

Culture Clash— or a Class in Culture?

Understanding local context and realities may help animal welfare advocates overseas

BY LORRAINE CHITTOCK

WHEN THE MINERS IN CHILE were being rescued last year, many people noticed Mario Sepulveda, the second man to emerge from the depths. As he was carried away on a stretcher for a medical evaluation he asked his wife, “How’s the dog?”

In Chile, many refer to dogs as “Major amigo de hombre”—man’s best friend.

And yet many Americans visiting Chile see all the dogs loose on city streets, and conclude that the animals aren’t cared for.

Are we missing something?

Our warehouse-sized pet stores in America announce to the world we’re a country of animal lovers. But the number of animals in our shelters and the seemingly endless Facebook posts about cases of abuse and neglect show another side.

Likewise, I’ve discovered hidden layers to the animal situation overseas.

For the past 11 years I’ve been accompanied on my travels through Africa and Latin America by Kenyan-born canines, Dog and Bruiser. Before that, I lived in the Middle

East for seven years. Traveling as a “foreigner” with two community-raised dogs in tow brought animal lovers out of the woodwork. People who might never speak to their friends about their love for critters felt free to speak to me.

When Dog and I took a trip north to an area around Lake Turkana in Kenya to stay with a nomadic tribe called the Gabra, I noticed a woman who was never apart from her four dogs. Waatu had folds of fabric flowing over her fertility-goddess hips. I inquired about her family and health, as is Gabra custom, before I felt it appropriate to ask about her dogs.

“Many of the dogs here in Miakona guard the houses, but your dogs are guarding you. Why?” I asked through my Gabra translator, Saless.

“They know I care for them,” Waatu replied, adjusting her bright tobe.

As our lives in the West have become more hectic, could it be that we have forgotten these age-old animal training methods and lost some basic intuitive connections with animals?

“Is that why your dogs come to work with you? To guard you?”

“They get lonely without me. And I get lonely without them.”

I explained that where I come from it’s normal for people to touch and stroke their dogs. “Have you ever seen this in your village?”

“No, never. But me, I touch my dogs. I think it just depends on how people think upstairs.”

As a child who kept my love for animals hidden, I understood this division between public and private affection. Not wanting to be the subject of shaming, I knew better as a child than to cuddle Toby, our white cat, in public. Though as a girl I was less worried about being called a “sissy,” I was still very conscious that more-than-casual displays of affection toward Toby would be considered inappropriate. While I lavished affection on Toby behind closed doors, to my friends she was “just” a cat. Cuddling, I deduced from observing those around me, was meant for dolls or human babies. I was raised when Disney—and other cultural forces—were only just beginning to make an impression on how Americans viewed our relationships with animals. Warehouse-size stores selling pet paraphernalia weren’t even a dream, and many Americans considered vet care a luxury.

In this village of Maikona, there wasn’t even electricity.

Waatu and I wandered outside, and a few minutes later while she was breast-feeding her youngest child, one of her

dogs strayed close. She threw a rock in its direction, which made me wonder if she’d merely said what she thought I wanted to hear.

A few minutes after she finished nursing, she swatted her oldest daughter with the end of a cane, which made me realize perspective was in order. The daughter did something Waatu didn’t like. Swat! The dog did something she didn’t like. Ping! Both dog and daughter slunk away. Though it’s easy for us to preach this isn’t the way to raise your child or teach your dog, it worked for Waatu.

In other cultures, there’s less of a division between the indoor and outdoor worlds. In tropical locations without air conditioning, restaurants don’t have doors and windows, so dogs can wander in and out. Raised in this open-air environment, people understand that offering one morsel of food to one dog results in a quickly gathered pack of 20 gaping mouths who will never voluntarily leave your side.

“What do you do about rabies?” I asked Waatu.

“If we have a case of rabies, all the dogs in the village have to be killed.”

I was stunned—but on the continents of Africa and Asia, rabies is still common and means certain death. The nearest hospital for Waatu was a five-hour drive away on a very rocky track. Usually less than one vehicle a day passed through Maikona.

“And now I have a question for you,” Waatu said. “What can I do about *dudus*, the insects that crawl on my dogs and make them scratch?”

How do I reply? That the only thing that really works costs half the month’s profits from her store where she sells basic supplies like soap and sugar? There isn’t even toilet paper in this village. I tell her there is a tree called eucalyptus, and leaves placed where the dogs sleep will help. But there are no eucalyptus trees in Miakona. It’s obvious she’s disappointed.

I wondered what I would do if Dog and I lived here, and her fleas got out of hand. I knew locals used some herbal remedies for their dogs. I’d met a family earlier who’d strung some medicinal herbs around a dog’s neck to make her better. Did it work? I didn’t know. But the owners cared enough to try.

While we chatted, Waatu’s brother, Shamou Canchor, entered. Tall and good-looking, with a lean, muscular body, his smile flashed brightly. He listened to his sister, nodding his head in acknowledgment.

“I lost my dog once,” he interrupted. “I was so upset. What makes my home is my dog. That dog is the most important part of my life.”

