What secret stories can be told by a sacred object in Islam?

(10-14 years)
What secret stories can be told by a sacred object in Islam? (10–14 years)

Here is some key vocabulary to help you prepare for using this resource:

- **Sitarah**: screen or curtain hung near the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad.
- **Haramayn**: holy sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina.
- **Kiswa**: ceremonial embroidered black cloth used to cover the Ka'bah.
- **tomb**: place where someone is buried, usually casket-shaped in Islam.
- **Qur'an**: Muslim holy book containing 114 verses of the revelations of Muhammad.
- **Shahadah**: confession of faith, one of the Five Pillars of Islam.
- **Muhammad** (often succeeded by ‘Peace be upon him, pbuh, as a mark of respect'): the final prophet of Allah, the ‘Seal of the Prophets’, to whom Allah revealed the Qur'an, the Muslim sacred scripture.
- **Medina**: city established by Muhammad as the first Muslim community, where the Mosque of the prophet houses his tomb along with the tombs of other key figures in Islam.
- **Mecca**: sacred city of Islam and direction of prayer for Muslims.
- **hajj**: annual pilgrimage to Mecca.
- **mosque**: Muslim place of worship.
- **mihrab**: niche in a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca.
- **Sultan Selim III**: Ottoman or Turkish ruler who reigned from 1789–1807.
- **donation**: gift given without expectation of payment.
- **piety**: the quality of being religious or reverent. For Muslims this might be expressed through an act of devotion, e.g., charitable giving at an auspicious event, such as the hajj.
- **prestige**: widely recognised respect and admiration felt for someone or something.
- **sacred**: set apart, special because it is in a sacred space or place or relates to a religious concept or person.
- **calligraphy**: the art of using special script when writing out sacred verses e.g. the thuluth script used on the sitarah to record verses in Arabic from the Qur'an.

Some of these terms are also key concepts. Here is some further background to some of these to help you prepare for the teaching and learning activities:

- **Allah**: Arabic for God, means literally ‘the’ [al] ‘God’ to represent the fact that there is only one God, as monotheism is a key belief in Islam. ‘Alahu Akbar’ or ‘God is great’ is a key phrase used by Muslims.
- **Shirk** [idolatry]: the placing of an individual or thing above Allah for worship is regarded as a grave sin. No images are allowed in Islam and calligraphy is used instead.
• Prophet: messenger of God, Allah. Muslims believe that there have been at least 25 prophets in total starting with Adam, each of whom provided partial messages from Allah whereas the message or revelation imparted to Muhammad is complete and perfect and the final one.

• Caliph [successor]: there are believed to be four Rightly Guided Caliphs or ‘successors’ of the prophet Muhammad. These are: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. They are mentioned by name on the top of the sitarah.

• angels: the angel Gabriel [Jibril in Arabic] revealed the Qur’an to Muhammad. A belief in angels is central to the Six Articles of Faith in Islam. Angels are heavenly beings who do the will of Allah.

• blessings: the conferral of sacred benefits, spiritual rewards from Allah. Some Muslims believe that possessing or being close to objects such as the sitarah confer blessings because they have been close to a sacred place such as the tomb of the prophet Muhammad. For example, reciting one of the verses found on the sitarah is said to confer blessings and lead to paradise.

• paradise: in Islam the place where the righteous will go as reward in the afterlife from Allah. Allah judges all individually. There is no intercessor who will stand between the individual and Allah on Judgment Day. There are different ideas about what paradise or Jannah will be like and there are references to it in the Qur’an where it is sometimes described as a celestial garden.

• pilgrimage: a sacred journey undertaken as a religious duty or in the hopes of spiritual reward. In Islam pilgrimage [hajj] is one of the Five Pillars or duties of Islam. Only the fit and healthy and those who are free of debt are expected to undertake hajj to Mecca. In Islam there is minor hajj, which can be undertaken at any time of the year, and major hajj which is annual pilgrimage undertaken during the month of hajj [dhul-ul-hajj]. Pilgrimage can include an optional visit to the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina where pilgrims can be near the tomb of Muhammad, which is screened off.

