

## THE CENTRAL ASIAN OVCHARKA IN TAJIKISTAN

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**Abstract.** *The authors are very concerned with the state of the Central Asian Ovcharka breed in its home country. Alikhon Latifi authors the first part of the article. It is based on his personal observations and data from old publications. The second part is written by Arunas Derus, who surveyed dogs in winter pastures of Tajikistan. Arunas Derus is owner of Central Asian and Caucasian Ovcharka with the kennel name “Akmen Gele”.*

I would like to share the results of my observations on the condition of the breed today in its original natural habitats. I do not claim to review the entire vast distribution range of these dogs and will limit myself to Tajikistan, Northern Iran (Khorasan Province and Mazandaran Province) and northern Afghanistan (Balkh Province and Kunduz Province).

My scope does not include the classification of the breed by types. If I were to speak of the types, then it would be only for the convenience of the European audience. It happened that I have traveled crisscrossing the whole of Tajikistan since my childhood. First, I traveled with my father; then, as a student during field training projects; and finally during my own independent expeditions. Because dogs were always within the range of my interests, I always paid special attention to them. In Tajikistan, during the 1960s, there were no other breeds, except the Central Asian Ovcharka (the still remaining and sporadically occurring Tazy did not count). Therefore, this breed was the only subject of my studies. During the 60s and 70s, these dogs were seen everywhere. During that time, there were four million sheep and an average herd was about 1000 animals, each herd accompanied by about five dogs. Therefore, the total number of dogs with herds was about 20 000. Perhaps, number of dogs remained in villages (kishlaks) was the same as in house yards. The number of bitches was about 10% of the total dog population. The population of the Central Asian Ovcharka in Tajikistan has never been isolated, because



during winter some herds were moved to Uzbekistan, where Tajiks and Uzbeks exchanged dogs. I will say a few words about the formation of the population of Central Asian Ovcharkas in the Zeravshan River Valley, in northern Tajikistan. In the upper part of the Valley, there are wonderful summer pastures. However, because of the complexity of the terrain and because the pastures are scattered, it is impossible to secure a forage supply. Therefore, even in the Soviet period, keeping herds in this valley was incredibly difficult and before the Communist Revolution it was virtually impossible. However, nobody wanted to abandon these pastures. In the XIXth century, an original system of utilization of the pastures in the upper Zeravshan was developed. In early winter,

breeders bought many thousands of young sheep on the plains of northern Afghanistan and drove them towards Samarqand, where they arrived by early spring. There were dogs with the sheep herds. Then, the sheep herds were turned in the direction of the upper Zeravshan and grazed there during the entire summer. By wintertime, sheep had gained weight and then they were gathered in Samarqand for sale there. The shepherds returned to Afghanistan. Understandably, the dogs were left in the Zeravshan valley. In late 70s- early 80s the situation with the Central Asian Ovcharka in Tajikistan was changing. Great numbers of Europeans were moving into Tajikistan and they brought many dogs there, mainly mutts. During the same time, because of movies like “Four Tankmen and a Dog” and “Give me a Paw, Friend” the East European Ovcharka [a Soviet-time version of the German Shepherd Dog, comment by the translator] grew considerably in popularity. Central Asian Ovcharkas living in cities and villages

suffered the first blow. Interbreeding and new diseases wiped out aboriginal Central Asian Ovcharkas there. Aboriginal Ovcharkas had no resistance against newly introduced dog diseases. The situation with regard to sheep herds also became less favorable, because the total extermination of wolves made dogs obsolete.



**Fighting male from Balkh Province, northern Afghanistan**

Out of the former population of 40, 000 dogs, only a few thousands survived. As always in such cases, the surviving dogs were not among the best ones. To the credit of the Club “DOSAAF” of Tajikistan its leaders began working on the preservation of the breed. The Club managed to collect some breeding stock dogs, but, perhaps, they were not the best. A little later, the Club of Hunters and Fishermen joined the effort. Something good began to emerge out of these efforts. At the same time, the emerging interest in dogfights helped. Amateurs were buying dogs by sheep herds and raised litters out of the best fighting dogs. At this time, a civil war started in Tajikistan and the results of all these efforts were lost. Fortunately, some of the dogs came to Russia and they played their modest role in the preservation of the purebred version of the Central Asian Ovcharka. There is a saying that during wartime, the number of wolves and bad people always increase. Tajikistan experienced this in full. As a result, chabans (term for herdsmen of sheep) needed the dogs. Some city people still had fighting dogs. Now, there is a good chance that the breed could be restored in Tajikistan, but government support is needed for that.

