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English-Language Haiku Poets Are Missing Out on All the Fun: Sociality in Haiku

by Richard Tice

This is how Kagami Shikō, a disciple of Matsuo Bashō, described the circumstances surrounding the composition of his master's most famous poem, published in 1686. Bashō was spending the spring in seclusion in his house, the Bashō-an, though he was as usual accompanied by many of his disciples.

One day...the rain was gently falling, the cooing of the pigeons was deep-throated, and the cherry blossoms were slowly falling in the soft wind. It was just the kind of day when one most regrets the passing of the third month. The sound of frogs leaping into the water could frequently be heard, and the Master, moved by this remarkable beauty, wrote the second and third lines of a poem about the scene: "A frog jumps in,/ The sound of the water" [*kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto*]. Kikaku, who was with him, suggested for the first line "The yellow roses" [*yamabuki ya*], but the Master settled on "The ancient pond" [*furuike ya*]. (Keene, *World* 88-89; Japanese phrases added)

If Shikō's account can be trusted, Bashō did not initially compose the first line but was open for suggestions. The poem supposedly could have been "Yellow roses! / A frog jumps in /

the sound of water.” In relating Shikō’s account, Maeda Cana claims that this is one of four different extant versions of the poem, another having some different written characters and one more using *tondaru* instead of *tobikomu* (xxix). Presumably the phrase *furuike ya* was Bashō’s, though in this account it is not really clear—he *settled on* the phrase.

Mukai Kyorai, another prominent disciple of Bashō, in his work *Conversations with Kyorai* (Kyorai-shō), relates a similar story about a verse by Nozawa Bonchō, but with a more humorous result:

<i>Shimokyō ya</i>	Shimokyō!
<i>Yuki tsumu ue no</i>	On the piled-up snow
<i>Yo no ame</i>	The night rain.

[*Shimokyō was a very quiet district of Kyoto.*]

This verse at first lacked an opening line, and everyone from the Master downward tried to think of one. At length the Master settled on the above line. Bonchō said “yes” to it, but still didn’t seem satisfied.

The Master said, “Bonchō, why don’t you think of a better opening line? If you do, I’ll never write another *haiku*.”

Kyorai said, “Anyone can see how good a line it is, but it’s not so easy to appreciate that no other line would do.” (381; paragraphing added)

I suspect most of us readers today cannot “see how good a line” *Shimokyō ya* is, and we might wish for a different opening line that did not name a place we don’t know, but at the time that district in Kyōtō must have had a distinctive reputation, enough to make it just right.

These two anecdotes, however unrelated, show some typical features of older Japanese *renku* composition, *renku* being a modern term referring to all forms of linked verse as well as modern linked poetry. Composing could be done solitarily

but more often was done at poetry gatherings, aloud and in the presence of others. The composition could also be subject to the input of others, especially if a master or teacher were present, resulting in a poem with words from someone other than the primary author. Japanese haiku composition has become more solitary as it has entered the modern era, but I still remember watching some haiku shows on NHK, Japan National Public Broadcasting, that featured two recognized haiku poets giving a topic for haiku composition and then reading, commenting on, and judging the poems submitted by the audience. Invariably, one of the judges would suggest different wording or even change lines of some of the poems outright. In the practice of *tensaku* (ten, accompany, garnish, append; *saku*, whittle, pare), or correction, writing submitted to experts for improvement or publication is revised with the expectation that the author accepts all changes (see Michael Dylan Welch's experience with this in "Sax Riffs and the Art of Tensaku").

In contrast, American haiku writers follow the Western concept of writing as a lonely, or solitary, activity, to be shared when the author is ready for input, though most writers probably hope that input equals complete acceptance, while being resigned to endure some criticism. Furthermore, most English-language haiku meetings, I think, are discussion- and critique-oriented, in which the poets present poems they have written alone beforehand. Even in workshops, where some hands-on writing takes place, poets generally write singly and silently, the results to be shared later, or not at all. In Western convention, editing may sometimes be social but writing is solitary.

