

# **The Eagle Huntress**

## **Ancient Traditions and New Generations**

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**"The sight of a Eurasian nomad hunting with swift horse, loyal dog, and powerful golden eagle is a majestic scene with ancient roots. For thousands of years this was how the nomadic peoples of the northern steppes from the Caucasus to Manchuria hunted for survival. " This is a revised and expanded version of the two-part article that appeared April 5-6, 2016 online at [ancient-origins.net](http://ancient-origins.net) and reprinted April 18, 2016 <http://bust.com/feminism/16147-the-untold-history-of-the-eagle-huntress.html>**

*"A fast horse and a soaring eagle  
are the wings of a nomad." --Kazakh proverb*



***FIG 1. Kazakh eagle hunter (Shutterstock)***

Falconry, training raptors to hunt for game, is particularly suited to vast grasslands especially in combination with horses and dogs. The earliest images of falconry appear in Assyrian and Hittite reliefs of the 9th and 8th centuries BC. Classical Greek and Roman authors Ctesias, Aristotle, Pliny, and Aelian described falconry.

A Persian textile (10th century AD) depicts the Banu (Lady Governor) of Rayy (ancient Rhages, near Tehran, northern Iran) riding with her falcon. In AD 1270 Marco Polo described how the nomads of Central Asia hunted on horseback with small falcons, hawks, and eagles.



***FIG 2. Banu (Lady Governor) of Rayy, Persian textile, 10th century AD***

For thousands of years, golden eagles have been the favorite raptor to train as a hunting companion across the northern steppes from the Caucasus to China. Eagles are strong predators especially adapted to winter hunting for hare, marmot, wild goat, deer, fox (even lynx, pallas cat, and wolf, although these are unnatural prey and dangerous for the eagles). Eagles have very acute eyesight for spotting prey in snow-covered grasslands and mountains. The eagles weigh up to 12 pounds and have an extremely strong grip with sharp talons. To support the eagle on a rider's arm, a *baldak*, a Y-shaped wooden rest, is attached to the saddle. Female eagles, larger, fiercer, and more powerful than males, are preferred as hunting companions by Kazakhs; Kyrgyz eagle hunters train both females and males. Several types of eagles are recognized with different abilities. Fledglings or sub-adult eagles are captured from the nest and trained to hunt. According to tradition, after 5-7 years the eagles are released back to the wild to mate and raise young.

Evidence pointing to eagle hunting's antiquity comes from Scythian and other burial mounds of nomads who roamed the steppes 3,000 years ago and whose artifacts abound in eagle imagery. An ancient Scythian nomad skeleton buried with an eagle was reportedly excavated near Aktobe Gorge, Kazakhstan. Ancient petroglyphs in the Altai region depict eagle hunters and inscribed Chinese stone reliefs show eagles perched on the arms of hunters in tunics, trousers, and boots, identified as northern nomads (1st to 2nd century AD).



**FIG 3. Central Asian nomad eagle hunters on ancient Chinese stone reliefs (Soma 2013)**

Song Dynasty (AD 960) paintings show Khitan nomads of Manchuria practicing their ancient eagle hunting arts. Other eagle-hunting groups in the past included Jurchen, Oirat, Torghut, Kyrgyz in Tajikistan, Kalmyk, Kirei, Buryat, Nogai, and Altaian, Siberian, and Caucasus nomads.



**FIG 4. Song Dynasty painting of Khitan eagle hunters, AD 960**

Eagle hunting lore is preserved in ancient poems of Central Asia, such as the Kyrgyz epic *Manas* in which the hero's death is mourned by his horse, dog, and eagle. Another Kyrgyz epic recounts the adventures of Janyl Myrza, a legendary warrior woman and eagle huntress (see below). In ancient Caucasus legends about great heroes and heroines (*Nart Sagas*), hunters set forth on fine steeds, hounds trotting along and golden eagles on their arms: “Your horse is ready, your weapons and armor, your hounds and your eagle too.” In eagle hunting, specially bred greyhound-like dogs (Kyrgyz *Taigan*, Kazakh *Tazi*) and sometimes youths serve as beaters to flush out game for the eagles.

