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AN EXPLORATION OF HENNA ART IN TRINIDAD: TRADITIONS,
MISCONCEPTIONS AND EVOLUTION

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TRADITIONS, MISCONCEPTIONS AND EVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the evaluation of henna body art in Trinidad with particular attention to the traditions, misconceptions and evolutions associated with the artform. Data was obtained through personal, oral interviews among six (6) experienced, independent, local henna artists as well as primary documentary sources. The research concludes an in dept analysis of how henna art is viewed and perceived by society through religious aspects as well as gender and ethnicity, following the debate of who should be able to wear henna and when. The art of henna has evolved immensely in all categories of research, however further education on the subject is needed to combat the misconceptions associated with it.

Key Words: Henna, mehndi, Trinidad, traditional, body art, misconception, evolution.

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INTRODUCTION

The henna plant, scientifically known as *Lawsonia Inermis*, is one of the oldest forms of cosmetic, medicinal and temporary body art. According to Sudhir Ahluwalia in an article entitled “Henna – Historical Overview”, henna has been used since the first millennium B.C., with the earliest reference to henna being discovered in the Neolithic period of the 7th millennium B.C. (9000 years ago). Henna is believed by many to have been introduced to Trinidad during the arrival of indentured labourers in the 1800s (Karim; Ali; Ramnarine-Lochan), the art of henna is now widely used throughout the island by various races and cultures. Amongst Trinidadians, henna is also popularly known by its Indian name: mehndi.

In order to use henna for body art, the leaves of the plant are dried and crushed into a fine powder. This powder is then mixed with water and/or lemon juice, essential oils and sugar to form a thick paste. When applied to the body, henna stains are first bright orange. The stain then oxidizes and darkens to a deep, cherry-brown shade over 24 to 48 hours. These henna stains can last one to two weeks depending on factors such as aftercare and the area to which the henna was applied.

RATIONALE

As a henna artist for the past seven years in Trinidad, it has come to my attention that not enough people are educated about why henna is used as well as what kind of henna should be used. Henceforth, this thesis focuses primarily on an exploration of henna art within Trinidad, specific to the traditional/religious use of henna, misconceptions commonly formed about henna, and the evolution of henna. Responses from personal interviews with local henna artists aim to unmask real life situations and experiences these individuals have been exposed to regarding henna.

THESIS STATEMENT

Although henna art has become a prevalent part of Trinidad's culture, it can be argued that not enough is being done to inform and educate individuals about the history of henna, its traditions, misconceptions and evolutions.

OBJECTIVES

This study serves to highlight the history of henna art in Trinidad's diverse and multicultural society with regards to traditional uses, misconceptions commonly associated with the art as well the evolution of henna. Although henna is used by numerous cultures globally, within Trinidad it is mainly viewed as being specific to Islam and Hinduism. Henceforth, this study also aims to distinguish why individuals have this particular misconception of henna.

METHODOLOGY

Research for this paper focuses on henna art within the Caribbean island of Trinidad from 2009-2019. Although Trinidad and Tobago is viewed as a single nation, Tobago was excluded from the study as the art form is not prevalent amongst Tobagonians. The traditional, cultural as well as social impacts on Trinidad's community will be explored. Qualitative data was obtained through primary oral sources (interviews) and primary documentary sources. Personal interviews were conducted amongst six independent, local henna artists, each with at least seven years of experience. In order to be viable for the interview, all participating henna artists must be using all-natural henna which contain no harmful artificial or chemical additives. The research however was not particular to any specific age or gender.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This study consists of four chapters. Chapter one focuses on an analysis of what henna is. Chapter two focuses on the traditional usage of henna as a form of body decoration. Chapter three encompasses the misconceptions and misinterpretations formed about henna. Chapter four focuses on the evolution of henna art both within and outside of its traditional boundaries.

LITERATURE REIVIEW

The earliest use of henna in India consisted of smearing henna paste on the palms of hands and the soles of feet which produced a cooling effect in harsh desert conditions. Later on, brides created designs and symbols which attained meanings such as fertility, prosperity and purity among others. Today, Indian henna designs are even more intricate with great attention to intricate details. Studies by Dr. Joann Fletcher have shown that “mummies from Dynastic Egypt also survive with hennaed hair and fingernails, including famous figures like Ramses I and Hatshepsut” (Sienna). Some of the earliest uses of henna in Egypt were for perfume and hair dye which were used by Egyptian queen Cleopatra (Sienna; Miczak, 68). Traditionally, henna is “used to beckon spirits, summon wealth, offer protection or celebrate major life events” as well as being “intimately tied to animistic beliefs” (Basas, 781).

Within Trinidad’s multicultural society, henna is used across a variety of races, religions, cultures and rituals. “Henna is not associated with any one religion but is often used during times of great celebration. Similarly, the use of henna is not specific to just one culture, but it is an integral and dynamic part of many cultures each with their own traditions, symbols and myths.” (Levin). Henna is commonly known for staining the skin, nails and hair for beautification purposes; however, it also contains medicinal properties including

“hepatoprotective and immunomodulatory effect, antimicrobial, anthelmintic, antifungal, antitrypanosomal, abortifacient, antioxidant and anticancer activity” (Zumrutdal and Ozaslan). Although there are many benefits to using henna and it is safe for external use, it is unsafe to eat and can cause upset stomach, vomiting and other stomach complications. Studies by Miczak have shown that many women have performed abortions by ingesting it (262).