As I mentioned above, the populations of dogs of Central Tajikistan, Central Uzbekistan and Northern Afghanistan were closely related. I was lucky to see only a few dogs from Northern Afghanistan live. According to available photographs and videos and the evidence of trustworthy people, I can say that the dogs of Northern Afghanistan look closer to the idea of the true “Asian” (Central Asian Ovcharka).

Knowing about the excellent dogs of Turkmenistan, I thought that I would find equally good dogs in Iran as well. After I had traveled across the whole of Mazandaran and Khorasan (northern Iran), I was brutally disappointed with what I found. First, there were very few dogs and they were mainly with sheep herds. Second, the dogs did not meet our standards of Asian sheep dog. During the entire time spent there, I saw only two dogs, which I would not mind having in my yard. Iranians explained that during the Iran-Iraq war there were many dogs eating human corpses. Special teams were created for the extermination of dogs and many dogs were killed even far away from battlefields. Now, I will say some more about the dogs. It is well known that the Central Asian Ovcharka is not a homogenous group of dogs. The differences between individual dogs are greater than the differences between some different European breeds. However, there is one thing, which is stable and it unites them all. This is their similar working

quality. In the past, the chaban could rely on any dog that reached a certain degree of maturity. Weak dogs died and unfit ones were killed. As a result, they got a dog, which is now marching from one country to another, possibly towards its ruination. Of course, I am over-exaggerating. Russia has contributed much to the preservation of the Central Asian Ovcharka during the time of its total degeneration in its traditional home range. However, here, we find another side of the pancake. The Central Asian Ovcharka bred away from its natural environment is losing little by little its unique qualities, which had made the breed popular in the first place. Of course, even today, purebred dogs are capable of guarding. However, are they still the same dogs? Do they have the same courage, strength (not just physical strength, but also strong spirit), and endurance and are they undemanding to keep? Today, selective breeding of dogs in Europe cannot produce dogs satisfying the requirements of them under the working conditions of life in Central Asia. The “Asian” in Europe is changing in the same way as happened to the English Mastiff, Great Dane and other Mastiffs. There is a story by Jack London called “League of Old Men”. It describes the degeneration of dogs of one Indian tribe and how they had been rejuvenated. Maybe it is worth thinking about the model described in that story, sled dog – wolf; in our case purebred Central Asian Ovcharka – aboriginal Central Asian Ovcharka. This is not a new idea and it works somewhat now. However, taking into account the small number of aboriginal dogs and the even smaller number of aboriginal dogs used for interbreeding with purebreds, we only slightly postpone the agonizingly difficult modern situation with the “Asian”. The dogs will survive, but their similarity to the real “Asian” would be no greater than the similarity of the contemporary English Bulldog to the old glorious English Bulldog of the XVII century.



**Yard dog in Dushanbe, Tajikistan**

I am the owner of the “Akmenu Gele” kennel and a passionate fancier of the “Asian”. I was very sorry not to be able to have the possibility of traveling to the home country of these dogs and see them in their natural surroundings. I remember how I listened with envy to stories told by other breeders and amateur enthusiasts of herd-guarding dogs, who were lucky to visit that country and watch the dogs in their natural environment. I think that every breeder, who studies history and development of his chosen breed at a certain moment, wants to visit that “holy land”, which begot those wonderful dogs.

I am not afraid to say that perhaps only the Asian herd-guarding dog has its own home country, which not only had produced and shaped them but also loves and cherishes its creation. Therefore, when I had an opportunity finally of taking off on my own expedition to Central Asia, I was burning with impatience.

At last, the airplane is landing in my “holy land”. After some custom formalities, I obtain my visa right there in the airport and since that moment, my official presence in Tajikistan has started. Alikhon met me and we headed off to adventures together. Unfortunately, Dushanbe met me with atypically cold weather for the local climate, which forced us to make changes in the future sequence of events. On the next day, we made our first sightseeing in the city and met the dog breeders of Dushanbe, who were friends of Alikhon and other people, whose names we only heard of before.

