

# How stories are told around the world

[Amy S. Choi](#) Mar 17, 2015

[It's said](#) there isn't anyone you couldn't learn to love, once you've heard their story. Dave Isay knows that. The ability to honor every human by listening to what they have to say about themselves is central to [StoryCorps](#), the nonprofit he founded in 2003.

The premise of StoryCorps is simple: One person interviews another and their conversation is recorded for posterity. It's a strikingly straightforward proposition. But then, storytelling has always been less about glitz or gadgetry and more about connection and communication. No matter the tech, humans have invariably figured out a compelling way to tell each other stories.

That's not to say we all tell stories the same way. Far from it. As Kay Turner, a folklorist and independent scholar who's on the board of the [New York Folklore Society](#), notes, "Even if a story is the same, each culture will tell it differently, because each one has its own genres and cultural rules." That's led to a host of different traditions and practices beloved around the world. Here are just some of them.



## **Hula**

You might not know it while on an island vacation luau, but traditional hula dancers dance not to a beat, but to language, Hawaiian-language chants or songs. Without the words, the dance loses meaning as a story. Hula shares traditional stories as well as mythology and creation tales, including those of the gods and goddesses of the islands.



## **Chinese Shadow Puppetry**

Traditional shadow puppetry tells folk stories, issues moral lessons, and projects specific local customs. Most often seen at celebrations such as weddings or religious festivals, the puppets are silhouettes shaped from leather or paper that are manipulated on long rods by storytellers.

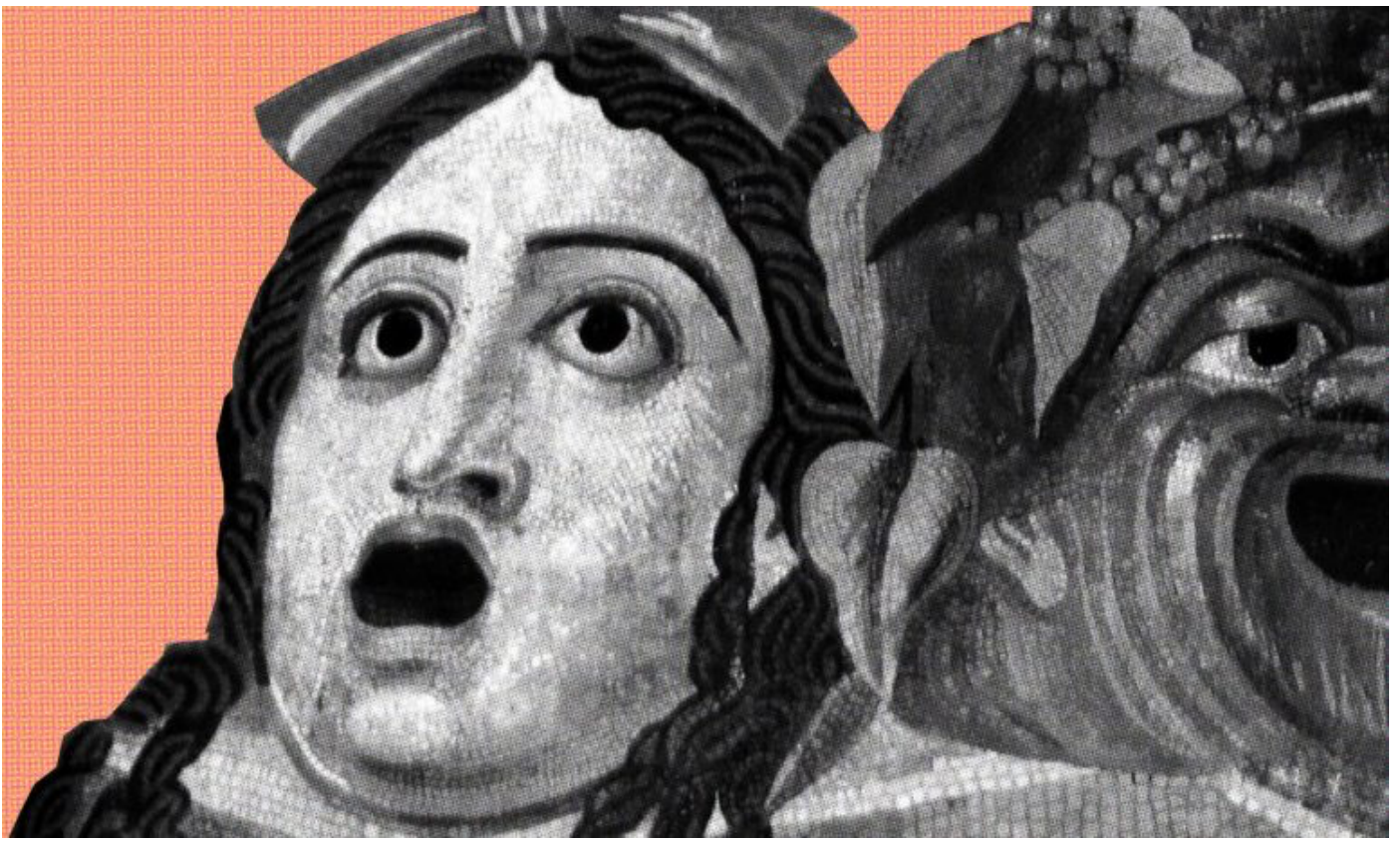
The puppeteers either sing, often in falsetto, or are accompanied by singers and musicians. Though it originated in China during the Han dynasty, the tradition has spread to countries throughout Southeast Asia.





