

# Haiku in Brazil:

## Assimilation or a New Poetic Accomplishment?

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*Translated by André Setti*

### Introduction

Certainly we are all aware of the excellent studies by Paulo Franchetti, professor and haiku poet from Unicamp, of haiku as both a Japanese poetic form and a poetic form practiced in Brazil. There is no need to reiterate what he has already written, and here I will not make comments regarding the circumstances or the process of introduction of this poetic form and its practice in our country.

Despite the pretentious title that I have given to this chapter, in fact I would like to restrict the focus to Niterói, a city in the state of Rio de Janeiro, and to talk about a single haikuist and his views regarding this poetic form.

Initially, I would like to present some definitions of haiku coined in Portuguese language a long time ago. As Franchetti points out (1990), one of the first definitions of haiku in the Western hemisphere was written in Portuguese:

There is a sort of verses in a Renga style which is named: Faicai, of a lower style & the verse with ordinary words...

These are the words of Priest João Rodrigues, published in the *Arte da lingua de Iapan* (The Art of the Language of Japan) in 1604.

But another Portuguese man provided us with information about the haiku approximately 300 years later. It was Wenceslau de Moraes (1908), who wrote in one of his letters published in a newspaper called *O Comércio do Porto* (The Trade of the Port):

The uta of our days . . . is still the spontaneous murmur, almost unconscious, that the Japanese people pronounce, like the nightingale, like the female frog, to translate his or her feelings of desire, joy, sorrow, or pain. . . . [T]he uta is part of the same inconsistency, the same flow, the same parsimony of details (of the Japanese paintings). Just like the paintings, it is, more than everything, a stimulus of our memories, of what we have seen, of what we have felt and what we have suffered. . . . Restricting each poem to its undermost dimensions, usually not exceeding thirty-one syllables, with only seventeen at times, the skill of the poet consists in grouping, within these short limits, a choice of words that suggests a deep intimate impression.<sup>1</sup>

Although, in this definition, Moraes does not make a distinction between *waka* and *haiku*, calling both *uta*, he points out the parsimony of details and the apprehension of the Japanese poetry as a

“stimulus” of our experiences. The haiku is not only a poem of “lower style,” of “ordinary words” anymore. It is, at this point, a poetic form with the status of literature.

From the time Osório Dutra began to publish haiku in Portuguese, in 1920, many Brazilian literary men treated haiku with condescension, offering a prejudicial characterization of the genre (among these, the Parnassian expression of Guilherme de Almeida, the Concretism of Haroldo de Campos, the reinterpretation of Paulo Leminski, and many others). Here however I do not intend to survey the famous names in the literary field, but to treat those of Portuguese language that knew, learned, composed, and disseminated haiku in Portuguese language in Brazil. There has been intense activity of haikuists writing in Portuguese language, and poets have associated with several groups, one of the best known of which is the group called Grêmio Haicai Ipê.

The “stimulus” in Moraes’ definition can be understood as complementary to a statement by Franchetti:

... the register or the awakening of a very wide or intense perception born from  
a sensation. This seems to be the nucleus of the form of haiku.<sup>2</sup>

And this “very wide or intense perception,” this “stimulus,” results in a haiku in order to define the haiku itself.

What is a haiku?  
It is the sparkle of stars  
On a drop of dew.<sup>3</sup>

The poet who defines this genre in this manner is Luís Antonio Pimentel, whose poetry, mainly haikus, will be the theme of the next section.

### **The Man and the Poet**

Luís Antonio Pimentel was born in Miracema, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, in 1912, but lived in Niterói, another city of the same state, from the time he was two years old. Left fatherless at the age of three, he began to work in a newspaper when he was seventeen (an activity that he continues to perform up to the present day). He has worked for several well reputed newspapers, both in Niterói and in the city of Rio de Janeiro. In 1933, he was hired to work for the newspaper *A Nação* (The Nation), together with Cecília Meireles, her husband Corrêa Dias, and Carlos Lacerda, among others. Later on, he was hired by *Gazeta de Notícias*, where he worked until 1937. In that year he sailed to Japan.