The first impression was encouraging. There were many dogs and they looked purebred, including many dogs randomly seen on city streets. Now, after some reflection, I can say that in Tajikistan, there are many typical, easily recognizable purebred dogs. There were several types of Ovcharkas, but they were all identifiable, which would be sometimes hard to say about contemporarily bred dogs. And this happened on the first day! What was awaiting me ahead?

Slightly looking ahead, I would say that in Tajikistan, with sheep herds we found only a few dogs of mixed origins, obviously descendants of German Shepherd Dogs. They occurred in regions near the border and in all regions most favorable for life. We were told that this kind of mixing took place as a result of cultural exchanges with Russian troops. We visited one of the border military detachments and saw dogs of their “kennel”. This explanation was confirmed. They had mixes for every taste. There were “Asians” and East European Ovcharkas (German Shepherd Dogs) and what could be Caucasian Ovcharkas. Actually, they were ordinary mixes. I did not find them even worthy of taking pictures. As soon as we moved deeper into more isolated



**Dog and herdsman, Black Mountain, Tajikistan**

regions, we saw a different situation. At the request of the local people, I will not reveal geographical names and the actual route of our trip in Tajikistan. During the trip we covered about 1500 km, including mountain passes and valleys. Besides kishlaks (villages), we visited 25 sheep herds; saw over 100 dogs working with sheep herds, a little more village dogs and all kinds of “purebred” mongrels. It was hard to tell the breed of the latter, but they were all sheep guarding dogs freed from their job for some reason. We were also surprised to find dogs in absolutely incredible places. It happened, when far away from sheep or villages, that we saw a purebred-looking dog walking along the road. Where was it from and where was it heading? The impression was unreal! There was a feeling that we were in the kingdom of the Central Asian Ovcharka! We spend most of our time trying to find dogs working with herds, because village dogs were smaller than and not as good as those working with sheep herds. Besides, in villages, we were given meaningless suggestions and lost much time, because local people were not up to date and their directions were misleading. Besides, in the village, a good dog is not as important as it would be with the sheep herd. Therefore, the chabans took the best dogs; and only young dogs and pregnant bitches were left in villages. Some of the chabans purposely left purebred bitches with their puppies and young dogs in the village. This was done, because many dogs working on protecting the sheep herds died by a variety of causes. Leaving some dogs at home was a good insurance for the preservation of breeding dogs to replenish losses. This was what we were told by herdsmen, but we did not have a chance of seeing such dogs.

As I wrote above, dogs found with sheep herds were radically different in quality from all other dogs. Our first visit to a sheep herd left a most pleasant and unforgettable impression. Everything was like in a movie. On the right side of the road, a huge mountain massif showed up and after the first turn we saw on the slope of the mountain a sheep herd moving towards us. Ahead of the herd and on both flanks, each at his right position, like Roman legionnaires, big dogs were escorting the herd. One of them was standing at a vantage spot on the hill, overseeing events. We approached the herd from the side. Dogs on our side slowed down for a moment. It seemed they assessed whether we posed any threat to the herd. Because the herd was grazing near the road, the dogs were not surprised at seeing a car and two two-legged dare-devils. Nevertheless, two other dogs, walking behind the herd, speeded up at took position between the sheep and us. It looked like in a game of checkers, when every your move is blocked by the opponent. As we observed later, other herd guarding dogs were also skilful in using territorial tactics so that we remained constantly cut off from the sheep and we were thus kept in a very inconvenient position, if we wanted to access the herd. Some dog teams simply encircled us so that we were walking frequently looking over the shoulder to avoid their sudden approach from behind. Herdsmen quickly noticed everything and told us how to respond. Sometimes herdsman simply mingled with us; and all the dogs then left us alone and did not pay us any special attention. However, before one of the chabans came up, we felt very insecure. Therefore, we did not rush to get out of the car and meet possible danger. Moreover, some dogs enthusiastically and fearlessly attacked our car, while we were

still driving, if we crossed their territory. We were told about one male (he left with the sheep herd prior to our arrival), which could bite through a tire.