“Our ancestors had three comrades,” goes the old Kazakh saying, “*swift-foot*, *tazi*, and *bürkit*” (fine horse, sight-hound, and golden eagle). By training these three animals—horse, dog, and eagle—to be their hunting companions, the early nomads made the harsh, unforgiving steppes into a land rich with accessible game for furs and food.

Today, the ancient arts of the *bürkitshi* (*berkutchi*, eagle hunter) are carried on mainly by Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomadic groups who are now dispersed in Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Xianjiang province (northwest China). These people are the descendants of nomads whose

territories ranged from the steppes of the Altai region to Inner Asia. Eagle falconry traditions have been handed down from generation to generation over millennia.

A modern sculpture by the Buryat artist Dashi Namdakov in Kyzyl, Tuva, honors the nomads' ancient heritage in a stunning bronze sculpture of a man and women setting off on horseback to hunt with their hound and eagle.



***FIG 5. "Royal Hunt" sculpture by Buryat artist Dashi Namdakov, Kyzyl, Tuva***

One must be tough and patient to learn to hunt with such a formidable bird of prey as the golden eagle. *Bürkitshi* is a general term for several categories of eagle falconry. There are nuanced, complex distinctions among the activities of capturing, domesticating, training, evaluating eagle types, showing, competing, and going on hunting expeditions with eagles. Eagle falconry can be done on foot or horseback; some eagle hunters own several eagles.



**FIG 6. Kazakh eagle hunters, early 1900s**

## **Evidence for Women as Eagle Falconers in Antiquity**

Male *bürkitshi* are certainly more common than females today, although eagle hunting has always been open to interested girls. Archaeology suggests that eagle huntresses were probably more common in ancient times. Recent and spectacular archaeological discoveries of graves (ca 700 BC to AD 300) across ancient Scythia, from Ukraine to China, reveals that steppe nomad females engaged in the same riding and hunting activities as the men, and about one third of the women were active warriors in battle.

Unlike settled, patriarchal societies such as classical Greece and Rome, where women stayed home to weave and mind children, the lives of nomadic steppe tribes centered on horses and archery. Boys and girls, men and women, young and old, all shared the vigorous outdoor life and everyone could ride fast horses, shoot arrows with deadly accuracy, hunt for fur and game, and defend the tribe. The combination of horse riding and archery was an equalizer, leveling out physical differences: a woman on horseback is as fast and agile as a man. This ancient way of life—embracing gender equality—was essential for tribes continuously migrating across oceans of grass, and egalitarian traditions persist in their descendants today, even though men and women in semi-nomadic herding communities now have more differentiated tasks.

## **Archaeological Discoveries**

Remarkable archaeological evidence of a female *bürkitshi* in antiquity emerged among the famous Urumqi mummies preserved for more than two millennia in the extremely dry Tarim Basin (Xinjiang province, northwest China). The tall, lavishly dressed, tattooed bodies of men,

women, and children were naturally mummified in the desert sand. They were buried with horse gear, clothing, weapons, and other possessions. Many of these mummies are now in the Urumqi Museum.

One of the women is dressed in a sheepskin coat over a colorful striped woolen skirt. On her left hand and forearm she wears a large, heavy leather falconry mitten. The exceptional size and thickness matches the distinctive *bialeye*, protective mitt or gauntlet, worn by Kazakh and Kyrgyz eagle hunters in the same region today. (In antiquity, the raptors perched on the left arm, leaving the rider's right arm free to wield weapons. The left arm-style was also used for eagle hunting on foot. The practice has evolved since the days of mounted warrior nomads; today's Kazakh and Kyrgyz eagle hunters carry eagles on the right arm.)



**FIG 7. Mummified eagle huntress with thick leather eagle falconry mitt, Tarim Basin, 4th-3rd century BC, Urumqi Museum, photo and sketch courtesy of Victor Mair**

Another striking piece of archaeological evidence for eagle hunting by women in antiquity came to light only recently, on an ancient golden ring (Greek, ca 425 BC) in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. The full significance of the scene has eluded understanding until now. The ring shows a nomad horsewoman, identified as an Amazon. Her hair and cloak are blowing back to indicate the speed of her galloping horse. She has the reins choked up tight, with a spear in her left hand. The deer is so finely detailed that we can tell the species. It is a Eurasian spotted fallow buck with broad palmate antlers. Her hunting dog is a sight-hound like those used today by Kazakh and Kyrgyz eagle hunters.



