



Historical view of the Tibetan Mastiff as a Working Dog

Tibetan Mastiffs have been used as working guardians in historical Tibet (Ü-Tsang, Amdo and Kham provinces) and surrounding areas such as Nepal, Bhutan, and northern India for centuries. The region lacks an agricultural base, and until recent times, crops such as vegetables and fruits were largely unknown. A portion of the population was mostly nomadic and highly dependent on livestock for milk, meat, wool, hair, hides, and calves and (goat) kids to trade or sell for income. Their prosperity and wealth were measured by the number of their livestock, and it would have been impossible for nomads/shepherds to raise livestock without their dogs, bred for their guardian abilities. In 2004, Primoz Peer noted: “These dogs are living with people, lying (often chained) around the tents of nomads or in front of the houses of farmers...As expected Do-Khyis are not used for herding, but they are also not (!!) used for protection of the herds of sheep and goat and yaks while out on pastures...The main purpose of Do-Khyis is the protection of the nomads’ tents and herds who return to this place for the night. (While) some, especially male Do-Khyis are chained around the tents the most part of the day” (1). Here, with the nomadic people of the Tibetan Plateau and the high Himalayas, is the origin of our breed. Over time, Tibetan Mastiffs not only became indispensable to the nomads, but became a fixture outside the homes in the villages and by the gates of the monasteries, and an integral part of the Tibetan culture.

The nomads are always on the move with their livestock throughout the year, moving in winter to the lower, warmer regions and in summer to higher altitudes in search of pastures. Normally, their livestock consists of sheep, yak, or goats. The dogs are trained to work 24 hours a day, traveling alongside the nomads/shepherds or encircling the camps. The dogs may be chained or not, depending on the location. In areas where the pasture is near to villages, they are chained during the day, as there is a high risk of unwanted casualties with humans. In more remote areas, they are not chained, but accompany the nomads to the pastures with the livestock. Those left behind to guard the camp patrol the perimeter of the encampment as a pack, although the composition of the pack may change as dogs join or drop out as they move around. “The dogs which belong to each tent keep fairly close to that tent, and any dog which gets too far away finds himself among more enemies than friends, and in trouble” (2). This moving wall of defense makes it impossible for anyone to cross into the encampment without their presence being made known. At night, the chained TMs are let loose, but even when free, they keep close to the encampment, ringing the tents and barking with increased fury, keeping a trained ear and a watchful eye for intruders or predators. In this sense, their role more resembles that of watchdog than of livestock guardian. They are normally kept in numbers of 2-5 dogs depending on the size of the herd. Predators include the common leopard, snow leopard, wolf, bear, and human marauders, and these predators are as much a threat to the people of the camp as to the livestock. The presence and type of predators seems to influence the selection of these dogs. Very small dogs are easily picked off by leopards, and dogs that approach and attempt to attack the predators head-on may also not survive long. Dogs that bark and make their stand in numbers are more likely to survive, so dogs are selected that will take a fearless stand, bark to keep predators at bay, and work as a pack to protect the encampments and herds. The dogs are so trustworthy in their job that the nomads are able to leave their camp for periods of time, leaving the dogs with full responsibility. There are stories of TMs doing search and rescue of livestock, guiding livestock on their own back to camp without the shepherd, and protecting injured owners all night against wild animals when they were unable to return to camp. (3) In addition to being utilized in the camps of the nomads, households in the villages keep TMs for security. Due to the historical absence of coordinated police and the presence of bands of armed robbers throughout the

region, the dogs are responsible to guard against thieves, keeping the homes, women, and children safe. There is little or no fencing, so the dogs are chained during the day outside the homes and let loose during the night to guard the home, the family, and the property; hence, the common term “Do-Khyi”, meaning “chained dog”. Fierceness towards strangers is encouraged and enhanced by being on the chain. It should be noted that while the dogs can be ferocious towards strangers, they are regularly fed and cared for by the women and children with much affection, creating a special bond that lasts a lifetime.

Dogs considered too large, too slow, or unable to perform the job expected of them were often given to the monasteries to guard the gates there, where a more sedentary lifestyle was better suited to their abilities, giving rise to tales that the monastery dogs were larger and heavier boned. These dogs were highly valued by the monks and Dalai Lama, and some monasteries even embarked on their own breeding programs. The role of the TM within the monasteries and the role of the monasteries in preservation of the breed should not be minimized: Monasteries have traditionally served as the center of Tibetan culture. Prior to Chinese occupation in 1959, Dreprung monastery alone housed 10,000 monks; Sera, 6,000; and Ganden, 4,000.

In summary, anthropologist Don Messerschmidt stated it well: “Tibet’s big landrace dogs are bred and raised locally to perform the important economic functions of protecting both fixed and moveable assets, land as well as livestock...Among the nomad folk, having a big dog that does its traditional job remains a necessary condition for cultural and economic survival.” (4).

With this history in mind, a debate has arisen as to whether Tibetan Mastiffs can be utilized in western societies as livestock guardian dogs (LGDs). In the next installment of this two-part series, this issue will be addressed from a modern day perspective.

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References:

- 1) Primoz Peer, 2004.
- 2) Ekvall, R.B., Role of the Dog in Tibetan Nomadic Society, Central Asiatic Journal, Vol. 8, No. 3, Sept. 1963, p. 168.
- 3) Moktan, A., Private communication, May, 2020.
- 4) Messerschmidt, D., Big Dogs of Tibet and the Himalayas, Orchid Press, Bangkok Thailand, 2010, p. 138.

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Noble Legacy Tibetan Mastiffs