

Essays

BONDING BORDERS & BOUNDARIES:

Afriku and Changing Seasons on the Continent

by Jerome Berglund

In Memory of Adjei Agyei-Baah (June 29, 1977—December 18, 2023)

The haiku is a migratory creature. While practiced by the wittiest and most learned of different eclectic generations, it is not content to be stifled in the halls of the small elite or the chambers of royals (the way *waka* was relegated for many years to a privileged and titled few of the august, imperial courts). The haiku's most renowned practitioners over the eons, from Bashō to Issa, have characteristically been wanderers, wayfaring across great swathes of land with begging bowls and walking sticks—like Mongolian nomads, but no less so akin to (and relatable to) the European wandering gypsy, the medieval Jewish peddler, or the American hobo: itinerant laborers of the Dust Bowl era that modern readers associate with Steinbeck and his *Grapes of Wrath*. These wanderers most frequently (through heady environmental allegory) told of the universal and existential struggles every human can relate to, against the elements' onslaught, the insidious stranglehold of poverty, the body's fragility, and wildlife's harrying. Yet the *haijin* manages to discern great beauty from this transience and plight, almost contrarily, and stubbornly has derived and celebrated the yang hiding within the great yins we experience, often quite viciously, and vice versa. Hence, naturally, being so egalitarian and concerned with capturing and depicting nature and its wonders, near and far, haiku has proven to be a potent and well-suited medium for poets worldwide to productively mine their unique landscapes and experiences for precious deposits.

As the gods of Greek and Roman mythology gravitated around the globe in myths that imitated and reflected their more tangible spread in temples and burial grounds—physical monuments and places of

worship—not unlike the ever-shifting diaspora of those who honored them, with the same restlessness, Dionysus made his triumphant progress from Egypt and across India before calling Greece home, and Odin emigrated alongside the Aryans to assume the names Shiva and Jupiter among different populations. In turn, Vulcan never grew moss by constantly remaining in motion, relocating from one volcanic island to the next. As culture and literature spread globally and familiarity with Eastern arts increased (paralleling a general rise in connectivity and access that the digital age provided), haiku has experienced a similar renaissance and explosion of application and widespread popularity in distant and diverse locales. One of the latest and most engaging continents to embrace, refine, employ, and assume capable ownership of this age-old tradition and means of poetic production has been the vastness of Africa.

It's no exaggeration to trace a considerable portion of the impetus for this exhilarating proliferation back to a chain reaction set off nearly a decade ago by the formal, global recognition of a seminal book by Red Moon Press, *Afriku* by Adjei Agyei-Baah, which made a great splash across the four corners of the earth and was heavily commented upon in its most disparate sectors. The collection had been composed following its Ghanaian author's anointment by haiku's most qualified reigning experts at an important gathering in Japan.

The forward by Hidenor Hiruta (the administrator of the Akita Haiku International Network) situates Adjei Agyei-Baah's work within its global and historic context, while vividly describing the events accompanying its author's opuses being spotlighted and awarded at an important contest in Japan. This, in itself, is quite interesting and significant and lends to an immediate appreciation for what a momentous and groundbreaking occasion this collection's publication represents historically to the haiku world, and in the East where the form originated, especially.

There is also a noteworthy mention of the prevailing philosophy of haiku helping to promote peace and conversation, to find synergy and commonality among distant and diverse peoples. Amidst the less familiar sights and sounds—mango, cobra!—can't we all appreciate frog ponds, children's toys, the majestic egret, fear lightning or spiders, celebrate a farmer, pity those destitute, mourn our dead, loath the mosquito, get annoyed with traffic jams and politics, detect the insidious tendrils of classism infecting education systems and their accessing from our youngest ages?

Afriku (and its individual pieces, printed in English alongside *Two* with a helpful pronunciation guide for the latter at the opening) is a testament to that spirit of communicativeness and ambassadorship, and Agyei-Baah deserves great recognition for his contributions to continuing a worldwide dialogue toward the most beneficial causes of elevating understanding and fostering fellowship across barriers of language and physical borders:

just a moment —
distant lightning connects
sky and earth

As many cartographical authorities have noted, historically, Africa has been consistently rendered on maps inaccurately and pictured much smaller than the land mass actually is. Thus, it is with excitement that international audiences are finally discovering the rich history of African traditions and culture, which have long been flourishing unsung outside their native frameworks, and the African people's literary capabilities are at last finding a more robust audience and are winning global attention and a much-deserved limelight of notoriety through the inimitable application and reimagining of an ancient form which continues to captivate contemporary scholars and laymen alike today (at the heart of nascent humanity, with Africa being centrally located between East and West).

