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Lukuru Basenjis – New African Import and Program Philosophy

by Dr. Jo Thompson

In the November/December 2006 issue of The Basenji (Vol. 63 No. 6), I announced plans to import native African basenjis from the Lukuru, the very remote center of the forested Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Africa. Fortified with lots of advice from Basenji Fanciers and a laminated copy of the Basenji Standard, in January I returned to the DRC and to my long-term field site of 16 years.

The principal goal for importing native Africans from the Lukuru is to have them accepted in the registry of the AKC Basenji Studbook so that they can contribute healthy genetic diversity to the limited domestic Basenji gene pool in the states and abroad. As a conservation biologist concerned primarily with the preservation and wellbeing of the breed, my selection criteria were 1) temperament, 2) type conformation strictly following the breed Standard 3) soundness and 4) good health. As part of that selection process I made certain to personally see the home environment of all candidates. Therefore, I did not put out a call for puppies. I wanted to avoid the scenario of people bringing puppies from far a field where I would be unable to evaluate their home situation and observe the other dogs of the family scene. Having the benefit of long-term association with the people of the Lukuru, I could move freely anywhere and was therefore able to experience even private parts of family lives.

A loyal companion at the market stall.

It is not my intention to bring dogs that will be controversial or push the limits of the breed Standard. The domestic Basenji is not a man-made dog; it is a selected subset of the native ancestral stock advanced through restricted breeding practices. If we are to

direct our efforts at preservation of the primitive Basenji type, we must remember that the ancestors of present day Basenjis were forest dwellers, adapted to a niche as efficient hunters in dense jungle vegetation. We must look for our true Basenji's in the most remote, isolated villages occupied by forest-dwelling people.

By writing a Standard, the Fancy automatically narrowed the distinctive attributes that exemplify the breed when it defined those characteristics of type. The Basenji is not categorized by its DNA or by its ancestors migration route through Africa; domestic breed determination is based on morphology as it is defined by the breed Standard. I do not believe that genetics are a panacea for breed determination. However, genetics are a tool that can well serve the breeding concerns about health issues. So, a broad sampling of dogs from a wide distribution area will enhance the diversity represented from the Lukuru.

The unique breeding history of the domestic Basenji emphasizes those primitive characteristics of the basenji-type from remote forested villages. The Lukuru is that haven of environmental factors that also select for native features paralleling those of the domestic Basenji. Therefore, finding a quality dog according to the Basenji Standard is not a problem in the Lukuru. The only limiting aspect of my plan is that I want to sample from a very broad region and bring one or two dogs from distinct locations in the small window of time proposed for the studbook to be open. Access to a large geographic area is something I can uniquely provide as a benefit of my long-term presence in the Lukuru area.

The Lukuru Project covers an expanse of 23,908 km^2 (9,230 square miles or 5,910,000 acres). In the site I base from two villages; Yasa (3° 45' South, 21° 21' East) in the southern portion of the Lukuru and Anga (3° 09' South, 21° 33' East) in the northern region. From those two centers of operation, I have been able to springboard to much more remote villages and foray to less accessible locations. I have cleared a landing strip for small bush aircraft at Anga and have been using it in recent years. The first trip of 2007 was important because it marked the official reopening of the Yasa landing strip. Prior to the conflict events in 1998, we had access to a clearing in the savanna that could support small aircraft (Cessna 206 or 207) near the village. In April 1998, use of all airspace was restricted to government flights only across the whole of the country, forcing me to flee from the Lukuru overland via waterways as the frontline of rebel fighting swept across the landscape. The Yasa landing strip had been closed since April 1998 and I have been required to charter flights to neighboring areas and then walk the distance over rough terrain to reach the Lukuru. In recent years we have been working administratively and physically to rebuild access; it has not been an easy endeavor. My return this year was the grand reopening flight.

Once on the ground I could locate many pregnant bitches (a condition called Zemi in the local language). As I went about my conservation work, I inquired about the availability of puppies. Whenever a litter was identified, I went to the owners' home. I examined several litters of puppies of various colors but all were still suckling. I had to find puppies that had been weaned in order for them to make the long journey back to the states. My evaluation measures were strict and my criterions rigorous so that the Lukuru Basenjis would maintain the integrity / authenticity of this unique breed.

Raising puppies in the corner of the family hut.

