

# Are Russian Brothers Really Tuvan Brothers? The Allure of Incipient Christianese in Bible Translation<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers the Tuvan church's resistance to using the Tuvan kin terms that mean "brother, sister, brethren" with a specifically Christian meaning, possibly due to the age stratification inherent in these terms and their unmarked status as standard terms of address in Tuvan society. Tuvan Christians prefer to use the equivalent kin terms borrowed from the Russian language, which are free of age stratification and also specifically mark speakers as belonging to the church subculture. The paper proceeds by examining the positive and negative aspects of this borrowing into Tuvan Christianese in order to determine whether or not it is suitable for inclusion in the Tuvan translation of the Bible, and concludes that the negatives outweigh the positive. If similar borrowings are to be included in a Bible translation, they must be acceptable from the point of view of secular language use. This approach will hopefully mold the nascent Church's jargon instead of being bound by it even when it includes unnatural accretions that can add to the linguistic rift between Christians and non-Christians in the target-language community.

## I The Problem

While living in the south-Siberian Republic of Tuva (a member state of the Russian Federation) and working as the main exegete on a translation of the Bible into the Tuvan language<sup>2</sup> with the Institute of Bible Translation (IBT), I spent much time with Tuvan Christians, in both church and secular activities. As I listened to their conversations, I soon noticed that Tuvan believers frequently address and refer to one another with the Russian words *brat* ("brother") and *sestra* ("sister"), and the plural *brattar*, *sestralar* (the Russian word with the Tuvan plural ending) instead of with the Tuvan terms that express the same basic kinship relations.

In itself, lexical borrowing from Russian, the lingua franca of the Commonwealth of Independent States (former Soviet Union) and one of the two official languages in Tuva, is not a surprising phenomenon and occurs frequently in the Tuvan language nowadays. For the most part, information about the world outside of Tuva is filtered into the republic via Russian-language media, and it is much easier for the local information mavens (newscasters, journalists, schoolteachers, etc.) who convert the information into Tuvan to simply borrow a Russian word when needed instead of attempting to find or produce a Tuvan equivalent. Likewise, in the young Tuvan Church (the first wave of Tuvan converts to Christ appeared in the *perestroika* years), it is very common for numerous Russian loanwords to be present when Christian spiritual concepts are dealt with in sermons, Bible studies, and informal conversation<sup>3</sup>. Most congregations in the capital city of Kyzyl are led by Russians who do not speak Tuvan, and most Christian literature (besides Bible portions) is available to Tuvan believers only in the Russian language. In the other Tuvan towns and villages where there are Christian churches or house groups, Tuvan is the preferred language because Russian believers are present only rarely, but inasmuch as these churches look to Kyzyl for their leadership and send their ministers to be trained there, the Russian loanwords inevitably filter down into their Christian lexicon, too.

But this specific borrowing puzzled me. After all, the construct of fictive kinship (invoking a genetically non-existent family relationship for the purpose of creating social proximity) is used widely in

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<sup>2</sup> Tuvan is a Turkic language with about a quarter of a million native speakers in the Russian Federation (according to the 2002 census of the Russian Federation) and up to 30,000 more in Mongolia and China (according to the Ethnologue).

<sup>3</sup> An interesting exception to this rule are Tuvan hymns, which do not use Russian loanwords. This exception is worthy of further research on the part of ethnomusicologists.

the Tuvan language to address non-relatives just as it is in many other languages, including Russian<sup>4</sup>. Using the terminology of fictive kinship to address or refer to someone in Tuvan shows respect and warm feeling towards that person, and sets up the parameters of the given relationship according to the roles prescribed by Tuvan kinship structures. This usage is still active in most spheres of Tuvan society, both in the capital city and in the outlying towns and villages; it is by no means an archaic or fossilized form.

This borrowing was all the more surprising to me because the same Russian kin terms had already been previously borrowed into the Tuvan language with a different sense: to designate female nurses and male orderlies, also following the short form of the Russian words *medsestra* and *medbrat*<sup>5</sup>.

