



The Eagle Huntress Discussion Guide

Director: Otto Bell

Year: 2016

Time: 87 min

You might know this director from:

This is the first feature-length film from this director.

FILM SUMMARY

Nomadic life on the plains of western Mongolia is difficult. The Kazakh population, who call this harsh but beautiful environment home, battles sub-zero temperatures, whipping winds, and an unsteady supply of sustenance. Like many in the region, Aisholpan and her family pitch their ger (a portable round tent) and turn to the age-old tradition of eagle hunting to put food on the table in the frigid winter months.

In addition to providing essential food, eagle hunting also cultivates a sense of cultural pride and self-esteem among Aisholpan's kinsmen. That's right, men. "Men go eagle hunting" and "women are weaker and more fragile" are both commonly held assumptions expressed amongst her people. Then along comes Aisholpan. Thirteen years old and confident in her own ability, Aisholpan convinces her father to teach her the ways of the hunt. A long lineage of men precedes her, and although she is not the first female to eagle hunt, she is by far the youngest.

THE EAGLE HUNTRESS offers a breathtaking cinematic portrayal of Aisholpan's journey onto the patriarchal stage of eagle hunting. Filmmaker Otto Bell and his determined team follow her and her father as they capture her eagle, train it, and ultimately hunt with it. When THE EAGLE HUNTRESS captures Aisholpan winning a highly coveted prize at the male dominated Golden Eagle Festival, girl power reaches new heights and this hopeful tale soars.

FILM THEMES

As the youngest and one of the only female entrants into the masculine field of eagle hunting, Aisholpan has much to prove—not only to the naysayers and disbelievers, but to the bloodlines coursing within her.

CONNECTIONS AND BONDS

Life consists of connections. The bond between child and parent, individuals and their community, and even between pets and owners carry us along and strengthen over time. As shown in the film, the bond between an eagle and a hunter is as true and steadfast as any connection, and arguably the difference between a good and a great eagle-hunter team lies in that invisible connection. By listening to and observing one another, eagle and hunter achieve an auspicious collaboration. As Nurgaiv puts it, “Only if they work together can they hope to be successful.”

TRADITIONS AND THE MODERN WORLD

Eagle hunting has been practiced in the Central Asian Steppe for 6,000 years, and traditionally by men only. Learning the art of berkutchi, the highly specialized skill of training and bonding with eagles, is a rite of passage for young men passed down from their fathers. Aisholpan’s introduction into this male-dominated practice is a sign of a changing Mongolia, although this change is a slow one in the rural landscapes, where patriarchy maintains a strong hold. “This is not good. This will set a precedent,” the old generation states. By breaking into the world of eagle-hunting, Aisholpan not only proves her individual strength but also paves the way for a changing mentality within her community.

GIRL POWER

As an up-and-coming huntress, Aisholpan has the odds stacked against her. Young and female in a male-dominated sphere, she must not only master the art of hunting, but also silence the naysayers. The lack of female role models does not stop her. She loves eagles, has marveled at her forefathers, and wants to be a huntress though it doesn’t come easy and is not for the weak willed. But Aisholpan endures. The fire of her dream and the strength of her desire fuels her onwards, muffling the disbelievers and elevating her to success. Aisholpan is nothing less than an inspiring ambassador of girl power.

SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR SUCCESS

“I worry for her,” Aisholpan’s father states. Keeping this concern to himself, however, Nurgaiv approaches his daughter with loving support, belief, and appoints endless hours to training her in the hunt. Without such a supportive family and an endless supply of encouragement and devotion, Aisholpan’s initiation into the eagle-hunting world would have looked very different. Would she have abandoned her dream? It is hard to know, but being surrounded by love and devotion undoubtedly made her path easier. With her mother stating, “I just want my daughter to love her life,” and her father repeating, “she is a very brave and courageous girl,” Aisholpan’s story is a testament to the power of positive support.

“It’s not a choice. It’s a calling that has to be in your blood.”

Rys Nurgaiv, father

“She decided on her own to be an eagle hunter, and I believe it’s a woman’s right to choose.”

Kuksyegyen Almagul, mother

“People might think it’s strange because she does something men usually do. But she shows extraordinary strength, regardless of her gender.”

Rys Nurgaiv, father

FILM FACTS:

- Kazakh golden eagles are considered one of the world's fiercest. With a wingspan around 7.5 ft. (230 cm), they dive at speeds up to 190 mph (300 km/h). Weighing up to 15 lbs. (7 kg) and standing 3 ft. (90 cm) tall, female eagles are used in the hunt, as they are larger and more aggressive. They primarily hunt foxes and rabbits, and are blindfolded to keep them calm and undistracted before being set off to hunt.
- The Golden Eagle Festival located just outside of Ulgii, Mongolia, began in 1999, and is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Event.
- Mongolia, a landlocked country located between Russia and China, had a 2016 population of just over three million. 45% of its inhabitants live in the capital Ulaanbaatar; 30% are nomadic. Aisholpan's family are Kazakh, a Turkic people who traditionally live a nomadic life with origins extending back to medieval times. As the second largest ethnic group in Mongolia, Kazakhs comprise 5% of the population; the majority live in the western province of Bayan-Olgii. Islam is the primary religion. The dombra, the national instrument, is the two-stringed lute shown played by a few children in the film.
- Nurgaiv was training Aisholpan's older brother to become an eagle hunter when he was drafted into the Mongolian Army. In his absence Aisholpan took up many of her brother's tasks. She asked her father to teach her eagle hunting as he had been teaching her brother.
- Director Otto Bell and director of photography Simon Niblett often filmed on their own, with over 1,500 lbs. (700 kg) of camera equipment, including a RED ONE digital camera, zoom lenses, and a self-made drone and crane. For the final hunting scene, Bell took his largest team (four people, including a sound man), and shot for 22 days. Temperatures regularly reached -40F, and the eagle was often too frozen to hunt.
- Traditionally Kazakh eagle hunters do not name their eagles. Breaking with tradition, Aisholpan named hers Aq Qanattari, translated as white wings. Aisholpan is not the first female eagle huntress in modern times—Makpal Abdrazakova recently hunted eagles as well—but she is the first and youngest Mongolian female to compete at the Golden Eagle Festival and beat 70 men. While most eagles fly down from the mountain to their master's arm in 30 seconds, Aq Qanattari reached her in a record-breaking five seconds.
- The Altai Mountains (meaning "gold mountain") are located in western Mongolia and are a prime place for eagle hunting. Most hunting takes place in the winter, between November and February, when foxes are most visible against the snow.
- A "ger" is the traditional Mongolian home. It is a round tent covered in animal skins. Among the Kazakh, household chores are often split within a family, with the left side of the ger the domain of women and the right for men.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** THE EAGLE HUNTRESS with those in your immediate community. In addition to being an inspiring and heartwarming tale, it is a story of self-confidence and empowerment.
2. **Support** organizations that promote girls' rights, such as [Girls Inc.](#) Not all girls are given as much support and encouragement by their families as Aisholpan. The fight for gender equality is a global battle.
3. **Deepen** your knowledge of Kazakh eagle hunting to learn more about this 4,000-year-old tradition still alive today. [This website](#) offers information on eagle hunting and other Mongolian-related facts and tips.
4. **Protect** golden eagles, which are endangered in many places around the globe. For England, visit [RSPB](#). For the U.S., visit [USFWS](#). To stop the killing of golden eagles in Norway, sign this [petition](#).

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Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.