As my work took me farther out to distant villages, I came across a nice looking, weaned male in the village called “Quinze.” But, there were no other puppies in that clan settlement. I learned that his owner had purchased him from a village north of the Lukenie River for 2700 Franc Congolaise ($4.82 USD). The puppy’s mother was a legendary hunter known across the region. That got my attention. Believing fully that form follows function; I decided to seek out the littermates. I believed that their mother’s expertise in the hunting function would translate into the ideal form passed on to the puppies.

We traveled overland 40 kms and crossed the Lukenie River to reach our goal: a settlement just north of Dekese (3° 30' South, 21° 24' East). The remaining litter mates were all females. As I approached their hut, a spunky little girl-pup came effortlessly trotting out to meet me. Now this struck me as extraordinary. Typically the village dogs are aloof from strangers … and I look and smell stranger than anyone around. Yet here was this perfect petite red & white specimen, her head held high, her high-set tail wagging in a lovely curl over her back and off to the side; with the relaxed confidence, boldness and poise to approach me. I leaned down and asked her (in English) if she wanted to make a pilgrimage to live in America and be the ambassador of the Lukuru colony. She eagerly wagged her tail and licked my face, much to the admonition of all the spectators standing around (they do not let their dogs lick them … and certainly not in the face!). She reached into my heart with a penetrating glance from her dark brown almond-shaped eyes. I gleefully swept her up into my embrace and said with all certainty, “Nalingi yango! (I want her!)” My Congolese colleagues responded with, “Elingi YO! (She wants YOU!) Elingi kokenda Amerik! (She wants to go to America!)” When reason returned, I asked if I could keep her for the remainder of the day and “observe / evaluate” her as a candidate. That was agreeable with the owner. I wanted to

critique her structure and movement, as well as give her a thorough handling and examination. All the while she was very vocal, barooing at all her litter mates and anybody else within hearing distance. She let it be known unequivocally that she was in charge of all she surveyed and SHE was going to America. As I watched her movement and interactions around other animals and people in the yard, it became apparent that she was indeed perfect for the task at hand. She would be the first pilgrim from the Lukuru.

Observe and Evaluate

We agreed on a selling price of 2000 Franc Congolaise ($3.57 USD). Once she was purchased, I left her there with her litter mates and family because I still had work to do. During the intervening nights before we left her natal village, I struggled with the image of her last nights with her family in the only home she had ever known.

A new world filled with adventure.

Quickly, the day came for me to leave and return to my base camp at Yasa. I sent a colleague to retrieve her. The early morning passed hurriedly with the activities of breaking-down camp. The sky turned an ominous shade of grey and we had a good 10

hours hike ahead of us. Heralding the return of the rainy season, an equatorial downpour was fast approaching and we had to hurry on our journey back to Yasa. I gave my puppy to one of the Lukuru team members and he rushed on ahead with her strapped by vines in a prone position against the handle bars of a borrowed bicycle. I tried not to think about her dangling over the swift-moving black-water when the bicycle was propped precariously in the narrow pirogue (dugout canoe) as they crossed the river. I fought to keep out thoughts of her torturous ride over bone-jarring paths bound against the unyielding metal of the vehicle. I was overwhelmed with relief when she was returned to my arms at my house. It was late and we were exhausted. Although she was covered with fleas, ticks, and mites, we crawled into my bedroll and snuggled together for warmth. That is how we slept every night after.

I was impressed that she never visibly mourned the separation from her family, she never cried, she was always alert and eagerly interested in new people and her new surroundings. Her intelligence was immediately obvious when she went to the door in those first hours and scratched to go outside. I know that she was never housebroken by her previous owners but her mother must have trained her because she would very purposefully go out and find the nearest grass to urinate outside. But, she would choose a more distant place to defecate; and then would come right back into the house. Her most appealing manner was her affectionate nature. Given the choice between food and being in my lap, she always chose to be in contact with me. That was incredible.

Mopaya in my village home.

Those days passed on angels wings and are now all just a blur. There was never any question about her name. She was “Mopaya” (Pilgrim or Traveler) from the moment we met. Lukuru na Liboso Mopaya , the first pilgrim from the Lukuru.

Mopaya's life in the village.