The translator’s jaw dropped open. Not being a dog lover, or coming from a family who cared for dogs, he’d never heard such a thing. I smiled.

I asked to take a picture of Canchor with his dog. While walking to his hut where his dog was guarding, I got my camera ready. Gourage was waiting for Shamou near the



A Chilean man, who lost two dogs during the eruption of Mount Chaiten in 2008, carries 4-month-old Chupeti on an ash-filled harbor. In a situation reminiscent of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, the authority known as the *Municipalidad* ordered residents to evacuate—without their pets. Almost immediately, the first rescue and evacuation of animals in Chile began. The man also cares for Latay and Morocho, two dogs whose owners never returned.

hut, and asked to be petted by wrapping himself excitedly around the tall man's legs. Shamou looked down at his black dog fondly, but did not touch the animal. The most important part of his life? It seemed unlikely.

But then Canchor began telling me a story about Gourage.

"Six months ago in January, the hottest time of the year, we were making arrangements for our wedding. We had been on the move, searching for better grazing for our animals. With all the wedding preparations, everything was chaotic. Somehow, I did not notice Gourage was missing. I looked everywhere. Without him, what would I do? I had to find him. The morning after my wedding I gave my new wife instructions on what to feed Gourage if he came back," he said, and pointed to a multitude of food containers hanging from leather cords along the wall. All the vessels are hand-woven and covered with goat fat to prevent any liquid from seeping out.

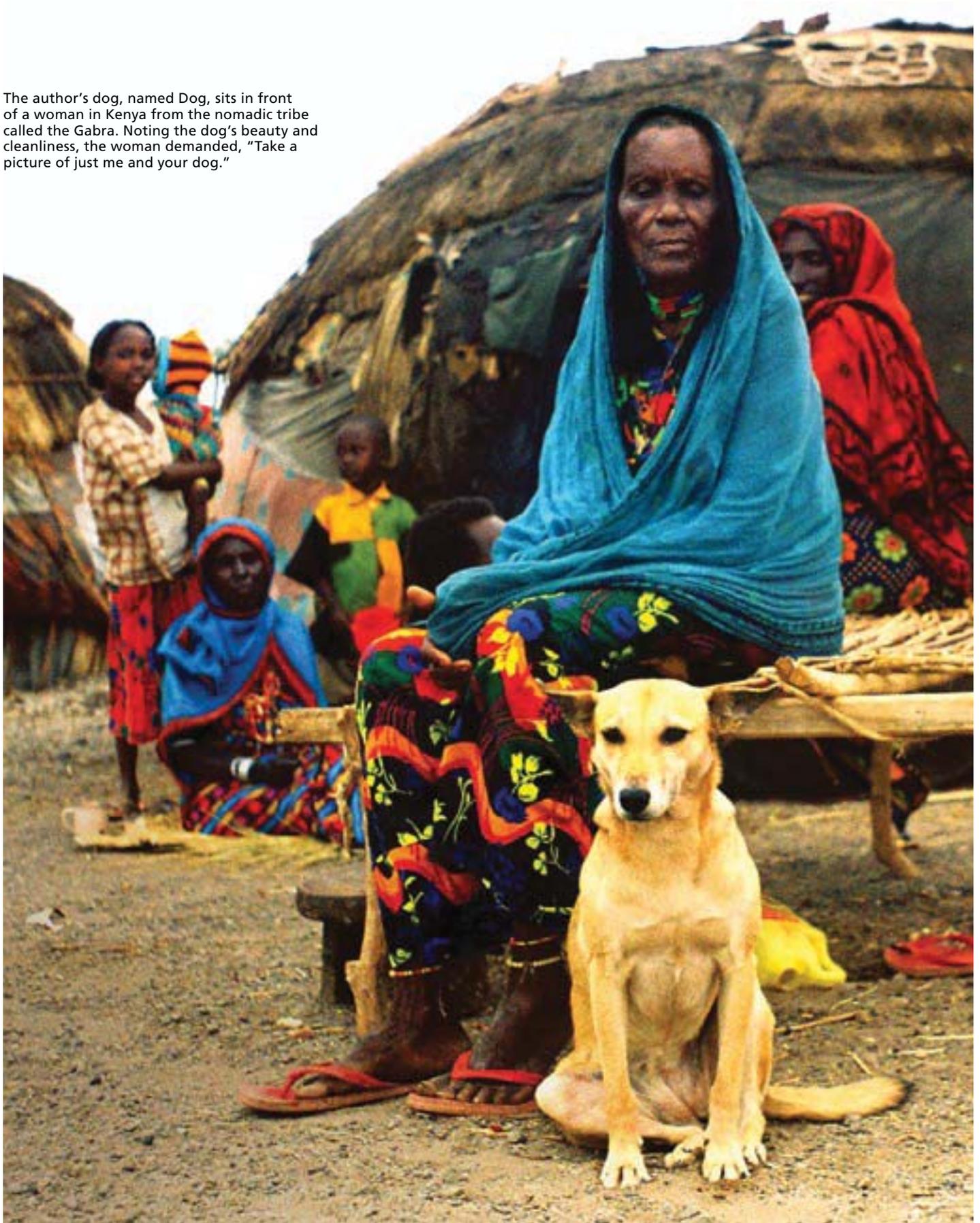
"I began walking in the direction where we had last camped. After two days I met a man. He had seen Gourage, and somehow knew the dog belonged to someone who loved him. The man had taken him in. I was so happy to find Gourage! But he was very, very weak. He had walked for miles without food or water during the hottest time of the year. I do not know what I would have done if he had died. My life would not be worth living ..."

