

The Kiswah

Covering the Ka'bah in silk & gold

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

High up on the wall, just under the ceiling of the narrow passageway that houses the West Asia Gallery's calligraphy cases in the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), is a very large textile fragment from a *kiswah*.

The *kiswah* is the drapery that covers the *Ka'bah*, the large, square structure that is the focus of the annual Muslim pilgrimage known as the *Hajj*. The *Ka'bah* is located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the spiritual home of Islam. Interestingly, both the *Ka'bah* and the *kiswah* that covers it predate Islam.

The *Ka'bah* was an important religious shrine and pilgrimage site even before the Prophet Muhammad cast out its pre-Islamic idols and claimed the shrine for Islam. It had long been venerated and honoured with a rich and beautiful covering. Some claim that the original *kiswah* was made by Ishmael, the first-born son of the Prophet Abraham, who is credited in Islam with erecting the first building at the site. (Abraham is an important patriarch in all three monotheistic religions of the Middle East – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – and recognised by many Arabs as the ancestor of all northern Arabs.) Other sources attribute the *kiswah's* origins to the Prophet Muhammad's great-great-grandfather as he belonged to a clan that at one time served as caretakers of the *Ka'bah*.

Ancient texts relate that the honour of draping the shrine was given primarily to the ruling tribe of Mecca, the Quraysh. The shrine remained covered after its dedication to Islam, but then the *kiswah* was accidentally destroyed while being fumigated and the Prophet is said to have replaced the original covering with a white Yemeni cloth. After his death, the caliphs provided new draperies.

For a while, new cloths were simply placed over older cloths until the year 782 when the Abbasid Caliph feared that the weight of the cloths could damage the *Ka'bah* and it was decided that only one drapery at a time would be used. The

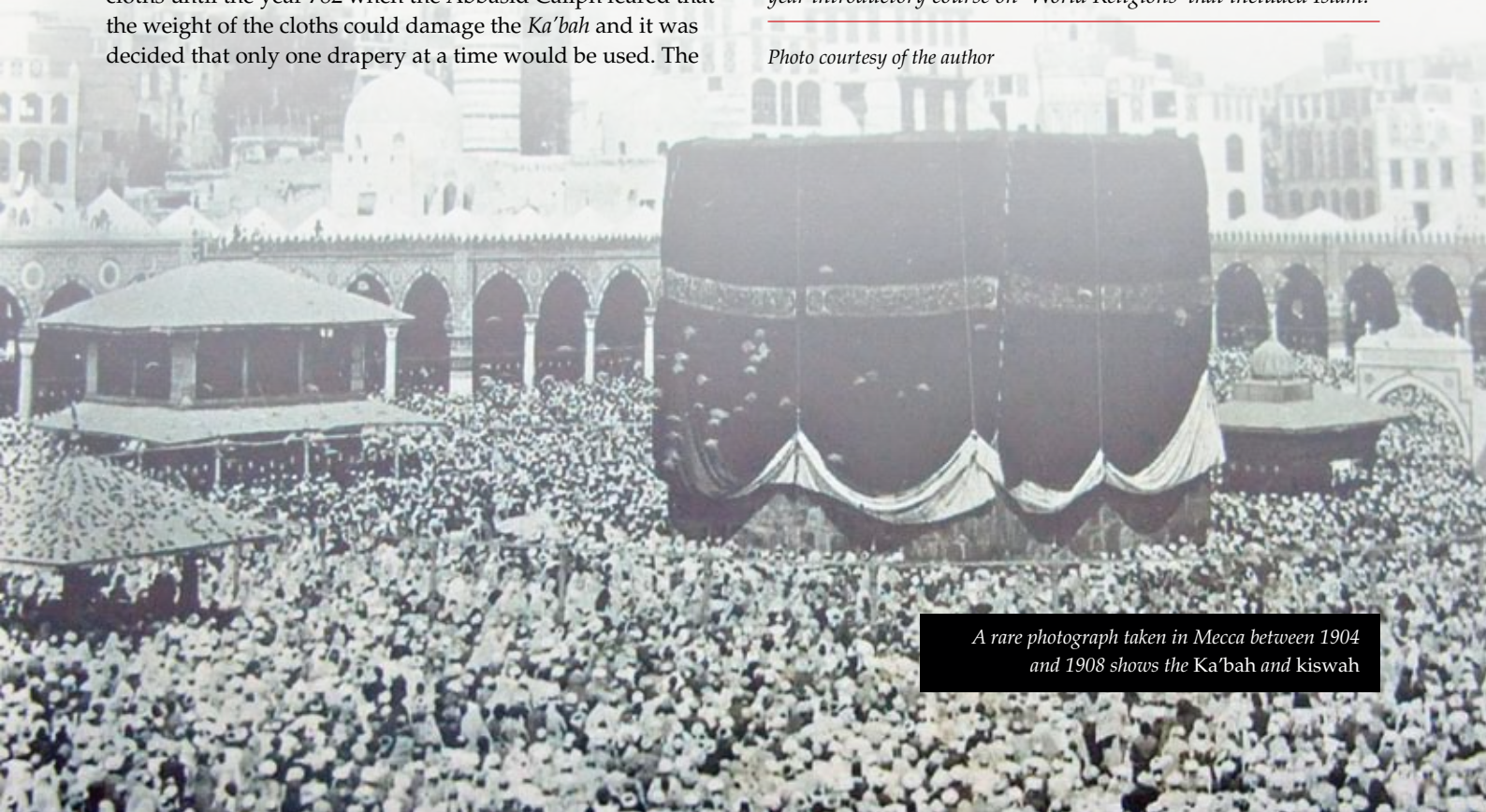
colours often varied between red, white and green until it was decided to use black alone as the official colour.

The *kiswah* was traditionally made in Egypt until a special *kiswah* workshop was established in Mecca in 1926. In older times, the *kiswah* would be brought to Mecca by camel train and presented by the leading Muslim regime of the time. An acceptance of the *kiswah* by the authorities in Mecca was said to be an acknowledgment of the donor's political power. Since 1962, however, the honour of bestowing the *kiswah* has belonged to the King of Saudi Arabia.

The *kiswah* is made from more than 40 separate pieces, each 14 metres long and approximately one metre wide. The fabric is pure natural silk that has been dyed black. Its weight is estimated at 670 kilogrammes—about the same weight as a full-grown dromedary camel. The verses from the Muslim holy book (the *Qur'an*) that decorate its perimeter are all embroidered in gold thread (weighing 15 kilogrammes) and the hanging's four corners are embroidered with medallions that contain the *Surah Al-Ikhlās* (Purity of Faith verse) from the *Qur'an*. The *kiswah* is attached to the ground using copper rings. Every year, before the *Hajj*, the previous year's *kiswah* is replaced in the month of *Dhu al-Hijjah*, the final month of the Islamic calendar and the month in which the *Hajj* takes place. The previous year's piece is cut up and sold or distributed as *barakah* (blessings) to pilgrims and various other recipients. The embroidered fragment on display in the ACM's West Asia gallery is Egyptian, from the early 20th century.

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Photo courtesy of the author



A rare photograph taken in Mecca between 1904 and 1908 shows the Ka'bah and kiswah