We think the following links related to this resource should prove useful if you would like to explore the subject further:

Authority in Islam >> [www.reonline.org.uk/knowing/what-re/islam/]

• British Museum exhibition Hajj: journey to the centre of Islam >> [www.britishmuseum.org/Whats_On/Past_Exhibitions/2012/Hajj/The_Exhibition.aspx]

• Link to information about the kiswa [cloth covering the Ka’bah] >> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiswa]

• Link to the making and use of the kiswa, an equivalent textile to the sitarah used during hajj >> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3MQk-q1cfY]

• Green Dome above the tomb of the Prophet and information about what is in the tomb >> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Dome]

• Video images of the inside of the Prophet’s tomb in the Prophet’s Mosque, Medina >> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PdeUafGzAc]

• Notes about the Thuluth and Naskh scripts used in Ottoman and Persian calligraphy with links to other examples of Thuluth script as used on the embroidered verses from the Qur’an found on the sitarah [http://calligraphyqalam.com/styles/thuluth-naskh.html]

Articles about and pictures of the Sitarah – sacred curtain made for the Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina [in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford]:

• http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/921/object/10073

• http://www.ashmolean.org/news/?id=181&s=Sitarah
• http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/4/837
RE:ONLINE Banquet

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Focus for Learning and Assessment

Approaches to learning in the aims of the Learning Activities for this Resource

1. Mostly using the human development: learning about / learning from approach:

   • encouraging pupils to compare their own experiences with those of others to understand them better and build a more positive approach to diversity while understanding their own identities better;
   • providing opportunities for pupils to develop spiritually, morally, socially and culturally by upholding and strengthening shared values and the belief in a common human identity;
   • encouraging pupils to see Muslim beliefs and practices from a new perspective through a museum object connected with a key religious site, the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina.

2. Elements of the ethnographic/interpretive approach

   The interpretive approach starts with the other’s language and experiences [the insider view] and then moves to that of the pupil [the outsider view] and then moving back and forth between the two in order to understand another’s way of life:

   • helping pupils to gain a critical and reflective understanding of the beliefs and practices of Muslims by comparing and contrasting their own concepts and experiences with those of others;
   • considering issues and questions raised by the sitarah, e.g., what its purpose might have been in the past in connection with the tomb of the prophet Muhammad and now as a museum exhibit, why some religious art is not meant to be seen by the general public when in situ;
   • debating whether [from the outsider perspective] the sitarah is an example of piety or prestige on the part of the donor, whether it was designed to bring heavenly or earthly rewards;
   • linking with pupils’ own interests and concerns by encouraging them to think of ways of ‘bringing the exhibit to life’ so that it ‘tells its story’ using a digital learning experience of their own choice

The main aim of the banquet is to consider what the sitarah can teach us about important Muslim beliefs and values connected with holy people and places, as well as our own beliefs and values. This banquet uses a sacred object in a museum collection with the purpose of ‘brining it to life’ and allowing it to ‘tell its own story’. It explores whether the gift of the sitarah is an example of piety or prestige on behalf of the original donor, the
Ottoman Sultan Selim III. It challenges pupils to consider which are more important: earthly rewards or heavenly ones.

The sample learning activities provide an introduction to some key beliefs of Islam as expressed by the Sitarah – a sacred curtain from the Mosque of the prophet in Medina. The linked activities are designed to help pupils learn about these beliefs. They also contain ideas for pupils to ask their own questions and to learn from Islam as they think about their own values in relation to seeking rewards on earth (prestige) versus rewards in heaven (piety). The terms ‘piety’ and ‘prestige’ can be seen as part of literacy in RE.

