

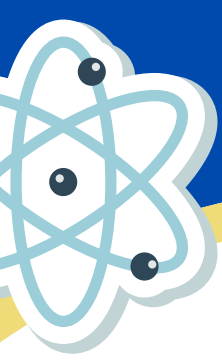

Academy of Language Studies  
UiTM Cawangan Pulau Pinang

# e-Lingua

2/2024



**MAY  
2024**

- 
- ✓ Chief Editor's Desk 2 
  - ✓ News & Reports 3
  - ✓ Heads Over Meal 24
  - ✓ Art & Culture 30
  - ✓ Lecturer's Contribution 37
  - ✓ Creative Corner 48
  - ✓ The Team 52





# Art & Culture

Henna: A Cultural Tapestry of Beauty, Tradition, and Symbolism 31

Playful Heritage: The Legacy of Malay Traditional Games 33

Jawi Peranakans in Conversation 36





# Henna: A Cultural Tapestry of Beauty, Tradition, and Symbolism

By Noraziah Mohd Amin

The English term, "henna" is derived from the Arabic word, "al-ḥinna" and the term, "henna" is also used to describe the dye made from the henna plant and the practice of creating temporary tattoos using these colors (The Art of Henna in Muslim Cultures, (n. d). Henna, which is scientifically known as *Lawsonia inermis*, is a plant from the Lythracea family that encompasses over 500 plant species, including pomegranate (Ariffin et al., 2020).

Henna wearing is an integral part of cultural festivities and traditional rituals. Henna, which has a long history dating back centuries, has become an essential aspect of Malaysian culture. Henna is a popular plant in Malay society and it is often used as a pigmenting agent and for adorning brides during traditional wedding ceremonies (Ariffin et al., 2020). In Malay culture, "malam berinai" or a henna wearing night is arranged before the wedding ceremony on the next day to ensure the reddish pigment left by applying henna paste on the skin stays fresh and vibrant red.

The practice of using henna at certain events and celebrations has its roots in Indian culture and the majority of archaeologists hold the belief that the use of henna can be traced back to its origins in Egypt (Ariffin et al., 2020). This belief is supported by the finding of mummies adorned with henna on their fingernails and toenails (Ariffin et al., 2020).

Henna has been used for ages to pigment the skin, fingernails, and hair as well as to colour textiles. It is used to decorate the hands and feet of people at important events like weddings, festivals, and religious ceremonies. Henna, also known as "mehndi" in Hindi and Urdu, is believed to bestow good fortune prior to wedding ceremonies and possess "barakat", an intangible force of positive energy that brings blessings and safeguards against malevolent entities (*The Art of Henna in Muslim Cultures*, n. d). The complex patterns and vivid hues of henna function as representations of aesthetics, affluence, and cultural



heritage, mirroring the multifaceted fabric of Malaysian civilization. Henna wearing in Malaysia, whether for personal beautification or as part of community rites, represents the enduring traditions and cultural legacy of the country. In Afghanistan, henna which is known as “kheena”, is believed to bring good fortune and joy according to Afghan culture. Henna in this country is used by male and female individuals throughout many events, including wedding nights, Eidul Fitr, Eidul Adha, and Shabe-e Barat. In Sudan, henna is used as an adornment and as a symbol to indicate a woman’s marital status (Bauer & Kaucka, n. d). The conventional North African design comprises of geometric designs characterised by bold lines and abstract motifs. In Sudan, black henna is preferred by the local tribes, although in other nations henna may vary in hue from brown to red or even orange (Bauer & Kaucka, n. d).

From the perspective of Islam, Ariffin et al. (2020) state that it was narrated from Abu Dhar, from the Prophet SAW who said: “Indeed the best to change (color) gray hair with is henna and *katam* (a type of henna).” According to al-Sindi, it is advisable to apply henna and *katam* separately since when combined, these two substances will create a dark hue that is strictly forbidden for dyeing hair and facial hair (‘Ali Ibn Adam Ibn Musa al-Ityubi al-Wallawy, cited in Ariffin et al., 2020). *Khadab*, which refers to the act of altering the colour of hair and beard, may be done using henna (*hinna*) and similar substances, according to al-Fayyumi. During the process of *khadab*, the colour of the hair and skin may undergo a transformation, appearing reddish, yellowish, or similar in hue.

Wearing henna provides a multitude of advantages in terms of creative expression and enhancing one’s appearance. Henna is a temporary method of body decoration, enabling people to explore various patterns and aesthetics without the permanence associated with a traditional tattoo. Henna designs exhibit elaborate and meticulous craftsmanship, including a wide range of classic motifs as well as contemporary patterns. Applying henna enables the creation of elaborate and visually striking patterns that enhance the wearer’s appearance. The deep russet hue of henna provides a striking juxtaposition against the complexion, resulting in a visually captivating effect. Adorning oneself with henna promotes a strong connection with cultural customs and ancestral legacy. Henna patterns often convey symbolic meanings and cultural value, enabling people to demonstrate their cultural identity via the medium of body art. There is a belief held by some individuals that the application of henna may have therapeutic advantages, such as facilitating relaxation. Applying henna may also induce a calming state, promoting a feeling of contentment in the person wearing it. Thus, knowing all these benefits, the imperative lyric from a once popular song from a Hindi movie, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* which says, “*Mehndi laga ke rakhna*” (“Put your henna on”) should be a good reminder about the importance of wearing henna.

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