

## MY THOUGHTS ON THE AKITA DOG pp.48-55, 1975, Shin-Journal-sha, Tokyo, Japan

By Naoto Kajiwara

### The History of The Akita Dog: The Meiji Period (1868-1912)

Until the Meiji Period (1868-1912), dogs in the Odate area were used mainly for hunting, then as guard dogs and finally as fighting dogs. As mentioned previously, these domesticated dogs are believed to have changed, due to their environmental changes.

**Mr. Kokichi (pen name: Hiroshi) Saito** states in his article, "Ancestors of Japanese Dogs" ("Nihonken no Soken"), that "Japanese dogs were probably prehistoric domesticated dogs, which under various influences in different regions of Japan, resulted in dogs with the present body forms. The medium and small dogs have the oldest history, while the large dog is probably of recent origin, and related to large dogs from the Asiatic Mainland."

In general, I agree with Mr. Saito's view on the history of the Akita dog to the beginning of the Meiji Period (1868-1912). However, I would question his theory on the "recent origin" of the large Japanese dog and their being "related to large dogs from the Asiatic Mainland." I will not raise that question if he is inferring that the large dogs of "recent origin" are dogs since 1912. However, if he is referring to dogs prior to 1868, he should clarify the factors that lead to the development of the Akita dog. **I am of the opinion that no size distinctions of Japanese dogs were made before the Edo Period (1617-1867), and crossbreeding became quite common in the developing regions, whereas dogs in the secluded mountain villages were not greatly affected.** Mr. Saito's article was published around the 10th year of Showa (1935), and I am assuming that he was referring to crossbreedings that occurred after 1912.

During the early (*around the 1870s*) Meiji Period, Akita dogs were used mainly as guard dogs, and, I believe, they did not differ much from dogs of the Edo Period (1617-1868) until the middle (*around the 1890s*) of the Meiji Period. Prior to this, very little changes occurred probably in the outward appearance of these dogs over a long period, even after some crossbreedings had occurred. A rapid decline in the quality of these dogs was seen from this time on. One possible cause was the rising popularity of dog fighting during this period. Demands for the large powerful fighting dog increased and crossbreeding was resorted to in order to attain this goal, resulting in Akita dogs that differed in appearance from other Japanese dogs.

After the Meiji Period, many records of great value for research on the Akita dog were unfortunately destroyed by fires that swept through the city of Odate. The photographs shown are those of Akita dogs from the late Meiji and early Taisho Periods.

As for stories from the Meiji Period (1868-1912), an article entitled, "Inu no Machi, Odate no Inufukei wo Kataru" ("Dog Stories from Odate, The Dog City") by Susumi Ono, of the Odate Junior High School faculty, who narrates dog stories as told by the elders of Odate is available.

This discussion by elders, who were born during the Ansei through the Bunkyo Periods (the 1850s and 1860s), was held on October of the 6th year of Showa (1931). The most famous dog called "Moku" was raised in the Jo-o Temple (also called the Naka no Tera). Some of the old stories seem to be exaggerated: Moku-go was 2 shaku 8 sun (84.8 cm, approximately 33.4 inches) tall and had a fairly long goma (sesame) coat. He was able to carry two children on his back. He is also said to have carried adults. As a fighting dog, he was able to face two to three opponents at a time. He was the only puppy from a litter in the late Ansei Period (*around the late 1850s*) in Iwanome in the village of Hayakuchi in Northern Akita. He lived through the ensuing Manen, Bunkyo, Genji and Keio Periods. He was still in good health in the 3rd year of Meiji (1870), when he was speared and killed by the descendant of a samurai.

Other famous fighting dogs after Moku-go were Saku of Shinzawa Village, Goma of Benzosama, Jiku of Mato Village and Aka of Misonai Village. However, no photographs or any other information on their body type(s) are available.

Many types of fighting dogs seem to have existed during the middle (*around the 1890s*) of the Meiji Period, because the term, "Junwa-inu" ("Pure Japanese Dog") comes from this period. This term probably would not have originated if uniformity of the Japanese dog had been maintained.

Much has been written on the circumstances that led to the crossbreeding of these dogs. According to one reliable source, a German mining engineer brought a large dog with droopy ears (probably a Mastiff) to the Ani mines in Northern Akita during the Meiji Period (1868-1912). In the 37th year of Meiji (1904), a Mr. Kenkichi Mogami from Kakumagawa in Southern Akita reportedly imported a huge dog (believed to be an impure St. Bernard dog) after paying a

large sum for it and used the dog for crossbreeding. Also during this period, Tosa fighting dogs were touring the Odate area and being crossbred widely with local dogs. It seems that huge dogs from the Ani mine area were widely used as stud dogs and are believed to have had some significant effects. However, due to the limited accessibility of transportation to Akita at that time, many of the pure local Japanese fighting dogs were not affected by such crossbreedings.

Dog fighting gained popularity and many fighting dog organizations were established. In the 32nd year of Meiji (1899), a fighting dog organization called the "Enyu-kai" ("The Garden Party"), was established in Odate with **Mr. Naoto Takaku** as its first chairman. Dog fighting arenas were within city limits of Shintomi and, reportedly, the admission was 5 sen for adults and 3 sen for children. During the peak of popularity, over 100 classified dogs were entered for dog fighting. Many spectators with packed lunches came to the arena early in the morning, and the neighborhood around the arena was indeed bustling all day. The very competitive matches between the Tosa fighting dog organizations increased dog fighting fervor in the Odate area.

