

WEEK 3

POETS GOING PUBLIC

Creative _expression is the need of their souls

By ERIKO ARITA

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Reciting in a rap rhythm, a young man read his poem in a low, strong voice as 10 others around him listened intently.

"As the world's only country that experienced the atomic bomb, we should have taken action. But someone pushed Bush!," the 19-year-old shouted. "So now the light of hope is very small, and the world is a ship named Small Lake, tied to the land with a chain, and still, bright deep-red blood flows from heads."



Speaking afterward at Open Mic Up!, a monthly poetry reading event at the Mr.Friendly Daily Store cafe in Tokyo's Daikanyama district, the impassioned university

A student who goes by the pen name Inha reads his work aloud at an Open Mic Up! poetry-reading event at a cafe in Tokyo's Daikanyama district.

student whose pen name is Inha said he wrote the poem with the 9/11 attacks, the war in Iraq and his memories of a high-school trip to Hiroshima in mind.

At that meeting last month, of the 11 men and women present, aged from their teens to fortysomething, eight read aloud poems they'd written on topics drawn not only from world events, but from impressions of nature and their love of family as well.



Chisato Daigo reads a poem about her children at an Open Mic Up! event in Tokyo.

Tetra Tanizaki, a scriptwriter who is one of the organizers of Tokyo Poetical Movement, said the group launched the event in February 2005 to provide a forum in which ordinary people could express themselves to others through their poems.

Stressing that poetry should not be regarded as a special art that is the exclusive preserve of professional poets to write and enjoy, Tanizaki said that "anybody who reads their poem becomes a poet." Just as U.S. Beat poets from the 1950s, such as Allen Ginsberg would often stage poetry-readings in cafes or parks, Tanizaki said similar events started in Japan in the '90s and have become increasingly popular in recent years.

Another sign of that is Shinjuku Spoken Words Slam, a poetry and rap event that's been held every Friday in Tokyo since February 2003. Inko

Saito -- who started the Slam and was one of those at Open Mic Up! -- said she got the idea for her event from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York.

In the relaxed but enthusiastic settings of her Slams, Saito said new human channels can often open up, even for people who often felt isolated before. "I have seen youngsters who never really fitted in at school being warmly accepted by other participants," she said. "[And through sharing in the artistic activity,] they made friends."

But it's not only Japanese who are increasingly enjoying reading and listening to poetry, but foreign residents as well.

Last month, too, at a cafe called Yanakabossa in Tokyo's Taito Ward, French singer and auteur Pierre Barouh read his poems in French, one of which was about a couple on the point of breaking up:

"La nuit nous semble farouche, louche l'ombre de nos corps ... Nous n'avons rien a nous dire, pire nous sommes d'accord."

Barouh, who played a role in the classic French movie "Un homme et une femme," and has directed a film on Brazilian musicians, told the 30-strong gathering that rhyme in poetry makes the art form into "music of words." Fittingly, his own delivery had been nothing if not musical.

But those challenged by French need not have worried, because a selection of his poems translated into Japanese by his Japanese wife were then read out by another performer named Yohani Kibe.

Kibe also read some poems that he had composed. One, titled "A Life Hanged by Night," was about a crow that he saw through a window of a train he was on one winter's day:

"The moment we stopped at a station, I noticed something twisting its body in the sky as I glanced through the window. I thought it was a piece of paper or cloth ... but it was a crow tangled up in an electric wire above a housetop, flapping its wings in vain."

The next moment, Kibe said, the train started to move and the crow was gone from his view. "My heart was about to break, thinking of the lonely creature waiting to pass away, being hanged somewhere under this night sky," he said.

Among those present at Yanakabossa that day was Sakura Nagasaki, a 30-year-old housewife who said she very much enjoyed listening to the poets. "Poetry is art that consists of only words," she said, "but they can provoke the imagination of the audience about the content of the work."

Kibe, who is freelance writer, said he guesses that poetry readings are getting popular partly because many people nowadays must suppress their emotions and feelings at their workplaces, but they can find release through reading poetry out loud.

"I myself feel that expressing my ideas this way has a better effect on my mind and body than just writing sentences," Kibe said.

As relatively new as the poetry-performance trend may be, and despite the many younger people involved, others have been enjoying modern free-style poetry for decades.

In an event titled Library of Voice, at which established poets and writers read their works at the Museum of Modern Japanese Literature in Tokyo's Meguro Ward last month, most of the audience were in their 50s and above. One participant, award-winning 50-year-old Toshiko Hirata, read some of her works, including "Blue Umbrella named Jill," which spoke of her imagining her umbrella turned into a dog.

Referring to the growing popularity of poetry readings, especially among young people, Hirata said such youngsters are attracted by the extent to which they can express themselves in that way -- "in a similar way as blogs on the Internet . . . whether the content is sophisticated and artistic, or not."

Information (in Japanese) on upcoming poetry-reading events can be found on the Internet at www.poeca.net/ and also in the free newsletter Tokyo Reading Press, available at major bookstores in Tokyo.