Altai Kazakh falconry as 'heritage tourism': the Golden Eagle Festivals of Western Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

Falconry (or hawking), a centuries-old method of hunting, survives in the Altaic Kazakh pastoralist community in Bayan Ulgii (Баян Өлгий/Bayan Ölgii) Aimag (Province) , in Western Mongolia. The hunters specialise in hunting foxes with female golden eagles. Over the last decade, the spread of heritage tourism has brought about positive and negative changes in the tradition. It has also changed the attitude of local eagle hunters towards people and especially towards tourists. Since 2000, the establishment of the Golden Eagle Festival (Бүргэдийн наадам/ бүркіт той) has changed falconry from a way of hunting into something that provides demonstrations and entertainment for tourists.

This research reports on the ambivalent situation of the Altaic Kazakh eagle hunters with (1) a survey of the attitudes of local eagle hunters in the Altai, Sagsai, Tolbo and Ulaanhus *Sum* (Counties), (2) interviews with the authorities concerned, and (3) ethnographic documentation based on participant observation.

The research describes the role of the Golden Eagle Festival which has become the force for major changes in the tradition of hunting with eagles. New eagle owners are coming on the scene while at the same time traditional hunting activities are almost disappearing. It seems that some eagle hunters now hold eagles without having any knowledge about taming and hunting. The local falconry culture is more complex than ever before and the hunters have various views of the situation.

Finally, to focus on this cultural transition from 'living tradition' to 'post-contextual culture', this study sets out to identify criteria and create a master plan for the cultural sustainability of Altaic Kazakh falconry in order to conserve it as 'on-going' intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords

Altai Mountains, Bayan Ölgii *Aimag*, *Sum*, cultural change, eagle hunting, ethnic identity, falconry (hawking), heritage sociology, Kazakh, minority groups, transhumance, animal herding, 'demonstration falconry', *Kolbala*, traditional art and knowledge (*tak*), decontextualization

1. Introduction

Falconry (hawking) is not only a most elaborate human-animal interaction, but it is also an influential practice connected with political power, social position, divine symbolism and royalty. It is estimated from archaeological evidence that it dates back more than 2,500 years (Soma; 2012a, 2013a). The practice of falconry was inscribed on *The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* as a living human heritage in November 2010, and this included the eagle falconry of the Altaic Kazakhs in Western Mongolia (UNESCO; 2010a, 2010b).

The Altaic Kazakhs (a minority group) in Bayan Ulgii (Баян Өлгий/Bayan Ölgii) *Aimag*, Western Mongolia (Figure 1) are one of the most significant groups to preserve this tradition, and a few still practice eagle hunting as a job. This little-known culture was first reported in an article by Millard in 1999, in the travel writings of Bodio in 2001 and 2003, and by NHK on Japanese TV (Japan Broadcasting Corporation; 2003, 2010) in advance of academic research on the subject. The falconry custom is unique in that the hunters use trained golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos daphanea*) and hunt on horseback (Plates 1 and 2). Their prey is nearly always the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) or the Corsac fox (*Vulpes corsac*). This custom of hunting with eagles on horseback did not develop for food or sport but for the acquisition of fur (Soma; 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e).

In October 2000, young Kazakhs set up 'The Golden Eagle Festival' (Бүргэдийн наадам/ бүркіт той) and another similar festival was established in 2002 (Plates 3-6). Both festivals aimed to demonstrate and promote Kazakh falconry and the eagle hunters or falconers. This is the first major ethno-cultural upheaval the Altaic



Figure 1
Map of the areas studied in Bayan Ulgii *Aimag* in western Mongolia.
Image: Google Earth



Plate 1
A tamed adult golden eagle. Photo: Author.



Plate 2
Eagle hunters (S-11 and S-22) at work. Photo: Author.



Plate 3
The eagle 'recall' contest at the Ulgii Festival in 2012. Photo: Author.