***FIG 8. Gold ring with scene of ancient eagle huntress, Greek, 425 BC, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, painting by Michele Angel***

Art historians had assumed the large bird was a random decoration. But in 2014, in *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World*, I identified this naturalistic scene as the earliest known image of a female eagle hunter. The bird hovering above the deer's head is an eagle with hooked beak and spread wings and tail, about to attack the deer. The ring is compelling evidence that ancient Greek travelers, who first encountered steppe tribes



in about 700 BC, had heard about or even observed nomadic horsewomen of eastern lands hunting with trained eagles and sight-hounds.

In addition to artistic and archaeological evidence, an intriguing hint that women might have been more involved in eagle hunting in the past is embedded in a persistent folk belief. The Kazakhs traditionally associate *bürkitshi* with women's fertility and childbirth.

## **New Generations of Eagle Huntresses in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Mongolia**

The ancient practice of eagle falconry is carried on today by about 200-400 eagle hunters and a handful of eagle huntresses, in Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the Xinjiang province of China (estimates vary). The majority of Kazakh eagle hunters live in the Altai region of northwest Mongolia, and the families keep in touch with Kazakhs in the other countries.

### **The Life of an Eagle Hunter**

Both Mongolia and the Kazakh community have a long history of women's equality in education, government, religion, law, medicine, and other fields. Girls and boys start riding horses at age five and help with herds and putting up *gers*. Girls and women can compete in horse racing, archery, and wrestling. Eagle hunting is traditionally passed down among male relatives. Female hunters are rare but there are no religious or cultural prohibitions against a girl who wishes to participate in training and flying eagles.

Children of both sexes commonly help to care for the eagles, go along on hunts, and attend eagle festivals. Anyone strong enough to carry an eagle while on horseback can begin apprenticeship with one's own eagle. The traditional test of a true *Bürkitshi* is a successful hunting expedition of several days on horseback. Not everyone who raises an eagle becomes an experienced, regular hunter and not all eagle trainers compete in contests. Some people train eagles for other hunters, some show their trained eagles at festivals, some enter eagle contests, and some hunt with eagles. There are many levels of being a *bürkitshi*, including helper, apprentice, trainer, festival participant, and experienced hunter. Not all who begin eagle falconry are able to continue: military service, education, marriage, family, and employment can intervene

### **Janyl Myrza**

Oral traditions, epic sagas, poems, songs, ballads, and lore of Central Asian nomad groups, perpetuated over countless centuries by bards, contain many references to eagle falconry. The

Kyrgyz *Manas* epic, mentioned above, is the most famous. Of about 40 known Kyrgyz epics, only a few have been recorded in writing and most have not been translated into any other languages. One of these epics recounts the adventures of a nomadic Nogai warrior woman of the 17th century. Janyl Myrza ("Sir" Janyl), thought to have been a historical figure whose courageous exploits later became legendary. Janyl "Tamed wild eagles and other birds of prey and taught them to hunt" and gained "power and respect among the Nogai people."

Born in the mountains above the Arpa valley of the Tien Shan range (Naryn district, central Kyrgyzstan), Janyl was an expert horsewoman-archer and skilled eagle hunter. In 2007, a play based on *Janyl Myrza* was staged in the Kyrgyz Republic and New York City. The cast traveled to Kyrgyzstan in 2006 to meet the eagle hunters of Janyl's homeland and hear bards recite her story. Many of the people in the region claimed to be descendants of Janyl and the "best female eagles" bear her name. A champion eagle hunter who learned the art at age 9, Tenti Djamanakov (b. 1933), remarked that there were very few eagle hunters during Soviet rule and he knew of no huntresses then. But "in the old epics," he told them, "all the great women warriors were also eagle hunters."



**FIG 9.** *Janyl Myrza, eagle huntress heroine of the Kyrgyz epic, drawing by Bulashka*

## Princess Nirgidma

The turbulent history and isolation of Central Asia makes it difficult to trace the practice of eagle hunting in the modern era. A Mongol horsewoman-eagle huntress who became a celebrity in Europe in the 1920s was known as Princess Nirgidma (1907-1983). She was a highly educated member of the Torghut/Oirat/Kalmyk nomads who traditionally ranged from the Altai to the Tarim Basin. Nirgidma was photographed with her hunting eagle in 1932 in Urumqi (where the mummified eagle huntress now resides). “We Mongols are emancipated,” Nirgidma declared in a *National Geographic* interview, “a good horse and a wide plain, that's our desire.”



