often with a degree of heightening as in verse 13; (b) the second line contrasts with the first, as in verse 6; or (c) the second line is similar in linguistic structure(s) to the first, as in verse 3.

Natqgu tolerates some degree of repetition in speech, but in the song form repetition is highly valued, and the traditional quatrain songs are sung as many as fifteen or more times in succession. Therefore, such a setting is perfect for psalms like 148, with its extensive repetition. In Psalm 148, over a third of the lines start with injunction ‘Praise Yahweh’ or ‘Praise him.’ Using Natqgu traditional forms to translate the parallel lines of Hebrew, applies principles 1 through 5, which deal with literary borrowing from SL to TL.

Such adjustments were made throughout Psalm 148. The bordered verses 7-12 comprise one long sentence in the source text. This text was divided into six sentences in Natqgu, because a sentence of that length is unnatural and difficult for listeners to follow. Furthermore, since many Natqgu speakers are newly literate in Natqgu, it is critical that they be able to aurally process the structures in the Psalms as they hear them read or sung.

Looking more closely at Psalm 148, the literal reading of verse 3 is, “Praise him sun and moon; praise him all you shining stars.” By reordering according to principle 7, it was possible to retain one “*praise him*” at the beginning of the verse and move the second one to the end of the second line, resulting in, “Ever exalt Yahweh, sun and moon. And all you stars, ever exalt Yahweh,” thereby achieving the *abca* lyric structure required for traditional Santa Cruz forms.

The song form assists comprehension in that it creates shorter sentences which make processing easier for the reader/hearer. But another advantage is that the repetition of ‘Ever exalt Yahweh’ retains the spirit of the original Hebrew poetry through the salience of the repetition in the psalm. The same exhortation forms an *inclusio* in Hebrew, in that the psalm starts and ends with ‘Praise Yahweh.’ The Natqgu song form captures this device with ‘Ever exalt Yahweh’ in verse 1 and ‘Let’s ever exalt Yahweh’ in verse 14.

Psalm 148

Psalm 148: Ever Exalt Yahweh [Natqgu]

English back translation of Natqgu	vs	literal English representing Hebrew
Ever exalt Yahweh, all you heavenly ones. You his angels, ever exalt Yahweh.	1-2	Praise Yahweh. Praise Yahweh from the heavens. Praise him in the heights above. Praise him all his angels, Praise him all his heavenly hosts.
Ever exalt Yahweh, sun and moon. And all you stars, ever exalt Yahweh.	3	Praise him sun and moon, Praise him all you shining stars.
Ever exalt him, everything in the sky. And you upper waters, ever exalt him.	4	Praise him, you highest heavens And you waters above the skies.
Ever exalt his name. He who made you, By the word he gave. Ever exalt Yahweh.	5	Let them praise the name of Yahweh, He commanded and they were created.

²² Bratcher and Reyburn, “Psalms Handbook”.

His word's eternal. He set for each one Where you'll ever be. His word's eternal.	6	He set them in place forever and ever. His decree won't ever pass away.
Ever exalt Yahweh, you fish and monsters Of the sea and deeps. Ever exalt Yahweh.	7	Praise Yahweh from the earth, You great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
You obey his word, lightning and hail. Clouds, wind and rain, you obey his word.	8	Lightning and hail, snow and cloud, Stormy winds that do his bidding,
Ever exalt Yahweh, all mountains and hills. You trees of the bush, ever exalt Yahweh.	9	You mountains and all hills, Fruit trees and all cedars,
Ever exalt him, all animals and birds. And things that crawl, ever exalt Yahweh.	10	Wild animals and all cattle, Small creatures and flying birds,
Let's exalt Yahweh too, all of us in the world. VIPs and leaders, we must also exalt Yahweh.	11	Kings of earth and all nations, You princes and all rulers on earth,
Let's exalt him too, us lads and lasses. Babes and elders, let's exalt him too.	12	Young men and maidens, Old men and children.
Let's exalt his name, all of us. His name is high. Let's exalt his name. His greatness surpasses the land And the sky too. His greatness!	13	Let them praise the name of Yahweh, For his name alone is exalted. His splendor is above the earth and the heavens.
Let's ever exalt Yahweh, All us his Israelites. He saves and loves us. Let's ever exalt Yahweh.	14	He's raised up for his people a horn, The praise of all his saints, Of Israel, those close to his heart. Praise Yahweh.

Psalm 23

Mr. Simon, the senior translator, composed the second half of Psalm 23:4 to be used in a literacy workshop. In our studies together the two of us learned that the Lord's rod and staff can be seen as a source of comfort because they are used to protect and rescue, but he realized that people would not understand that connection, so he made it explicit for the sake of clarity. Later he completed the full psalm according to the custom music form. But verse 4 alone is sufficient to illustrate the use of the Natqgu song form in psalms without repeating refrains.

In section 2, above, I suggested that sung scriptures could have the outcome that people then apply them to their lives. This was borne out in Mr. Simon's life in relation to this verse. Even though he was older and physically weaker than younger team members and he lived a greater distance from the translation office in our home, he exhibited no fear walking alone to and from meetings after dark. The young people were amazed at this, and often insisted on walking him home, even though he told them repeatedly that it was not necessary. He demonstrated to them that he trusted the Lord to watch over him after dark, in spite of the possibilities of attacks by demons or vicious dogs. He sang Psalm 23:4b as a testimony to them.