He studied at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes (National School of Belas Artes) until he was selected to study in Japan. After his return to Brazil, he returned to college, graduating in journalism in 1952 from Faculdade Nacional de Filosofia da Universidade do Brasil, the institution known today as Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.

Chosen by the rector of Universidade do Brasil, Prof. Raul Leitão da Cunha, to be awarded with the scholarship offered by the Instituto Cultural Nippo-Brasileiro and by the Japanese Government, Pimentel studied Japanese language and culture Waseda Kokusai Gakuin of Waseda Univer-

sity in Japan from 1937 to 1939. Having finished his scholarship, he chose to continue in Japan, working at the Tokyo Radio, where he was a speaker in Portuguese language. He also worked occasionally at the Brazilian Consulate in Tokyo.

In 1942, after the outbreak of the Pacific War, Pimentel had to leave Japan. He was aboard the last ship designated for the evacuation of foreigners, the *Tatsuta Maru*. In Lourenço Marques, the capital of the Portuguese colony of Mozambique (the city is named Maputo today), there was an exchange of people evacuated from Japan for the Japanese people coming from the Americas. At the time, Portugal was neutral in the war. Pimentel was one of those involved in the exchange, and he returned to Rio de Janeiro on board the *Grips Holm* (a ship with a Swedish flag). He had lived in Japan for five years and two months.

His experience in the late 1930s and early '40s makes him a *senpai* of us Brazilians who have studied in Japan. Journalist, poet, writer, memorialist, researcher of the Brazilian folklore, plastic artist, and occasional composer, Luís Antonio Pimentel is the subject of an entry of the Delta-Larousse Encyclopedia.

Pimentel published his first book of poetry, *Ciranda, cirandinha*. . . , in 1933. He presented himself as the “disillusioned fellow who used to look on,” who was, at the end of the *ciranda, cirandinha* dance, “the only one without a partner.” In the title poem of this first book, he describes the soul of the poet as “a window wide open to the universal beauty.” It is this wide opening that allows him to understand Japan and the Japanese poetry.

In the Japan of that time, he relished the company of great names of Japanese literature and arts, such as Kawabata Yasunari, Horiguchi Daigaku, and Tange Murata, among others, of whom he has a vivid memory. He also knew Ōtake Wasaburō, with whom he had some dialogues about the meaning of certain words in Portuguese. According to Pimentel, it was with Horiguchi Daigaku that he penetrated into the secrets of haiku.

The friendship and the linguistic assistance of Yonekura Teruo also helped him. Yonekura lived in Brazil, studied in a Brazilian school, and learned Portuguese. He was also a poet. The sensibility that united these two men has formed and strengthened a great friendship which resulted in the translation into Japanese of Pimentel's poems. And so *Namida no kitō* (Prayer in Tears—unpublished in Portuguese) was born, published in 1940 in Tokyo by Daichisha.<sup>4</sup> In this book, there is a poem that, according to Pimentel, has caused perplexity among Japanese readers because of the innovative treatment that he has given to Mt. Fuji. This is the poem.

Fuji inside the afternoon

In the sleepy afternoon  
Fuji-san used to rise,  
between the soft kimono of the clouds,  
fearless as a virginal breast,  
to receive the last kiss  
of the burning, dying Sun.

His editor in Japan, Shiratori Shogo at the time, believes that his verses have the “southern passion,”

whose feeling “springs in an unrestricted way.” In the preface of *Namida no kitō* (Prayer in tears), he affirms:

Art has no boundaries. When Mr. Pimentel, sitting at the next table, with innocent and shining eyes, recites his poems full of feelings, we forget about our nationalities. This is what we call artistic respect.<sup>5</sup>

Although I intend to talk about Pimentel’s haikus, I could not miss the opportunity to mention this poem, since it is one of his own favorites and reminds him of Japan.

