

# A HISTORY OF PHILIPPINE HAIKU

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The Philippines—a tropical country located near the western edge of the Pacific Ocean, along the great Ring of Fire, consists of 7,100 individual islands. Our ancestors were *makata* / poets long before the conquistadores came to the country. No doubt, poetry is in our Filipino blood and to keep it alive, one must embrace it, write it and share it. Poetry has always been a part of what we call *kwentong bayan* or folk stories. We have passion for words; we love exploring the meaning of words. We enjoy writing poems, in any poetic form. Perhaps this is one overwhelming reason why we are easily adapted to writing haiku poetry.

The introduction of haiku writing in the Philippines can be traced back to the influence of the Japanese occupation, 1941–1945, and by understanding it you can have a better understanding of how Japanese literature was introduced and what we have gained thus far. The arrival of the Japanese brought about one good aspect to the Philippines, and that was the prohibition of Philippine literature in English, which had a favourable effect on a diminishing Tagalog Literature.

The first noted Filipino poet to write haiku was Gonzalo K. Flores, also known as Severino Gerundio, an avant-garde poet during the Japanese period. Here are some of his haiku, along with translations, published in *Lidayway*, June 5, 1943.

tutubi

hila mo'y tabak...  
ang bulaklak, nanginig!  
sa paglapit mo.

dragonfly

pulling your sword...  
the flower trembled  
as you approached

anyaya

ulilang damo  
sa tahimik na ilog  
halika, sinta.

invitation

lonely grass  
by the silent river  
come, my dear

Haiku did not flourish in the Philippines until the Internet. The Internet brought haiku to some individual Filipino writers. However, the eventual resurgence of haiku poetry writing in the Philippines is ineffaceably connected to different organizations and / or groups, who discussed and promoted haiku poetry. Below are some haiku organizations and / or groups—

*Brown Song* or *Kayumangging Awit*, a Yahoo online forum of Filipino poets in the Philippines and overseas, and it was founded in October 4, 2004 by Robert Wilson, an American haiku poet living in the Philippines. Mr. Wilson is the co-owner, co-publisher, and co-editor & chief of *Simply Haiku*, an online literary journal showcasing Japanese short form poetry.

*Bahag-hari* or *Rainbow*, another Yahoo online group of Filipino poets-writers whose efforts are to be mentioned and praised, was created March 30, 2005. At its early stage *Bahag-hari's* main goal was the translation of Japanese haiku into Filipino language.

In 2006, on the occasion of 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Philippines and Japan diplomatic relations from 1956–2006, Philippine President Gloria Arroyo declared 2006 as Philippines-Japan Friendship Year. The positive influence of this declaration, for haiku re-introduction to Filipinos, was the creation of the first haiku competition among Filipinos, organized by the Japan Information and Cultural Center, Embassy of Japan and the University of Santo Tomas Graduate Studies.

The University of Santo Tomas (UST) Haiku group was formed from the Chinese and Japanese Literature Class 2006 under Dr. Milagros G. Tanlayco of the Graduate School, University of Santo Tomas, after studying Japanese poetry from the *Man'yōshū*. The UST Haiku group's original objective was to promote mutual understanding through cultural exchange and propagate haiku poetry among Filipinos.

In 2008, LITERATURA: A Photography and Haiku-Writing Contest were organized, by the UP *Tomo-Kai*, to embody Japanese literature through creativity in Filipino photography. The organization's original name was UP Philippines-Japan Friendship Club, but was later changed to a more appealing name *Tomo-Kai*. Tomo was derived from *Tomodachi*, a Japanese word for friend, and *Kai* from *Kaibigan*, which means friend in Filipino. According to its description, "UP *Tomo-Kai* is an organization that aims to promote the Japanese language and culture, as well as foster mutual relations between Filipinos and Japanese."

The aforementioned organizations / groups having discussed and promoted haiku poetry in the Philippines, still it is not easy to measure their contributions to the Japanese haiku development in the Philippines. But of course they provided an outlet for haiku poetry that,

I think, led to the reviving of Philippines' short forms of poetry, such as *tanaga*, *diona* and *dalit*, which were considered dying art forms.

