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Citation

Eum, I. (2003). The Revival of Henna Night in Cairo. *Isim Newsletter*, 13(1), 28-29.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16910>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Revival of Henna Night in Cairo

IKRAN EUM

The decorative application of henna has recently become a globalized fad, especially among young people in cosmopolitan cities where tattoo culture has set a trend in body art. Fashionable shops from Europe and America to Korea provide their customers with henna drawings. In Muslim societies the application of henna has a long tradition, dating at least to the time of

Prophet Mohammed. It's believed that the Prophet regarded white hairs on the body as ugly and accordingly said, 'change this whiteness of the hair and of the beard with something and avoid blackness... [T]he best way to change whiteness is henna and *katam* (another dyeing material).'¹

Apart from its association with the Prophet, henna drawing rituals had been a long-standing tradition in the Middle East, especially on the occasion of the bridal 'shower' which is usually held the night before the wedding. In addition to serving decorative and informative functions, henna also played an important role in the social and festive aspects of the wedding. For instance, henna drawings were seen to prepare the bride's body for her wedding night (a decorative function), and also announced her marriage to others (an informative function). At the same time, henna night represented a time when women—including female relatives and friends—celebrated in a segregated gendered space where professional singers and dancers entertained them (a festive function). The henna party can thus be seen as a time when women bid farewell to the bride before she left her natal home (a social func-

Henna rituals associated with the marriage celebration have been gradually disappearing in urban Egypt in the past half-century. Yet the art of henna has recently been revived among certain circles of young middle- and upper-class Cairene women who have reincorporated the tradition of henna painting into the pre-nuptial 'henna night' party.

tion). It was also commonly believed that henna night brought good luck to a marriage.²

With changes in urban middle- and upper-class cultures in the Middle East, the henna ritual began disappearing. Yet based on field research I conducted in Cairo from 2001 to 2002, it became apparent that in some circles the custom has been revived due, in part,

to the emerging commercial wedding industry in Cairo.

Henna night in contemporary Cairo

The term 'henna night' can be deceptive as I found when I was invited to the henna party of 25-year-old Iman where henna drawings didn't make up any part of the celebration whatsoever.³ The henna night, following tradition, was held at the home of the bride's parents. Multi-coloured light bulbs were hung in a triangular pattern on their apartment building to signal the event.⁴ I entered the party to sounds of loud music and women's *zagharid* (sound made to express a joyous occasion). Iman's mother warmly greeted us with hugs and kisses and after seating us served us small bottles of Pepsi. She told us that Iman had gone to the coiffeur. Soon thereafter Iman entered the house dressed in a long, snug-fitting gold-coloured evening dress signalling the start of the henna night.

For our entertainment taped music of Egyptian pop singers such as Hakim and Amd Diab blared from the loudspeakers. We danced, clapped and sang along to the music. Several other female relatives and neighbours arrived and some of them took off their headscarves, tied them around their hips and danced in the Oriental style swerving their hips adeptly. Some girls changed into party dresses that they had prepared especially for the night. Another guest brought her video camera to record the night's activities. When we tired of dancing, Iman's mother served us chocolates, Pepsi and cakes and several women gathered around Iman to ask her about her experience at the coiffeur. The group then started to sing again, this time folkloric songs about the love between a man and a woman. Some girls improvised rhythms turning anything they could find such as a plastic vessel, a pot and salad forks and spoons into instruments (in place of *table* (drum) and *duff* (tambourine)). Later, the girls presented the bride with some gifts which included a silver ring, a small silver frame carved with Qur'anic verses and expensive foreign perfume. After more *zagharid*, the party came to an end.

I later began investigating why the actual application of henna didn't make up a part in the night's celebrations. According to older Egyptian women whom I interviewed, the drawing of henna patterns in the henna night seems to have been gradually disappearing since the 1950s and 1960s, or even earlier, except in Upper Egypt. Some said its decline occurred when women first started entering the labour force since working urban women and students found it inappropriate for their skin to be stained for up to several weeks with henna drawings (Morgan 1995:36).⁵ However, even though the tradition of henna drawing seemed to have become extinct in Cairo, the tradition of women gathering the night before the wedding for the 'henna night' continued. Since the late 1990s, however, some young middle-class and upper-class Cairene women have revived the tradition of the actual henna painting during henna night. Their interest in the art is often attributed to the popularity of Sattouna, a Sudanese *hannana* based in Cairo who draws traditional Sudanese patterns on the body with henna paste. The tradition of hiring professional singers and dancers (as opposed to relying on taped pop music) has also returned to Cairo. The revival of henna night seems to be also attributed to the growing

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ISBN 90 5460 076 4
€ 16,90

PHOTO: IKRAN EUM, 2002



Patterns of henna on the bride's hand

wedding industry in Cairo where it can be purchased as part of a wedding package. Henna nights are now organized, directed, and performed by professional groups who supply the musicians, famous singers, dancers, and most critically, a videographer to professionally record the entire event. The current henna rituals seem to have changed from a ritual of 'celebration' to a commodity that can be 'purchased'.

The commercialization of henna night

Interestingly, in the interest of 'the revival of tradition', the programmes of several henna nights that I attended—which were organized by one of Egypt's famous singers—actually followed the rituals of the traditional henna night, with the exception that women and men were no longer segregated. In the new commercialized henna night party, both the bride and the groom are adorned with 'traditional' items supplied by the night's show director. While the bride is entirely covered from head to waist and escorted by several dancers in traditional garments, the groom is adorned in the Turkish style, carries a walking stick and wears a red fez (Turkish-style hat) on his head. The couple's movements are directed and controlled by the director's cues in order to capture the best moments for video recording. Following the performance, the henna drawing ritual takes place.

The commercialized henna night brings about a significant transformation in the traditionally segregated 'feminized' space. Unlike the traditional henna night, the mixing of men and women in the current, commercialized henna night festivities has blurred the divisions between gendered spaces. As a result, women's expressions and movements in the current mixed henna night festivities are more restricted than in the past. The revival of the henna night serves as an example of how 'traditional' and 'authentic' practices get reinvented.



PHOTO: IKRAN EUM, 2002

Sattouna, who is a hannana, is drawing patterns on the bride's skin at the henna night.

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Notes

1. Al-Nasai v. 8 Adornment: 138-140 in Aida S. Kanafani *Aesthetics and Ritual in the United Arab Emirates: The Anthropology of food and personal adornment among Arabian Women*. (Beirut: American University of Beirut.1983), p. 53-7
2. For a description of henna night see Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians: Written in Egypt During the Years 1833-1835*. (The Hague and London: East-West Publications, 1989 [1836]),.
3. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
4. It is a long-standing tradition for the bride's parents to announce the marriage to the neighbours by lighting up their home or the front of the building in which their flat is located.
5. See, for example, Patti Jones Morgan 'Family Affairs: Weddings in Egypt', *Aramco World*, September/October, 1995.

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