

The appeal of *kamishibai*

Kyokan

— An empathy that knows no borders

This report is by Etsuko Nozaka, a translator who writes about children's literature outside Japan and presents *kamishibai*, a unique part of Japan's cultural heritage, to an international audience.



Children get hooked on *kamishibai* at the Biblioteca Pública de Pamplona-Yamaguchi, in Spain



Marie-Charlotte Delmas, director of the Médiathèque Louis Aragon, performs King of the ducks, a French folk tale



Vietnamese artist and *kamishibai* writer Bui Duc Lien performing The Ivory Comb



Dutch children's literature scholar and writer Rindert Kromhout introduces *kamishibai* at the Bologna Children's Book Fair

"*Kamishibai* is cool!"

Kamishibai, a storytelling medium which all Japanese are familiar with from childhood, is now gaining followers abroad, where it is seen as a "cool" and appealing art form.

I have been part of this export drive, performing and describing *kamishibai* in English and French at events such as the Bologna Children's Book Fair and the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY)'s World Congress in Macao.

"What a splendid idea, I am definitely going to use that in class." This comment typified the admiring reaction of French spectators at one such function. "If this is *kamishibai*, I want to know all about it," said a Spanish participant. Muttering, a British participant quietly wondered how it differed from picture books. There are various reasons for the popularity of *kamishibai*. For people overseas, who have never experienced it before, this art form has the appeal of novelty. So where does that appeal come from?

What is *kamishibai*?

Kamishibai differs from picture books. It has its own indispensable, distinctive format.

- *Kamishibai* texts are not bound: they consist of a certain number of separate sheets of thick paper with pictures on the front. Two movements are important in the process of *kamishibai*: sliding the picture out and sliding it back in.
- The story is written on the back of the pictures, and the performer displays the scene on one board and reads the accompanying text out loud from the board backs. The performer tells the story while facing the audience.
- To make each separate sheet stand out, and to facilitate the performer's reading of the text on the back, a stage (or mini-theater) has been used. The stage has three-part doors on the front.

That is the format of *kamishibai*. The special features of *kamishibai* are derived from this format, as follows.

- The story-world expands out into the space of the real world.
- Through concentration and communication, the *kyokan* (literally "shared feeling") of the story-world is born and spreads between the performer and the audience.
- Through *kyokan*, the story-world becomes the audience's own world. The delight children feel reflects the arising of *kyokan*.

Fostering this sensibility of *kyokan* is the secret of the appeal of *kamishibai*, we believe.



Working with International *Kamishibai* Association of Japan

The International *Kamishibai* Association of Japan (IKAJA), which this year celebrates its tenth anniversary, is concerned with the theoretical aspects of *kamishibai*, and arranges lectures and workshops with performance of the best *kamishibai* works all over Japan and throughout the world. This Association, represented by Noriko Matsui, a pioneer of picture books and *kamishibai* and author of theoretical works on *kamishibai*, began life as a 22-person steering committee. Including overseas members, it has grown into an association of over 700 members. Over 100 of them are overseas, from 33 countries around the world. As international project coordinator for this organization, the world's largest *kamishibai* association, I have worked with IKAJA for 10 years.

IKAJA member countries outside Japan

Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Colombia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, South Korea, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Norway, Peru, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, the UK, the USA and Vietnam