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# BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH



By Hamid Sardar



## SYNOPSIS

**This series of three films explores the depth of the physical and spiritual bond between three nomadic tribes of Mongolia and the animals around them. In each film, the protagonist struggles with an identity crisis: torn between modernity and tradition. But by returning to the wilderness and bonding with the sacred animal, they find a way to resolve their inner conflict.**

Whether it is a woman who convinces a camel to adopt a colt through music, a child who tries to cure their illness by finding their protective reindeer, or a teenage girl who breaks free from gender codes by training a golden eagle, these three stories expose the strength of the relationship between the nomadic tribes of Mongolia and the local animals. While the relationships between the protagonists and the animals may seem strange and foreign to our eyes, the conflicts and problems they face are universal. They awaken something familiar in us, evoke myths and common beliefs. In each story, the symbolic animal acts as a mirror through which humans learn about themselves and the dilemmas they face in an ever shifting modern world.

*"These ancient rituals of human-animal connection are among the last authentic forms of cultural expression for nomads. As an ethnographic filmmaker, I would like to document these rituals before they disappear – these ancient bonds that connect us to nature and animals. In this trilogy, I would like to convey this secret language."* Hamid Sardar



## **DIRECTOR'S NOTE OF INTENT**

As an ethnographer and filmmaker thirsting for adventure, I went to live in Mongolia 15 years ago. As a matter of fact, this boundless landscape, the size of Western Europe, was the cradle of the Turkic, Mongolian and Tungus civilizations. By observing the nomadic peoples who live there today, we find keys to understand our own past. I also went to Mongolia to seek a certain way of life, a link with nature that I had lost as a human. This period was an essential step in my personal development.

If you can recognize a great civilization by the way its people treat their fellow humans, then you can count those who call the Mongolian steppe their home among them. As a foreigner and complete stranger, I could walk into any house, at any time of the day or night and be assured of a cup of hot tea and a place to sleep.

This ritual behavior extends to the natural and animal world. The spiritual bond between man and animal has thus become the common thread in my film and photography practice. As an ethnographic filmmaker, I would like to document these rituals of human-animal connection before they disappear – these ancient bonds that connect us to nature and animals. In this trilogy, I would like to convey this secret language.

At the same time, over the last ten years, I have seen the country gradually split between a modernizing industrial society and a traditional pastoral culture that has endured. With the progress of telecommunications, the nomads of the steppes are no longer as isolated as before. Most of them now own a cell phone and almost every home is fitted with a satellite dish. A disproportionate number of mining operations have spread across the countryside, pushing the nomads towards the cities. Abandoning horses and pastures, these new migrants find refuge in polluted slums with no running water and high crime rates. Living in Mongolia as a filmmaker, it was impossible for me to ignore these transformations linked to the passing of time. While we sometimes consider nomads as victims of a system that overcomes and crushes them, they also take part in these societal changes.

This trilogy will closely follow the three protagonists, mirroring their ancestral links with the animals with their new and conflicting relationships with modernity.



## EPISODE 1 - TEARS IN THE SAND



In the Gobi desert, Kukhenduu is a “camel whisperer”. Her mother taught her to sing and hypnotize the camels with her violin. But her art is disappearing as camel herders move to the city and young people turn away from the villages to look for work in the mines. Her friend Galbadrakh is the last camel herder to live with his camels all year round in the middle of the desert. During the spring birthing season, camels often die after giving birth. Without a mother, a young camel can die within hours in this windy and inhospitable environment. Kukhenduu goes to the desert to revive her ancient art: she must coax the nursing camels to adopt the orphans. To do this, she plays the *huur* (a Mongolian violin) in a hypnotic ritual that usually lasts for hours or even days, during which the baby camel’s fate hangs in the balance between life and death.

## EPISODE 2 - THE REINDEER PEOPLE



In the Mongolian taiga, Tuvan reindeer herders are faced with a difficult decision: to live in the mountains with their reindeer, or move to the city to provide an education for their children. Today, most families are divided for most of the year. In winter, the elders, women and children usually move to town, while the able-bodied men stay in the taiga to herd the reindeer. But the children sometimes fall ill in town and the local doctors are unable to make a scientific diagnosis. The shamans of the tribe identify this condition as a "shamanic" disease. To get well, the child must leave their schoolmates and return to the mountains. They must learn to become a shaman, healing themselves through a series of initiations and rituals to connect with their ancestors.



### EPISODE 3: THE EAGLE TOTEM



In the steppe of the Delun district, almost every family owns an eagle. They are trained to hunt wolves. But hunts are always risky: an eagle can be fatally wounded if it fails to hold on tightly to the wolf. Like bullfighting, this form of hunting ignites the wild and heroic instincts of both human and eagle. In this film, an old eagle-hunting sheikh captures a young one in its nest and passes on his knowledge to a young girl, who forms a bond with the wild bird. The spectacular Kazakh migrations across the Altai become a perfect cinematic backdrop for the eagle's training. Through rituals including singing and touching, the wild raptor gradually bonds with the girl until it loses all aggression towards her. But in Kazakh culture, eagle hunting is a male pastime. This film explores a girl's feelings, as she crosses this cultural gender boundary. I wish to mirror the suffering of the eagle that is forcibly removed from its nest with the young girl's identity crisis – especially when other girls in her village are also ritually "abducted" to be married to men from neighboring clans.

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