

My Journey into the Home of the Basenji

Veronica Tudor-Williams

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I WONDER if any breed has had a more mysterious past than Basenjies? Their homeland is Central Africa which used to be called the Dark Continent, as so little was known of it. Even today, where the Sudan adjoins the Belgian Congo and French Equatorial Africa it is difficult to find a map which is in any way detailed and correct.

With such a background it is not surprising that there have been all kinds of rumours and theories about Basenjies in their native land. Statements of every sort have been made, and the same statements completely contradicted. No one has ever gone on an expedition with the definite purpose of finding out more about them, so in April 1959, Colonel Rybot, Mr. Hughes-Halls and I set out for the Southern Sudan to see for ourselves.

We had no idea what to expect. Some people told us there were no Basenjies left, and if there were, they would not be pure-bred. Others said there were plenty of Basenjies scattered all over Central Africa—a theory we quickly found entirely incorrect.

We went by sea to Port Sudan, then flew on to Khartoum, where we spent a few days, then by air to Malakal and Juba. During this time we saw dogs of faint Basenji

type, merely because they had prick ears and curly tails, and later in our travels we saw that we nick-named “the little red dog of Africa.” I believe this dog is common to many parts of Africa, and probably the cause of the rumour that Basenjies are plentiful. It is of varying size, with rather a domed head, little or no wrinkle, rather large erect ears, slim and long-backed, with an almost straight tail. It is red in colour, usually with white feet. To a Basenji expert it is just a dog, but to the uninitiated it might resemble a bad Basenji.

Colonel Rybot, Mr. Hughes-Halls and I arrived in Juba, and then set out in a Land-Rover with a trailer, into Equatoria and the Bahrel-Ghazal—an area which I believe extends to over 100,000 square miles. We had with us a native driver, a native interpreter, and camping equipment.

We drove, on an average, 100 miles a day over rough roads, through the most fascinating country of rolling hills and brilliant green jungle. Then we came to what used to be known as “the country of the barkless dogs.” One Sudanese district commissioner told us that until a few years ago most of the natives had never heard a dog bark, and were dumbfounded when they heard a European dog bark. Here the dogs are not called Basenjies, which is an

unfortunate misnomer, but are known as Zande Dogs to the English speaking people, and as Ango Angari by the natives.



Photo left labelled: Miss Tudor-Williams with a three-week-old Basenji puppy (note the ears already up). Photo left labelled The Basenji the natives refused to sale.

In scattered villages we saw Basenjjs of various sorts, ranging from poor specimens with sickle tails, then good ones fit for any show ring, and a few beauties of exquisite type, and better than anything we have in England. It is impossible to describe the thrill of seeing such a dog in the jungle with its native owners.

The biggest difference between the native dogs and the English-bred specimens is not so much in size as in grace and fine bone. The native dogs looked just like gazelles, with long slim legs, narrow fronts, slim bodies



without much spring of rib, elegant waists, narrow hindquarters, with very long slim second thighs and very little bend of stifle. I do not remember seeing a single cow-hocked Basenji. And, contrary to what we expected, we did not see a single dog with an umbilical hernia. Tails were usually high-set and usually a single curl, though we saw a number of wonderful tails, tightly curled in a double twist and carried closely to one side of the hip. We also saw a number of the less attractive central curls.



Colours were also of great interest and quite surprising. The usual shade was rather a poor chestnut, possibly bleached by the sun, though a fair number were a glorious bright red. Many had a lot of white markings, blaze, legs and collar. About a quarter of the dogs we saw were typical tri-colours of black, tan and white clearly defined. We saw only one black and white, without any tan on it, which proves that the rumour of black and whites is true. The most surprising of all was the fact that about one-fifth of the dogs were true tiger-striped brindles, bright red with black stripes – a colour I had not known to exist. In one village there were only tiger-striped Basenjjs. We saw only two dogs, an adult and a puppy of the unattractive colouring which we have called in England shaded reds, brindle or blanketed tricolours, which is really a mixture of red and tricolour, black hairs being sprinkled through the red, and we again confirmed how unpleasant it was to the eye. We saw only one cream. This was in a town and on closer inspection we came to the conclusion it was not pure-bred as it had long coarse hair on its back.

Wrinkle was rather disappointing. It was there, but usually not nearly as well-defined as most English-bred dogs, though a few dogs had beautiful fine wrinkle. Eyes were mostly dark, and noses black.

The majority of heads were good with very little cheekiness and short muzzles. Ears were often rather large and too wide set. Easily the most attractive were the small wedge-shaped heads with small triangular ears set on top. We saw quite a number of these and they stood out for type.

Feet were small and oval, but I was surprised to see such long nails on hunting dogs.

Size varied from dogs which were much smaller than the English ones, to dogs as tall as those in this country. The big difference was the fine bone and the slim grace of the native dogs—a point, which needs very careful consideration.

Temperament was delightful. The dogs are as precious to their native owners as their children. Their dogs followed them quietly to heel and when we stopped to look at them they were picked up in their arms. Then we did not attempt to touch them. On the ground the puppies and young adults played with us, but the older dogs were timid of white people and usually kept their distance—a point which made the photographing of the best specimens almost impossible.

