



*The Henna Page*TM
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HENNA

Lailet al Hinna fi Sharq'ia
Night of the Henna in Sharq'ia



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My awareness of and interest in henna always seemed to please and amuse the *hareem*, the women of my husband's family in his small village in *Sharq'ia* - the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. They were quite surprised to discover that I was actually fairly skilled in applying designs to my own hands, however, as a former wedding cake decorator, I had been intrigued from the first time I saw it, and it was relatively easy to make the jump from executing the lacy patterns of Australian-style cake decorating with an icing bag to creating similar patterns with a cone of henna.

During the roughly thirteen years that I lived in the Kingdom, I discovered that both in the capital city Riyadh in Najd, the central region where we lived, and in my husband's village, the Saudis do most of their socializing in the cool of the evening, likely because of the brutally hot daytime temperatures. As my husband's oldest brother and his wife are very highly esteemed and well-respected leaders in the village, their home is a popular gathering place and it is not unusual for large numbers of friends, immediate relatives and extended family to congregate there, either to benefit from their wisdom or simply enjoy convivial conversation and company. In keeping with the hospitality for which the region is justifiably famous, guests are routinely served strong, sweet, mint tea in tiny glasses and sometimes also small round bowl-like cups of bitter, cardamom-scented *Qahwa* – Arabic coffee. The older daughters of the house often serve the refreshments, always on a tray laden with fruit, nuts, dates and other small sweets. Cups are filled over and over again as the ladies enjoy light gossip and discussions about life in their small corner of the world, often into the wee hours of the morning.

We always spent time there with the family in the last days of Ramadan, and often on the eve of the *Eid*, small premixed tubes of henna paste - usually Rani Kona - would be on hand as they were available at every corner *Baqala* - small grocery shop. Of course it always began with one request, but sometimes evolved into an evening-long project for me, as I would be asked to decorate the hands of first one, then another and another of the ladies. This was a fairly daunting task because seating is primarily on pillows on the floor, and there are no tables or surfaces on which to rest the hands or elbows. Unaccustomed as I was to doing back-to-back henna designs in such a posture, the end result was often eye strain and an aching back, however I counted it a cheap price to pay to offer this gesture of goodwill toward people who had opened their hearts and homes to me. And I do believe they all took real delight in showing off their hands later and shocking their disbelieving admirers by telling them that the work had been done by an *Amreekeea* - an American woman.

One weekend when we came to visit, my sister-in-law asked if I'd like to attend a *Lailat al Hinna* - a Night of Henna - with her. I could scarcely contain my excitement, for although it would not be my first time being included in a bridal henna party, at last I would have the chance to see something mysterious I'd only heard about before: a *henaya* - a professional henna artist - using *ageen* - dough - to create henna designs by the resist method. While that may not seem remarkable on its own merits, I had traveled fairly extensively in the region, and had never encountered this way of doing henna anywhere else - indeed, it seemed that every time that I inquired of ladies in other Middle Eastern countries that I visited, they had never even heard of such a method.

Later that evening, a group of us walked the short distance through narrow alleyways to the home of the bride-to-be. Although the night was warm, we were covered head-to-toe in our black *abeyas*, *hijabs* and *burqas*. The street where the bride lived was gaily decorated with many strings of colored Christmas lights, and a banner written in ornate Arabic calligraphy hung overhead to announce the coming wedding. As we stepped through the doorway, my senses were assaulted by the bright lights, smells of food, henna, and *bokhor*, mixed with the traditional perfume, *AlOud*, made of roses and sandalwood and the sounds typically heard when excited groups of women gather together.

The room was virtually packed wall to wall with brightly dressed women, young girls and children, and loud, animated conversations were punctuated with occasional cries of babies or shouts of laughter. Our arrival was greeted with openly inquisitive stares and murmuring as I had brought an Australian friend from Riyadh to visit with me that weekend and both of us were obviously foreign. The arrival of outsiders at an occasion like this one is more than a little remarkable as foreign visitors at such a gathering are all but unheard of, but the curiosity seemed overall friendly.

