

## **A bowl of rice: An Introduction to the Haiku of Taneda Santoka by Stanford M. Forrester**

The reason I chose to write a paper on Taneda Santoka is that he is a very important poet in modern haiku literature, but he is not very well known within the English language haiku community, which is unfortunate. Therefore, what I plan to do in this paper is to discuss various aspects of Santoka's life and his poetry, and hope to address some of the questions that may arise from this discussion.

Taneda Santoka was born in 1882 and died in 1940. He was 58 years old. Of these 58 years, Santoka spent 16 of them as a mendicant Zen priest. As James Abrams points out in his article "Hail in the Begging Bowl", Santoka most likely was in Japan the last in line of priest-poets.

What is different, however, about Santoka compared to Basho, Issa, Ryokan, Saigyō, or Dogen, is that he did not follow the traditional conventions of the poetic form in which he worked. Santoka was a disciple of Ogiwara Seisensui (1884-1976), the leader of the "free-style school of haiku". This school of haiku discarded the traditional use of the season word and the 5-7-5 structure. Instead it opted for a freer verse form. John Stevens, in his book *Mountain Tasting*, explains that after Shiki's death in 1902, "there became two main streams in the haiku world, one working more or less in a traditional form using modern themes and the other which fell under the 'new development movement.'" Seisensui's school falls under the latter.

Another important thing to know about Santoka is that his life was equally as interesting as his poetry. His family life was filled with tragedy, he tried to commit suicide numerous times and he also was an alcoholic. Due to all this Santoka became a mendicant priest who chose walking meditation instead of zazen or sitting meditation. It is estimated that he walked about 28,000 miles (45,061km) during his life as a priest. This of course added to his lore. Abrams notes that in the late 60s Japan began to see a boom in interest in Santoka and believes that it can be attributed to the poet's wandering lifestyle. For the majority of people "burdened with family and economic responsibilities" it is easy to see how this could appeal to one's sense of nostalgia or romanticism. It is interesting to note that we in the US have had our own Santoka. The first one that comes to mind is Jack Kerouac, immortalized also for his escapades "On the road." Like Santoka, Kerouac could not stay still, wrote to live and also drank himself to death. Kerouac and Santoka both were attracted to the dharma (the teachings of the Buddha), and both tried to follow it properly, but their own ghosts and demons got in the way of their own salvation.

Let's begin with a brief biography of this colourful figure. As we said before Taneda Santoka was born on December 3, 1882 under the name Shoichi Taneda. He was born in Bofu in the Yamaguchi prefecture, which is in a rural part of western Japan. Santoka was the first born out of five children to Takejiro and Fusa. Takejiro, his father, was a wealthy landowner who had many mistresses and neglected his family.

When Santoka was 10 years old his mother committed suicide by jumping into the family well. She did this when her husband was on a weekend getaway with one of his mistresses. Santoka was deeply affected by seeing his mother's dead body extracted from the well. His mother was 33. After his mother's death Santoka and his siblings were raised by one of his aunts.

In 1901 Santoka went to Tokyo to study for his entrance exams and in 1902 he was admitted to Waseda University where he would study literature.

It was here, in his early twenties, that Shoichi took on his pen name as Santoka, which means "burning mountain peak". It is also about this time that he started drinking heavily and began having problems with all his classes.

In 1904 he had his first nervous breakdown, dropped out of school and returned home. During this time his father continued to squander the family wealth on women and had to sell pieces of land to pay the bills. In 1906 after there was almost nothing left to sell, Santoka's father used what little was left of the estate to buy a sake brewery. (Now let me interrupt with a comment: if your son has a drinking problem, the one business you don't want your family to start is a brewery.) As one would guess the business quickly declined with his father spending all of his time womanising and Santoka with his own demons to deal with.

An interesting thing that Abrams points out in his article, a point that I could not find in the others, though I could stand corrected, is that Santoka at an early age wanted to be a Zen priest. Santoka was not interested in women like his father, and it is said that due to his mother's death it was too painful for him. Not caring, Santoka's father pressured his son to marry. It did not take long for the marriage to fall apart with Santoka going on drinking binges and disappearing for days on end. He and his wife, Sato, did manage to have one son which was a result of things going right at the very beginning of the marriage. They would later divorce in 1920.