Soon the time came that I had prearranged for a bush pilot to pick us up. I packed up my things and prepared to take her away from the interior … away from all the sights, sounds, and smells that were so familiar to her; what she had known all her life. Mopaya would have to sit on my lap for the flight to Kinshasa, the capital city. She had no problem with that and spent the early part of the ride with her paws on the pane looking out the window, gazing over the unbroken blanket of forest passing below us. But the weather there can change in an instant. Quickly our little plane was assaulted by a violent storm. We were being battered around and it appeared to be increasingly difficult to keep upright. Diversionary tactics were required. The pilot rerouted our flight plan to layover at a missionary post and wait out the worst of the deluge. As we approached the grass landing strip, the bush pilot fought to keep the little Cessna in the air. Palm trees were bent at 90 degree angles; the pilot was steering us at a right angle to keep us moving straight ahead in the 48 knot winds (55.2 miles per hour – near hurricane force). I held Mopaya cuddled against my chest and tucked under my chin. I have conveniently blocked out all memory of that landing but remember that, once we were back on solid ground we had to run for cover as the local workers tried desperately to tie down the aircraft. Later the pilot told me that the landing was one of the worst two flying experiences he had survived in 20 years and numerous rebellions flying in the Congo. I wondered then and I still wonder, were the forest spirits / ancestors fighting to keep Mopaya in her homeland?

Once we reached Kinshasa, the bureaucratic negotiations began. Paperwork and medical attention were required. Mopaya had her first veterinary visit and care at the Clinique Vétérinaire Kinoise, Kinshasa, DRC, at which time she received her first puppy inoculations and was micro-chipped. Flight arrangements presented the biggest obstacles. We were flying from Kinshasa to Brussels, Belgium for the first leg. It was

fairly simple to arrange for her passage in the cabin with me on the overnight flight. But, when we were to reach Belgium the plans got complicated. American Airlines had instituted new rules that required all animals to travel in the cargo hold. They had also reduced the number of flights per week to two for transporting animals. So, we immediately had to change all our tickets and the travel itinerary to get us to Belgium in time to catch one of the two possible flights back to the states. This maneuver meant that I had to hand-carry a crate from Kinshasa so that I would be able to transfer into the cargo hold in Brussels. On the day before our departure I was informed that the ground temperature in Brussels would be tje determining factor in whether or not we could board Mopaya because she would be exposed to the elements at the time cargo was being loaded on the aircraft. If the temperature was below 45^{o}F or above 85^{o}F, we would not be allowed to load. I checked the weather forecast and found that they were predicting 36^{o}F. So, we put out a plea from friends, family, and trip followers to sent warm wishes and hot air our way.

Finally, the time had come. We were leaving Africa. Mopaya was leaving home forever. But first we had to traverse the gauntlet of Ndjili International Airport and somehow obtain a stamp from the Congolese Health and Hygiene inspectors in the dark of night. The electricity was erratic at the airport, leaving us standing in absolute blackness several times for intervals of long blocks of time. Mopaya took it all in perfect stride; the crowds, the noise, the strange and pungent odors. As we cleared the final hurdle in the airport and I started to relax, we were thrust out onto the tarmac for a body and baggage hand-check … in the dark. The carry-on bags are separated from the passengers and rifled through by 5-7 agents huddled around the bags and rifled through them with flashlights. As numbers of people repeatedly attempted to extract the Sherpa bag out of my clinching hold, I kept exclaiming in desperation over and over, “la chienne” (a dog). The result was chaos. Security was called and I was escorted onto the plane, wrestling to keep all my carry-on things together and intact with Mopaya in her carrier pressed tightly against my chest. Finally, we collapsed in the seat.

In Belgium the people were wonderful. Everyone adored Mopaya and asked a myriad of questions. People were bringing bottles of water, cooing in response to her sweet nature, and offering all kinds of assistance. We proceeded on as planned; our flight uneventful. Arriving in Chicago, I was anxious to retrieve her from the baggage claim. My progress was slowed by the long lines passing through customs. But finally we were reunited. The last obstacle was the inspection by the US Department of Public Health, Quarantine Officer. She was determined to impose homeland security measures on this little African alien. She put me through the wringer and made me sign a contract of compliance with the looming threat of jail time and an enormous fee if I broke any laws.

At last, we pushed through the swinging doors of International Arrivals and were greeted by CarolAnn Worsham who had made the trip, as Co-owner, to receive the little girl-pup who carries the weight of our program on her slight but square frame. We all spent the night together to ease the transition. As the final moments of my time with Mopaya ticked away, I gulped down a double intake of air, pressed a lingering kiss on her head, gently handed her over to CarolAnn, turned and walked away; secure in the knowledge that Mopaya’s destiny had just begun.