There are many suspicions and misconceptions regarding henna art such as only specific religions are allowed to wear henna, henna immediately stains the skin and that henna comes in a wide variety of colours. Henna drawings are referred to by many as henna ‘tattoos’. Tattoos are created by piercing the skin, however henna binds with keratin and stains the stratum corneum layer of skin. In addition, there is also the argument that western people are appropriating the art. According to Modesrah Ahmed, henna artists experience “cultural diffusion and appreciation, not misappropriation.” “Westerners have taken the time and trouble to research global henna styles, methods, health and safety and even hold conferences to educate each other. If this was cultural misappropriation, all of the above would have to be categorized as abuse of a culture, which is the opposite of the reality... western henna artists are culturally appropriating. They have taken an element from my culture, and other henna rich cultures, and used a potentially dying tradition as their artistic inspiration” (Ahmed). However, “henna as it is today and henna as it was originally in ancient times is much different. Harsh pesticides are used in many occasions and chemicals are added, namely the infamous PPD, to bring the dye deeper into the skin and/or hair” (Miczak, 167). Thus, convenience became an immense aspect in the evolution of henna, in that creating a product which instantly stained the skin with little to no aftercare. “Black henna’ body art evolved from traditional henna body art when artists began to add para-phenylenediamine to traditional henna body art because the chemical dye produced a faster, more efficient, darker stain. This chemical addition caused blistering, scarring in the area of the pattern, with a reaction appearing five to twenty days after

application in about 15% to 50% of the subjects.” (Cartwright-Jones). Cartwright-Jones also states that ‘black henna’ produced a PPD sensitization epidemic from 1997-2014. PPD is often added to commercial, mass produced henna products to give immediate stains. These products are responsible for the misconception that henna stains should be black and stain the skin instantly. This chemical is also added to coloured ‘henna’ cones creating the misconception that henna which is red, green, blue, purple and pink is safe to use. These fake products make it difficult to distinguish what is safe and what is not.

Over thousands of years, henna has evolved from smearing henna paste on the hands and feet to creating intricate designs. Sticks, cones, syringes, bottles, wooden blocks and stencils are mainly used to create designs. These instruments allow for better control when applying designs to the body, based on an artist’s personal preference. The art of henna has spread globally and “in the recent time, the use of henna has re-emerged and become current fashion” (Chairunnisa and Solihat, 220). Henna has become somewhat of a fashion trend and is known as ‘popular culture.’ Some individuals have even moved away from traditional uses and wear henna for the sole purpose of body art. Popular culture is frequently associated with globalization, however it can also be viewed as evolution or modernization. New designs and trends are often created which gain fast popularity through social media.

Additionally, the art of applying henna has also evolved through the use of technology. In 2014, a group of students at the Olin College of Engineering, Massachusetts, designed and built a printer for applying henna designs to the hand called ‘HennaBot.’ The purpose of the machine was to create “satisfying user art experience” (HennaBot). In 2018, a “Mehndi Printer” that will print Mehndi on human hand automatically using dispensing mechanism to dispense Mehndi, stepper motors, Arduino microcontroller and motor control software” (Danish et al. 7) was created by a group of students at the Bahria University, Karachi. The machine consists of a camera, sensors, a needle for the henna to be poured and aims to “install the device in

shopping malls and stalls to help reduce the manual, tedious labour” (Dunya News). However, “applying mehndi designs is an art form, it should not be made ‘scientific’. The art of applying mehndi is not just the design itself; it is about the event, girls gathering laughing, singing and gossiping” (Pracha). Pracha also argues “What fun would be applying mehndi if women won’t gather for mehndi sessions right before Eid and shadi amidst all the preparations. It will take away the charm of going to a salon or hiring home services for henna application.” Although applying henna designs may be tedious, many henna artists rely on henna as their main, or even only source of income, therefore machines such as ‘HennaBot’ and ‘Mehndi Printer’ will be a disadvantage to such artists. These machines will also not be able to create as neat, intricate, precise and unique designs as well as a human being would.

Although henna is a prevalent art form in Trinidad, there are not any in depth studies regarding its history or traditional uses. The extent to which henna has been documented in Trinidad is mainly seen in magazines, blogs and newspapers during the periods of Eid-Ul-Fitr and Divali. This suggests that further research is needed to understand Trinidad’s henna history. Further exploration needs to be carried out in order to fully understand religious suspicions of wearing henna. Furthermore, investigations should be conducted to determine the prevalence of fake henna products in Trinidad. Research has however proven that henna art is constantly evolving whether that means creating new designs by hand or mechanically. With uses in art cosmetics and medicine, henna is indeed a multipurpose plant.

