

Wearing Henna: The Tradition of Arab or Islam?

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ABSTRACT: In Indonesia, there is a phenomenon that may have become a tradition among certain communities where people who do Hajj (Hajj) bring souvenirs upon returning home from Hajj to be distributed to the family, relatives, friends or neighbours present in the gathering held before the Hajj (Walimatus Safar). It is not a problem if the souvenir is purchased directly from Mecca and Medina, or purchased from Indonesia itself, such as in Tanah Abang, Jakarta, before or after returning home from Hajj. What's important is the souvenirs, because it seems that it has become an obligation. One of the souvenirs which is never missed by the people who returned from Hajj is nail paint made from the *inai* (henna) tree, which in Indonesia is usually called "pacar", either in the form of powder or packed like a paste. However, the problem is that people are unsure whether henna is a tradition of Arab or Islam. Thus is the topic of discussion in this article.

KEYWORDS: henna, Arab, Indonesia, tradition, Islam

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the past, there was a tradition in Indonesia where the dye souvenir of *inai* or henna leaves brought from the Hajj was generally used by women only on nails and it was used at certain times, especially when they received a souvenir from the person who has just returned from Hajj. However nowadays, it seems that the use of dye from the henna leaf has been more widespread. It is not only used on the nails and not only at the time when the women receive the souvenir from the people who have just returned from Hajj. It begins to be used to decorate the palm of the hand or the fingers in the form of drawings similar to tattoo and done at any time as desired, because nowadays there are many traders who sell henna.

In fact, body art dye made from the henna leaf has already been in Indonesia since a long time ago. This is seen from Indonesian proverbs describing about henna, such as *Bagai Inai dengan Kuku*, which translates to 'Such are the henna and the nail' meaning 'Has never divorced'. Other proverbs are Feet fight, for the sake of Henna means which 'Must dare to bear the deeds or own promises' and Henna powdered by a single nail which means 'Something that is finished, but eventually there is a difficulty.' In Indonesia, *inai* is known as a bush plant which leaves can be used to paint nails red (The Editorial Team of the Indonesian Dictionary: 1991: 375).

As mentioned above, the discussion about henna is usually fixated on the souvenir that is brought by the Indonesian people who return home from Hajj or Umrah, because aside of that time, not many Indonesian people are interested in buying and using such cosmetic materials. Due to this habit of Indonesian people gifting henna upon completing Hajj or Umrah, there are so many people who think that such activities of body art with henna are in part of Islamic tradition. Is this true? This article discusses the aforementioned case of *inai* or henna.

II. THE TRADITION OF DECORATING THE BODY WITH HENNA

The use of henna as a hair dye and nail polish has been around since the ancient Egypt. This is documented in the scriptures about medicine. Egyptian mummies were found, apparently wearing henna on their nails. Experts argue that Henna is beneficial for healthy nails. Other evidence in Egypt is that there are women from certain circles who wear henna on their nails as decorations, such as singers, entertainers or prostitutes. Likewise in other cultures, those who wear henna on nails are of lower class people.

The use of henna for dying hair and beards was common in some ancient cultures. The King of Egypt Ramses II was one of the most famous people who liked to paint his hair with henna. Likewise, Queen Hatshepsut, the wife of Pharaoh of the 18th dynasty had been found mummified with blond hair. The Prophet Muhammad also dyed his beard with henna. Likewise, his followers practised it until now. His daughter, Fatima, also used the henna on her hands and palms.

Henna, besides being used for weddings, births and religious events, is also used in various important events, such as during the month of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. Due to its excellent properties, it grows and flourishes in Africa, India and the Middle East. Henna contains a protein for hair and nails, making hair and nails strong and healthy. Because of the rich benefits of this herbal medicine, this is not only used for cosmetics, but also for healthy hair, skin and nails. (Faulks, 2010: 12)

In the Middle East, as in India, henna was believed to be a cooling ailment. Henna leaf herb was used to reduce body heat during fever and was used as a protective ingredient and an antidote for sunburn. This allows henna to be widely used in tropical countries. Then, gradually, it was developed into cosmetics, because of its benefits for the skin. In Egypt, women use Henna to dye their nails to make them healthy.

In addition to nails, this can also be used as a hair dye and conditioner that is better and safer than hair dyes made from artificial chemicals. If hair dye from these chemicals can damage the hair structure, the dye from henna can protect it. Henna has the properties to coat the hair shaft, as well as soften and thicken hair strands. Using Henna can make the hair beautiful, shiny and easily arranged. In addition, Henna can also be used as a cleanser of hair and scalp, easy to manage. It does not damage the natural acidity on the scalp which is needed for healthy hair. Especially mixed with lemon juice, eggs and yogurt, henna can be used as the best natural remedy as a hair cleanser and conditioner. Using a mixture with ingredients as above regularly can make hair grow well and the scalp becomes healthy. (Husain, 2008: 16)

Henna is one of the oldest cosmetic ingredients in the world. The leaves are used to dye finger nails, make drawings or decorations on the palms and soles of the feet and dye hair. According to written records, henna has been used for more than 2500 years. Henna is a very important part of Islam, because it is used in various events, especially in weddings. Then, the use of henna was also adopted by Hindus and Buddhists. The use of henna for decorations on the hands and feet of married women has spread to most parts of the Muslim world and India. As part of the preparation for the wedding event, the bride's hands and feet are often decorated with beautiful and complex patterns using henna.

