

# *Introduction*

A book is obviously not simply a physical thing. It is a living entity. People's lives are definitely influenced by this old and basic vehicle of communication. Our planet's civilizations and cultures, one may safely state, did not begin to flourish and expand until the book was invented. Books have become so general and extensive that we need not emphasize what is manifestly plain.

In the West, the study of the book as a vehicle of culture has been common and fruitful, but is not so in the world of Islam. There, the book, so much esteemed and cherished, has not been the subject of many serious studies as an entity and as a vehicle of cultural development. Aware of the need for further studies on the subject, the Library of Congress, which holds one of the largest collections in the world of books and other materials from the Islamic countries, convened an international conference on 8–9 November 1990, and mounted an exhibit in order to discuss and display the role of the book in the development of civilization in the Islamic world. It thus provided an opportunity for a number of distinguished scholars to examine and reflect upon this very important aspect of Islamic civilization, and it is hoped that this would open the doors for further studies. All the papers in this volume, except for my own, were read and discussed, and sometimes debated, by the scholars who wrote them and the scholarly public who attended the conference.

The study of "the book" as an entity is complex and multifaceted. Any such study embraces the origins, production, content, use, and role of books in culture, education, and society in general. The production of books involves materials, formats, script, typography, and illustration, among other things. As an instrument of communication, the book in its many forms has been and still is the greatest factor in the growth, development, and preservation of culture, inasmuch as it carries the knowledge, the ideas, and the messages without which an advanced culture cannot exist. Whether in the form of clay tablet, scroll, codex, or volume, the book remains central to culture. In the words of Dr. Guy Story Brown, Director of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the United States Information Agency, "the idea of *culture* itself originally emerged in connection with cultivation of learning through the written word. . . . The idea of *the book* or centrality of writing as a universal human inheritance in a sense involves a fundamental change in the idea of culture, a change that itself is characteristic of modernity, and underlies the ubiquity of books."

Although the development of the book, from its rudimentary form into the codex, and later the book manuscript, owes much to Christian scholarship

in the Roman and Byzantine periods, the book in the Islamic world was more fundamentally integrated with Islam as a religion and with the Arabic language and script, which were the early means of communication in the Islamic world. Scarcely has the literary life of any other culture played such a role as in Islam. The Koran, referred to as the Book or *al-Kitāb*, has a privileged place in Islam in that it is considered to be the word of God and in that it is inimitable (*mu'jizah*). It was only natural that The Book affect greatly the course of Arabic and Islamic culture. Under its stimulus, the various sciences (*'ulūm*, plural of *'ilm*) developed. Science, or learning (*'ilm*), by which is meant the whole world of the intellect, engaged the interest of the Muslims more than anything else except perhaps politics during the golden age of Islam, that is, the early part of the Abbasid period. It was a period that saw the elaboration of methods of publication, transcription, bookbinding, and book selling to a great degree. The circulation of books was greatly assisted by the introduction of paper in the eighth century. Literature and the art of the book received a great impetus from the manufacture of paper. The Muslims developed paper manufacturing through the employment of new materials and the discovery of new methods. This was as much a revolution as the one achieved in the fifteenth century by Gutenberg. As Professor Irfan Shahid says, "Neither parchment nor papyrus was able to bring about such a revolution." The extraordinary efflorescence of book making is reflected in the large number of repositories, or libraries (*maktabāt*), and the large number of manuscripts that have reached us. Once the printed book came into being and the process of dethroning the manuscript began, opposition to the new technology by the Islamic *'ulamā'* grew. The *'ulamā'*, until the invention and spread of printing, monopolized the transmission of knowledge. The manuscript, moreover, represented for the Muslims an historic and cultural value. This remains so until today. Most of the Muslim scholars who visit me at the Library of Congress begin their questioning by asking how many Arabic or Islamic manuscripts the Library holds. Printing meant a new cultural direction. The manuscript, which represented the old culture, became the center of controversy between the old and the new. Although it is presented in different forms and on many levels, this controversy remains with us today.

