

Use of Henna and Indigo for Celebrations by the Jews of Kurdistan During the Ottoman Empire¹



The Kurdish Jewish Use of Henna for Betrothal

When Kurdish Jewish families arranged marriages for their sons and daughters, they celebrated a successful agreement with a betrothal party, a *qadoshe*. The groom's family prepared a feast, and took the food to the bride's house on a Tuesday. The next day, the bridegroom came in a procession to his bride's house, and sat in a seat of honor. The bride's family brought his bride to meet him, and unveiled her, so everyone could be certain that he was getting the girl he bargained for, and not a substitute! He kissed her hand, gave her a ring, and smashed a wine glass as women ululated *klililililililili*. Then, he went home to celebrate with his friends and dance until morning.

The bride's family celebrated the rest of the night at her house, and hennaed the bride's hands, feet and hair. If fashion or circumstance didn't permit such thorough henna, the bride had at least

¹ Reference material for this essay is from "The Jews of Kurdistan" by Erich Brauer, completed and edited by Raphael Patai, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1993

² Pattern by Catherine Cartwright-Jones done in henna, indigo, and turmeric.

her little finger hennaed. The bride's friends stayed with her all night, celebrating her good fortune.

The Kurdish Jewish “False Night of the Henna”

Kurdish Jewish families had two "night of the henna" celebrations before a wedding. The first henna was on a Thursday night, and the second was at the close of the Sabbath. The first henna night was to fool the demons that might intend to harm the married couple, so it was called "the false henna night" or "*lel hinne bedulge*". People believed that malevolent spirits, the "evil eye", could come to a wedding and bring bad luck, infertility, and misery to the marriage. Therefore, they fooled the spirits by having a "false night of the henna" to throw them off, and had an excellent excuse for another round of partying!

Thursday morning, women brought henna powder to the groom's house. They mixed it with tepid water and *smauk*, the sour herb used in zatar. They left the henna paste in a bowl until evening.

The families took a gift of henna powder to the *aga*, the local Kurdish leader, to get permission for the wedding. They took three bowls of henna and three cakes of soap on a brass platter, covered with silk cloth, to the village leader. A young man carried this platter on his head, accompanied by musicians and a procession of family members. When they arrived at the *aga's* house, the *aga's* servant came to the door and asked: "For whose wedding is this henna?"

The family told the servant who was to marry, and asked if the *aga* would give permission. The *aga* usually accepted the henna gift and permitted the marriage, unless there were disagreements between the families in particular, or Jews and Muslims generally in the village. If the *aga* refused the henna, the procession went back to the groom's house without music, and the *aga* sent a servant to tear the musician's drumheads ... to make sure there would be no wedding! The family then tried to make peace with the *aga* through bribes or other amends, because no wedding could take place without his permission.

If the *aga* accepted the henna and approved the wedding, the musicians played in his courtyard, and his servant took the henna to the *aga's* wife. The *aga* gave the musicians a gift, usually a garment.

Muslim Kurds presented henna to the *aga* in the same way to get permission for their weddings.

The Jewish groom's procession went to Muslim Kurdish friends and gave them bowls of henna. They asked if the *aga* had accepted the henna and if so, they also accepted the henna and also gave the musicians a gift. The henna was also an invitation to the wedding!

When the procession of musicians and family returned to the groom's house, they retrieved henna paste and took it to all the bride's relatives who used it to henna the hair of all the little

girls in the family. This continued through Friday and Sunday, because any little girl who didn't get her hair hennaed for the wedding would be very upset.

That same Thursday evening, men went to the groom's house and women went to the bride's house. One of the girls from the groom's family asked several people from the party to help bring the henna from the groom's house. They carried the henna in a procession, with musicians, singing "the henna is coming, the henna is coming!" A young, strong, tall man carried two big bowls of henna over, and little boys tried to snatch the henna bowls from him. When the bride heard them coming, she veiled and secluded herself from the visitors

The bride's mother and friends unbraided her hair, and then hennaed it. They hennaed the bride's hands, then their own hands.

When the bride and her relatives were hennaed, the remaining henna was taken back to the groom's house. His family hennaed his hands, his feet to the ankles, his forelock and his side locks. The groom's male friends and relatives hennaed their hands.

The couple celebrated their "real" night of the henna during the evening after the following Sabbath.