Given these factors, I wondered why Tuvans in the Christian faith community would stop referring to each other with the usual Tuvan kin terms that are used by all other Tuvans in reference to both blood relations and totally unrelated persons. My initial hypothesis was that this might reflect a desire on the part of Christians to eliminate worries related to age stratification in their Christian relationships, since the Tuvan language (similarly to other Turkic languages) differentiates its kin terms based on an older/younger distinction as well as several others, as shown in the following componential analysis<sup>6</sup>:

**Figure 1: Componential Analysis of Relevant Tuvan Kin Terms**

	<i>akyi</i> [ak'kɯj]	<i>oogbai</i> [ug'baɯ]	<i>doongmai</i> [duŋ'maj]	<i>ha-doongma</i> [xaduŋ'ma]	<i>aky-doongma</i> [ak,kɯduŋ'ma]
Male/Female	M	F	unspecified	unspecified	M
Younger/Older	O	O	Y	unspecified	both
Singular/Plural	S	S	S	P (collective)	P (collective)
Close/Distant Relative	unspecified	unspecified	unspecified	D	C

Thus, *akyi* means 'older brother', *oogbai* means 'older sister', and *doongmai* 'younger sibling'. All three terms are also used to refer to certain other kin relations within the non-nuclear family by extension, and to unrelated persons by fictive kinship. *Ha-doongma* refers to 'clan relatives (both male and female, either younger or older or both)', whereas the compound term *aky-doongma* refers to closer male relatives (both younger and older)<sup>7</sup>. The component of relative age is necessarily present when addressing or referring to someone using the singular kin terms; there is no neutral word that means simply "brother" or "sister" without reference to that person's age relative to the speaker (unlike the Russian words *brat* and *sestra*, which function similarly to their English equivalents in terms of being unspecified for relative age). Tuvans that I have consulted about this admit that the mandatory choice sometimes makes it awkward to address someone using a kin term if you are not sure of their age relative to your own. For example, addressing a woman in one's peer group as *oogbai* 'older sister' may offend her by indicating that she looks older than she really is; conversely, addressing someone who is older than you as *doongmai* may belittle him or her. In cases like this, a Tuvan speaker may just avoid using any term of address, or use a non-kin term of address or reference like *öngnük* 'friend', which is not specified for age.

Despite the social awkwardness potentially caused by using the natural Tuvan kin terms, non-Christian Tuvans never (as far as I am aware) borrow the corresponding Russian kin terms *brat* or *sestra*

<sup>4</sup> Examples of fictive kin terms actively used by most Russians are *dyadya* 'uncle', *tyotyā* 'aunt' and *babushka* 'grandmother'.

<sup>5</sup> The Russian usage seems to have developed from the fact that in previous centuries, hospitals were primarily staffed by nuns and monks, who were of course called "sisters" and "brothers" according to the Christian usage. In English, this usage can still be found in the Sisters of Mercy, who together with Florence Nightingale dedicated themselves to caring for the sick and wounded in the mid-19th century.

<sup>6</sup> Only vocative forms of these kin terms are presented here, but the meaning is the same for other forms.

<sup>7</sup> The compound collective terms *oogba-doongma* and *aky-ugba* also occur in natural Tuvan, but much more rarely, and are not (in my experience) used for expressing fictive kinship, although semantically there does not seem to be anything inherent in the terms that would inhibit this usage.

into their language merely for the sake of having a non-age-specific option for referring to another person. Could it then be specifically Christian teaching received by Tuvan believers in church that is responsible for this borrowing? This is unlikely. Though the New Testament does teach the abolition of many other social barriers in Christian relationships (Col 3:11), it does not do away with age stratification as a norm in Christian society. Take, for example, Paul's exhortation to Timothy: "Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters – with absolute purity" (1 Tim 5:1-2, NRSV). Thus, the explicit teaching of the Scriptures in itself would not be expected to lead to Tuvan believers' borrowing of these Russian terms.

