

Silent Night: A Christmas Carol in Ayeri

In December 2022 I posted on my Mastodon account a photo from the Berlin State Library's Unter den Linden branch featuring a pinboard on which were posted festive tags with Christmas greetings in a slew of languages spoken by library patrons.¹ User Scott Hühnerkrisp wondered whether there already exists a translation of *Stille Nacht* into Ayeri. I replied that it would be a challenge for the Christmas break. Even though it's past Christmas now and this year's is still a ways off, I wanted to make good on it. This is ၵိၵ်ႈၵုၵ်ႈၵုၵ်ႈၵုၵ်ႈ *Sirutay ternu kaluy*, my attempt to translate the Austrian Christmas carol *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*—to English speakers known as *Silent Night*—into Ayeri.

1 The German Text

The text of the carol in German as it is commonly sung today—along with a more or less literal English translation—goes as follows.² This serves as the base for the Ayeri version since I speak German natively and my inner philologist is skeptical of second-hand translations.

	Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht!	<i>Silent night, holy night!</i>
	Alles schläft, einsam wacht	<i>All is asleep, lonely wakes</i>
	nur das traute, hochheilige Paar.	<i>only the intimate, most holy couple.</i>
	Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,	<i>Lovely boy with curly hair</i>
5	schlaf in himmlischer Ruh,	<i>sleep in heavenly calm,</i>
	schlaf in himmlischer Ruh.	<i>sleep in heavenly calm.</i>
	Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht!	<i>Silent night, holy night!</i>
	Gottes Sohn, o wie lacht	<i>Son of God, oh how is laughing</i>
	Lieb aus deinem göttlichen Mund,	<i>love from your divine mouth</i>
10	da uns schlägt die rettende Stund,	<i>as the hour of salvation tolls for us,</i>
	Christ, in deiner Geburt,	<i>Christ, with your birth,</i>
	Christ, in deiner Geburt.	<i>Christ, with your birth.</i>
	Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht!	<i>Silent night, holy night!</i>
	Hirten erst kundgemacht,	<i>First announced to shepherds,</i>
15	durch der Engel Halleluja	<i>per the angels' hallelujah</i>
	tönt es laut von fern und nah:	<i>loudly it sounds from near and far:</i>
	Christ, der Retter, ist da,	<i>Christ, the Savior, is here,</i>
	Christ, der Retter, ist da!	<i>Christ, the Savior, is here!</i>

¹ See <https://mastodon.online/@chripistorius/109522620399297747>.

² The second and third stanza are sometimes switched around. Either way, this is the version I know.

2 The Ayeri translation

The text below is my translation of the above into Ayeri. Since this is in verse, the translation ought to fit the original's meter as closely as possible, which is always a challenge. However, with songs the melody fortunately creates some leeway. The German text sometimes stretches single syllables over two notes (*Sti-il-le Nacht*), so the number of syllables per line slightly varies across stanzas. In translation one can make use of such built-in tolerance as well. A greater challenge is that Ayeri tends to have disyllabic roots to which are attached grammatical suffixes creating even more syllables. Not exceeding the overall syllable count while staying true to the content of the text requires a little creativity at times. Bonus points if you can fit the foreign words' natural stress pattern to what the melody dictates.

	Ah sirutay ternu kaluy!	ផ្លូវក្រហមស្ងៀមស្ងៀម
	Torya enyāng, nārya-nama	ត្រីវិស័យ ព័ន្ធនាម
	sānang sitang-setim ternu-vā.	ស្រស់ស្អាត ក្រហមស្ងៀមស្ងៀម
	Yanang val' mitrangeri gura,	បុរាណៈ ឃើញរាងកាយ
5	toru sempayya aray,	ស្រីក្រហមស្ងៀម
	toru sempayya aray.	ស្រីក្រហមស្ងៀម
	Ah sirutay ternu kaluy!	ផ្លូវក្រហមស្ងៀមស្ងៀម
	Yampangal, sā d'-apayo	បុរាណៈ ស្រីស្ងៀម
	cān bantāng van'. Eng yomara	ទន្ធនៈ ក្រហមស្ងៀម
10	pidim madānena nana,	ក្រហមស្ងៀមស្ងៀម
	Yesu, vesangeri vana,	ប្រតិ វិស័យស្ងៀម
	Yesu, vesangeri van'.	ប្រតិ វិស័យស្ងៀម
	Ah sirutay ternu kaluy!	ផ្លូវក្រហមស្ងៀមស្ងៀម
	Ang tangyan nantongye	ស្ងៀមស្ងៀមស្ងៀម
15	aleluyās kelangyena.	ស្ងៀមស្ងៀមស្ងៀម
	Edauyi tangnang baho naynay:	ស្ងៀមស្ងៀមស្ងៀម
	Yomaya ang Yesu Madaya,	ស្ងៀមស្ងៀមស្ងៀម
	yomaya ang Yesu Maday'!	ស្ងៀមស្ងៀមស្ងៀម