Psalm 23:4

Natqgu	English back translation	order	English text
Abtrpo drtwrnge bam.	I put my trust in you.	g	a
Nctrko tzmle nnti.	Your stick, it clears a path.	e	b
Brti drtwrnge bz scmq.	I depend on your club.	f	c
Abtrpo drtwrnge bam.	I put my trust in you.	g	d
		e	Your rod
Kxmule-esz' vztrx mz nzlo,	Although I walk in the dark,	ab	f
A' trmwxlrwxu e.	Yet I am not afraid.	c	g
Yawe, mncme bange,	Yahweh, you're with me,	d	they comfort me.
Kxmule-esz' vztrx mz nzlo.	Although I walk in the dark.	ab	

Natqgu also reordered the propositions in the verse as indicated in the narrow lettered columns, because according to Natqgu structures the psalmist's reason for not being afraid more naturally precedes the statement that he is not afraid, and thereby better sets up the rest of the verse. For each quatrain, the main idea of a verse or a line was identified as the focal point which was emphasized through the repetition inherent in the song form, but not manifest as repetition in the Hebrew source text.

Other Psalms Using Custom Forms

The Natqgu team did not translate every psalm according to one of the folk melodies of the island. Nor did they always translate full psalms. But when a portion leant itself to the quatrain structure discussed above, certain verses were translated to be sung. The Hebrew Psalter is divided into five books. Most translations maintain these divisions in some way. There is general consensus that each of the five books ends with a closing chorus, which although it is not considered to be part of the final psalm of that book, its verses have conventionally been numbered as part of that psalm. In Natqgu these portions are all composed to be sung following the quatrain structure of Santa Cruz custom songs, lending coherence to them as a set and providing a kind of bookmarking of the psalter. These are found at PS 41:13, PS 72:18-20, PS 89:52, and PS 106:48.

Psalm 150 is said to be the chorus which closes both Book Five and the entire Psalter. But rather than compose it as a custom song, the team used indigenous instruments and body movements associated with the *nelâ* dance to reflect the high praise of the composition. The English back-translation follows.

Psalm 150 Let's Dance to Yahweh

- 1 Let's exalt Yahweh in his being in the House-for-worshipping.
And in his being in the High Heaven.
- 2 Let's make-songs-about him for his exceeding greatness
In doing powerful things.

- 3-5 Let's dance to him with leg-rattles
and strongly beat the drum to him.
Let's dance to him by our banging things,
our smacking things, and by our shaking things in our hands.
Let's blow the conch shell and bamboo flutes (to him).
And let's strum the guitar and ukulele in our exalting him.

- 6 We who are alive should rejoice in Yahweh.
Our praising Yahweh is forever and ever. Yes, it is so.

In addition to the choruses closing Books 1, 2, 3, and 4 of the Psalter, other psalms which were composed with selected verses using traditional Natqgu quatrains are: 13:6, 47:6, 75:1, 107:8-9, 21-22, 31-32, 116:1-2, 118:1-4, 10-12, 15-16, 28-29, and 141:1. A few psalms were composed completely as custom songs—Psalms 134, 136, and 148. Psalm 23 warranted two translations. We started with a custom song, verse 4 of which is discussed above. It is included in the *Book of Worship*. But another more conventional rendering without repetition was included in the published Natqgu scriptures. This is the only psalm having two versions. For the rest, the custom song forms are exactly the forms which are part of the dedicated scriptures and which were checked by multiple consultants from two major translation organizations.

Natqgu Scripture Songs Using Western Music

At this point, it is probably useful to say that in addition to the indigenous song forms, the Natqgu team also translated scripture songs to western hymn and chorus tunes. Santa Cruz Island already had a long history

of singing hymns, first in Mota [mtt], a language of Vanuatu, and then in English, the national language of the Solomon Islands. The oldest speakers still enjoy Christmas caroling—another western import—in Mota. With regard to musical preferences, middle aged people liked the hymns they grew up with; older people liked the traditional music they knew; and young people preferred choruses. It was the traditional music that was being neglected both in the church context and more widely in the community.²³

In the New Testament, the Natqgu team translated all of the short worship portions of Revelation to a single western chorus melody and formatted them as songs in the scripture text. The second of these worship texts begins at Revelation 5:9, and the quote margin introducing it says, “And they sang a new song.” If that’s what worship in heaven looks like, perhaps imitating that here on earth is also called for. After all, we routinely pray, “...on earth as it is in heaven.” And in fact, translating these songs as songs was affirmed by the (Bible Society) consultant who checked Revelation and by the typesetting staff a few years later who said many translation practitioners get to the typesetting stage without having considered formatting songs as songs.²⁴ Elsewhere, the Natqgu passages in Romans 11:33-36, 16:25-27 and Ephesians 5:14 were all translated to a favorite hymn tune of the Santa Cruz people. A different melody was used for 1 Timothy 1:17, and yet another hymn tune for 1 Tim 6:15-16.