**FIG 10.** *Nirgidma with her eagle. Photo Maynard Owen Williams, National Geographic 1932*

During the Soviet era, eagle hunting waned but the tradition began to reemerge in the late 20th century. Annual eagle contests were established, like the *Sayat* festival at Nura, Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan's *Salburun* hunting festival began in 1997 and Mongolia's eagle festival began in Bayaan Ulgii in 1999.

## Clara Isabekov

Clara Isabekov and her husband Bekmukharbet and (son?) Kuanysh raise and train hunting eagles in Kazakhstan. In 2011, London photographer Sam Faulkner took several pictures of eagle hunters, including the Isabekovs, with their eagles. One photo shows them "riding to the hunting grounds near the village of Nura" with one of their eagles, on a motorcycle and sidecar. Bekmukharbet's eagle is named "White Neck," Kuanysh's is named Ak Iyik, "White Shoulders," and Clara's eagle is Ak Balak, "White Legs." At that time, Faulkner described Clara as the "only female eagle huntress in Kazakhstan."



***FIG 11. Clara Isabekov with her eagle Ak Balak, 2011, photos courtesy of Sam Faulkner/NB/CONTACTO***

## Makpal Abdrazakova

In 2009, Reuters news agency released a video of a young eagle huntress named Makpal Abdrazakova, shown competing in the eagle festival in Kazakhstan. In 2010, the American falconry historian Dennis Keen, studying in Kyrgyzstan, traveled to meet, interview, and photograph Makpal with her eagle in Karaganda, Kazakhstan.



*FIG 12. Makpal and her eagle, 2010, Kazakhstan, photo courtesy Dennis Keen*

By 2011, numerous photographs, interviews, and videos in international media presented Makpal as the sole female *bürkitshi* in Kazakhstan. As a child, she helped her father with his eagle and when she was 12-13 years old, Makpal began training her own eagle Ak Zhelke (“White Neck”). She went on hunting trips with her father and won many victories in competitions.

In an interview, Makpal says most Kazakh elders gave their blessing because they “remembered that women used to hunt with horses, dogs, and eagles.” As in any society, there are some exceptions, and two conservative, older Kazakh eagle hunters, Abylkhak Turlybaev and Bakyt Karnakbaev, feel strongly that only men should hunt with eagles.

Makpal, now a lawyer, continues to enter eagle contests and she encourages other young women eagle hunters. By 2012, it was reported that her father, Murat Abdrazakov, was training three new girls aged 8, 12, and 15, to become eagle hunters in Kazakhstan.

That year, 2012, an unidentified young horsewoman with an eagle appeared at the festival in Ulgii, Mongolia.



*FIG 13. Unidentified young horsewoman with eagle at Ulgii festival, 2012, photo by j.d.*

The next year, 2013, another young woman (name unknown) with an eagle was photographed at the festival in Nura, Kazakhstan. It is unknown whether either of the girls competed.



*FIG 14. Unidentified eagle huntress at the Eagle Festival, Nura, Kazakhstan, 2013 (Ruta Production/Shutterstock)*

## **Lauren McGough**

In 2009, an eagle hunting elder named Kukan, in Bayan Ulgii, Kazakhstan, taught an American falconer, a young woman from Oklahoma, Lauren McGough, to be a *bürkitshi*. Her experience shows that eagle hunting is always open to women, even non-Kazakhs, as long as they are strong and determined.

Witnessing Lauren's joy in bringing in game taken by her magnificent eagle, Kukan exclaimed, "Why didn't I ever take my daughters hunting?" Lauren is a highly accomplished eagle huntress, and she and her eagle have participated in many fox and rabbit hunts in northwestern Mongolia with Kazakhs in 2009-2013. Lauren also hunts with eagles in Scotland, Idaho, and Wyoming.