The example makes potential cross-curricular connections with the following:

- PSHE, e.g., reflecting on spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues surrounding sacred objects and how they should be treated and appreciated, starting with sensitivity and aiming for empathy through understanding of the use of religious terms and symbols.
- Citizenship, e.g., considering how religious culture is transmitted and how museum objects can be brought to life by understanding its religious context, understanding diversity of religious practice and values education, considering ways of life that are different from their own.
- ICT, e.g., in using ICT to find resources that will broaden their knowledge and understanding of the sitarah and using it to create a digital learning experience of their own such as a poster, booklet or PowerPoint.
- Art and the use of images and text to create sacred objects, the relationship between religious and secular art, representational art and the ban on images in Islam.
- DT and the design and production of sacred cloth using precious materials such as silver, the conservation and preservation of museum objects, display and information in a museum, Islamic calligraphy.
- History and how the history of the world can be told through objects connected with powerful people and places.

The lessons could be used in discrete RE time or as part of a ‘creative curriculum’ approach where RE links with other curriculum subjects around a theme or key question, such as ‘Words and Art’.
In terms of assessing pupils’ progress in RE, the focus for this example is on the following Areas of Enquiry:

- Area A [Beliefs, teachings and sources] and
- Area E [Meaning, purpose and truth].

Pupils participating in the investigation of this resource might be expected to make progress within the following range of expectations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All pupils can:</th>
<th>Most pupils (majority class expectation) can:</th>
<th>Some pupils can:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A4 make links between the beliefs and teachings in the Qur’an and show how they are connected to Muslims’ lives.</td>
<td>A5 suggest reasons for the similar and different beliefs which people hold and explain how religious sources are used to provide answers to important questions about life.</td>
<td>A6 say what religions teach about the big questions of life using different sources and arguments to explain diversity within and between them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E4 ask questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and suggest a range of answers of their own as well as those given by Muslims.</td>
<td>E5 ask questions about the meaning and purpose of life and suggest answers which relate to the search for truth and their own and others’ lives.</td>
<td>E6 use reasoning and examples to express insights into their own and others’ views on questions about the meaning and purpose of life and the search for truth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Questions

As well as the key question, this example can be built around questions that pupils ask about the resource.

How to develop pupils’ question-making powers, e.g., http://p4c.com/articles/community-enquiry-framework

How to build pupils’ enquiries into the assessment scheme, e.g., http://amv.somerset.gov.uk/syllabus/standards-and-assessment/assessment-guide/

Here are some examples of questions pupils might ask, based on this Resource:

• How can a curtain be regarded as a sacred object? [It is sacred because it contains Qur’anic verses and was placed near the tomb of the Prophet.]

• What do the verses from Qur’an on the sitarah mean? [They concern the power of Allah and blessings on Muhammad and include the Shahadah. The Throne Verse from Sura 2: 225 is the most well-known and frequently recited verse from the Qur’an proclaiming the power of Allah over the universe.]

• What do the other designs and symbols on it mean? [The designs resemble furnishings in a mosque such as the arches, mihrab, hanging lamps found in a typical prayer hall plus calligraphic inscriptions with verses from the Qur’an and the names of Allah, Muhammad and the four Orthodox caliphs who succeeded him. Finally there is the imperial monogram or tughra of Sultan Selim III and the date it was made which was in 1206 of the Muslim calendar which corresponds to 1791-2.]

• Who made it and why? [It would have been made for the Sultan by a professional group of embroiderers working in Constantinople-now Istanbul-in Turkey. It was traditional for Muslim rulers to give such religious gifts once they came to power, which Sultan Selim did in 1789.]

• Why is it in a museum now? [It was donated by Professor Nasser Khalil, a scholar and collector of Islamic art. He believes it will help promote a better understanding between people of different cultures and faiths and show the contribution of Islamic culture has made to world art.]

• How was it used and displayed in the tomb of Muhammad? [It was probably displayed near his tomb or the mihrab in the Prophet’s Mosque at Medina. It was believed to bring protection and blessings to the person who received it later.]

