

## KAMISHIBAI, WHAT IS IT? SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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From January to May 2007, I spent time researching the history of *kamishibai* in Japan. Prior to leaving, when my colleagues asked me what I was researching, I would reply *kamishibai*. Of course, they had no idea what I was talking about. When you tell someone in Japan you are studying *kamishibai*, they might look at you with a puzzled look, wondering why you are studying that and not something more practical and business oriented but at least they know what you are talking about. For most Americans, the subject is completely arcane.

The usual translation of *kamishibai* is “paper plays.” But I found that telling my colleagues that I was studying paper plays really didn’t clarify things. It often conjured up for them an image of Indonesian puppet theater. Instead, I usually resorted to telling them that I was studying a type of street performance that was popular in Japan during the 1930s and 1950s.

Indeed, it is possible to offer a fairly straightforward description of *kamishibai*. *Kamishibai*, in a format similar to the ones presented on *Kamishibai for Kids*, first appeared in 1930 in Tokyo and quickly became one of the most popular forms of mass entertainment in the major cities of Japan. *Kamishibai* is designed so that virtually anyone can perform it. Though the first *kamishibai* didn’t have words on the back, within a few years of its debut words were added to the back of the pictures so that anyone could perform it.

There are basically two kinds of *kamishibai*: street *kamishibai* (*gaitô kamishibai*) and printed or educational *kamishibai* (*kyôiku kamishibai*). What I have been writing about and will continue to discuss for the next few pages is street *kamishibai*. The *kamishibai* that *Kamishibai for Kids* deals with are educational *kamishibai* and I will discuss those in less detail later on.

But this rather straightforward description of what constituted *kamishibai* does not fully answer the question I want to address here: What is *kamishibai*? For as I discovered through the course of my research and travels and conversations about *kamishibai*, the answer is not entirely simple or singular. The art of *kamishibai* took on many meanings during its heyday and remains difficult to define as a cultural phenomenon. Thinking hard about this art form and its meanings takes us deep into the economic, cultural, and social roots of modern Japan.

I initially became interested in *kamishibai* because of previous research I had done on *benshi*, Japanese silent film narrators. (For those interested in the topic please check out my book: *Benshi, Japanese Silent Film Narrators, and their Forgotten Narrative Art of Setsumei: A History of Japanese Silent Film Narration*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.) Talking pictures entered Japan in the early 1930s and with their introduction the need for *benshi* gradually declined. (Because of the cost and numerous other factors, it took time for Japan to switch from silent films to talking films). My research on *benshi* showed that with the advent of talkies, a number of *benshi* became *kamishibaiya*, or *kamishibai* performers. Thus, for me, I initially associated *kamishibai* as a performance or entertainment medium.

On one of my first days researching in Japan, I visited the bookstores in the Kanda/Jimbocho section of Tokyo. This is a district in Tokyo with roughly 100-150 used bookstores. As I entered the various bookstores in Kanda that specialized in entertainment and all types of performance theater and asked if they had any books on *kamishibai*, they all looked at me as if I was some sort of space alien. How could I ask such a question? Why in the world would they have such books? When I asked which stores might have books on *kamishibai*, again they responded in a puzzled manner and said they didn't know. In short, even for Japanese bookstore owners, *kamishibai* is a "thing", if you will, that is hard to categorize. Everyone knew that it didn't fit into their holdings, but no one knew into whose holdings it would fit.

Thus, from prior to setting foot in Japan to conduct my research, to my first steps researching, and, as we shall see in a little bit, until my last days of research in Japan, I kept running into the same question: What is *kamishibai*?

So what is *kamishibai*?

### **Is *Kamishibai* a Means for Unemployed Men (and Some Women) to Earn a Living?**

During the economically depressed 1930s, thousands of unemployed men (and some women) turned to *kamishibai* to earn a living. The men mounted a set of shelves and a stage on the back of bicycles and rode around from spot to spot performing. They earned a living by selling penny candy and treats to the children who gathered around to listen and to watch their performance.

The *kamishibai* performer would pick a spot in a park or temple or by the side of the road. Then walk around with his *hyôshige* (wooden clappers) calling out for children to gather to watch a performance.

Throughout the 1930s and 1950s the sound of wooden clappers for children in Japan was very similar to the sound of the ice cream truck bells for many of us. Once he had gathered children around him the *kamishibaiya* would sell them candy: *mizuame*, milk senbei, dried squid, and a variety of other treats. In order to listen to a show, a child was supposed to first buy some candy from the *kamishibaiya*. Those who didn't could, if space was available watch from a distance in the back. For many children the treats themselves were more of an attraction than the show.

