



HENNA {MEHNDI}

My first encounter with henna occurred during a summer cultural festival, where an artist from India offered to create a floral design on my hand. What began as a simple appreciation for its beauty evolved into curiosity about its meaning and cultural roots.

Henna, known as mehndi in Hindi and Urdu, is a natural dye used to create intricate body art. Mehndi is an essential part of weddings and celebrations, symbolizing joy, beauty, and spiritual protection.

The henna plant, *Lawsonia inermis*, is a very resilient plant that survives in a wide range of environments (Gallo et al., p. 135).

Henna is applied as a smooth paste through a cone, forming delicate floral or geometric patterns on the skin. As it dries and flakes away, it leaves a reddish-brown stain that deepens over time.



THROUGH THE GENERATIONS

Through migration and cultural exchange, henna traditions have spread from South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa to communities worldwide. Families continue to pass down designs, techniques, and meanings, adapting them to new contexts while preserving their cultural roots. The practice of applying mehndi connects generations—serving as a living symbol of heritage, celebration, and identity (Begum).

BACKGROUND/ ETHNICITY

The origin of the henna plant is not very well-recorded, but there is evidence that one of the earliest uses of henna can be dated back to ancient Egypt, when it was used to stain mummies. It was believed that henna retained a person's spirituality and reduced decay. Henna was also important in the Mughal Empire, which ruled India between ~1526-1857 and was known for its fine art (Begum). It is now more often associated with South Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African cultures as it is used often at celebratory events.

Henna functions as a powerful cultural symbol, making ethnicity central to understanding its meaning. Fredrick Barth (1969) argues that ethnic identities persist not because of static cultural traits, but because groups maintain boundaries through ongoing social practices. The ritual application of henna during important events is a recognizable social practice that serves as an act of ethnic reaffirmation, connecting South Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African individuals to generational practices and cultural traditions. Even as designs, tools, and techniques adapt in new contexts, families enact a sense of cultural authenticity through the continued sharing of henna traditions. In this way, henna becomes both a lived practice and a symbolic boundary, holding ethnic identity "despite changing participation and membership" over time (p.10).



IDENTITY

Henna functions as a powerful medium through which identity is expressed, negotiated, and continually reconstructed. As one anthropologist argues, material objects are not passive reflections of identity but "active agents" in its construction, maintenance, and transformation (Georgekutty, 2025, p.63). Henna, as both a visual artifact and a bodily artifact, participates in this process. Its materiality—its impermanence, its placement on the skin, its sensory and ritual dimensions, allows for individuals to navigate cultural boundaries, feel a sense of belonging, express values, and articulate who they are in relation to both tradition and change.

Yet, identity is dynamic. Identity is what Stuart Hall (1990) calls a "production" rather than a fixed essence (p.222). The act of adapting the methods or designs reflects this evolving identity. Through this lens, henna illustrates how cultural media are continually reinterpreted as part of a lived identity, bridging tradition and change.

RACE

As a practice emerging from South Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African regions, henna has long been associated—positively or negatively—with "non-Western" identities. Anthropologist Fays Harrison (1995) reminds us that race itself is not a biological truth but a social construct produced through power, inequality, and colonial histories (pp. 48-49). This framing helps us understand how practices like henna become racialized markers in multicultural societies.

Racial theorists such as Howard Winant (2000) argue that race operates through what he calls *racial formation processes*: the ongoing political and cultural mechanisms where meanings are assigned to bodies, traditions, and identities (p.169). Henna has been shaped by these very processes. During colonial periods, Western institutions classified cultural practices from colonized regions as exotic, primitive, or Other—creating hierarchical distinctions that still influence contemporary perceptions (p. 171). As a result, henna can be perceived differently depending on who wears it: celebrated as aesthetic "boho" style by white bodies, yet read as ethnic, foreign, or overly cultural on racialized bodies.

Works Cited

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