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Moroccan Women's Body Signs: Henna and Tattoo

Deborah Kapchan

Adornment of the human body provides a fascinating opportunity to consider relationships between gender, cultural understandings of the body, art, and rituals both sacred and secular. In this excerpt from a lengthier publication, Deborah Kapchan explores two ways of ornamenting a woman's skin in Morocco. Associated with medicine and supernatural cures, tattoo has largely fallen out of fashion and is now disapproved of for religious reasons, while henna—a temporary adornment of the hands and feet, using many of the same designs as traditional Moroccan tattoos—plays an integral part in women's life-cycle rituals as well as women's secular festivities and parties. Henna is associated with baraka, *a form of holy or blessed power, and is valued in Islam, the predominant faith of Morocco. Kapchan describes the various all-female contexts in which henna and tattoo are applied, including the bridal henna ceremony that precedes weddings. These ritual occasions highlight skin as a boundary between the external and internal self. The author concludes that Moroccan hennaed women carry a complex variety of messages regarding religious beliefs, feminine festivity, celebration of sexuality, the incorporation of spiritual power, and the display of artistry.*

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> Meanings and values are embodied in material things and actions . . . The meaning of art is completely inseparable from all the details of its material body. The work of art is meaningful in its entirety. The very construction of the body-sign . . . has primary importance in this instance.
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> —Medvedev and Bakhtin (1985: 7, 12)

Henna is an elaborate form of body marking that accompanies rites of passage (particularly marriage) or festive occasions among women in Morocco. Marking the body is a way of inscribing it into a system of cultural discourse that can be read by members of society. On *nhar an-nqash*, "day of engraving (or inscription)," a Moroccan bride is quite literally the designated carrier of social symbols. These symbols take the form of geometric and floral patterns applied ritually, over the span of six to eight hours, on her hands and feet. The act of inscription itself entails a reading of the social values and codes that have engendered the doing, the defining of the body, whose definition is brought into relief by a social fabric of shared beliefs. The design of the ritual act becomes clear only after close and patient observation of its lines and cross-lines.

Contextual analysis reveals that henna art is the locus of a complex of social structures that play

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themselves out in gender-specific body ornamentation. As such, henna art is a genre that can tell us much about gender coding and renewal of the Moroccan female community. The juxtaposition of ritual henna occasions with secular ones in the Moroccan calendar allows Moroccan women the reflexive capacity to distance themselves from the meanings ritually mapped onto them during the wedding ceremony; in mocking the seriousness of ritual, they reinterpret and reevaluate the initiation rites of marriage. Also at issue are Moroccan concepts of the body and the reexamination of ideas of public and private space and time with regard to gender. This chapter, based on my acquaintance with Zohra Kaddori, a henna artist *(nqasha)* in Beni Mellal, Morocco,[1] will thread out several readings of the art and ritual application of henna with the intention of establishing the symbolic depth and importance of this feminine art in the Moroccan context.

What does the art of henna tell us about Moroccan concepts of the female body and what does that body (physical, social, symbolic) bring to the art and ritual application of henna? As will be seen, transformation of the physical body effects changes at all levels of Moroccan society. The painting of the bride acts to beautify her; it is auspicious and marks her as an initiate into the most paradigmatic of all Moroccan institutions: marriage. The richness of the significance of marriage in Moroccan culture surfaces in the henna ceremony, and, by transference, in the designs themselves. The implications of voluntary inscription in the secular henna ceremony are different. As a self-initiated event, meaning is more open and more openly manipulated. That the female body itself has become a canvas of sorts for the display of feminine artistry is of particular importance in a culture that has traditionally kept the female body covered and out of public view.

Henna art displays feminine celebration to the general public, and its medium employs a particularly feminine aesthetic. As a folk art, it has significance as both a vehicle for feminine expression and an artifact that finds its place among other Moroccan so-called plastic arts. The term *plastic* is not wholly inappropriate here, as the hennaed body, too, is malleable, symbolically as well as physically. It is the nature of this art to fade away—usually within three weeks—making its documentation difficult. Yet its very transience lends it much of its potency. As it must always be reapplied, henna art has the potential to express a multiplicity of meanings and forms, one of which is the renewal of the feminine community itself.

There is a surprising dearth of information regarding body marking and decoration in North Africa, despite its obvious artistry and social importance. Little attention has been paid to tattoo (for exceptions see Field 1958; Herber 1950; Sijelmassi 1986; and Searight 1984) and even less to the ephemeral art and artifact of henna design. In the case of henna, the reasons for this neglect may be attributed to a historical undervaluation of both ephemeral and feminine arts. Scholars can remedy this by incorporating the art of henna design and its ritual application into the history of art in Morocco. As a thorough understanding of henna's significance in Moroccan society cannot be had without understanding its relation to tattoo, this examination casts a net around body-marking practices in Morocco generally in order to focus more clearly on the art of henna design.