Plate 4
Kok-Bal (traditional wrestling on horseback) at the Ulgii Festival in 2012. Photo: Author.



Plate 5
Local shops selling traditional arts and crafts at the Ulgii Festival in 2012. Photo: Author.



Plate 6
Audience at the Ulgii Festival in 2012. Photo: Author.

Kazakhs have experienced in the post-socialist period (Бикұмар; 1994: Battulga; 2007: Баттулга; 2011: Soma; 2012b, 2012d). The festivals have successfully motivated people to continue to keep eagles and to participate in the demonstrations. The festivals also bring together over 50 eagle hunters and more than 300 foreign tourists every year as a form of 'heritage tourism', to experience the way nomadic animal herders interact with the natural world. On the other hand, the festivals are rapidly taking traditional falconry out of its original context. In particular, the traditional art and knowledge (*tak*) of taming eagles, and actual hunting, have almost vanished in the last decade. In addition, the buying and selling of eagles and eaglets, which very seldom happened in the past, has become commonplace, and thus threatens natural resources. Whereas the Golden Eagle Festivals encourage cultural preservation, all these negative effects pose a serious threat to future conservation.

1-1 Subject and methods

To assess such a socially ambivalent influence as the Golden Eagle Festivals, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with the people in charge of the festivals, local travel companies and other authorities during the period between August 2012 and January 2013. They also carried out anthropological research with the eagle hunters between August 2011 and January 2013. They interviewed 47 eagle hunters from Altai (Алтаи),

Tolbo (Толво), Sagsai (Сагсаи), and Ulaanhus (Улаанхус) *Sum* about their personal status, what they knew about the origins of falconry and their participation in the festivals.This is a follow up article to the previous paper, *Contemporary Falconry in Altai-Kazakh in Western Mongolia,* in *IJIH* vol. 7 (Soma; 2012b) and adds extensive data from intensive sociological research to describe regional differences and the current status of local falconry and the eagle hunters.

All prices are quoted in Mongolian Tuglig (1,600MNT =$1). In addition, after June 2012 age, title, and a reference number were recorded for each subject.

2. The Golden Eagle Festival as a cultural upheaval for the Altaic Kazakhs

2-1. The establishment of the Golden Eagle Festival

The Golden Eagle Festival is becoming one of the most successful and influential events, not only for the Altaic Kazakhs, but also for all the people in Western Mongolia. The original plan for this festival was conceived around 1998 by two local travel companies,the Altai Tour Co Ltd in Ulgii and the Nomadic Expedition Co Ltd in Ulaanbaatar. Some local young Kazakhs agreed to this plan and they worked together to make falconry and the eagle hunters the centrepiece of this festival. In 1999, they submitted their plan to the Prefectural Assembly as the first ethnic event for Altaic Kazakhs. Eventually, through *Decision no.44 of the Bayan Ulgii Representative Committee Meeting on* 24th January 2000, this festival was chosen to be an official prefectural event. It started in October 2000 with financial support from the two travel companies mentioned above, as well as and from Bayan Ulgii *Aimag* and the National Tourism Department of Mongolia (Монголын аялал жуулчлалын холбоо). The first festival (the Ulgii Festival) was held on 6th October 2000 at Khal-Tolgoi in Bogot *Sum* which lies 18km southeast of Ulgii city. A total of 60 eagle hunters (five from each *sum*) took part in the festival.

At the same time as the first festival was celebrated, the Association of Mongolian Eagle Hunters (Монголын Бүргэдчдийн холбоо) and the Foundation for Eagle Hunters (Бүргэдчин сан) were set up with Z. Kazbek (President of the Altai Tour Co. Ltd), H. Adelkhan (Manager of the Altai Tour Co. Ltd), and S. Medeokhan (President of Orman-an Co. Ltd) as joint directors. These associations aim:

To revitalise the tradition and custom of eagle hunting by the Altaic Kazakh minority group of Mongolia and to transmit the tradition to the next generation, to promote it to the nation as well as internationally, to protect the interests of eagle hunters helping each other…(from The Rules of the Association of Mongolian Eagle Hunters).