In the examples of Bonchō's and Bashō's poems above, what is not obvious is that they were participating in writing linked verse, the form known as *haikai*, or *haikai no renga*, with Bashō as the judge, or *sabaki*. *Haikai* was the primary form of poetry poets from Bashō to Issa wrote and the most popular form until the late 1800s; the individual poems we read of these poets were mostly *hokku*, the first verse of *haikai*, retroactively

called haiku, which, like *renku*, is a modern term for both the independent short form of today and the *hokku*—first verse—of previous generations. Outside of the poetry in his diaries, like the travelogue *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*), Bashō wrote collaborative, social poetry, as did Buson, Chiyoni, Issa, and other poets up to the Meiji Era (1868). Even many of the poems in his travel diaries, perhaps most or even all of them, were composed initially at haikai gatherings held while he stayed at his stop. The gatherings were generally not mentioned in the travelogues, but they were nonetheless held. It is not clear to me when haiku began to be written independently, that is, not as part of linked poetry, though I suspect that much of Issa's enormous body of work was written as *hokku* but actually never used in linked verse.

Frequently, even a few times every week for masters like Bashō, poets would gather for a *haikai* writing session; this was a popular social pastime. If possible, gatherings would include a master or teacher with some of his followers, which was not always possible in countryside towns. In *renga*, the courtly, classical form of linked verse that dominated Japanese poetry from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, the composing party would include a judge (*sabaki*), a scribe, and often seven or eight participants, including the host. The host provided the accommodations for the gathering and had the honor of providing the second link *wakiku*, subject to the judge's approval. If the host intended to use the poem for an offering at a religious or governmental site, he could provide the *hokku*; otherwise, the master or teacher, as the guest, usually provided the first verse, composed especially for the party, and served as the judge. The scribe actually played the central role in the *renga* session. When a participant proposed a verse, he signaled the scribe and recited the verse when the scribe indicated he was ready. The scribe repeated the verse out loud, checked it against the rules, and ensured that it linked only to the preceding verse. After discussion, if the master accepted it, the scribe recorded it and chanted it once more. The scribe could also participate in the composition (Horton 447-49, 462, 465).

Haikai participants followed *renga* procedures when possible, though greater freedom was acceptable. For example, in the Bashō collections of *haikai*, he often contributes the second link, not the first, even though he acted as judge otherwise. In one session with Issa as scribe, nineteen poets are represented in the resulting linked poem “With Discrimination” (*Funbetsu no*). Issa has two verses, and the master Somaru provided the second, not the first (Ueda 17-19).

The length of the linked poem was set at the beginning by consensus—thirty-six verses, known as the *kasen*, was the preferred length at the time of Bashō and later, though one hundred verses, the *hyakuin*, was the preferred length earlier. The fifty-verse, the twenty-verse, and the twelve-verse lengths were also composed frequently. Two-, three-, and four-verse poems by multiple authors were also popular but not considered *renga* or *haikai*. The verses alternated between seventeen and fourteen sound syllables, though that was a characteristic of Japanese poetry in general and not unique to *renku*. Each verse was written by the scribe as one line; the seventeen-syllable line would typically include parts of five, seven, five syllables, and the fourteen syllable line would typically include two seven-syllable parts. The composition was often a free-for-all—anyone could proffer a verse anywhere in the sequence—but it could also follow an order of poets determined beforehand. Sometimes, the first several stanzas were assigned to specific attendees so they could prepare some suitable possibilities and present them, still subject to help and comments from others (Horton 465). I often think that Japanese *renga* and *haikai* poets must have been fairly thick-skinned, over and above the rules about acceptable decorum and deference to the master. Nevertheless, we know that some poets were offended by others and some even broke with their masters. Even a master as revered and beloved as Bashō had disciples like Kikaku leave for a time.

The rules for the overall sequence and for each verse were grammatical, structural, and thematic, and the linking between the verses followed specific guidelines. Grammatical rules

might maintain that the *hokku* had to use a *kireji*, or cutting word like *kana* or *ya*, inside or at the end of the verse. The rules might stipulate a *-te* verb, which indicates present continuous, at the end of the third verse or a noun ending for the fourth verse. Verbs with *-keri* endings, like the present perfect *ochikeri* (have fallen), might be used only in 7-7 syllable verses (Miner 65, 300).

