Notes from the Heart of Africa

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Michael Work Photo

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After more than ten years of planning and research, I finally arrived in the home of the Azande people and their Basenji dogs. Michael Work, of Sirius Basenjis, and I along with our guide John Valk were travelling on our way to Garamba Park which lies along the Sudanese-Zaire border and is one of the most and least visited game preserves in the world. Fewer than 250 foreigners visit the park each year.

Somewhere during the eight hour drive I recall trying to remember exactly when the idea for this trip occurred to me. It must have been 1975 at the B.C.O.A. Central Zone Specialty where Veronica Tudor-Williams judged the sweep-stakes and talked of her 1959 trip to the southern Sudan. I remember thinking that her description of where she had been in the Sudan was at least a starting point, and I had always wanted to see Africa anyway.

The next several years were spent researching the geography of the area and making inquiries regarding the details of travel in the Sudan. The responses I received were not encouraging. Then in 1977, I happened to be looking through the AKC publication on foreign registrations and noticed a listing for the East African Kennel Club in Kenya. There, if anywhere, might be someone who had seen native bred Basenjis. I called their office in Nairobi, but no

Basenjis were registered and they had never seen one. This was the dead end that put a trip to Africa to the back of my mind for more than a year. In 1978, for some reason, I called the E.A.K.C. again and this time they had two Basenjis registered in their stud book. The dogs had been brought out of the southern Sudan by a professional hunter and given to a dog breeder friend in Nairobi. Moreover, they had already produced a litter of five puppies that were also going to be registered.

The hunter who had obtained the dogs was then a resident of the U.S. and lived in Texas. I called him shortly thereafter and was able to determine that the dogs had come from almost the same area that Miss Tudor-Williams had found Fula and Tiger. He agreed to watch for dogs on his next trip and take photos of them for me.

About six months later I received several slides of red and brindle dogs taken that spring in the southern Sudan. My enthusiasm for getting to Africa was renewed. Final plans and arrangements were being made when the Sudanese civil war became more serious in the south. It quickly became evident that travel in southern Sudan would now be impossible.

What now? Research on the ethnography of the area shows that the Azande people who owned Basenjis in the Sudan were also the predominant tribe in north-eastern Zaire. In fact, about seventy percent of the Azande live in Zaire. There was no reason to believe that there were not Basenjis wherever there were Azande.

Again, I began to develop contacts with people on the Zaire desk at the U.S. Department of State. After many phone calls and several referrals I was able to contact Mr. Gotz von Wild who is the director of a small safari company in Isiro, north-eastern Zaire. Several months of corresponding by mail (which took about six weeks for my letter to reach him and his reply to arrive here) was needed to explain what we wanted to do, where we wanted to go and why we were doing it.

Finally, we had been vaccinated for everything, supplied a dozen or more passport photos to the Zairian embassy, received our visas, purchased our tickets and were on our way. We travelled from New York to Brussels and then to Kinshasa, the capitol of Zaire, stayed overnight and then continued our journey to Isiro, Haut-Zaire.

Isiro is a town that was an important agricultural center in Belgian colonial days. Although many of the old building are just shells of what they once were, they are all in use today as residences and businesses of one kind or another. The principle industry is the regional brewery which provides jobs for many of the local people. A number of Europeans operate small coffee and cotton trading companies. Isiro, by western standards, is about a hundred years behind the times. Only about two blocks of the streets are paved. Telephone and electricity are not available from 6:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m.

On Monday morning, the Toyota Landcruiser was packed and we left Isiro for Garamba Park on the Sudanese border. Travelling with us was our guide, John Valk, and a driver/mechanic, Jeff. We carried everything we needed to camp out for seven days except for food that we could buy from the local people along the way and fuel that had been left with a Greek trader several days earlier.

Travel in the bush of north-eastern Zaire is extremely slow. All roads are dirt and most have not had any work done to them in twenty years or more. The distance from Isiro to Garamba Park is approximate 150 miles — a hard eight hour drive. In the rainy season, the trip could easily take twenty hours.

The difficulty of travel in that vast area between Isiro and the Sudanese border is one of the foremost reasons that the Basenji has remained as it is for so long and continued to be purebred.

About two hours before Garamba Park, we began to see some very typical Basenjis. What a relief to know that after all the planning and time we were going to see real purebred Basenjis in their native environment. A number of the first dogs we saw were puppies, which was a pleasant surprise because we had not known when Basenjis would be born in Africa.

Our first night in the bush was spent in what was left of an old Belgian guest house near the entrance to Garamba Park.

There were four guest rooms, a kitchen and a common area for eating and drinking. The place was minimal at best, but it was shelter from the rain and provided a cold water showers, supplied from barrels atop a wooden platform.