***FIG 15. American eagle huntress Lauren McGough, second from right in top photo with her Kazakh eagle hunting group, Mongolia, 2009, below with her horse and eagle, photos courtesy Lauren McGough***



## Elizabeth Schoultz

In 2003, another experienced American female falconer traveled to Mongolia to hunt on horseback with three Kazakh eagle hunters near the Russian border. In 2010, she trekked to the Lake Issyk-Kul region, Kyrgyz Republic, with the hope of becoming an eagle huntress. "Why not welcome women who hear a calling to the life of an eagle hunter?" she asked. The respected elder, Sary Satilganov (b. 1930), known to his friends as stubborn, accepted Elizabeth as his apprentice. In 2011, she began training a young male eagle named Ak Jol Toy ("Friendly"). Cheered on by the male hunters, Elizabeth became the first woman *burkutchu* to fly an eagle in the Kyrgyz Salburun festival in 2010. She made five trips in 2010-2013 to Kyrgyz to hunt with Sary and his friends Ruslan and Talgar Shaibyrov, two well-known Kyrgyz *burkutchulor*.

Noting that only about 12% of licensed falconers in the United States were women in 2011, Elizabeth asked the Kyrgyz men why so few women become eagle huntresses. The replies of Sary and Ruslan are consistent with the explanations of eagle hunters such as Agii Makhsum, Kukan, Agalai (see below), and others in Mongolia. They point out that women are as capable as men in horse riding and handling eagles, and that nomad society is more flexible about gender roles than other Asian cultures. As Dauit Daukysh Ryskhan, an eagle falconry guide in Bayan Ulgii, told me in 2016, it is not unusual for girls to help raise young eagles and they enjoy hunting with their fathers. Another eagle hunting guide, Jagaa Baatar, commented to photographer Cale Glendening that no one objects if a girl wishes to learn eagle hunting. But the men point out that these days the women are overloaded with work taking care of families and herds, while the "men have more free time" to race horses, train and show eagles, enter contests, and go away on hunting expeditions.

"You'll be the first woman," Sary told Elizabeth, "and hopefully not the last."



**FIG 16.** *Elizabeth Schoultz with wild-caught female eagle Kalima, in 2012-13 (left), and with Ak Jol Toy, in 2011, in Kyrgyzstan, photos courtesy of Elizabeth Schoultz*

## **Aisholpan Nurgaiv**

In 2013, Israeli photographer Asher Svidensky spent 40 days photographing Kazakh *bürkitshi* families in Mongolia. Svidensky says his approach is to produce stories rather than mere documentaries, to "mix documentary and art" to tell a story. Conscious of women's achievements in Mongolia, Svidensky sought out a girl to round out his personal vision of "the future of eagle hunting." "I had gone looking for my eagle huntress," he wrote in the 2013 text for his photos. With the help of his guide Dauit Daukysh Ryskhan, Svidensky "discovered" Aisholpan Nurgaiv, the 13-year-old daughter of the eagle hunter Agalai.

In his photo-essay of 2013, Svidensky noted that Aisholpan seemed at ease "as she began handling the grand eagle for the first time in her life." When he learned that Aisholpan's older brother had joined the army in 2011 and probably would not return to eagle hunting, Svidensky encouraged her father, Agalai, to make Aisholpan his apprentice. Agalai replied that he had been considering this possibility and if his daughter asked for this he would do so. He invited Svidensky to return in 2014 to see her progress.

Apparently unaware of Makpal Abdrazakova's fame and other girls and women with eagle training experience, Svidensky cited the extreme cold and difficult terrain as the reason eagle hunting was always reserved for males. He portrayed Aisholpan as the only girl to train an eagle. But since antiquity, the challenging conditions on the steppes have meant that men and women engaged in strenuous riding and other activities together. Indeed, as Svidensky himself remarked in his 2013 photo essay, girls only have to ask and they could become a *bürkitshi*.

