

Liberia Paper

1964

Dr. Leon Standifer

A Plant Physiologist by profession, with a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. He imported Kiki of Cryon to the U.S. when he left Liberia.

Previously in "The Official Bulletin of the Basenji Club of America" March-April 1964 pp. 14-16 and reproduced in "The Basenji" Volume XXII Number 2 February 1986 pp. 8 & 10 Copyright © 1986 "The Basenji." All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

"The Basenji" had as introduction: "Note: Shirley Chambers has provided this article about the experiences of Leon Standifer and his wife Marie with the Basenji in his native environment. Mrs. Chambers writes that Mr. Standifer is a Plant Physiologist by profession, with a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. This article was previously published in the BCOA Bulletin (1964)."

This is not intended to be an authoritative discourse on the basenji in Africa. It is merely a group of observations and thoughts collected over a two year period in Liberia during which time I bred and studied Basenjjs. In 1959 I went to Liberia on a 2-year contract with the Firestone Plantations Company to conduct research on rubber trees. Upon arrival, I found that a group on the plantation had been engaged in selective breeding of the native Basenjjs for approximately 10 years. There were about ten persons on the plantation working on the "Basenjjs Project" and about that many more scattered in various parts of the country. Liberia is a rather small country – about the size of the state of Ohio. It is



Miliku, Dr. Standifer, and Kiki of Cryon (left to right).
Photo courtesy Baton Rouge Advocate, Feb. 17, 1963

entirely in a tropical rain forest, but the topography ranges from coastal swamp to rather low mountains. Within Liberia, we found three general strains of Basenjjs, or "Country Dogs" as they are called. Quite a number of the persons working with the dogs are missionaries, who have contact with missionaries throughout Africa. Through these friends, they have attempted to locate the areas in Africa where the Basenji exists as a recognizable breed. It appears from the incomplete survey that the Basenji (with certain variations), is roughly limited to the rain forest regions of Africa. (Later, I will attempt to comment on the possible reasons behind this).

A Rain Forest is an ecological subdivision based mainly on temperature and rainfall. Typically, this is simply a jungle, but it actually ranges from swamp to open plains which are called savannas. These savannas were at one time jungle, but the vegetation was changed for some reason. (In some coastal areas it has been shown that the savannas are the result of the slave trade. Such large areas were used as camps that the jungle vegetation was entirely killed and grass and low bushes took over). Rainfall in a rain forest is usually not heavy torrential rain, but is a slow steady drizzle. Also, the temperature is not often extremely hot – in Liberia it seldom got above 90° or below 70°. Within Liberia the rainfall will range from around 90 to over 200 inches of rain per year. This amount of rain is so much that most of the soil fertility is washed out, especially the nitrogen. The lush growth which you see in the jungle is very deceptive. There is very little extra fertilizer in the soil to replace that growth if it is cut away. The plants growing there are very low in nitrogen and therefore in protein also. Most foods made from plants are high in carbohydrates (starches and sugar), but low in protein. This means that the food value, for humans, animals or even insects, is very low. In contrast to the picture presented in the "Tarzan" movies, the rain forest is usually a very quiet, near-lifeless place and the people living in it are hungry. Of course, this is a generalization and as you move away from the high rainfall areas, you will find areas which are still rain forest but are more fertile and support more life. However, my point is that in the typical Basenji areas, there is usually a scarcity of good food, whether plant or animal. Especially in these areas, the Basenji must earn his keep. There is an old tribal saying in Liberia that Kiki (dog) will fill the pot – somehow. This means very simply that if he doesn't hunt well enough to fill the pot they will eat him. This brings up the old question of what and how the Basenji hunts. In Liberia, he hunts what is to be hunted in his area. In many areas he

hunts the "deer" (a nocturnal antelope) almost exclusively. There are sections which still have a number of the forest buffalo. This is one of the most dangerous game animals alive, but the little Basenji will track him down and worry him to near-exhaustion until natives come in for the kill. Long ago they used spears, but the spear is seldom used now. Every village has at least one shot-gun or rifle. This would support the idea that the Basenji hunts as a hound. However, along the southern coastal section of Liberia, the Grebo tribe hunts what is called groundhog (a very large rodent) with Basenjis. In this case the dogs either drive them into large nets or wear them down until the natives arrive to club the rodent with a stick. American personnel at Firestone have long used the dogs to hunt the Guinea fowl, which is somewhat like a pheasant. Adding further to the confusion, the Kru tribe, who are mostly fisherman, keep Basenjis entirely as pets.