Marks on the skin, whether ephemeral or permanent, evoke an explicit and quite visceral response. A woman whose swollen neck is tattooed in the hope of cure for a goiter, for example, displays not only the social belief in the healing powers of tattoo but also a permanent testimony to the efficacy or nonefficacy of those beliefs. Her history is portrayed on her flesh; her mere presence summons inquiry from the viewer. A narrative is promised.

Moroccan women are tattooed for diverse reasons (Searight 1984), but tattoos generally fall into two categories: adornment and expressions of prophylactic supernatural belief. Women are tattooed either for beauty or to prevent or cure conditions such as sterility, goiter, and premature infant mortality. Tattoos are also thought to effectively ward off the evil eye and to guard against the potential devastations of evil spirits *(jnun)*. Although Sijelmassi (1986) posits that tattooing was originally part of the initiation rites marking entry into female adult life, this kind of tattooing is not customarily practiced today. A tattooed woman

1. Zohra is originally from Marrakech but moved with her family to Beni Mellal in the 1970s when her father, a government worker, was transferred there. As is the case generally in Morocco, Zohra identifies herself with the place of her birth. This is of particular relevance as *Marrokshi* are known for their henna designs.

joins a subset of shared experience with other "marked" women, yet, as tattooing is no longer a part of the ritual canon in Morocco, each woman has her own narrative to tell regarding the where, why, and when of her particular mark *(washm)*. In a very real sense, the tattoo acts as a visual memory for its wearer—an encapsulated, incorporated account of personal history.

Surface painting of the skin as exemplified in the decorative art of Moroccan henna design is equally communicative, but it expresses an expanded repertoire of meanings within a somewhat different aesthetic. Unlike tattoo, henna forms a part of the social canon of ritual and festivity in Morocco, and its ephemeral and revisable nature make it a more able carrier of multiple symbols than the indelible tattoo. The ephemerality of henna design dictates a changing relationship as the designs and the circumstances of application change and as the woman herself changes with the passage of time. The important difference between tattoo and henna is that henna art is not only visible but is *revisable;* its coherence, symbolic and physical, is only temporary. It does not establish a woman in a particular narrative but provides the possibility of multiple interpretations on multiple occasions. A hennaed woman may signify a recently initiated bride, but she may also signify the recent festive gathering of a community of her peers, a gathering initiated by women in which women take possession of their own bodies and responsibility for their own aesthetic. In a society in which gender roles are highly polarized and socially prescribed, this sort of self-conscious act is particularly salient.

Baraka

Body marking codes the social body with significance just as it marks the physical body with design and change. Just how the social and physical bodies are transformed corresponds, in part, to the nature of the substance used, as well as to the social beliefs surrounding it. Historically, the henna substance has been a matrix for abundant prophylactic and apotropaic folklore, which has contributed to its decorative significance. As the henna plant is still the nexus of a rich folklore and a carrier of *baraka*, "divine blessing," its power to evoke both historical and dynamic meaning is indelible. In fact, by virtue of its baraka, henna possesses many of the curative and prophylactic qualities that were formerly (and sometimes still are) attributed to tattoo, whose capacity to change the appearance empowered it to affect the physical and mental body as well. Like tattoo, baraka works through the physical body to affect the metaphysical one. These two bodies are not antithetic (as in the Cartesian dichotomy) but sympathetic; they represent two parts of an even larger whole whose state they both partake of and contribute to—namely, the social body.

When something has baraka, it is blessed or holy. Baraka as a noun might correspond to the Christian notion of grace; it is a state of being, possessed by people of virtue. In the Moroccan idiom, baraka exists in degrees. The baraka of holy women and men, for example, is of sufficient magnitude to heal and bless others, and it is this baraka that is solicited at their shrines. The baraka of saints survives the body in that it is an effective power for healing and blessing even after death, but it is inextricably linked to the body in that its power "resides" (in popular belief and practice) in the place of entombment. In both life and death, baraka may be said to inhabit the body. It is both material and ethereal, able to permeate the skin. Henna's status as a bearer of baraka reinforces its connection to the body. Henna paste is an earthy substance that penetrates and stains the top layers of skin. It is a botanical agent that acts, in popular belief, to purify the body from the outside in. The skin is porous and not a seal to the self; it allows baraka to pass through and infuse the less directly biological—that is, the psychological, social, and spiritual bodies.

