A Basenji Safari

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Thirty years ago, Veronica Tudor-Williams, premier English breeder (of the Congo suffix) and author of "*Basenjis, The Barkless Dog*," visited the Sudan and returned with a Basenji puppy named Fula of the Congo. Approximately 14 individuals make up the gene pool of today's Basenji, and over time several health problems have emerged. With this in mind, fanciers of the breed have talked about acquiring more native stock from Africa, which is logical but difficult to do. Then, about ten years ago, Jon Curby, a Basenji Club of America past president and dedicated breeder, started looking into the idea and gathering information on pursuing the plan. Finally, in February 1987, Jon Curby and Mike Work, another Basenji breeder, returned from Zaire, enormously enthusiastic—with seven Basenji puppies.

During December of 1987, while I was speaking with Jon, he mentioned the possibility of taking another trip to Zaire to find Basenji. My ears perked up when he asked, "Why don't you come?"

Well, why not? The more I thought about it the more excited I became. So, Jon, Stan Carter—a veterinarian and Basenji breeder and I were ready to depart on March 2, 1988, for Zaire. Because we had only 12 days for the round trip, we could spend little time for visiting, concentrating instead on our primary mission of finding Basenjis.

The dogs were in surprisingly good condition and some of excellent quality.

Photo: Damara Bolte

Jon had located an area called "the land of Basenjis," contacted Uele Safaris, and mapped out where we should look. He also advised us about what clothes, equipment, money, items of trade, and extra edibles we should bring. I had never packed such a casual wardrobe to travel; it was all L.L Bean: light-weight slacks, camp shirts, socks and sneakers. But we were to spend five days in the hot, humid, dusty bush with no bath-room and little water.

Jon also provided us with background information on Zaire: Once called the Belgian Congo, Zaire has dropped all reminders of colonial times. The Congo River is now called the Zaire, the people are Zairois, the money is Zaires (about 150 to the U.S. dollar), the military president is Mobutu, and the climate is hot.

Basenjis are used in hunting to drive the game into nets which have been strategically placed, and the barkless dogs are equipped with a bell.

Photo: © Michael Work

Africa Bound

So off we flew from Washington to Paris, then on to Libraville, Gabon and finally Kinshasa, Zaire's capital. Gotz von Wild in Kinshasa and John Valk, our guide and interpreter in Isiro made all of our arrangements. Along with the owner, Mr. Saro Albertini, these gentlemen comprise Uele Safaris. I recommend being met and escorted by local individuals who are knowledgeable about the country.

On our first day we toured Kinshasa before leaving for Isiro the following day. We flew 1,000 miles north over endless rain forests to reach the Haut-Zaire. The great, mysterious Zaire River wound its way through the dense brush below.

Once in Isiro, John Valk eased our way through security and passport checks, and we spent a pleasant evening at his home talking, than repacking for our early morning departure.

From Isiro, we drove 250 kilometers north through Rungu and Doruma in the direction of the Sudan, making camp 11 hours later. John Valk handled the Toyota Landcruiser expertly over the dusty roads, winding to avoid "potholes." Excitedly, we watched for glimpses of Basenjis. Albert, the cook, and Jeff, the mechanic, followed with camping gear and supplies in another Landcruiser.

The Zairois are handsome, moderate in stature, fit and erect. The entire population travels on foot, the women walking with great loads balanced on their heads.

The soil is usually an iron-rich red, and the foliage that lines the roadside is lush and green. The palm trees provide nuts for oil, leaves for shelter, wood, food, and

The Bell used during the hunt is made from the nut of the borasus palm, and the clapper is made of monkey bones or sticks. The sound helps frighten the game and locate the dog. *Photo © M. Work*

plenty of shade. Bananas grow in abundance as do mangos, plantains, papayas and pineapples. Although the land is so fertile and climate so warm, poverty and poor

nutrition is prevalent. The staple is manioc root which can be prepared in many ways: the leaves are like spinach and the tuberous roots are potato-like and are boiled or made into flour. Rice and wheat are imported, but peanuts, corn and coffee grow there, and chickens are everywhere. Fishing and hunting provide a welcome supplement. The usual method of hunting is to use the Basenjis as beaters to drive the game into nets which have been strategically placed. During the hunt, the barkless dogs are equipped with a bell made from the nut of the borasus palm. The clapper is made of monkey bones or sticks and its sound helps to frighten the game and to locate the dogs.