The decorations vary according to the culture in each region. It can be meaningful and represent policies, fertility, and both mental and physical health. In parts of Africa, black and large geometric designs are preferred. Universally, Henna is used to dye hair. By using henna, the hair retains its shine. If one wants to have reddish blonde, chestnut or deep black brown hair, henna can be mixed or combined with other ingredients. To obtain black colour, henna is usually mixed with True Indigo leaves (*Indigoferatinctoria*).

The use of henna is not limited to women only. In Iran and Afghanistan, many men use henna to dye their grey hair and beards. In addition, Henna is also often used to dye the hair on the nape of the neck and the horse's tail of the top brass for the parade. From Southeast Asia and Indochina to Japan, most women are used to dyeing or painting their finger nails, while in other countries they are used for other parts of the body. To dye nails, skin or hair, people dry and fresh henna leaves or henna powder mixed with water, then they add lemon juice or lime to make it thicker. (Jansen, 2005: 106)

Dying a part of the body and taking care of hair with henna is a popular tradition. The mixture is made by mixing leaves of dried henna trees and water. This herb can make the skin become brownish orange in colour and the hair becomes reddish and shiny. But, sometimes there are also mixtures that can produce black, like those found in Sudan, but if the colouring agent is not from a henna tree, then the herbal mixture may not be good for health. Henna is used as a protective ingredient for hair to keep it healthy and shiny. When used on the skin, palms, soles of the feet, this can make the skin beautiful and nourished. Henna can be used with a variety of designs without having to be permanent like a tattoo.

When henna is considered to be used as a material to treat the body, many men also use it. Men who like to dive in search of pearls in the sea, can use the henna on their hands and feet to maintain the condition of the skin and to prevent their lips from cracking. Meanwhile, women use this every day and at certain times, such as marriage or Eid al-Fitr with beautiful complex designs. Henna patterns on the skin can last between six and twelve days. Often, after the body parts are drawn, they are then smeared with oil, so that the skin moisture is maintained and can clarify the colour of the henna patterns.

Dried henna leaves are the basis of the mixture, then mixed with lemon juice or concentrated tea, so that the mixture can come out if the cracks are pressed and produce a good spray. To make a good pattern, matchstick can also be used by dipping it into the mixture so that it functions as a brush. Henna is generally used on the hands, palms, fingers, soles and feet with patterns such as flowers or abstract designs such as tree branches. However, there are also some women who use Henna to make pictures on other parts of the body, such as their backs, so they can make patterns more freely. In Arabic, usually, the pattern is in the form of flowers. The time needed to make one drawing is at least thirty minutes, hence there are women who spend hours to decorate as such. (Torstrick, 2009: .106)

Wearing henna is a tradition that is respected throughout the ages in Egypt and throughout the Arab world. Henna is believed to be a symbol of happiness. Hundreds of famous songs in the Arab world contain themes about Henna, a sign that marriage is near. The best quality henna comes from Sudan. There, there are various types of henna which are used to paint on the hands, feet and sometimes in the face of the bride. Likewise in the West, this is used, especially for hair dyeing materials because of its natural and beneficial properties.

In Maghribi countries, such as Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco, the art of dying with henna is done to obtain perfection. In the Parsi Gulf countries, Henna is also used to express happiness. There, the bride

and in some cases, also the groom dyes his hands, feet and hair. Nowadays, decorating with Henna becomes an integral part of marriage preparation for the bride, her family and her bride maids. The henna-decorating activity is called *laylat al-henna*, which translates to 'the henna night'. It is usually done on the day before the wedding. (Mikhail, 2004: 13).

Dying with henna became part of Islamic culture around the sixth and seventh centuries and spread throughout the Middle East along with the spread of the Islam. Because Islam prohibits representing human images in art and decoration, the use of human, animal and bird faces is no longer used. Most designs in the Middle East use images that tend to be more abstract, such as images of flowers and vines, similar to images of Arabic calligraphy or designs on ceramics or cloth.

Dying with henna was first discovered in Morocco, when the Barbarians who were likely to come from Yemen, migrated to the area. In the past, dying using henna was used as a ritual event to avoid bad people and in traditional events such as marriages, childbirths and funerals. Traditional Barbarians and Moroccans usually made their decorations with designs of thick geometry, eyes, plants, flowers that are beautiful, unique and full of magical symbols. When Arabs invaded the area in the eighth century, they incorporated the rich Barbarian culture to their culture. However, because Islam forbids using it, educated women replaced it by drawing images using henna on their skin. (Faulks, 2010: 33).