• How it is connected to the hajj? [It was one of many embroidered cloths presented each year during processions linked with the hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca which often involves visits to the Haramayn, the holy sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina. Such cloths were often cut up and sold afterwards.]
• What does the tomb of Muhammad look like and where is it exactly? [see video link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PdeUafGzAc]
• Why do Muslims visit the tomb? [see British Museum exhibition notes.]
• Why is it screened off? [To indicate its holiness and protect it]
• What do Muslims believe about life after death and paradise? [Allah judges each individual and paradise is a spiritual reward.]
• How can the sitarah explain key Muslim beliefs? [It refers to God as the Light of the World and His power as well as the belief that Muhammad was Allah’s gift to the world. Reciting the Throne Verse, which is embroidered on it, is said to bring reward to anyone reciting it and leads to paradise. Some Muslims believe the sitarah confers protection and blessings because it has been close to the Prophet Muhammad. Others believe that you should ask only Allah for His blessings and protection.]
• Is the sitarah still regarded as a sacred object even when it is in a museum? [As with all objects like this after their use, it has been de-installed and is no longer sacred. Some Muslims discourage over-emphasis on this kind of object as it detracts from worship of Allah and gives undue importance to Muhammad who is dead while God lives forever.]

Here are some more questions to ask the pupils, some that may provoke learning about religion and belief, and some that may inspire learning from religion and belief:

• What does it mean to believe that something is sacred?
• Why do people go on pilgrimage?
• How might visiting the tomb of a holy person help you?
• Which are more important: earthly rewards or heavenly ones?
• Who or what should believers turn to for spiritual protection and blessings?
• What do you think about Muslim views on life after death and paradise?
• What do other religions believe about the importance of sacred objects?
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Here are some links to what Muslims say that may be relevant to this resource:

- Raziana >> [pof.reonline.org.uk/]
- Children Talking: Muslim belief about death >> [http://www.natre.org.uk/db/result_video.php?vid=pq03_mus_10_m_sidali ]
- Muslim list of mistaken beliefs about visiting the tomb of the Prophet >> [www.onislam.net/english/shariah/special-coverage/459025-mistakes-in-visiting-the-prophets-mosque-and-tomb.html ]

Or, you can search for Muslim answers to your questions at: pof.reonline.org.uk/
or email a Muslim or an RE Expert to find out an answer to your own question(s).
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Learning Activities

• This resource can be accessed at: http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/921/object/10073

Here are some ideas to use in the classroom to make the most of the Resource. Assessment opportunities are given to show where you need to watch for pupils' participation and contribution to the lesson. At key points you may wish to make a record of individual responses.

• Explain that pupils are going to investigate and then make a presentation on a museum exhibit [or better still take them to the Ashmolean Museum, Room 31 Islamic Middle East Gallery to look at the sitarah] to answer the question: What secret stories can be told by a sacred object in Islam? This can be done using it as a mystery object initially or a group exercise where they are given the task of identifying what the object is using the weblink above. Prior knowledge of what the inside of a mosque looks like is needed. Labelled drawings of a mosque showing the mihrab, mosque lamps and use of calligraphy would be useful from the start. Similarly, prior knowledge of aspects of the hajj is required such as the decoration of the Ka’bah with a cloth similar to the sitarah and a map of Saudi Arabia showing the pilgrimage route with Mecca and Medina.

• Provide some background historical information about the sitarah as a sacred curtain donated initially by a Muslim ruler during hajj to be hung on a wall in or near the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina. Pupils can be given the task of finding additional background information using a range of resources such as: the video of the tomb, recent photographs of the tomb, links to the British Museum hajj exhibition, weblinks to information about the Prophet’s Mosque and the Green Dome in Medina, information about the Ka’bah and the kiswa cloth that cover it and the sacred sites of Mecca and Medina [the Haramayn]. Remind them that they are trying to find out what secret stories can be revealed by the sitarah and that they are acting like detectives finding clues.

• Show pupils the sitarah either in the Ashmolean Museum as part of a museum visit or as a PowerPoint presentation in the classroom using its online resources. Take pupils through what they need to focus on working from the outside edge to the middle in a clockwise direction. Draw attention to the framing of the overall design within arches and columns that resemble the mihrab, then the calligraphy and the finer details such as the imperial monogram of Sultan Selim III at the bottom which is two crossed swords and symbol in between. Ask pupils to write down as many key facts as they can remember about the sitarah and then share these in pairs or groups. If pupils are on a
museum visit there is an interactive board with a link to the online information about the sitarah also.