While I personally might prefer using primarily traditional songs, it was too late at the time we were working there to turn the clock back. And in fact, my Santa Cruz friends would have objected strongly to leaving hymns and choruses out of the hymnal. Ironically, I was the one who initially objected to leaving out the custom songs. So ultimately the hymnal’s 455 songs included lyrics for all three song types. The desire to have the song lyrics so that people could sing all the verses to hymns meant that they came to our door to buy an earlier short songbook of 110 songs, and then the later *Book of Worship* with the larger number of song lyrics. In fact, people were willing to spend money on the song books more than the trial edition scripture portions which we also printed.

It became the practice at St. Thomas, the church we attended, for the choir to lead chorus singing while waiting for people to arrive. Then during the service only hymns were sung—but after we started working on hymn translations, these were in Natqgu and not English as when we arrived. During Holy Communion the choir would quietly sing relevant communion hymns and choruses. Then after everyone else had been served and they went forward to partake, one or two of the older men would start a Christian song using the traditional melody form. And there was time for several of these. This meant, then, that there was music for all tastes in one service and no one was left out.

We found that people who routinely used the song books to sing along in church became more fluent readers than those who only read the story books we produced. This could tie into the psycholinguistic evidence in the second section, or be accounted for by the fact that they just read more, or a combination of these. In any case, we have observed a correlate between frequency of singing written lyrics and reading fluency.

²³ This is a generalization that held for much of the population, while there were families, like that of our sons’ babysitter, who more commonly sang custom songs, as the following story illustrates. One Sunday after the Diocesan Bishop had celebrated Holy Communion a group of people were waiting for the breakfast feast to be served. The Bishop, who was from a different island and language group, said, “Why doesn’t someone start a song for us to sing?” Everyone just sat there in an uncomfortable silence until our older son, around five years old at the time, started singing a custom song about an old woman gathering firewood. At first there was stunned silence. Then the old men joined in with huge grins on their faces. I imagine that they felt honored that a little white boy would assume that the right songs to sing in a Natqgu-speaking context were custom songs in Natqgu. After a few such custom songs broke the ice, people switched to Christian choruses in English, which had, after all, been the Bishop’s original intent.

²⁴ In fact, many translators do not even consider translating poetry as poetry, let alone song as song.

English Examples of Psalms in Song

Acrostics

Turning now to the Hebrew acrostics, as I said when they were first published, the ten principles proposed for literary translation²⁵ were partly motivated by a desire to respond to authors who made statements like the following:

“Such so-called ‘acrostic poems’ are very clever devices, and perhaps they were used as an aid in memorising. But woe to the translator who imagines he can satisfactorily reproduce such an acrostic structure in a translation into another language!”²⁶

“Only someone with the rare literary skills of a Monsignor Ronald Knox²⁷ would dare attempt to represent this feature in translation.”²⁸

Thankfully, a few voices take a different view, as Timothy Wilt said,

“The possibility of reproducing in translation the acrostic form of Hebrew poems has generally been summarily dismissed. In this article I want to raise the question of whether this should be so.”²⁹

But in spite of Wilt’s proposal, my ten principles, and Wendland’s prolific production in the area of literary translation³⁰, many Bible translation practitioners still blindly and blithely view poetic translations of Biblical poetry as ill-advised, illegitimate, and/or impossible.

There are nine acrostic psalms in Hebrew (Psalms 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, and 145), in which the first letter of each line, verse, or stanza follows sequentially through the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Scholars propose that one function of the acrostics may have been for ease of memorization, as in the quote from Nida above. Another proposal for the function of acrostics is that they represent the full breadth and depth of a topic, all the way from aleph to tav (tav)³¹. Wendland also suggests (personal communication) that people perceived the acrostic form as esthetically attractive, and rejoiced in that beauty.

For all of these reasons I made it a priority to represent the acrostics in my own English translation of the Psalter. To that end, of the nine acrostics, five were translated with rhymed iambic lines; Psalms 9 and 10 (one acrostic) were translated using the sung Sakha *ohuokai* form from Siberia; Psalm 119 was translated with extensive alliteration to highlight the focus letter/sound; and Psalms 25 and 34 were translated to hymn tunes—“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” (11.11.11.11. *St. Denio*) and “And now, O Father, mindful of thy love” (10.10.10.10.10. *Unde et Memores*), respectively.

Having addressed Psalm 111, 112 and 119 previously³², I have more recently been exploring the *ohuokai* form of the Sakha people of Yakutia, Siberia.³³ Psalms 9 and 10 form one together form the first alphabetic acrostic in the Psalter. Ancient versions such as the Greek Septuagint and Latin Vulgate translations combine Psalms 9 and 10 as one psalm and then break up a later psalm so that the total still comes to 150.

²⁵ Boerger, “Extending”.

²⁶ Nida, “Poetry”, 435.

²⁷ The Knox translation of 1954 translated the Biblical acrostics acrostically. However, that language is now archaic and the Jerusalem Bible (1966) is the only modern translation which reflects the acrostics, both in its French and English versions. It uses a Romanized transliteration of the Hebrew letter names as section headings in Psalm 119.

²⁸ Bratcher and Reyburn, “Psalms handbook”, 4.

²⁹ Wilt, “Acrostics”.

³⁰ Such as Wendland, “Psalms”, Wendland, “Literature of Scripture”, and Wendland, “Lovely, lively lyrics”.

³¹ Wilt, “Acrostics”, 207.

³² Boerger, “Extending”.