3 Analysis of the translation

3.1 First stanza

Let us now analyze the translation in tried-and-tested fashion, sentence by sentence. I will start with the verse that heads every stanza to evoke a peaceful and solemn atmosphere.

- (i) *Ah sirutay ternu kaluy!*
 oh night holy silent
 'Oh silent, holy night!'

Here already, concessions had to be made for a more natural stress pattern and to fit the words. The melody prescribes $\acute{x} \times \times \acute{x} | \acute{x} \times \times \acute{x}$. *Nacht* ‘night’ is conveniently a single-syllable word while the adjectives *stille* ‘silent’ and *heilige* ‘holy’ (both NOM.SG.F.ST) each occupy three beats. It is apparent from (1) that *နိတ်ရုလ* *sirutay* ‘night’ alone already contains three syllables while the adjectives are each disyllabic. Repetition of *နိတ်ရုလ* *sirutay* is thus out of the question. Moreover, *နိတ်ရုလ* *sirutay* and *ခဲရုင်* *kaluy* both have final-syllable stress due to diphthongs being heavy in terms of syllable weight. To keep the translation in line with the original pattern, *နိတ်ရုလ* *sirutay* and *ခဲရုင်* *kaluy* need to end on the fourth and eighth beat. Thus, *တဲရု* *ternu* ‘silent’ needs to precede *ခဲရုင်* *kaluy*, and there is an unoccupied stressed beat before *နိတ်ရုလ* *sirutay*. I decided not to stretch *နိတ်ရုလ* *sirutay* over all four beats in the same way the German text stretches the two syllables of *stille* over the first three beats. Instead, I opted to introduce the vocative particle *ခွဲ* *ab* ‘oh’, which fits the function of this line and is appropriately solemn.

Since *နိတ်ရုလ* *sirutay* is addressed here, I decided not to give it a case marker, as when addressing people. Besides, this would’ve increased the syllable count. The order of the adjectives, even though reversed from the original, is natural in Ayeri due to its very consistent head-first nature.

The second and third verse in (2) present the nativity scene with Mary and Joseph in intimate togetherness.

- (2) *Torya* *enyāng,* *nārya-nama*
 sleep-3SG.AN.M everyone-AN.A but=only
- sānang* *sitang-setim* *ternu-vā.*
 couple-AN.A self=familiar holy=SUP

‘Everyone is sleeping, except for the intimate, most holy couple.’

These two verses contain the newly coined words *တဲရု* *nārya-nama* and *ခိတဲရု* *sitang-setim* ‘intimate’. The former adds the adverbial quantifier *ရဲ* *-nama* ‘only, just’ to the adversative conjunction *တဲရု* *nārya* ‘but, though, yet, etc.’ to express something along the lines of ‘except for’. In German, *außer* ‘except for, apart from’ would require a complement in the dative because it’s a preposition. In contrast, *တဲရု* *nārya* is a conjunction, so I went with the agent case in parallel to *တဲရု* *တဲရု* *torya enyāng*. Context would then imply that everyone is sleeping, except the couple isn’t asleep. The adjective *traute* ‘intimately familiar with each other’ (NOM.SG.N.WK) from the German text is dated. Adding the reflexive particle *ခိတဲရု* *sitang-* to *ခိတဲရု* *setim* ‘familiar’ seemed a good way to convey the same meaning, though conflates reflexivity with reciprocity.³

Technically, the order of adjectives in Ayeri is reversed here by using the head-final order of the German text, but this as well flows better with the melody. *ရဲ* *-nama* untypically receives stress on the final syllable here because German *wacht* ‘wakes’ is stressed. However, stress in Ayeri is not commonly phonemic, so to speakers it would simply sound slightly off.

