

## Appalachia

The first people to live in the region we now call Appalachia were Native Americans belonging to the Cherokee tribe. The Cherokee had a strong tradition of oral storytelling, as did the people who were brought over from Africa to work as slaves in the region, whose ancestors often remained in the South even after the abolishment of slavery was officially recognized everywhere in the United States in 1865. When White Europeans settled in Appalachia, they brought with them stories from their home countries. Printed books were rare, and music and storytelling were the primary sources of entertainment for Appalachian people for many generations. Because the mountains provided geographic separation between communities, with different communities putting their own stamp on well-known folktales, locally specific variants of folktales, myths, and fairytales emerged. One of the most familiar characters in Appalachian folktales is Jack, a “trickster” character who was the hero of stories told across the region. Beginning in 1935, Richard Chase traveled all over Appalachia collecting different versions of Jack’s stories, listening to many different storytellers tell them in their own ways. Chase compiled them into a book, *The Jack Tales: Folk Tales From the Southern Appalachians* (1943), but he admitted in the preface to the book that the stories really aren’t meant to be written down and read, so he encouraged people to read his book to become familiar with the stories but then tell them aloud in their own way.

## Japan

The tradition of storytelling is very strong in Japan. Blind storytellers once traveled around the country telling long stories about the adventures of the samurai. These “Biwa Hōshi” shaved their heads and wore long robes. They told stories and played music on a lute, called a biwa. The biwa looks a bit like a small guitar, a tear-drop shape with a skinny neck. Later, Japanese storytellers told “paper dramas” or Kamishibai (kah-meesh-byeh). These storytellers use sets of large printed or painted cards to tell a story. The kamishibai storyteller rode into a village on a bicycle with a stage attached to it. He clasped together two blocks. This told children it was storytime. He also sold candy, and the children who bought it sat close to the stage. The storyteller began the story dramatically, by holding up pictures, one by one. However, he never finished the tale—when the plot got exciting, he stopped the story so the little children would come running the next time he came in town! When television was invented, the storytellers started to vanish. (They even called TV “electric kamishibai.” The artists who made a living making the drawings for the cards became manga (comic book) and anime artists. The art of kamishibai is popular in Japanese schools. The storyteller stacks sheets of thick paper. The front of the paper has an illustration. The back has the words to the story. The pages slide in and out of a special frame.

## China

Long ago, Chinese storytellers fell into different classes. The lowest, “artists of the bazaar,” performed in the street. They were despised. The highest class of storyteller told history, and just below them were storytellers of ghosts and love. Now there are two kinds of storytelling—pingtan/pinghua (stories without music) and tanci (stories with music). For tanci stories, two performers usually sing and tell the stories, which are often love stories. In some places, storytelling switches between singing and chanting. Sometimes this happens in teams. Once one team chooses a song, they sing part of the story and end it with a question. The other team repeats what the first team sang, but tells more of the story. They also end their song with a question. The story continues until one team cannot answer a question. In olden times, storytellers formed guilds to control who could perform and charge fees. Now, the Chinese government sponsors storytelling troupes and controls them. Students go to an official school for three years to learn pingtan. Students learn to play a pipa (a 40-stringed lute), and they also learn Chinese history, literature, and politics. They must learn scripts to perform as a test in class. After they finish school, students then study with a master for months. As the Chinese saying goes: “To memorize the master’s words a thousand times is not as effective as seeing the master in actual performance, and to see the master’s performance a thousand times is not as effective as performing it yourself.”

## Africa

Storytellers in West Africa are very important. The griots once helped kings make decisions and tutored the king’s children. After the fall of the Lion King, Sundiata, the griots worked for rich families to give them advice. They helped arrange marriages and fix arguments because they knew the long histories of the families. Any time a family asked, the griot had to sing about the history of a tribe or family, going back seven generations. In some places the griot had to know special songs to summon spirits and get approval from the ancestors. Over time, the griots or jalis (as they are also known) have become the official musicians and storytellers of the culture. They play a lute called a ngoni, or an kora, which is a cross between a lute and a harp. Some griots are men, but most are women. Most families cannot afford their own griot, so they move from family to family, performing at special events like weddings and baptisms. Now, people say, the griots know a little about many people, but not a lot about one, as they once did. Many famous pop stars from Africa are actually griots. They take traditional songs and make them modern. Also, African storytellers pass on moral lessons. A famous African writer, Chinua Achebe, said: “The storytellers worked out what is right and what is wrong, what is courageous and what is cowardly, and they translated this into stories.” As with storytellers from other places, we can learn a lot about people from their stories.