While traveling in Latin America, I continued to be perplexed when seeing dogs greeted unenthusiastically by their people—until I viewed a few revealing and private moments. Just after a typical noncommittal exchange, one man walked inside his home. Just before the gate closed, he reached down to pet his dog. Once attuned to this, I kept my eyes open. Repeat performances followed between other people and their animals. The conflict between public and private displays of affection was not isolated to my American childhood.

I also commonly saw dogs walking to heel without leashes—even on busy streets. Some modern training methods teach us to keep an aloof attitude when returning home to ensure the dog owner is the pack leader. As our lives in the West have become more hectic, could it be that we have forgotten these age-old animal training methods and lost some basic intuitive connections with animals?

Surrounded by strays from childhood to old age, people in some other cultures develop a high tolerance for mutts who pee, poop, carouse, and mate in public. As I ordered food from a street stall in Bolivia, I was the only one who seemed to notice two dogs bumping into people as they mated enthusiastically. Usually the most attention this warrants is someone waving their hands to shoo dogs away. Loose canines are interwoven into the fabric of Asian, African, and Latin societies in a way they're not in America.

The author's dog, named Dog, sits in front of a woman in Kenya from the nomadic tribe called the Gabra. Noting the dog's beauty and cleanliness, the woman demanded, "Take a picture of just me and your dog."





A Kuna woman enjoys a moment on the waterfront with her beloved dog Estrella, or Star, on one of the San Blas Islands in the Caribbean.

And yet a comment I've repeatedly heard from tourists is: "All these loose dogs. No one cares!"

Is that true? Do cultures that have loose dogs equate with an uncaring populace? Or could it just mean that people are involved in their own lives, just as many Americans are so involved with work that they're not involved in animal rescue, even though they have pets?

In America, people take in one or two animals, rarely more. (Perhaps the readers of this magazine are an exception to the rule!) But in Chile, where I now live, it's not uncommon to see animal lovers taking in five to 10 animals, knowing that city officials might eliminate excess animals from the streets with a "cleanup" campaign, culling by poison or other methods. Audiences often gasp when I mention this during speaking engagements. Barring the fact that poison is an inhumane method of euthanasia, is this public killing perhaps more honest than our way: killing animals behind doors in shelters, privately, so that our communities rarely have to confront the issue? In other countries, the public cannot pretend not to know what happens to loose dogs. Ask average Americans about the animal homelessness issue: Many won't know our euthanasia numbers are still in the millions.

Stories abound of well-meaning tourists or aid workers "saving" dogs from the street, without realizing the animal might already have a home. Unlike canines in the Northern Hemisphere who live within strict property lines, many foreign dogs are allowed to come and go at will. "Gringos" often consider this irresponsible ownership. Might a dog's opinion differ? Having a life outside the human family was



"My dogs get lonely without me," says Waatu, a Gabra woman in Northern Kenya who is never apart from her four dogs. "And I get lonely without them."

how American dogs from a bygone era once lived. Family hounds socialized freely with other neighborhood mutts during the day, returning home to collect scraps from the table in exchange for guard duties.

Guarding is a role dogs know well. In many countries, you can't call 911, and police offer minimal protection. Instead, people rely on dogs. In America, when an aggressive dog fails a temperament test, he could be euthanized. In other countries, an overly aggressive dog would be rewarded. The fear of dogs we find so prevalent in other societies also dates back to a not-so-distant past when dogs served a useful but morbid scavenger role by eating dead bodies, in addition to spreading diseases and carrying rabies. While we perceive other cultures' fear of dogs as excessive, it makes sense in context.

As we work toward improved conditions for animals all over the globe, we need to make sure that we don't have on cultural "blindness." There are reasons that people behave in the ways they do, and the more we understand those reasons, the more we can do to identify and solve genuine animal welfare problems.

In Chile, pet cemeteries abound. One just south of Iquique lies at the foot of the Atacama mountains and overlooks the Pacific Ocean. Thousands of beloved pets have been buried there since 2004, some with elaborate tombstones, others very simple. One reads, "To the great friend Polo, who believed he was a child. You gave us much happiness and sorrow. We'll always love you." The bond between people and animals can never be broken. Love of animals is not a purely Western value; it is universal. **AS**

After twelve years living in Africa and the Middle East as a writer and photographer, Lorraine Chittock returned to America with two Kenyan street dogs. In 2006 the pack began exploring South America to produce Los Mutts — Latin American Dogs. They currently live in Chile. Chittock's books, including the recently released On a Mission from Dog, can be found at lorrainechittock.com.