

History and Function of the Ancient Basenji

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PARIAH DOGS VERY LIKE in type and size to Basenjies are found today in villages and city streets of the tropical world. These dogs must live by their wits, serving as rodent control, garbage clean-up, hunting assistants and sometimes as protectors. Only the hardiest survive in these adverse conditions. They have evolved to a very efficient size (15 to 30 pounds) and are moderate in all things. Their coats are short for comforts sake. Those who survive do so due to their high intelligence and adaptability.

BASENJIS SIMILAR TO THOSE of today appear among the first dogs ever depicted in Egyptian engravings. They are often shown near the feet or under the chairs of their owners. Khufu dogs shown in the Great Pyramid of Khufu (Cheops) built around 2700 B.C. are described as “Spitz-like” dogs, the muzzle is short and pointed and distinctly fox-like, the ears are pointed and held erect. The tail is curled and comes close to and on the side of the back.”¹ These dogs are frequently depicted with bells tied around their necks just as European explorers found Basenjies when they were rediscovered in 19th century Africa.

THE PYGMIES OF THE AFRICAN rain forest are among the oldest races of mankind. Hunter-gatherers, their lives are extremely simple. Since they are very slow to adopt new ideas, their maintenance and use of Basenjies could easily date back many centuries. Pygmies are depicted in Egyptian work though the various dynasties. It is not clear whether Basenjies came to central Africa from Asia and then were acquired by Egyptians from the Pygmies or the opposite, with the Egyptians bringing Basenjies into central Africa. The former seems more likely, since the Pygmies were the more ancient race and slow to accept anything new. The Egyptians were conquering and absorbing adjacent peoples and might even have demanded Basenjies from the Pygmies as tribute. The Egyptians had many different kinds of dogs which seem to have been well established in type at their first appearance in ancient Egyptian art.

ONE OF THE EARLIEST MENTIONS of Basenjis in more modern times appeared around 1870 in the writings of Dr. Schweinfurth, one of the first explorers to reach the Pygmies. He wrote, “[their] dogs are distinguished by small stature, straight legs, a curled tail, and short smooth coat which is red or yellow in color with the neck commonly white...They are made to wear little bells around the neck so that they should not be lost in the long steppe-grass.”¹ Another physical description mentions “the barkless Basenji of Central African rain forest, small, short-haired, quick-footed...an ideal hunter in thick underbrush.” Elsewhere, they were called the “Jumping Up and Down Dogs,” because of their technique of jumping straight up in the tall grass and “hovering” while they located the game by sight. Although renowned for their ability to scent game at long distances, Basenjis are not trained as retrievers. This is not considered possible because “the dogs want to eat the meat.”

BASENJIS IN AFRICA WERE described as being used to drive game towards nets, where the hunters wait with spears and machetes for the kill. The accompanying photograph by Mike Work is completely unposed – this is an actual hunting party on their way out. Notice the natives are carrying their hunting equipment: spears, nets machetes and the *dog with his bell around his neck.*



THE FOLLOWING PHOTOS ARE FROM the 1987 expedition to Africa by Jon Curby and Mike Work to ascertain if there were still pure Basenjis in their native land. This and the second expedition in 1988 by Jon, Damara Bolté and Stan Carter, resulted in the importation of a number of native dogs. During my second term as President, impelled by health problems attributable to our extremely small² gene, pool, the Basenji Club of America petition A.K.C. and in 1990 won an unprecedented reopening of our stud book to allow the registration of fourteen of these native dogs as Foundation Stock. (BU Note: (BU Editor: Find photos from 1987 at this link: *Africa in Photos 1987 and 1988.*)

WHEN JUDGING THE BASENJI, PLEASE keep in mind that this is an ALL-PURPOSE HUNTING DOG: he used his eyes, nose and ears to hunt. Try to envision the dog in front of you out on an African hunt – will he CATCH dinner or will BE dinner? If the latter comes to mind, please do not reward a non-functional dog.

¹ Coe, Susan, *The Basenji – Out of Africa to You*, Doral Publishing, 1990

² All Basenjis in America, Canada, England and Australia were, at that time, descended from just TWELVE dogs.