Although henna coloration is temporary, its status is somewhere between the indelibility of tattoo and the superficiality of commercial cosmetics that may be removed with water. Even substantially, henna is ambiguous: when applied, it is a viscous paste, somewhere between liquid and solid.[2] Henna, like baraka, transforms the body in subtle ways; because of its baraka, henna has the potential to change the *nafs*, the "earthly soul" or "carnal spirit." In more practical language, using henna

2. For a discussion of the ambiguous nature of viscosity, see Sartre 1943: 696 and Douglas 1984: 38.

produces feelings of well-being. Douglas (1984: 112) refers to baraka as a "success power":

> Another characteristic of success power is that it is often contagious. It is transmitted materially. Anything that has been in contact with *baraka* may get *baraka*. Luck was also transmitted partly in heirlooms and treasures. If these changed hands, Luck changed hands too. In this respect these powers are like pollution, which transmits danger by contact.

As Douglas has shown, concepts such as baraka are necessary to balance social conceptions of pollution, which are particularly salient in ritual moments and circumstances of transformation such as marriage. If baraka can permeate via the skin, so can polluting substances. It is noteworthy that henna is often applied during times when female blood, which is impure, is at issue; namely, during wedding celebrations (before consummation) and shortly before delivery of a child. Both of these transitionary events involve a dynamic engagement of self with other at the borders of the skin, and both encounters change the status and, effectively, the identity of the woman. In the case of birth, what is inner becomes outer; from one skin, another emerges, bringing prestige to the mother (especially if she mothers a son) as a fecund and useful member of society. In the case of marriage, the blood of the broken hymen externalizes what the bride has internalized—the social acceptance of responsibility for a sexual life that must be controlled and hidden. No longer an "*zhu*, "virgin," a married woman presents a threat to social order should her sexuality go unchecked (Mernissi 1975). She is a potential pollutant to society and must come to terms with the power ascribed to her.

It is the blood of menstruation that first makes a girl eligible for marriage. The blood that consequently ensues from her first intercourse with her husband marks both her previous purity and the end of that purity, the beginning of her sexual life. Henna designs accompany the bride through this passage into womanhood—the loss of innocence—just as they accompany the laboring woman through her travails, also signaled by a profusion of blood. Baraka fortifies the initiate against the pollution and the *stigma* of pollution that is ultimately linked to these rites of passage. Through henna, baraka enters the skin from without, purifying what is within while what is polluting is discharged.

Baraka also means "enough." When a woman has baraka, she is blessed with sufficiency; she has all that she needs. In corporeal terms, the woman's body is in balance with her surroundings and her society. Henna possesses baraka by virtue of its being a favored flower and cosmetic of the Prophet Mohamed, who used it to dye his beard. A synonym for the henna plant in Arabic is *nor-Nbi*, "light of the Prophet" (Westermarck 1926).

The ramifications of henna's baraka-bearing status are great. When applied to the skin in the form of paste, the henna plant is thought to rejuvenate and is attributed with a cooling, refreshing quality and has been used in a healing capacity to counter fever, hair loss, ringworm, chapped feet and hands, and itching sores (Westermarck 1926). Some women apply it to their entire body, leaving it on for just a while before washing it off. This is thought to give the skin vitality as well as a subtle, desirable hue. Baraka, then, transforms a simple cosmetic into a rejuvenating one, a medicinal poultice into a healing salve, a decorative decoration into an auspicious symbol. Although henna is not seen to effect physical changes—reverse sterility, for example—the baraka that henna effuses is thought to have a positive influence on such matters, thus its association with ritual moments when fertility is at issue, such as weddings, births, and circumcisions (Lacoste-Dujardin 1985).

Nhar an-Nqash: Henna and the Bride

Henna is applied at changes of life states, but it is most particularly linked with the henna ceremony that forms a part of a girl's passage to womanhood. Henna designs thus lead associatively to the passive liminality that is the common experience of brides. Yet the silence and fasting that accompany the bride's inscription into the role of wife are in inverse proportion to the merriment of the women around her. For the bride, the henna ritual is the overture to a marriage ceremony that, for her, will be more solemn than festive.

The transformative power of the ritual process is that it entails an internalization, consciously or not, of the core values of the society in which it is performed. This may be a subsociety—as is a women's society—or it may be the dominant society.

> Ritual works by sending messages through symbols to those who perform and those who receive and

> observe it. The message contained in a symbol will be felt holistically through the body and emotions, not [necessarily] decoded analytically by the intellect . . . Thus the ultimate effect of the repetitive series of symbolic message sent through ritual can be extremely powerful, acting to map the model of reality presented by ritual onto the individual belief and value system of the recipient . . . (Davis-Floyd 1985, crediting Munn 1973)

Although it is not clear that the bride is completely unable to establish a conceptual distance from the social meanings traced onto her during the henna ritual, a "model of reality" is clearly being mapped onto her, and it is important to examine just what messages are being sent, in what contexts, from and to whom.

