

# My Lover's Pillow

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The patterns on these hands are adapted from hand and forearm tattoo patterns recorded by Mathea Gaudry, in *La Femme Chaoiua De L'Aures*

Many Algerian, Egyptian, Tunisian, and Moroccan women tattooed the backs of their hands and arms, complementing their henna. The existing photographs and records from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries show that North African women often had delicate, profuse tattoo patterns on the backs of their hands and arms, complementing bold henna patterns on the fingertips and arms. The grouping of arm patterns was often called *usada*, pillow, implying that a woman's lover would fall asleep with his head resting on her arm. Another term for arm patterns was *kfafa*, *kfafet la-hlib*, the end of suckling, referring to the way a woman wiped her breast with her forearm to catch the last drop of milk after her baby finished nursing, a reference to the belief that a mother's milk was as precious and beautiful as jewels. (Searight)

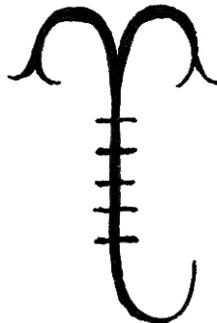
When only whole henna leaves were available, either off the local henna tree or dried at a market, it was difficult for a woman to directly apply delicate patterns because henna paste made from pounded whole leaves is coarse. North African and Turkish women made simple band and diamond patterns on their fingertips by winding and tying floss around their fingers, creating a sort of macramé resist, such as is seen in the diamond

henna patterns on the fingertips in the photograph above. They applied thick henna paste over the netting and covered it with old cloth strips to get a dark stain.

Women were the tattoo artists in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Algeria and Morocco, and women wore the tattoos. Relatively few Algerian men tattooed or wore tattoos. Girlfriends and family often tattooed each other, and most of the tattoos were completed before marriage. The tattooing began as early as age six or seven, as soon as a child would hold still and bear the discomfort. Girls received most of their tattoos between the ages of ten and sixteen. Because the tattoos were considered beautiful and elegant, a sign of being “grown up” and an announcement that they were marriageable, young girls were willing to hold still while getting pricked, just as western girls tolerate high heeled shoes, eyebrow plucking, and bras for the sake of looking grownup.

One household tattoo method was to trace a design in pot black on the skin, prick it into the skin with a cactus needle, and then cover that with black ash. Others dipped a needle into pot black and pricked the design into the skin with the sooty needle. The Ouled Nail women also did tattooing and circumcisions. A woman who had daughters approaching a marriageable age might hire an Ouled Nail to make them attractive by tattooing them and trimming their clitorises if she wanted more skillful work than anyone in the household could manage.

- Scorpion: a protective symbol (Gaudry)



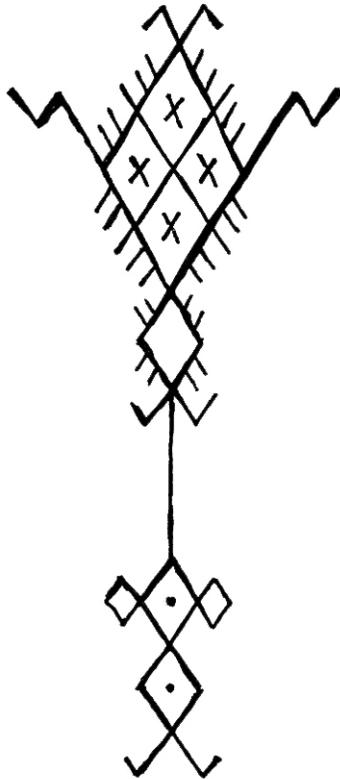
- ZigZag: Gaudry interprets the zigzag as a symbol of running water, running water being a symbol of fertility. (Gaudry)



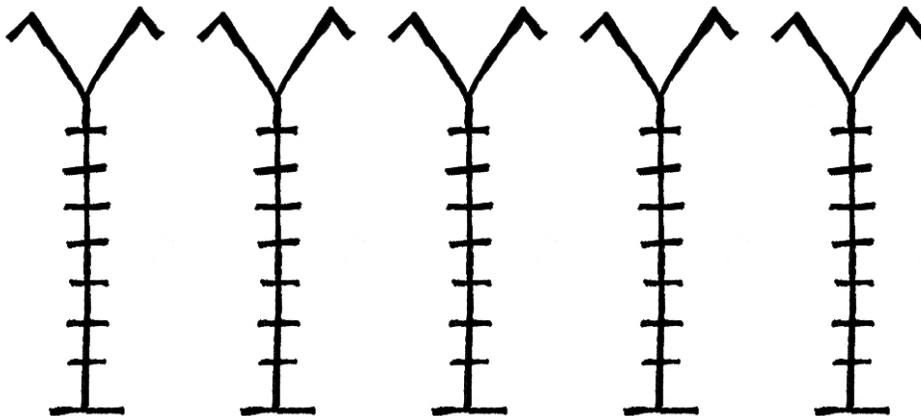
- Cross: an equal armed cross is a protective symbol. (Gaudry)



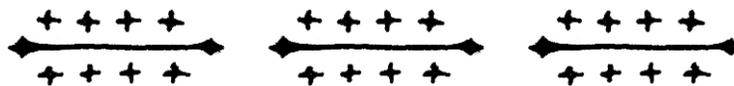
- Palm Tree: a symbol of fertility. Gaudry believed this particular pattern might have been related to depictions of the North African pre-monotheistic goddess Tanit.



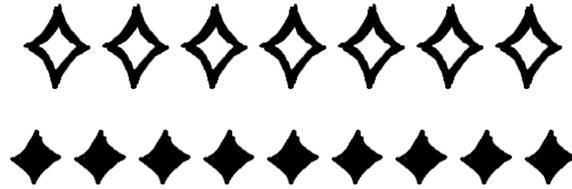
- Palm Trees: a symbol of fertility (Gaudry)



- Chain: *sesla* or *ifer*, leaves (Searight)



- Diamonds: *el ain*, an eye, especially used to avert the Evil Eye. (Sigelmassi)



- Dots: *el Hebba* or grain (Sigelmassi)



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