³³ I studied the *ohuokai* as part of the Arts for a Better Future workshop I attended during the summer of 2014, led by Drs. Brian Schrag, SIL International and Robin Harris, Center for Excellence in World Arts at the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics. Part of the workshop involved participants discovering and using the many poetic features of the *ohuokai*. See also Crate “Ohuokai.”

In my *POET Psalms* translation, it is composed as one poem, but retains the verse numbering as if they were separate psalms. This facilitates comparison with other English versions. While Hebrew acrostics focus on the first letter of each Biblical verse, for English it is better poetic style to establish a pattern the beginning of each line, rather than each verse. In the composition below, Psalm 9 generally repeats each letter three times, except 'O' at the end which occurs four times. Then in Psalm 10 each generally letter repeats four times, except for Z, which occurs three times. The result here then derives 26 English letters from the 22 found in Hebrew.

The *ohuokai* poem-song-dance form is a call and response in which the traditionally male poet-singer-dance leader sings one line and the rest of the dancers sing it back to him. The poetic form has several required and/or highly favored features. First, the beginnings of lines alliterate with each other, indicated by using a bold font to begin each line. The alliteration may run for as long as the poet wants, but here is harnessed by the alphabetic pattern. Second, the ends of lines exhibit rhyme, or identical or very similar sounds.

One of the most salient features is the third one, line length. The preferred line has seven syllables linguistically, but eight beats musically. That is, one syllable, often the last, carries two beats on two notes of the tune. Such two-note sections are italicized and underlined below. Such lines could be described in English poetic terms as trochaic tetrameter with the last of the four trochees being a tailless trochee poetically, even though it is not tailless musically. For example, the English word *numbers* is a trochee, with stress on the first syllable and the second unstressed. The stressed syllable of the tailless trochee, then, is only one syllable poetically, but it receives two tones in the melody. While this is the preferred pattern, the *ohuokai* line exhibits variation in Sakha, with some lines being six syllables long and others eight syllables. When there are only six syllables, two syllables are assigned two tones in the music; and when there are eight syllables, each syllable receives only one musical tone. I use the same flexibility in the English translation.

A fourth characteristic is that the singer-poet should also provide as much cross-rhyme within a couplet (and beyond) as possible. To achieve the cross-rhyme in Psalms 9-10, I use any similar sounding vowels and/or consonants, but frequently not true rhyme. I also look for ways to alliterate or rhyme within a single line, in addition to the pattern between lines.

Finally, there is a fifth characteristic related to the vowel quality of vowels in parallel lines. Sakha has two different classes of vowels, such that it is highly favored for a line or a couplet to have a majority of the vowels be from just one class. These might be compared to short vowels versus long vowels in English. I did not attempt this feature. Thus, most of the complexity of an *ohuokai* lies in the lyrics, and Sakha people listen intently during the dance for all the creativity the poet-singer has included in the composition.

One further aspect to the form is that the lyrics are not written down, but internalized. They can also be reused as chunks to create other *ohuokai*. The most popular poet-singers are those with the most complexity and variation. It is presumed that they compose their lyrics during the long winter months then release their poems as they sing and dance during the following spring and summer.

Beyond the lyrics, there is the melody. All *ohuokai* have the same tune. It is a simple tune based on a major scale with the pattern 13312321 or *do mi mi do re mi re do*, and the melody is unchanging for every line of every *ohuokai*. There are, however, several upward key changes depending on length of the piece, as well as an increase in tempo (or two) toward the end. For the English version, it is suggested that key changes take place at the two *selahs*, indicated by diamonds; and that a further key change and increase in tempo start with the first V-line.

A dance begins with the call, "Come dance the *ohuokai*," starting with an open half circle, which closes as more and more people join the dance. They clasp hands, linking forearms, and inch around the circle in a clockwise direction, with the left foot leading and the right closing behind the left heel in an approximate 45 degree angle. As the dance progresses, and as the tempo increases, arm swinging occurs. The dancing ends with the singing of the lines, "*Oho-oho-ohuokai. Ehe-ehe-ehekei. Oho-oho-ohuokai. Ehe-ehe-ehekei.*" This and the call are modified for English. At the end, people drop arms and embrace or shake hands with the other dancers. Meanwhile, a new *ohuokai* circle may form and the dancing resumes.

The use of the *ohuokai* form in Psalms 9 and 10 necessitated considerable compressing of the lyrics to fit the required line length. While I am not yet satisfied with the result, I offer it here as an example of sung Biblical poetry.

Psalm 9 & Psalm 10
 a psalm of petition and trust
 an acrostic
 an ohuokai

Come dance to Adonai. Come sing to Adonai.

