

The BBC series *The Dog's Tale* was a huge investigation into the relationship between people and dogs across the globe. Here, *Dog's Tale* director Prataap Rughani gives an inside account of the programme's production



Photos by Prataap Rughani

# FROM DOG TO GOD

Professor Laurence Stager scratched away the dry earth until white enamel teeth glistened in the late afternoon sunlight. Archaeologists, uncovering the ancient city of Ashkelon, on the edge of the Gaza strip, had been intrigued to discover the remains of a dog buried carefully on its side with its paws flexed and tail tucked neatly between its legs. As they combed the site, they found another, and yet another, until the expedition uncovered more than seven hundred dogs in a unique dog cemetery.

It was an historic find revealing that, for a short time during the Persian period, dogs in Ashkelon were honoured with burial in a cemetery bigger than anything discovered in the ancient world. How had dogs suddenly attained a status that commanded special burials?

Archaeologists speculate that the dog had come to hold a ritual significance for the people of Ashkelon roughly between 450 and 400 BC, and that a cult grew up linked to the Phoenician gods Reseph-Mukol and Tanit. Dogs were kept in temples and formed part of a healing cult. "Presumably, the dog became associated with healing because of the curative powers evident from licking its own

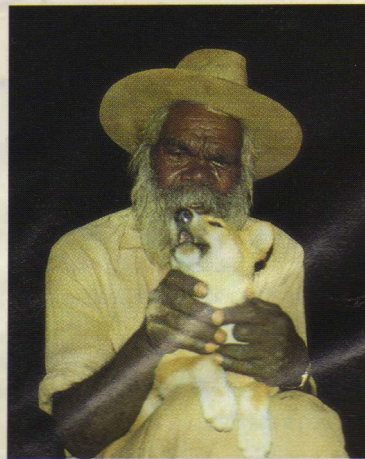
wounds or sores," Professor Stager suggests.

Dogs of this period had been integrated into the broader family of humankind and had risen, briefly, to the new status of "sacred animal". The archaeological dig made a strong historical point for the film but to explore how dogs are intertwined with religious belief today, we had to find communities where the letters d-o-g are still reversed to make god.

Zoroastrianism is an ancient Persian religion whose sacred rituals involve the dog as a chief participant in death ceremonies. There is a substantial and tightly knit community of Zoroastrians living in Bombay. They are well-known for their suspicion of journalists and jealous protection of their traditions so we needed to find a high priest who would explain the role of the dog to us and allow us to film a ritual.

## INSIDE STORY

One of the challenges of documentary filming is to enable people to describe their experience naturally in their own environment. It would have been easy to get an outside expert to tell us what they thought was happening. However, there would then have been no authentic feel about the lives of people whose



understanding of the religious qualities of the dog shape their beliefs. We approached the High Priests, explaining what we were exploring in the series, hoping that they would see our work as a useful resource in the future. We secured an interview but the trickier part was finding a way of showing dogs at a religious ceremony without invading the privacy of the ritual. Would the presence of a non-Zoroastrian film crew defile the ceremony?

The solution we found was to film at a Zoroastrian seminary where young boys training for the priesthood were learning their ceremonial responsibilities. The priests here became enthusiastic about the project, seeing it as a way

to rekindle community interest in Zoroastrian rites.

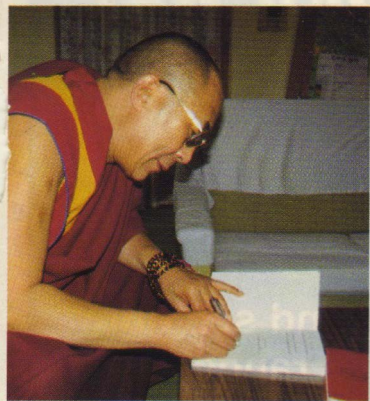
The effort paid off well when the High Priest, an impressive figure with a white turban and a broad grey beard, warmed to the theme. "A dog's life is cherished above other animals. The scriptures say that killing a dog could only be atoned for by killing 10,000 cats, 10,000 snakes, 10,000 tortoises, 20,000 frogs, 20,000 ants and 10,000 earthworms and flies," he said. He quoted religious poetry paying homage to the various "personalities" of dogs and finally proclaimed that "the dog is next to a human in importance".

He explained how dogs are essential to rites of passage: "In a funeral ceremony, only the dog will know if a person has really died. We bring the dog to a corpse and wait for its reaction."

If negotiations for filming with the Zoroastrians were difficult, they were nothing compared to the complexities of arranging to film on Aboriginal land.

For the Walpiri people of central Australia, the Dingo is a creator of the Aboriginal world. The land itself was believed to be formed during the mythological life of the Dreamtime Dingo and a few families survive today who continue the





sacred line of "Dingo dreaming". The stories about the exploits of Dingo are an Aboriginal key to understanding the world, handed down in ceremonies that wind a double thread of spiritual and practical bonds between Dingoes and Walpiri people. Some stories are only told by men, others by women and some should only be heard by a certain group. We also had to debate carefully with the Aboriginal elders who were concerned that pictures taken of them might capture their spirits.

### RARE PRIVILEGE

As far as we know, this is the first time outsiders had been allowed to film this rare religious ceremony in a culture that had developed radically different ways of relating to people and dogs.

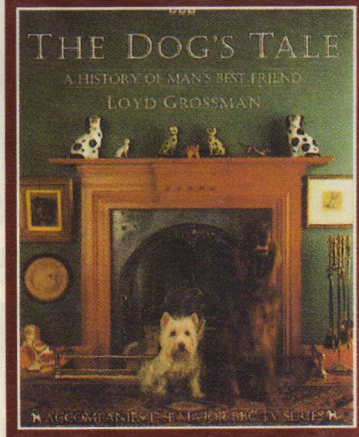
Other religious orders have been inspired by their canine companions. Augustine monk St Bernard founded a hospice in the 11th century and his followers bred variations of the Molossian Mastiff which became talented rescuers in the snow-swept Alps. The Dalmatian became a symbol of the 13th century Christian Dominican order which was appointed to moderate Papal inquisitions. The ruthlessness with which the monks in

their black and white habits carried out the task earned them the nickname Domini canes or 'Sleuthhounds of the Lord'.

In Tibetan Buddhist belief, dogs are closely linked to us in an interdependent web of life. His Holiness the Dalai Lama told us how, through rebirth, the dog's consciousness had developed over many lifetimes and had great potential for bonding and communicating. The temple dogs seen in Buddhist monasteries had a special connection with the monks. The Dalai Lama said, "I had a suspicion that my dog Sangye was a reincarnated monk who had died of starvation. He was always hungry and showed no interest in the opposite sex!"

Whether reviled as a demon or worshipped as a god, dogs today are a mirror of our thought structure. They reflect back to us the image of our fantasies, prejudices and contradictory beliefs. ■

*The Dog's Tale* by Loyd Grossman, written to accompany the TV series and published by BBC Books is available from most book shops, or can be ordered by completing the coupon on page 47.



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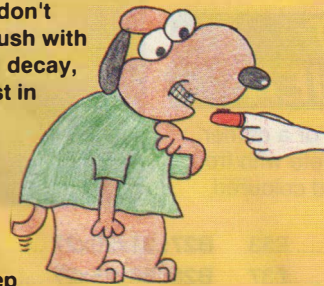


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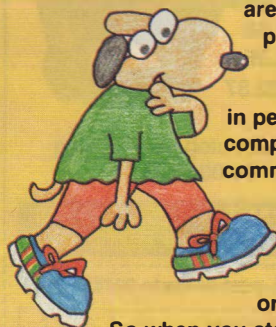
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