

A HISTORY OF AFRICAN HAIKU

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Introduction

Haiku in Africa is growing nowadays. And as a ‘new’ art finding roots in Africa, credit could be given to Sono Uchida (a prominent Japanese haiku poet and diplomat) in Senegal, who 30 years ago initiated a haiku contest in the French language, which in those days was the only international haiku contest on the African continent. And afterward, also promoted haiku in Morocco (as an ambassador) among other places to which he was posted. Being a haikuist himself, he founded The International Association of Haiku, Japan with his friends in 1989 to support the development of cultural and human exchanges through the works of haiku.

During his three-and-a-half year’s mission as an ambassador of Japan, he had always felt that Senegal would be a very fertile ground for the growth of haiku. The image of the Senegalese people adapting to the nature reminded him of the traditional life of the Japanese people that the contemporary world starts to forget. According to Sono Uchida, it was the belief of haiku poets in Japan that nature does not belong to men, but instead, it was men who belong to nature. In that respect, men should always revere nature and live in harmony with it.

His haiku pursuit in Senegal was supported by the first President of Senegal, His Excellency Leopold Sedar Senghor, who was also a great friend of haiku.

In 1980 Uchida wrote this haiku during his stay in Dakar:

firmament covered
of Saharan dust
white sun does not move.

(translated from the original Japanese, source unknown)

Haiku Activities in West African Countries

Haiku activities in West Africa for the past four years have been dominated and championed for the most part by Ghanaian and Nigerian poets in international circles, primarily through regular posting on various haiku societies' and associations' websites, on social media platforms, and by participating in international contest and kukai, with some of their haiku taking the topmost, runner ups and honorable mention positions. Mention can be made of early African haiku poets like Nana Fredua Agyeman (Ghana), Jacob Kobina Ayiah Acquah (Ghana), and Emmanuel Jakpa (Nigeria), all of whom had written and published in journals, and later Emmanuel-Abdalmasih Samson of Nigeria, who invented what he termed "mirror haiku," a technique that would be found in many other haiku cultures around the world.

Here are few samples of their early published haiku in various journals around the world:

the swift's home
in the wall—
painted over

—Nana Fredua Agyeman, Ghana (*Simply Haiku* 4.4)

empty matchboxes
scattered in the mud
my new community

—Jacob Kobina Ayiah Mensah, Ghana (*Ambrosia* 4)

harmattan
cracking green buds
from a tree

—Emmanuel Jakpa, Nigeria (*Shamrock* 15)

walking in the rain
umbrellas sing counterpoint
August concerto

August concerto
umbrellas sing counterpoint
walking in the rain

—Emmanuel Sampson Abdalmasih, *Facebook Notes* (Mirror Haiku Series), 31-08-2011

Among the contemporary *haijin* who followed these early advocates, and who remain front-runners of African haiku, are Adjei Agyei-Baah (Ghana), Celestine Nudanu (Ghana), Kwaku Feni Adow (Ghana), Kojo Turson (Ghana), Emmanuel Jessie Kalusian (Nigeria), Barnabas Ìkéólúwa Adélékè (Nigeria) and Precious Oboh (Nigeria), all of whose work appears regularly in prominent journals and among winners in international contests.

roasting sun
the egret's measured steps
in buffalo shadow

— Adjei Agyei-Baah (*The Heron's Nest* XVIII.1, *The Heron's Nest* Award 2016)

blackout evening
the moon lights up
outdoor conversation

—Kwaku Feni Adow (Babishaiku Contest 2016, First Prize)

midday shower
a cow's hoofprint quenches
the dove's thirst

—Barnabas Ikeoluwa Adeleke (*Cattails* May 2016, Editor's Choice Haiku)

the homeless man
tides up his new residence
approaching storm

—Emmanuel Kalusian (Vladimir Devide Haiku Contest 2015, Commended)

after the storm
the homelessness
of fallen leaves

—Turkson Adu Darkwa (5th Japan-Russia Haiku Contest 2016, Winner, Akita International University President's Award)

harmattan moon
a leafless tree leans on
its shadow

—Celestine Nudanu (5th Japan-Russia Haiku Contest 2016, Honorable Mention)

ballad of the moon—
virgins painted
in primary colours

—Precious Oboh (*The Heron's Nest* XVIII,3)

dinner with family—
thread by thread
okra slime ties our hands

—Justice Joseph Prah (*Mamba Haiku Journal* II)

Haiku Activities in East African Countries

Haiku activities in Kenya emerged strongly from around 2006, spurred by Dr Gabi Greve in Japan, the Director of the Worldkigo Database, and Susumu Takiguchi, Chairperson of the World Haiku Club. Isabelle Prondzynski, a member of the World Haiku Club, founded Kenya Saijiki, an internet discussion forum collecting a *kigo* database (i.e. *saijiki*) for Kenya and similar tropical regions, in early 2006 under the direction of Dr Greve. The group began with some 100 members with six local co-ordinators, and it has stabilised and grown from there.