For most weddings, a professional nqasha is engaged. The henna leaves have already been sent by the groom to the bride, along with other gifts of food and clothing. The henna has been carefully sorted, ground with mortar and pestle and then sifted, perhaps by the bride's mother. When the nqasha arrives, she is presented with the henna powder, which she then kneads with warm water until it is a viscous green paste. It is then placed in a bowl with an egg, symbolizing "white luck" and, perhaps, fertility. Other ingredients, such as lemon juice, rose water, and even diesel fuel (said to darken the color, but inauspicious for brides) are sometimes added. Before the nqasha is ready to begin her designs, she must prepare the fixative that is dabbed with cotton on the henna after its application. This mixture also varies with the nqasha, but is usually a combination of water, sugar, ground cloves (or rose water or perfume), lemon juice, and mashed garlic. The air is, needless to say, full of fragrance. Henna itself has a subtle but very distinct scent—rather "planty," like chlorophyll—that, I am told, "men don't like." The smell undoubtedly carries associations of nonmale occasions and feminine exclusivity. It is not only applied decoratively on women's skin but also used to dye their hair; its smell permeates the women's *hammam*, or "public bath." It thus engenders no fondness on the part of men, though women, in general, have no aversion at all to its smell, and some like it. The smell of henna not only invokes a feminine domain but also may be experienced as actually constituting a temporary boundary of the painted subject herself.

The most modern method of henna application is with a syringe. Zohra has been using one for three years and says that it originated in Marrakech—though she doesn't know with whom. Before the syringe, a thin silver rod, wooden stick, or sometimes an empty Bic pen cartridge was used to drag a thin line of henna across the skin. The syringe cuts the time of the traditional methods in half. It takes Zohra about one and a half hours to complete one hand, and a little longer to do a foot.

The nhar al-henna, "day of henna" (also called *nhar an-nqash*, "day of engraving"), usually takes place the day before the official wedding party begins and the day after *nhar al-hammam*, "day of the bath." Purified by many hours at the public bath, the bride is ready to receive the designs that will accompany her transition from girl to woman. At her wedding she will soon become a self-conscious object, literally displaying herself in several ornate costumes, seated on a pedestal-like chair, her hair and face made up, her hands and feet hennaed.

At the bridal henna ceremony, the bride is about to be "born" into womanhood and wifely duties, and her behavior reflects an embryonic state. It is not insignificant that henna stain is reddish in color; the bride is heralded into her new life in a wash of red, much as a newborn arrives in such a wash. In actual fact, the blood of the bride's broken hymen will be displayed publicly immediately after the consummation. The power ascribed to this blood is a focal point of the wedding ceremony; the honor of the family and the purity of the bride are therein. In this sense blood may be considered "symbolic capital"—a social currency that maintains that not only has the groom received goods that now belong to him (are his private property) but that these goods have been untouched, except by him (Bourdieu 1977). The henna designs are the insignia of this exchange (blood for dowry). Whether henna can be definitively linked with blood symbolism is unclear. Underscoring this interpretation is a custom (practiced in Algeria, however) that takes place in the male henna ceremony: after the groom's palms are dabbed with henna, the bowl containing the henna is passed among the male guests; the last male to hold the bowl lets it drop and smash on the floor that the bride's hymen might break just as easily on the wedding night (Lacoste-Dujardin 1985).

Feminine blood has an ambiguous status in Moroccan society. It is both powerful, the source of family honor, and polluting—a menstruating woman is in a state of impurity. Henna also is an ambiguous substance. Although it possesses baraka and purificatory status, it also acts to beautify the feminine subject, thereby contributing to vanity. Henna's association with blood becomes clearer upon analysis of one conversation with Zohra in which she describes a bloodletting ritual. She says that natives of Marrakech not only *naqsh*, decorate or "engrave," with henna but also used to naqsh with the *sizaar*, "scissor":

> It is the Marrokshis that naqsh a lot. They used to naqsh even with incisions (*sharat*) . . . I'm a *naqsha*. They call that a *sharata*. He comes and he incises the women. There's dancing and women entertainers (*shikhat*) and crowds . . . And when they incise them, they put in the place of those incisions, henna and saffron . . . because that incision (*shart* is like henna design (*naqash*). It's just done for fat women . . . They take out the bad blood . . . It's like tattoos, yes, it's like tattoo.

This association of Zohra's indicates several things. First, fat women were believed to have excessive, polluting blood, which had to be siphoned for health (traditionally men have also had their blood let, often by barbers at the marketplace). This remedy was celebrated much like henna application is celebrated today, with dancing and general festivity. Zohra further equates *shart* with *naqash*, asserting that they are similar functions; incision and henna design, via baraka, both act to purify the body. After the blood is let, henna is even applied directly to the wounds. Henna is not equated with blood, but it is ritually related to it. Apart from the secular henna ceremonies, all others involve a certain amount of bloodshed (marriage consummation, birth, circumcision). If blood is polluting, henna may be seen as a countervailing force. And just as henna application sparks remembrance of these ritual incision events (which, Zohra mentions, have not been practiced with any frequency since the 1970s), so do they, in turn, refer Zohra to the practice of tattooing. This relation of genre is a native recognition.