³ This also happens with *sich* ‘oneself, him/her/itself, themselves; each other’ in colloquial German, so it doesn’t seem too far-fetched to me. At the point of writing this, I haven’t done research on how common it is cross-linguistically for languages to conflate the two categories.

Verses 4 to 6 now also introduce the main figure of the nativity scene, the baby in the manger, Jesus Christ. The boy having curly hair is poetic license, I suppose.

- (3) *Yanang val' mitrangeri gura,*
 boy-AN.A lovely hair-INS curly
toru sempayya aray.
 sleep-IMP peace-LOC blissful
 'Lovely boy with curly hair, sleep in blissful peace.'

Another two words had to be coined here, namely *ጳጳ* *gura* 'curly' and *ጳጳ* *aray* 'blissful'. The former is derived from the verb *ጳጳ*: *gur-* 'turn around, wind' and the latter from the noun *ጳጳ* *aray* 'bliss'. *ጳጳ* *gura* is also untypically stressed on the second syllable here. It would have been more fitting probably to use the instrumental *ጳጳ* *sempayeri* 'with peace' here, but this would create problems with the syllable count. I also would've preferred *ጳጳ* *pangra* 'divine' instead of *ጳጳ* *aray* 'blissful' to render *himmlischer* 'heavenly' (DAT.SG.F.ST), but the latter fits the stress requirement more naturally. There is a word *ጳጳ* *mayaran* 'heaven' as referring to the beyond, but turning it into an adjective in some way certainly would exceed the syllable count again.

3.2 Second stanza

Verse 7, the first line of the second stanza, is the same as the first verse, compare (1). I have omitted it here as well as in the next section since it would've been redundant. The German text corresponding to the couplet in (4) describes baby Jesus as literally 'laughing' love from his divine mouth in connection with the next two verses about the prospect of salvation. I suppose, the overall image is one of looking at a (not necessarily newborn) baby beaming with happy contentment.

- (4) *Yampangal, sā d'-apayo*
 Son.God TOP.CAUS= thus=laugh-3SG.AN.N
cān bantāng van'.
 love.TOP mouth-AN.A 2.GEN
 'God-son, how love makes your mouth laugh.'

Making a compound *ጳጳ* *Yampangal* 'God-son' instead of literally adapting *Gottes Sohn* 'son of God' as *ጳጳ* *pangalena* 'son God-GEN' saves two syllables. Nonetheless, *ጳጳ* *pangra* 'divine' as corresponding to *göttlichen* 'divine' (DAT.SG.M.WK) in verse 9 doesn't fit here either.

Verses 10 to 12 in German give the theological reason for baby Jesus' joy: the birth of Christ heralds human salvation—which is consummated on Easter, except according to the carol, Jesus' birth is already the key moment. In ignorance of further theological details and ramifications I shrugged and translated this more or less literally in (5).

- (5) *Eng yomara pidim madānena nana,*
 TOP.INAN.A= be.there-3SG.INAN hour.TOP rescue-GEN IPL.GEN

Yesu, vesangeri vana.
 Jesus birth-INS 2.GEN

‘The hour of our salvation is here, Jesus, by means of your birth.’

The first line above actually already begins in verse 9, creating an enjambment because it was convenient given the syllable count. What is unfortunately lost is the logical connection to the previous two verses implied by *da* ‘as’ in German, likewise due to meeting the syllable count. Furthermore, I chose to use 𐌲𐌹𐍃 *Yesu* ‘Jesus’ here instead of trying to adapt *Christ* in some way—whether borrowing it as 𐌺𐌹𐍃𐌸𐌹 *Kristo* or attempting to calque Greek *Khrīstós* ‘the anointed one’. The stress pattern dictated by the melody (× × × × × × ×) goes completely counter to the natural pattern of 𐌲𐌹𐍃𐌺𐌹𐍃𐌸𐌹 *pidim madānena nana* (× × × ˊ × × × ×).