The existence of Kenya Saijiki provided a foundation for the country's poets to grasp the aesthetics of haiku art and thus to be able to write about their local seasons, their immediate environment and their culture, which they shared on the world stage through participation in competitions and contributions to journals, blogs and magazines. It is to be noted that haiku is included as part of the national curriculum for Kenyan secondary schools.

Isabelle Prondzynski also initiated the Haiku Clubs of Nairobi, with Patrick Wafula, a Kenyan teacher, as coordinator of these clubs. Wafula (the 2010 Shiki Kukai runner-up awardee and a professional teacher at Bahati Community Centre as well as a member of Kenyasaijiki) and Caleb Mutua (a gifted Kenyan haikai and journalist, who became the first Kenyan to be published in Shamrock Haiku Journal in 2011) are among the leading lights of Kenyan haiku.

full moon —
cumulus clouds
slowly form a wolf
—Patrick Wafula (Shiki Kukai 2010)

on the campus lawn,
fresh anthills surrounded
by fresh mushrooms
—Caleb Mutua (*Shamrock* 18)

The Haiku Clubs of Nairobi regularly invite new *haikai* to join, and have thus passed on their love of haiku to ever-new populations over the past ten years. They meet at least twice yearly in an all-day kukai. They now have active members in several regions of Kenya, as well as writing haiku when travelling to neighbouring countries.

The Japan Information and Culture Centre attended the very first meeting of Kenya Saijiki in 2006, and in recent years has been supportive in inviting members of Kenya Saijiki to cultural events providing information about Japan.

sunny savanna
the lion starts to yawn
then roars
—Mercy Ikuri, Kenya (5th Japan-Russia Haiku Contest 2016, Honorable Mention)

Maasai village
cattle bells awakening
the dawn
—Mercy Ikuri, Kenya (*Asahi Haikuist Network*, January 6, 2017)

Though not much is known about haiku activities in other East African countries, some individual poets have emerged on the international scene:

a committee
gathers in celebration
dying buffalo

—Nshai Waluzimba, Zambia (The 17th HIA Haiku Contest 2015, Honorable Mention)

monsoon rain
rinse the beggar's eyes
clearer petitions

—Roundsquare Chomulet, Somalia (*Mamba Haiku Journal* 1)

the bully walks slow
to the principal's office
second time this week

—Judy McIntosh, Tanzania ("Our Daily Online Haiku," *USToday.com* January, 2003)

Recent haiku activity from the East African region includes the founding of the Babishaiku Contest, organized in 2016 by Babishai Niwe Poetry Foundation, a Ugandan-based NGO dedicated to the promotion of African poetry, founded by Beverley Nambozo Nsengiyunva. The Foundation organized the 2nd international haiku contest solely for Africans to promote haiku. Its first contest was judged by Adjei Agyei-Baah, a Ghanaian poet with an international reputation who is also the co-founder of Africa Haiku Network.

Haiku Activities in South African Countries

Haiku emergence in the South/southern part of Africa might similarly have been inspired by the activities of Japanese ambassadors and visiting Western lecturers/professors.

Dennis Brutus, for instance, during an early visit to China in 1973, was influenced by haiku. And as a political racial advocate employed this terse poetic genre to communicate his intimate moments of his memories of a love lost, fleeting and a wish for reclamation:

That gentle touch on
your cheek many years from now:
ashes from my urn.