It is also interesting to consider that the original Portuguese version of *Namida no kitō*, a collection of 115 poems, has disappeared. Reading it in Japanese, it is difficult to realize that it was written by a Brazilian man. However, it is true that his lyricism is more ardent than the one produced by the ink of Japanese poets, since it is colored by the sensuality, perhaps the same trait that will appear in some of his haikus. But the themes of his poems reveal how much he had already assimilated from the Japanese *modus vivendi* (way of living), the symbolism of its myths.

Pimentel talks about the woman he loves and about some cultural traditions that are neither the feminine figure nor the cultural idiosyncrasies perceived through the filter of exoticism that prevailed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He reflects the free circulation and the knowledge of the different tones of the historical and social moment of Japan at that time. In this sense, his is a very rich contribution to our comprehension of a Japan—he gives us something that we cannot find in books. In the poem *Senninbari*, he describes the practice (originated in the war between China and Japan of 1894) of a thousand women sewing a thousand stitches in a piece of a white fabric, in a rococo style. This piece of cloth was carried by soldiers to the frontline of battle, either in their pockets or pressed against their chests, as an amulet that would allow them to return to the country in safety. The *senninbari* was the fruit of the perseverance of women, mothers and wives, to protect their beloved son or husband from unavoidable dangers. Pimentel’s sensibility in the capture of the moment reveals the pride and devotion in the anxiety of these women. It was at the beginning of the war between Japan and China, in 1937, when the sewing of *senninbari* was revived and experienced by Pimentel. The poet talks about all the hands filling his democratic eyes, and his tone is plainly lamenting. The slender hands of the nurse, the refined hands of the lady, the sinful hands of the *geisha*, the agile and gracious hands of the dancers, the rude hands of the laborers, all these hands united in an unique patriotic spirit transport him to the fabric, as if to sew the veins of the brave soldiers even before they were torn by wounds.

In the poem *Chōchin gyōretsu* (Lantern Parade) the theme of war appears again. All the lanterns, looking like inflamed hearts, and all the hearts, looking like lanterns lighted, flags waving—the crowd, as in a wave, passes through the city. The entire scene is seen by the timid eyes of the young widow, preserved on the shadow of the crowd. The perception of the personal drama is suggested (not expressed), in accordance to the Japanese style of representation of a dramatic reality. While I was reading the poem, I remembered the short story *Hankechi* (The Handkerchief) written by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke in 1916, which portrays a mother communicating to a teacher the death of her son. The apparent tranquility of the mother hid her turmoil, which, however, was revealed by her wringing of the handkerchief under the table while she was talking to the teacher. This subtlety

in the apprehension of the drama is a Japanese influence in Pimentel's poetic expression.

When the poet talks about love and about his beloved in this book, his Latin blood is always present, as Shiratori correctly points out, but the sensuality is subtle. The woman whom he loves is Japanese, and her absence is cried as the "unpetalling" of the cherry blossoms on the breeze, as in *Soyokaze*.

### Pimentel and the Haiku

In 1954, Pimentel published *Tankas e Haicais* (Tankas and Haikus).<sup>6</sup> To his tankas, only a title, contextualizing the poem. The themes of the book are indigenous to Brazil and the "southern passion" is also present. Consider:

#### Lyrism

In the white and nervous stalk  
of your slender body of waterspout,  
I harvested the red flower of your kiss.

#### Sadness

When it rains up in the hill,  
without the flags of the clothes,  
the ropes remain crying.

Pimentel himself, in the postface of *Tankas e Haicais*, affirms that Japanese poetry is a thing of "difficult transportation to our language, due to the lack of linguistic mood." He declares that we are too prolix to make poetry either with thirty-one or seventeen syllables, but that it is impossible for him to resist and not to write his own poems. He compares the tanka to our epigram in terms of form and, regarding its content, he emphasizes the softness and the emotion of its essence.