We seldom saw more than three or four dogs in a village, sometimes none, though in one leper colony there were perhaps a dozen, but of these only one was a first-class specimen.



We then ran into expected and unexpected difficulties. I had often been told that the natives seldom parted with their adult dogs, which I could hardly credit. But it proved true. We occasionally saw a young adult we wished to buy. Through our interpreter we offered large sums of money (up to double and treble the price of a native bride), we offered jewelry and cigarettes, but to no effect, the native owner usually walking away with a disdainful expression on his or her face. This was an attitude with which I thoroughly sympathized. Another point was that the adult dogs obviously had a reciprocated attachment for their owners and naturally knew nothing of white people or the doggy horrors of civilization such as

cars and aeroplanes and we felt it would be very cruel to bring such dogs to England and put them through quarantine. So we decided that puppies were the answer. We then had another shock. We went to various villages asking for puppies and usually received the answer that they'd had some puppies, but they were all sold. There seems to be a roaring trace in Basenjis in the Sudan!

The most unexpected difficulty was that there are now few white people in the Sudan and word went ahead of by the mysterious African grapevine that we were Europeans who had come to shoot the dogs. Probably this came from memories of the days when dozens of dogs were shot because of rabies' outbreaks. As a result, the dogs were hidden and it would have taken more time than we had at our disposal to gain the native confidence and persuade them we wished them good, and not harm.



In the end, I think more by good luck than good management, we acquired two puppies. Mr. Hughes-Halls bought the son of one of the best bitches we saw, and I purchased a tiny red bitch, against the advice of my fellow travellers, who said she was too young and too fragile to live. We had to do terrible things to her, like dosing her for dysentery and squeezing huge maggots out from under her skin and all she did was lick our hands in appreciation. She may not be a world-beater, but she is a true Basenji with fine bone and all the necessary characteristics, including a delicious yodel through which she kept up an incessant conversation with me.

The puppies were no trouble on our travels. They were not car-sick in spite of the neck-breaking jolts, and in the evening used to go to sleep round our feet with their heads between our ankles. At night we often had to shut them in the Land-Rover, as leopards are very partial to dogs, and the native boy warned us they might be whipped off in front of our eyes. It was only when we got them to Khartoum we suddenly realized we had never trained them to collar and leads! The latest news is that both puppies, now aged about 12 weeks, are doing well in quarantine. I have written of both our troubles and our triumphs, and to my mind our triumphs far exceeded our troubles. One cannot go to a strange land on a strange quest and meet with instant success. We have paved the way for future expeditions and, as far as I am concerned, I am already planning to return to the lovely and mysterious country of the barkless dogs within a year as there is still so much to be seen and learnt.

No further trips were made to Africa by Veronica Tudor-Williams and these two pups were the last foundation stock until the 1980's when Americans brought dogs from Africa.

The two pups were:

South African Champion **Binza of Laughing Brook**

Sire: Nguaguru and Dam: Wiringua

Tiger's influence in the breed was unfortunately not great although his line still comes down in modern Basenjis.

Fula of the Congo

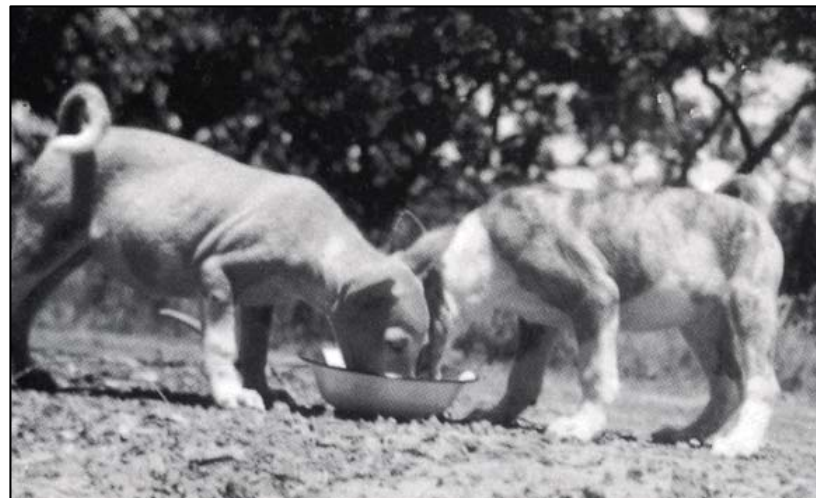
Sire: Bobi and Dam: Danakide

Fula became very influential in the future of the breed

The book "***Fula, Basenji from the Jungle,***" was published in 1988 by Veronica Tudor-Williams. This is a book of 109 pages devoted to the trip and the importance of Fula to the breed.

Additional Photos:

The volcanic pool with John, myself, three young Azandes, Tiger, Fula (behind me) and big Harry.