CHAPTER 1: HENNA OVERVIEW

There are a variety of henna powders which are “cultivated in different countries, including, but not limited to, India, Pakistan, some South Asian countries, the Middle East, North Africa, etc. Climate - temperature and rainfall - are major factors that affect the lawsone/tannin concentrations of the henna grown in these regions.” (Karim). Common types of henna powders include Rajasthani, Jamila, Sojat and Moroccan. These powders can be categorised into body art quality (BAQ) and hair henna quality. For body art quality, the henna leaves are ground into a very fine powder which is then sifted multiple times to remove unwanted lumps, twigs and leaves. The finer the powder, the smoother the henna paste will be which in turn makes application to the skin easier. Hair henna quality henna consists of a courser ground powder which is not sifted as much as the BAQ powder. Henna powders also have different qualities and can “make a stringy paste while others make a creamy paste” (Jagmohan). Below is a recipe used to make BAQ henna paste:

Ingredients

- 100 grams of henna powder
- 4 tablespoons of granulated sugar
- 30 millilitres of aromatherapy grade essential oil (lavender, eucalyptus or cajepu)
- Water

Method

1. Mix all dry ingredients together (henna powder and sugar).
2. Add essential oil to the dry ingredients and mix in water slowly until a thick cake-like consistency is formed (see figure 1).

3. Cover the mixture with cling wrap. Ensure that it is touching the paste to create a vacuum seal. Place a tissue over the cling wrap (this will help to tell if dye release has occurred).
4. Place in a warm area and leave overnight for 6-8 hours.
5. Check the paste for dye release the next day. There are 3 methods of testing for dye release:
 - Look at the side of the tissue which was touching the cling wrap. It should be bright orange (see figure 2).
 - Scrape away the top layer of the paste. The henna below should be a lighter colour (see figure 3).
 - Mix the paste and apply a small amount to the heel of the palm. Wait 5 minutes and wipe away the paste. The ideal result should be a bright orange stain. (See figure 4).

If dye release has not occurred, cover the paste and let it sit longer checking periodically.

6. Add water in small amounts to thin the henna paste until desired consistency is achieved.
7. Place a nylon stocking into a carrot bag. Place henna paste into a nylon stocking and squeeze to strain paste. This removes unwanted lumps and gets the paste into the carrot bag mess-free. The paste is now ready for body application and can be placed into cellophane cones (see figure 5) or jacquard bottles. Henna paste can be stored at room temperature for 2-3 days and up to 6 months in the freezer.

Some recipes may even utilize lemon juice, tea, coffee, rose water or witch's brew instead of water.



Figure 1: Image of henna paste.

Source: Amelia Dręiewicz Kinsey,

Instagram: @henna_amelia, 2015



Figure 2: Image showing indication of dye release.

Source: Amelia Dręiewicz Kinsey,

Instagram: @henna_amelia, 2018

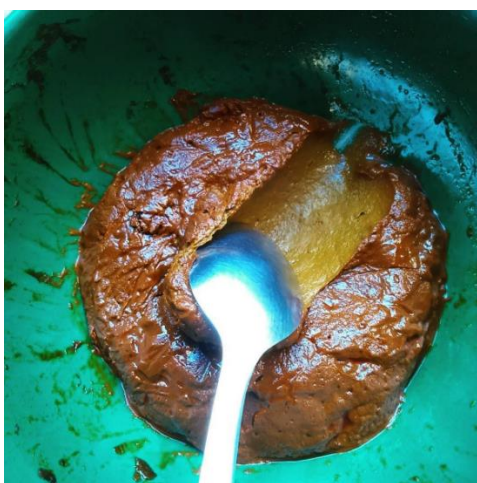


Figure 3: Image showing indication of dye release.

Source: Amelia Dręiewicz Kinsey,

Instagram: @henna_amelia, 2015



Figure 4: Image showing indication of dye release.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram:

@mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 5: Image showing cellophane henna cones.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Facebook: Mehndi by Cassie, 2019

1:1 - Preparing the Skin for Henna Application

In order to ready the skin for henna designs, the skin must be cleaned with soap and water or an alcohol-based sanitizer. The skin must be free from oils, creams, lotions and serums as these products create a barrier between the henna paste and skin which can impede the stain. It is also imperative that any hair waxing, manicures and pedicures should be done 2-3 days prior to getting the henna done. The products used for these procedures can impede the oxidation of the henna stain if they were to be done after the henna application resulting in a less than ideal stain.

1:2 - Henna Aftercare

Once the henna paste has been applied, there are steps which should be followed to ensure it is properly taken care of. A sugar sealant (water/lemon and sugar) is often applied to

the dried henna paste with a cotton ball or spray bottle. The sealant helps the henna paste to stick to the skin for a longer period of time. The henna should be worn for at least 4 hours. Henna artists often recommend that the henna is kept on the skin for 6-8 hours or longer. The longer the henna is kept on, the better the stain will be. During this time, it is crucial that the henna does not get wet. The henna can be wrapped with a breathable tape, fabric or tissue. It is not recommended to wrap the henna in plastic or wear gloves as these materials can cause the skin to sweat which 'melts' the henna paste resulting in a smudged design. Clients should also keep warm after receiving mehndi so the henna can efficiently stain the skin.

When removing the henna paste, it should be scraped off rather than washed. Introducing water to the fresh henna stain can impede its oxidation. If the henna is stuck to the skin and cannot be scraped off, it is advised to use a natural oil (coconut, olive, etc.) to soak the henna. This will aid in softening the paste for easy removal. The fresh henna stain should be bright orange (see figures 6 and 7). It is then advised to keep the stain away from water for a minimum of 12 hours. The henna stain "will darken to a deep cherry-brown over the course of 24-48 hours" (Jagmohan). This is known as a mature stain (see figure 8). Oil or aftercare balms should also be applied to the stain before and after water contact to increase its longevity. The stain should not be exposed to water for long period of time or scrubbed/exfoliated during this time.