It is interesting that Zohra refers to the *sharta* as "he." There are certain categories of men that can act as go-betweens in the polarized world of gender relations in Morocco. As Abu-Lughod has shown (1986), women do not defer to all men, but *kat-hashamu*, or "are modest," only in front of equal or greater status. The sharata, as she who works with a polluted substance, is thus considered unworthy of deference.[3]

It is usually during the henna ceremony the bride begins a vigil of silence and fasting, a sign her imminent change of status. Maher remarks the special behavior of the bride in her description a Moroccan wedding: "The bride, who has not spoken nor eaten for the previous three days, is to a room where she is later joined by the groom the marriage is consummated" (1974:169). And the bride turns inward, she is marked outward designs put upon her by the nqasha are the center her visual attention. And attention it is, as she be sure to hold her hands perfectly still and extended in order not to smudge the thin threads of henna a wrinkling of the skin. The henna is applied intricately to both the palms and the top of the hand is extended up the arm to about two inches above wrist. The soles of the feet are solidly caked with (no decorations here), but the designs begin immediately at the edges of the soles and travel up some well past the ankles. The nails on both the hands the feet are dipped in henna so as to cover them pletely (henna stains the nails permanently an orange color that lasts until the nail grows out.

Because all her limbs will eventually be dyed the bride is forced into a hypersensitive cognizance inhabiting her skin. She turns inward to better her body; the threshold of her virginity is also threshold of a new life of social expectations. The plication of henna plays on these themes of inner outer, drawing attention to the boundaries of self other, but also to the boundaries between an old new self, and to the significance of the hymen skin, the red stain. Henna is applied to the surface it possesses baraka, which inhabits the body. Henna visible to the public, conveying public messages it also pivots the bride into the private realm own thoughts and sensibilities.

The henna may take anywhere from four to hours to apply, depending on method. As it is

3. All blood is not equal, of course. The ritual slaughter an animal, most always performed by a man, is also brings one closer to God by invoking Abraham's sacrifice.

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kept on for eight hours or overnight, the bride is without the use of her hands for at least this long. By the time the feet have been done (they are always done after the hands) the bride has virtually lost the use of all her limbs. She cannot handle food or tend to her bodily needs without assistance until the henna has dried. It would seem, then, that she fasts more by regulation than by discretion. Yet the fasting continues beyond the henna ceremony. This is not a religious fasting, as in the holy month of Ramadan, but is more like a self-imposed test. Hunger also reveals boundaries and insists on corporeal acknowledgment. The bride practices control not only in consumption but also in speech and facial expression. In mastering her body, she affirms the self.

When the henna is ceremoniously scraped off with a silver bangle, the "girl" may be said to embody the "bride." The designs are intricate, calling attention to their lines rather than the spaces they entwine. The eye is led to follow them like a path until the patterns and their regularity become clear. The patterned designs usually travel up the arm and foot and culminate in a triangular filigree above the wrist and ankle, an arrow that directs the eye to the rest of the body.

This is a rite of passage, and the bride exhibits the passivity that Van Gennep attributes to the liminal phase in such rites (1960). To say, however, that the bride is a tabula rasa, a blank slate, is to deny the import of previous experiences that have prepared her for this ritual (Turner 1969:103).[4] It is conceivable, of course, that internal dialogue is completely suspended during the henna ritual, but it is presumptuous to assume this simply because of outward manifestations of submission. Indeed, the bride displays (and the verb here is key) some characteristics that are *counter* to those that Turner regards as belonging to a "liminal entity" (102); she is an ostentatious display object that is highly marked as a sexual being with elaborate adornment.[5] For her husband's family, she is attractive property acquired. Her expressionless face may be read as submissive; she is quiet and shy; she is the ideal woman, beautiful yet demure. Indeed, the bride wears a mask that receives and reflects the meanings of feminine definition that predominate in the larger Moroccan society. But the mask is apparent to all, and its reasons for being are even more telling than its expression.

