

1923
Lady Helen Nutting
arriving in England
with her African dogs



Reflection

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2007 IS SHAPING UP to be a great year for basenjis and basenji fanciers. Developments in Fanconi research promise future genetic testing. This year also gives the breed fancy another golden opportunity to bring new African genes into the domestic pool: the BGOA will petition the AKC to once again re-open the studbook for recently obtained native blood; an endeavor not seen since the 1990 inclusion of the 1987/88 Avongara and Esenjo bloodlines. Exciting times indeed, and also a time for reflection of past, present and perhaps future discussions about the impact of native dogs on domestic stock. What is an African basenji, if not *Nature's Masterpiece*?

Defining native

Throughout the breed's short tenure in western civilization there have been numerous discussions regarding the purity of post-1960 imports, leaving

many fanciers, new and old, with the erroneous belief that only pre-1960 imports are purebred. Mary Lou Kenworthy writes, 'With cross-breeding diluting the African basenjis since the early 1900s and continuing to escalate with time as more civilization moved in, what are the odds of finding pure basenjis in Africa today?'¹

Cross-breeding practices since the early 1900's supports the premise that native purity has always been predicated on a particular breed phenotype, as evaluated by basenji experts of that time. Much like these original pioneers, our generational experts, with a collective 60+ years in the breed, multiple litters, hundreds of breed champions, as well as judging widely attended National Specialties, have applied their cumulative knowledge of basenji phenotype when choosing which specimens to bring back from their African excursions.

Native colors

There have been many debates regarding the introductions of blacks and brindles, not all of which are fact based. It has been said that the black and white color has never before been seen prior to the 1960s when they were found in Liberia. However on page fourteen of Veronica Tudor-Williams (VTW) Blue Book, she writes in reference to Major George Richards, M.C. who had basenjis in 1920, 'He was one of the unlucky ones, as his black and white dog was bitten by a jackal just before leaving Egypt and died of septicemia in the Mediterranean.' In the very next line VTW talks about a bitch she refers to as a 'tricolour'. Further along she writes, in reference to her own importation attempts, 'In 1938 a beautiful black and white bitch weighing 14 lb., was sent to me from the Sudan, about the best native specimen to arrive in England.' This is followed by a paragraph wherein she describes her 1939 importation attempts of a black, tan, and white dog. In both passages VTW distinctly made references to two different colored basenjis: black and white, and tricolor (black, tan, and white basenjis).

Blacks are also mentioned in 1967 by Elspet Ford, one of the first English importers of the black color. She wrote, 'The first time I exhibited a black Basenji

Avongara Zamee, an adult African import, has well-set, small, hooded ears, excellent wrinkle, small almond-shaped eyes, as well as cheek and cushioning—a welcome addition to our domestic gene pool.



in Zambia, I was informed by an onlooker that the dogs she had when she first arrived in Northern Rhodesia in 1902 were exactly the same as mine; they didn't bark either (*emphasis added*).² The original breed standard, written in 1939 and accepted by the Kennel Club in 1942, co-authored by Mrs. Burn, Lady Kitty Ritson, Lady Helen Nutting, Major Richards and VTW states under acceptable colors, 'Chestnut with white points and tail tip, *also black and white*, and black, tan and white (*emphasis added*).' Why would the black and white color, a color assumed to be non-existent prior to 1960, be included by the experts themselves as an acceptable color as early as the late 1930s, if the color did not in fact exist to some degree at that time?

Native patterns

The brindle pattern has its fair share of detractors as well, if not more so. The first assumption that some make is that the brindle pattern is not a naturally occurring phenotype. However, the first recorded brindle basenji was Tiger, brought to England with Fula in 1959 thirty years *before* the 1987/88 imports and any amorous whippet.

The recent genetic identification of the original nine progenitor breeds includes Chow Chow, Shar-Pei, Basenji, Shiba Inu, Akita, Siberian husky, Alaskan malamute, Afghan hound and the Saluki.³ At least two of these originals, the Akita and the Afghan hound, have the brindle gene naturally occurring. Certainly the basenji does as well.

VTW wrote, 'Tiger-striped Basenjis have been seen by experts in the Southern Sudan and the Belgian Congo, and are *possibly the purest colour* there is in Basenjis.'⁴ She further writes, 'Finally, is it right to ban a colour which is known in the Southern Sudan, the home of the purest Basenjis, and as the Basenji Clubs of the world have been formed with the idea of retaining true native type. *It would be rather ludicrous to ban a colour found in Africa.* (*emphasis added*)'⁵. VTW, the iconic "mother" of our breed felt the brindle pattern naturally occurred in the jungles of Africa. Serious fanciers cannot ignore her expertise and observations on this particular subject.

Hark! Bark?