I heard my sister-in-law answering a question and realized that she was saying that yes, the *Amreekeea* spoke some Arabic, and yes, I was her sister-in-law, and no, the other lady was my friend from Australia and she did not understand Arabic. Suddenly I was

surrounded by ladies and bombarded with all sorts of questions: “Do you really speak Arabic?” “Are you a Muslim? Why not?” “How do you like living in Riyadh? Isn’t it too hot there?” “How do you like being married to a Saudi man?” “Why is your friend so thin – doesn’t she eat?” Is she married to a Saudi?” “Is it true that American women do not remove all hair from their bodies?” “How many children do you have?” Much to my relief, before I could even begin to frame answers for all those questions, my sister-in-law gently drew me away from the group and led my friend and me to the bride.

Although nearly fifteen years have passed, she made an impression that remains to this day. Swathed in a green *mishmar* glittering with heavy golden embroidery, she was sitting on the floor propped up with cushions, perfectly still and silent. Through the semi-sheer fabric I could faintly see her face, staring, motionless. For a moment, her eyes made a flickering glance in our direction, and then she resumed staring straight ahead with huge, dark, unblinking kohl-lined eyes. She did not glance at us or anyone else again. How tiny and young and fragile she looked! I wondered whether she was terrified by her impending marriage and all that it entailed, or simply serene in the knowledge that she was fulfilling the role for which Allah had put her in this world.

Beside her was the black-shrouded figure of the *henaya*. I never saw her face, only the back of her head and her back as she bent over the hand of the bride, going about her business in efficient silence. Rapidly rolling bits of dough from the bowl beside her into very long thin strings, she arranged and pressed simple spirals and geometric patterns first onto the palms of the bride’s hands and then the soles of her feet finally using what looked like a little spoon to apply henna to the skin that remained exposed.

As the *henaya* finished her work, a woman began a song, and at the end of what seemed to be each verse, all the women joined with her and sang a response complimenting the bride and her beauty, and praising God for her coming marriage. They asked the blessings of Allah upon the bride, her new husband and the children they might – *Inshallah* - have. Someone began beating some sort of drum while the others clapped along, and the *zaghareet* –a chorus of high-pitched ululations - frequently rang out, startling my Australian friend who had never before heard this spontaneous expression of joy so often heard when Arabic women are celebrating. Eventually several graceful younger women were pushed forward to dance an impromptu belly dance, while some women called out to the bride in what seemed to be good natured teasing – likely sexual in nature – their comments greeted with bursts of laughter. Through all of this, the tiny bride never moved or spoke, and her face remained covered until all the guests had gone so that no one might even inadvertently give her the Evil Eye and spoil her beauty or in any other way mar her chance for a successful and fruitful marriage.

The atmosphere was one of great excitement and joy, and my Australian friend and I quietly exchanged glances, both of us somewhat awed and deeply moved. Although we had been to countless weddings over the years, we both felt privileged to have this opportunity to witness and experience what occurs in the inner sanctum in this place where virginity is still protected and highly prized, and ancient customs and traditions still honored. We were each lost in our own thoughts and reflections, and I was left

feeling that marriage was something truly significant – even remarkable. Ultimately, it seemed right and fitting that there should be a gathering like this, a time-honored ritual whose sole purpose is that the female relatives and friends of the bride should pamper and beautify a girl, and celebrate and encourage her as she stands upon the threshold of womanhood.

The Henaya's Bread-Dough Resist Technique, Step-By Step



Mix bread dough with flour and water.



Mix it to a consistency suitable for either rolling thin coils of dough, or thinner for piping through a confectioner's piping bag (a carrot bag).



Using the confectioner's piping cone, decorate the skin with dough as if you were decorating a cake with frosting. Or, roll out long strings of dough and create patterns by pressing the dough onto the skin. Allow the dough to dry slightly, and stick to the skin.



Fill in the pattern with henna paste.



Repeat the same process on the feet.



Remove the henna the next day and allow the color to darken.

Sharq'ia Henna Techniques:

According to my sources who wish to remain anonymous, in the old days, women applied henna to cover the palms of their hands, soles of their feet and to stain their own fingertips and fingernails, and it wasn't considered an art because almost anyone could do it.

