



Introduction

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It is a misconception to believe that the chief method of passing on story and experience was a purely oral tradition. There is much evidence to support the position that the first method might well have been pictures (viz early cave and rock drawings that appear in many parts of the world).

It is much more likely that early human cultures passed on stories of their beliefs and experiences through a combination of speech, the drawing of pictures, dancing or miming the actions of the story, or singing it, in part or in whole.

Some of these methods have survived to the present day. For example, here is a kalamkari cloth from Andhra Pradesh, India. (For a photo of the cloth, see Pellowski, *The World of Storytelling*.) It is just one of many types of “story cloths” that began to be used from about the first century of the Common Era (C. E.)

This depicts a scene from the Ramayana, one of the great epics of India. Such cloths can still be seen in performances in very rural parts of India. Similarly, other epics such as the Mahabharata, the Panchatantra, and more local hero epics also had cloths depicting the more dramatic episodes of the stories. It was considered essential to show the pictures while narrating.

When this custom passed into Southeast Asia, it was transformed into a scroll with pictures that was unrolled, one picture at a time, as the narration proceeded. In Bahasa Indonesia, this type was called *wayang beber*, or unrolled story. The last known performers appeared in the second decade of the 20th century and a few scrolls survive in museums. Here is a modern version of a *wayang beber*, constructed during a workshop in Jakarta, organized by the Indonesian section of IBBY.

Finally, one must mention the short, episodic drawing stories, common chiefly among children in certain cultures. Some of the most interesting are storyknifing in the

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snow among many indigenous Alaskan groups, sand storytelling found among the Australian aborigines, and the *ekaki uta* (chanted stories) of Japanese children.

In these drawing stories, which actually exist in most parts of the world, the narrator draws a figure or scene as the story is told, and the denouement of the story occurs at the moment of completion of the drawing, often with an element of surprise. Here is an example of an *ekaki uta* (For the story that was told and drawn, see Pellowski, *Drawing Stories from Around the World*).

Among African cultures, both epic and folk oral narration is often accompanied by music, sometimes with refrains that are sung out by the narrator and which must be answered by the listeners, also in song. Children learn these standard responses from the time they are quite young. These “call and response” interludes in stories were carried by Africans to the Americas and live on in certain areas of storytelling, preaching or speechmaking.

From one of the presenters here at the round table, we will hear a bit about the role of dance in storytelling.

There have been, and still are, many storytellers who use a purely oral speech method when narrating. Our panelists will give you some examples.