## ***The Eagle Huntress* Documentary**

Svidensky's photographs of Aisholpan posing with her father's eagle went viral in 2014. In early 2014, the BBC published Svidensky's photos (reporter William Kremer cautiously stated that Aisholpan "could be the world's only girl hunting with an eagle" and "may well be [Mongolia's] only eagle hunting apprentice"). Inspired by the photographs, film maker Otto Bell flew to Mongolia to secure the rights to Aisholpan's story. Bell explained in an interview that he "felt a sense of responsibility to carefully bring her story to life through film." In 2014, Bell and Svidensky, with Dauit Daukysh Ryskhan as guide, filmed Aisholpan bravely capturing a fledgling eagle (named Ak Kanat, "White Wings"). That fall, Bell's team filmed her competing in the festival in Ulgii, where she was declared the winner in the eagle contest. To complete the narrative, Bell also arranged to film Aisholpan hunting a fox.



***FIG 17. Aisholpan and her father Agalai in front of their home (her mother Almagul is in the background), Mongolia, October 2014, photo courtesy of Meghan Fitz-James, a Canadian guest staying with the family***

Bell's breathtaking documentary "The Eagle Huntress" previewed at Sundance Film Festival in January 2016 to international acclaim. Film distribution rights were purchased by Sony in February and 20th Century Fox obtained the rights for a separate animation film in April. A media blitz featuring Bell, his producers, and Aisholpan's family followed the documentary's debut at Sundance.



***FIG 18. Aisholpan, photographed by Asher Svidensky, National Geographic (Mongolia) 2014, and Otto Bell's "The Eagle Huntress" Sundance Film Festival poster 2016***

In numerous interviews, videos, press releases, and publicity for the documentary, Aisholpan is presented as the only girl in history to become an eagle hunter. According to the original official synopsis published in January 2016, the film "follows Aisholpan, a 13-year-old nomadic Mongolian girl who is fighting an ingrained culture of misogyny to become the first female Eagle Hunter in 2,000 years of male-dominated history" (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3882074/>). According to *Variety's* announcement of the animation rights in April 2016, "The film follows Aisholpan, a 13-year old Mongolian girl striving to become the first female Eagle Hunter in the sport's 2,000-year history."

The documentary portrays Aisholpan and her father as "rebels" defying Kazakh elders' belief that women are "too fragile and weak" to hunt on horseback with an eagle. To add a sense of dramatic conflict to his storyline, Otto Bell sought out eagle hunting elders in Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan who would express opposition to girls becoming apprentice eagle

hunters. As with Makpal, most eagle hunters approved, so Bell's docu-drama shows a humorous montage of old men frowning and shaking their heads.

In interviews in early 2016, Bell characterized Mongolia as backwards, claiming that because the Kazakhs live in such isolation they “are ignorant about what women can do.” When she was interviewed in Mongolia's leading newspaper in 2016, however, Aisholpan's mother Almagul stated that there are no restrictions on girls deciding to be eagle hunters. In the film itself, Aisholpan's father Agalai says, "I think boys and girls are equal." Reviewer Amber Wilkinson commented that Bell's film shows how Agalai's "view puts him firmly in the minority in his community."

But the film's suggestion that Aisholpan's parents are outliers in the Kazakh community does not ring true. Her parents' support and the general belief that girls can do whatever boys can do has been confirmed by several other celebrated Kazakh and Kyrgyz eagle hunters such as Kukan, Agii, and Sary, by Mongolian guides, and by the experiences of other young women in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia. Eagle hunting families are deeply committed to preserving their ancient legacy.

Documentary photography and films are expected to be ethnographically sensitive and factual, so it is surprising that the creators of Aisholpan's story for Western audiences have failed to acknowledge Makpal Abdrazakova's prior eagle hunting prowess, widely publicized since 2011. Otto Bell knew about Makpal in 2014 but he declined an offer to meet her, preferring to focus on his heartwarming story pitting one girl and her father against their male-dominated society. In spring 2016, Bell indicated that it is not his responsibility to tell an ethnologically comprehensive story. As co-producer Asher Svidensky commented to me in early 2016, "Entertainment isn't anthropology."

The film makers have also misrepresented the historical independence of women in Kazakh and Mongolian culture. Mongolia is far from backwards or misogynistic: women have voted and held office since 1924 in Mongolia, more than 80 percent of women have secondary education, and 70 percent of college students are women (a fact acknowledged by Svidensky in his photo-essay). Strong women have always been part of the venerable Kazakh nomad heritage and girls were never forbidden to train eagles. It is to be hoped that once the film's producers, publicists, and distributors become aware of the facts, they will decide to present Aisholpan's experience and her culture more honestly.