In the 34th year of Meiji (1896), the Shikoku Tosa Tokenkai (the Tosa Fighting Dog Society of Shikoku), toured Western Japan. In May, they were in the Harukiza area of Tokyo, passed through the Kanto area and then headed toward Tohoku. The first match with the Akita dogs in Odate were scheduled toward the latter part of that year. The Tosa fighting dogs of that period were not as well developed as those of today. They weighed only about 7 to 8 kan (1 kan = 8 1/3 lbs, 58.3 to 66.4 lbs), while Akita fighting dogs of that period were about 10 kan (83.3 lbs.) or greater. The Tosa fighting dogs also had the disadvantage of having to travel and it has been reported that the Akita fighting dog was often a better fighter in the ring. Dog fighting stories from this period have been passed down by the seniors of Odate. The exact date of the following story of a visiting Tosa fighting dog group is not known. After much anticipation, about fifteen to sixteen Tosa fighting dogs arrived in Odate, about two days prior to the match. The following day, these dogs on leashes were paraded through the city streets. The parade was led by a drummer, followed by a large banner with a sketch of the Tosa fighting dog, to draw attention of the city's populace. Many on the streets stopped to watch, while others ran out of their homes to see this spectacle. Many children followed the parade throughout the city. The price of admissions were raised, at this time, to 20 sen for adults and 12 sen for children from 5 and 3 sen respectively. Although the match began at noon, a full crowd was already present from early morning. With much fanfare, the match began with the calling of contestants by an announcer who shielded his eyes from the sun with an open fan. The Akita dog's fierce bite hold and swinging of the opponent versus the Tosa fighting dog's method of biting and holding the opponent's ears were noticed. The Akita fighting dog was said to be stronger.

My knowledge on the Tosa fighting dog is limited. However, I saw a few photographs of these dogs from the early (around the early 1910s) Taisho Period at the home of an Akita dog fan a few years ago. Some Tosa fighting dogs of that era differed in body form from those of today. The Mastiff type of recent years were also seen in those days with the Pointer types and others suggestive of other dog breeds. The stately Tosa fighting dogs of today were not seen in those days.

As the Akita fighting dogs gained more experience with the Tosa fighting dogs, they became more popular. At the same time, purity of the Akita dog was being affected by increased crossbreeding. An ordinance of the 42nd year of Meiji (1909) that was of historical importance had a detrimental effect on the Akita dog as a breed. The nationwide popularity of bullfights, dogfights and cockfights involved large sums in gambling. In order to control this trend in gambling, ordinances banning animal fighting were issued in many places, which included Akita. Many Akita dog fanciers began to lose their interest in the Akita dog. They began to neglect their Akita dogs instead of using them for other useful purposes such as working dogs. This was not limited to the Akita fighting dog, but also to the rest of the Akita dog world. Furthermore, dog licensing was introduced in the 43rd year of Meiji (1910). The outbreak of rabies at this time led to stricter controls to eradicate strays. All of these factors hastened the decline of the Akita dog.

The foregoing events are described in Yutaka Oura's book, Research on Japanese Dogs (Nihonken no Kenkyu) in the section entitled "Tennenkinenbutsu Akitainu Ni Tsuite" "The Akita Dog as A Natural Monument"):

"The first outbreak of rabies occurred in the suburbs of Tokyo in 1890. Dog control ordinances were issued in 1873 and in 1881. In 1884, the first rabid dog was admitted to the Tokyo Imperial University Hospital.

Ninety-nine cases of rabies were reported in Japan between 1901 and 1905. This number increased to a peak of 3205 by 1924. Dog ordinances also became stricter. Eradication of strays was carried out by those who were often unable to distinguish between the dogs, and thus, many famous dogs were destroyed also. This was another factor that contributed to the decline of the Akita dog.

The establishment of the dog license in 1910 may have been the main cause in the increased number of strays.

Raising of dogs by the wealthy was not usually affected. However, for those with less income in remote northern farming areas, providing food for the dog and paying for the dog license became almost unaffordable. Life itself was difficult enough working for a livelihood. Many dogs in these farming areas were either given to them or kept in the family for generations and considered as a part of their family. Stricter dog controls and dog licensing caused these farmers to abandon their dogs, with great reluctance and to allow these dogs to become strays. Thus the large Japanese dog went into a rapid decline from around 1909."

Akita dogs were crossbred for dog fighting from the 1890s and on, so that by the early 1900s, much of their original characteristics were lost. Stricter dog controls during the rabies outbreak, as well as dog licenses for all Japanese dogs were enforced. This led to more dogs being abandoned or strays and to a very dark period for the Akita dog.

During the era of enlightenment of the Meiji Period, new things from abroad were regarded highly. This idea was also carried over to the dog world, where western dogs were held in higher esteem. Some favored the improvement of Japanese regional dogs by crossbreeding them with western dogs, while others irrationally favored destroying all Japanese dogs. Thus, this was the most dangerous period for the survival of the Japanese dogs.

A senior told me the following story regarding the confusion of this period. With the ban on dogfighting, exercising of these dogs were neglected, if not their feeding. Some became strays, while others were taken to nearby Tsugaru or Nambu. Others were taken to larger cities.

A Who's Who Directory of 1913 contains photographs of viscounts, barons and other well-known names from the political world and their pet dogs apparently. Some of the dogs in the photographs leads one to question the purity of the dogs, owing to their different shapes and coat colors. However, a few dogs with the qualities of the Matagi dog are seen.

The purity and survival of the Akita dog was at its lowest ebb during the Meiji Period. Even in Odate, known as the Inu no Gai (Boulevard of Dogs), the fighting dogs, for sure, and the Akita dog began to fade away.

Note: **Bold** types and *italics* were supplied by the translator.

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