

1945 Letters from Africa

Veronica Tudor-Williams shared this bit of history and the letters and her comments appeared in *The Basenji*, May 1988

Dear Lady Helen (Nutting),

I enclose a copy of a note written by Major Wyld, District Commissioner of the Zande District of the South Sudan, on the Zande dogs.

H.E. Sir Hubert Huddleston wrote to him, asking for this note as he was sure Major Wyld knew more about them than anyone else in the Sudan.

Yours sincerely,
B. A. Lewis

Yambio
October 22, 1945

Dear Ned,

I had a letter recently from H.E. asking me to write something about Nyam Nyam and/or Basenjis dogs for Lady Helen Nutting, through you.

The first thing to be said is that both these names are ridiculous and should be altered while there is yet time. Nyam-Nyan was the old slavers' name for Azande and allied races. It was probably coined from the Dinka name "Nimyam" which is onomatopoeic, meaning cannibal. As a name it is locally considered insulting and has died out.

Basenji is completely ridiculous and means nothing at all anywhere, as far as I know some good lady travelled in the Belgian Congo some years ago and spotted these dogs. She

asked some boy, servant or other retainer what they were called. What he must have told her was that they were "Ba sehnti" or just "Belledi" in Sudan vernacular. The good dame thereupon wrote it down, but got even her transcription of the absurdity wrong and wrote Basenji. The Zande name for their dogs is Ango. This would seem to me to be a far easier and better name to give them and would have some point in it.

As regards the dogs themselves, I don't really know what I can contribute. <My wife and I are very fond of them and kept numbers of them for years until we had to destroy because of a serious rabies epidemic about three years ago. Lady Helen knows all their points and characteristics no doubt.

The Zande are very fond of their dogs and look after them very well. They use them for hunting. The method is to let them into a patch of grass or thicket which they want to drive game into their nets. The nets are set up along a bush path all touching, hooked up on branches, etc. Each little dog is fitted with a bell made of dome palm nutshell so that he can be spotted easily and not mistaken for game and speared by some enthusiastic hunter.

I personally believe (without authority) that there is a special form of rabies among these dogs which kills them but is harmless to humans. Both my wife and I have been bitten by dogs and pups in the past which had every appearance of being mad and had to be destroyed. We suffered no ill effects and were not pasteurized. I admit that during the last epidemic which was particularly severe and diagnosed positive, our courage failed us and we and most of our servants had injections.

I hope that legislation will be made to stop people bringing other dogs into this area. Otherwise there is a risk they will gradually be spoiled and altered by imported blood. My own impression (again without authority) is that the larger dogs, misnamed "Basenjjs" in England, were the ordinary Zande dog crossed with pie dogs from surrounding areas. There are many such animals to be seen on the fringes of the Zande country and they usually reproduce some of the Zande characteristics both of colour, curly tail, etc.

The well-bred Zande dog in this country never exceeds about 12 inches at the shoulder. Although he does not bark in his natural state, we have proved to our satisfaction that they can learn to bark if associated with ordinary barking dogs.

One of the most attractive features is that they are one man dogs and will rarely condescend to attentions by strangers. Another unique feature is that they will go to extreme lengths to avoid sleeping on the floor and perch themselves in the most absurd places to avoid it. I believe they are about the only dog that house-train their puppies instinctively. All the bitches we have had started the pups out of the house and parking them on flower-beds and other suitable spots when they were 2 to 3 weeks old. It is most amusing to watch and much appreciated by the householder and his servants.

Hope you are very fit.

Yours Tiger

Comments by Veronica Tudor-Williams

Tiger Wyld sent me my first Basenji (or Zande dog as I knew them and always wanted them to be called) in 1938.

"Kandi of the Congo" was an enchanting little bitch weighing about 12 pounds, a black and white with lemon coloured melon pips. At the same time, Major George Richards had a small mahogany, tan and white bitch of about 14 pounds in weight.

Amatangazig weighted 14 pounds on my scales and was measured at 14 ½ inches after having been reared by Europeans since she was 8 weeks old. Wau weighted 16 pounds, reared since 7 weeks old and Fula weighted 15 pounds, height 15 ½ inches also reared by Europeans since 10 weeks old. The full weighs are given when they were mature adults.

We found that the Basenjjs in the "country of the barkless dogs" were a lot smaller than the less pure Basenji-like bigger dogs in the country surrounding this special area. We too found the Zande natives were devoted to their dogs often carrying them and other puppies under their arms and often rescued their dogs first if the very occasional lorry came by. I've always found the Zande Basenjjs very much more civilized and obedient than the dogs from Zaire (or Belgian Congo as it was then). They were fed from the human pot in little gourds of their own, meat if any, gravy, ants, slugs, birds, etc.

The dogs from the South Sudan never learned to bark in the ceaseless barking of quarantine kennels during their six month stays.