To summarize these thoughts, within Liberia there is a considerable variation in the amount and kind of game found and as consequence, there is a variation in the use to which the Basenji is put. Along with this, there is a similar variation in the capability of the dog to hunt these animals. A Kru dog is usually not a good hunter, but a Kpelle dog is almost always a fine hunter – simply because the Kpelle people are too hungry to afford to keep a poor hunter. Natives do not engage in breeding programs as we know them. They never know the sire of a particular litter, and don't care. They are always amused at the white man who wants to know who the "daddy" is. There is probably a great deal of inbreeding and within a village, dogs tend to look much the same. I want to make it clear at this point that many native dogs in Liberia (probably throughout Africa) are very poor appearing specimens. Native standards are simply not the same as ours. For example, very few of them care at all about the curl of the tail. Some tribes routinely dock the dogs' tails because the curl gets caught in briars and vines and often

becomes infected, make horrible looking sores. Of course, hardly any of them care about the quality of the coat. Some tribes are very much opposed to the black and white dogs, and just will not have them around. They are very easily eliminated, since the black is dominant. Most of the natives look on the lack of a bark as a disadvantage, but for generations they didn't know that dogs could bark. They made the picturesque wooden or iron bells and hung them around the loins, simply because their dogs did not bark well enough. Unfortunately, "civilization" has moved in and now instead of making a wooden bell, they take a salmon can, put a few stones in it, bend it shut, and have a "bell". I searched Liberia for 2 years and did not even get to see a wooden bell. Every tribe in Liberia used that at one time. Civilization is also hurting the breed itself. For many generations this was a pure breed simply because there were no other breeds. Now it is a pure breed only in very isolated villages. Generally speaking if a road of any sort goes to a village, there no longer any pure Basenjis there. The native is sold on the civilized idea of bigger and better. They don't want a pure "American" dog, because it



*Kiki of Cryon came from
Liberia to the USA with Dr. Standifer
Born: 21 Nov 1961 – Black Hunter of Duside x Wheeler's Goa Goa*

will probably die of disease, but they want "some American dog to make him big and some country dog to make him strong". One of the natives working in my laboratory had a rather nice Basenji bitch which he had named "Research", and he usually bred her to a good stud, but finally, he broke down and mated her with a Doberman, which was owned by one of the staff members. (I say he "broke down", he felt he had finally come up and was delighted at the prospects of the fine dogs he would have.) Just before I left, the bitch whelped three Doberman-Basenji pups, apparently without a great deal of trouble. In Liberia, at least, the Basenji is rapidly disappearing as a pure breed except among foreign personnel who are interested in preserving them.

It is very difficult to make a good comparison of the Basenji in Africa as a hunting dog. In his terrain, the Basenji is good, but he is all there is. How would an American hound compare wearing down an antelope in swamp-like jungle? In some areas he would have difficulty moving through the undergrowth, but in other areas he would probably be superior to the Basenji. However, he would also probably die very soon. One of my dogs, Goa Gba, hunted Guinea fowl as a brace with a Labrador retriever and held her own very well in the brushy areas. The Labrador later died of a paralytic tropical disease. An imported dog kept simply as a pet fares fairly well in Liberia, but they usually do not have the resistance to stand the stress of hunting in that country.

I realize that this does not answer any questions as to what Basenjis hunt in Africa and how good they are. There is no simple answer. If there were, it would have been clarified long ago. I also realize that these comments leave me open to arguments. It is impossible to generalize about Africa even if you limit yourself to one ecological area such as the rain forest. However, it is also impossible to say much about Africa without generalizing.

Another similar paper appeared in “Popular Dogs” June 1964:

Report from LIBERIA on the Basenji in Native Environment

Leon C. Standifer, Baton Rouge, LA

Ed. Note: Mr. Standifer is a plant physiologist with a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin who went to Liberia on a two year contract for Firestone Plantations Co. to study a problem on rubber trees. He discovered that several people on the plantation had been selectively breeding Basenjjs for about 10 years. His report follows:

I am beginning my “Liberia Paper” with comments on the general character of the country where the Basenji is found. Originally, I started with a defense of the idea that the dog in Liberia is a Basenji. Now I believe that is a negative approach. I am *convinced* these are Basenjjs—so I start from there. This is not intended as an authoritative discourse but merely observations and thoughts collected over a two-year period during which time I bred and studied Basenjjs.

Ten people on the plantation were working on the “Basenji Project” and had been doing so for 10 years when I arrived in '59. Another 10 were interested in the project and were scattered around Liberia. Liberia is about the size of Ohio and is entirely in a tropical rain forest, with topography ranging from coastal swamp to low mountains. Three general strains of Basenjjs, or “Country Dogs” as they are called, are evident. Many persons working with the dogs are missionaries who have contact with other missionaries throughout Africa. Through these contacts,

they have attempted to locate the area in Africa where the Basenjis exists as a recognizable breed. This incomplete survey seems to roughly limit them to the rain forest regions of Africa.