Secular Henna Ceremonies

If henna is visible to all who gaze upon it, what then are the socially constructed meanings assigned to it? This depends on the context of the doing and its viewing. And for this discussion it is useful to separate henna ceremonies in marriage rites from what I call *secular* henna ceremonies. These two categories are in many ways antithetical. Although henna art in Morocco is most paradigmatically associated with the former (the ritual inscription of the bride), women use decorative henna on many other social occasions as well. In fact, the function of renewal in the henna ceremony is most clearly seen in the more secular forms of the henna occasion; namely, those ceremonies that are initiated by women for the express purpose of creating festivity for themselves and their peers. According to Zohra, secular henna ceremonies are most popular in Marrakech, though practiced in other regions of Morocco.[6] Of them, she says,

> *Marrokshi* [those living in Marrakech] can be sitting around. One woman says [to the others], "get up, I want to make myself happy" *[bghit n'-ferha bi ras-i]*. She gets up. She brings the nqasha ... There's chicken, there's meat, and all of that. What is happening with this woman? [lit., "what does she have?"] She's doing henna *[and-ha al-henna]* She's happy with herself. She gets up. She brings women entertainers *[shikhat]*,[7] she brings the nqasha, she

4. Girls usually attend many henna ceremonies and weddings before participating in their own.

5. Turner lists "nakedness or uniform clothing," "minimization of sex distinctions," "disregard for personal appearance," and "no distinctions of wealth," as properties of liminal beings (1969: 106). These categories directly oppose those of the bride in the Moroccan wedding ceremony.

6. Albeit with less frequency.

7. *Shikhat* are an anomalous category of women in Morocco. They are often, but not always, prostitutes. Women speak of them disparagingly, but not without some admiration and compassion in their voices. *Shikhat* are usually women who must support themselves and their children without any help. They are also considered "free" women, women with independence (thus the admiration). Some even manage to acquire property with the money they earn. Despite their low status in society, *shikhat* are highly visible at both private and public gatherings.

> invites her girlfriends and loved ones. And there's henna-ing and laughing and playing, cooking, *shikhat* and crowds. And that's it. That's the occasion of henna. You don't have any reason, no wedding or anything, just happiness . . .

It is in this kind of ceremony that the degree to which women have appropriated the genre of henna art and ritual becomes evident. It is their art and their festival. It is, in a sense, art for art's sake, given that renewal is a consequence and correlate of art. This is a *hefla*, "party," and not an *'rs*, "wedding." The verb from which hefla derives is *hefalq*, "to gather, assemble . . . to pay attention, attend, give one's mind [to]." The second form of this same verb *(heffala)* means "to adorn" and "to decorate"(*Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*). The conscious attention given to adornment in the secular henna ceremony contrasts to the bride's self-conscious adornment.

Apart from the passivity of the bride during henna application, all others participate in an air of jocularity and festivity. This is true of all henna occasions. There is sometimes singing and dancing, but there is always laughter and levity, albeit mixed with moments of sober reflection on life and its circumstances. If young girls are present, their celebration is a vicarious one, unfettered with themes of confrontation and boundary definition. Married women, on the other hand, have their own reasons for festivity. As a married woman is more socially secure, she is also more free to discover and express her own will and desires in the company of her peers. A henna ceremony postmarriage is thus qualitatively different from a bridal henna ceremony as experienced by the bride, who is closely surveyed by her future husband's female kin. Secular henna occasions provide a time and space for self-expression rather than inhibition, and the designs come to signify sexual self-possession rather than initiation. Although the designs remain the same, the meanings ascribed to their application are not. Secular henna ceremonies are, in effect, an inversion of the henna ceremony as experienced by brides. They are no longer prescribed events but have become subscribed, self-authored. The marks applied in the "private" domain of a small group of women later serve as public attestation to the reality of feminine community; that is, in the public presentation of the hennaed limb, gender boundaries are revealed, domains circumscribed, and a feminine art and presence is affirmed. Women thus embroider their "private" into the public fabric.

The secular henna ceremony is clearly a festive occasion. Although the henna ceremony involves only a small segment of the female community at any given time, all women participate in a festival of henna application at regular intervals throughout their lives. The etymological link between the henna ceremony and festival is present in Arabic itself: the word that is used to describe a particular henna occasion, *heflat al-henna*, is the same word that is used to mean both "festival" and "performance." The saying goes, *henna 'liya i- hen* "Let us wear henna and God will have compassion on you." The verb hena, "to feel sympathy . . . compassion . . . pity . . . [or] tenderness [for]" (*Hans Wehr*) is homologous with the word *henna*, forming part of the same semantic family.[8]

The process of henna application is both an honoring of God (by employing a baraka-endowed substance) and an honoring of the women present at the festivities. Although forms of exaggeration usually associated with festive behavior are not highly salient, the fact that this is a monosexual occasion does serve to reverse the usual symbolic order of domination; if only temporarily, women have charge over their language and their bodies. The henna occasion also provides a rich forum for the study of feminine humor.

Dialogues and Genres

As implied earlier, there is a definite dialogue between the ephemeral art of henna and its more permanent counterpart, tattoo. Even though henna is a transient art, its vocabulary strains toward images of permanency. Evoking the wood and plaster carving abundant in Moroccan architecture, the verb *nqash*, literally "to engrave" or "inscribe," implies a surface transgressed, a making unsmooth. A woman who is *manqusha*, "hennaed," is also traced with those semantic underpinnings: her boundaries malleable, her form unable to be glossed.