Backtracking a little, in 1913 Santoka became the disciple of Ogiwara Seisenui, the leader of the "New Tendency School". He also began writing for Seisenui's poetry journal called *Soun*.

In 1916, he became poetry editor, which is also the same year that his father's sake business went bankrupt. His father let all the barrels of sake spoil. Needing a new job and a new start, he took his wife and son to Kumamoto City to start a used bookstore.

Just as things were going fairly well, Santoka's brother in 1918 committed suicide. To make matters worse the aunt who raised him after his mother's death also died. He began to drink again and run up large bar tabs and the cycle of self-destruction resumed, thus also financially ruining him and his wife's bookstore business.

In 1919 he couldn't take it any more and left his family to look for a job in Tokyo. In 1920 his wife divorced him. The same year he found a job as a librarian that had some nice benefits, but like everything else, he lost that.

After the famous Tokyo Earthquake of 1923 he went back to Kumamoto.

In 1924 the pain from all of his life culminated in his attempting suicide. Most contemplating suicide would think of quiet and painless ways to end it, but Santoka of course was different; he chose to stand facing an incoming train. To me this represents his strong will to face everything that life had to offer, the good and the bad. He wanted realisation at death and the only way to have that was to face it directly. Anyway his plan was thwarted, the conductor spotted him and brought the train to a screeching halt. He was then brought to a nearby Zen temple where he was invited to stay as long as he liked. He quickly fell into the rigorous life of a Zen student and in a year he was ordained a Zen priest at age 42. Though I have only read what has been written in English about Santoka, I think it is here with his attempted suicide that his life really begins to take on a mythical stature.

Every person living in a Zen temple had certain responsibilities. Santoka's was to teach classes about Zen Buddhism. This new lifestyle also allowed Santoka to continue his writing. But as we can guess his ghosts were only in remission. Santoka believed in order to be a teacher, he should be a perfect example. This internal struggle resulted in frustration and the feeling that he was a fake and unworthy of his temple duties.

In 1926, Santoka left his post to be a mendicant monk.

In 1929 and 1930 he returned to Kumamoto briefly. He helped his ex-wife out in her store, started to contribute again to Soun and then founded his own journal entitled *Sambaku*. During this time he continued his cycle of self destruction, running high bar tabs and disappearing for days on drinking binges. What Santoka seemed to do after sobering up was to decide to go on pilgrimages or journeys where he could repent by practicing his walking meditation. These walks were often in the burning sun or the freezing rain and Santoka allowed himself no luxuries along the way. However, to some extent, his intentions were good, but his journeys always seemed to end up by visiting a poetry friend in the next village or so. This usually meant inviting himself in with no notice and staying for a few days that often included the mass consumption of sake. One can only imagine the face of a poet's wife when she saw Santoka coming to her home. It is said that Santoka did not like goodbyes and basically after a few days would say something short and would just walk away without turning back. Sometimes too he would get so drunk that he would land himself in jail, which takes a lot of skill in Japan, because of their tolerance, or he would not be able to pay his bill and would tell the police to go to the person's house he was staying at and that they would pay for him. This was an all-too-common story for Santoka.

In 1932, Santoka's disciples or inner poetry circle refurbished an old house and presented it to him. They called it "Gochuan", which means "Cottage in the mist". The house or hut, whatever you call it, was in Ogori in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

That same year he published his first book, *Hachi no ko* or *Rice Bowl Child*. As the story goes, it again didn't take Santoka long to grow restless. His drinking was out of control and he decided he needed to repent for all his sins so he took to the road. This time the combination of the hard road and his body's being weakened from years of drinking almost took its toll. He came down with acute pneumonia and was returned to his hut.

One year later, restless again, he tried to take his life, this time with sleeping pills. Another failed attempt and in 1936 he was back on the road. At this point he must have known his health was failing and Abrams writes:

The last few years of his life were spent in active writing and continual drifting. As he [Santoka] noted in his diary at that time, his only two purposes in life were 'to produce all the true poems that are within me' and 'to die a blessed death, without lengthy pain, without being a burden to others'.