In addition, the association tries to help the locals conserve Altaic Kazakh eagle falconry with regular lectures about the proper way of taming eagles and keeping the tradition alive (Interview, Kazbek, 2nd January 2013).The 60 eagle hunters who took part in the first festival were registered as the first members of the association. The number of registered eagle hunters has increased every year and in 2003 there were 384 members (Баян Өлгий Аймаг; 2003, p.3).

2-2. The extensive promotion of Altaic Kazakh Falconry

While the Golden Eagle Festival and Kazakh eagle falconry have flourished internally, it has only gradually been acknowledged outside of the Altaic Kazakh community. As a result, in September 2002 another Golden Eagle Festival (the Sagsai Festival) was independently launched in Sagsai *Sum* by a local travel company, Blue Wolf Travel Co Ltd (Көк жал Co Ltd) which is run by Mr. Kanat in Ulgii city. At the same time, the original association of local eagle hunters, the Golden Eagle Association (Алтан Бүргэд Клыб) was also established and 120 local residents attended its inaugural meeting. The Sagsai Festival also happens every September and by 2010 had achieved almost the same scale as the Ulgii Festival. According to the Ulgii Statistics Office, that year a total of 300 overseas travellers came to visit the festivals (Interview, Mandat, August 2012). In February 2007, Mr. Kanat and Орог саарал Travel Company also held a mini Golden Eagle Festival (бүргэдийн баяр) at Ulaanbaatar with 20 eagle hunters invited from Bayan-Ulgii. Blue Wolf Travel Co Ltd also published an information paper *Altan Burged (Алтан Вургед)* to promote Altaic Kazakh falconry. As a result of these successful cultural promotions, 21 Kazakh eagle hunters were praised for their traditional intangible art and knowledge and presented with national awards by the President, Nambaryn Enkhbayar, in February 2008. After that, Kazakh eagle falconry was known nation-wide by

the Mongolian people and small falconry demonstrations continue to be held every February in Ulaanbaatar.

Both Golden Eagle Festivals were obviously successful, even though they brought about the greatest cultural upheaval the Altaic Kazakhs have experienced in the post-socialist period. Currently, American and European travellers are the main visitors; they are extremely interested in local culture and experience eagle falconry among the Kazakh herdsmen as 'heritage tourism'. The festivals encouraged people in the communities to keep eagles, and over the last 12 years ideas about conserving this tradition have spread. Official inscription on *The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* as a 'living human heritage' in March 2011 was the culmination of, and reward for, their efforts. This development is important not only for Altaic Kazakhs in Bayan Ulgii, but also for the whole of Mongolian national culture.

3. The de-contextualisation of eagle falconry: the decline of a living human heritage

3-1. Demonstrations for tourists have become the main raison d'etre for eagle falconry: the Sagsai and Altai cases

According to interviews with 47 local eagle hunters in Altai, Sagsai, Tolbo, and Ulaanhus *Sum*, the chance of participating in the festivals provides significant motivation for eagle ownership (Table1). In addition, owning an eagle and demonstrating what it can do has become a way for people to make money by inviting foreign tourists to their homes.

In Sagsai *Sum*, most of today's eagle hunters are only interested in taking part in the festivals, even though in the past there were a lot of genuine eagle falconers in the area. In fact there are around 30 eagle hunters in Sagsai of whom 18 belong to traditional falconer families, and only 5 eagle hunters (S-10, 11, 17, 21, and 22) set up on their own account. Providing falconry demonstrations for tourists is today the main reason Sagsai eagle hunters keep eagles. One of these eagle hunters (S-11) even goes to the festivals with a male golden eagle (a so-called *salcha*) for demonstration purposes. Yet male eagles were never tamed for hunting according to the Kazakh eagle hunters' traditional discipline.