- 1 **A**clamation to my Lord;
 All your acts should be adored.
- 2 **A**ccolades for all you've done,
Ballads to Almighty One.
- 3 **B**lessedly foes flee in fright,
Bad men die when you're in sight.
- 4 **C**leared name; so I am set free.
 Case is closed; you act justly.
 Court says heathen are condemned!
- 5 **D**'feated, seething, in the end.
 Don't consider them again.
Dictate evil be wiped out;
- 6 **E**xtirpate their every house.
 Erased, gone hither. Amen.
- 7 **E**ver Yahweh, ruler, yes
 Faithful rule in righteousness,
- 8 **F**ixed on earth your judgment throne:
 Filled with justice, yours alone.
- 9-10 **G**od, you keep the battered safe.
 Gladder hearts leap toward your grace.
Glorious Turret, be our host.
High security; None lost.
- 11 **H**oly One in Zion.
Heathens, hear us sing of God.
- 12 **I**f he hears our troubled cries,
 It is sure our God replies.
- 13 **I** say, That's my plea.
 Just **pl**uck me from th'enemy.
 Justly come, deliver me!
- 14 **J**oyous, Zion-bound I stand
 Keeping praise sounds in our band;
 Keeping joy; hand
- 15 **K**illers dig a hole, and bait it,
 Lured to roll into that same pit.
- 16 **L**ord, you showed your fair decrees
 Lies the wicked sowed they reaped.
- ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖
- 17 **M**en rejecting God must go;
 Must be destined for Sheol.
- 18 **M**ake the needy hold to hope,
 Not concede or fold up. Nope.
- 19 **N**ow, Lord Yahweh, raise your hand.
 Nullify the rebel band.
Overwhelm with your great law.

Only then, let their fate dawn—
 20 Overawe bring fear to them,
 Oh we're merely mortal men.
 ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖
 1 Please Yahweh, why far away?
 Persecuted day by day.
 2 Pulling weaker ones aside.
 Patron, hopes are bleak. Why hide?
 3 Quite proud, they love evil rot.
 Quarrel, say, "Above's God
 4 Quickly impure ones all say,
 "Quite sure we will not pay
 5 Rebels cheer in all they do.
 Ruthless sneering at foes too.
 6 Resolute, they won't withdraw;
 Ruling out King Yahweh's law.
 7 Speak assaults in lie, threat, curse;
 Speech is salted with set slurs.
 8 Shadow-hid, they slink around,
 Search out victims to bring down.
 Traitors tear the innocent;
 9 Terrify like tigers, rend.
 Trap the helpless, lie in wait;
 10 Troll their net and dangle bait,
 Unaware ones trip the snare.
 11 Until men judge, "God won't care.
 Unaddressed ills stay ignored,
 Unseen still by Yahweh Lord."
 12 Vict'ry, Yahweh, raise your hand,
 Vindicate us, take a stand.
 13 Violent foes reject our God,
 "Villains will not get the rod."
 14 Well aware, you see our grief;
 Waiting, b'lieving for relief.
 Wise one delivers orphaned, poor,
 Wants to father them, restore.
 15 Expunge evil influence.
Exact full recompense,
Expose their evil plans.
 16 Yahweh, ever, you command;
 You drive heathens from your land.
 17 Yahweh hears all our requests,
 Yields hope for the fatherless.
 18 Zion's Zeal lifts the oppressed.
 Zapped, our foes cannot cause fear.
 Zero hour for man is here.

Ho'o-ho'o-Ho'osana. Ha'a-ha'a-hallelujah!

Ho'o-ho'o-Ho'osana. Ha'a-ha'a-hallelujah!

and to test their translatability. Even though Psalms 33 and 38 are not acrostics in Hebrew, they do each have 22 verses, and scholars say any 22 verse psalm might suggest an acrostic to Hebrew readers. Thus, in keeping with the theme of singing to the Lord a new song, I used Psalms 33 and 38 as test cases for double acrostics. To make my “new song” as difficult as possible, I set myself the task of translating Psalm 33 as a metered, double acrostic, with some rhyme and assonance, and it had to be set to a well-known tune. Assonance features similar vowel sounds, even when consonants differ. I chose a quatrain form and through semantic amplification stretched the 22 letters of Hebrew to the 26 of English, plus two further lines inserting ‘*ch*’ and ‘*sh*,’ for a total of 28 lines, that being a multiple of four, as required by the use of quatrains. Such semantic amplification was done through applications of principles 6 and 7, which allow for augmenting imagery and applying principles across a broader range of verses than in non-literary translation.

Double acrostics have the target letter (or sound) at both the beginning and the end of the line. As anyone familiar with Hebrew acrostics will confirm, there are places in the Hebrew text where clarity and naturalness were compromised in order to maintain the form³⁴. But even so, the English rendering below seems fairly clear and fairly natural. In fact, a review reader of *POET Psalms* said she found the poetic renderings easier to understand than the English translations she normally used. So clarity may actually be enhanced through poetry.

The formatting used here is to highlight the final letters and sounds of each line as they follow the alphabet. Each line should be read across the page.

Psalm 33

The A to Z of Delighting in the Master

a psalm of praise

double acrostic

Tune: “Joyful, Joyful” (8.7.8.7.D. *Hymn to Joy*)

1	A ll God’s subjects, give him praises.	Sing with joy, “Hallelu-Ya!”
	B ecause praise becomes the blameless,	Praising him should be your j ob.
2-3	C ompose Yahweh songs and dances,	You lyre-strumming maniac.
	C hant songs that your harp enhances,	Using skill no one can m atch.
	D rum your joy; join as you’re able.	Harmonize each worship ³⁵ sound.
4	E very action shows God’s faithful.	Yahweh’s words are always t ru e .
5	F or God does what’s just, he planned it—	Loves forever, gives us p roof.
6	G od’s word made the stars and planets,	Crafting heaven by his s ong.
7	H e made barns for seas so salty,	Gathered oceans in one s wath.
8	I say, you should worship Yahweh.	Stand in awe of Adonai.
9	J ust think how his word begot it—	Everything within his ³⁶ raj.
10	K ing Yahweh sees kingdoms plotting,	And confounds the foe’s a ttack.
11	L ord God’s plans all stand forever,	As he executes his r ule.
12	M ark then Jacob’s people’s blessings—	Chosen by the great I A M.
	N amed to inherit Yahweh’s blessings—	Every woman, child and m an.
13	O n high, God looks down from heaven,	Knowing all we think and d o.
14	P eering down he sees all humans,	Testing every people g roup.
15	Q uickened by Yahweh, who made them,	He knows those at home or ³⁵ su q .