The rise of *al-warrāq*, a person who made a profession out of transcribing books, was a high point in the "Civilization of the Book." The *warrāqūn* (plural of *warrāq*) were the link between men of letters and the general public. They were interested not only in beautiful calligraphy, but also in reproducing correctly and exactly the text. They were not only copyists, but also booksellers, and oftentimes they were men of letters themselves. al-Jāḥiẓ (d.255/868), who was a versatile author and a great bookworm, hit upon the idea of hiring booths from the *warrāqūn* and spending the nights in their shops reading. In his famous book, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* (The Book of Animals), al-Jāḥiẓ dedicates a lengthy

section to the topic of “the book”. In it he responds to a critic of books by describing the value of the book as a companion, a vehicle of learning, and a versatile tool for the success of all human endeavors. He recites stories about book collecting, calligraphy, ancient writing, the preservation of cultural heritage, translation in general and translation of religious books, book editing, and the conflict between the written and oral traditions. Throughout the history of Islam, oral transmission of “the book” proceeded alongside the written. Many considered the written as merely a corroboration of and complement to the memory.

There is indeed a great need to look into the role of the book in the development of the Islamic world and its culture. The history of the book, not only as an artifact, but also in terms of intellectual content and physical properties, needs to be seriously explored. An investigation into the creation, manufacture, and use of the book in its written and printed forms has not been systematically approached, although there have been several attempts to do so. The kinship between the book and civilization is obvious yet understudied. Investigating it, as far as the Islamic world is concerned, can offer many insights into the nature and characteristics of that world.

The term “Islamic world” should be clarified. We don’t mean by it the *ummah*, or community of believers, rather the countries that became mostly Muslim by religion and contributed to the growth and characterization of the widely spread Islamic civilization. The essays and studies in the present volume are, however, concerned only with what might be called the core of the Islamic world, namely, the Middle East.

The distinguished professors and scholars who participated in the conference expounded on many aspects and problems related to the book and its study in the Islamic world. Professor Muhsin Mahdi, in his issue-raising paper, confirms the need for more information on the history of books in the Islamic world. He explains the reasons why the printing of religious books by Muslims came late, as late as the nineteenth century, and wonders why the excellent scribal traditions of dictation, collation, and illustration have not been applied to the exigencies of modern book production. He systematically raises many issues resulting from the introduction of printing, such as the impact of translations on the development of the sciences, languages, and even orthography. Furthermore, he calls for the preservation and sustenance of scholarly traditions and systems while looking forward to the new technologies in the editing and preservation of the great wealth of manuscripts remaining in the Islamic world. Jacques Berque elaborates more abundantly on the meaning of the term *al-Kitāb* (the Book) and the methods used in compiling the text of the Koran in its final form, looking at the early conditions under which the task of compilation was initiated. Looking at the properties having to do with the Koran, Professor Berque discerns a structure of type strongly akin to the

synchronal and concludes that the Koranic "edition" attests to a reflective and orderly character and is not a miscellany of disorganization and arbitrariness. The text of the Koran was the outcome of a laborious effort and is laden with potentialities that have stood the test of time well.

Professor Franz Rosenthal discusses Muslim attitudes toward books and the dilemma caused by the abundance of books in terms of quantity and quality. Books were often so plentiful that one could think of discarding some, but this was generally considered wrong. The destruction of books is discussed, when and why it occurred, the meaning and scope of originality, and the relationship between knowledge and books. Rosenthal points out the persistent distinction between oral and written information, a theme that appears in several papers and is effectively handled by Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who discusses the great significance throughout Islamic history of oral transmission in education and the spoken word as compliment to the written text. The Islamic intellectual tradition itself has functioned with the belief that oral tradition is of central importance. Oral teaching always accompanied the written text.