- Provide pupils with quote from Dr Christopher Brown CBE Director of the Ashmolean Museum (http://www.ashmolean.org/news/?id=181&s=Sitarah) about why the sitarah is so important in understanding the ‘complex nature of the Islamic cultural tradition’. Ask pupils to record on a large sheet of paper what they have learnt so far about this Islamic cultural tradition and about their own cultural traditions [e.g. the importance of learning about other cultures and religions, shared values, celebrating diversity]. Then ask them to record at least three questions they would like to ask about the sitarah as a sacred object and about the possible secret meanings and stories hidden in its design. Swap questions with each other to use as a later task where the other pupil has to try and answer the question and provide useful information regarding the sitarah.

[Assessment opportunity: E5: ask questions about the possible secret meanings and stories hidden in the sitarah and suggest answers which relate to the search for truth and their own and others' lives.]

- Provide pupils with a printed version of the Ashmolean information about the sitarah (see ‘Subject Knowledge’ resources >>). Ask pupils to work in pairs to recall aspects of the sitarah and then label an image of the sitar explaining what it shows about Muslim beliefs.

- Ask pupils to work in pairs to exchange views and make a range of written comments on why each of the following five verses from the Qur’an was chosen to be embroidered onto the sitarah.

  1. 29:35 Chapter of the Light which proclaims God as the ‘light of the heavens and earth.’ [Think about the mosque lamp.]
  2. 33:56 Chapter of the Clans: ‘Allah and His angels send blessings on the Prophet: O ye that believe! Send ye blessings on him, and salute him with all respect.’
  3. The Shahadah: ‘There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Prophet.’ [The names of Allah and of Muhammad are on the red roundels at the top of the sitarah.]
  4. 2:225 Throne Verse. One part of it states: ‘His throne extends over the heavens and on earth, and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them, for He is the Most High, The Supreme in glory.’"

This is the most frequently recited verse of the Qur’an. More reward is said to come from reading this than any other verse. [Think about the protection and blessings that are said to come from the sitarah.]
5. 21:107 Chapter of the Prophets: ‘And We have not sent you O Muhammad except as a mercy to the worlds’. [Think about the Qur’an itself.]

[Assessment opportunities: A4: make links between the beliefs and teachings of the Qur’an and show how they are connected to Muslims’ lives and E4: ask questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and suggest a range of answers of their own as well as those given by Muslims.]

• Explain that you would now like them to work out answers to their original questions asked about the sitarah and its possible secret meanings and stories. They can email a Muslim or ask an RE Expert to help them find the answers. Share some of the answers across the class.

[Assessment opportunity: E4: ask questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and suggest a range of answers of their own as well as those given by Muslims.]

• In preparation for the next lesson, pupils should assemble all the information that they have gathered so far about the sitarah in response to the original main question about the secret stories it might reveal and then decide how this information will be presented. Examples could include: a poster display of questions and answers; a cartoon illustrating the voyage of the sitarah from Constantinople to Medina and then Oxford; an interactive quiz; a guidebook for visitors to the museum going to see the exhibit; a letter of thanks to the museum or the donor Dr Khalil explaining how it has helped deepen understanding of Muslims tradition and culture; or as a collection of recordings of pupils speaking about what they have learnt about and from the sitarah to donate to the Ashmolean Museum Education Department for use as a resources for future RE students.

• Provide access for pupils to computers and other resources to enable them to produce their presentations. They should choose a catchy title, bearing in mind the key question, ‘What secret stories can be told by a sacred object in Islam?’ and think about the intended audience. This is where Assessment for Learning could be applied to improve presentations and think about assessment opportunities.