In a rain forest, certain specific temperature and rainfall conditions exist, although the actual 'forest' may range from swamps to open plains called 'savannas.' These savannas were once jungle but the vegetation was changed for some reason. In some coastal areas, the savannas were the direct result of slave trade; such large areas were used as camps and the vegetation was entirely killed and grass and low bushes took over. The rainfall is not a heavy, torrential rain, but a slow, steady drizzle. Temperature is moderate, ranging in Liberia between 70 and 90 degrees. There may be from 90 to 200 inches of rain a year. The rain washes away most of the soil fertility, especially nitrogen. The lush jungle growth is very deceptive as there is little nourishment in the soil to replace that growth if it is cut. Plants are very low in nitrogen and protein. Most of the foods made from tropical plants are high in carbohydrates but have little protein value. Thus, food value for humans, animals or even insects is very low. The areas of high rainfall are very quiet, nearly lifeless, and people living there are hungry. Thus, in typical Basenji areas, there is a scarcity of good food that the Basenji must earn his keep.

There is an old tribal saying that the Kiki (dog) will fill the pot—somehow. This means that if he does not hunt well to fill the pot—he fills the pot (and is eaten). As to what he hunts—in Liberia he hunts whatever is to be hunted. In many areas, it is a nocturnal antelope. Some sections still have forest buffalo. Although this is a most dangerous game animal, the little Basenji will track him down and worry him to near exhaustion until natives come in for the kill.

Every village has at least one shotgun or rifle, replacing the old time spears. This supports the idea that

the Basenji hunts as a hound. In the southern coastal region of Liberia, the Grebo tribe hunts a large rodent with Basenjis. They either drive them into large nets or wear them down. American personnel at Firestone have used Basenjis to hunt Guinea fowl. Adding further to the confusion, the Kru tribe, who are largely fishermen, keep Basenjis entirely as pets. Thus, a Kru dog is usually not a good hunter; a Kpelle dog, however, is almost always skillful, simply because the Kpelle people are too hungry to afford to keep a poor hunter.

Natives do not engage in breeding programs as we know them. They never know the sire of a particular litter—and do not care. They are amused at the white man who wants to know who the 'daddy' is. There is probably a great deal of inbreeding and within a village, a dogs tend to look very much alike.

Many of the native dogs in Liberia are very poor specimen. Native standards are simply not the same as ours. Very few care about the curl of the tail. Some tribes routinely dock them because the curl gets caught in the briars and vines and often becomes infected. There is little coat care. Some tribes are much opposed to black and white dogs and will not have them around. They are very sadly eliminated since the black is dominant.

Most natives consider the lack of bark a disadvantage and for generations, did not know that a dog could bark. They made picturesque wooden or iron bells and hung them around the loins, so they could locate their dogs. Now that 'civilization' has moved in, the natives put a few stones in a salmon can, bend it shut and use that for a bell! The wooden bells are now a thing of the past; I did not see a single one in two years.

Civilization is also hurting the breed. For many generations, this was a pure breed simply because there were no others. Now it is pure only in very isolated villages. Generally speaking, if a road of any sort goes to a village, there are no longer pure Basenjis there. The

native is sold on the civilized idea of 'bigger and better.' They do not want a pure America dog, because it will probably die of disease. They want 'some 'Merican dog to make him big and some country dog to make him strong.' A native working in my lab had a nice Basenji bitch which he named 'Research' and which he would usually breed to a good Basenji stud, but finally he mated her with a Doberman. He felt he had 'progressed' and was delighted with the prospects of the fine dogs he would have. The dog whelped three Dobeman-Basenji puppies without much trouble. In Liberia, the Basenji is rapidly disappearing as a pure breed except among foreign personnel who are interested in preserving them.

Actually, it is difficult to make a good comparison of the Basenji in Africa as a hunter. In his terrain, the Basenji is good, but he is all there is. How would an American

Deerhound compare in wearing down antelope in swamp-like jungle? In some areas, he would have difficulty moving through the undergrowth, but in other areas he would probably be superior to the Basenji. However, he would probably die soon. One of my dogs, Goa Gba, hunted Guinea fowl as a brace with a Labrador and held her own very well in brushy areas. The Labrador died of a paralytic tropical disease. An imported dog kept solely as a pet fares rather well in Liberia, but usually will not have the resistance to stand the stress of hunting there.

Even when limiting yourself to one ecological area such as the rain forest, it is impossible to generalize about Africa and its human and animal inhabitants; but on the other hand, it is also impossible to say much about Africa without generalizing.