3.3 Third stanza

The third stanza is the most challenging one yet, since a rather literal translation is too long. Instead of the shepherds being announced to as in the German *Hirten erst kundgemacht* ‘first announced to shepherds’, in (6), I rephrased the text rather neutrally as the shepherds hearing the angels’ jubilation.

(6) *Ang tangyan nantongye*
 TOP.AN.A= hear-3PL.AN.M shepherd-PL.TOP
aleluyās kelangyena.
 hallelujah-AN.P angel-PL-GEN

‘The shepherds heard the angels’ hallelujah.’

Anyone familiar with the biblical story will know the context anyway, so I only slightly regretted also dropping *erst* ‘first’ for exceeding the syllable count. I suppose that otherwise, 𐌸𐌹𐍃 *menanya* ‘(at) first’ (one-NMLZ-LOC) could be a viable translation due to the peculiarity of how ordinals are formed in Ayeri as nouns. The corresponding dative form, 𐌸𐌹𐍃𐌺𐌹 *menanyam*, means ‘once’ as a multiplicative. Alternatively, one might use 𐌺𐌹𐍃𐌸𐌹𐍃𐌹 *ku-menanjang* ‘as the first ones’ (like=one-NMLZ-PL-AN.A) in reference to the shepherds, but of course, this is far too long as well.

Translating Greek *ángelos* ‘messenger’, from which English gets *angel*, literally as 𐌺𐌹𐍃 *ninaya* would’ve yielded the rather tongue-twisty form 𐌺𐌹𐍃𐌺𐌹 *ninayayena* in Ayeri’s iotaphile fashion. It would again have been too long. Thus, I decided to extend the meaning of 𐌺𐌹𐍃 *kelang* ‘chain, garland’ with ‘angel’. The common denominator is the corresponding verb 𐌺𐌹𐍃: *kelang-* ‘connect’, which otherwise gives 𐌺𐌹𐍃𐌺𐌹 *kelangan* ‘connection’, and possibly 𐌺𐌹𐍃𐌺𐌹𐍃 *kelangaya* ‘connector, liaison’—likewise too long with :𐌺𐌹 *-yena* added for genitive plural.

The remaining verses 16 to 18 in (7) differ from the German text as well. I tried to compensate for the missing temporal aspect in the previous two lines by extending German’s *tönt es laut von fern und nah* ‘loudly it sounds from near and far’ with “us now, too” as recipients of the message.

(7) *Edauyi tangnang babo naynay:*
 now hear=IPL.A loudly too

yomaya ang Yesu Madaya!
 be.there-3SG.AN.M AN.A= Jesus Savior

‘Now we hear loudly as well: Jesus the Savior is here.’

The Ayeri translation on the other hand omits the *fern und nah* ‘near and far’ aspect completely, again because there was no space to fit anything along those lines. Replacing ꝑꝑ *naynay* ‘as well, too’ with a wrongly stressed ꝑꝑ *yanen* ‘everywhere’ seemed comparatively more awkward to me.

4 Conclusion

All in all, playing with constrained language, such as verse, is always fun because it forces you to think creatively about ways to make words work. I suppose that this translation could’ve been done more elegantly still with a lot more patience and language proficiency. That is, even as the inventor of Ayeri, I only have limited passive knowledge of the language. Moreover, Ayeri’s word structure is very different from both German and English, so trying to stay close to the original text in terms of content and syllable count often came at the expense of natural stress patterns (no bonus points this time, I guess). Making the translation rhyme properly as an additional constraint was not even attempted. Consider this a first try.

Abbreviations

1	first person	GEN	genitive	NOM	nominative
2	second person	IMP	imperative	P	patient
3	third person	INAN	inanimate	PL	plural
A	agent	INS	instrumental	SG	singular
AN	animate	LOC	locative	ST	strong
CAUS	causative	M	masculine	SUP	superlative
DAT	dative	N	neuter	TOP	topic
F	feminine	NMLZ	nominalizer	WK	weak