When a region so significant and expansive as Africa—the cradle of life and civilization—gets a hold of a promising tool and

methodology, one can expect it will be put to stunning and productive usage, the ripples of which may be traced and meticulously cataloged both in *Haikupedia*'s listings on haiku in North, South, East, and West Africa, as well as on the pages of the *Mamba* literary journal—Africa's first dedicated haiku journal, which functions as an extension of the Africa Haiku Society and the more localized Poetry Foundation Ghana, co-chaired with Emmanuel Kalusian, that *Modern Haiku Journal* equates to the “culmination” of “haiku composition...slowly picking up steam in Africa” (Root-Bernstein, 176), which *Afriku*'s author, Adjei Agyei-Baah, subsequently founded. These organizations painstakingly curate and meticulously produce haiku.

Upon *Afriku*'s release, a greatly admired and perceptive luminary of the short form poetry community in a *Frogpond* review described Agyei-Baah as “one of the new leaders of contemporary haiku in Africa,” stating emphatically how much he “look[ed] forward to seeing the growth of haiku across Africa,” noting that “this book is a preview of that anticipated growth.” (Brooks, 91). Those words were written in 2017 and have proven to be prophetic; one need only to peruse the latest edition of *Mamba* for evidence of how well they anticipated the resurgence of haiku.

Agyei-Baah's research also demonstrates innovation and success in the haiku form across his wide continent: from Ugandan Ingrid Baluchi winning the international Little Haiku Contest in 2017 to the development of that nation's own Africa-wide Babishai Haiku Awards, including works composed in native languages such as Twi, Afrikaans, and Swahili, as well as Arabic and French in places like Algeria and Morocco, and also those published in English for the appreciation of remote readers, as well as the formation of productive haiku clubs in Ghana and Nigeria, and efforts to collect seasonal words characteristic of African settings and sounds for future domestic practitioners. As an appraiser native to the area, Fredua-Agyeman notes many African haiku writers are faced with a challenge when attempting to situate each piece in its temporal placement, as one is customarily expected to:

For haiku writers in the tropics, the use of kigo has become the dry season of our arts. It makes writing difficult since the changes in the season is not dramatic. (Fredua-Agyeman)

He explains how *Afriku* and the continent's haikuists have overcome this challenge artfully (and expounds upon the wealth of rich meaning and geologic/meteoric significance which can be subtly encoded into a stanza of terse poetry) as follows:

Adjei faced some of these problems and maneuvered around it... In the 'Drought' piece ... one can easily feel the harmattan and can geopin it to the northern part of Ghana where the harmattan is severe and the drudgery of farmers become palpable in their breaths. In fact, if one has a broader and deeper knowledge of the landscape of the country, one can easily say that this farmer is in the Bongo District of the Upper East where the land is rocky and the soil is laterite and extremely difficult to cultivate.

There have also been laudable efforts by a Somalian scholar to contextualize the haiku's application as an extension of older traditions, along with its parallels to, and analogs with, forms more familiar and established in the region:

I was always intrigued by how the shirib had some uncanny resemblance to the haiku, and not only in terms of its antiphonal structure, its provocative amplifications and implications, but also in the way both forms communicate a feeling or impression in the most succinct and taut manner. (Ahmed, 62)

Harmony with other native approaches (such as the 'short talk' poetry of Senegal and the Arabic *qasīda* of Persia and Turkey) has also been thoughtfully expressed and explored by contemporary poets and intellectuals on the continent and

abroad and can be perused for great edification within the *Mamba* and *Haikupedia's* pages in numerous illuminating and informative articles by Agyei-Baah and company that are meticulously researched and eloquently articulated.

The significance of *Afriku* and Agyei-Baah's larger oeuvre is further clarified and recognized by Professor Richard Gilbert of Kumamoto University in Japan, who discussed it in Ireland's *Shamrock Journal*. (Consider, for a second, how much traveling across language and spatial barriers is occurring just in that interaction alone! To be studied in snowy Minneapolis this afternoon...)