Along the road between Dungu and Doruma

Michael Work Photo

Garamba Park, an immense game preserve, lies in the northeastern corner of the Azande territory. Across the river that forms the southern boundary to the park the scenery changes from woodland savannah to the rolling hills covered with savannah grass and only an occasional tree, except around streams where the fire resistant trees are more numerous.

It is interesting that the edge of the Azande area and the beginning of the open savannah coincide. The obvious reason would be that Azande hunting techniques do not work in the open grassland. The use of nets and Basenjis in the tall grass would be futile. The Azande prefer to set up a series of nets of about 300 meters total length in a horseshoe shape in the forest areas. They usually leave the nets in place for a day or two before using the Basenjis to drive the game into the enclosure to be trapped in the nets and speared.

We spent two days and three nights in the Garamba Park area watching the animals in the park and looking for Basenjis on the roads around the parameter. Along these roads we first saw what Veronica Tudor-Williams described as a "mahogany tri-color". The best comparison I can make would be to a red Doberman except with the typical Basenji white points. We saw several Basenjis with this coloration and found them to be quite attractive.

The several litters of puppies in the area made it appear that the Basenji breeding season was December and January. Almost no puppies were older than three months and many were just a few weeks old. Due to the high mortality rate among puppies in a relatively high population of Basenjis, it is difficult to tell what percentage of Basenjis in Africa are born outside the normal seasons or if there is a particular season for puppies in Africa.

Since it is generally thought that the decreasing hours of sunlight in the fall signals the beginning of the breeding season for Basenji in the U.S. and Europe, it has often been speculated that on the equator where the days are of the same length year round, a "season" for puppies does not exist.

Most puppies we saw were very difficult to evaluate because they become malnourished and dehydrated quickly when weaned and only recover if they are able to hunt small animals and birds on their own. Their lack of condition makes them appear to have very large ears and heads in proportion to the rest of their bodies. The first puppies we bought were still nursing and, therefore, in reasonably good condition. Of the six

in the litter, we decided to take two tri males, a red female, and a red male. Had we known anything about the dogs we were to see later, we would have chosen only the best one or two puppies in that litter.

After completing the purchase and determining as much as we could about their pedigree and breeder, we left Garamba and headed to the northwest towards Doruma and the Sudanese border. Our first stop was in Dungu to refuel with diesel fuel that

Hunters with Bobi, the sire of the brindle bitch pup we brought back. Note hunting bell around his neck.

Michael Work Photo

had been stored with a trader earlier. The road from Dungu that went toward Doruma did not appear on any of the maps I had seen. John Vaulk told us it was only about twenty-five years old and had been built by missionaries as an escape route should there be another rebellion such as the one that occurred in 1964 which cost hundreds of Europeans their lives. The lifestyle along that road appeared to be more primitive than any we saw on either trip. There were fewer people with western clothes and almost every man we met carried a spear. The dogs along that road were very typical and among the best we saw. Unfortunately, we did not find puppies that were of the right age, condition and type to bring back with us.

Since it became dark by 6:30 p.m., we sought to find a place to camp by early afternoon and were usually asleep by about 8:30 p.m. Our camp that night was near a chief's village at the end of an unmarked side road. John Vaulk hired several people to gather fire wood and bring water for cooking and bathing and also to be watchmen for the night. Sleeping on cots and bed rolls in the bush at that time of the year is quite pleasant as there are few insects and it rarely rains. The evenings are warm but it is rather cool in the early morning.

The next day we continued on to Doruma. After driving several hours on some of the worst roads we had seen, we came upon a group of hunters. There were six or seven older men each carrying a spear and machete and most of them had large woven hunting nets over their shoulders. Most interesting to us was the Basenji hunting dog with them. It was a beautiful brindle male complete with hunting bell. He did not like the looks of us and tried to stay just of sight in the forest but we could here his bell as he moved around behind the hunters. The men would call him out of the bush for us to photograph but he was not comfortable being close to us. After a while, John learned from the owner of the brindle dog that he had a female puppy, sired by his dog that was about eight weeks old. He was not interested in selling her but we told John we had to have her, even though we had no idea what she looked like. John convinced the hunter that we would pay him enough to buy three puppies, so he agreed to get her for us.

We waited for about twenty minutes while the puppy's owner went to his home in the bush to retrieve her. She was a very small, pest ridden, almost black brindle thing of about six weeks of age. By that time, we were accustomed to seeing puppies that were dehydrated and malnourished. We, therefore, ignored her round head, big ears and rat like tail, knowing that at some point she would turn into a "normal" looking Basenji. After we quickly cleaned her up for ticks and fleas, we were again on our way to Doruma.

