



## Stories from the Hijaz

### THE MAKKAH CHRONICLES



# Kiswah – the covering of the Kaabah



Craftsmen at work with part of the kiswah to be used in 2018. This was at an exhibition in Abu Dhabi. Photo FATIMA PARKER

#### SALIM PARKER

HAJJ is Arafah, and on the ninth day of Dhul-Hijjah, all pilgrims, dressed in their symbolically basic and unifying ihraam, head for Arafah, the vast plain around Jabal Rahmah, the Mount of Mercy. All are aware of the two pieces of white cloth that adorn the bodies of men while ladies wear their humblest garbs.

No pilgrim is in Makkah at that time and the Kaabah, in effect, the centre of the universe for all Muslims, undergoes a revival of its glorious external splendour.

It is on this day that the kiswah, the cloth covering the Kaabah, is changed annually, and there is a rich history associated with it.

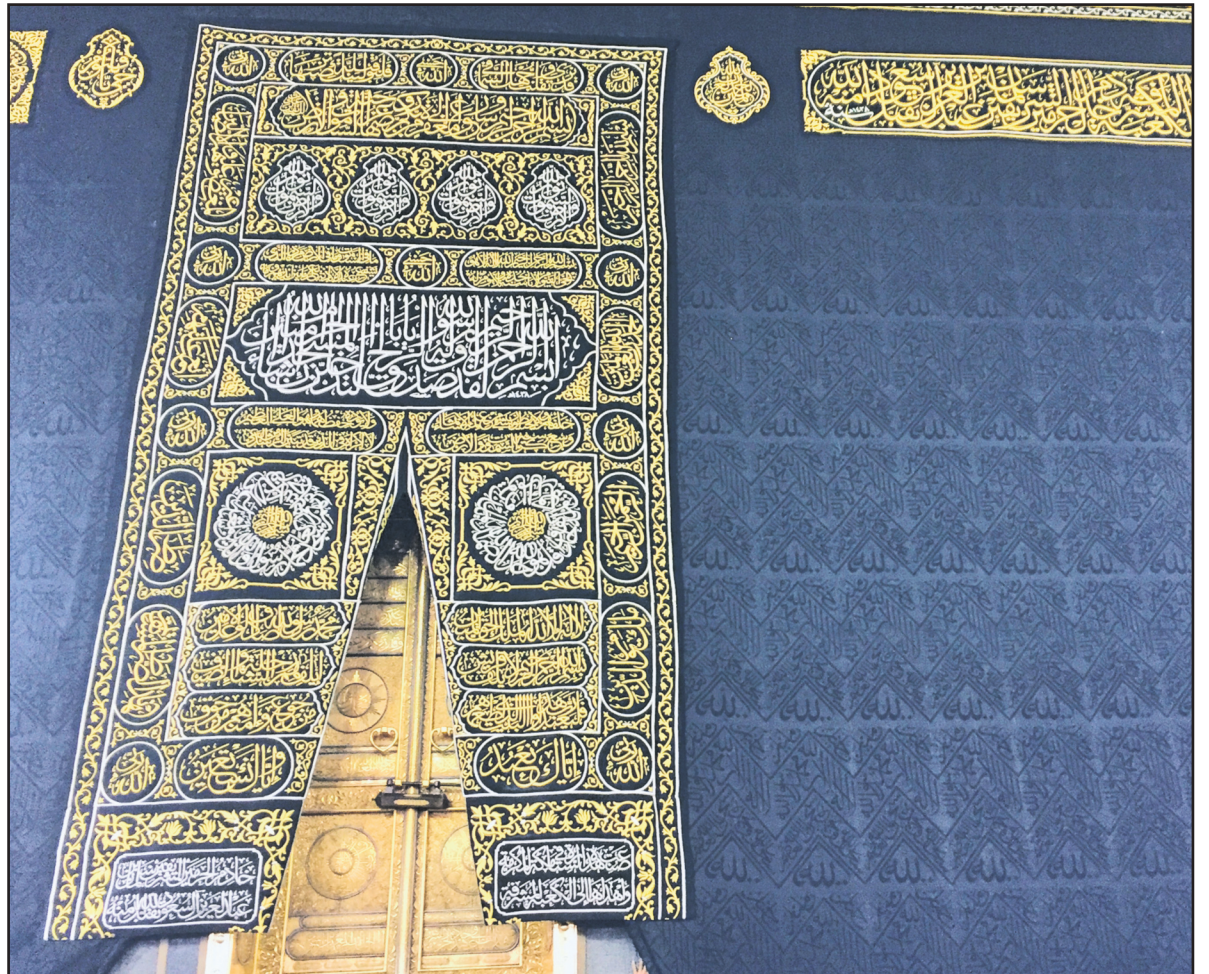
On this day, every year, the old kiswah is removed and cut into small pieces. Certain individuals, visiting foreign Muslim dignitaries and organisations are then given some of these pieces. Most consider it as one of their most prized possessions.