³⁴ Wilt, “Acrostics”, 208.

³⁵ 33:15. The *suq* is the public marketplace, borrowed into English from Arabic.

	Recognizing hearts are hollow, So his judgments always follow ³⁶	He perceives them from afar. From their actions, thoughts, and words.
16	Shrewdest kings lose with battalions.	Heroes, too, fall in the clash.
17	Triumph's not found in one's stallions.	A war horses won't deliver that.
18	Unrelenting, Yahweh cares for Victory meets hearts prepared for	Those who say, <i>I'll worship you</i> . Hoping in Lord Yahweh's love.
19	When there's famine, God the savior	Rescues from starvation's maw.
20	Expect and hope Yahweh will answer.	He's your shield and battle ax.
21	Yes, delighting in the master,	We trust Yahweh's holy way.
22	Zion's hope, we wait for favor,	Which your loving-kindness sends.

Selected Further English Examples

The following initial stanzas of selected psalms will serve to illustrate those which were first composed to specific poetic forms, and later hymn tunes were found which were compatible with them. All of these are selections from *POET Psalms*.

The *rubaiyat* (plural of *rubai*) is an Arabic form composed of more than one four-line *rubai*, with each *rubai* having its own *aaba* rhyme scheme³⁷. Many such poems have an interlocking feature, such as the one illustrated by the English translation of Psalm 27, in which the b-rhyme of one *rubai* becomes the a-rhyme of the following *rubai*, and the b-rhyme of the final *rubai* being the a-rhyme of the first stanza. Two stanzas are given here.

Psalm 27

I Said, "Your Favor, Let Me See"

by David

a psalm of trust

interlocking rubaiyat

Tune: "Just As I Am" (L.M. Woodworth)

1	God, with you I have life, I'm saved, There is no reason to be afraid. I can face my foes without fear, For Lord, you are my strong stockade.
2	When evil enemies appear, To rip me apart and to sneer; When they think me torn to pieces, They'll find their fall will be severe.

Psalm 31 uses a six-line Welsh form called the *hir a thoddaid*³⁸. Each line has ten syllables, except the last, which has nine. The ends of all lines except the fifth have rhyme or near-rhyme with each other. A word toward the end of line five must cross-rhyme with a middle syllable of line six. I made two adjustments to the form in translation. First, I changed the last line to 10 syllables so that it would fit the song's meter, an application of principle 4. I also added an interlocking feature to compensate for changing the line length, for more cohesion, according to principle 9.

³⁶ 33:15. The two halves of this last line are implied by the rest of this verse.

³⁷ Turco, "Book of Forms", 245-246.

³⁸ Ibid., 194-195.

Psalm 31
Trusting During Testing
by David

a psalm of trust
interlocking hir a thoddaid

Tune: “And now, O Father, mindful of thy love” (10.10.10.10.10.10. *Unde et Memores*)

- 1 Oh Yahweh, refuge sure for which I long,
Don't shame me, Lord, or let my trust be wrong.
But save me! You're the one who's right and strong.
- 2 Come, rescue soon, Lord, lest my strength be gone.
My fortress, ward off, please, the foes' broadside.
From plots they've tried, oh keep me safe, my God.

Another Welsh form was used to translate Psalm 40. The *cyrch a chwta*³⁹ has eight lines of seven syllables each. The ends of all but the seventh line rhyme with each other, while the end of it cross-rhymes with the third, fourth, or fifth syllable of line eight. For English, often the second syllable of the last line better leant itself to the cross-rhyme, and I allowed that to happen, once again according to principle 4. Note too that verse 3 of this psalm also echoes the theme of this article—to sing a new song. The NIV translation of Psalm 40:3a reads, “He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.”

Psalm 40
From the Chasm of Decay
by David

a psalm of petition and praise
cyrch a chwta

Tune: “See the gloomy gathering cloud” (7.7.7.7.D. *Benevenuto*)

- 1 Patiently I used to wait.
When I cried, you heard me pray,
- 2 Pulled me from the clinging clay,
Up from chasms of decay,
Gave my feet a solid place.
- 3 Now may my new song of praise⁴⁰
Mean that many people hear,
Trust, revere you, Lord Yahweh.

Psalm 136—Extended Example in Natqgu and English

We turn now to an application of the ten principles of literary translation to Psalm 136 in Natqgu and English. The Hebrew Psalms are the prayers and hymns of the Jews. As such, a cantor sung them with worshippers responding. To understand adjustments made in Psalm 136 in both Natqgu and English, it is necessary to first examine its structure in Hebrew. The psalm is comprised of 26 couplets, each of which has the same second line, as shown in Table 4 using the first three couplets. Psalm 136 is the only Hebrew psalm which exhibits this structure.

³⁹ Ibid., 166-167.