The Tagalog *tanaga*, which dates back to 1500, has been referred to as the Philippine equivalent of the Japanese haiku, but this is totally wrong. *Tanaga* is a poem composed of four lines with each line having seven syllables, written in *aaaa* or *aabb*, *abba*, or *abab* rhyming pattern. *Tanaga* have no titles. Below is an example of a *tanaga*.

bango ay todo bigay  
rosas siyang donselya  
tinik na kapamilya  
hindi man lang mapugay

living life at full pelt  
she is a rose so pure  
yet her own prickles  
she just overlooks

*Diona* is a pre-Hispanic rhyming poem of three lines with seven syllables in each line expressing a complete thought. My *diona* serves as an example.

isang mapulang apol  
sa'yo lagi kong ungol  
na ayaw kong pumatol

like a red apple  
each day I so long for you  
to depart from me

*Dalit* is another type of short Filipino poem, composed of four lines with eight syllables in each line. It was very popular during the Spanish period, and the friars used *dalit* to promote Catholicism. Here is one of my *dalit*.

bakit sa banyagang dila  
bow ng bow, tula ng tula  
ngunit sa sariling wika  
isang kahig, isang tuka

why in a foreign tongue  
you often bow, verse after verse  
but script of your own lips  
you live hand to mouth

Tagalog, otherwise known as Filipino, is the national language of the Philippines. In his poem "Sa Aking Mga Kabata / To my Fellow Youth" Dr. Jose P. Rizal, Philippine national hero, urged Filipinos to use Tagalog in their writings. To commemorate the establishment of the Filipino language as the national language of the Philippines, the following passage from the poem is often quoted during *Buwan ng Wika* / Language Month:

Ang hindi marunong magmahal sa sariling wika,  
masahol pa sa hayop at malansang isda

One who does not treasure his own language  
is worse than a beast and putrid fish

Translating Tagalog haiku into any other language (and vice versa) is harder than writing it, simply because we enjoy not only its expressiveness, its essence, its structure, but also its poetic sound. While traditional English haiku is a 5-7-5 syllables and unrhymed poem, (and Japanese haiku relies on symbolism, with fixed numbers of *moras*), Philippine haiku (locally known as Pinoy Haiku) is a concoction of Japanese haiku and two lines of *tanaga*, is written in 7-5-7 with rhyming pattern of *a-a-a*, *a-b-a*, *a-a-b*, *a-b-b*, or *a-b-c*. Here is one of my Pinoy haiku.

masid ang mga tala . . .  
utak gumana  
mga tuldok tinala

stargazing . . .  
my brain begins  
connecting dots

Tagalog words have more syllables, than English words. Therefore, it is imperative not to follow the English haiku of 17-syllable structure (itself based on a total misinterpretation of Japanese practice — Japanese moras are not the same as English and / or Tagalog syllables). Most Filipino haiku poets write haiku in Tagalog in a Pinoy haiku form of 7-5-7 syllables, some prefer a *Malayang Taludturan* / Free Verse style, and still others prefer the English pattern of 5-7-5 syllables.

There are Filipino poets who write haiku both in English and Tagalog, but their works are being featured mostly abroad and / or directly posted on Filipino poetry websites or on their personal blogs. There are no print publications / magazines of Filipino haiku as yet.

I offer here one of my bilingual English–Tagalog haiku, first published in *Simply Haiku*, 9:3-4.

nowhere  
to go — the old guitar,  
and rain song

walang  
mapuntahan — ang lumang gitara,  
at awit ng ulan

Nowadays haiku poetry writing forms a daily proposition in Philippine life, art and literature. Haiku has been re-born and cradling into fruition in the heart of Filipinos. Still, it needs more public exposure, for example haiku festivals, haiku poetry reading, contests, book / print publications, etc., to build the tradition of haiku in the Philippines. There's something unique about Philippine haiku that you can't help but be awed by it, that can make you feel as though you're so close to Philippines. In general, Philippine poetry is not more than just a

pretty arrangement of words; it embodies a philosophy, love for the natural world, and a truth about Philippine life, art and culture. Every facet of life, we celebrate to understand ourselves.

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