We saw different dogs, some were hyperactive and some were calm. It may seem strange, but the most beautiful and powerful dogs were quiet and dignified. They were exactly those dogs, which controlled the situation; they understood everything and kept an eye on us. Youngsters were hilarious and playfully chased cars. Later, when we crossed the mountain pass, which was pretty high for a winter pasture, we met several sheep herds, where the dogs were particularly aggressive. We should emphasize that Tajik sheep guarding dogs are particularly aggressive, especially if you see them during their work. The dogs detected us in a moment and quickly covered the distance of a few hundred yards over rugged terrain to block our passage. We stopped, thank God, in time, because we knew from the chabans that the dogs could attack and inflict bad injuries. They also told us that some dogs were virtually fearless and there was no big stick, which is usually used by travelers, which would help to stop the attacking dog. Besides, the dogs work as a team and they are not just bluffing.



Only after we had spent some time with the sheep herds and listened to the stories told by the chabans, did we understand the life style of these people and the working skills of their dogs. Each year many dogs working with sheep herds get killed. Therefore, the herdsmen keep many dogs with each herd. We never saw less than four dogs with one herd. Usually, with a large sheep herd, there were 7-8 dogs, among which one or two were females, one of which was for breeding, while the major female was becoming too old. Only males work with the herd. It is strange, but we never saw dogfights. However, many scars seen on the dogs' faces indicated some past troubles. The chabans did not intervene in dog-to-dog relationships in the team; perhaps, the dogs established their relationships during their spare time. Because the dogs constantly work, they have little time left for fights. Tajiks began keeping more dogs, because in the mountains the sheep are often attacked by bears. Emboldened bears are afraid of nothing and pursue their game no matter what, acting like they were tax collectors. It is an enormously difficult task for the dogs to stop the trespasser and hold their ground. Understandably, dogs are often killed and only boldest and most skillful of them can fight and persist. I remember one chaban, who brought his sheep herd from the high mountain and showed me his 12-year-old male. He was bragging that with this male he never lost even a single sheep; the dog always courageously defended his territory. He managed to survive and now he taught young dogs. My guide, his name was Akhad, was our car driver and we became good friends. He was descended from chabans. He told me stories how brave dogs fought bear; some were killed, but others protected their sheep herd. This is one reason why their sheep guarding dogs attack seriously and they do it even if they put their lives on the line. There is no stick that would impress these dogs, because they are prepared to fight even bear with its huge canines and nails.

We saw dogs with serious wounds and scars left from past battles. It was precisely those fights with bears that helped to dispel the myth about the too coarse body complexion of the dogs. Only the strongest and agile dogs can escape bear attacks and fight back. Sometimes several dogs stop bear on a steep mountain slope or a narrow passage. Under these conditions agility and maneuverability are crucial; otherwise it is easy to fall down into the abyss, which sometimes really happens. Akhad told one story he witnessed himself. Two dogs of his father stopped a bear on a narrow mountain path. One of the dogs attacked the bear from the rear and the other from the front. The dogs attacked it so viciously that

the bear stumbled and fell into the gorge, while the dog dashed out in time and was safe. According to the chabans, wolf is not a serious foe of these dogs, because they can fight them as equals; whereas only the most skillful dogs can resist bear. Chabans value and are proud of having such dogs. Being a guest at one sheep ranch, I met four dark black and tan dogs. They seemed as if they were representing something like a breed of their own. The fifth dog in the same ranch was a pale cream bitch.



She differed from the other dogs in the type of head and body proportions. She was clearly distinguished by her peculiar purebred type. Therefore, I had some questions to ask chabans. They told me that she was the last representative of this type; such dogs had lived at this ranch for a long time; they worked very well, but the majority of them had been killed. Even a male puppy out of this batch, from the past year's litter (at the time of our visit she was pregnant) died when he was one year old. The