After observing them for a year, we found that only 3 eagle hunters (S-7, 11, and 22) now hunt regularly in winter; of the others, probably more than a half of them have never had any actual hunting experience. Moreover, 2 of the eagle hunters (S-10 and 15) normally hunt with traps and rifles.There are also 4 falconer households (S-5, 8, 11, and 14) which open their homes as tourist accommodation in affiliation with a local travel company.

Nonetheless, most of the eagle hunters tell tourists that they go hunting almost every day in winter- although nobody really does. Likewise, every eagle hunter insists that their own eagle was taken directly from the nest, but that is not true either. This is because an *eyas* (eaglet) captured from the nest is called *Kolbala* (Қолбала) – a term that implies respect. Such an eaglet is believed to grow up stronger than any captured young or adult bird, and is able to hunt wolves - a 'wolf hunter eagle'. On the other hand, young or adult birds captured in a trap (or traded) are called *Juz* (Жүз). They are thought to be less valuable or vulnerable than *kolbala* eaglets. However, after observing the hunters for a year we found that only 3 *kolbala* eaglets were actually tamed by Sagsai eagle hunters (S-10 and 11). Most of the Sagsai eagle hunters know very well that the falsehoods they tell represent what a genuine hunter should do. In other words, they well understand that an authentic eagle hunter needs to go hunting every day with his eagle, and should have captured his own eaglet directly from her nest as hunters used to do in the past. However, nobody now follows those traditions. This contradiction shows a process of de-contextualising eagle falconry, but it also shows that local eagle hunters suffer some sort of internal conflict when they pretend to be authentic eagle hunters just to impress tourists. Alternatively, their pretence could indicate a complete absence of knowledge of the traditional art.

Eagle hunters in Altai *Sum* also show some similarities with those in Sagsai. There are about 12 eagle hunters in Altai territory and the authors visited 8 of them. One of the significant things in Altai *Sum* is that falconry culture has been transmitted mainly by one falconer family, the Komarkhans. Seven of the 8 eagle hunters we met (all except A-3) are closely related to this family.