Upon further reflection on the matter, I began to suspect that one of the reasons why Tuvan believers do not want to address each other with their own language's kin terms might be that they consider these words *too* standard and usual, not conveying in and of themselves the desired degree of specifically Christian relationship, and not distinguishing the speakers as belonging to a particular and separate stratum of society. In other words, when a Tuvan believer says *brat* or *sestra* to another believer instead of *akyi* or *doongmai*, it is like using a code word that activates the mental schema of Christianity and shows it to be relevant for the given relationship. This could not be done by using the corresponding Tuvan kin terms, which have no intrinsically religious value. This desire for a more "spiritual", specialized vocabulary can also be encountered in other borrowings in Tuvan church usage. This is an incipient form of Christianese, the function of which is described by one author as follows: "At its most basic level, Christianese serves to identify speakers as Christians and reaffirm Christian ideology ... when Christians are communicating with each other, Christianese is preferable to patterns of speech used by secular in-groups"<sup>8</sup>. In effect, the Tuvan believers have added to the growing repertoire of Tuvan Christianese by importing these kin terms from Russian church jargon.

By borrowing the Russian kin terms into their speech, Tuvan believers get a three-for-the-price-of-one deal: 1) they indicate close, family-like relations towards the addressee or referent, 2) they mark themselves out as part of a separate Christian subculture, and 3) they avoid the potential awkwardness of age stratification.

## II The Temptation

In light of the felt need by Tuvan Christians to borrow these terms into their lexical repertoire, I began to wonder whether or not our translation team should have followed their lead in considering *brat/brattar* as a possible rendering for Greek *adelphos/adelphoi* in our translation of the New Testament. There were several rationales for exploring this possibility.

First, the mother-tongue Tuvan writer who translated the New Testament (himself not a member of the Christian community) had his doubts about the appropriateness of always using Tuvan kin terms to render the fictive kin meaning of the Greek term *adelphos/adelphoi*. In his draft of the New Testament, for collective reference the translator did sometimes use the address form *ha-doongma* (ex. Rom 7:4, 16:14), but more frequently he used a non-kin-related phrase meaning "our believing friends". For reference to individual Christian brothers, the translator usually avoided using any Tuvan kin term, preferring a word meaning "friend" (ex. Ac 9:17), or an expression meaning "our believing friend" (ex. Rom 16:1). When I asked our translator why he rendered in this fashion and avoided using the Tuvan kin terms, he responded that the text did not indicate the relative age of the "brother" mentioned in relation to the speaker, and he did not want to guess.<sup>9</sup> As can be seen from his initial renderings of *adelphos/adelphoi* as "believing friend/s" in many verses, the translator also considered the element of faith to be a crucial component of the meaning of the original.

Secondly, a Tuvan friend had pointed out to me that the collective term *ha-doongma* is used by most Tuvans only in addressing or referring to other Tuvans; i.e. it references the addressee's shared ethnic identity with that of the speaker. Thus, when Peter addresses his fellow Jews as "brothers" in Acts 2:29, this would be a very appropriate use of the term *ha-doongma* from the Tuvan perspective, just as the kin term *adelphoi* seems quite appropriate as the Greek rendering of Aramaic or Hebrew *ahim* in such a

<sup>8</sup> Amanda Baker, "Christianese: 'Low' Church Jargon in Contemporary North America", <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~cpercycourses/6362-baker.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Some educated guesses concerning the relative age of Biblical siblings are made by D. J. Clark in "Olders and Youngers", *The Bible Translator*, April 1995, pp. 201-208. But that article deals only with the Gospels, and touches upon the "extended figurative sense ... [of] spiritual kinship" only in passing.

context. But what about when Paul, a Jew, is addressing or referring to non-Jews in his epistles (ex. 1 Cor 1:10)? Are they still “brothers” to the Tuvan consciousness? It is very hard to imagine a Tuvan speaker using the Russian word *bratya* (“brothers”) in addressing an audience of Russians in the Russian language (outside of a Christian context), or a Russian doing likewise when addressing a Tuvan audience. It is clearly obvious to everyone involved that there is a difference of ethnicities, and this word would ring false. This “consciousness of ethnicity” also applies to the individual Tuvan kin terms and may be another contributing factor to Tuvan Christians’ reluctance to use these terms in the multiethnic church in Tuva.