chaban told us that this bitch, before giving birth to pups, worked with the sheep herd. "Those dogs, - he waved his hand in the direction of the sheep, - are worthless. Nothing good has come from them so far." He picked them up from neighboring sheep herds, but he did not like them - just dogs. When he talked about the cream dog, he spoke softly and his voice trembled. It was clear that he liked that dog. Everyone knows that each dog breeder hopes to find a beautiful, ideal animal during his expedition. The dream was to find one and purchase it. This bitch was one of the two dogs, which got into my heart. I could hardly restrain myself from betraying my feelings and begging him to sell me this dog. Do you believe it? After that conversation, I could not find enough courage to ask to trade something most precious to him. The bitch, probably knowing her own value, came up to the herdsman, wagging her tail. I was very happy with having the luck of knowing such good friends as this chaban and his dog. I rarely witnessed people who valued their dogs as high. It was not because they did not like their dogs; it was just because the herdsmen and their dogs were very different. There were hired chabans and communal chabans and some sheep herds belonged to local village people. There were also private sheep herds owned by old dynasties of chabans, who had knowledge and respect of their profession and traditions. This is why the attitude of herdsmen towards dogs was very different. Who cares much about a dog that belongs to the collective farm? If the dog runs, that is good enough. By the way, in the past more care was taken of dogs working with sheep herds than today, when the collective farms fell apart. According to one veteran, dogs were even allotted a certain amount of food ration per capita.

From the very first minutes of my learning about the life of herd-guarding dogs I was stunned, because I never saw the dogs fed anything but one pita bread a day. I can seriously say that none of the chabans prepared any meal for the dogs and nobody bothered about feeding them. Nevertheless, we never saw skinny looking dogs and there were no overfed dogs either. They were dogs in excellent working condition. Usually the quality of the coat is a good indicator of the condition of the animal. Naturally, I cannot insist that pita bread is the miracle food that is sufficient for a dog to live on and grow, because there are other foods usually available, such as table leftovers, meat scraps after butchering, afterbirths, dead young sheep and what dogs are catching on their own. We did not see them eating these foods, but such supplements are either occasional or only seasonal. We can say that local sheep dogs are undemanding for food. At first, it seemed unreal how eagerly dogs grabbed the bread thrown to them. Then, we understood that it was their only diversion and that the second course would be

never available! Involuntarily we thought about our own dogs and it was ridiculous to recall how we discussed dog foods, such as “premium” or “super premium” class; let alone glucosamines, chondroitines, etc.



**Street female in Dushanbe**

And yet, Mother Nature is wise! The majority of the bitches we saw were pregnant. The time of the mass birth of puppies coincided with the time of giving birth by sheep. Thus, nature itself took care of the natural supplementation of the young dogs’ meager diets. And then, it depends on luck. Thinking of the unstable supply of food for dogs, I would like to add a few comments about the conditions necessary for the growth of animals. I think that such poor food has its impact on the dog’s size. It was a little strange to see dogs of the same working team and similar type, but of different sizes. I had the impression that some dogs probably starved during some stage of their youth. At one ranch, we saw a

beautiful black bitch with puppies. She was no higher than 50 cm at the withers and she looked out of proportion, because her month and a half old puppies were half her size. The puppies were powerful, with good bone and well fed. By herself, this bitch looked well enough. Such purebred dwarfs occurred in many places.

I would like to speak about the cost of importing dogs. Perhaps it is a vital theme of interest to every traveling dog breeder and even more so if he is visiting the country of origin of his chosen breed. I was always fascinated by people who traveled and imported aboriginal dogs. These dogs themselves seemed unique to me and even had some mystical aura. I admit it has been my favorite dream to find a worthy animal and, if possible, take such a joy with me back home, if not exactly now during this trip, then possibly in another life...

When I stepped for the first time on Tajikistan soil, this idea constantly followed me and I examined all dogs from this standpoint. However, time was going by and something broke inside of me...

Naturally, procurement and exportation of dogs have never been my major goal. I traveled to Central Asia, because I wanted to become familiar with the customs of the people and to learn more about what I was already involved with (dogs), make a movie for keeping memories in the future and then, if lucky, to obtain some dogs. It happened that I arrived there in the most favorable time, when I could see the maximum of sheep herds with dogs on winter pastures. It was also the time when the majority of females were either pregnant or already with puppies. I wanted most of all to choose a not too old female or adolescent female. Unfortunately, there were very few females with sheep herds. I truly liked two females. One of them was the last of her clan and the second one, similar to the first, was too old. The more I knew of the dogs in their own complex, difficult and free world, the more I respected them and understood the misery of my covetous plans. I recall that one of my good friends, when I was in Tajikistan, sent me a message asking whether I found something interesting for myself. At this moment I understood that I rediscovered my own dogs, I better understood them and I liked them even more than ever. I discovered another side of life of my breed and these undemanding, brave, proud and free dogs became even more valuable to me.