⁴⁰ 40:3a. This verse is similar to Psalm 33:3 as well as 96:1a and 98:1a which are identical to each other in both the Hebrew and POET's English.

Table 4. Hebrew structure of Psalm 136:1-3

Praise the Lord; for he is good,
His steadfast love is eternal.
 Praise the God of gods,
His steadfast love is eternal.
 Praise the Lord of lords,
His steadfast love is eternal.

But even though the Hebrew forms were normally sung or chanted, this has not been the practice in many of the languages into which the Psalms have been translated. In fact, when surveyed, I discovered that both Natqgu and English speakers found the repetition of the refrain of Psalm 136 very monotonous well before the end of its 26 repetitions, whether read silently or aloud. And at the same time, speakers of both these languages also both have a significantly higher tolerance for repetition when it occurs in a song. Natqgu speakers certainly value repetition in song and I suspect this is true in many languages. Thus, it may be the case that unless poetic repetition is set to music it will not maintain the function of enhancing the composition as it almost certainly did in Hebrew, but rather it will detract from it, a violation of the overarching principle of accuracy.

Natqgu Psalm 136

Natqgu Psalm 136:1-3

Natqgu	English back translation
Aodu-zvzle nigu.	He always loves us.
Awi-ngrbzku bade	We give thanks to him for
Nzmlz-esz'ngr-krde.	His surpassing goodness.
Aodu-zvzle nigu.	He always loves us.
Aodu-zvzle nigu.	He always loves us.
Kxetu r kxnzetur,	Master of all masters,
Myaszlzle kxnzmncng mzlilxl.	He surpasses spirit beings.
Aodu-zvzle nigu.	He always loves us.

In his translation of Psalm 136, I encouraged the national translator, Mr. Simon, who is also a song leader and composer, to apply principle 7 which allows reordering. This gave him the flexibility in a two verse sequence to place one occurrence of the refrain at the beginning and to leave the other at the end, thereby achieving the Santa Cruz *abca* lyric structure illustrated above. Using the traditional form to translate the parallel lines of Hebrew, applies principles 1, 2, and 5, all of which deal with borrowing and combining source language and target language poetic forms. Translating according to the song form has the further advantage that it translates repetition in a way that is appeals to readers and hearers, rather than causing them to tune out.

English Psalm 136

Psalm 136

Lord, Your Love Endures Forever

a liturgical and historical psalm of thanksgiving

Tune: "Nothing but the blood of Jesus" *Plainfield*

- 1 God, your goodness is the best.
Lord, your love endures forever.

2 You're the God who made the rest.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 3 Yahweh, you're Lord of lords.
 You're the one we adore.
 Hear adoration roar.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 4 You alone work miracles.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 5-6 Sky, land, and water's trickles.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 7 You filled the sky with light –
 8 Sunshine makes daytime bright,
 9 Moon and stars glow at night.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 10-11 You showed all your dominion,
Lord, your love endures forever.
 Killing first-born Egyptians.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 12 Freed from Egyptian wrath,
 13 The Reed Sea split in half,
 14 Took your own on that path.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 15 You sank Pharaoh's army down.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 16 Took your own through desert ground.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 17 Kingdoms you've overthrown,
 18 Pulled kings down from their thrones.
 Your power and might were shown.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 19 You killed Sihon, the Amorite,
Lord, your love endures forever.
 20 Brought down Og, the Bashanite.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 21 Yahweh, by your hand
 You gave your own the land,
 22 Israel's to command.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 23 You loved us when we were low.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 24 You rescued us from our foe.
Lord, your love endures forever.
 25 You care for all you made,
 Giving them food and aid.
 26 Thanks for all you've displayed!
Lord, your love endures forever.

As stated in the introduction, in order to better guide the Natqgu team, I also applied the principles from Table 1 to my English translation, *POET Psalms*⁴¹, in which each psalm is set to a particular poetic form,

⁴¹ Boerger, "POET Psalms".

such as a sonnet, or to a song tune or a regular meter. To explore English poetic forms I used Lewis Turco's *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*, in which he also includes forms which have been borrowed into English.

The *POET* translation of Psalm 136 was set to the tune named *Plainfield* which has a 7.8.7.8. meter with a refrain. The song was written by Robert Lowry and first published in *Gospel Music*⁴². I felt the tune was a good fit for this psalm for two reasons. First, the repetition in the original lyrics worked well with the psalm's refrain, giving 18 repetitions in English as opposed to 40 in Natqgu and 26 in Hebrew. And second, the gospel sound of the tune has its source in the bluegrass music of Appalachia, making it something that most speakers of American English will find familiar. Therefore, the instrumentation and style of audio recording were chosen to reinforce the bluegrass feel. For example, no drums are used. Instead, the instruments selected for recording are the guitar, banjo, violin, hammer dulcimer, jaw harp, and tambourine. The first verse starts with guitar, banjo and a single vocalist, with each verse adding further instruments or voices, and with tension building by the use of two key changes.

The response to the song recording made of Psalm 136⁴³ from English-speaking target audiences in the US has been essentially positive, with people willingly joining in to sing the refrains or to keep time by clapping, stomping of feet, and other signs of engagement and enthusiasm.