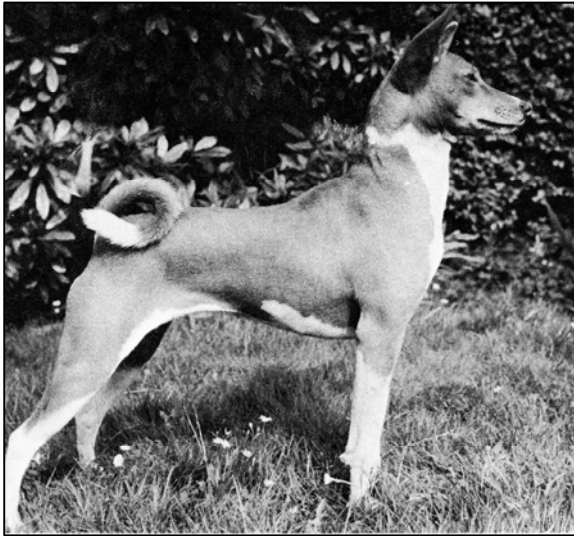
In the book, this photo is labelled: The first picture of Fula and Tiger together. Their pot-bellies are from over-eating and Fula's sores and bumps are from maggot fly.





Photos above show Tiger with his dam in Africa and Fula just out of quarantine. She is 11 months in this photo which appeared on the cover of the Fula book. Tiger's photo also came from the book

Adult photos:



Fula of the Congo



From the Mailbox,
The Basenji, June 1967
Emily and Bernard Moler write:

...We are enclosing a photo which might be of interest to the readers who have never seen a brindle Basenji. The markings appear very distinctly in the colored photo and hope they show up as well in black and white. In South Africa, this brindling is not considered a fault, in fact the dog pictured is SA Ch. Binza of Laughing Brook, the first champion Basenji in South Africa. Mr. Michael Hughes-Halls, his owner, accompanied Miss Tudor-Williams on her well known trip into the Sudan to collect Basenjis a few years back.

In 1967 Veronica Tudor-Williams looked back to tell more from this trip:

The Basenji, August 1967

It is eight years ago today (May 12) that I found Fula in the Southern Sudan. We had arrived the afternoon before at a village very near to the borders of the Belgian Congo and French Equatorial Africa, and whilst John and Michael were off looking for somewhere to pitch our camp beds, I was in the Land Rover when a native who spoke very good English asked if he could help me. I explained we were looking for “Ango angari,” which is the native name for Basenjjs, and he said he would send messages into the forest and the dogs would be brought to the village. That very evening a native turned up with a puppy. It was a sweet little thing, it looked purebred, but was a poor specimen with a long back and straightish tail. I explained it was not what we wanted, and did not buy it.

I was very taken aback when a short time later, Michael arrived with the same puppy, and it handed it to me saying if we did not buy they would not bring more puppies in for us. I could see the point, but I could not help feeling that we were going to look a bit silly, having travelled thousands of miles, spent hundreds, almost thousands of

pounds, and this all all we had to show for it. We deflea-ed and fed the puppy, then it curled up and went to sleep on my feet, and when I went to bed, it insisted oncoming too. It was a roasting night, and a puppy curled around one’s neck in a narrow camp bed with a mosquito net a couple of feet above one’s nose, is hard to beat for sheer physical discomfort. I remember I threw off the mosquito net feeling I’d sooner die of malaria than of a heat stroke.

Next morning I wearily emerged, escorted by the puppy and was standing by the Land Rover ready to leave when a native appeared with a puppy in his arms. She was wearing a strip of brightly colored native cloth around her neck, tied in a bow; the only puppy we ever saw wearing a “collar.” I looked and looked again. I asked for her to be put down, and within a few minutes I said I’d buy that puppy. John asked me what I would do with the other pup, and I said I would give her back to her owner and ask him to spend her price on food for himself and for her, whereupon John said if I was going to do this sort of thing all over Africa

it was going to be very expensive, a remark I enjoyed then and still do.



We next concentrated upon the new puppy, we asked her full name. Fula, which I wrote on an old envelope which I still possess, as Foula and I was immediately corrected to Fula. The translation being “a cork.” We asked her breeder, Sayed Ruge, about her parents. Bobi and Dankide, without hesitation was his answer so I feel it was

correct. We were then invited to go into the forest to see her sire and dam, as her father has “such a curly tail.” We had a journey of 170 miles ahead of us over rough tracks to be completed by nightfall, so we did not accept. This is my greatest regret of the whole trip; it would have added so much interest to have seen Fula’s forebears. We know the “very curly tail” must be true, and I would not be surprised if we had found that one of her parents was black and white because of the black and white puppies that have descended from her through a recessive gene. I will amuse most of you that John and Michael pulled my leg for the rest of the trip – calling me “the fool who bought Fula.” Left is a photo of Fula, taken two weeks after I got her.

Ch. MBinza of Laughing Brook is called “Tiger.” Alas, the tiger stripe is a dominant gene so we can only get it again if we get another tiger stripe. “Tiger” was in England for nine months, but the Basenjites in the northern section said they would never allow this color to be included to the standard, so the only thing to do was to send him back to Michael in Rhodesia. I imported his daughter M’Bunga, mated to him. It cost me the earth and then she was not in whelp. That’s the good and bad luck importing. Fula has been my only really lucky import.