After an hour or so, we found what the map indicated was a small dead-end road that veered off toward the Sudanese border. It quickly became nothing more than a foot path and after six or seven miles, we stopped at a group of huts to ask about puppies. A boy told us of several litters along that road and went with us to find them. There were some very nice puppies, but they were only two or three weeks old. While driving back to the Doruma road, I saw a red and white puppy running down the path to a hut, and as always we stopped to get a better look and take photographs. Her owner brought her out for us with her tri-color mother right at his heels. She was about eight weeks old and, of course, very thin with a flea bitten coat. Both she and her mother appeared to have reasonable tail curls, exceptionally nice heads and overall good conformation. A price was negotiated and she became the sixth Basenji purchase of the trip.

Note: the original photos in the magazine were black and white. They are replaced here with color versions. The group of hunters is a different photo but taken at the same time.

Jon Curby Answers Your Questions

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Note: Sandra Bridges (editor) asked readers in the April/May/June 1987 *Official Bulletin of the BCOA* to submit their questions on the February 1987 trip to Africa by Jon Curby and Mike Work

What do Basenjis in Africa eat? The dogs' owners feed them part of whatever they have for themselves to eat. The Azande diet is mostly vegetables with occasional chicken, monkey, duiker antelope or bush pig. The dogs supplement their diet by hunting on their own for small animals and birds.

How healthy are Basenjis in Africa? In general, adult dogs appear to be in excellent health and condition. All of the dogs have ticks, fleas and hookworms which must do some damage. Puppies are most affected by these pests and it appears that the period between weaning and six months of age may be critical to their survival. We saw many large litters of small puppies (5 and 6), but rarely more than two pups in litters older than 9 or 10 weeks of age.

How well are they treated by their owners? I would classify their treatment as about average compared with the treatment received by family pets in this country…They share the owners' house and food, and are very well socialized to people and other dogs. Mother dogs were allowed to keep their puppies in a hut until they were old enough to be sold or given away as gifts. It seemed that there was always a market for puppies and they sold for a standard price with females being worth about a third more than males. I did not see a Basenji carried on the shoulders or around the neck but on several occasions, when we would ask for a dog to be brought closer for a photo, the owner would pick it up by one front leg and carry it to us. Needless to say, the dogs did not care for this method of transport.

Mischief in African Basenjis? African dogs are probably not presented with as many temptations as are our dogs and, therefore, are not afforded as many opportunities to have any real fun with their owners. They don't have any socks to chew or trash cans to empty, but they have all the same play mannerisms that we are used to seeing in our own dogs.

The Brindle color? Of the approximately 300 dogs we saw, about 1/3 were brindle. The color appears to have the same degree of variation and genetics that we see in other AKC breeds. It has sometimes been referred to as 'tiger stripe" in Basenjis. The degree of brindle stripe varies. A dog could have very few black marks on one part or be red with a covering of uniformly spaced lines. Others were predominantly black on the dorsal area with red between the stripes on the sides and head. There was no evidence that brindle dogs' being part of the population had any effect on the quality of color in red and tri dogs. Over the entire trip, we saw only three dogs that could have been pure black and white, and two other black and whites

that had red hair scattered in the black. Because we saw so few, I believe that the dominant black and white is not indigenous to central Africa. We saw several examples of two rather unusual colors. One is a tri-color dog with a tan mask covering that face just over the eyes creating a look similar to that of a malamute. The other color was what Veronica Tudor-Williams described as a "mahogany tri", a tri-color dog with dark red replacing what is usually black. The tan and white colors appear in the same places they usually do.

Did we bring back any dogs? We were able to bring seven puppies back with us. Three pups were females and four pups were males. Of the seven puppies, there were one brindle male, one brindle female, two tri-colored males, one red male and two red females. The two tris, the red male and one red female are litter mates. All of the other pups were from separate litters and separate geographic areas. Evidently, puppies are born between the first of January and the end of February with most being born during February. I do not recall seeing any dogs in the 4-6 month age group and very few in the 3-4 month range. There would have been many more puppies to choose from if we could have been a few weeks later, but if we had gone at the beginning of the dry season, mid-November, we would have found almost none at all.

How do we include these dogs in our gene pool? In the case of the brindle dogs, the standard needs to be changed to include the brindle color. There are provisions in the B.C.O.A. Bylaws to facilitate a change of this nature. The second and most complicated step will require the American Kennel Club to reopen the Basenji stud book to include more native dogs as foundation stock. Over the last 35 years, this has been attempted several times, always unsuccessfully. The failure of these attempts to register imported native dogs is due, in part, to the lack of involvement by the B.C.O.A. Preliminary inquiries to the AKC and research into precedents set by other breed clubs make it clear that any proposal to reopen the stud book must come from the B.C.O.A. The B.C.O.A. board of directors has voted to support the registration of native Basenjis in general, but will, of course, want to consider each case individually.