(Source: Dennis Brutus Collection at Worcester State College, Worcester, Massachusetts, Publications and Printing Services Worcester State College Press Third Edition 2010)

Similar mention can be made of the enormous contribution of Ted Goossen, a professor from the York University with a specialty in Modern and Contemporary Japanese Literature, who brought Japan's culture to Zimbabwe through public and academic lectures, on subjects as diverse as the tea ceremony and ancestor worship to writing haiku. Goossen's lectures yielded results, as he returned to his country with some delectable African haiku written by his students as a memoir:

In the middle of the night
Two frogs are croaking
At least I have some company
—Cynthia Chigiya, Zimbabwe

A pool of water
Covered with wings
Where did the flying termites go?¹
—Takvra Whande, Zimbabwe

Falling raindrops
Flying *ishwa*
Companions on a chameleon's tongue
—anonymous

On the fallen leaves
The grasshopper squats
Praying for rain
—anonymous

In South Africa at least six *haijin* have published work. Once vibrant on the scene in late '90s was Wilhelm Haupt, who wrote in Afrikaans and published in the Netherlands. One of his early haiku published in a Dutch journal is:

Daddy, come quick and look:
The sky is so full of
God's foot prints.
—Wilhelm Haupt (*Vuursteen* 1998/3)

Moira Richards (George, Eastern Cape) writes mostly tanka and linked verse. She once served as *renku* editor for *Simply Haiku*, and a co-convenor of the annual online festival of women's poetry in South Africa. Some of her pieces among other *renku* participants can be found here:

a crusted pier
points to where
the moon just was
—Moira Richards (*A Hundred Gourds* 4:2)

Gus Ferguson is an African cartoonist, editor and pharmacist from Cape Town, South Africa. He edited the poetry journal, *Carapace*. A typical example of his verse is found below:

Gus Ferguson should be martyred
But not with wood and nails
he should be wrapped in lettuce leaves
and thrown amongst his snails.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gus_Ferguson)

1. Rainflies/*ishwa* are termites which grow wings in the evening after it has been raining. During the day they lose the wings and go underground.

Steve Shapiro writes lovely haiku as well as *haiga*, and has published two haiku books, *In A Borrowed Tent* (1994) and *Of Little Consequence* (2007):

Through a hole
in a borrowed tent
the Milky Way
(*In A Borrowed Tent*)

Collecting mushrooms
my knife blade reflecting mist
swirling through the pines
(*Of Little Consequence*)

Dr. Marie Heese published *Haiku for Africa* in 2014 (Unisa Press, South Africa) and excerpts the collection can be read below:

faith
small beetle, huge ball of dung
he rolls it, thrusting it with the finest sand

after birth
nobody told her, she will carry the child
for the rest of her life

long live the king
vultures are circling just to frustrate them
I shall survive one more day

Daniel Hugo, an Afrikaans poet occasionally writes haiku in Afrikaans. He was a specialist announcer/producer for Radiosondergrense, the national Afrikaans radio, and was also responsible for the literary programmes “Leeskring” and “Vers en Klank”. He was also an editor at the publishing house Protea Boekhuis. Below are sample pieces of his random written haiku:

o haiku without
nature and the seasons:
frog without pool

o haiku without
counted syllables:
spring without swallows

haikoewêreldjie:
only seventeen steps to
the top of Fuji

the rooster has a daily
break notch in his throat, he crows
get dawn color

A poet from South Africa whose haiku began appearing in journals in 2015 or so is Clifford W Lindemann of Broederstroom. Among his most recent publications are:

Dusk and the moon
smiles at the evening star
Venus blinks
(*Asabi haikuist Network*, December 30, 2016)

My grandson
greeted the fridge first
last night's chicken
(*Asabi haikuist Network*, January 6 Issue, 2017)

Other haikuists from Southern African countries recorded in contests and journals include:

a committee
gathers in celebration
dying buffalo
—Nshai Waluzimba, Zambia (The 17th HIA Haiku Contest 2015, Honorable Mention)

I looked around me
In the middle of the street
Suddenly I am lost.
—Jacob Nthoiwa, Botswana (University of Botswana English Department, 2003)

African summer
elephants trumpet
in the dusty plains
—Rakotomahefa Diamondra, Madagascar (*The Heron's Nest* XVII.3)

they roam hand in hand
in their deep connectedness
our thoughts and our minds
—Lize Bard, Namibia (Haiku out of Africa, <https://wandererhaiku.wordpress.com/>
November 29, 2016)

The above haiku and books demonstrate the presence of haiku in South/Southern African countries but no significant activities had been recorded yet on countries such as Angola, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, and Swaziland.