The dough resist method came into use at least 30 years ago, and it became necessary for another person help; the woman who did this work came to be called a *henaya*. She rolled the dough into very thin coils by hand, and placed upon the soles of the feet and the palms of the hands of her client in simple designs, usually limited to geometric shapes such as circles, triangles, squares and crossed lines. A few artists favored the method popular in neighboring Bahrain, and used the tip of a match or toothpick to draw freehand designs, but like the hand-rolled dough coiling, that method was eventually all but abandoned because it was so time-consuming. About six year ago, it was realized that it was faster and easier to create patterns by forcing the dough through plastic cones, so nearly everyone switched to that method.

In the beginning, the *henaya* was paid whatever the client chose to give her, but as the number of practitioners increased, the business became more competitive with increasingly skilled artists commanding higher fees. The social status of a professional henna artist could be likened to that of a hairdresser, but at the same time, today it is appreciated as an art form. It is not uncommon for even ladies of substance to do this as a hobby and to show off their expertise even though they do not need the money. It is currently possible to engage the services of a *henaya* for a bride for about \$65, but it is more common to pay around \$150.

Ladies in the Eastern Province who mix their own henna brews obtain their supplies from many areas, though they tend to favor the henna from Al-Ahsa in Eastern Saudi Arabia or from neighboring Yemen, however, they complain that the Yemeni henna has many impurities and thus needs to be sifted very finely. Of course henna is also sold as a ready-to-use paste in special markets that cater to women's needs and also in the *Hawaj* – the herb shop.

The finely sifted henna powder is usually mixed with tea water and Mahalabiya – pungent-smelling oil sold under the brand name Meso, and they do not leave the paste sitting for any set amount of time. Wheat flour is preferred over white for making the dough for the resist, and is mixed with water and some cooking oil until the consistency soft enough that it will flow through the cone easily. If the dough is to be used for hand coiling, far less oil is added, as it needs to be firmer. Both the dough and the henna paste are applied with plastic cones today.

The paste is left on for at least 4 hours or until it dries and flakes off on its own. Covering and wrapping the henna is not believed to be necessary to increase the beauty

or the intensity of the color of the resulting stain. On the rare occasion that wrapping is done, it is primarily to avoid dropping henna on the floors and carpets and staining them. Since henna has a cooling effect on the body, hands and feet might be covered once the paste has crusted over if the lady should happen to feel cold, but since winters are short and mild, that cooling effect is welcome during most of the year.

The Mishmar

I always saw the bride's heads and faces covered with green mishmars, but my sister-in-law said that about five years ago, people started switching to red. Apparently this innovation has met with considerable disapproval by those who feel that it's wrong to break the old custom. She didn't say this, but I suspect this could be because Muslims much favor the color green and even consider it blessed – and perhaps because red is associated with Indian brides (Hindus). The fancy mishmars for brides usually come from Bahrain.

Also, in case you aren't familiar with it, the mishmar is a long rectangular piece of cloth hemmed on the two short sides. I'd guess it to be about 4 feet long. The women there are fully covered and ALWAYS wear their black abeyas when they go out of the house, but when they come home, they remove their abeyas and replace them with this garment. It's wrapped around the body (over clothes of course) kind of like a sari and looped up over the head so it can be let down off the head or quickly pulled back up to cover the head and the face. These are made from soft, lightweight semi-sheer fabric and the women tend to favor strong, bright and hot colors and busy patterns, though they are also available in pastels with more subdued patterns and occasionally solid colors.

If another male member of the family – not a son, brother, husband or father (a brother-in-law, for instance) should enter the women's area, she would cover her face. Of course he would not just walk in but would greet the lady of the house, for example. "A-salamu aleikum, Um Abdullah!" (Peace be upon you, mother of Abdullah – if they were talking to me, I would be Um-Daud since my oldest son's name is Daud.) "Shlonitch?" (That is a very local expression – it means literally 'How is your color' – I suppose to ask, 'Are you in the pink of health?') "Y'allah!" from the other side of the door and enter noisily to allow all the women time to cover or leave the area. Men who are not relatives would never enter the women's part of the house. All homes have entirely separate entrances and seating areas for men and women.

In most homes, they keep a bunch of mishmars in a basket near the door, and other women who visit and intend to help with cooking or other household chores - or are simply going to be there for a while and want to be more comfortable - will also remove their abeyas and don a mishmar.