## **Zajal**

The classical Arabic version of a poetry slam or rap battle, Zajal originated in Lebanon and is practiced across the Middle East and the United Arab Emirates. Competitions pit one poet or spoken-word artist against another. One poet recites a stanza (often insulting the opponent), then the other responds with a stanza using the same meter and rhyme.



## **Cunto**

This ancient Sicilian storytelling method draws from Greek theatre and relies heavily on improvisation. It alternates between sung verse and spoken prose and is often performed on a small wooden platform. The stories can occasionally include marionettes, though are typically told with a single prop or none at all. The storytellers, known as *cuntisti*, traditionally tell stories of epic heroes and their struggles, though these days they also include tales of daily Sicilian life.

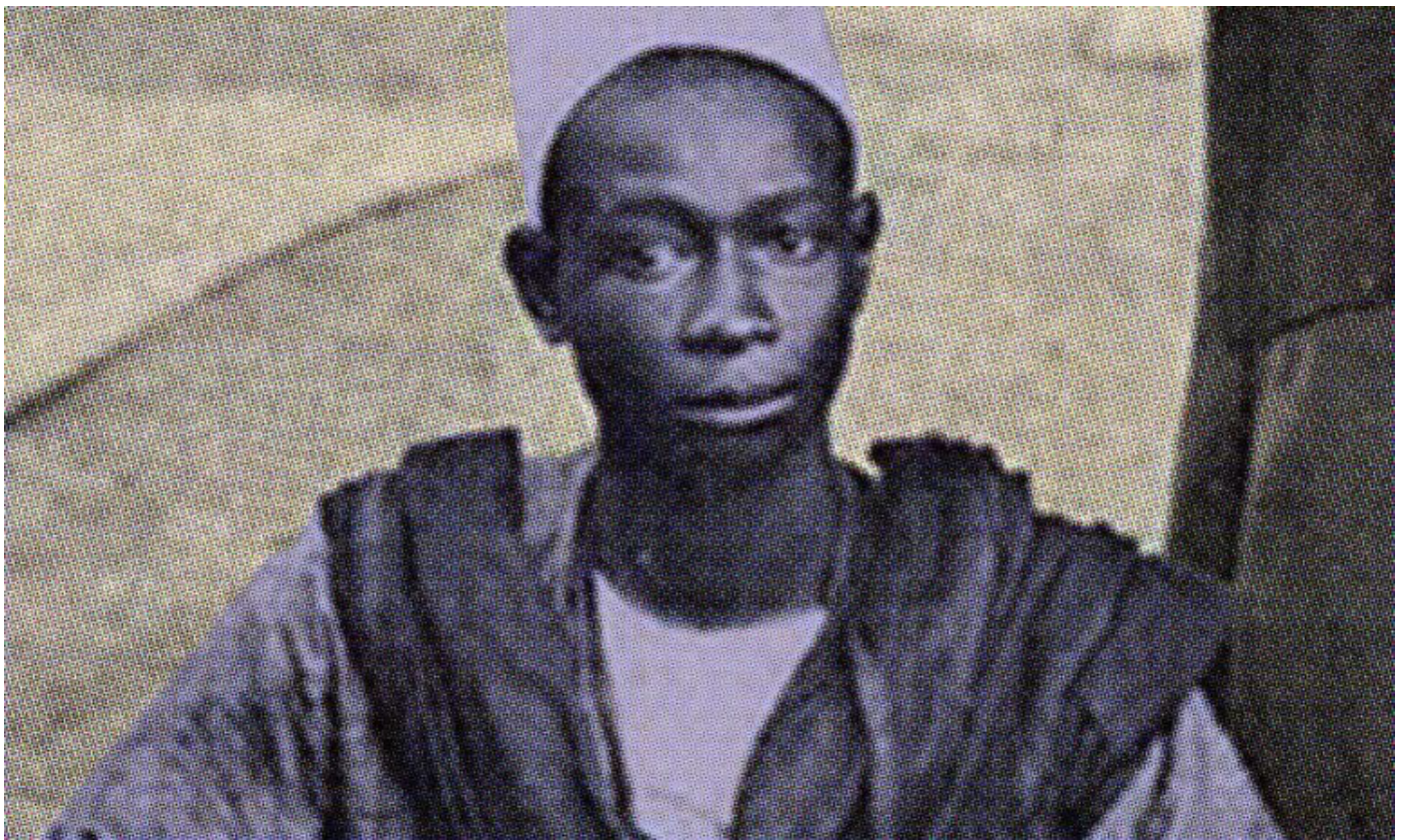




## **Rakugo**

This Japanese tradition is performed in monologues by a single storyteller, called a *hanashika*. The storytellers are similar to comedians, and they tell tales of daily life and reinforce historical and moral lessons, though they generally avoid making direct reference to particular events or figures.





## **Griot**

Griots, or Jelis, are the traditional keepers of a society's history in West African cultures. Griot storytellers often play instruments such as the kora, similar to a lute, and preserve family and cultural histories in the manner of a genealogist. In some West African cultures, griots were at once singers of praise and messengers for nobility.





## **Bharatanatyam**

Indian temple dancers, or *devadasis*, perform bharatanatyam, a dance that is considered a form of prayer. The dances tell the stories of specific deities, such as Krishna or Shiva, and are unique to different temples and spiritual days. While the bharatanatyam, which originated in Tamil Nadu, in South India, has been in existence for millennia, it has experienced a renaissance in the past century.





## Calypso

Calypso developed in the early 20th century in Trinidad, where the lyrics, which described local life and neighborhood dramas, were used as a tool to share news and shine a light on everything from the challenges of a banana farmer to local political corruption. As a political tool, calypso was often subject to censorship by the government. “Song is a popular form of expression in all Caribbean storytelling,” says Maxine Alexander, a Jamaican-American artist and storyteller. “Reggae and calypso deal very heavily in political injustice and social disparity, so storytellers use this musical platform to express things that couldn’t be spoken about. We’re singing about the stories around us in daily life.”

*Dave Isay of Storycorps won the 2015 [TED Prize](#).*

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