Thirdly, the borrowing *brat* might prove useful in the Tuvan translation in some contexts where there is a 3<sup>rd</sup> person reference to a generic individual that would otherwise be burdensome to render efficiently. Take, for instance, Jas 1:9 – “The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.” (NIV) Here, James is talking about the generic *ho adelfos ho tapeinos*, who is in all likelihood to be taken as another member of the Christian faith community. Even the fairly literal NRSV here feels that it is necessary to render as “the believer who is lowly”. Now, when used in a non-vocative meaning, Tuvan kin terms have to be possessed (i.e. my brother, their brother, etc.) So in this verse, if we wanted to use these kin terms, we would have to first decide *whose* brother is to be explicitly indicated in the translation (mine? yours? ours?) , and then decide whether this should be a younger sibling or an older brother. Since we would not want to limit this exhortation to only one end of the age-spectrum, we might want to add a disjunction to include both olders and youngers, something like *akyvys azy doongmavys* ‘our older-brother or younger-sibling’. But the extra disjunction, though good for the sake of inclusiveness, is likely to create a processing difficulty for readers: they would wonder why exactly James is using a disjunction – doesn’t he know which group he means? To avoid this, we might decide to just render the Greek generic singular using the collective term *ha-doongmavys* ‘our relatives’ or the compound *aky-doongmavys* ‘our brothers (both older and younger)’, which would not force any artificial age distinctions into the text and avoid the awkward disjunction as well<sup>10</sup>. Instead of wading through all of these sometimes difficult choices for the sake of naturalness every time that a similar usage of *adelphos* occurs, it is tempting to just use the Russian loanword *brat*, which has already been imported into the Tuvan language by Tuvan Christians with the meaning of spiritual kinship, and without the baggage of mandatory age-stratification or possessed suffixes.

Finally, a Tuvan Christian calque of a Russian expression had already been accepted as a key term in our translation of the Old Testament: *Burganga aldar* ‘Glory be to God!’, which utilizes native Tuvan words and word order, but the collocation of which is copied from the Russian expression *Slava Bogu* (Figure 2)<sup>11</sup>. Our translation team took this phrase and reapplied it in a slightly different context -- as the standard rendering of the frequently-occurring Old Testament exclamation *Baruch El/Elohim* ‘Blessed be God’ (ex. Gen 14:20, Psa 66:20 [65:20]). There were two main reasons why we chose to do this: 1) a literal translation using the closest Tuvan equivalent to the concept of “blessed” did not quite get the right idea across; it came out meaning something like “May people wish good things to happen to God”; 2) the calqued construction itself (minus the reference to God) had already been in use by the secular community since Tuva’s early Soviet era in the 1940s, when expressions like *Slava krasnym partizanam* ‘Glory to the Red Partisans’ were translated into Tuvan and promulgated in newspapers, school textbooks, and on monuments.

### **Figure 2: “Glory be to God” calque in Tuvan Christianese**

<sup>10</sup> In this specific verse, the translator ended up not using any kin term at all, but rather rendered the component of faith as primary (as done by the NRSV, NLT and other translations) – “the believer in dire straits” as opposed to “the believer who lives in wealth” in the following verse.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase *Slava Bogu* is frequently used by Russians in a purely secular context with the meaning “Great!” or “How wonderful!” in reaction to an unexpected piece of good news (similarly to the secular usage of “Thank God!” in English). But the Tuvan calque is used only by Tuvan Christians with a specifically doxological sense.