In 1938 Santoka abandoned his hut; he hit the road again and in 1939 settled in to a temple hermitage in Shikoku near Matsuyama. Abrams writes:

On October 10, 1940, his poetry companions gathered at the cottage for their regular discussion meeting and found Santoka in what seemed to be a drunken stupor, not an unusual condition. They left him sleeping and went ahead with their meeting, but after they had returned home, a neighbour came by to check on him late that night and, finding his condition worsened, called a doctor. Santoka died early the next morning, shortly before his 58th birthday, of an apparent apoplexy.

I think it is important to note that in presenting a paper about a poet or a writer I would normally have not spent so much time discussing the person's life history as I have here. I think using Santoka here as a specific example will help raise a question that arises all the time in literary discussions. Can we separate the work from the poet? Does the person's colourful life enhance or diminish the author's work? For example, does knowing about all of Hemingway's adventures raise his work to a new level, or knowing that Ezra Pound made broadcasts for the Fascists while living in Italy during World War 2 change how we see his work? Is the work strong without our knowing its associations? Maybe, maybe not. So in other words, if we know the author, do we look at his or her work differently than if we did

not? The question is between objectivity and association.

What I feel comfortable saying is that with anything, there are exceptions. After reading so much about Santoka's life, I would find it very difficult to separate his life from his haiku. To me they are one in the same. (An interesting thing that I also discovered recently is if one reads Kerouac's letters the writing style is generally no different than that of his novels. He writes about the same exact things, the only difference is that his publishers made him change all the characters' real names in his novels. It was one of Kerouac's hopes in his later years to revise all his novels and revert the fictional names back to the original, but of course he never got around to it. Reading either his letters or his novels, one walks away saying what is the difference? I think the same is true with Santoka.

Let me give you an example, your rain, Santoka's rain. How many people when they write about rain are actually in the rain. You might get caught in a shower, but I would guess you are probably writing from inside a cozy house. (Again. there are exceptions.) When Santoka wrote about rain, he was drenched in it, wearing a thin monk's robe, straw sandals and a bamboo hat that leaked. He walked for hours in it and when he found shelter it was not as if he could change into a dry set of clothes. To me, thus knowing how Santoka lived really makes me feel a different rain than if someone else wrote about rain. Santoka's rain is really wet, really cold, a rain that seeps into your bones and gives you chills. Here are some examples of Santoka's rain:

when i die  
weeds, falling rain

has my kasa  
also begun to leak?

eating my bento  
it, too, is rain-soaked

soaking wet  
i can't read the letters  
on the signpost

This convention can be applied to other topics found in Santoka's haiku. The nature Santoka travelled in, Abrams writes, was not the same nature as Basho, Issa or Buson, or at least a nature they chose not to portray in their haiku. "For Santoka [nature] was an exhausting physical experience, the positive and aggressive exposure of self to blazing suns, freezing rain, and endless roads of dust and mud."

begging i accept  
the blazing sun

hailstones, too,  
enter my begging bowl

walking in freezing wind  
bitterly reproaching myself

And one of my favourite rain haiku:

i am wet  
by the rain  
from that cloud

Even Santoka's sleep offered little or no comfort after his long lonely day:

using a stone for a pillow  
truly sleeping this beggar

Let's talk more about Santoka's haiku. To start off it is safe to say that Santoka's haiku were on the short side. His haiku seldom were longer than ten words and sometimes as few as two.

His haiku are generally bare, as I said before. To Santoka his haiku had to tell the stark naked truth even if it were painful. For example:

just as it is  
it rains, i get wet, i walk

my stark naked body  
revealed to the sun

Nothing in Santoka's haiku provides shelter to hide behind. Here we see the monk wearing a simple robe in the cold:

daily torn and tattered  
turning to shreds  
my robe for travelling

it can't be helped  
my old robe  
is rotting away

Santoka even goes further than that, he offers the reader a look at his exposed inner self:

No money  
no things  
no teeth  
just me

This naked approach to haiku can be found throughout Zen thought. Seeing clearly is seeing the truth. This seeing though in Buddhism is not an easy thing to do; it is the same with eating. To really do both properly, to really see or really eat, one must chew. In this case Santoka has offered us a bowl of rice, plain white rice, not the house special fried rice with pork, shrimp or whatever, but simply white rice in a monk's bowl. Can we as readers eat these haiku and feel full afterwards? In order to do that we need to be mindful of our meal, really chew our food, take the time to find its flavour, focus on the taste, the texture, the warmth of the rice.