Socio-Cultural Evidence Supporting Sung Scripture Translations

The UNESCO website for Intangible Cultural Heritage starts with this statement:

Cultural heritage...also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.⁴⁴

Socio-cultural factors related to cultural heritage also support sung scripture translations. As I say elsewhere⁴⁵,

Those features which distinguish one group from another and which are associated with its identity have been called cultural identity markers or ethnic and cultural identification tags (Adegbija 2004:127). They help define what it means to be an insider in a particular group. Globalization in our increasingly interconnected world has been a major cause of weakening and loss of cultural heritage and identity markers, including language. Such undermining of identities can lead to social instability.

Therefore, whenever we use indigenous song forms in vernacular translations, we contribute to strengthening of group identity. When individuals outside the culture show an interest in the cultural heritage of a community, it increases the self-esteem of people groups⁴⁶, which in turn contributes to language and culture stability⁴⁷.

Failure to incorporate expressions of cultural heritage in our translations, then, is counter-productive to our goals. On our arrival as advisors to the Natqgu project in 1988 believers on Santa Cruz Island were already singing hymns and choruses in English, the national language of the Solomon Islands. Part of our efforts aimed at increasing literacy and scripture use was to translate the lyrics of those songs into Natqgu. At the same time, we began to advocate for and to value the use of custom tunes which already had Natqgu

⁴² Doane and Lowry, "Gospel Music".

⁴³ Thanks for help in recording Psalm 136 in English go to the following people: Paul McAndrew (guitar, vocals, rattle, recording technician), Cathy McAndrew (vocals, Jew's harp, tambourine, recording technician), Cory & Julie Cummins, Morelle Cummins and Cora Cummins (vocals), Karen Nelson (vocals), Ian Larrimore (banjo, hammer dulcimer), and Mary Draper (violin). Musicians are members of one or more of the following: The Bleatniks or IziBongo bands or are in some way related to World Arts in SIL or Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics (GIAL).

⁴⁴ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00002>

⁴⁵ Boerger et al, "A Language and Culture".

⁴⁶ Ostler, "Desperate straits", 175.

⁴⁷ Cahill, "Endangered", Quakenbush, "Agutaynen vitality".

lyrics; and at one point I was told by a man my age that I sang “custom” better than he did. May it never be!

Over the nearly 20 years we lived there, the value people themselves placed on their traditional music began to increase. In fact, by the time of the dedication of the *New Testament, Ruth and Psalms in Natqgu*⁴⁸, our family and a team of US college students were greeted on our arrival by a group of middle-aged and older women singing a welcome song in the custom form. The dedication committee, comprised of members of two denominations (Pentecostal and Anglican),⁴⁹ had also decided to have traditional music as a strong component of the dedication service, and even young people enthusiastically sang those songs. Even more telling, new lyrics were composed to an old custom tune for presentation at the feast following the dedication service. The lyrics told the story of the coming of Daniel and Brenda to translate the scriptures into Natqgu, and the singers were almost exclusively middle-aged and younger women and children, rather than the old men who had been custodians of custom music until that time.

Similarly, on my return to Santa Cruz Island in 2015, I found that two women had joined together to form a church choir dedicated solely to singing the Christian custom tunes of the Natqgu Book of Worship, and to even composing their own lyrics. The women are in their early 60s and early 40s respectively and their choir includes children as well as adults. The singing of traditional tunes in worship, including scripture songs, increases vernacular literacy and enhances the well-being of the people who sing them.

These two examples from 2008 and 2015 demonstrate that our valuing traditional music has led to a sustainable practice of using it in the church, whereas previously it was the exclusive domain of the oldest generation of men.

Conclusion

We have now seen a number of outcomes and advantages to using song forms in translation. First, for both Natqgu and English, the song form raised the tolerance, or even appreciation, for what might otherwise have been excessive repetition. Secondly, the use of indigenous song forms in both languages helps in the processing of foreign concepts and history, by providing something familiar along with the unknown. In addition, for Natqgu, the song form has contributed to an increased desire to read in the vernacular, which has in turn led to a rise in vernacular literacy rates, thereby contributing not just to language maintenance and vitality for Natqgu, but also for an underlying stability for the culture in a more and more globalized world.

We have also seen that such results are likely to be the norm since they are consistent with the literature on language, music, and the brain. And furthermore, we have seen that translating Biblical songs as vernacular songs can be viewed as an application of the translation goal of accuracy.

As stated in the opening paragraphs, I advocate for poetic scripture translation using relevant cultural music to be considered more than merely the effective scripture use tool that it has been for some, but rather as an inherent and essential feature of best practices in Bible translation from the outset of a translation project, such that these sung poetic translations are the main translation, worthy of publication and subject to consultant checking. Given the arguments and evidence above, vernacular translations could and should incorporate song forms, especially traditional song forms. Then language groups around the world will be able to “sing to the Lord a new song,” thereby freeing Biblical poetry to sing. We are commanded to sing a new song. It is accurate to do it. Our brains are structured to do it. It is beneficial to do it. So, let’s do it!

⁴⁸ Natqgu scriptures.

⁴⁹ The Natqgu dedication committee told us that working together toward the dedication had unified them in a way that they had not experienced since the church split when the Pentecostal group, broke off from the Anglicans. Just preparing for the scripture launch showed them that they were one in the Lord, and they began to feel like one people once again. Such unity is an extraordinary result, especially considering that the Pentecostals had previously opposed the use of custom music in the church.

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