Structure means that the poems followed a *jo*, *ha*, *kyū* development, which can be interpreted as introduction, development (or scattering), and rapid resolution. A certain number of verses was allotted to each stage: *Jo* verses built up slowly, *ha* verses increased the pace, *kyū* verses swiftly ended the build-up, releasing tension in an uplifting tone. The structure was built with the help of the *sabaki*, who had to ensure constant change and avoid repetition of images and themes. He would often suggest a certain subject, tone, or level of verse as appropriate at that moment in composition, or contribute one of his own to nudge the poem in a desired direction (Horton 454-56).

Thematic guidelines required a season word for the *hokku*, as well as a focus on some facet of the place of composition. The *wakiku* might extend the image of or allude to the place, but the following verses did not. Seasons were established at certain junctures for a set number of verses, then a change to another season might be required, or movement to no season. Love was usually expected as a theme for two or three contiguous verses somewhere in the poem, sometimes in more than one short sequence. The subject or image had to vary from verse to verse, and even categories of images, such as botanical verses, should not continue more than two verses. Certain verses had to contain a reference to cherry blossoms or the moon, though the exact position was a point of disagreement among the instruction manuals. The number, however, was actually determined by the number of folio sheets used to record the verses: one cherry blossom image per page and one moon image per side. Other subjects might be suggested by the *sabaki* as the poem progressed (Horton 460; Keene 110-14; Miner 132-33).

The linking was key to the composition. A verse had to link, or connect, to the preceding verse in some way, but not to any other verse. Thus the poem progressed in pairs, one and two linked, two and three linked, three and four linked, and so on, but no links should exist between separated verses. The connections would be stipulated as *so* (light or distant) or *shin* (heavy or close), either by the *sabaki* or the scribe using the instruction manual he was entrusted with. The linking was never narrative but could be an extension of a scene, or use images related in some way, or employ literary reference through wording, allusion, or echoes. Word play as in *kotobazuke* (word continuation) was a common form of close linking, but feeling as in *kokorozuke* (feeling/heart continuation) was just as common (Keene, 110-114; Miner 74-75).

Bashō and his school linked by the “perfume” of the preceding verse, the overtones of the mood and atmosphere. Bashō’s criteria of haikai, expressed by such a word as *nioi* (perfume), were concerned with *renku* composition and the shifting of thought from one poet to the next, rather than with the qualities of a single verse. (Keene 114)

The types of *nioi* include the well-known aesthetics of *sabi* (loneliness), *wabi* (the patina of age), *karumi* (lightheartedness), *yūgen* (otherworldliness), *shibumi* (astringency), among others.

The guidelines may seem overly restrictive, but they served a number of functions, not entirely literary. *Renku* was considered performative art, so just as music is shaped by its strictures and rules, *haikai* and *renga* benefitted from, even depended on, its strictures and rules. *Renku* was also designed deliberately to be representational: one poem had to range in time and space throughout the world, and the rules forced it to do so. Of course there was the gamelike function of *renku* composition; *renku* was after all both art and game, so meeting the challenges posed by the rules to produce something noteworthy was enjoyable. The meeting was meant to be fun. Very important too was the comradery created

by the experience, very welcome during the centuries when Japan was plunged in constant strife and internal warfare. Sōgi, who lived at the height of Japan's civil wars, stressed the bonding that could occur: "Friends in linked verse are as close as cousins" (quoted and translated in Horton 479).

The title of this presentation says that English-language haiku poets have missed out on all the fun. That's not strictly true, though we have missed out on much of the fun. English-language haiku poets inherited the modern Japanese haiku represented by Masaoki Shiki and the older poems presented as if they were haiku only. In the 1970s and 1980s translations of famous *haikai* and *renga* began to appear, including the seminal publication of Japanese Linked Poetry by Earl Miner, and some English-language poets began to experiment and dabble in linked verse and thus delved into collaborative, social composition.