We also need to do the same for each word in his poems. If we are accustomed to reading a haiku fast, looking for that immediate gratification, are we really tasting our haiku? Do we actually spend the time with each word and bring it to life? To read Santoka's haiku the reader must do this to walk away fulfilled. There are very few clever tricks, literary devices, flash or what not to catch the reader's eye here. What keeps Santoka's haiku afloat is its lightness, the bareness and the sincerity that comes along with this clear vision and truth that raises his haiku to a different level. The point I want to reiterate is that in Santoka's poetry we are forced to chew every grain and my guess is that for people who swallow their food without tasting it, the meal could go unappreciated.

Let's return to the nature in Santoka's haiku. This again is very much aligned with Zen thought. When we generally read haiku from the masters we find an idealised sense of nature surrounding them. By being aware of the natural beauty that surrounds them, they become closer to all that is in the universe, thus elevating themselves in some type of Eastern Petrarchian enlightenment. Haiku is about being aware. Basho, Buson and Shiki, all studied the Chinese masters and much of their work drew from these classical ascetics. Because of their success, it is generally safe to say that on the whole haiku poets tend to follow these poets' examples by leaning on the side of beauty.

What is important about Santoka and his using Zen thought in haiku is that there is no side of nature. Everything is a cycle, everything is interconnected; is there any part of a circle that is more important than another, can we even ever designate what are the parts of a circle anyway?

This is Santoka's approach. His nature was dust, rain, mud, frost biting ice and snow; his trees were bare, cold, scratchy; his plants were weeds or wild grass. But with all Santoka's unadorned elements, we must remember their importance is equal to the aesthetically pleasing cherry blossom or a gentle breeze. Like the classical poets looked to the beauty of nature to find truth, Santoka looked in nature's bareness to find his. R.H. Blyth excerpts this from one of Santoka's diaries: "Those who do not know the meaning of weeds do not know the mind of nature. Weeds grasp their own essence and express truth."

To take this one step further, we can even say that the beauty of the classical nature portrayed by the masters evoked joy, the bareness of Santoka's nature evoked pain. These feelings, whichever they might be, in the end tell us a lot about the philosophy and outlook of the life of the poet.

Let's return to some major themes that thread throughout Santoka's work. The first that comes to mind is his motion, his travelling. Again, he sought salvation on the road. He also knew that he had no real destination. There was always one more trip. This seems the same with Kerouac who also could not stay still for a second. Maybe when either of them was still he knew he would finally have to face himself. So by moving they were able to avoid this own realisation. Here are some more of Santoka's haiku on this theme:

nice road  
to a nice building  
it's a crematorium

well, which way should i go  
the wind blows

baggage i cannot throw off  
so heavy front and back

mountains I'll never see again  
fade in the distance

Along with walking we find the theme of drinking equally important. Many of his friends said that Santoka used the excuse of walking meditation to visit friends in his haiku circle. He then would stay for days on end and drink the host out of house and home, or stick him with a bar tab.

I remember the first time I learned about Santoka. Stephen Addiss had curated an exhibit at the Japan Society in New York City and among the art work were a few pieces by Santoka. Professor Addiss said there were many wonderful stories of how Santoka would trade haiku or calligraphy for sake. Many of these stories to me, though I am certain are true, seem to fall into a sort of traditional folklore about poet priests that were established before Santoka's time by Saigyō, Ikkyū and Ryōkan, thus laying the groundwork for Santoka to become a folklore hero. Either way, I feel fortunate that I was first introduced to Santoka by calligraphy done in his own hand.

An interesting note, Santoka went to great lengths to justify his drinking and even wrote a number of doctrines about drinking. The same of course goes for Kerouac. If we removed his writing about drinking for example in his novel *The Big Sur*, 80% of the pages would be gone. Here are some haiku by Santoka:

no sake  
i stare at the moon

drunk

i slept with crickets  
sometimes

the sound of swallowing sake  
seems very lonely

For fun here is one by Kerouac:

missing a kick  
at the ice box door  
it closed anyway

On a very interesting note another topic Santoka wrote about was pure cold water. How polemic, on one end we have him being a servant to sake, alcohol representing so many negative things in many cultures and of course it is against Buddhist precepts to ingest any intoxicants, while on the other end we have the pureness of water and the countless other things it represents. Clear water can act as a mirror also, to see one's reflection; this water also acts as a lens to see all things. Water is the giver of life, we drink it, plants need it; water can connect us to the heavens. Here are some examples:

in the ceaseless sound of the water there is buddha

glad to be alive  
i scoop up the water

receiving the deep autumn waters  
i return

Much of Zen thought and education is based on koans, which are mental puzzles that require a paradoxical approach to solve. (An example of a koan is "what is the sound of one hand clapping?") Santoka's use of alcohol and water could almost be a koan. We know when he was flat out broke water was the only thing he could obtain to quench his thirst. Imagine the pain he felt sobering up involuntarily, left to drink water and seeing himself in a basin's or a lake's reflection. It was with pain that he could only see his true self. On the other hand when he had money, or someone treated him to sake, he needed to drink a certain amount to "be sober" again, to function as most alcoholics do. This of course was painful because he would then castigate himself for breaking his religious vows and having his friends bail him out financially.

What goes in must come out. Scatological topics are no strangers to Zen. Why, again, there is no difference from the outside from the inside, no difference or separation between nature and oneself. Urinating and defecating are integral parts of life and have been present in Zen literature for centuries.

I quote Ikkyu:

my dying teacher could not wipe himself unlike you disciples  
who use bamboo I cleaned his lovely ass with my bare hands

In Zen Buddhism shying away from bodily functions means shying away from life and death. Shying away from the real truth. Here is a haiku that falls under this category:

nonchalantly pissing  
off the side of the road  
soaking the young weeds

This poem is important because to some extent the weeds are Santoka himself. One can still live even without pure water. Notice also the fate of these weeds - they are not on the path, the road to salvation,

but are destined to be on the path's edge. Could this be how Santoka saw himself? I think so.

Another poem tying bodily functions to impermanence is:

pissing blood  
how long will I be able  
to carry on?

Interconnected to all of this, Santoka writes about life and some of its hard realities he has to face. I think it is interesting to note that hardships were not unfamiliar to many of the old masters, but few chose to express them to such a degree as did Santoka. We look at Issa for example, how could one have a harder life than his, houses burning down, witnessing all his children become ill and die. Though one lived, he had passed away before her birth. We recall Issa's famous haiku:

the world of dew  
the world of dew it is indeed  
and yet and yet...

It is important to note that Issa is a good example for another reason. He like Santoka was a poet priest, but in the Pure Land tradition, not in the Zen.

As mentioned before, it was the fourth master, Masaoka Shiki, who led the haiku world to reform. It was Shiki who paved the path for poets such as Santoka. Though Shiki was not a poet priest, he suffered tremendously due to being bed ridden with TB. Shiki, like Santoka, called it like it is, which I think during Shiki's time was very daring. Shiki writes:

autumn passes  
for me no gods  
no buddhas

autumn wind  
gods, buddha  
lies, lies, lies

Now one from Santoka:

all day long  
meeting demons  
meeting buddhas

Following the theme of life, there of course is a central theme of death for Santoka. Let's return to the exception of putting the poem to the person's life. I think if we read a haiku from someone who is in great health and not in serious hardship it would be hard for the reader to accept the poet's words. Santoka of course faced death every day for much of his life.

We remember that both his mother and his brother committed suicide and he also tried a few times. It can also be argued that his drinking was a form of slow suicide, and with the combination of his lifestyle he was able to expedite things.

It may have been Shiki who paved the way for this to be a common topic to put in one's notebook. Shiki, having TB, had to also face death on a daily basis, as did Santoka. I think it is important to note that these poems did not function the same way as one would write a traditional death poem. Both Shiki and Santoka wrote poems about death on a daily basis. Here are some haiku by Santoka dealing with life on a daily basis combined with death:

some life remains



i scratch my body  
falling leaves  
deep in the forest  
i see a buddha

When hearing this haiku one can not help but be bombarded with metaphysical metaphors and multiple layers of meaning. This poem undoubtedly offers us many readings. Here we see the falling leaves and all they represent, but what I think is most interesting is that it is this bareness of the trees that allows the poet to have a heightened and deeper sense of perception. It is closer to death that the poet can see clearer and deeper. The buddha in the last line is intriguing. Is this a typical stone buddha found most anywhere in Japan, or is this a vision of a deity welcoming the poet to the next realm. Maybe a Zen answer would be yes, both are correct.