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8. Almost homologous with the word *henna* (the *n* and *h* is here a soft *h)* is the verb *hena*, "to be beneficial, wholesome, healthful." This is also played on in the linguistic context of henna use: see the poem quoted later in the

Historically henna has had a geographical distribution coinciding with tattoo practices (Field 1958:4). That is to say, where henna is currently in use, there is a history of tattoo. This alone speaks of a necessary affinity and mutual influence between the two. Tattoo motifs are also highly salient in the henna designs themselves. Although tattoo was once more widespread in Morocco, it is now seen as a sign of backwardness, owing to a combination of religious disapproval and change of cultural aesthetic. Tattoos are so inauspicious that women use caustics to remove them, preferring the scar these caustics leave to the tattoo mark itself. The evidence of the negation of tattoo, its marked absence—the permanent scar—has itself become a (positive) symbol, expressing a rejection of a past aesthetic and a departure from a system of belief. Ironically henna reincorporates a similar aesthetic and belief system in an ephemeral, and thus less controversial, format. Because it is impermanent, so are its effects. Whereas the hadith (the reported sayings of the Prophet) says that on judgment day all tattoos will be removed with fire, henna requires no such drastic treatment. Henna thus permits the expression of female aesthetics and sexuality with impunity as well as providing an opportunity for renewal of the feminine community.

The fact that henna is used only on the hands and feet distinguishes it from the practice of tattooing, which uses more of the body—the face, neck, chest, torso, calves, and forearms, as well as hands and feet. Ebin calls attention to the fact that the hands and feet are the "outward means of communicating with the outside world and the concentration points of our nerves and sensitivity" (1979:27). In traditional Moroccan society, the hands and feet are the visible parts of a body otherwise covered with a long *jellaba* and sometimes with a veil. The hands and the feet are the only body parts that have not somehow been mystified in the male-propagated discourse; they are the parts open to the exterior world, *"offert a l'inconnu et au risque"* (Maertens 1978:54). Is it not appropriate, then, that these parts also be veiled in lacey "gloves" of henna? But there is an ambiguity here: the hands and feet are not hidden so much as they are disguised, and this disguise, capable of communicating many messages, is one that calls attention to itself. In masklike fashion, something is both hidden and revealed. Henna design changes the body into a text of many meanings.

Unlike tattoo, henna accompanies rites of passage such as birth, circumcision, marriage, and death. Among these, marriage is the most salient of the henna occasions. Even the groom is dabbed with henna on his palms. Despite this practice, however, decorative henna is a particularly feminine phenomenon. Although men were once tattooed (identifying them as prisoners or musicians or in order to insure the survival of a male child [Searight 1984: 81–83]), tattoo among men has now all but ceased. Thus both body-marking practices are now attributes of the feminine world in Morocco and act to "mark off" one sex from the other.

Although tattoo and henna do not occupy the same ritual space, tattoo has largely been supplanted by henna application as a popular form of body marking. Levi-Strauss noted a similar transformation among the Caduveo. Tattooing and body painting served not only as emblems of culture for the Caduveo people but also as social markers and signs of rank: "The nobles bore, quite literally, the 'mark of rank' in the form of pictorial designs—painted or tattooed—on their bodies" (Levi-Strauss 1974: 161). Body marking among the Caduveo, as reported by Levi-Strauss, performed a dual function: it made the Caduveo able to cross the frontier from nature to culture, and it stratified that culture by conferring different social status on the inhabitants. Interesting and relevant to Morocco is the fact that tattooing eventually gave way to body painting, men eventually gave up the practice, and the representational art associated with men abdicated to the nonrepresentational designs of women. At the time of the publication of *Tristes Tropiques*, Levi-Strauss says that body painting had become simply a "pastime" for the Caduveo, although the "practice had once a much deeper meaning" (168). What Levi-Strauss does not address is the importance and meaning of this "pastime" for the women who practiced it. For him, this semiotic shift was rather a fall into secularization and trivialization. Furthermore, we have no clue as to what the indigenous interpretations of this shift were, or even if they viewed it as a shift.

Despite the truncated analysis of Levi-Strauss, his observations of the transition from permanence (tattoo) to impermanence (body painting) and the practice

by men and women to women alone is pertinent to our concerns. A similar shift in Morocco suggests not an impoverishment of meaning, but a formal and semantic re-orientation of genre. Although tattoo and henna are contiguous rather than continuous, it is clear that henna has incorporated much of the significance once attached to tattoo (prophylactic benefits, luck, insurance against the evil eye), without incurring the negative associations.

