

TUNISIAN IMAGES: Of Henna and Weddings

by Barbara Siegel Barber

This article continues Ms. Barber's reports gathered from a recent extended trip to Tunisia. Unlike a tourist staying for only a short time, Ms. Barber and her husband Ron lived with a Tunisian family where they enjoyed the typical outpouring of Arab hospitality. This gave her the opportunity to study first hand the fascinating customs of this country.

Henna, one of the oldest cosmetics, has been used for thousands of years as a decoration for the hands and feet of Middle Eastern women as well as a hair dye. It produces a deep red, long-lasting stain; only the form of decoration varies from country to country. The simple and geometric henna patterns of Tunisia differ from the lacy, intricate Moroccan patterns. Patterns are traditionally regional and vehement discussions are held by chauvinists as to which is best.

The Nabeul area of Tunisia, famed for its pottery, is a great artistic center. Its pattern is simple and elegant: the outline comes to a graceful point emphasizing long, slim fingers. The palm side's fingers are completely stained to the second joint with thin lines connected to an elegant half crescent from the top of the palm at the base of the index finger across the heel of the hand at the base of the thumb. The foot is even plainer: the hennaed part looks like a low shoe with points at each toe. The pattern of Bizerte, a city on the coast, has a lovely scalloped look called *henna chabakuni* with shapes similar to fish scales or waves. The scallops surround the foot and cover the palm, with a star and crescent sometimes on the heel of the hand.

The meanings of these patterns — if they ever existed — are lost in antiquity, but aesthetic merits are hotly debated. Sometimes a black substance, *snajer*, is used to decorate the border of the henna pattern. It is made from the pod of a plant found in the souk of herbalists. Besides the time-consuming patterns there is a quicker method of application in which henna paste is held in the palm of the closed fist until the henna stains the hands. This was considered a slovenly method by the women I met.

The use of henna — along with decorative tattoos on the face, hands and arms — is fast becoming obsolete. One does not see henna patterns on the more educated women in Tunis, and, except in the south, one hardly ever sees the young women with facial tattoos. Probably the only time

most urban women wear henna is for their weddings since its use is closely associated with festivities. For rituals such as weddings, long preparation and decoration of the bride underscore the significance of the occasion and the application process figures as importantly as the wedding ceremony itself.

Of Gold and Brides

The traditional Tunisian wedding lasts one week and reveals the fact that the arranged alliance of two families in marriage is just as important as the individual bride and groom. There are so many social obligations involved in the ceremony that many families are brought to financial ruin. The families are by custom obliged to entertain the whole village with one night devoted to the bride and one to the groom.

By far the biggest night of the festivities is the night the groom takes the bride home. On this night the families entertain the whole village, providing pastries and soft drinks in huge quantities. Depending on the amount of money the families can spend, some type of music is also pro-

vided. This can range from a local band to a full Arabic orchestra and sometimes an oriental dancer. The bride appears in her spectacular costume and sits enthroned displaying her wedding jewelry and hennaed hands. The two-piece costume, huge pantaloons and top, is so heavily embroidered with silver or gold that the bride needs to be supported on both sides while making her entrance. There are ritual gestures with which the bride displays her hennaed palms and turns her hands to show her rings. Gold jewelry is a must; every bride must own at least her wedding necklace. It should be pointed out that 14k gold does not exist over there — the lowest is 18k.

We attended two weddings. One was in the town wedding hall of Dar Chabaane. This building, used specifically for weddings, was built by Ben Slama, our host's father, when he was mayor. The whole village came to look at the bride and eat pastries while a local band played Tunisian music. The other wedding was in a spectacular hotel with 800 guests. They were entertained with a full classical Arabic orchestra and a young girl who had won the Um Kalthoum voice contest the previous year.

The month after Ramadan (a sacred month in the Islamic calendar) is the big season for weddings. Wedding songs are heard throughout the village of Dar Chabaane all night, every night. The ritotously joyful procession of the groom bringing the furniture and gifts to the new house is a very common sight and is performed amongst the background of the village women's *zaghareets*.

My expressed interest in weddings brought an invitation from our host's sister-in-law to view and photograph her traditional wedding costume made in Hammamet, a coastal town. This costume, worth thousands of dollars and differing from the more modern bridal dresses, consisted of five pieces: handmade lace pantaloons, blouse and vest as well as two 22k gold embroidered vests — one long and one short. Fatumah took off her wedding



A mingling of the old and new: a Tunisian bride in a modern gown with a Nabeul henna pattern on her hands. (Photo: Ron Barber)

jewelry and insisted I put on all of it. The afternoon turned into a social event as quantities of mint tea were served and people turned up to see how I looked as my husband photographed me.

Weddings were a great place to inspect various tattoo and henna patterns. I attended one bride's party strictly for women. The night after the groom finally takes the bride home all the women are invited to a big feast. The bride sits on a small couch and becomes the subject of many remarks and speculations concerning the wedding night. The older women come in completely veiled in white; sitting down heavily on folding chairs they remove their veils and make remarks greeted with boisterous laughter. All this had the curious aspect of a show with the bride being the center of attraction. The chairs faced the bride like those in a theatre. The men gathered in another room, clearly removed from the focus of attention. A women's band was hired — three old women singing and playing two dumbecs and a bendir. Their voices were wonderful, and one by one the guests got up to dance. They performed a step typical of Tunisian dance — a clockwise twist of the right hip achieved by pushing off the ball of the left foot which keeps counterpoint rhythm. The music was compelling and hypnotically repetitive. Our host's cousin got up to dance and invited me onto the floor. Even though I was dancing an Egyptian step, the party was amazed that I could dance to their music.

