

## The Avuvi - the unrecognized primitive

You may never have heard of them. But they have existed for thousands of years. Perhaps much longer.

Despised and feared in its natural environment

Avuvi. Of "avu" (pronounced /avou/), dog, and "-vi", diminutive suffix in the Gbé language group (Éwé, Mina, Aja, Fon, and others) of a region including the southeast of the Ghana, the south of the Togo and the south of Benin. It forms so much of the local landscape that precision is unnecessary: it is THE dog.

Neither completely domesticated nor truly wild, it lives outside the hamlets, towns, and villages, nourishing itself on the remains of human meals, hunting for its sustenance, and participating occasionally in hunts organized by the villagers. It is the pariah par excellence.

The relations between man and Avuvi are complex. It is inconceivable for the majority of the natives to share their lives with a dog, as we do in the West with our pets. The Avuvis are feared, indeed hated; one of the reasons, the most evident, most logical, and most defensible, is the risk of bite and of communication of diseases that doubtlessly all roaming animals carry. Another lies in collective imagination of the local cultures that use the Avuvi in animistic rites. Nevertheless, it also occasionally assists in hunts, recognizing its superior hunting skills.

A companion unlike any other

If one sought a description of the Avuvi, one could lean on the standard of the Basenji. "Discovered" in central Africa approximately 70 years ago and transported to the West, it was selectively bred according to specific aesthetic criteria, favoring the exaggeration of the wrinkles, the "turtleneck" collar markings, and the corkscrew tight tail. One obtained a "breed", but one sawed the genetic branch on which this breed was founded, as all of the other created and recognized breeds in west. A considerable proportion of the Avuvi population corresponds closely enough to this description, although averaging a few centimeters taller and with a slightly superior weight. However, variations of this profile include the degree of tail curl and the length of the coat. Moreover, a significant proportion of Avuvis have a slimmer silhouette, a more robust head, and the general appearance of speed and of power. Generally russet-red and white, it can also be black and white, tricolor, agouti, cream and white, or have "saddle" markings evoking an image of a German shepherd.

The Avuvi demonstrates other original characteristics: it is devoid of "doggy" odor and washes itself in the manner of a cat. To communicate, it sings, yodels, mutters, or talks in various more or less noisy manners. It barks rarely, to alert against an intruder that threatens to penetrate a perimeter defined as belonging to it. Erected on its rear paws (where it can remain "standing" an astonishingly long time), raising its back crest, it is completely dissuasive! It is also able to howl, notably to signal his presence (in the manner of a wolf, to define its territory). This very strong territorial instinct, that dictates its more noisy demonstrations, can be bothersome for the human environment and it is assuredly a phenomenon to take in consideration if one plans to share his life with one or several Avuvis. The remainder of the time, if it was bonded sufficiently early to its human family, the Avuvi is the most charming of dogs, attached to its family, lively, funny, and most extraordinarily playful. It will gladly learn all that is necessary for it to become a pleasant companion, even if it remains very independent, does not often see the need sit or lie down on command and must be never be allowed to digress without leave. There remains within a hunter fearsome to behold which will "fly" as soon as it sees potential prey, becoming deaf to any command until it has exhausted the thrill of the chase. The call of the outside becomes systematically stronger and, even if there is some chance it will return to its own "den" after escaping (provided that it did not meet a car in the meantime or a hunter a little fast on the trigger), it is preferable not to offer the opportunity to it by providing a rather high and smooth fence that it cannot scale.

Threat of extinction

The indigenous dog is threatened by extinction today. The reasons are numerous:

- Hunters are becoming more and more rare and the cooperation, even occasional, between man and dog suffers as a result. 20 years ago one often met, in periphery of the cities, hunters accompanied by 3 to 5 dogs. Today, those which the soft foods of a hypothetical participation in the consumer society did not divert of their traditional way of life are pushed back further and further into the rapidly disappearing wilderness.

- In the city, the dramatic gulf between rich and poor makes those that have the means to maintain a "useless mouth", prefer a dog that allows them to parade their success, such as a Western breed. Labradors, Rottweilers, German Shepherds and Dobermans abound and the veterinary offices often cross dogs of the more popular breeds. The less scrupulous do not hesitate to cross the more costly specimens not very well adapted to life in extreme conditions of temperature, humidity, and exposure to the various parasites, with local dogs. This forces them to abandon on the street the puppies that do not conform

sufficiently to the desired appearance to be marketable. The local breed therefore runs the risk of uncontrolled and irreversible hybridization.

. The poorest populations have so much difficulty surviving that the dogs which excavate the leavings of others often are considered as competitors - to eliminate - in this pathetic search for any sustenance that will allow them to survive another day. Finally, even if the dog is not considered as a food in the Gbé culture, it is assuredly in neighboring ethnic groups and the population movements of the crowded towns towards the coastal capitals bring more and more connoisseurs of this flesh into the proliferation zone of the Avuvi. The modification of the food practices induced by poverty and rural migration has been demonstrated - to the detriment of the local dogs - in other African regions. It is necessary to believe that in the coastal band of West Africa (in which are located all of the political or economical capitals of the concerned countries) the perception of the Avuvi as an intruder will become more and more supplanted by that of merchandise, even food.

The situation does not appear to be dramatic: one sees numbers of these dogs wandering in the streets of African cities and towns. But for how long can they withstand the spectacular changes of their habitat and the lifestyle of the surrounding humans? Will they be able to preserve their genetic originality? The described phenomena is accelerating at an impressive rate. It is therefore urgent to protect, starting now, this native canine population in all its variety. Once the authentic population is eliminated, is debased, it will be too late to undo what was done.

How to proceed? Who must assume this responsibility? Kennel clubs are nonexistent in the territory of the Avuvi. The protective corporations of the animals are at best embryonic. The public services have strong motivation to contain the epidemics effecting the necessary farm-raised animals for human consumption on one hand, and support the development of natural reserves likely to preserve vestiges of the native flora and fauna and to bring money courtesy of foreign visitors on the other. Finally, there is only one veterinary school for all of French-speaking West Africa, in Dakar (Senegal). As one sees, the candidates for the preservation of the Avuvi on the continent are very rare. How could it be otherwise in countries where humans cannot be assured a decent life?

There remains the West which, unencumbered with the immediate concerns of survival, can and must contribute to the safeguard and the conservation of this magnificent animal, largely free from all the hereditary diseases that one finds too often in the dogs known as "purebred", victims of their success and of a policy of over-selective reproduction, which fixed aesthetic characteristics at the same time as genetic problems much less desirable. It is time to adopt bit of humility, while taking care not to carry out any selection other than that of healthy subjects, by keeping consanguinity. Only a reasoned and coordinated action can avoid with the Avuvi the genetic problems of other canines promoted with the name of "primitive" and victimized by those who love them in an attempt "to save them".

In the name of the biological diversity.