The Kurdish Jewish Bridegroom's Night of the Henna

The bride's and groom's parents invited villagers to "the night of the henna" that preceded the wedding. Invitations to wealthy guests said: "Come to the dyeing in the house of the bride, please cook". This implied that the wealthy should bring food to the wedding feast. Invitations to poor people specified that they did not need to bring food to the party.

Women hennaed a young boy before the party began. A young girl worked up the henna paste for the groom, and the family put the hennaed child on the groom's lap. This child was a decoy for malevolent spirits and the evil eye that might try to harm the groom. The evil eye would pounce on the boy, mistaking him for the groom, but the henna protected the child from harm. The child stayed in the groom's lap as people hennaed the groom. First they hennaed the groom's right hand and left foot, then the left hand and right foot. The henna patterns were wrapped when they had dried. When the groom's henna was finished, his male friends and relatives at the party had henna too. The groom's family celebrated and feasted during his henna. When this was completed, the family, friends and groom went to the bride's house, where she had her night of the henna, to continue celebrating and feasting.

Each Jewish village and family had slightly different traditions. In Sinne, women hennaed the fronts and backs of the groom's hands, then his hair.

The next morning, the groom went in a procession to bathe at the river or the local bathhouse, later in the morning than the bride's procession. When he was bathed, he dressed, but left his shirt unbuttoned until he consummated his marriage. His friends put roses in his belt and

sprinkled rose water over him. He borrowed a dagger from the Muslim Kurds to put in his belt, to protect him from the evil eye, or from a resistant bride! He returned from the river dressed in his wedding finery, and he went with his procession to the bride's house, and to begin the wedding day celebrations.

The Kurdish Jewish Bride's Night of the Henna

The bride's and groom's families invited people from around the village to "the night of the henna" before the wedding. Invitations to wealthy guests said: "Come to the dyeing in the house of the bride, please cook." This implied that the wealthy should bring food to the wedding. Invitations to poor people specified that they need not bring food to the party.

First, the bridegroom was hennaed in his home. Then, girls brought the rest of his bowl of henna to the bride's house. A young girl stirred the henna paste for the bride. Women began by hennaing a little girl to be the decoy for malevolent spirits and the evil eye that might attack the bride. When the child was hennaed, they lifted her onto the bride's lap. Then, women dyed the bride's hair. Next, they hennaed her right hand and left foot, then her left hand and right foot. When the patterns were completed and dried, they wrapped her hennaed hands and feet with cloth strips. In Sinne, they also hennaed patterns on her forehead.

The groom's family and friends brought him to the bride's house, with his hennaed hands and feet wrapped from his night of the henna. The bride and groom wanted to feast at the celebration, because they had to fast the next day. However, with their henna wrappings, they could not feed themselves, so their bridesmaids and groomsmen fed them. When the attendants gave the bride and groom their first bites of food, their friends made a show of trying to steal it, and everyone took a morsel for luck.

The bride and groom slept in their henna wrappings that night, as the party continued. The family and friends stayed up all night to keep demons from harming the couple.

Early the next day, the bride's attendants and female kin bathed her in hot water at her home, and then took her to the river before daylight, when at least one star was still visible in the sky, for a ritual bath. The groom sent soap, a washcloth, a comb, rosewater and depilatory, and she dipped herself in the water three times. When the bride had bathed, her friends dressed her. They braided her hennaed hair into long, thin braids, with a silver bell at the end of each. They brought her home purified and veiled, ready to put on wedding clothes and jewels, and have her wedding day.

The Kurdish Jewish Henna Traditions for Circumcision

Jews in Kurdistan celebrated the night before a newborn son's circumcision. This was called the *lel sheshe*, and it included music, dancing, singing, and gifts of sweets for children.

On this night, the sixth night after birth, women ornamented the mother with indigo and turmeric, and sometimes with harquus, a black cosmetic, or darkened henna. These traditions paralleled those for betrothal and marriage, the *lel hinne*, when the bride was adorned with henna. The purpose of the *lel sheshe* ornamentation was specifically to protect the mother and son from Lilith, the queen of demons, who preyed upon women during their childbirth and lying-in period. Lilith might steal the child (cause stillbirth or neonatal death), or kill the mother (maternal death during or after childbirth).