In these two tankas previously quoted, we cannot find the pattern of "versification" in a tercet of 5-7-5 syllables and a distich of 7-7 syllables. Not even the typical relationship between the tercet and the distich that, on strict terms, should not have a logical meaning. But we can apprehend, in the first example—Lyrism—a comment about the first two verses; suddenly, the stolen kiss that had left the (helpless?) small lady shy. In the second example (Sadness), although the relationship between the parts seems explicative in a certain degree, the feeling of sadness is permanent throughout the poem, in all the stanzas. When the rain prevents even the exhibition of the flags, the only thing left for the ropes is the tears.

Pimentel's haikus are more "canonical" regarding their metrification, but there is not always a concern with *kigo* (seasonal words). The poet himself declares that he does not consider it indispensable, yet he can use it with mastery:

The field is a sea. . .  
In cornfields, in waves  
of gold, sparrows dive.

Loaded with cane,  
the ox cars creak,  
grinding the roads. . . .

The poem is talking about the autumn, time of harvesting the cane, the wheat. The ox car leaves its mark on the dusty road, and the sparrows enjoy their last opportunity to obtain the abundant and easy food. These photographs of the moments intensely lived are portrayed in a direct, simple, and light way.

Let us see what Pimentel has to say about the Japanese poetry:

Always regarding as a poem what, for us, would be only a theme, the Japanese became poets in order to feel their own poetry. In fact, where can we find beauty if we do not have it within ourselves?<sup>7</sup>

We realize, then, that the author relates the haiku to the feeling of what is poetic, and that the beauty of what is poetic is gracious, because it lives within us. It is, therefore, with the beauty that we carry in ourselves that we illuminate the perception that comes from an intense feeling, as Franchetti points out. Certainly, it is with this “beauty” that, by seeing the reality, we drive ourselves away from it, portraying with simplicity the apprehension of the moment. Allow me to present another pair of haikus:

On the festive roofs,  
in nests made of mud,  
swallows coo.

A new pitanga tree  
full of mature fruits  
—festive lanterns.

The vision of the swallows cooing in the rude nest or the mature fruits of the pitanga tree is put into words, as a description of that truth apprehended by sensibility, and touches us through its festive atmosphere. In my humble knowledge of this Japanese poetic genre, this is haiku. It communicates a timeless feeling that has no boundaries, neither physical nor linguistic.

But Pimentel is Brazilian and, as Wenceslau de Moraes correctly points out, “One cannot reject ancestral inheritances of tendencies, preferences, inherited during several centuries by an enormous quantity of ancestors, although the caprices of destiny threw us to the antipodes.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, some of Pimentel’s haikus are not examples of assimilation, any longer, but rather they are a new poetic accomplishment in the form of haiku.

His definition of haiku is a good example. The question “What is a haiku?” is rather strange, even as a rhetorical question, to the poetic genre in question—maybe it is something related to the Western tendency to argue, but Pimentel uses it as a Brazilian haikuist in order to explain himself. And he explains himself in a precious and passionate way, yet distant from the “lightness” attributed to this poetic genre. On the other hand, his explanation can mean what was not explicitly said with

words, but is present in the general meaning. After all, the haiku is a poem extremely short, but very dense, and the “**drop** of dew” comprises the “**sparkle of stars**.”

Pimentel wrote some haikus that remind us of Kobayashi Issa:

Loaded with cane,  
the ox cars creak,  
grinding the roads. . . .

In the hands of the child,  
the small dove of paper  
coos and even talks.

Foot on the curb,  
foot on the ditch, the lame  
boy walks happily.

Other haikus bear the mark of the “I-lyric” from the Romantic School and Symbolism. The theme of love, not a common theme in haiku, appears in a subtle way in Pimentel’s verses, yet it makes us realize the vast nuances of what is not expressed, but only suggested.

Staring at a picture,  
your eyes were beautiful,  
pearled hortensias.

Your singular lips  
reflected on the vitrine  
were a precious jewel.