Figure 6: Image showing the removal of henna using coconut oil.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 7: Image showing a fresh henna stain.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 8: Image showing a mature henna stain.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2019

1:3 - Types of henna designs used in Trinidad.

There are various styles of henna which originate from different geographical locations. The prevalent styles used in Trinidad are Indian, Arabic, Indo-Arabic and Pakistani.

Indians believe that for men, wearing henna on the left hand is considered projective whereas the left hand is receptive for women. Henna on the palms signify an offering from the individual to the world. Henna on the back of the hand symbolizes protection. The feet are a spiritual place for henna as it connects and strengthens the bond between the body, mind and spirit with the earth. The henna paste is associated with positive spirits and good luck. Indian henna designs are very intricate and elaborate. It consists of fill-in designs between larger patterns and leaves little skin showing. Shapes have patterns inside of them rather than being left empty or filled with a solid colour. Indian designs often centre on motifs which have symbolic meaning. The following is a table showing motifs and its meaning:

Motif	Meaning
Mandala	Represents the universe.
Peacock	Beauty.
Paisley	Fertility and luck.
Flowers	Pure happiness and joy.
Lotus	Stands for multiple virtues including creativity, grace, sensuality, beauty, femininity and purity. The lotus also represents the awakening of one's soul.
Birds	Symbolizes freedom and are considered messenger between heaven and earth.

Vines	Longevity, perseverance and vitality.
Elephant	Power, intelligence and auspicious.

Figure 9: Table showing Indian henna motifs and their meanings.

Arabic henna designs have roots in the Middle East (India, Pakistan, Egypt, Morocco, etc.). Arabic designs are freeform and are done for the sheer beauty of the art with no religious or cultural meaning. They exhibit a minimal but elegant aura. Designs can be applied freehand or with the use of templates or stencils. These designs are usually asymmetrical with a lot of open space showing skin, a combination of thick and thin lines and features a lot of shading. Arabic designs also feature geometric patterns and large floral patterns which are less detailed when compared to that of Indian designs. These designs consist of several large shapes with large areas that are filled with henna/solid colour unlike that of Indian design which are filled with patterns.

Indo-Arabic henna designs are a combination of Indian and Arabic designs which feature bold lines, leaves, flowers and intricate henna patterns.

Pakistani henna designs are greatly influenced by Arabic and Indian designs however it features domes in addition to mandalas, flowers and leaf-like patterns.

CHAPTER 2: TRADITIONS OF HENNA ART IN TRINIDAD.

Within Trinidad, mehndi is often worn for religious festivals and events, for carnival as body art accessories, fetes, parties, boudoirs, birthdays, belly blessings for pregnant women or just because the individual feels like wearing it. Henna is also sometimes done for national holidays such as Indian Arrival Day and Independence Day. It is predominantly known for being used within the Hindu and Islamic communities. For most henna artists, weddings are how they earn an income throughout the year even though Eid-ul-Fitr and Divali are the busiest times. The months of May to August are affectionally referred to as 'wedding season'. During this period is where many henna artists are booked for bridal mehndi and mehndi parties. According to Colai, some Christian brides may get henna done for their wedding just because they like how henna looks.

2:1 - Henna in Hinduism

Indo-Arabic designs are often favoured by Hindu brides and is referred to as 'traditional mehndi'. The henna is applied 2-3 days before the wedding day (usually a Sunday) in order to give the stain ample time to mature. The Friday before, also known as the 'maticoor' night is an important part of a traditional Hindu wedding. During this time, the women of the wedding party come together to ready the bride for married life. The ritualistic ceremonies embrace life, energy and joy of female sensuality and empowerment. The event is female-centred and instructs the bride on sexual matters through dance, song and role play. There are three parts of the maticoor night: first a ritual is performed in an area of clean earth with clear running water, secondly, saffron is applied to the bride by young girls for purification and adornment and thirdly is the application of mehndi to enhance and celebrate the bride's beauty. Friends and family often gather to watch the henna being applied. While the henna is being applied, it

is imperative not to shake the henna artist or bride as the design is easily smudged. Once the bride's henna is done, the wedding party would get their hands and feet adorned as well. In some instances, other henna artists are also hired to apply mehndi to the wedding party. Henna designs for the guests are simple/less intricate than the bride's (see figure 10).

Bridal mehndi can take anywhere from 2 hours to 12 hours, or even longer to complete, depending on coverage, intricacy of the design as well as the artist's skill and speed. Bridal mehndi may feature bride and groom figures (see figure 11), religious figures (see figures 12-13), hidden names, musical instruments, peacocks, mandalas, lotuses, paisleys, elephants and flowers. Designs can range anywhere from the fingertips to mid upper arm, covering both sides of the arm (see figures 14-18). Designs for the legs range from the toes to below the knee (see figures 19-22). Nowadays, many brides choose to customise their mehndi with motifs representing special events in their relationship with their partners. It is a common practice to hide the groom's name or initials in the bride's mehndi for him to search for on the wedding day. This was first done as an ice-breaker for the couple in cases of arranged marriages, however it is still practiced today as a fun game. If the groom can find his name or initials within the intricate henna patterns before the wedding night is over, it is said that he will be the dominant one in the marriage. If he fails to do so, the wife will be dominant. It is also believed that the darker the bride's henna stain, the more her husband/mother-in-law would love her and care for her. However, the darkness of the henna stain is determined by the quality of ingredients used in the paste as well as the aftercare. Traditionally, upon returning to her family home, the bride's family will check her henna stain to see if it has faded. This was done to ensure that the bride was being treated fairly and not made to do chores at her in-law's home. Grooms may also get henna done; however, it is usually a token design and is less intricate than the bride's mehndi (see figure 23).