Henna was used for centuries by men and women in Arab, Persian, Turkish and Mughal countries in India to give reddish colours to the palms, fingertips, fingernails and toes. They pound the henna and mix it with pomegranates or lemon juice, instead, sometimes with just water, to become thick. Then, they apply the parts to be dyed with the mixture at night, then cover with a cloth. In the morning, they take the cloth and the henna remains will fall off like dust.

In some areas, the pattern decorated on hands and feet is a flower pattern. In the nineteenth century, in Turkey, only the people of the lower class used henna. Some sources say that many men dyed their grey hair and beards. Although Abu Bakar, the first caliph, dyed his hair with red henna, but in general, people like black, and to make it black, the henna is mixed with pomegranate skin. (Walther, 1999: 204).

Bedouin women in eastern and northern Arabia only use red henna. The henna is used in hands, fingernails and toenails. When dying their body, they repeat it three times so that the colour is strong, sometimes even four times, to make the red colour look even brighter. The way they use henna is firstly by mixing the powder with water, until it thickens. Only then, they dip a stick into the mixture and use it to draw the skin a certain motifs. Then they dry it quickly near the furnace until it cracks and falls, or they cover the part that has been dyed with a cloth overnight, until it dries naturally. After that the dirt is washed with clean water. At the time of holidays or religious events, all Bedouin Arabs decorated their body with henna. In some parts of the Arab country, they body part decorated is the top of the body and legs with motifs such as lace. In the past, dying parts of the body with henna was a part of the ritual. (Heather, Ross, 1981: 110)

Henna is mostly produced in homes and is considered as the lowest level of cosmetics among the other cosmetic materials. Therefore, it is difficult to predict exactly the amount produced. Each year, the amount of powder and leaves exported from India, Egypt and Sudan reached 6000-8000 tons in 1975-1980. Hence, the annual total export is more than 10,000 tons. Dubai and Singapore are the most important warehouse for goods. The world market price in 1992 fell between 250-700 US per ton, depending on the quality and inventory. Demand for buying this increased rapidly between 1960-1980, after that it was stable.

The main importers of henna are Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, around 3000 tons per year, France 250 tons per year, Britain 100 tons per year, the United States several hundred tons per year. Usually, Nigeria has export relations with Algeria. In international markets, Henna has three colour levels, namely green, black and neutral, but these levels are not always clear. Green henna is made from young leaves and produces a deep red colour. Black henna is considered the most expensive, because it is mixed with true indigo leaves or paraphenylenediamine chemicals (PPD) which functions to dye hair. Meanwhile, the lowest level is the neutral level. (Jansen, 2005: 107)

III. CONCLUSIONS

Looking at the data above, it can be concluded that using henna for body art has been a tradition in Arab and Islamic societies since the ancient times. In the Arab tradition, the Henna was used by the King of Egypt Ramses II to dye his hair. Likewise, Queen Hatshepsut, Pharaoh's wife of the 18th dynasty, dyed her hair blonde. This can be seen from the mummy. In the Islamic tradition, Henna was also used by the Prophet Muhammad to dye his beard and his daughter, Fatima, used to make drawings on parts of his hands and palms. Likewise, Abu Bakar, the first caliph, also dyed his hair red.

Some Islamic traditions also mention about the use of henna. First is the Hadith narrated by An-Nasa'i, which tells about the story of Karimah bint Hammam who said that there was a woman who asked Aisyah RA about whether or not he could dye his nails with henna, then A'ishah replied that it was okay, but she did not like it because the Prophet Muhammad did not like the smell.

Second, the Hadith narrated by Abu Daud and An-Nasa'i which contains the story of A'isha who said that a woman handed over a letter to the Prophet Muhammad from behind the curtain, then the Prophet held his hand and asked, whether the person behind the curtain was a boy or a girl, then the person behind the curtain replied that she was a woman. Then the Prophet said that if he had been a woman, surely the Prophet would dye his fingernails with henna.

Third is the Hadith narrated by Abu Daud which contains a story. A'isha said that Hindun bin Uthbah asked the Messenger of Allāh that the Messenger of Allah would accept her pledge of allegiance to him. Then, the Messenger of Allah answered that he would not accept Hindun's allegiance until she dyed her fingernails, because if they were not dyed, her nails were like the nails of a wild animal. (Khan, 2009: .116).

From the data above, it can also be concluded that in both the Arab and Islamic traditions, Henna is generally used by women to dye their nails, hair, palms, and soles of the feet, and by men, henna is used to dye hair or beards. Meanwhile, from there perspective of the use of Henna in Indonesia, it seems that Indonesian people still prefer to use Henna to dye their nails over their fingers, palms, soles, or bodies, and the people who use henna are mostly women. To dye hair, both male and female, it seems that the Indonesian people still prefer to use hair dyes made from artificial chemicals rather than those made from henna. This is perhaps due to the fact that the production of henna for hair in Indonesia has not developed its qualities and popularity unlike in the Arab countries.

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