Ornamenting the mother with indigo, harquus, and turmeric for the *lel sheshe* was called “*rang kolekhila*”, or, “dye they are making”³. First the midwife would strike the mother three times on the temples, saying “Depart Lilith!” The mother's female friends or family went to the dyer to get indigo and turmeric. They painted blue, black, and yellow patterns on her face, her hands, her feet, and her vulva. They painted the infant with a little turmeric and indigo, or harquus. They also painted the wall opposite the lying-in bed with these indigo and turmeric patterns. When the mother was painted, the women protected themselves from Lilith by marking their own foreheads, hands and feet with blue, black and yellow patterns.

When the painting was complete, the midwife put an amber necklace on the mother, and two more midwives came to sleep on either side of the mother overnight. The infant was not allowed to sleep in its usual bed, but was held on women's laps all night. These traditions were kept most carefully for the firstborn son and in households where other children had died. Lilith especially desired firstborn children, and was feared in homes where she had previously taken children.

The Kurdish Jewish Henna Traditions for the Death of a Young Man

If an unmarried young Jewish man died in 19th century and early 20th century Amadiya, Kurdistan, women adorned and hennaed him, so he could enter the afterlife as joyous and handsome as on his wedding day.

Women hennaed this young man immediately after his death, exactly as he would have been for his night of the henna, dressed him in his best clothes, and laid roses around him. As they did this, they sang the same songs as they would have sung for his wedding, though they would frequently stop for intervals of weeping. If the young man was betrothed, women brought his bride-to-be to him, and she exchanged wedding rings with him.

³ Indigo dye in the intermediate state, the partially fermented indigo leaf.

The boy's family set up a black cloth *huppah*,⁴ and often left it hanging for years in his memory.

If a young unmarried man died in Sinne, Kurdistan, women brought in his wedding clothes and prepared henna for him as if he were about to be married, but they did not henna his body as they wept over him.

Mothers, betrothed, and other family women mourning for a young man wore no henna for a year after their loved one's death. They laid aside their jewelry, wore dark clothing, and limited themselves to 2 or 3 braids in their hair rather than the usual seven to 10 braids.

Henna Traditions for the Death of a Young Woman

In Amidiya, Kurdistan, when a unmarried young woman died, women hennaed and dressed her body as if preparing her for her wedding. This would let her enter the afterlife joyous and beautiful, as on her wedding day. They sang wedding songs to her, *Dim hamlula* and *Narike*. In the 19th century, the girl was elaborately adorned with wedding henna, but in the early 20th century, the women only hennaed her little finger.

Her parents hung up her jewelry and clothing by the bed where she once slept.

In Sinne, women prepared henna for the dead girl, but did not henna her body. They ululated *klilililili*, as if for a bride, amid rounds of weeping.

Young women were not buried in their wedding finery, as grave robbers might plunder their graves and steal their wedding jewelry.

The Kurdish Jewish Traditions for Purim: The Bath of the Maidens

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews often used henna to celebrate holidays. Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews celebrated a night of the henna as early as 1000 BCE, and the tradition continues in some communities unbroken through the present. Purim was one of the Jewish religious holidays that regularly included henna.

Purim is a Jewish holiday celebrating Queen Esther's bravery in rescuing the Jewish people from a plan to massacre them. Esther risked her own life to speak to Ahasuerus, King of Persia, and successfully pleaded with him to save the Jews. Kurdish Purim celebrates the beauty of brides, maidens and beautiful young women, paralleling Esther's bridal beautification. The Jews of Kurdistan included henna in many of their social and religious celebrations into the early part of the 20th century, and Kurdish Jewish girls hennaed for Purim.

⁴ A huppah (or chuppah) is a canopy under which a Jewish couple stand during their wedding ceremony

Jewish girls' second celebration bath, on *lel purim* (Purim eve), is meant to make the maidens as beautiful for Purim as Esther was when she appeared for King Ahsaureus. This bath was called *khiyapit benatha, ase ileni shiprit Ister*, "Bath of the maidens, may the beauty of Esther come to us". The girls go to the house of a rich man; the prettiest girl prepares and brings the henna. Their mothers go with them. The group sings *De mesulu*, "Come now, bring", and all the girls have their hands and feet ornamented with henna.

After the hennaing, the mothers bathe their daughters, and sing *narike*, as if they were singing to a bride. The mothers then shower their hennaed bride-like daughters, made as beautiful as Esther, with roses and nuts.

Cakes and cookies were favorite Purim treats. In Sulaimani, children especially enjoyed *kalda* cookies, shaped and decorated like brides.