Although in Hindu weddings, it is traditional to apply the mehndi on the maticoor night, many brides “prefer to have their henna done prior to the mehndi night so that they can enjoy the festivities and also have a deeper stain by the wedding day” (Shah). Many henna artists also prefer to apply their henna before the maticoor as it allows both the bride and henna artist sufficient time to complete the mehndi without distractions in a calm environment. Bridal mehndi may also be done over the course of two days in which the artist does the arms one day and the feet the next. This may be best for designs which will take over 12 hours to complete.

In the days leading up to Divali, henna artists all over Trinidad work tirelessly adorning the hands and feet of clients who schedule appointments as early as a month in advance. Although booking an appointment is highly recommended, many henna artists also accept walk-in clients albeit the wait time is longer. Henna designs done for Divali range from simple to ‘full hand’, resembling that of bridal mehndi. For many henna artists, Divali is the busiest time of the year.

The Divali Nagar hosts many henna artists every year including Henna Trinidad, a local business founded and owned by Mrs. Risa Raghunanan-Mohammed. This business has operated a booth at the Divali Nagar every year since 2010. Henna Trinidad is the largest distributor of henna products in the Caribbean and employs several henna artists every year when working at the Nagar to apply mehndi on the never-ending line of customers. Clients are urged to book appointments with an artist of their choice prior to visiting the booth to ensure they receive henna when they arrive. Many individuals attend the Divali Nagar every year for the sole purpose of getting mehndi done and are frequently seen walking through the crowds with their hands above their heads as to not smudge the wet henna designs. Henna Trinidad also sells various items including henna, jagua and hengua cones, white henna cones, henna powder, essential oils, henna stencils, henna kits, aftercare products and henna decorations (gems and glitter). Henna artist Rajiv Deonarine is an affiliate marketer of Henna Trinidad and

has worked with the company for the last 3-4 years along with running his own successful mehndi business, 'Henna by Rajiv'. During the weeks leading up to Divali, hundreds of henna cones are made and sold. Henna artist Bindhi Colai also supplies henna cones to henna artists working at the Divali Nagar, however she only accepts house calls and appointments at her home for Divali where she applies mehndi to clients. Both Colai and Aneesa Karim offer delivery services to public places such as Grand Bazaar, Price Plaza and C3 Centre on selected days, where they can meet with customers who purchase their henna cones.

Henna is also done for Karva Chauth, a one-day festival celebrated by married Hindu women. The women fast without food and drink from sunrise to moonrise, ending their fast with a prayer for the safety, longevity, prosperity and well-being of their husbands. The application of mehndi is considered auspicious for married women and the darkness of the henna stain represents the husband's love for his wife. During this festival, the mehndi applied often depicts a woman looking at the moon through a strainer, one of the rituals performed before the fast is broken.



Figure 10: Image showing a simple henna design.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2020



Figure 11: Image showing mehndi with bride and groom figures.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 12: Image showing mehndi with religious figures Radha and Krishna.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 13: Image showing mehndi with bride and groom figures (left) and religious figure, Lord Ganesha (right).

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 14: Image showing a bridal henna design on the palms.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram:
@mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 15: Image showing a bridal henna design from fingertips to wrist.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram:
@mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 16: Image showing a bridal henna design from fingertips to mid arm.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 17: Image showing a bridal henna design from fingertips to elbow.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 18: Image showing a bridal henna design from fingertips to mid-upper arm.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 19: Image showing a bridal henna design from toes to ankle.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram:
@mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 20: Image showing a bridal henna design from toes to above the ankle.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram:
@mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 21: Image showing a bridal henna design from toes to mid shin.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram:
@mehndi_by_cassie, 2019



Figure 22: Image showing a bridal henna design from toes to below the knee.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram:
@mehndi_by_cassie, 2018

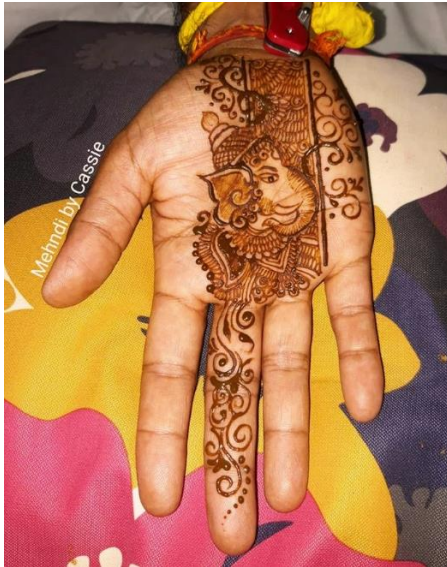


Figure 23: Image showing a Hindu groom's mehndi.

