

# MATSUYAMA OUTLOUD, December 2021

—Voices of the WGO? Staff and Members of the Volunteer Guide Seminar—

## December Poetry

### Let's roll the *RENGA*!

I spoke to a group at the ruins of Yuzukijo Castle in Dogo Park. Sometimes renga enthusiasts refer to composing their poems as “rolling”.

Last December, doing volunteer guide training fieldwork, we had a Nigerian student along as a “guest tourist”. Pointing out the posed figures in the samurai house, I briefly introduced the history of renga. This form of collaborative poetry started more than 1,000 years ago and quickly became popular among upper class men as a game where participants competed in composing the best poetic links.

Renga became the basis for the modern haiku form, 5-7-5 syllables with a single-season word. The civil war era, between the 15th and 16th centuries, is considered renga's golden age. Bushi commanders got together to compose 100 verses on scrolls of *washi* paper before departing for the battlefield. They prayed for victory and dedicated their 100 rengas to one of the gods at a local shrine.

In the 18th century, ordinary people enjoyed renga meetings as a part of social gathering. Compared to haiku, it is difficult to compose because the rules are so complicated. That's why I suggested we start with writing a simple three-line poem that morning. For the *hokku* opening stanza, I borrowed a haiku written by Masaoka Shiki. The other members of our group followed with their own short poems. As game secretary, I wrote down all the poems on a scroll of paper.

Let me share some of the renga composed for our game. I got things rolling with this poem by Shiki, “a snowy day, on the *kotatsu* heating table, a sleeping cat”.

I followed this with, “no visitors, whispering to the kitten, with a *Beni-Madonna*”. Yoshie wrote, “seeing from the window alone, falling snow makes the world calm, a cat is only friend”. Finally, Anjorin wrote, “frozen in the land of the rising sun, cut by distance from home, yet feeling love away from home”.

Wishing this sweet young couple living apart Happy Holidays!

(Kazuyo Kajiwara)

**To follow in Emperor Showa's footsteps is to learn all there** is to know about Japan in the 20th century. The Japanese emperors are the descendants of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu. Emperor Showa who ruled over the Empire of Japan was once regarded as a living god. At least until the conclusion of World War II.

When the Showa ended in 1989 with the Emperor's death, TV news characterized his reign as a tumultuous era of “war and peace”. And it made me wonder at what an incredible life he must have led. Most people alive today

(including me) did not experience the instability and violence of the early Showa era. My childhood memories are primarily of his Majesty standing on the Imperial Palace balcony on New Year's Day, delivering his annual address in flat tones with a blank look on his face. Waving his hand awkwardly and a little robotically to the thousands of people gathered at the palace to see his face and hear his voice.

In those days, most households displayed the Japanese flag at their front doors to celebrate national holidays. I'm not sure whether it's because our respect for the Imperial family is weakening or that we're becoming less patriotic than before. At any rate, I don't put up our national flag any more and neither do my neighbors.

Recently, however, one book altered my staid impression of Emperor Hirohito. According to the book *Bansuiso Monogatari* when he visited Matsuyama for the first time in 1922, in the last few moments of calm before chaos erupted and overwhelmed Japan, he was the twenty-one-year-old Crown Prince. The local newspaper, *Kainan* reported the prince's satisfaction with his accommodations at *Bansuiso*, the French style villa built by Count Hisamatsu, where he stayed for three days. For me, as a Matsuyama resident, his good evaluation of the house is good to know. The Prince was curious about what was going on in town, and when he learned that women had started frequenting the newly opened cafes, he exclaimed, "Oh, you Matsuyama people also have cafes now!" Despite his tightly controlled itinerary, he still found time to play billiards, one of the games he enjoyed with celebrities from abroad who visited the Imperial family. He enjoyed it so much he wanted to practice it even for a short time while at *Bansuiso*.

At a dinner party on the Imperial ship leaving Matsuyama, he remarked, "Military marches are alright, but if I had to listen to Noh drama music all the time, I'd fall asleep." After reading all these intriguing stories about him, I felt he was closer to his subjects, ordinary Japanese people, than I ever imagined, and that he was actually very human.

After all, that's exactly what he was. Just one young man.

(Miwa N.)