

The transformation of trees into knowledge has a long history especially in Africa. Many people do not know that Africa was for a long time the repository of the world's greatest libraries in places like Alexandria, Meroe and Kush. Since these libraries were so consistently pillaged and destroyed in ancient history, the Africans decided instead to place their contents into the minds of the elders. Hence it is said that when a Native or African elder dies it is as if a library was burned to the ground. This is how much respect these cultures have for their elders.

One of the oldest books ever published came from Egypt. It was called the "Book of the Dead." This book, along with the Bible and the Qu'ran, has had an incalculable impact on the organization, belief systems and actions of the human species. This speaks to the power of books as a mass media, and their historical relationship to religion.

In an interesting scene in the movie "Aguirre: The Wrath of God" (Herzog, Germany, 1977) in which some European conquistadors come upon an Indian tribe. The Europeans hold up the bible and explain to the Native people that this is "the word of God." The Native people naturally hold the book up to their ears to listen to "the word." The conquistadors then violently strike the Indians down for "making fun" of their religion.

The entire religion of Islam is organized completely around the book written by the Prophet Muhammed (peace and blessings be upon him). The entire contents of this book were told to Muhammed at least 7 times by the angel Gabril (Gabriel). The publication of this book is said to be the only miracle of Islam since Muhammed as an Arab man was functionally illiterate and completely incapable of articulating the intricate detail and relatively uncontradictory complexity of a major world religion.

However, with book publishing came the new danger of people re-interpreting the religions and organization of society for themselves. The Protestant reformation, the re-organization of paganism and the articulation and (relative) acceptance of atheism have all stemmed from the book publishing industry.

Books are the first mass media to begin the process of isolationism. When reading one is alone and shuns all contact with others, unless reading to them.

Slaves use literacy to satisfy their natural curiosity about the world and as an initial buffer to the oppression they experience. This is of course strongly discouraged. In the United States having a finger chopped off was the reward for any slave who could at least recite the alphabet. This identified the slave as dangerous, revolutionary and okay to lynch or kill if found off the plantation. The film "Nightjohn" (Burnett, USA, 1996) is based on a novel by Gary Paulson (Sarny) and illustrates this phenomenon in an extremely effective narrative.

Reading and writing books creates a barrier between the reader and the oppression or pain of life. Music does the same thing, but because it is not as difficult as reading, the effect is not as lasting or as potent. As they say in the film about Islam "The Message" (Akkad, Egypt, 1976) "it flatters God to see a man reading."