

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

Learning Outcomes

Emerging

- Explain the purpose of the *sitarah* cloth
- Explain the significance of on Qur'anic passage on the *sitarah* cloth

Expected

- Explain how at least two key Islamic beliefs are represented on the *sitarah cloth*
- Compare and contrast one ancient use of the *sitarah* to a modern use
- With reference to two pieces of information, explain what secret story the cloth tells

Exceeding

- Offer a supported view as to whether the *sitarah* is a sacred object or not

Key words and concepts

- **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.
- **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.

Learning activities

The learning activities are based around the **Sitarah**, an embroidered cloth to cover the prophet's tomb in Medina. The Sitarah is held in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and is available to look at online.

Firstly, search for **Sitarah**, Jameel Centre, Ashmolean and make sure you have this resource. The Jameel Centre is an online resource allowing viewers to look at and learn about some of the museum's collection.

- 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 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.
- Provide pupils with a printed version of the Ashmolean information about the sitarah. Ask pupils to work in pairs to recall aspects of the sitarah and then label an image of the sitarah 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.
Encourage them to say what each verse reveals about why the sitarah is a sacred object, and what each verse might be saying about the meaning and purpose of life. Prompt their thinking by asking which quote from the Qur'an might be the most revealing in this respect. [The Throne Verse seems the most likely as it

brings rewards.]

Ask them to focus on the design which recalls the mosque, the place of worship and in particular the mihrab showing the direction of prayer [Mecca] and the references to Caliphs and the donation of the sitarah by the Sultan. Direct the discussion towards whether the sitarah is an example of piety [devotion through the act of giving at an auspicious event, the hajj] or prestige [marking the accession to the throne of the Sultan; something that was standard practice at the time amongst the Ottoman rulers].

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.]
- 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.
 - 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 the prophet's tomb, 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;
 - 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;
 - 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;
 - 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];
 - 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.
 - 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.]
 - 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.

- 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?

[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.]