Another major topic that is abundant in Santoka's work is loneliness. Part of his loneliness again was to isolate himself, see himself as he truly was and to do penitence for his falls from grace. This loneliness of course is a major theme running throughout the history of haiku literature, but maybe not to the degree as we see here. Some examples are:

after all  
it's sad to be alone  
the withered grasses  
  
the caw of a crow  
i too am alone

Here's another one reminiscent of the tanka poet Takuboku:

all day i said nothing  
the sound of waves  
  
the long night  
made longer -  
a dog barking

The opposite of loneliness is being surround by people. One of Santoka's true joys, like many haiku poets, was to be with good friends. It was these friends Santoka to some extent depended on. Here is an example:

(to a friend) The caption:

Tomorrow I'll come  
cooking wild vegetables  
for your visit

Interesting to note that what makes this haiku different is that the vegetables are wild. Santoka, probably can not afford to buy food himself, so he will forage around for something to serve his guest. Stevens also tells a story about a visitor bringing food for himself and Santoka, but when he offered it, Santoka said you eat first, I have only one bowl, Santoka waited till his guest was done and then ate out of the same bowl. Or the time he had an overnight guest, but there were not enough blankets or another place to sleep. Santoka stayed up all night so his guest could sleep and basically froze. These stories though are not uncommon in the Zen tradition, they are almost expected.

There of course are many other themes that were present throughout Santoka's work, but the last one I would like to touch upon today is that of war. Many non-Japanese do not know that many haiku poets in Japan were thrown in jail in the 20th century for either writing non-traditional haiku or writing anti-

war protest haiku. Anything against the norm was seen as subversive and many haiku poets spent some time in jail in the 1930s and 40s and were labelled "thought offenders". Saito Sanki was one such poet. In his book *The Kobe Hotel* he goes into depth about the round up of poets and going to jail. Here are some of his anti-war poems:

cannon booms  
I count them  
ice melting on my tongue  
  
I buy a mourning badge -  
past noon  
the fall of pine cones  
  
from the night ground  
stained with cold blood  
mushrooms grow  
  
in darkness  
over the ochre earth  
a single exchange of bullets

As you can hear these haiku by Saito Sanki paint a picture that is far from the nationalistic propaganda that glorifies the Japanese empire of the early 20th century. Santoka also wrote about Japan's invasion of China. The only difference is Santoka was hard to find at that time and somehow managed to avoid the ultra-nationalists and jail. Here are some of Santoka's perhaps most powerful and moving haiku:

Marching together  
on the ground  
they will never step on again  
  
Winter rain clouds -  
Thinking: going to China  
to be torn to pieces  
  
Leaving hands and feet  
behind in China  
the soldiers return to Japan  
  
Will the town  
throw a festival  
for those brought back as bones?  
  
the bones  
silently this time  
returned across the ocean  
  
the air raid alarm  
screaming, screaming  
red persimmons

We have now covered the poet's life and read enough of Santoka's haiku for one to get a basic feeling for what the poet is about. My general assumption is that many will like Santoka's poems and many will not. Whichever category you here might fall under, one can not deny that he has some to offer each and everyone of us. You can't like all the haiku all the time, or some of the haiku some of the time or all the haiku none of the time, I believe an old Zen master said that.

But maybe it is better to quote R H Blyth than a Bob Dylan Zen Master to conclude this paper. Blyth writes:

Santoka put every ounce of his spiritual energy into his verses. His verses are a combination of Zen, Buddhism, and Japaneseness, the last word implying an innate appreciation of the transitoriness of life, the just-so-ness, the thus-ness of things, their existence value.

**Editor's note:** Stanford M. Forrester is a past president of the Haiku Society of American and the editor of *bottle rockets: a collection of short verse* which is celebrating its 16th year in 2014. In 2003, some of his work was published in the Everyman's Library Pocket Poets Series in the anthology *Haiku*, edited by Peter Washington and *American Zen: A Gathering of Poets*, published by Bottom Dog Press. In August 2013, his haiku and a paragraph or two about him can be found in *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years* published by Norton. He lives in Windsor, Connecticut and spends all his food money on books.

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