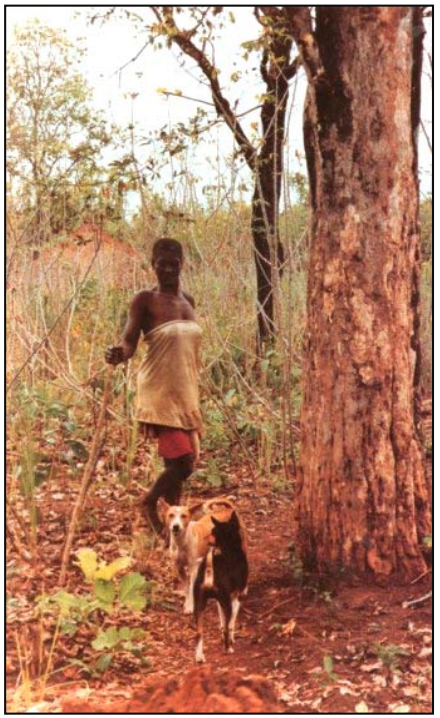
The Land of Basenjis!

How often in the last 33 years I have read Veronica Tudor-Williams' account of her adventures and dreamed of the possibilities, without visualizing it as it really is. Now we were there, searching for Basenjis as we bounced and lurched along. We quickly learned to shout "Stop!" whenever we spied a dog. Even though we had come to see these dogs in their native habitat, it was exhilarating to actually experience it.

The dogs we saw were in surprisingly good condition considering their resident fleas and worms and their nicks and scratches. Theirs is not an easy life. Puppies are weaned very young, dams having little milk to give. The adult dogs fend for themselves and are generally in good shape. These native dogs live symbiotically with their masters; each part of the other's life. They share the fire, the hut, the hunt and the food. Although we saw little petting of dogs, there is a strong bond between man and dog.

Coats of Many Colors

In five days and 800 kilometers of driving, we saw at least 200 dogs of which only three were not Basenjis. We spotted Basenjis of various types and sizes in very remote pockets, individual dogs of exceptional quality. However, on the whole, we probably witnessed less diversity in the type and quality and way of going than one might see at a national specialty.



An Azande woman with her Basenji in the bush near her hut.

Photo: Damara Bolte

The color variants intrigued us, most notably the tiger-striped brindle. Miss Tudor-Williams wrote enthusiastically of the brindle color, stating that it was a true African color, and that the Basenji Club was dedicated to preserving the breed as it is in Africa. Although she was on the board of the Basenji Club of Great Britain and seemed to be pro tiger-striped brindle, she did not explain why this color was excluded). We saw a grizzle color with tan mask, as seen in Salukis, and many of what in Corgis are called red-headed tris. There were individuals of all three colors: red, brindle and tri-color, open marked with white.

From what we could determine through our interpreter, the natives make no effort to mate a bitch to a specific dog. The breed has remained pure due to lack of a contamination source. In towns or other areas where Europeans may have brought over other breeds, there is evidence of loss of type which may result from crosses. In remote, isolated areas where there has been no opportunity for cross breeding, the type has endured and surely those who survived were the fittest.

It is a wonderful feeling to see these little dogs in their natural setting. They are not confined or restricted in any way. Adults were interested but cautious and knew that we did not look, smell or sound right. The puppies would come up to us in a most engaging manner. The lack of aggressiveness of these dogs was interesting, especially when one is familiar with their less than passive temperament in the U.S. When the natives showed them to us, they mingled with each other with a minimum of mutterings. One morning I was given a present of chicken and it was placed on the ground with its feet tied together. No puppy or dog heeded it and of course the chicken was quiet, not wishing to draw any attention to its precarious situation.

Our selection of puppies was limited to what was available. We wanted pups about eight to ten weeks old and did find five that appealed to us, from five different litters and from different areas. Two were tri males (Wele), one a lightly brindled male and two were red bitches (K'posi). The sixth, from a very remote area, a lovely tiger-striped brindle bitch, may be seven months old. However, our last acquisition might be the jackpot; a red bitch in whelp. She is of excellent type, with a super curled tail and the dam of two handsome yearling sons. After several hours of bumping contentedly on the back seat, she gave birth the next morning to six puppies (Renzi, Nabodio, and Elly). Mother and babies, and the other pups made the complicated journey back to the U.S. in better shape than we did.

Our experience with the puppies we bought was equally surprising. They were amenable, uncomplaining, and incredibly adaptable. They learned almost immediately to walk on lead, were not carsick or airsick, ate voraciously, drank well, were clean in their crates, and responded to fondling. They were and still are reluctant to go outside in the dark—an undeniable survival skill in Africa.

We are pleased with our "souvenirs" and relieved to have completed our mission so successfully. Time—and the conscientious and cooperative efforts of dedicated breeders—will tell if these individuals from Haut-Zaire will make a positive contribution to the future of Basenjis.