In 2000, William Higginson and Tadashi Kondō posted online their guidelines titled *Shorter Renku*, followed by the article *Link and Shift: A Practical Guide to Renku Composition*. Though Higginson and Kondō had previously worked on printed versions of the two articles for a decade, much of the content of the articles is related to the Global *Renku* Symposium held in Tokyo in 2000. These articles are now links in a home page Renku Home created by Higginson and maintained to about 2005, though some of the links no longer function. To me, the two articles seem to be similar to what a Japanese master might have developed for his instruction manual and used for his school to follow during poetry parties.

In Japan hundreds of instruction manuals for *renku* were published by masters who were seeking to establish and promulgate their schools, though many were also kept privately. Interestingly, there were great variety and differences among the manuals (Horton 446, 457-58). Because of that, I think *renku* practitioners have a great deal of flexibility in establishing and following rules and guidelines of their own. So, though Higginson and Kondō's treatises are more simplified than the Japanese treatises from the 1400s

to the 1700s, they still approach the richness and complexity of traditional *renga* and *haikai*. At any rate, the availability of resources online has enabled many poets to try their hands more easily at collaborative writing.

For about two decades, the symbiotic poetry journal *Lynx* was a major outlet for linked verse until 2014. There were also shorter-lived markets for linked verse such as *Simply Haiku* and *Journal of Renga & Renku*. Earlier, several haiku magazines had held capping line contests and published the results, including *Dragonfly*, edited first by Lorraine Ellis Harr and then by me. Nowadays, the Haiku Society of America holds a yearly *renku* contest. The Haiku Foundation ran *renku* sessions until late 2018 and plans to resume them in late 2019. For some time now, *Frogpond* has regularly included sections for linked verse, and the online journal *Under the Bashō* focuses on what it says is “the *haikai* spirit of Japan,” including sections for *hokku* and linked verse. The University of Pennsylvania currently offers a free online course via Coursera called Modern & Contemporary American Poetry (“ModPo”), open year-round, with two of its threads titled “Haiku Corner” and “Japanese Renga ModPo Style,” moderated by Laura de Bernardi in Australia. “Haiku Corner” has logged over 2,600 replies, and the linked verse thread is into its ninth collaboration, several sequences over seventy verses in length. I’m sure I’ve missed some markets, but in print or online, obviously there hasn’t been much—just a fraction compared to haiku publications.

Occasionally some *renku* groups have formed over the past two decades, such as the Higginson-led groups of the early 2000s and the one that met in Port Townsend, Washington, monthly in 2010 and 2011. Throughout her career as a professor of East Asian studies and into retirement, Sonja Arntzen, now on Gabriola Island, British Columbia, has held gatherings to write *renku*. Apparently the Yuki Teikei Haiku Society also holds meetings regularly to write linked verse. Under the banner of the Haiku Society of America, meetings to write *renku* are held occasionally, such as one in the Midwest that announced in a 2019 HSA newsletter that they had composed a *kasen* together

using a *sabaki* and the HSA quarterly meeting in September 2019 in Newport, Oregon, with James Rodriguez as *sabaki*.

Possibly the most popular form of linked verse in North America today is, interestingly, not a Japanese but an American invention. In 1992, Garry Gay developed a six-stanza form of linked verse, the stanzas varying in length between three and two lines, all on one theme and composed usually by two or three authors, calling it *rengay* (which I presume is Japanese *ren* for connection, *gay* for Gary's last name). The first one was composed, or experimented on, by Gary Gay and Michael Dylan Welch. Just how popular has the form become? For one example, the recent issue of *Frogpond*, vol. 42, issue 3, Fall 2019, has seven pages of sequences and linked verse: *rengay* comprises five of those pages. On his website *Graceguts*, Welch also maintains a page *Rengay Essays* that has links to more than two dozen essays and notes on the form, as well as an essay he wrote surveying other invented forms of linked verse "Breaking through Novelty: A Survey of Invented Forms of Linked Poetry."

English-language haiku poets wrote haiku first and then some began to dabble in linking, so the order is reversed from the Japanese poetic tradition of linked verse first and then haiku later, and the English-language production of haiku and *renku* will undoubtedly remain separate activities, unlike the five hundred years in Japan when they were indivisible. The important development, however, is that writers can get out of their lonely existence for a while and turn writing into a social, collaborative enterprise. What they need is at least two to tango, or two to *renku*.

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