



The Barkless Dog of the Congo

Natives of Central Africa Keep the Basenji Principally for its Hunting Ability

By Olivia Burn

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TO go to an entirely new country, such as the Belgian Congo, for the first time, is exciting to say the least of it. As one slowly churns up the rivers in an ancient paddle wheel steamer, one expects to see the forests festooned with monkeys, elephants taking their morning baths, hippo snouts protruding from the shallows, and so on; where as, in actual fact, one rarely sees anything more exciting than an odd crocodile sunning itself on a bank, and sliding into the water with incredible ease and no apparent movement, just out of gunshot.

To anyone as canine minded as I am, the really thrilling thing was the discovery of a very ancient breed of dog, the Basenji, of which I now have flourishing kennels of 15 at Bossingham, near Canterbury, in England.



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The winning team, this year, at Crufts

I HAVE bred and shown wires for many years, but have given them up for this African hunting dog, which is entirely new to England.

Seven years ago, I went out to the Congo to join my husband, trekking into the interior among native who had hardly ever seen a white woman. Everywhere in the villages were to be found these alert little chestnut dogs, the best ones on the plateau among the war-like or hunting tribes, such as the Bapendi. These people, as recently as four years ago, cut up a Belgian, and distributed bits of him among the villages, thus starting a war and much bloodshed.



Fo-rie is a smooth Basenji. The coat is short and has a great sheen. The author is the breeder

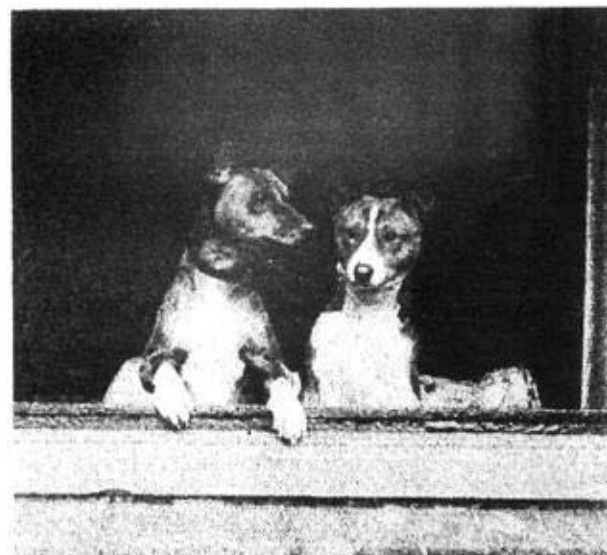
At the end of the dry season, the natives burn whole tracks of bush—strictly forbidden by the State—to round up game. The excitement—and I may add, the danger—is great.

IMAGINE the roar and crackle of mighty flame. Terrified game—antelope, bush pig, wild fowl, not to mention snakes—rushing out from the advancing inferno—unclad, gleaming figures of shouting, gesticulating natives! Old flintlock guns going off with ear-splitting bangs! Arrows flying, and everywhere, little red dogs, darting hither and thither, adding more excitement to the scene.

They will follow up wounded game for miles, and pull it down, holding it until the hunter catches up. As they run mute, they wore little wooden gourds, tied around their loins, filled with pebbles, which rattle, so that their master can follow them through the tall elephant grass.

THEY are of high intelligence and great courage. A female will attack a leopard in defense of her young. The mortality from “coy” (cat) is very heavy. It is difficult to induce a chief to part with a really good Basenji that has proved itself “*N’golo mingi na K’umata m’bisi*,” (very strong at catching game.)

They are devoted to their masters, and have a strong homing instinct. If you should make the initial error, as I did, of obtaining an adult bitch unused to whites, it is an uneven chance that you will retain her. After three weeks on a lead and apparent acceptance of European standards, my first was liberated—and was gone!



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In many ways, including the extreme cleanliness of their habits, Basenjis make ideal companions. They are very long suffering with children

Two days later, she fetched up at the village of her birth, 80 miles away, and this, through wildest bush, infested by leopard, and in spite of the fact that she had travelled with me part of the way by lorry.

In many ways, including the extreme cleanliness of the habits; licking themselves all over when wet or muddy—licking each other too—and “retiring” to a given spot far away from the house, they are extraordinarily like cats. They are domesticated and very long suffering with children.

IN their native haunts, they curl up and they sleep with their backs against their owners to guard the latter from harm. They have a great sense of humor and have a playful temperament that makes them ideal companions.

They appear to stand most climates admirably, evolving, like many wild animals, a special winter coat to combat the English cold. This disappears by May, when their pliant skin becomes smoother, softer, and redder than ever. It is curious that they never seem to smell of “dog,” even when wet.

A small percentage are black, while others are cream, or pale sand-colored.

THE natives treasure these dogs, saying they resemble the white man—“*pilamushi mondelli*.” But the majority of the dogs are chestnut with white points. These, to my mind are by far the most attractive. They have prick ears, wrinkled foreheads, and tightly curled tails to one or other side of the quarters.