The ability to bark has been a part of the breed’s history from the earliest foundation stock and was not acquired with the importation and acceptance of the brindle pattern. The brindle pattern has been incorrectly linked to an indigenous barking behavior during the time the pattern was integrated with the existing gene pool. The premise first appeared in a 1992 article titled, “Hark! Hark! The Dogs Do Bark! The Brindles are coming to town.”⁵ Despite anecdotal accounts at that time from long time breeders regarding the barking abilities of their domestic lines, up to and including dogs line bred on Fula, there are many fanciers who continue to use barking as proof of the brindles impurity. VTW wrote, on page ten of her Blue Book, in reference to why natives tie rattles to the loins of their African dogs, ‘For the dogs themselves *do not usually* give tongue *unless* they actually get a view of their quarry ... occasionally, though very rarely, giving vent to a *short, sharp yelp (emphasis added).*’

VTW also wrote regarding Bungwa of Blean, date of birth is listed as 1937, ‘...*his puppies showed a tendency to bark (emphasis added).*’⁶ In 1946 she describes Bungwa as having a rich red coat color, excellent movement, somewhat large ears and a tea-pot tail. VTW further notes that while Bungwa was removed from stud once

The domestic basenji gene pool has been artificially constricted. Breeders’ face difficult choices when they are looking to refine conformation, avoid health issues, or improve temperament. At left, Bushbabies Louise Brooks, eleven years old and going strong.



the barking offspring became known, his progeny live on. Bungwa, VTW asserts is one of the original eleven foundation stock ‘... whose blood is carried by practically every Basenji in the world.’⁷

Genes don’t bark but speak volumes

The most damaging of all past and present arguments against inclusion of the 1987/88 Avongaras is that the health of the breed has not improved. Kenworthy touched briefly upon it, ‘Health was the excuse used to open the studbooks for the imports of the 1980s and that turned out to be a dismal failure for the breed as a whole. Basenjis still have Fanconi syndrome, IPSID, PRA, thyroid problems, and an increasing incidence of hip dysplasia.’⁷

Sally Wallis of Zande basenjis (UK) has created the most extensive pedigree database of the basenji dog, upwards of 78,000 entries, from across the globe. According to this database there are 260 basenjis bearing the Avongara prefix, comprising of almost 20 years of breeding and multiple generations. Below is a breakdown of known health statistics from the African Stock Project data:

- Fanconi or PRA affected Avongaras**
Zero (0)

- IPSID affected Avongaras (littermates)**
Two (2)

- Dysplastic Avongaras**
One (1)

- Hypothyroid affected Avongaras**
Ten (10)

- Fanconi, PRA or IPSID affected basenjis an Avongara has produced when bred to a domestic.**
Zero (0)

- Dysplastic basenjis produced when bred to a domestic**
Three (3)

There are over 173 Avongara entries in the OFA database representing the same number of different health tests being performed on these basenjis, with fantastic results. No other kennel prefix has this kind of public health testing history, no other kennel has been under such scrutiny, nor has any one kennel passed with flying colors as evidenced by the sheer



Native African dogs add much needed genetic diversity and provide breeders opportunities to revitalize domestic pedigrees. Avongara SkyHi Elation, shown at right, is a major-pointed full African and the first Avongara to win a major in AKC competition.

numbers being tested *and* the positive results obtained, despite several long time breeders (30+ years) who are still actively breeding.

Any failure of the 1987/88 imports to positively impact long-term basenji health, real or implied, lies with the shortsightedness of those detractors in the breed fancy. When breeders choose not to take advantage of an opportunity to use phenotypic African basenjis, as found in their native country, they must continue with a small gene pool; a gene pool restricted by the *unnatural* selection of a limited number of foundation stock and further restricted by health issues such as HA, and/or one dimensional breeding practices resulting in the over use of particular dogs, known as popular sire syndrome. Today's domestic gene pool no longer reflects the natural breed found in the wilds of Africa and hasn't for a long time. Can the breed fancy truly afford to turn their back on new genes imported by long-term breed fanciers?

The 1987/88 Avongaras, along with Esenjo, have contributed greatly to those breeders who had, and continue to have, the intestinal fortitude to forge ahead into un-chartered territory. With 20 years of proven excellence in the whelping box, the breed ring; as evidenced by the number of half Avongara breed champions, and the resoundingly positive health scores; average age of death well into the teens, it is unfathomable that any serious breed aficionado would not embrace, if not fully at least partially, the opportunity to broaden our gene pool. Lest we forget, *Nature's Masterpiece* did not start in an English whelping box, but on the native soil of Africa.

References

- 1 BCOA Bulletin, Jan/Feb/Mar 2007, pp. 37-40
- 2 The Basenji, September 1967, pp. 7 & 16
- 3 Science Magazine, May 22, 2004, pp. 1160-1164
- 4 The Basenji, October 1970, pp. 3
- 5 The Basenji, January 1992, pp. 7
- 6 The Basenji, April 1979, pp. 3
- 7 BCOA Bulletin, Jan/Feb/Mar 2007, pp. 37-40