

Kamishibai: How It Differs from Picture Books

By Etsuko Nozaka

紙芝居— 絵本とどこが違うのか? 発表者：野坂悦子

(JBBY, The International Kamishibai Association of Japan)

I am a translator of children's books, and I have translated more than 80 picture books from Dutch into Japanese. For the past 12 years I have also been working with the International Kamishibai Association of Japan (IKAJA) in introducing kamishibai in the world. Many things essential for children's growth and outlook on the future can be conveyed to children through kamishibai and picture books. But they are totally different genres, each has its own format and key features. How do kamishibai differ from picture books?

First I let us look at picture books.

Picture Book Format and Key Features

The format of picture books is as follows:

- The pages are bound, and the story proceeds by turning the pages.
- The text is written on the same pages as the pictures.
- The reader directly faces the pages of the book and turns them in order to follow the story.

What is it like when you read a book? As the scene changes with each page that is turned, the reader enters the story-world. The reader "goes into" the book.

The pace at which the pages are turned differs from one reader to another, but in the process of turning the pages, the story-world

becomes the reader's own (individual) world, and the delight of entering that inner world helps readers nurture their sense of their individual identity. These key features of picture books are derived from their format.

The creation of good picture books, therefore, utilizes these key features to the utmost. Opening the cover, seeing the end paper and the title page, and turning the pages one after another, the reader is gradually drawn into the book. The illustrations, too, are made to enhance the sense of *entering into* the book, heightening the reader's absorption and involvement in the story. Even when the story is being read aloud to a child, the idea is basically the same.

Kamishibai Format

Kamishibai have their own distinctive format as follows:

- They are composed of a certain number of loose sheets of thick paper.
- The pictures are on the front and the text on the back.
- Because the text is written on the back of the drawing, a "performer," or somebody who reads the text, is always needed for kamishibai. The performer faces the audience to convey the content of the work.
- The story progresses by showing the sheets using the two important movements – "sliding out" and "sliding in".
- A stage (*butai*) is mostly used to outline the story sheets and to facilitate the performer's reading. The stage has three doors on the front.

Kamishibai Key Features

The key features of kamishibai derived from the above format are as follows:

- The scene of story-world goes out and spreads into real space.
- Through concentration on the story, and communication between the performer and the audience as they face each other, the shared feeling or *kyokan* 共感 of the story-world is born and spreads between the performer and the audience.
- The audience within that space experience the shared feeling of the story-world as their own world. The delight they gain from such an experience helps foster the sense of *kyokan*.

The creation of good works of kamishibai, therefore, utilize these key features to the utmost. The creator composes the text and illustrations in a way that will allow the performer and audience to share the joy of *kyokan*. The illustrations are made to enhance the shared experience. By varying voice volume, rhythm, pauses, and the speed of sliding the sheets in and out of the *butai* (frame) the performer expresses the message of the work.

Children benefit from both picture books and kamishibai because the experience of their own (individual) world and that of shared experience (*kyokan*) are indispensable to people living as humans. They are like the two wheels of a cart, neither of which can be missing.

From the History of Kamishibai

Kamishibai are said to have been born around 1930 in a traditional shopping and residential area of Tokyo. These early street corner

kamishibai were mainly a tool to gather people and sell sweets; the content of the stories was just for entertainment.

Then there came the era of the published kamishibai. The motive of the creators of these stories, unlike those for street corner kamishibai, was not just superficial entertainment. Around 1935, some people began publishing kamishibai for kindergartens, elementary schools as well as church Sunday schools. These works carried specific messages, so they were obviously different from street corner kamishibai.

Before they reached maturity as a cultural form, kamishibai were taken over to be used as tools of state policy. As Japan plunged into the war in Asia and the Pacific, the Japanese government created kamishibai to glorify militarism. After Japan's defeat in 1945, kamishibai moved along a new path in the direction of democracy, and from then until today they have grown into a cultural form that provides pleasure while telling about all facets of human life. In 1983 Noriko Matsui created a masterpiece of kamishibai titled *Grow, grow, grow, bigger* (Jp: *Ookiku ookiku ookikunare*) which expresses the deep joy of growth. In 2005 Eiko Matsui's *Never again* (Jp: *Nidoto*) was published, which is a plea for peace from Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Both works were printed by Doshinsha publishing. In this way Japan has cultivated the kamishibai genre as part of its popular culture.