Table. 1 Succession of Falconry by Informant Falconers

Region	Falconer (n=47)	Age	Year of 1st eagle	Job	From	Ulgii Festival	Sagsai Festival	Hunting days p.a.	Number of eagle's	Eagle's age	Eagles held in past	1930s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s	90s	2000s
Altai	A-1	75	—	herder	father	×	×	retired	—	—	—								
	A-2	56	1981	herder	father	joined	joined	none	1	3	6								
	A-3	51	1983	herder	self	joined	joined	none	1	5	7								
	A-4	50	1987	herder	father	joined	joined	none	1	5	5								
	A-5	45	1982	herder	father	joined	joined	none	1	12	6								
	A-6	39	1990	herder	father	×	×	none	1	2	6								
	A-7	30	2002	herder	father	joined	joined	none	1	—	2?								
	A-8	30	2004	herder	father	×	×	none	2	3/ 1	3								
Bogot	B-1	53	1996	herder	father	×	×	1~5	1	2	3								
Sagsai	S-1	95	1951	herder	father	×	×	retired	—	—	—								
	S-2	74	1958	herder	father	joined	joined	retired	1	4	—								
	S-3	71	1963	herder	father	joined	2002~	retired	1	4	9								
	S-4	66	1976	herder	father	joined	joined	retired	1	—	—								
	S-5	65	1972	herder	father	joined	2002~	retired	1	6	5								
	S-6	61	1981	driver	father	joined	joined	retired	2	13/ 1	5								
	S-7	55	1972	complex	father	joined	2002~	1~5	1	5	4								
	S-8	54	1988	herder	father	joined	2002~	none	1	5	3								
	S-9	51	1996	complex	father	joined	2002~	none	1	2	11								
	S-10	51	1991	complex	self	joined	2002~	trap/ gun	1	6	5								
	S-11	47	2003	herder	self	joined	2002~	5~10	1	1	5								
	S-12	46	1992	herder	father	joined	joined	none	1	3	11								
	S-13	44	1993	herder	father	×	2002~	none	1	4	3								
	S-14	40	1994	herder	father	joined	2002~	none	1	6	2								
	S-15	36	1991	complex	father	joined	2002~	trap/ gun	1	5	1								
	S-16	34	1995	herder	father	×	2002~	1~5	1	4	3								
	S-17	32	2005	herder	self	×	×	none	1	7	1								
	S-18	28	2000	herder	father	×	×	none	1	6	3								
	S-19	27	1995	herder	father	joined	joined	none	1	6	2								
	S-20	25	2002	complex	father	×	×	none	1	4	2								
	S-21	22	2012	herder	self	×	×	none	1	7	1								
	S-22	20	2008	herder	self	joined	joined	5~10	1	7	1								
	S-23	17	2006	student	father	joined	joined	none	1	4	1								
Tolbo	T-1	90	1952	herder	self	×	×	retired	2	20/ 2	5								
	T-2	70	1957	herder	father	×	×	10~20	1	5	10								
	T-3	65	1966	herder	self	×	×	10~20	1	5	13								
	T-4	58	1997	herder	father	×	×	10~20	1	2	5								
	T-5	54	1998	herder	self	×	×	10~20	1	3	6								
	T-6	49	1983	herder	father	×	×	10~20	1	2	4								
	T-7	46	2008	herder	father	×	×	10~20	1	2	1								
	T-8	45	1990	herder	father	×	×	10~20	2	5	3								
Ulaanhus	U-1	80	1962	herder	father	×	×	retired	—	—	—								
	U-2	71	—	herder	father	2002~	2000~	retired	1	—	—								
	U-3	63	1995	herder	self	×	joined	none	—	—	10~								
	U-4	56	1971	herder	self	×	joined	none	3	6/ 6/ 1	40~								
	U-5	52	1980	herder	father	×	joined	none	1	4	6								
	U-6	46	1998	herder	father	×	×	none	1	6	3								
	U-7	35	2002	herder	self	joined	joined	none	1	1	3								

The master Komarkhan, who died at 95 years old in 2009, was one of most famous eagle hunters in Mongolia (Plate 7). He was given several awards and honours by the government, and various overseas tourists and photographers used to visit him. Due to his reputation, participation in the festivals has been important for Altai eagle hunters, and 5 of the 8 eagle hunters go almost every year. However, since 2009 after the death of the Master Komarkhan, they have not continued to hunt. In addition, there has been no tradition of falconry amongst those herders who do not belong to the Komarkhan family. Therefore the festival has not brought about an increase in the eagle hunter population, though there may be some hesitation that un-authorised people in the region may acquire eagles. In this sense, the cultural succession may be threatened in the near future by the loss of the leadership of the Komarkhan family.

3-2. Hunting practice in the contemporary context: Tolbo

In contrast to Sagsai and Altai, Tolbo *Sum* is unique. There are 15 eagle hunters in winter pastures near the centre of the county, and we researched 8 of them. None of these hunters have taken part in any of the festivals. Typical reasons for their absence were health and safety related: *'It would be dangerous to use my eagle for demonstrations because she was tamed as a true hunting bird'*, *'My eagle will get fat if she takes part'*, *'The atmosphere will damage her health'* or *'She may attack other eagles at the festival.'*



Plate 7
The Master Komarkhan, one of the most famous eagle hunters, taken at the Ulgii Festival in 2006. Photo: Author.