By the time I finished, only minutes later, the entire village knew that I was dancing because the children ran spreading the news that the American woman was dancing. My husband, who stayed with the men at our host's house, heard about it long before we returned. After the dancing an incredible feast was set, and the women sat down to eat in various shifts. I was among the first and the hostess insisted on picking the best of each dish for me. The most interesting one was a huge platter of Tunisian style spaghetti decorated with candy coated almonds and sweets, a traditional good luck symbol.

The groom has a night designated in his honor. A religious ceremony dominates this celebration that is typical of the Nabeul/Hammamet region. A Sufi society, a religious brotherhood, is hired to perform. The one I attended took place in the courtyard of an enormous mansion that at first I thought was a hotel. Orange trees perfumed the entrance. We sat on chairs in the courtyard and were the only women to do so. The other women were in the house, a curtain covering the doorway. They peeked out while trying to stay hidden, but were very audible with their zaghareets.

After a short time about twenty men entered, the younger novices wearing

striped robes. They sat down in rows facing each other, some with flutes and bendirs. Their aim was to sing verses from the Koran that will instruct the groom in his new role as head of a household. Frankincense burned all night, and the singers gradually worked themselves into a trance and danced as well. Tunisians, in general, seem to be born with the ability to stay up all night for any number of occasions.

The Ritual of Henna

My husband and I were always treated with great courtesy, and in the beginning of our stay the younger people kept trying to take us to discotheques to make us comfortable. It took some time to convince them that we were more interested in events such as the above. That is why my desire to have my hands and feet hennaed was met with such amazement, since this is a practice definitely being phased out. When I expressed my desire at the family table, our host's father was at first stunned and then he absolutely beamed.

It was decided that my friend would apply the henna that night. After the common Arabic discussion in which everyone had an opinion so adamant it seemed like a family feud, Algerian henna was decided upon. When I was ready for bed, Hayet (our host during our Tunisian stay) came in with the henna which comes in a green powder. It is mixed with a little tea or lemon juice to make a paste and is then kneaded. The application process required great patience as the paste must be applied neatly in ¼ inch thickness to achieve the required geometric sharpness



Top photo: Elaborate tattoos such as the one pictured are rarely seen in Tunisia today. (Photo: Ron Barber) Center photo: A close-up of a palm decorated in the Nabeul pattern. (Photo: Ron Barber) Bottom photo: Removing the dried henna paste. (Photo: Ron Barber)

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of the pattern.

As she finished each hand or foot, she wrapped it in wool combed from a sheepskin and then tightly bound it in a scarf. I was told to stay as motionless as I could all night. In the morning Hayet untied my hands and feet and removed the dried paste to reveal the design stained on my hands and feet. She then rubbed them with olive oil which conditioned and deepened the color. The henna, after all, will last only as long as the top layers of the skin. I was thrilled, but Hayet was disappointed because the color was orangey rather than the deep burgandy that Tunisian women usually get. All the family members commented that the henna was too light.

Hayet's mother decided that this was a job for her to be tackled that afternoon. This time it was more fun. It seemed very fitting since I was a bride anyway, and this was my honeymoon. All the female relatives got involved this time, and we made an afternoon of it. Jamila, Hayet's mother, put me on a foam mattress on the floor. These mattresses were preferred to chairs by most of the women — a modern form of a rug.

Jamila did most things seated on the floor. She applied the henna precisely following Hayet's pattern. Making ample use of saliva, she took a small ball of henna and put it in her mouth, coated it with saliva and shaped it before she put it on me. All the while female relatives and children kept arriving. The women said *saha* to me, which means something like "wear it in good health" and I replied, *yatik saha*, which means "same to you." (This is a common conversational exchange used for a whole range of occasions from the purchase of new shoes to the taking of a shower.)

From the kitchen came a stream of mint tea, pastries, squash seeds and candies that Hayet brought from America. Babies ran around and were loved equally by all as everyone chatted. When my hands and feet were bound, I sat for about five hours ensconced on the foam mattress. People fed me pastries, candies and sips of tea since I was unable to feed myself. I found this women's society a very comfortable, secure and welcome change from the constant anxiety of the achievement oriented society in which I normally exist.

The second application made my hands much darker but did not approach the color of Tunisian women's henna patterns. I really think that this is a matter of individual skin pigmentation. But I thought mine was wonderful and wished to wear it all the time. Its exotic beauty is appealing, however its secret is yet to be revealed.

My hands and feet caused quite a stir both among the men we knew as well as strangers. People in Tunis stared at my husband and me, perhaps thinking that a rich European had just married a Tunisian girl — hands freshly hennaed for a wedding but dressed in a European-style Khaki suit. But it was the men we knew who told us the real appeal of henna — its erotic effect on men. Henna has a very earthy smell that lasts as long as the stain does. This smell has a noticeable effect, and the men we talked to volunteered that they found the scent quite pleasing. Even the most dignified admitted that they adored the smell on a woman's hands. It seemed to me that this was probably its most important function.

Obviously the application of henna involves a concerted effort involving a social experience in a society where women spend a large amount of time in the company of other women. Our Western concept of time would find no room for the demands of henna applications. We require instant cosmetic solutions. You just can't run into your favorite beauty parlor and have your hands and feet hennaed for a party, nor can you change its look or remove it when tired of it. It takes months to wear off.□