

Burkina Faso Dogs

by

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At the start of my Peace Corps service in the town of Kirsi in Burkina Faso one of the first things I decided to do was to get a dog. I asked everyone around town in my basic Moore (the local language) and was told that it was not yet the correct season. I'd never thought of it in terms of harvest, but dogs are definitely born during the jardinage - the season just after the main harvest where veggies are grown if there is a barrage or a nearby source of water. They told me to wait until October, but that December-January was really the time to get a pup. Being that my job was a teacher and would start once the crops were in and classes started up, in October, this was not going to work for me. I even asked the guy who brought in biisap, a frozen tea, from another town to ask around in his village. However, several people tried to offer me monkeys instead of puppies. I would go for bike rides and essentially harass the people I would run across if they knew of any litters. There was one puppy that I saw, following a cart, I asked the women about it and she said that she had always been a smaller dog – so not a puppy.

One day I finally got word of a litter, but all of the males had already been picked out and taken away. I followed a guy down towards the river and to his family's concession. There were about ten puppies running around and hiding under empty granaries. Three of them ran up to me and were very friendly. There was one black female puppy, the unique one the owners said, that didn't come over. The puppies were about three weeks old and tiny. I was never able to figure out how many litters there were, possibly two. One of the momma dogs walked over and some of the pups jumped up and ran to her while the rest stayed languidly behind. The mother was not interested in feeding them and it was apparent that there was a serious caloric deficit amongst all of the dogs present. The black one persisted in her attempts to get milk from the mother. Knowing that lots of volunteers lost their dogs to health related issues; I decided to go with the fighter.

I tried to convince them to hold her for me and let her drink her mother's milk for a couple more weeks but they told me they would just give it to the next person. I gave them a dollar (I definitely over paid according to my village mom who scolded them for ripping me off) and the guy picked up the black one with white on her face, tail, and feet and we rode back to the village. I was told that all dogs were just simply called Baaga, meaning, well, dog. I decided to be a little more creative and named my dog

Roumsii (Room-sea), which I knew to mean mosquitoes. I later learned that it also means animals; so much for not being generic.

Roumsii definitely had a personality, and went everywhere with me. When I first got her I was feeding her whatever I could think of, beans, milk, and sardines. She was so malnourished that after a small meal her tummy would bloat up and almost drag against the ground. One of my villagers told me that I'd better not feed her anymore or else she would die. "A sas dit yeeda, a nan kiime."

At first I carried Rou around in my backpack, and then when she was older she would follow me on my bicycle. She could last for about ten miles at full speed until she got tired. She'd let me know by trying to run just in front of the bicycle so I'd have to slow down and then she'd stop. After this happened I would pick her up and put her in a basket that I had attached to the back of my bike and she would lie down with her tongue lolling in the wind and smiling at the shocked people as we rolled past. I'd attempted to train her using a leash, but it was so ridiculous in the village because she followed me more or less in her own style that everyone just laughed. Later, I noticed other people finding random cloth scraps and trying to walk their dogs on leashes.

When she was six months old she went into heat. I had suspected that something was about to happen, but didn't realize what was going on until one evening, while we were up at the school coaching the girls' soccer team one of the girls noticed Rou in the bushes with the Director's dog. It was wedding time! The girls started joking about it and since we were talking about Rou it was ok for them to mention condoms, and monogamy, and ask me questions about her behavior. They decided that the dogs should get married but that they needed biisap in order for it to be an official wedding. Just then the biisap guy rolled past, on his way home. It was official.

For the next couple of weeks I carried a large stick with me wherever we went. Mostly I left Rou locked up at home, and had to prepare myself with rocks so that I could get into my courtyard without too much difficulty. This was why all of the male dogs had all been taken when I'd gotten Rou as a puppy – a swarm of male dogs was not fun to deal with.

Rou had a litter of six, and my villagers loved asking me about it. They all wanted one of the pups. She had four males and two females. I ended up giving two to other volunteers and three others to people in my village, one to each of my "moms" and one to the prefet, or government official in the village. He bought me a beer in exchange for the pup when I'd refused to let him pay me. Later, when the pup died he'd told me that it was because he hadn't properly paid me for her.