Encourage the pupils to include some or all of the following ideas in their presentations:

- the ‘secret stories’ that can now be told about the sacred object, the sitarah (this could include a sense of competition for finding the most obscure or most revealing secret e.g. Sultan Selim III, the original donor of the sitarah, was a member of the Sufi order of whirling dervishes and this means the sitarah may well have been given out of piety as well as prestige);
- some mistaken beliefs about visiting the tomb of the Prophet, e.g. that you should ask for Muhammad’s mercy when only Allah can grant mercy to the believer;
- their ideas about the sitarah as a CURTAIN – why might that be significant for Muslims here?
- what big questions of life are being addressed within the design of the sitarah and within the embroidered quotations [e.g. about God, the role of Muhammad as God’s prophet, the ultimate rewards for Muslims who honour God, Muhammad and the teachings of the Qur’an]
- how people might give different answers to those questions, depending on their own beliefs;
o their own insights into the stories, mistaken beliefs, mysteries and big questions raised by their study of the sitarah, using reasoning and examples to support their ideas.

o their thoughts about how and why the Sufi practice of dhikr which involves the repeated recitation of the name of Allah might create a trance like state of union with God.

o the choice made by the designer of the sitarah to use the Thuluth script for the embroidered verses of the Qur’an and what secret stories this tells us about the art of calligraphy [e.g., the belief that you cannot be a calligrapher until you have mastered the Thuluth script; the beauty behind the lines and shapes created this way and how it might show devotion to Allah and His revelation in the words of the Qur’an].

o their own thoughts about how the arts and beautifully embroidered cloth specifically might lift people spiritually [e.g. linking with the idea of beauty and order in creation being a sign or ayat of Allah].

• Ask pupils to present their completed work to others. This can be done in a variety of ways: as a poster in which questions are answered; as a PowerPoint presentation; as a cartoon charting the creation of the sitarah to its donation to the Ashmolean; as a guide for visitors to the Ashmolean; as a question and answer interactive display to go in the museum for young visitors.

[Assessment opportunities: A6: suggest what similar and different beliefs Muslims might hold about the sitarah and how religious sources are used to provide answers to important questions about life and E6: use reasoning and examples to express insights into their own and others’ views on questions about the meaning and purpose of life and the search for truth.]

• Remind pupils of the questions they wrote about the sacredness of the sitarah and ask them to choose three of the best. Explain that a key Muslim belief is that there is only one God and worship of anything or anyone other than God is called shirk (idolatry), which is a sin. Ask them to work out in small groups what answers they think that present day Muslims might give to these questions, bearing in mind the points above about shirk. What answers might believers from another religion such as Christianity give? [This could link with the idea of relics of Jesus and saints.]

[Assessment opportunity: A5: suggest what similar and different beliefs Muslims might hold about the sitarah and how religious sources are used to provide answers to important questions about life.]

• Explain that not all Muslims will agree about the value of the sitarah in providing protection and blessings. Most believe that only Allah can provide this, so Muslims should perform their religious duties such as prayer (du’a), follow the teachings of the Qur’an and remember the words of the 1st Caliph Abu Bakr, “Oh people, if Muhammad is the sole object of your worship, then know that he is dead. But if it is Allah the One God you worship then know that He does not die.” Other Muslims may believe that going to the Prophet’s Mosque at Medina as part of hajj and praying in front of his tomb will gain them protection (for example from hell) and blessings in life. However, visiting the Prophet’s tomb is regarded as an optional part of hajj. The verses from the Qur’an embroidered onto the sitarah remind Muslims of the Allah’s power over the universe and the importance of worshipping Him alone. Remind them also about shirk (see above). This could provide the basis of a pupil debate about the spiritual value of the sitarah, arguing both for and against from a Muslim perspective.

[Assessment opportunity: A6: say what Islam teaches about the big questions of
life using different sources such as the Qur’an and traditions surrounding the Prophet and arguments to explain diversity within and between religions.]

- Revisit the group exercise and the sheet summarising what was learnt about Islamic cultural tradition and one’s own tradition (based around the quote from Dr Christopher Brown). What can now be added to this? In summary and as feedback, do pupils feel that the sitarah is an object of piety or prestige? What has it taught them about their own beliefs and what insights have they gained about the beliefs of Muslims, bearing in mind that there might be differences within these?

[Assessment opportunity: E6: use reasoning and examples to express insights into their own and others’ views on questions about the meaning and purpose of life and the search for truth.]

[There are videos of the hajj available from the British Museum shop that might be relevant in terms of the procession of the kiswa or ceremonial cloth covering the Ka’bah at Mecca.]