Most *kamishibai* performers rented their bicycles and the stories they performed from a "boss" called a "*kashimoto*". The *kashimoto* was also the one who supplied the performers with the treats that they sold. Most *kamishibaiya* performed 3-4 shows a day to 20 or more children per show. After they paid the *kashimoto* rent for the bicycle, the *kamishibai* (the cards themselves) and for the treats, the performers earned enough to live on.

Often a enough to support several family members. It was by no means a wealthy occupation, but it was an occupation that supported tens of thousands of performers and their families in the harsh economic times of the 1930s and immediate postwar decade.

One unique aspect of this occupation was that you couldn't perform when it rained. Thus, one's livelihood often depended on the weather. If there was nice weather everyday of the month, a performer could earn a descent living. However, if there were many rainy days, then a performer might have trouble making ends meet that month.

### **Is *Kamishibai* a Two-Dimensional Art Form?**

So one way to understand *kamishibai* is as an economic entity and business enterprise. At the same time, these "for-profit" productions had a great deal of artistic merit to them. Each street *kamishibai* story was hand painted and is an individual work of art. Most stories were written as cliff hangers to bring the children back day after day. While some stories ran into hundreds of episodes, it was more typical for them to last about 30 episodes. Depending on the distributor and the region of the country each episode of a story was comprised of between 10-12 cards. During *kamishibai*'s peak, *kashimoto* not only rented out *kamishibai* but they also frequently produced them by hiring people to create new episodes of their stories day after day.

For the artists involved that meant creating 10-12 original paintings every day. Artist earned from 1-4 yen per episode. During the 1930s, when many college graduates earned around 70 yen a month and school principals earned 120 yen per month, *kamishibai* artists earned between 30-100 yen per month. Some artists were skilled, others less so. Some artists worked in teams where one person would outline the figures, while someone else colored them in.

There are various techniques involved in painting *kamishibai* which make it rather unique. In particular they deal with the fact that you pull the cards out from right to left.

Thus, how characters are positioned has to be considered because all sorts of effects can be created in the pulling out process. For example, pulling a card out halfway can allow a performer to create a dialog between two characters. Unfortunately, I don't have time to go into the various aspects of street *kamishibai* painting techniques right now.

(Picture composition and framing is an integral part of education *kamishibai* as well. One of the characteristics that makes *kamishibai* so unique and so different from picture books is the effects created when the cards are pulled out. The *kamishibai Hats for Jizo*, for example, has numerous cards designed for a "partial pull" that enable to storyteller to build up anticipation and excitement in the narrative.)

In looking at these hand painted *kamishibai* day after day I came to appreciate the real artistic quality of them. Unfortunately, the vast majority of them have been lost or destroyed. There are very few pre-war *kamishibai* left and only about 10-12 thousand postwar episodes remain. One *kashimoto* in Osaka loved *kamishibai* and kept all of his and thus we have his collection of *kamishibai* to appreciate and study. During the 1950s, however, as the economy improved and men went to work in factories and people started to watch TV, which was originally called "Electric *kamishibai*" (*denki kamishibai*), *kamishibai* died out and as it disappeared, most *kashimoto* threw their collections of tens of thousands of *kamishibai* into the trash. Thus, thousands and thousands of paintings and stories were destroyed.

That they are seen as a two-dimensional art form by some is clear to me from an experience I had at one of the very last archives that I visited. The head of the library told me that I was not allowed to photocopy the *kamishibai* because they were in poor condition, but I could photograph them if I put in a request one day in advance. When I came back the next day to continue looking at the *kamishibai* and to photograph the ones I had requested permission to photograph, he told me, "it turns out you can't photograph them." Or, to be more precise I could only photograph half of the picture.

Not half of the number of cards but literally only half a picture. Why? Because the librarians had talked it over and determined that the *kamishibai* were individual works of art—paintings—and under Japanese copyright laws only half a work can be copied. I explained that every other archive, including the National Diet Library, had let me copy or photograph the entire “painting.” They talked about it for 3 hours and then finally decided that it would be OK for me to photograph the entire *kamishibai*. Clearly a case can be made that *kamishibai* most certainly is a two-dimensional art form.