Another distinctive factor is that actual hunting activities still go on in Tolbo *Sum*. All of the 8 eagle hunters have between 10 and 20 days' hunting each winter. When the author visited their winter houses in October 2012, almost all of them were away from home for hours on hunting expeditions. Their way of hunting is unique and does not follow the traditional rules. Traditionally, eagle hunters go out with beaters and other eagle hunters on horseback. Then a beater gallops his horse up to the foothills of the mountain while the other eagle hunters go to the top of the mountain to look for foxes or other prey (Soma; 2012e, 2012f, 2013b). But, at Tolbo, everybody goes looking for prey at the same time with cars and motorcycles. When they find an animal, one eagle hunter goes to the top of the hill or mountain on foot, and then a beater gets close to the prey from the foothills with a Russian hunting rifle (TOZ-8). If the beater fails to shoot his prey, the eagle hunters fly their birds toward the escaping creature. In other words, the eagles and eagle hunters are just one part of a multifaceted hunting strategy.

One reason hunting has developed in this way is because, in Tolbo, it is possible to get to the hunting fields and up the mountain relatively easily by car and motorcycle without crossing a river or a marshy area. In the Sagsai and Altai regions it is only possible to access the hunting mountains on horseback because they are surrounded by rivers and marshy fields. In addition, the Tolbo eagle hunters are mostly wealthy and possess about 300-400 livestock or more apiece. Their financial situation gives them an economic and psychological advantage which allows them to carry on hunting with eagles.

However, as is suggested in [Table 1], as in Altai *Sum* no young successors to the huntsmen have emerged in the last 10 years. This means that the custom of hunting with eagles may not last much longer, even though it is currently quite widely practised.

3-3. The local practice of buying and selling eaglets and adult eagles: Sagsai

In the past, people did not really buy and sell eaglets and adult birds. However, these days it is quite commonplace and poses a significant threat to natural resources, especially to the golden eagle population. The festivals and tourists seem to be the main reason this is happening. In the past, Altaic Kazakh eagle hunters had a long-standing system of capturing and releasing tamed eagles. An eagle hunter captured his eaglet from her nest, tamed her and would normally hunt with her for 4 or 5 years. At the end of 4th or 5th hunting season he would release his eagle back into the wild in order to let her breed. Golden eagles usually reach sexual maturity at 4 to 5 years old. As a result of this custom, both eagles and eagle hunters could co-exist (Soma; 2012d).

However, this capture and release custom is not being carried out any more. Eagle hunters frequently buy an eaglet from local people and even after 5 years they

would never let it fly back to the mountain. Some also capture adult and juvenile eagles in traps. Even elderly adult birds over the age of 10 are sold to customers. An eaglet before fledging costs about 100,000-200,000MNT ($60-120) at local rates. The capture and sale of eaglets and adults has now turned into a valuable way of making money. For this reason, some locals and herdsmen will not tell anybody when they find an eagle's nest.

During a year's research at Sagsai between August 2011 and September 2012, we recorded the number of times tamed eagles changed hands at each falconer household (Table 2). Firstly, S-11's 12 year old eagle died, and he captured an eaglet from a nest by himself in the end of May (Plate 8). S-6 bought one juvenile eagle in May to replace his 13 year-old eagle. S-10 captured two 1 to 2 week-old eaglets from their nest and reared them at his house until the end of September. Later, one was sold to U-7, and the other was sold to Mr.KY (a younger brother of S-11 and an uncle of S-22) both for 100,000 MNT. Mr ER (living near S-22) captured a 3-4 year-old adult in a trap, and S-21 bought his first eagle, a 6-7 year-old adult. S-19 gave up keeping his eagle because it was too expensive. S-8 lost a 5 year-old adult, S-11 lost a 12 year-old adult, and U-7's 1 year-old juvenile died. S-8 later obtained a 3 year-old adult which had been tamed by his relative, S-16. Later, S-16 also obtained a new adult from someone else. In brief, exchanges of golden eagles between August 2011 and September 2012 were as follows: loss by death - 3, new capture - 4, bought - 6, and sold - 3 (Table 2).

We need to do further research to see what is happening in other *Sum*. If eaglets are being bought and sold all over Altai territory we will soon see a significant decline in the golden eagle population.