Aisholpan's ambition is to study medicine. Her younger sister intends to carry on the family's heritage when Aisholpan leaves for college. An extraordinary young woman, Aisholpan has become an empowering example for girls around the world. Her story is inspiring enough without being cast as a struggle against male oppression. As the first girl to compete in the Ulgii eagle festival, her achievements are truly impressive. But they are made possible not only by her own grit and skill but by her nomadic culture, in which women can be men's equals and girls can train eagles if they wish.

## Aisulu

Aisulu, a girl in the Kazakh community in Bayan Ulgii, Mongolia, is an example of open-minded eagle falconry traditions. In 2010, at age 5, Aisulu began helping her father Ardak train eagles. When she turned 11, Aisulu's parents approved her wish to become a *bürkitshi*, noting that her eagle hunter grandfather would have been very proud.



***FIG 19. Aisulu, at age 5, teaching a young eagle how to balance while perched on a horse.  
Photo 2010 Mongolia, courtesy of Bek, backtobektravel.com***

## Amanbol

At the 2014 Ulgii festival, while Bell was filming Aisholpan, yet another young eagle huntress-in-training captured attention. She was Amanbol, the 9-year-old daughter of the *bürkitshi* featured in the award-winning documentary “The Eagle Hunter's Son” (2009, directed by Renè Bo Hansen). The film starred her older brother Bazarbai when he was 12. After their father died, Bazarbai began teaching Amanbol to be an eagle huntress.



*FIG 20. Amanbol at Eagle Festival, Ulgii, Mongolia, 2014, photo courtesy of Stefan Cruysberghs*

As the Belgian photographer Stefan Cruysberghs remarked, Amanbol and Bazarbai are “the new generation [who] will make sure these ancient traditions will be kept alive.”



*FIG 21. Amanbol and Bazarbai, young brother and sister eagle hunters, 2014, photo courtesy of Stefan Cruysberghs*

## **Strength and Openness of the Kazakh Community**

Historian of Central Asian falconry Takuya Soma, who has lived among Kazakh eagle hunters, points out that falconry disappeared in other less open, sedentary societies. In contrast, Soma notes, eagle hunting persisted and has a promising future among Kazakhs because of their traditional belief that women can participate in the same activities as men. The “chief reason why eagle hunting is still practiced” is the “absence of strict social regulations to join.” As Dennis Keen, of the Central Asian Falconry Project, comments, “Curious adults and children absorb eagle hunting not just from ‘masters’ but from from the culture at large.” Soma, Keen, McGough, Schoultz, and the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs themselves affirm that anyone young or old, male or female, is free to find a teacher, “capture and own their eagle, and hunt without any restrictions.” Rather than being exclusive to “Kazakh masculinity,” *bürkitshi* techniques are “shared with community members, elders, wives, and children,” even foreign women. This “open knowledge



and free participation," open to anyone strong, capable, and determined enough, continues Soma, "is a remarkable trait in pastoralist society," unlike the all-male elite hunting of sedentary cultures.

In 2015, Aisholpan and Amanbol were both photographed at the annual Ulgii eagle festival. Another young girl *bürkitshi* apprentice also attended that festival. She is the daughter of Shohan, a prominent eagle hunter and friend of Agii Makhsum in Mongolia.



**FIG 22.** *Shohan's daughter, Eagle Festival, Ulgii, Mongolia, 2015, Photo: Marion Demanet*

“Generally men used to participate in the festival” at Ulgii, remarks Mongolian photographer Batzaya Chojiljav, but “the younger generation” of eagle hunters includes girls, ensuring its future. The intrepid eagle huntresses Makpal, Aisholpan, Aisulu, and Amanbol represent the new generation of eagle hunters' daughters, who are capturing world attention through photographs and film. The great excitement surrounding their extraordinary accomplishments is a powerful affirmation of the egalitarian values that were once taken for granted among the ancient steppe nomads.

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Part 1

<http://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history-archaeology/eagle-huntress-ancient-traditions-and-evidence-women-eagle-hunters-part-i-020797>

Part 2

<http://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history-archaeology/eagle-huntress-new-generations-eagle-huntresses-kazakhstan-and-mongolia-020798>

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