Source: Cassie Jagmohan, Instagram: @mehndi_by_cassie, 2018

2:2 - Henna in Islam

In Islam, henna is used as adornment for weddings, Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha. Henna holds no religious significance for Muslims. It is applied to girls and women for beauty and is considered feminine, sensual, sexual and erotic. Women are encouraged to beautify themselves and look good. Women are also advised to use henna to dye their fingernails in place of nail polish. However, Muslim men are prohibited/forbidden from wearing henna on their hands and feet as it is considered imitating or dressing like a woman. Nonetheless, men are allowed to use henna to dye their greying hair orange (see figure 24) as they are not permitted to use black dye since it signifies the inmates of hell. Henna is also permissible to be used for medicinal purposes. Permanent tattoos are greatly frowned upon as it forbidden by tradition (haram). Muslims believe that tattoos mutilate/change Allah's creation while inflicting unnecessary pain; therefore, henna is a popular alternative as it is temporary and only stains the top layer of the skin, whereas permanent tattoos are under the skin.

Before a wedding, bridal henna parties are often held where all the women receive henna, however, in some cases only the bride will be adorned. Arabic, Indo-Arab and Pakistani designs are favoured among Muslims. For Eid-ul-Fitr, henna artists are often busy preparing henna cones and scheduling appointments, similar to that of Diwali, as many persons book their henna appointment weeks in advance either at their homes or the artist's. Henna designs may be full-hand or simple and often feature domes, lanterns, crescent moons and star symbols (see figure 25).



Figure 24: Image showing a Muslim man with henna dyed hair.

Source: Greggorio Miller, Flickr, 2017



Figure 25: Image showing henna with a crescent moon.

Source: Rajiv Deonarine, Instagram: @hennabyrajiv_, 2019

CHAPTER 3: MISCONCEPTIONS OF HENNA IN TRINIDAD.

Misconceptions associated with the use of henna within Trinidad include the use of instant henna and the debate of who should be able to wear henna based on gender, religion and ethnicity.

3:1 - Instant Henna

With the introduction of ‘instant henna’ or ‘emergency henna’ in the 1990s, many people have purchased and used these products as a quick alternative to natural henna. “‘Instant henna’ or ‘emergency henna’ may refer to synthetic dyes or chemicals that are sometimes combined with natural henna to produce an almost immediate stain on the skin. Unlike natural henna, ‘instant henna’ is known to leave a stain on the skin vibrantly, or intensely, in as little as half an hour” (Karim). However, sometimes the ingredients used to make instant henna may not contain any actual henna and are harmful when used on human skin. Although many ingredients are unknown, the main additive used in instant henna is para-phenylenediamine (PPD), an ingredient commonly used in oxidative hair dye. PPD poses risks such as allergic reactions, rashes, hives, chemical burns and blisters. Permanent scarring may also occur as a result from using instant henna.

Instant henna has a gel-like consistency and is packaged into branded foil cones or plastic tubes. When these products are applied to the skin, it dries almost plastic-like. The dried paste can be peeled or washed away from the skin after 30 minutes, leaving behind a dark and vibrant stain. It is mainly known for being black, however it is also made in a variety of colours such as burgundy, red, pink, purple, blue, green, yellow, orange and brown. Instant henna is sold at puja stores and Indian expos throughout the year and the Divali Nagar in the days leading up to Divali. Popular instant henna brands found in Trinidad are Golecha and Rani.

Due to these products being marketed as safe for use, “unsuspecting people may purchase these products from the shelves of puja stores or the Indian Expo without checking the ingredients” (Karim). Some people may believe that the aftercare for natural henna is too much work, hence they prefer to purchase the instant henna instead. Referring to the instant henna as ‘chemical cones’, Deonarine states that “Although natural henna needs a little more attention, the stains achieved are always so much more darker and richer” when compared to instant henna. According to Colai and Deonarine, natural henna lasts longer on the skin and may take up to two weeks to completely fade away, whereas instant henna can be washed away in three days.

Henna bought from puja stores and the Divali Nagar can also mimic that of natural henna. That is, although the ingredients consist of using natural henna powder and the paste looks, smells, behaves and stains like natural henna, preservatives and chemicals are added to give the henna cones a longer shelf life. This henna paste may even last for months without spoiling. Popular brands found in Trinidad are Singh and Kaveri, and can be found at puja stores, Indian expos as well as the Divali Nagar. “Natural henna is also not shelf stable and must be kept frozen to retain freshness (similar to food)” (Jagmohan) and begins separating after 3 days at room temperature. The fake henna paste is packaged in branded opaque foil cones. The packaging is also deceptive as the product is advertised as ‘organic’ and features genuine natural henna stains. According to Jagmohan, “the best way to acquire henna is to purchase it from a local mehndi artist who makes the henna paste using 100 per cent natural ingredients. Natural henna should smell like essential oil and does not stain the skin instantly... This is one way someone can tell the difference between instant henna and natural henna.”