The history of modern picture book is said to have started in the nineteenth century, with the publication of epoch-making titles such as Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter* in 1845 in Germany or Lewis Carroll & John Tenniel's *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865 in England. The

Golden Age of the picture book in the United States came in 1930s and 1940s under the influence of brilliant British illustrators like Caldecott, Crane and Green a way of the previous generation. The culture of picture books spread all over the world in the twentieth century. In the beginning picture books were cultivated in Western countries, but gradually each country began to develop its own world of picture books.

The history of kamishibai is thus a little shorter than the history of picture books, but the best works in both genres have something in common in content: they both condense deep meaning and communicate the wonders of life, each pursuing its distinctive way of expression.

Kamishibai Across Cultures

In the course of disseminating kamishibai in the world, we have learned many things. For example, the people around the world are fascinated by the stage. Some performers in Japan don't use a stage, but by using the *butai* with its three doors, kamishibai becomes a real mixture of oriental and western culture. The way of sliding the sheets in and out evokes the Asian the culture of sliding panels to show or conceal.

Here are some titles IKAJA recommends as helpful in cross-cultural understanding. They have been translated into several languages including English, French, Spanish, Dutch, Vietnamese, German and Bahasa Indonesian:

1) *How the witch was eaten up (Jp:Taberareta Yamamba)*

Text by Miyoko Matsutani/illustrations by Eigo Futamata

2) *Father (Jp:Otosan)*

Text by Jun'ichi Yoda/illustrations by Seiichi Tabata

3) *Kind monster Wapper (Jp:Yashiimamono Wapper)*

Text by Nozaka Etsuko/illustrations by Nana Furiya

4) *Where does the sun come from? (Jp: Taiyo wadokokaraderuno?)*

Text and illustrations by Truong Van Hieu

5) *The ivory comb (Jp:Zoge no kushi)*

Text and illustrations by Bui Duc Lien

- 1) is a quite popular and humorous Japanese folktale that tells the victory of human wisdom over Yamamba. This Japanese word was translated in "witch" in English, but it misses something. The French translation uses Yamamba and adds some explanation. The Bahasa Indonesia edition uses the name of a local monster.
- 2) is based on a folktale in Sumatra, which asks considers the true meaning of fatherhood.
- 3) is my own work. It uses some episodes about Lange Wapper, legendary monster in Antwerp. I have recomposed this character through my imagination to convey the joy of cooperation with friends. The illustrations are quite dynamic.
- 4) is an original story by the author, who fought for many years in the Vietnam War. This story reflects on his life, as he tells

children about his journey seeking the truth. This work was made during the 1990s when cultural exchange between Japan and Vietnam through kamishibai was quite active.

- 5) Is also the work of a Vietnamese illustrator. It describes the resistance movement, hope, and eternal love for family and homeland.

Apart from the above, I would like to introduce some handmade kamishibai titles by Mihira Sylvia, who has been trying to put Indonesian folktales into kamishibai form. Other published kamishibai available include some by Dutch writer Rindert Kromhout as well as Italian illustrator Peppo Bianchessi, and Indian writer Ramendra Kumar.

In April last year, IKAJA organized the European Kamishibai Meeting at UNESCO in Paris in cooperation with La Petite Bibliothèque Ronde. Speakers from the Netherlands, Switzerland, France and Spain presented many interesting papers.

Perhaps picture books were developed at an early stage in Western society because of its high respect for individuality. On the other hand, perhaps Japan was the natural place for developing the culture of kamishibai, because of the high respect its culture gives to shared feelings. Japanese tend to be reticent, and often don't express much about themselves. But if we have the sense of *kyokan*, and can savor the joy of life through shared experience, we are ready to accept "others." This feeling is essential as we strive to build a peaceful world. The participants at the European Kamishibai Meeting embraced this central philosophy of kamishibai.

To conclude my paper, I would like to add one episode from my experience. I visited Ishinomaki-city in December 2011 to perform kamishibai. It was one of JBBY's projects, and our purpose was to help foreign or mixed-race children to become familiar with the Japanese language and society through contact with various forms of literature. Ishinomaki suffered massive devastation in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami. Some of the families come from Asian countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Korea and China, others come from countries in South America. But when I read the kamishibai text "This is a beautiful sea," the children nodded and their affirmation encouraged my performance. It was an unforgettable moment.

Kamishibai is good for multicultural groups of children, because there is communication between the performer and the audience. And because both the story and pictures are simple, children who are not good with words can concentrate and share the feelings with other children as they enjoy the story-world. People all over the world have begun to recognize the need for kamishibai. I hope that children from on now to the future will enjoy kamishibai as well as picture books!