I kept one of the males, and named him Helios. He was gorgeous and soft. He was incredibly friendly and when my family from the states came to visit they fell in love with him. Rou was a bit more standoffish and enjoyed stirring up trouble. Helios, however, was lazy and so was willing to let my sisters carry him around like a little baby. Rou was always careful to defecate far, far away from the house, trails, roads etc. However, Helios decided that pooping in my latrine was acceptable – he was lazy. When I had to switch villages for security reasons I chose to keep Rou, whose personality never failed to crack me up, and Helios moved to Ouagadougou, the capital city to live with one of my friends there.



Roumsii



Helios

Rou enjoyed Bilanga, she still looked like most of the dogs there, and this village turned out to be even more seasonal than Kirsi. There was definitely a puppy season. In January, February you could hardly step without tripping over a new pup, they were all over the place. People would pick out three or four dogs and then eat the ones whose personalities they didn't like. Two of my volunteer neighbors and I invented this game of going to the bar and counting the puppies that you could see at one time. I believe the record was about forty.

Rou wasn't quite the queen dog in Bilanga that she was back in Kirsi, and here people treated their dogs very differently. I'd moved from the Mossi tribe to the Gumalchamae. And dogs went from being rare to an over population. However, the appearance and build of these dogs did not seem noticeably different from those on the Mossi plateau. In the evenings I couldn't distinguish Rou from the other two dogs that lived in our courtyard, and would often have to enlist the help of one of my brothers to identify which dog was mine.



Burkina Faso map showing the location of Kirsi and Bilanga

On my last morning I brought out all of my bags and my family put them in a donkey cart. Rou got really excited and followed super close, prancing around next to the cart. She'd never been around when I had used a cart before and it dawned on me suddenly what a treat this was for her. I felt bad that we hadn't done it sooner. Almost every cart; in both Bilanga and Kirsi, had almost unfailingly been followed by a dog. I noticed that these dogs weren't necessarily good at following their owners, unless their owners were in or near a donkey cart. The dogs loved following carts. Not out front scaring up snakes but following directly behind. Rou's version of following me was to basically do her own thing, with occasional checks to make sure she knew where I was. If she lost sight of me, she'd panic, lose her cool and start running around frantically. This was usually in the market and generally the laughter of the people allowed me to find her. Everyone knew and loved her, and knew exactly why she was panicking. Eventually she just started running home, and would wait impatiently for me there. When I came home I'd get a knowing smile from Aissa, my neighbor and we'd both laugh at Rou's unusually excited greeting. On our daily runs together she'd take even more liberties with her distance from me, peeling off to harass the sheep, donkeys or whatever else moved. She'd found an injured bird once, and since then has been convinced that she can catch them. But on the day that I put my things in the cart she followed me so close I never once had to encourage her to keep up. She didn't stop to smell things, chase the chickens, or poke her nose in the kids' faces. She pranced along next to the cart and when another cart and dog passed she briefly went over to greet the other dog and then came right back.



Open faced tri under a cart

I mentioned that I'd picked out Rou because I thought she'd be a fighter, and she is. She has survived being sent flying by a crazy lady with a frying pan, getting hit by a motorcycle (not going too fast) and a bicycle, two bouts with worms that left her just skin and bones, and being attacked by a rabid dog. She was the "obompiiano's" (white thing's) dog and so was up to date on all of her shots, and always received timely medicine. After all that she went through in Burkina I felt it was only appropriate to bring her back to the states. I'd always explained to my villagers that I had a dog and not a child because that was what I could take care of.

She loves America, especially squirrels, and lying on couches. She's gotten fat and she adores people petting her. She definitely has her own antics, and has learned to add to her vocabulary as people have encouraged her to make all of her funny noises. She can bark, but she usually doesn't, instead, she'll growl, rumble, or howl; we've even taught her to say her name.

Rou is an interesting dog and displays some characteristics that I feel are normal for Burkinabe dogs, but not so much American dogs. She is meticulously clean. She doesn't like going in water and if she does this requires grooming. When she had puppies she would always clean up after them immediately and with absolutely no training did not soil my courtyard in any manner. All of the dogs hid their feces. Could this be a relic behavior of avoiding detection by predators? She is very good with dogs she knows but will grumble and be wary of new dogs. There's not really a pack mentality.

Mara acquired her dog in the area where pariah type dogs are predominant. Just to the north near the Mali border the greyhound type becomes more predominant. In the north-eastern corner of Burkina

Faso as well as in south-eastern Mali and western Niger the Azawakh hound (greyhound/saluki type) can be found. – James E Johannes

Map and editing by James E Johannes, photos Mara Lemagie.