Table. 2 Exchanges of Eagles in the Sagsai Region (from August 2011- September 2012)

Region	Falconer	Dead (n= 3)	Captured (n= 4)	Bought (n= 6)	Sold (n= 4)
Sagsai	S-6			1 (juvenile)	
	S-8	1 (young)		1 (young)	
	S-10		2 (eaglet)		2 (juvenile)
	S-11	1 (adult)	1 (eaglet)		
	S-16			1 (adult)	1 (adult)
	S-19				1 (adult)
	S-21			1 (adult)	
	Mr. KY			1 (juvenile)	
	Mr. ER		1 (young)		
Ulaanhus	U-7	1 (adult)		1 (juvenile)	

4. Discussion: the Golden Eagle Festivals as a force for cultural change

4-1. The festivals and local residents

One of the critical issues about the Golden Eagle Festivals is that both the Ulgii and Sagsai Festivals are not noted for involving local residents. One reason for this is that the Ulgii Festival is held at Khar-Tolgoi, 18km away from Ulgii city, and they collect entrance fees (1 person -$30 or 24,000 MNT) from visitors at a checkpoint on the road. This makes it difficult for local people to join



Plate 8
2-week old eaglet captured by S-11. Photo: Author.

in. They do not, therefore, have any sense of ownership of the festival.

The Sagsai Festival involves local people rather more because it is held near the centre of the village. Each year it attracts nearly 200 locals, especially school children and students who make up nearly half of the 200 and see it as a major local event. At the festival, 5 households set up small shops, 3 selling food and 2 setting up eating places in their yurts. However, the other 11 to 15 shops come from Ulgii city and sell ethnic artifacts. Most of the 300 non-local visitors stay in Ulgii, not in the village. Consequently the festival has little economic effect on Sagsai village itself.

In fact, many of negative comments we recorded in random interviews with locals made exactly this point, for example,'*That is not an event for us and it is pointless to try to get involved'*. Even a religious leader at Ulgii city commented that *'The festival is just for touristic and commercial purposes, it is not about our Kazakh identity'* (Interview with the Imam Usrkhan, 31st December, 2012). In other words, the festivals, especially the Ulgii Festival, do not really make people feel they are about *their* ethnic identity or about regional unity, nor would they see the Golden Eagle Festivals as a positive force for change. On the contrary, people insisted that local interest in the festivals had declined over the years. The Festivals have been promoted outside the region and have become business opportunities for the organisers. Practically speaking, even though the Ulgii Festival is obviously an 'ethnic event' under the official sponsorship of the local administration and government, the real purpose and actual effect is far from evoking ethnic unity and local support for cultural conservation in the Altaic Kazakh community.

4-2. The disappearance of traditional arts and knowledge

The Golden Eagle Festivals have had an ambivalent effect on local falconry. Indeed, these gatherings of local eagle hunters are creating a new type of falconry - 'demonstration falconry'. Consequently, the Sagsai festival has encouraged eagle ownership, even among people who had never before kept an eagle. This means that most of the participants at the festivals are not authentic eagle hunters, just eagle owners who *pretend* to be hunters.

The original tradition of men coexisting with golden eagles is not being continued when men simply own eagles for demonstration purposes. Some forms of intangible culture may be able to survive even if they lose their original meaning, form and purpose and are conserved simply as 'heritage'. However, falconry culture is made up of various elements - natural factors and transhumant animal herding (which in its turn provides food for the eagles), a healthy environment (to support the eagle population) and hunting (which creates the need to train hunting birds). Even if just one of those factors is lost, eagle falconry will not survive.

4-3. Buying and selling eagles threatens natural resources

The traditional system of capture and release is no longer practised. This has come about because of tourism and the necessity of using eagles for demonstration purposes. In the past, one eagle or eaglet might sometimes be exchanged for 1 or 2 sheep or goats between eagle hunters. However, it was not a regularised system. Many of the eagle hunters who are so keen to have an eagle are not skilled breeders, just owners. In the local Kazakh's philosophy this destroys traditional ideas about preserving the natural balance.