Moroccan women are not consistently tattooed upon either puberty or marriage, though, at one time, many women were tattooed right before or after marriage. One woman told me that before her marriage, her future sister and mother-in-law forcefully abducted her and tattooed her wrists. Although this was reputedly done to make her more beautiful to her husband, the power expressed by the mother-in-law over even the physical appearance of her future daughter-in-law has impressive symbolic import. Although henna practices are never so drastic, the painting of the bride carries these messages of power relations as well.

In the Islamic context, henna and tattoo appear antithetical: tattoo is religiously disapproved in the hadith, whereas henna was used by the Prophet himself, and he encouraged its use (al-Nasa'i, vol. 8, Adornment: 139–40). The disapproval of tattoos in Islam as well as the growing numbers of country people immigrating to cities, where the practice is disdained, has caused a shift in signifiers so that henna art is functioning much as tattoos did in the past, with the extra advantages of religious sanction, impermanence, and semantic flexibility. Field (1958) confirms that the last one thousand years have seen a "marked" depopularization of tattoo as an art form. Henna, on the other hand, has flourished, particularly in Islamic countries. This has been helped by the fact that the Prophet Mohamed said henna was "the chief of the sweet-scented flowers of this world and of the next" (Lane 1871).

It is worth noting that the emblem of the hand is pervasive in Moroccan culture. The hand of Fatima, as it is called (Fatima was the Prophet's daughter), is found over door lintels, on favored animals (made with henna), in taxicabs, in market stalls, and in virtually every public place. It guards against the evil eye and is a generally auspicious symbol. For some, each finger represents a pillar of Islam (namely, faith, charity, prayer, fasting, and the profession of Allah and his Prophet Mohamed). Because henna art is associated primarily with the hands (only secondarily with the feet), this general hand symbolism is accessible and integral to it. In fact, when the hand of Fatima is wrought in metal, as in jewelry, it is done in filigree and somewhat resembles a hennaed hand. This accessing, albeit unintentional, of a larger social symbol adds another layer to henna's significance. Although tattoo is also found on the hand, its most prominent location is on the face, making it a less likely candidate for sharing the auspiciousness of the hand of Fatima symbolism.

The most common response to the question of the meaning of henna art is *ferha*, "joy," or, in more colloquial parlance, "happiness." This is an individual and a social happiness, an undoubtedly physical happiness, but also a much more complex psychological one. In the marriage ritual, the happiness belongs more to the family gaining a working, fecund member than it does to the bride at the moment of her inscription. Her enrollment, so to speak, into the category of wife is one fraught with ambiguity: she is about to become a sexual being (thus a social danger) but is also about to take possession of a new status that will, potentially, bring her greater social recognition and fulfillment via motherhood. During the nharan-nqash, the bride is defined in relation to her impending position in the household of her future in-laws; that is, she is defined in relation to social prescription, in relation to a state not yet experienced. By de-ritualizing the nhar an-nqash, the secular henna ceremony helps women to make sense of this social rite of passage. The secular henna event, being authored by women, gives women back their bodies and allows them to refind the self offered to them by their feminine public. Renewal, in the broadest sense of the term, may be counted as a property of all henna events, whether it be the renewal (and reinforcement) of social structures in the dominant ideology, as in the wedding, or whether it be the renewal of particularly feminine concepts of self. The fact that henna application celebrates changes of life states such as marriage, birth, a son's circumcision, and even death serves to underscore henna's properties of renewal. Henna art elaborates on these internal changes by making them visible and public. This publication, as it were, of the woman's body serves not only to bear her into the dominant culture, but serves to define and even to rejuvenate

that wider society by extending, symbolically, the renewing properties of the monosexual (private) henna occasion to a wider audience. The renewal resulting from the henna process may be said to be the constant in an otherwise ephemeral art.

Henna application acts as a cohesive in the feminine community, serving to strengthen as well as question social beliefs. It is clear that Moroccan women view henna as both a Moroccan and a feminine art form. It is, for them, an integral aspect of *tagalilt*—a nexus of popular and religious folk beliefs, an occasion for feminine festivity, a celebration of the sexual body through its adornment, a means for incorporating baraka, and a gallery for the display of material artistry. The hennaed woman carries all of these messages. For the small group of women in attendance at the henna ceremony, the body represents itself, as the individual and physical body and as the gendered and the social body. The visibility of these private and public bodies calls into question their revisability and the power of the body itself to influence and alter its conditions.

Study Question

What do Moroccan skin adornments tell us about women's religious beliefs, sexuality, and self-definition? Why is skin an important canvas for such expression?

Related Readings and Media

Burton, John W.
2001 *Culture and the Human Body: An Anthropological Perspective.* Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press.

Schildkrout, Enid
2001 "Body Art as Visual Language," *AnthroNotes* 22(2):1-3.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Smf4mcNyJ8

Numerous examples of Moroccan henna application and design are available online, especially on YouTube. This 5:53 clip provides close-up views of an artist at work.