### **Is *Kamishibai* a Genre of Children’s Literature?**

Yet, another way to think about *kamishibai* is as a form of children’s literature. Though there were some painters who created their own stories, more often than not the job of writing a story fell to someone else. The writer was the one responsible for mapping out the direction that each episode would take. Often a writer would present a *kashimoto* with a script and if the *kashimoto* liked it, he would then buy it and hire artists to paint it.

Some stories are brilliantly written with one overarching arc and numerous subplots that provide a compelling story. They truly are great works of literature. At other times, the story makes almost no sense. It is just an action packed sequence of events that provide nice eye-candy, if you will, and were sure to keep children coming back. Much like some of our action-movies today.

Be that as it may, *kamishibai* were, and still are, viewed by many as children’s stories. Many collections are housed in the children’s sections of libraries. Now, I think that is in part because educational *kamishibai*, which is aimed at elementary school children, is housed there. Having looked through thousands of these stories, I can say that in a way some are great children’s literature. There are also numerous stories that I really wonder how children reacted to them.

For me they are just downright scary, some with themes of children, usually girls being kidnapped, drugged, and sold to the circus.

### **Is *Kamishibai* a Performance Art?**

What distinguishes *kamishibai* from children's picture books to which it is sometimes compared—and this is true for educational *kamishibai* as well—is that it is performed. *Kamishibai* is meant to be performed to an audience, not read to a child. After a story was produced, it was lent out to *kamishibai* performers known as *kamishibaiya*. Since the episodes of a particular story were sequential, performers would exchange their *kamishibai* everyday for the next one in sequence. In this way stories circulated all over the city. While it is true that anyone can perform *kamishibai*, it does require a certain skill to bring children back day after day. While the candies and stories undoubtedly attracted children, the *kamishibaiya* himself was also a draw.

Each performance consisted of 3-4 stories. After selling the children candy, the *kamishibaiya* frequently opened with a *manga*. These were serialized comedic stories usually about a child and some sort of side-kick that got into all sorts of misadventures.

They were, in many ways, very similar to the 4 framed comics that are in newspapers like *The Peanuts* or *Sazae-san*. Next, he would perform a tragedy. These were often tear-jerkers about a young girl, usually an orphaned, and all the trials and tribulations she went through to survive in the cruel world. Then he would perform an action-adventure story that usually had a young boy as the lead character who solved crimes, fought off wild animals and savages in the jungle or traveled through space fending off diabolical alien plots to conquer the world. Edo period horror stories, in which the ghost of a wrongly murdered individual (usually a woman) comes back to torment the people that killed her were also very popular. A *kamishibaiya* usually ended his performance with a quiz. If a child solved a riddle they would get an extra treat.

*Kamishibai* comes from a long line of what can be called “commingled entertainment.” That is, two separate forms of entertainment, usually a visual and an oral, that are combined to form one. Japan has a rich history of commingled entertainments that include *emakimono*, *etoki*, *noh*, *kabuki*, *bunraku*, *utsushie*, and *setsumei* (silent film narration). *Kamishibai* is just one in long line of commingled narrative arts in Japan.

### **Is *Kamishibai* a Means for Religious Proselytizing?**

This story gets even more complex when one looks at ways this art form was manipulated for other purposes. Shortly after street *kamishibai* emerged, a woman named Imai Yone began using *kamishibai* as a tool in her Christian proselytizing. Throughout the 1930s she created about 50 different *kamishibai* to use in her proselytizing.

In the postwar period, *kamishibai* was used by missionaries in their Christian proselytizing. There are also a number of Buddhist *kamishibai*, but I’m not sure yet in what manner they were used.

One curious aspect of the Christian *kamishibai* is that many of the stories are from the Old Testament rather than the New Testament. They tend to focus on stories of Moses, Noah, and David rather than Jesus. That isn’t to say that there aren’t stories of Jesus, it’s just that Old Testament stories are prevalent.

### **Is *Kamishibai* an Educational Tool?**

Shortly after Imai Yone began using *kamishibai* as a proselytizing tool educators picked up the power and influence that *kamishibai* could have in the classroom. Throughout the 1930s and into the 1960s, educational *kamishibai* was an integral part of the Japanese educational system, particularly in elementary school, but also in junior high as well.

Gaito *kamishibai* was often viewed as uncouth and vulgar. Social and cultural critics continually condemned it and said it was corrupting the youth of Japan.

Educational *kamishibai* was created, in part, to counteract the corrupting effects of street *kamishibai*, thus it tended to be very moralistic. Stories frequently focused on good conquering evil (also a common theme in street *kamishibai* but one that was never picked up on by the critics), being kind to others, and doing the right thing.