**Yard dog female in Dushanbe**

I would like to mention the great coat color variation of local type dogs. They ranged from black and black-and-tan to black and white, white with black ticking to gray, cream and white. This diversity of coat encompasses nearly the entire diversity of coat variation in dogs at large.

Anatomical differences also occurred, but I am not an expert in the anatomy and would not summarize it, because I did not take any measurements. I can tell that there were dogs with a good anatomy, but there were dogs with longer legs and narrower chest and dogs with shorter legs and broader chest. Some dogs had a nearly square body and there were rangy dogs with classical long and correct croup, strong angles at the hocks and at the arm/forearm joints. There were different dogs, but one thing remained true. Among over 200 dogs examined, I saw variable body proportions, different croups and angles, but I never saw dogs with ugly hind legs! I found only three dogs with poor legs; two of them were local village dogs and the third one had been brought into Tajikistan from Russia for the “improvement” of the breed. All the remaining dogs never had incorrect legs. Perhaps, nature itself was correcting dogs in this respect. I found several limping dogs, but each of them had some injuries. About teeth, I can say the following. In all cases, when herdsmen showed us their bites, they were somewhat different, but we never saw any obviously undershot or overshot. Some dogs had broken or rotten teeth, but they were caused by their hard way of life. Scars on the muzzles of males were evidence of frequent fights. There were no scars seen on females.

Chabans have different attitudes to ear cropping and tail docking. Perfectly cropped short ears occurred rarely. We saw one-month-old puppies with already cropped tails and ears and we saw two-month-old puppies still intact. We got the explanation that for some reason the cropping was done too early. There was no particular reasoning supporting this idea, because sooner or later the cropping was done and its efficiency did not depend on it. We have never seen intact dogs and nobody saw an important issue in this. Even the ears of mongrels had been carefully cropped, perhaps, just in case.

Unfortunately, just like everything beautiful, our trip was coming to an end. Unfortunately, we always had insufficient time and the weather was a problem for the visit to the last destination point within our planned range. There was a snowfall and our car “NIVA” (I would wish to speak only well of it!) began slipping on slopes covered with clay and mud. We could not visit the last valley. When we reached the last ranch, we were immediately warned about the bad road condition. However, to my joy, Akhad and I had found a beautiful and mistrustful one-year-old puppy. It was sitting near a house, focused and very serious. He was lifting one of his bitten paws. Perhaps he had had enough of the other dogs, which had left with the sheep herd. However, he was lucky to stay home, get good treats and become a star in our movie! The puppy was black with black ticking on the muzzle, well boned and proportionally built. We felt a little down, because of the impossibility to continue our trip and we could not see relatives of this puppy. However, the last turn of events was optimistic and we witnessed once again a good representative of the local sheep guarding dogs. .

I would like to mention a strange feeling when in Tajikistan; I saw copies of dogs that I had seen in my world of dog show rings. It was an unreal feeling when I saw Kassim from Klovi side by side with sheep. These were high-class dogs! They were like mirror copies of the existing pedigree dogs. This is when we can talk about breed types as they ought to be. I would like to emphasize that we saw relatively few dogs, but among them I discovered that more than half their number fitted existing types of known pedigreed dogs. Now it seemed to me that all or nearly all “Asians” were from Tajikistan. In any case, the diversity of dogs surprised me. Indeed. I was sorry that I was traveling alone. My guide Akhad worked hard at helping me, working as car driver and translator. My arrival coincided with his accounting time and Alikhon was engaged elsewhere doing his job. I needed an extra pair of hands for filming. This was a costly, difficult and very crowded trip. Therefore, I valued my time and tried to preserve as much as I could on video. Now, I have to be content with my filming. I am convinced that it is better to see once than to read or hear several times. I was inspired with what I saw and I gained confidence in the future of this remarkable breed and all that we are doing for its preservation.