

*Yemeni Women's Body Painting
with Black Gall Ink
Khidab*



Production Methods

by

Dr. Hanne Schöniq for the Henna Tribe

Yemeni Women's Body Painting with Black Gall Ink (khidab): Production Methods

On the occasion of religious and private feasts Yemeni women and girls use gall ink (*khidab*) for body-painting. The original meaning of the term *khidab* is 'dye' or 'dyeing'. In Yemen it is clearly used to denote this special kind of black ink.

1. The main ingredients:

- *afs*: the oak-gall of *Quercus infectoria*.

These are very hard, yellowish-brown or greyish-green balls with a diameter of 1-2,5cm. Besides being used for producing *khidab*, gall is common in folk-medicine, but in the past it was also used for the manufacturing of writing-ink. Oak galls are formed when the gall wasp *Andricus* stings the tender bark of younger limbs of oak trees and deposits their larva. The tree begins to produce excess cells in a tumor-like structure that encircles the wasp larva. The emerging larva are nurished as they develop and drill a visible hole to the exterior of the gall to escape.



2: *afs*

- *sikka*: copper-oxide, especially copper-1-oxide (Cu_2O).

- *shadhir*: dissolved sal ammoniac.

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2. The manufacturing.

Ink is obtained in two phases:

A. First a solid substance is produced out of the above mentioned ingredients. This is mostly done by professionals, a few women and sometimes even men, who sell the final product either directly to private customers or to merchants.

B. Before use water is added to the solid substance to obtain ink.

Both the solid substance and the ink are called *khidab*.

2.1. The solid substance.

The principle of manufacturing is to burn the gall in a vessel, covered by a lid, the bottom of which is smeared with *sikka* or *sikka* and *shadhir*. When burning the gall, their soot combines with the substances into a black coloured concoction.

Khidab may be manufactured in several ways:

2.1.1. The traditional method.

In Wadi Dahr, which is 25 km from the capital Sana'a, Habiba pulverizes a piece of *sikka* and the same quantity of *shadhir* on a grindstone, using one teaspoon of water.

The ground mixture is turquoise in colour. Approximately one teaspoon of the viscous liquid is smeared on the inner side of a small funnel-shaped vessel (*makhdaba*) made of a kind of clay. Then the *makhdaba* is put as a lid on a pot filled with gall, that stands on a brazier. The *makhdaba* is covered with a piece of wet fabric. After only two minutes the *makhdaba* is removed and the inside is now black. With its inner side down it is placed onto a large basting plate. Meanwhile another *makhdaba* has been smeared with the mixture and put onto the pot.

Habiba works with nine *makhdabas* at the same time: After two minutes on the pot they are put aside onto the plate. After each round of nine *makhdabas* she restarts with the first one, repeating the same procedure altogether 10 to 20 times.

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3: *sikka* and *shadhir* being ground



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4: *the makhdaba* is put on a plate



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5: portions of *khidab* are put on a tray



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6: vessel with flat cover



7

7: *makhdaba*

(photos: H. Shaykh: 1; J. Hilger/E. Petersen: 2, 7; H. Schöniq: 3, 4, 5; M. Manda: 7)

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I observed this traditional method of production in the mid-1990s but noticed during the following years that it is dying out.

2.1.2. The modern method.

In Sana'a I met with a professional producer of cosmetic materials. In his tiny house he has a special room to produce *khidab*: *sikka* is pulverised on a grindstone and then strewn with a spatula on the bottom side of a flat cover, which has a vertical stick in the middle of the upper side to serve as a handle. About 1 table-spoon oil and the same quantity of water are added. One teaspoon of oil is poured on the upper side.

There is a vessel on each of two gas-cookers, each vessel containing more than 1/4 kg galls put on high flame. Both vessels are then covered with the flat cover. After 45-60 minutes the covers are taken off. One table-spoon of salt is sprinkled on the black deposit, now found on the bottom side of the covers. Then the substance is scraped off with a small spatula.

The burnt gall is thrown away and replaced with new.

The same procedure is repeated several times a day. Finally the shapeless lumps that have been scratched from the lid are melted down upon a gas-cooker for no more than 5 minutes. After that small quantities are spooned out onto a metal tray and pressed flat. After a few minutes the stone-like solid black-silvery substance (*khidab*) has dried.

2.2. The manufacturing of ink.

In both cases you obtain ink by adding water to the black substance until you get a viscous liquid. The so-obtained gall-ink dries quickly and must be used during the next few hours.

2.2.1. To get the ink out of the *makhdaba* some water must be applied with the fingers on the black film in the inner side until a viscous ink is gained. The *khidab* in one *makhdaba* is enough for one complete application: on the hands up to the shoulders, on the feet up to the knees. If all of it is not needed at once, one can take a portion and use the rest later on. It doesn't spoil, as they say. The *makhdaba* can be washed in water and be reused.

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2.2.2. The solid piece is powdered with a pestle in a small mortar. The powder is mixed with some drops of water and a pinch of salt.

3. The application.

The ink is applied with/using a large acacia-thorn, a tooth-pick or any wooden chip or splinter. With this instrument the design is drawn on hands, arms, feet and legs, even on the face or the neck.

For more information see:

Hanne Schöning: *Schminken, Düfte und Räucherwerk der Jemenitinnen. Lexikon der Substanzen, Utensilien und Techniken.* Beirut Texte und Studien 91. Würzburg: Ergon 2002.

About the author.

Dr. Hanne Schöning has studied Roman and Oriental languages and literatures at Mainz university. From 1980-1995 she held a teaching position at Mainz and Würzburg universities (Arabian and Turkish languages; Islamic studies). Between 1995 and 1999 she was a researcher and publications manager at the Orient-Institut der DMG, Beirut/Lebanon. Since August 1999 she is a collaborator at the Orientwissenschaftliches Zentrum of Halle university. She has been travelling to Yemen since the end of the 1980s.

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