Professor Annemarie Schimmel considers the metaphor connected with the book in Islamic literature. After discussing the great love Muslims have for books, she deals with the figurative language in which books are used as metaphors in the works of the Persian and Persianate poets, showing the central role the imagery of the book played in Islamic poetry.

Biographical books are among the earliest and most extensive genres of Arabic literature. Professor Wadād al-Qāḍī believes that biographical dictionaries are not only indispensable tools of research, but also a mirror in which are reflected important aspects of the intellectual and cultural development of the Islamic community. A study of the inner structure of biographical dictionaries produced during the first nine centuries of Islam reveals that development. Professor Ramzi Baalbaki traces the development of the grammatical book by examining three stages in the history of Arabic grammar, based on Sībawayhi's book (*Kitāb*) as the focal point in this development. He concludes that Sībawayhi's originality was not to be matched by any of the later grammarians. Professor Salāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid discusses the role of Muslim women in learning, and after explaining the position of calligraphy in Islam, he investigates women's role in the copying of Korans and narrates the achievements of several women who distinguished themselves in that field. Professor David King considers the significance of certain categories of book illustrations, especially in works on astronomical instruments, and concludes that there are numerous illustrations in Islamic scientific books which further our understanding of different aspects of Islamic science, and even aspects of Islam and Islamic civilization.

Illuminated and illustrated books in the Islamic world were sought after diligently by kings, princes, and scholars. The special prestige attached to books

with a royal or princely provenance appears to have encouraged another method of book collection used by rulers, that of appropriating volumes from each other's libraries. Professor Priscilla Soucek and Dr. Filiz Çağman follow the path of such a volume now kept in the Topkapı Saray in Istanbul.

The transition from scribal to print culture, as exemplified by Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, is ably presented by Dr. Geoffrey Roper, who has shown that al-Shidyāq personifies in his career, as well as in his attitudes, the dawn of a new cultural era for the Arab and Islamic worlds, an era in which the communications revolution caused by the printing press brought radical changes to intellectual, political, and social life. In my article on the book in the Arab world, I survey the history of book publishing in the modern Arab world, describing the general attributes of book production and dissemination, and the prevalent trends that characterized the different periods of the last two centuries. Professor Eickelman's work, although it does not seem to be related to the history of the book as a cultural vehicle, is indirectly related in that it attempts, in a new approach, to show the impact of new means of communication in the field of education, a field that used to be associated almost exclusively with the book.

One can see from the sum total of the studies in this volume that we have only touched upon the surface of a whole new multifaceted discipline, the history of the book as a cultural vehicle. We hope that our efforts will lead to and point the way for further studies on this important and serious subject.

In the editorial work we have sought uniformity but not conformity. We adopted the Library of Congress' transliteration system and one style for the annotations. All foreign words found in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* are not italicized. Some proper names are written as they have been commonly used by the press or as they have been established by their owners. Names of cities are transliterated only when there is no English equivalent. The dates appear according to the *Hijrī* as well as Gregorian calendars. Whenever the solar instead of the lunar system is used for the *Hijrī* year, this is indicated. The words Koran and *tārīkh* are transliterated as Qur'ān and *ta'rīkh* whenever the author has requested it.

The editor wishes to thank a great number of colleagues and friends for their most valuable assistance. A special mention, however, should be made of Michael Albin, who did not spare any time or effort in making the conference "The Book in the Islamic World" the success it was, and to John Cole, the director of the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress, who co-sponsored the conference and supported it morally, administratively, and financially.

The editor also wishes to take this opportunity to express his gratitude to Shaykh Aḥmad Zaki Yamani, the Institute of Turkish Studies, Saudi ARAMCO, the United States Information Agency, and the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for their financial and moral support, which made holding the conference possible. He also wishes to thank all those staff members in the Near East

Section and the Library of Congress whose help was crucial in organizing the conference and the exhibit that accompanied it, in particular Christopher Murphy, Anne Boni, Doris Hamburg, and Carol Ido.

*George N. Atiyeh*