Haiku Activities in North African Countries

Haiku has not remained solely in the heartland of Africa but has traveled to North African countries as well. The aforementioned Sono Uchida served as Japanese ambassador to Morocco as well, where he initiated a haiku contest that might have been the first haiku competition to have emerged from the Arab world.

In spite of this, haiku is still a relatively ‘new’ practice in Arabic literature. The first book of haiku translated from the Japanese appeared in 2010 by a Syrian writer Muhammad Adimah. Though most Arab haiku poets use the three short lines structure, this has not always been considered a strict rule. Literary critics in the Arab world have not reached an agreement yet whether the haiku written by young poets can be considered a new form of poetry or merely a different name for (the already popular) flash fiction. In July 2015, *Poetry Letters Magazine* [“A study on Arabic Haiku,” *Poetry Letters Magazine* (Arabic ed.), No. 3, 2015, p. 47-54; *Poetry Letters Magazine* (Arabic ed.), No. 3, July 2015, “special issue (“The Arabic Haiku”)] acknowledged Arabic haiku as a distinct form of poetry by publishing, for the first time, haiku by 11 Arab poets from Syria, Morocco, Iraq, Jordan, and Tunisia.

The 11th World Haiku Association Japan Conference and the 5th World Haiku Seminar (April 29, 2016, Itabashi Green Hall, Tokyo) included poet Abdelkader Jamoussi, an envoy of the Moroccan Embassy in Japan, who discussed the development of haiku in Morocco, and announced the 2nd Morocco Haiku Seminar, to be held in July. His paper “Is Arab Haiku Possible?” explains the poetic tradition of the Arab world and the wide possibility of future of haiku there.

Examples of haiku from Northern African countries include:

scorching sun . . .
a leaf in search
of a shadow

—Ali Znaidi, Tunisia (*The Mamba Haiku Journal II*)

Another lemon tree
In another country
My gazes are desires

—Mohammed Bennis, Morocco (*World Haiku 2007* No.3)

Carefully picked spot
Cat sleeping in the garden
Caressed by the Sun

—Talib, Morocco (<https://talibhaiku.com/>)

There also exist haiku poems written in Arabic (and yet to be translated into English) from Arab poets from Syria, Morocco, Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia to be found in *Poetry Letters Magazine* (Arabic ed.), No. 3, July 2015, “special issue” (The Arabic Haiku). Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan, and Western Sahara still remain a greenfield where haiku seeds have yet to drop.

Ali Znaidi is a Tunisian secondary school English teacher and Arabic translator whose haiku and other Japanese poetry forms have been prominent on the international scene recently, appearing in many international journals and placing in contests as well. Below is some of his best-known work:

full sunshine . . .
rainbow perishing into
butterflies

Grand Prize, Non-Japanese Division, 8th Yamadera Bashō Memorial Museum English
Haiku Contest

sirocco . . .
a bird bathing
in the camel's urine

The International Matsuo Bashō Award 4th Edition 2016, Honorable Mention

cancer survivor . . .
a flower sipping
the dew

European Quarterly Kukai #14

full moon . . .
the weight of
the blood donor's joy

Croatia Blood Donation Haiku Contest 2015, High Commendation

Other Random Items

Richard Wright, a black America author discovered haiku in 1959 when the South African Beat poet Sinclair Beiles handed him R.H. Blyth's four-volume *Haiku*. This new poetic genre came as a revelation to him. Wright specialist Jianqing Zheng writes, "Immediately after Beiles's introduction, there was an enthusiastic intensity of haiku writing in Wright's life in Paris. Wright was 'completely incapable of stopping' his new obsession with haiku though he was very sick at the time." Wright seems to have had no other source of information about haiku and no one with whom to discuss his work. Still, Wright produced some 4,000 haiku, 817 of which were selected by the poet himself for publication.

His watershed collection, *Haiku: This Other World*, appeared in print, however, only in 1998.

Formation of Haiku Societies and Associations in Africa

Haiku's spread in Africa can be observed not only in publications but through the formation of societies and associations as well. Haiku activities seem to have spread faster in West Africa compared to the other sub-regions. Senegal most likely formed the first haiku society in Africa, since the Embassy of Japan in Senegal has records of a haiku contest dating back to 1979. This contest is widely recognized as a Senegalese cultural events, and 2017 marks the 30th year it has been held. Participants from previous contest had been from various countries but with mostly a greater representation coming from Senegal and Cameroon.