Tuvan Christians merely took this calque and applied it to the divine sphere. And our translation team took it one step further by employing the expression (together with its newly acquired theological context) to render a repeated Biblical exclamation. If we had already agreed to open the door a crack in order to let this calqued expression in, why shouldn't we be generous and allow the loanword *brat/brattar* in also?

### III The Resolution

Though our translation team was aware of these factors, we refrained from incorporating the Russian borrowing *brat/brattar* into our translation of the Bible for the following reasons. Official IBT policy states that translation teams should, when possible, aim at producing "common language, functionally equivalent translations. A functionally equivalent translation should be ... intelligible and meaningful to non-Christians as well as to Christians."<sup>12</sup> The last sentence indicates that we cannot permit ourselves to consider Tuvan Christians (less than 1% of the population) to be the only, or even main, target audience of our translation, though this would be easy to do because they were the most active in critiquing our translation and will most likely be our primary readership. Gratuitously using a Christianese term in the Tuvan Bible would be a sure sign that we gave preference to the small Christian community instead of the majority non-Christian one. When we did include a phrase taken from the Tuvan church jargon (such as *Burganga aldar*, described in the previous section), we did so because this construction had already been incorporated into secular language usage, and had merely been tweaked by the Christians (indicating that it would very likely be fully understood even by people who had not previously read the Russian Bible).

The Tuvan team members (all mother-tongue Tuvan speakers except for myself) were in general agreement to keep unnecessary borrowings out of our translation, as opposed to apathetically accepting the rampant Russification of the Tuvan language that has been transpiring over the past several decades. None of us denies the fact that change is a natural part of the life of any language; the issue here is rather

<sup>12</sup> *Translation principles for IBT–UBS–SIL Partnership Projects in the CIS*, 3.2.

one of scope and severity. Accepting gradual language change due to the influence of a majority language is different from embracing intense sociolinguistic processes that may lead to imminent language death. Such processes are currently taking place among all of the minority languages of Siberia, most of which are unmistakably losing their battle to survive against the encroachment of the dominant Russian language. The Tuvan people *want* their language to continue its existence, and have made serious attempts at language revitalization during the past two decades. Our translation strategy should be geared towards working *alongside* these efforts, not *against* them by including avoidable borrowings in our translation.

There is also a very high social price to pay for bringing such borrowings into Tuvan church jargon: they reinforce the notion held by many non-believers that Tuvan Christians have sold out to a Russian god, and that one must sacrifice his or her Tuvanness to become a follower of Christ. This negative reaction from the non-Christian community is in some ways similar to that of non-Christians in the U.S. upon hearing Evangelical Christianese – at best, they consider it “fake”, at worst they may find it completely unintelligible.

Using the Tuvan kin terms in conversation is by no means considered unacceptable in the Tuvan Church; it is simply rare because of the predominance of the expedient Russian borrowings. I have on occasion heard Tuvan Christians address fellow believers with *akyi* and *doongmai*. In fact, when I myself have used these terms to address other Christians, I have received very positive feedback, such as that of one woman several years younger than me: “In my four years of being a Christian and being in the church, you’re the only believer who has ever addressed me with Tuvan kin terms. Would that others did so too!” I doubt that these words were merely a typical Asian expression of politeness to a foreigner who is trying hard to master the native language. They rather seemed to be a confession of a deeply-rooted problem in the Christian community that is not being sufficiently brought to light and dealt with by the majority of its members.

Many older Tuvans as well have voiced their complaints about the loss of politeness and civility in their society, hand-in-hand with that of many other ideals of virtuous behavior<sup>13</sup>; it therefore seems a good idea to encourage the Tuvan Christian community to hold on to the good things that they already have in their traditional culture and linguistic resources instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater by drastically changing their speech patterns due to converting to Christianity. Endorsing the standard Tuvan kin terms in our Bible translation offers a positive evaluation of the cultural expectations already held by Tuvans about the given relationships: the elder Christian deserves respect and submission, and can be relied on for succor, while the younger Christian is to be protected, taught, and cared for. In my opinion, the duties implied by using these terms in their normal Tuvan meaning overlap closely with the Christian ideal of social relationships as presented in the Bible.