One reason there are so many transactions is because the traditional, sustainable art of taming birds has been lost. This often results in the sickness or death of birds. In previous eras, the death of a captive golden eagle was regarded as an abomination. If a tamed eagle died, her master brought the body to the mountain where she was born and carefully buried her near the summit as a mark of respect. However, the selling of captive eagles is now quite common and many die in captivity, none are ever released back into the wild. In this situation there need to be strict laws to protect wild eagles and to restrict the reckless trade in golden eagles because it is unsustainable and an abuse of natural resources.

5. Conclusion: suggestions for the sustainability of eagle falconry

The Golden Eagle Festivals have had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, the festivals became a central reason for preserving local falconry culture by putting on demonstrations at festivals for tourists. Eagle falconry thus achieved official registration on UNESCO's

Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as a 'living human heritage' in 2010. However, the recent massive change from hunting with eagles to demonstrations of eagle falconry has driven a process of 'decontextualisation' – a disappearance of traditional arts and knowledge, the abandonment of hunting with eagles, the discontinuation of the capture and release custom, and the normalisation of the process of buying and selling eagles and eaglets. In fact, most Altaic Kazakh eagle hunters have become eagle-owners pretending to be authentic eagle hunters- but they are no longer involved in hunting, nor are they concerned with the guardianship of the natural world.

Recognition of the cultural importance of eagle falconry is actually increasing, even though the core activity is changing rapidly. However, it is probably too early to register golden eagle falconry on the *List of Endangered ICH* because the programme of systematic academic research, and the development of criteria for appropriate ways of revitalising the tradition, have only just begun. This is a resilient tradition and the authors expect its practitioners will find ways of ensuring its survival.

In view of the challenges, this research has confirmed that Altaic Kazakh eagle falconry cannot be preserved outside its original context. It is deeply anchored in transhumant animal herding - which provides meat to feed the eagles in the form of dead lambs and kids each breeding season -and at the same time encourages horse ownership (Soma; 2012e, 2012f, 2013b). Probably the minimum number of livestock needed to provide enough food for one eagle for a year is something in excess of 80-100 adult sheep, goats and cattle (Soma; 2013c).

Taking account of these socio-ecological issues, the authors make the following preliminary suggestions for a change which would allow eagle falconry to remain viable:

1. Environmental: there should be legalised regulations about the management of natural resources, including protection for eaglets and potential prey animals such as foxes.This would safeguard both the golden eagle population and their prey.
2. Cultural: measures must be taken to preserve and transmit traditional art and knowledge about taming and hunting practices, and daily taming procedures need to be more carefully supervised.
3. Socio-ecological: there must be sustainable development of local animal husbandry and it needs to become more productive.This will make it easier for eagle-owners because there will be food for their birds.
4. Social resilience: local residents should be encouraged to be more involved with the festivals. This will create a sense of 'ownership' of eagle falconry and of the Golden Eagle Festivals, which will in turn lead to a movement for cultural preservation powered by social resilience.

Both direct conservation actions 1. and 2. and indirect actions 3. and 4. are essential to achieve the minimum ecological requirements that will support eagle falconry in the future.

The Golden Eagle Festivals should become successful examples of ethno-cultural representations, not only for the Altai Kazakhs , but also for ethnic minority groups in other parts of the world. However, the current situation surrounding the Altaic Kazakhs indicates the necessity of creating a full cultural infrastructure with socio-political support in order to preserve local eagle falconry as a living intangible cultural heritage for the future.

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ENDNOTES

1. Mongolian local government is divided into 3 levels. The highest level is the *aimag* (prefecture or province), then comes the *Sum* (county), then the *bag* (community). These terms will be used throughout this paper.

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