Based on the research conducted, three out of five respondents have used instant henna before, however they stopped after learning about its dangers. All interviewees have previously been asked to use instant henna by clients; in response, they stated that they try to educate the client on the dangers of using instant henna and the benefits of natural henna. In this situation,

Karim iterates, “I tell them that I do not offer henna that stains instantly, and try to educate them on the differences between ‘instant henna’ and natural henna. I also explain to them that I offer freshly mixed henna using premium ingredients. Many people are either unaware or mis-informed about ‘instant henna’ and how unsafe it is, while others simply choose to ignore available information and take a chance because ‘nothing has happened to me yet’. Some people who believe the latter, may not be aware of what sensitizing ingredients are; which of those ingredients are contained in ‘instant henna’, and how it may affect them in the long term.” Colai also states “Some people tend to argue that the stated reactions from it is a myth but I have seen the chemically induced henna do damage on the skin by causing burns and blisters.” Persons who may request to have instant henna applied may either be uneducated about the product or refuse to accept that the product is dangerous due to arrogance.

The henna artists interviewed source their henna powders locally from Henna Trinidad or from reputable, international suppliers in India, Morocco, Pakistan, the United States of America or the United Kingdom. Essential oils are either purchased from Henna Trinidad or from online sources. Other ingredients such as sugar and lemon juice are purchased locally from markets.

3:2 - Who is henna for?

Mehndi is often viewed as feminine and is believed by many that only women should wear henna. This can be due to cultural, religious (Hinduism and Islam) as well as personal beliefs and/or experiences. Despite this perspective, all interviewees have applied henna on males for weddings (grooms getting traditional mehndi designs), Carnival or for recreational purposes such as travel (tattoo-like designs). Colai shares her experience, “Sometimes while doing mehndi for Divali or Eid, little boys ask to get it (mehndi) done but their relatives tell

them it's a girl thing. Some people on the other hand are open to their son getting mehndi done." "Most males are happy and excited to have henna done (especially if it is their first-time wearing henna). Often, they opt for more geometric and tribal designs rather than the floral designs associated with traditional Indian henna art" (Ali). Some may not realise that henna can be anything the wearer wants it to be, whether it be a traditional design or not. Many males are open to wearing henna as it is a painless and relaxing experience. Nonetheless, henna designs can take a long time to apply and may fade within 2-3 weeks making the process painstaking. However, Colai states "They (males) are usually very enthusiastic about it and make their own requests for their designs. I have seen males with more knowledge about it than females so it is quite interesting." More males are now getting henna done as it is an expressive and versatile form of body art which can be done in a multitude of designs and patterns.

Although there are several male henna artists in Trinidad, there has been disdain against men who practice the art due to its association with femininity. People may also associate men who wear henna with homosexuality. Deonarine shares that people are often shocked to see him doing henna and when faced with negative comments, he chooses to ignore them. Deonarine was the first recipient of the Caribbean Beauty Awards - Henna Artist of the Year title in 2019, thus providing recognition for all henna artists, especially males as well as the artform. "Henna is not gender specific. Anybody can do henna" (Deonarine).

Henna is also viewed by many as something religious and as such, it should only be worn for certain religious events or special occasions. In Trinidad, it is also believed that henna belongs to people of East Indian/Indian decent and therefore, should only be worn by them. This is due to many believing the misconception that henna originated from India. It is also believed that henna is specific to Hinduism and Islam, and only those of that religion are allowed to wear it. Deonarine states that "In my time as a henna artist, this mindset has not

changed significantly.” Ramnarine-Lochan shares one of her experiences regarding this mindset, “I was at a bridal expo and a little girl wanted henna really bad and after coming back to my table a couple of times, she was just fascinated by it all. I asked her if she wanted me to do a flower on her hand, she said ‘I want to but my mummy said Jesus will get mad at me’.” This mindset may be due to henna having a wide range of meanings in Hinduism and the prevalence of Indian henna designs.

Furthermore, Colai states that the notion of “henna is only supposed to be done when getting married and no other time is often heard. Yes, henna represents a newly wedded bride when getting married, but it is also considered a temporary modern body art.” Many individuals wear henna for various non-religious events and occasions for the sole purpose of expressing themselves, however some argue that wearing henna should not be normalised as they believe that wearing henna frequently without occasion takes away its meaning and persons may lose appreciation for the artform.

CHAPTER 4: EVOLUTION OF HENNA IN TRINIDAD.

“Mehndi/henna patterns are constantly evolving and there are always new trends” (Jagmohan). Henna has evolved immensely over time and continues to do so with the creation of new motifs and elements as well as new variations of existing designs, patterns and even the layout in which the henna is applied. From 2017 onwards, leafy vines and negative space designs have been on trend. According to Karim, henna “has evolved in terms of it being accessible to almost anyone, both the product and the artform. The artform has evolved from traditional designs to more fusion designs, giving it more tattoo like appeal.” Modern henna designs often have western influences and are less detailed when compared to traditional designs. More young people are becoming interested in learning the artform and are pursuing classes hosted by established henna artists or are teaching themselves with the use of social media. “More men are participating in the artform – as both a giver and receiver. Finally, more people of various ethnic groups are open to receiving henna at any time, for almost any occasion.” (Karim). Henna is now applied to various areas of the body including the back, chest, breast, buttocks, stomach, thigh and even head (see figure 26). In 2019, Trinidadian henna artist Suraiya Surajdeen-Charles used henna to cover up scars on the body left behind from breast cancer removal surgery in an attempt to make these women feel beautiful again, giving the beauty of henna new meaning. Persons may even get henna done as a trial for a tattoo design before committing to permanency. Permanent tattoos have also been inspired by henna designs. This was popularized in 2013 by Barbadian singer, songwriter, actress and business woman, Rihanna with her henna inspired tattoo on her right hand.