#### IV Conclusion

Be that as it may, Tuvan believers will continue to develop their language usage in light of their newfound Christian worldview, even if some of these developments look less than desirable to outsiders like me. We must realize that all languages in which the Christian Church exists will sooner or later produce their own in-group jargon, just because of the nature of language as a marker of social affiliation. However, it is unfortunate that some aspects of the Tuvan Christians’ new faith seem to be founded on the expectation that Christianity acts not as a *transformer* of the existing culture and worldview (holding on to the good and correcting the faulty), but rather as a more or less *wholesale replacement* of it (producing a new heaven and a new earth already in this life, with a corresponding new dialect).

I do not think that Tuvan Christians dreamed up this approach to the Christian faith on their own; it seems more likely that they inherited it from their Russian forebears who are in active church leadership

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<sup>13</sup> Though this sort of claim is probably made by the older generation in just about every culture, it does have a particular degree of plausibility in societies that have undergone very rapid cultural transformation, as has been the case in Tuva ever since it joined the Soviet Union 65 years ago, and especially following the collapse of Communism (an event aptly called “traumatogenic change par excellence” by Piotr Sztompka in “The Trauma of Social Change: A Case of Postcommunist Societies” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, p.171); many elderly Tuvans were born into a feudal, nomadic society, grew up under Communism, and are living out their last days in a dysfunctional free-market, space-age, Twittering society.

in Tuva. It is of course understandable that previous generations of Russian Christians may have developed an intensely negative attitude towards the surrounding Soviet culture as a defense mechanism against the ideological pressure of atheism, leading them to seek an idiolect to reinforce their separateness from the Communist system. However, even if that attitude was in some respects essential for the survival of the Christian faith during Communist times, it does not necessarily follow that today believers from minority people groups must imitate the experience of those Russian believers by rejecting their own cultures and linguistic forms as a prerequisite to attaining true Christian spirituality. Unfortunately, this seems to be what many Russian pastors believe and teach their flocks, some regularly denigrating minority cultures as being inherently more deficient or corrupt than they really are.

It is interesting to prognosticate about the degree to which our Bible translation, having partially accepted and partially rejected recent developments in Tuvan Christian jargon, will itself shape the linguistic forms of the Tuvan Church once it is published. On one hand, a mother-tongue translation of the Scriptures that is well accepted by the target-language community can definitely be expected to become foundational in determining the theological vocabulary used by “the People of the Book”, its primary readership. At the same time, there is always the chance that IBT’s Tuvan translation may for some unforeseen reason be deemed unacceptable by a certain denomination or other segment of the target-language Church (despite our best efforts to include all denominations in the dialogue of translation). In this case, that part of the Church would continue to use the Russian Synodal version of the Bible and probably reject some or all of the lexical offerings proposed by the new Tuvan translation. Their Christian language usage would keep on developing independently of other believers who accept and use the new translation. If another translation project were to be carried out by a different organization in the near future, this might offer yet another set of religious words and phrases to Tuvan believers for expressing their Christian faith. How muddy the terminological waters would get in this case can at present only be guessed at.

As for now, “brothers” in the Tuvan Bible (due to be published in 2010 or 2011) will remain Tuvan brothers, not Russian brothers. In many verses that use the construct of fictive kinship, our translation team kept the native Tuvan kin terms discussed in this paper. In other verses, where the context and construction were not conducive to a clear and natural rendering using these kin terms, we typically translated more freely, focusing on the component of faith (“our believing friend” or “believer”) or close relationship (“our dear friend”). Hopefully, the approach taken in our translation will encourage readers of the Tuvan Bible to seriously reflect on the question of the Jewish law expert in Lk 10:29 – “And who is my neighbor?” – and pose a similar question in their own cultural context, “And who are my brothers?”