The new kiswah then adorns the Kaabah. It is claimed that this custom was started by Nabi Ismail (AS) 4 000 years before the origin of Islam. The current cost of the kiswah is about 60 million rand as 670 kilograms of pure silk is used as well as 150 kilograms of gold thread.

The kiswah consists of 47 pieces of cloth; each piece is 14 metres long and one metre wide, in effect, covering 658 square metres. The kiswah is wrapped around the Kaabah and tied to copper rings at its base.

The manually designed embroidery of the Quranic verses is slowly being aided by computers, thus increasing the speed of production. The upper half of the kiswah is decorated with a 95-centimetre wide strip featuring verses of the Holy Quran, inscribed in gold-plated silver thread.

Traditionally, the pattern of the kiswah has not changed. The material is made from silk and a gold embroidered band is sewn about



The door of the Kaabah is covered by an exquisitely decorated piece of embroidery. Photo SALIM PARKER

three-quarters the distance from the bottom.

The part covering the door, which stands just over two metres above the ground, on the north-east side wall, is covered separately with richly embroidered Quranic verses. There is also an opening at the Hajaratul Aswad, the Black Stone.

Nabi Muhammad (SAW) and the Muslims in Makkah did not participate in the draping of the Kaabah until the conquest of the city, in 630 AD (7 AH), as the rul-

ing Quraish tribe did not allow them to do so.

When Makkah was conquered by the Muslims, they decided to leave the kiswah as it was until a woman lighting incense in the Kaabah accidentally set it alight.

Nabi Muhammad (SAW) then draped it with white Yemeni cloth. Later, Caliph Muawiyah used to drape the Kaabah twice a year and introduced the now traditional silk covering. Al-Nasir, the Abbasid caliph, established the current practice of dressing the Kaabah with only one kiswah at a time, superseding the former custom of allowing old kiswahs to accumulate one over the other.

This was due to Al-Nasir observing, when he performed Hajj in 160 AH, that the accumulated kiswahs could cause damage to the Kaabah, and he, therefore, decreed that only one kiswah should drape the Kaabah at any one time.

Another caliph, named Al-Ma'mun, draped the Kaabah three times a year, each time in a different colour. He used red on the eighth of Dhul-Hijjah, white on the first of Rajab, and another red brocade on the twenty-ninth of Ramadan. Later on, Al-Nasir draped the Kaabah in green. However, both he and Al-Ma'mun were not happy with the frequent colour changes, and switched to black. Black has remained the only colour that has since been used for the kiswah.

Earlier, the kiswahs were plain and it was only in 1340 that the embroidery border tradition was introduced by the Egyptian ruler, Hassan.

From the time of the Ayyubids, during the reign of as-Salih Ayyub, the kiswah was manufactured in Egypt, with material sourced locally as well as from Sudan, India and Iraq. The Amir al-Hajj (commander of the hajj caravan), who

was directly designated by the reigning sultans and emperors, transported the kiswah from Egypt to Makkah on an annual basis, amid huge fanfare.

The tradition continued until 1927, when a factory was opened in Saudi Arabia but this closed about a decade later due to non-availability of machinery. Production was then shifted to Egypt until 1962.

The relationship between Egypt and Saudi Arabia soured during that time and the Saudi factory was reopened and was used until the modern, presently used, factory was opened, in 1977. Pilgrims often visit it. High quality silk is currently imported from Italy and Switzerland. It is then dyed black, and automated machines are increasingly being used in the spinning manufacturing process. Computers are currently also used to assist in the hand-embroidered decorative process.

Some pilgrims sometimes try to tear or even cut parts of the kiswah during the Hajj and Umrah, to take home. The factory has maintenance teams on standby who can inspect it every hour if needed and repair any damages.

To strengthen the kiswah, a team of experts at Umm al-Qura University, in Makkah, is studying the introduction of Kevlar, a synthetic fibre, into the silk in order to make it resistant to high temperatures and heavy weights. Nanotechnology is also being incorporated to strengthen the fabric and make it less susceptible to mishandling and the elements.

Saudi Arabia is introducing austerity measures due to its economic decline. When the high cost of the kiswah was mentioned to one of the factory officials, his reply was: 'The kiswah glorifies the house of Allah. The Kaabah more than deserves this honour.'



Besides the gold inlay, the black part of the kiswah is also embroidered with black Quranic inscriptions. Photo SALIM PARKER