In the scented alley,  
the branch that hurt me  
covered me with flowers.

Tears on the pier.  
A kerchief dreams of being  
a canvas, able to sail.

In the interview that he gave to Kahlmeyer-Mertens, when asked about whether the symbols, the figures of speech, the subjectivism observed in his poetry were personal characteristics or typical traits of haiku, Pimentel punctuated with mastery what, by transposing the assimilation, resulted into a new poetic accomplishment with marks of the individuality that is already able to deal with the “ancestral legacy” and the “caprices of destiny.”<sup>9</sup> These are his exact words:

*Some of these symbols are very much related to the feeling of Buddhism, while others are really transgressions. In a certain way, these transgressions were already present in the poetry of Issa. He drives himself away from Bashō’s poetry,*

*in the same way that I am rebelling myself against it. Take a look: I have created the onomastic haiku, which Bashō would never do; the erotic haiku, which is out of his canon; the engaged haiku, which Bashō would never do, because, for him, haiku has to make reference to natural events and its beautiful, kind and delicate things, and never to its sad and painful occurrences (p. 52).*

When asked about his creative process, he said:

*There is nothing special about it. Poetry comes, I check if it fits in the metric and write it in the paper. Haiku is not a work of a lapidary; it is a work for those who have the attention to "harvest" the moment (p. 72).*

I could not finish this article without mentioning some of Pimentel's "transgressive" haikus. I wrote some of them here, from the onomastic to the engaged ones, so you can feel the flavor of this transgression:

Maria, secular sister,  
pearl of Boa Viagem,  
is the guardian of the island.

In your eyes, green,  
in your mouth, red.  
Shall I stop or go on?

In three leaps of the tongue,  
on the roof of the mouth,  
your name is born: Lo-li-ta.

I have learnt your body by heart.  
I know it,<sup>10</sup> on the tip of my tongue,  
better than anyone.

Mature coffee field.  
Drops of blood from slaves  
sprouting in rubies.

Day over night.  
In the inflated womb of the black  
woman, sparkles the mulatta.<sup>11</sup>

Cultivate it with no land,  
The glebe is also yours.  
God made it for everyone.

With great vitality, the "transgressive" haikuist Luís Antonio Pimentel celebrated his ninety-sixth birthday on March, 29, 2008. He continues to perform his journalistic activities, to write poetry, and to talk about Japan from his house in Niterói.



NOTES

- 1 ANTOLOGIA, Wenceslau de Moraes. *Organização, seleção de textos e introdução de Armando Martins* *Janeira, Coleção Mnésis—Clássicos da Literatura Portuguesa*, Lisboa: Vega, 1993, 2ª edição, pp. 227–228.
- 2 OESTE. Paulo Franchetti, São Paulo, 2008, prefácio.
- 3 TANKAS E HAICAIS, in *Prosa e Poesia Reunidas, Obras Reunidas 2*, Luis Antonio Pimentel; Organização e Notas Aníbal Bragança, Niterói: Niterói Livros, 2004, p. 256.
- 4 Luis Pimentel, *Namida no kitō: Jojō shishū 涙の祈禱—抒情詩集*, trans. Yonekura Teruo 米倉輝夫. Tokyo: Daichisha, 1940.
- 5 Ibidem, p. 220.
- 6 Ibidem, pp. 237–267.
- 7 Ibidem, p. 266.
- 8 Moraes, W. Op. cit., p. 109.
- 9 Roberto Saraiva Kahlmeyer-Mertens, *Verdade-Metafísica-Poesia—Um ensaio de filosofia a partir dos haicais de Luís Antônio Pimentel*, Niterói: Nitpress, 2007.
- 10 *Translator's note*: in the original poem written in Portuguese, the expression “sei-o” (I Know it), has the exact same sound of the word “seio” (breast).
- 11 *Translator's note*: *Mulattos* are an offspring of Black and White parents. The last letter “a” in *mulatta* indicates that we are talking about a female.