Senegal has a tradition of "short talk" poetry, with no rule relating to syllable count as in haiku, but with rhyme and rhythm repeated, and engaging in much word play. Such poems

were recited at occasions such as weddings and baptisms. The Japanese Embassy saw an opportunity to connect traditional Japanese and Senegalese cultures by encouraging the creation of haiku in relation to the traditional oral poetry in West Africa.

The second such association was perhaps the Nigeria Haiku Society, formed in 2004 by Jerry S. Adesewo. The society, recognized and duly certified by the Association of Nigerian Authors, was officially inaugurated on June 2, 2005 by the then-Japanese Ambassador to Nigeria, Mr. Akio Tanaka, at his residence, during the prize-giving ceremony of the 1st Haiku Poetry Contest organized in collaboration with an Abuja-based edutainment outfit, Arojah Concepts, for FCT Schools. It has since ceased activity.

A third such organization is the Ghana Haiku Society (GHS), founded by Adjei Agyei-Baah and Celestine Nudanu in 2016 with sole aim of promoting haiku in Ghana and making it an acceptable new poetic genre in literature studies in both high schools and universities.

July 2015 saw the birth of “African Haiku Network” by two young Africans, Emmanuel Jessie Kalusian, a Nigerian ICT instructor with specialties in computer programming and networking, and Adjei Agyei-Baah, a Ghanaian lecturer from the University of Ghana Distance Learning Center, Kumasi Campus, with the purpose of promoting and teaching haiku in Africa. In February, 2016 *The Mamba Haiku Journal*, Africa’s first international haiku voice, was launched, bringing the global haiku community’s attention to haiku growth in Africa. Even before that, mention must be made of Nana Fredua-Agyeman’s blog, “Haiku from Ghana.” Fredua-Agyeman was one of the first Africans to be published in a Western journal (*Simply Haiku* 4.4, in 2006). Mention should also be made of Jacob Kobina Ayiah Mensah, Ghanaian editor of *Rough Sheet Tanka Journal*, who had written and published under the pseudonym “Sitting Mountain” who was published shortly thereafter (*Simply Haiku* 7.4, 2009).

Haiku Books / E-Books from Africa / Reviews

African haiku poets have not only achieved journal publication and winning contest awards and mentions, but have also put their poems into collection and anthologies either in e-print or hardcopy books. Below are a list of haiku books written by Africans or haiku about Africa written by foreigners:

Haiku for Awuku. Prince K. Mensah (Mensah Press, 2010)

Haiku Rhapsody. Celestine Nudanu (Nudanu Press, 2016)

AFRIKU. Adjei Agyei-Baah (Red Moon Press, 2016)

Bye, Donna Summer! Ali Znaidi (Fowlpox Press, 2014)

Moroccan Haiku. Sally Kendall (Blurb Books, 2010)

Of Little Consequence: Haiku. Steve Shapiro (Snail P. 2007)

Haiku for Africa. Marie Heese (Unisa Press, South Africa, 1997)

In A Borrowed Tent: Ninety nine haiku. Steve Shapiro (Firfield Pamphlet Press; 1st Edition, 1994)

Africa Haiku Journals and Reviews

The Mamba Haiku Journal (February 2016 – present)

Review of *Mamba Journal* I by Akwu Sunday Victor (2016)

Review of Haiku Activities in Ghana, 2016 by Justice Joseph Prah, UHTS Ambassador

Review of Adjei Agyei-Baah's *AFRIKU* (Red Moon Press, 2016) by Akwu Sunday Victor



Sources:

<https://kenyasaijiki.blogspot.co.ke/2006/12/african-haiku.html?m=1>

<https://kenyasaijiki.blogspot.com/2006/12/kenya-haiku-clubs.html>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiku_in_languages_other_than_Japanese

A study on Arabic Haiku, *Poetry Letters Magazine* (Arabic ed.), No. 3, 2015, p. 47-54

Poetry Letters Magazine (Arabic ed.), No. 3, July 2015, "special issue (the Arabic Haiku)

http://www.sn.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_ja/haiku2017.html

Acknowledgement:

The author is grateful to Patrick Wafula (Kenya), Maria Steyn (SA), and Charles Trumbull (US), for provision of research materials, and to all my haiku friends (Celestine Nudanu, Emmanuel Kalusian, and Joesph Justice Prah) at home who peer review this work.