Although the art of henna has evolved, “there is still a lack of respect given to the artform and the artist offering it. Also, it’s still seen by many as something that should be both cheap and done quickly” (Karim). There is a still a lack of appreciation for the henna and these persons may not realise how much time is invested into practicing and perfecting the artform.

Individuals may also underestimate how long henna designs may take to be completed and are often shocked at the length of time needed.

Henna has also evolved in the creation of the hybrid: hengua. Hengua is made by mixing henna paste with the juice of the jagua fruit. This mixture is similar to that of henna, in that, it is made from natural ingredients and can be applied the same way henna is, however a darker stain is produced from hengua. Persons with dark skin often opt for hengua due to this. Hengua is a safe alternative to instant henna as the mature hengua stain is bluish-black when compared to the red-brown of natural henna (see figure 27). Hengua does not need to be kept on the skin as long as natural henna, however the same aftercare should be followed in order to achieve a desirable stain.

White henna (see figure 28), a variant of body paint which contains no actual henna, has also become popular in the last 4 years. Individuals use this as it is more striking when applied to darker skin and does not require the aftercare natural henna and hengua does. Glitter has also become popular and is often used to enhance natural henna by adding it on top of wet henna designs (see figure 29). The glitter sticks to the henna paste but does not affect the stain produced. Glitter cones are used to enhance mature henna stains or even to create entire designs (see figure 30). These designs are eye-catching and a great alternative for natural henna, especially when applying to children as they often smudge their henna before it is dry. During Carnival, adults are often seen with glitter henna designs as well as natural henna and hengua designs which are embellished with rhinestones.

In addition, the application has also evolved through the use of stencils (see figure 31). The stencils are stuck to the skin and the henna paste is then applied over it, therefore only the exposed skin will be stained by the henna. Although, these stencils offer a less time-consuming

alternative when compared to the design being drawn by a person, the stencil designs will not be as intricate. Stencil designs are often bold and contain little detail.



Figure 26: Image showing henna designs done on the head, neck and back.

Source: Risa Raghunanan-Mohammed,
Instagram: @hennatrinidad, 2018



Figure 27: Image showing henna and henna stains.

Source: Rajiv Deonarine, Instagram:
@hennabyrajiv_, 2020



Figure 28: Image showing white henna.

Source: Risa Raghunanan-Mohammed,
Instagram: @hennatrinidad, 2016



Figure 29: Image showing glitter on henna.

Source: Risa Raghunanan-Mohammed,
Instagram: @hennatrinidad, 2019



Figure 30: Image showing a glitter henna design.

Source: Risa Raghunanan-Mohammed,
Instagram: @hennatrinidad, 2019



Figure 31: Image showing henna stencils.

Source: Risa Raghunanan-Mohammed, Instagram:
@hennatrinidad, 2019

CONCLUSION

The art of henna/mehndi is one of versatility and expressionism. In Trinidad, henna is predominantly used by Hindus who view it as having religious significance, therefore it is used for religious events such as weddings, Divali and Karva Chauth, whereas in Islam, henna is mainly used for beautification purposes. Over time, more people of different faiths and ethnicities have begun using henna. Moreover, it is becoming accepted that henna is not only for religious purposes, but is a mainstream form of body art anyone can wear at any time.

The many misconceptions of henna can be cleared through education; however, these individuals must be willing to learn and accept the information provided as well as ensure that they are learning from a reliable source.

The artform has evolved in a variety of ways from alternative mediums to different forms of application and how best to enhance the artworks. More males are becoming involved in the art regardless of the debate of who should be able to wear henna. More individuals are also accepting and normalising the notion of men wearing and practicing the art.

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE 1Interview Questions

- 1) What is your full name and age?
- 2) What is henna?
- 3) How long has henna been around in Trinidad?
- 4) How long have you been doing henna?
- 5) Where in Trinidad is your henna business located?
- 6) Is being a henna artist your full-time job?
- 7) Why did you start doing henna?
- 8) Who taught you how to do henna?
- 9) Do you make your own henna paste? How? Why?
- 10) Are your materials/ingredients sourced within Trinidad?
- 11) Are there different varieties of henna?
- 12) What type of henna designs do you prefer to do?
- 13) What traditions/events/celebrations have you done henna for?
- 14) What services and/or products do you provide as a henna artist?
- 15) How long does it take to complete a design?
- 16) What areas of the body have you applied henna designs to?
- 17) What is the busiest time for you as a henna artist?
- 18) In your opinion, has henna evolved during your career as a henna artist? If yes, in what ways?
- 19) What misconceptions do people have about henna?
- 20) Is the use of henna a controversial topic in Trinidad?
- 21) Had anyone ever said to you that using henna is cultural appropriation?
- 22) Do you think henna is a dying art in Trinidad? Why?

23) Do you think that there is a stigma associated with male henna artists in Trinidad?

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE 2Interview QuestionsInstant Henna:

1. What is instant henna?
2. Have you used instant henna before?
3. Do clients ask you to use instant henna? (Yes/No) What would be your response to the client?
4. What misconceptions do people have about instant henna?

Henna on Males

1. Have you done henna for males?
2. How often do males get henna done?
3. In your opinion, should males wear henna? (Yes/No) Why?
4. What are some of your experiences doing henna on males?
5. What misconceptions do people have about males wearing henna?