

Crossing Borders: Kamishibai Culture and Its Universal Appeal

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At AFCC 2016, I had the pleasure of presenting about kamishibai. Kamishibai is a form of storytelling from Japan that seems to have universal appeal.



Grow, Grow, Grow Bigger

One well-known kamishibai is *Grow, Grow, Grow Bigger*, which is the most popular one in Japan and enjoyed by children in Asia and Europe too. Its name in Japanese is *Okiku okiku okiku na-are*, and it was created by Noriko Matsui.



Duck the King

Another well-known kamishibai is *Duck the King*, or in Japanese, *Ahiru no o-sama*, which has text by Seishi Horio and illustrations by Seizo Tashima.

What exactly is kamishibai? It is a story printed on a series of sheets like large cards. The illustration is on the front of each sheet, and the text is on the back. The sheets are separate, not bound. Most kamishibai have eight or twelve of these separate sheets, which you put into a stage, or *butai*, to perform. So, what happens when we have separate sheets, with illustrations on front and text on back? We slide the sheets in and out of the stage to perform.



Kyoko Sakai performs Mr. Cook in a Sulky Mood, or Gokigen no warui kokkusan, created by Noriko Matsui, at AFCC 2016.

This sliding in and sliding out would be impossible with a picture book, because its pages are bound. Separate sheets are a big difference between kamishibai and picture books, and we can say they are a special form of kamishibai.

Also, with the illustrations on the front of the sheets and text on the back, the performer of kamishibai gets to stand near the stage and read while facing the audience. If the illustrations and text were combined in one spread, as in a picture book, this would not be possible.



Kyoko Sakai performs Mr. Cook in a Sulky Mood while facing the audience at AFCC 2016.

These characteristics make kamishibai a unique form, and the person who brings it all together is the performer. Kamishibai is not a form that can be enjoyed by one person. You need at least two people—performer and audience—in the world of kamishibai.

So how does the *butai*, or stage, contribute to the form? In Japan, we call this stage *san-men-biraki*, or stage with three doors that open. One door opens from each side, and one door opens from the top.



The kamishibai stage, or butai, with doors closed and open