Basenjis are alert, and antelope-like in form, stance, and elegance. They are very fast, which is curious considering the tail, and for long treks they will take to a straight legged run, which they can keep up for miles.

These dogs are indigenous to vast areas of Central Africa, mainly in the interior. Some, from the Nyam Nyam and Manboutu tribes, are thicker and shorter on the leg, but these were used by the hungry as a table delicacy! Such comestible dogs are described in the account of the journey in the upper Nile by Schweinfurth in 1868. They are also mentioned by Schebesta in his boo “*My Pygmy Hosts*” where a photograph of a poor specimen appears.

There is a replica of a Basenji in the Giza Museum Cairo; another from the 12th Egyptian dynasty; and a dog very similar is to be seen chasing an antelope, on a disk recently excavated from the tomb at Sakkhara, under the auspices of the well known American archaeologist, Walter B. Emery.



There is something “foxy” about the head of a Basenji. Note the fullness of the skull

The head study of Bereke that appear on page 7 (see next page) shows very clearly the characteristic wrinkles on the forehead. Bokoto, the lady standing up, whose picture taken in winter coat is seen on page 7 (see image on last page) is a matron, and the mother of six fine

puppies, three of which, including Foxie, won in a team class at Crufts this year, while a fourth got a reserve. A picture of the trio may be seen on the first page of this article.

Bongo, the father of these, is the house pet, and the idol of us all. He is a handsome, stocky little dog with somewhat “heraldic” appearance—as may be seen from his picture at the bottom of page 6 (see previous page)—and the sweetest nature.

IN spite of being the father of 12, he is not above behaving in the most absurd fashion, and flying, with tail as straight as is possible for a basenji to achieve, like a mad thing, hotly pursued by his yelping, panting young, whose greatest game is a form of “Chase me Charlie.” They “jink” with surprising rapidity, almost always ending up in a complete “head-over-heels.” If you look closely at the picture of Bongo you may notice that his left foreleg is broken and in splints. Also he is fat from quarantine.

At Crufts, Bongo’s attitude towards the crowds was laughable. Being tied up rather short, so that people could not touch him, he had not much room to move. So he sat on his rump, with his hind feet sticking out in front, looking absurdly like a brown bear at the Zoo, with a look of polite disdain on his face.

He trotted into the show ring as though he was accustomed to going to a show every week, and took second prize almost as a matter of course. Mr. Simpson, the judge, said of him: “Bongo of Blean, smart Basenji, capital legs and feet, very nice body, tightly curled tail, perfect hindquarters: one who looks as though he can do a hard job.”

I was delighted that judge confirmed my own opinion, which is that Bongo is the typical Basenji and almost perfect of his kind.

All six dogs behaved beautifully towards the jostling crowds, which pushed and shoved in their efforts to see “the little dogs that don’t bark,” so that one felt like shouting out: “stand back and give the dogs some air.”

THE questions were legion and all very much alike.

“Don’t they really bark?”

“What! You mean they can’t bark?”

“Could you tell me, are these the little dogs that don’t bark?”

And so on, ad infinitum.

By evening, when the crowds were spectators, and those really interested had gone, and our head was reeling, and some of our neighbors had gone to sleep in their benches along with the dogs, our own vocal cords began to give out.

Some people even suggested that the dogs had all been operated on to make them dumb!

It is perfectly true that the Basenji never barks. But it does not mean that they are dumb or had guards. Some asked:

“What good would a barkless dog be as a guard?”



Wrinkles on the forehead are among the characteristics of the Basenji. They may be seen plainly in this picture of Bereké

Well, if I were a burglar, I'd sooner face Fido's senseless yapping any day or night, than Bongo's unsoothing rumble and warning eye.

For ten days prior to Crufts, we had been infested with reporters and photographers. It was worth it though, for the dogs got amazing publicity, and some excellent photographs were taken. We were even met at Victoria Station, London, just like Royalty, by the press. So it was not surprising when inquiries and orders came pouring in directly after the show to combat which, more stock is being sent from the Congo. At this writing the six latest puppies are now 14 weeks old, four daughters and two sons of Bereke and of Bongo. They are uniform and perfect, healthy, full of pep, and extraordinarily typical of the breed.

When I remember the many vicissitudes and our nightmare journey home from the Congo—on account of the serious illness of my small daughter, who was with me, and my own ill health, and the dogs to cope with unaided all the way—and how we staggered ashore in the Old Country on Christmas Eve, 1936, exhausted but triumphant, it seems too good to be true that Basenjis have been successfully introduced into England.

BUT this success is not surprising, for they are such splendid all-around dogs. They are not gun-shy, and will face the thickest covert where a foxhound would not venture. They make ideal companions, being no larger than a fox terrier and clean skinned.

And best of all, Basenjis make perfect dogs for flat dwellers, for in a world continually being made hideous by nose, these little fellows from the Congo do not bark.



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With white markings, prick ears, and its tightly curled tail, the Basenji is a most attractive animal