Japanese folk tales such as Momotaro and Kintaro were turned into educational *kamishibai* as was great literature by authors such as Charles Dickens, Jonathan Swift, and Oscar Wilde.

Biographies of men like Edison and Noguchi Hideo as well as historical and scientific events were also turned into educational *kamishibai*. In short, during the 1930s and particularly throughout the 1950s, *kamishibai* was used as a teaching tool for a large number of subjects.

Today, educational *kamishibai* is most prevalent in pre-schools and kindergartens in Japan. It is no longer part of the elementary and junior high-school curriculum.

### **Is *Kamishibai* a Communal Event?**

The disappearance of *kamishibai* from the curriculum and the streets has to some critics and fans been accompanied by a loss of communal spirit. While in Tokyo I met a young man who was training to become a *kamishibai* performer. He wasn't interested in educational *kamishibai*, but street *kamishibai*. We talked on many occasions about *kamishibai*. I was particularly interested in why a 20-something Japanese wanted to become a *kamishibai* performer.

He is attracted to *kamishibai* because of its communal social power, which he thinks has been lost in this day and age. Today young children seldom gather and play with other children in the park or playground like they used to. If kids do get together, more often than not, it is with classmates who come over to their house to play video games. In the past, *kamishibai* drew kids of all ages together outside for a communal event that lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to one hour. Children played with kids of other ages, they socialized with kids of other ages. *Kamishibai* brought them together.

The young man I met was hoping that he could recreate that atmosphere.

He thinks the power of *kamishibai* lies in its ability to bring children of all ages together to socialize and share a communal experience.

### **Is *Kamishibai* a Form of Nostalgia?**

Today, *kamishibai* is used in pre-elementary schools as a form of storytelling. But most often when it is mentioned, it is talked about as a form of nostalgia. One of the major places that *kamishibai* is performed today is in nursing homes and old age centers. For the every growing number of seniors in Japan, seeing *kamishibai* brings back fond memories of their childhood.

Almost everyone I met in Japan waxed nostalgic for *kamishibai*. While in Osaka, I attended a Fulbright alumni reception in honor of new recipients. Most of the Japanese alumni in attendance were in their 60s, 70s or 80s. These were men who had received Fulbright's decades ago. Most were doctors, engineers, or scientist with amazing backgrounds, as you might expect from a group of men who earned Fulbright's in 1950s. No one was from the humanities and they all had trouble relating to someone in the humanities, let alone someone studying something like *kamishibai*. Though they all were taken aback by what I was studying, once they relaxed they started gushing forth with fond memories of *kamishibai*. They were all quick to recount how much they liked seeing *kamishibai* as children and most mentioned how they always got extra treats because they were able to answer the quiz questions correctly.

### **Is *Kamishibai* a Precursor to *Manga* and *Anime*?**

In many ways *kamishibai* was a precursor to *manga* and *anime* and undoubtedly influenced *manga* and *anime*. *Kamishibai* is a sequential art form and it is the sequencing of the images that instills the drama into *kamishibai*. Image sequencing is an integral part in the narrative structure of *manga* as well.

A few famous *manga* artists, most notably Mizuki Shigeru who wrote *Ge ge ge no Kitaro* started off as a *kamishibai* artist. I don't have the time to go into it now, but at a future date I will discuss how *kamishibai* influenced *manga* and *anime*.

### **Is *Kamishibai* Any Different from PowerPoint?**

Through this brief overview I hope I have provided you with an introduction to “What is *Kamishibai*?” One thing about *kamishibai* that is worth noting is that during its peak in the 1950s it was the most popular form of entertainment in Japan, far outpacing motion pictures, theater, and newspapers in terms of viewership. If you take a conservative estimate that roughly ten thousand men performed 4 shows a day to 20 to 25 people per show, then you come up with a figure of roughly 800,000 to 1,000,000 people a day being entertained by *kamishibai*. Despite its incredible popularity, *kamishibai* is a subject that has received very little scholarly attention. This is a lacuna that I hope to fill someday with a book on the history of *kamishibai*.

I leave you with one final thought about “What is *Kamishibai*?” When you think about it, is *kamishibai* any different from PowerPoint? What is the attraction and power of *kamishibai*? Well why do so many of us use PowerPoint in the classroom or when giving talks or presentations.

There is something about combining a visual medium with an oral narration that is powerful and it is that fusing of the visual and the oral that makes *kamishibai* both an entertaining medium and a powerful pedagogical tool.