Haiku... has an appeal that is now burgeoning throughout the world, and being widely shared through the medium of English. If the reader wonders at this mysterious power of the haiku form, Adjei's work certainly provides an answer, as he weaves together what is most personal and local, in his life, home and culture, with a humanity of spirit that is truly universal. (Gilbert, 38)

Modern Haiku also championed Agyei-Baah's "making a case for an Africa-centric haiku," which is not "merely...imitative of Japanese culture" (Root-Bernstein, 126), something haiku practitioners of the West have long struggled with and strived towards, contributing to the contention that his continent represents an important contingent of the vanguard, with *haijin* who are doing an unusually remarkable job of establishing African haiku and distinguishing their own striking representative iteration. Their book review editor, history professor, and Princeton graduate, Michele Root-Bernstein, posits Agyei-Baah "successfully illustrates that ideal." (Root-Bernstein, 126)

And truly, extensive institutional acceptance of such courageous refusals to be confined by stodgy, pedantic definitions and arbitrary limitations (from a tradition necessarily regimented and averse to evolution or digression, as a general rule) is quite ratifying and

encouraging, in a manner well put by renowned poet and agronomist, also from Ghana, Nana Fredua-Agyeman in *ImageNations: Promoting African Literature*:

I like the fact that Adjei broke the rules... If haiku were just [those] then it is not an art form... Jane Reichhold wrote in her book that one must learn all the rules, practice them, and break them. This is such a difficult thing to do, breaking them. Nevertheless, it is what one must do to remain relevant or to adapt the art form to a given culture. And haiku is one poetry form that requires a lot of adaptation. (Fredua-Agyeman)

The importance of *Afriku*'s printing and availability in his native language, alongside the English translations, cannot be overestimated either, as that reviewer further notes:

The bold attempt at translating into Twi is important for reasons beyond just haiku. Like many other things, the African is more comfortable writing in English or French than his native language. Yet, he thinks first in his native language even when speaking these languages. (Fredua-Agyeman)

While initially introduced in many countries through the literature of European colonial forces, the Eastern culture—associated with an influx of Asian business interests (Shepard, 2) and their widespread intermingling amongst indigenous African populations in recent years—will undoubtedly bring much more continued fusion of Asian and African traditions of art and poetry in productive and fascinating ways that we can only guess at, and we will observe budding developments as they advance with great interest.

Indeed, the underlying message of *Afriku* has been touted by haiku poet Keith Simmonds as most characteristically espousing “a stunning plea for worldwide peace and unity” (Simmonds, 43), which he found best exemplified in the following haiku:

black coffee
 white sugar
 I stir the world in oneness

Agyei-Baah concerns and concise missives are never superficial and avoid the ‘objective, apolitical’ school of haiku that can become pejoratively associated with conventional formulations. That same haiku above was praised enthusiastically in a lengthy address at the 1st Asian Literature Festival in 2017, during the Keynote Speech by Wole Soyinka, epitomizing “the very human condition” and our modern themes of national and racial divisionism in a manner which “speaks to the affliction of human borders that nations and races construct, thus implanting doctrines of separation that distort...human relationships.” (Asia Culture Institute, 91)

In a world that makes great leaps forward (and takes embarrassing steps backward as frequently), this collection, *Afriku*, and the principles and prerogatives advocated within it will remain as a profoundly consequential and meaningful text that shall be reviewed thoughtfully and regarded with great respect for generations to come. *Afriku*’s author, Adjei Agyei-Baah, was a true leader in the haiku community and will be greatly missed. His unexpected passing is a great loss for our haiku community on a local and global scale. He should be thanked and celebrated for his many contributions now and for many years to come.

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Jerome Berglund graduated from the University of Southern California's Cinema-Television Production program and spent a picaresque decade in the entertainment industry before returning to the midwest where he was born and raised. Since then, he has worked in several positions, including a dishwasher, a paralegal, a night watchman, and an assembler of heart valves. Jerome has many haiku, senryu and haiga published online and in print, most recently in the Asahi Shimbun, Cattails, Drifting Sands, Fireflies Light, Valley Voices, Under the Bashō, the Wise Owl, Failed Haiku, Scarlet Dragonfly, Cold Moon Journal, Bear Creek Haiku, the Zen Space and Daily Haiga. He is furthermore an established, award-winning fine art photographer, whose black and white pictures have been shown in New York, Minneapolis, and Santa Monica galleries. His collaborative poetry is published in Prune Juice and Raining Rengay. He received the Editor's Choice Award in last year's Otoroshi annual contest.