

«Tell Me History *Mma*»: Talking Back 60 Years Later

CHAMI Nidhal

University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria

chaminidhal@yahoo.fr

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ABSTRACT: *This article represents a modest contribution to the oral history of the Algerian War of Liberation. The author is particularly interested in the history of Algerian women combatants, better known as Moudjahidate or Mounadilate. However, while the study is modest in scope, its aims are more ambitious, as they are intended to contribute to a resurgence of memory that is currently reflected in a promising output of works linking history, memory and fiction. The article will highlight the significant contributions made by women in various sectors and at all levels of the revolution. Using an oral history approach, the author hopes to help restore the memory of these admirable women, who, from an early age, bore the brunt of oppression and subjugation, and who chose to leave their families and homes at great sacrifice in order to free themselves from the shackles of colonialism.*

KEYWORDS: Algeria, Women, War, Independence, Memory, Testimony, Oral History.

RÉSUMÉ: *Cet article est une modeste contribution à l'histoire orale de la guerre de libération algérienne. Son auteure s'intéresse plus particulièrement à l'histoire des combattantes algériennes, plus connues sous le nom de Moudjahidate ou de Mounadilate. Cependant, si l'étude s'annonce modeste, ses objectifs sont plus ambitieux puisqu'ils visent à participer à une résurgence mémorielle qui se traduit aujourd'hui par une production prometteuse d'ouvrages reliant histoire, mémoire et fiction. Seront mises en lumière les contributions significatives que les femmes ont apportées dans divers secteurs et à tous les niveaux de la révolution. En utilisant l'approche de l'histoire orale, l'auteure espère contribuer à restaurer la mémoire de ces femmes admirables qui, dès leur plus jeune âge, ont porté le poids de l'oppression et de l'assujettissement et qui, pour se libérer des chaînes du colonialisme, ont choisi de quitter leurs familles et leurs foyers au prix de grands sacrifices.*

MOTS-CLÉS: Algérie, Femmes, Guerre, Histoire Orale, Indépendance, Mémoire, Témoignage, .

Introduction

Writing the history of a people is an act of commitment to the truth ; failing to write or recount it is an act of complicity in the crime of silence and oblivion. The Algerian women's participation in one of the most devastating wars of the 20th Century is a historical fact that has long been ignored, not to say neglected. As their male comrades in arms would later testify, the role they played was crucial, and it undeniably contributed to the liberation of Algeria. However, their involvement in the War of Liberation, has received very little historical and literary attention. This prompted the author, as an Algerian woman, to respond to a call to duty by initiating a project aimed at restoring the memory of Algerian women fighters whose bravery and sacrifices were known only to their families and friends while others lived and died in total anonymity. It is evident that this project is not a singular occurrence. It is one of many research initiatives currently underway, spearheaded by women and men who are aware of the need to disseminate information about the struggles and resilience of Algerian women to the global community and to the Algerian youth in particular. Currently, there is a noticeable upsurge of interest in these women which is reflected in a plethora of articles¹ and books such as Louisa Bouzamouche's *Femmes des montagnes dans la guerre d'Algérie* (2018), Abdelmadjid Benyakoub's historical novel, *Les roses et les linceuls* (2019) and Ismail Lyazid's *Les Fahlate de la liberté: Honneur et dignité* (2023). These works (both scientific and artistic) serve not only as a tribute to exceptional women but also as a work of memory. In the same vein, the present article will inform and tell some of the stories of our "Fighting Mothers"² through an oral history approach.

1. Oral History Approach

1.1. The Historical Context

In the long and tumultuous history of Algeria, the 1940's and the 1950's are the decades that witnessed the most violent and culminating events

¹ A number of articles relating to Algerian women during the revolution can be found on the Algerian Scientific Journal Platform(ASJP: <https://www.asjp.cerist.dz>)

² The term "Our Fighting Mothers" is used in this article to refer to Algerian women fighters 60 years later. It echoes the title of Natalya Vinci's book, *Our Fighting Sisters*, which cites two of the author's interviewees.

leading to the liberation of the country. Hence, the wind of independence blew in Algeria (1962) as it did in most African countries. The decades in question saw the emergence of women activists who were wholly and unreservedly committed to the Algerian cause. What did they do? How did they help? To what extent was their participation in the revolution decisive? How important or essential was it? Many questions concerning Algerian women fighters' political and military actions still need to be answered, reported, recorded and written.

Despite the efforts of eminent Algerian women authors such as Assia Djebar, Yamina Mechakra and Djamila Amrane- Minne, who sought to break the silence through the act of writing, it took more than half a century for some voices to be heard. It was not until 2001, for example, that Louisette Ighilahriz disclosed her tragic journey through colonial prisons in *Algérienne* (account received by Anne Nivat). Twelve years later, Zohra Drif's *Mémoires d'une combattante de l'ALN: Zone autonome d'Alger* (2013) was published. The book provides not only Drif's personal account as a participant in the revolution, but it also sheds light on numerous *khouatate*³, or "sisters in war", who experienced the same events, traumas, convictions, commitments and pains.

These women are now in their eighties and nineties. Some of them are unwell, and some others have passed away in total indifference. It was therefore crucial to meet those who were still alive and eager to talk back before they leave this world with untold stories, unrevealed truths, unspoken thoughts, repressed emotions and unreleased trauma. The project was initially to tell history through stories, with the belief that to know the history of a people, one must turn to their stories. The idea was further reinforced by André Mandouze's⁴ statement in the preface to Djamila Amrane's *Les Femmes Algériennes dans la guerre* : "The subjectivity of beings is the unique and irreplaceable material of a historical knowledge

³ The term *Khoutate*, which translates as sisters, is the name Algerian women fighters used to refer to one another.

⁴ André Mandouze is an anti-colonial French historian and academic. He made a career as a university professor and is known for his involvement in the Algerian war of liberation. He was rector of the university of Algiers in 1963.

which aims, nevertheless, to be as objective as possible”(In Amrane 2014,16), referring thus to a paradox rarely acknowledged by historians.

1.2. The Oral History Method

In an effort to employ the oral history method, 10 women fighters were approached and graciously accepted the invitation. However, only 06 of them have been interviewed so far. The experience has been somewhat different from what the author had expected, as she had assumed that these women, whom she knew personally, would be willing to cooperate promptly. Unfortunately, many of them were feeling tired and sick, or were preoccupied with matters of the “present”. The researcher was then confronted with the initial challenge of the oral history method: the question of how to gather testimonies? It would be a mistake to assume that their attitudes reflected a lack of concern or awareness of the legacy they would transmit to future generations. Rather, it seems that they felt their war mission was achieved and closed while the researcher considered that the mission should be reopened and completed.

The definition of oral history as “ a primary source material created in an interview setting with a witness to or a participant in an event or way of life for the purpose of preserving the information and making it available to others” (Sommer 2018:1) is exemplified by the author’s (interviewer) experience with the 06 “Fighting Mothers” whose testimonies have been recorded in both written and audiovisual formats with the aim of preserving their individual and collective memories. Their stories, oral narratives, spontaneously, emotionally and truthfully expressed, established between the interviewer and the interviewees first and foremost a pact of sincerity followed by one of authenticity. Our “Fighting Mothers” will not be called by their names in this article which, as suggested earlier, is a preamble to a more ambitious project. Furthermore, for some ethical considerations, the process of interviewing requires the informed consent of the narrator, which the Oral History Association defines as “ an agreement that documents, verbally or in writing, that the narrator has been given all the information necessary to come to a decision about whether to participate in the oral history project ” (<https://oralhistory.org/informed-consent>). While the interview process has been transparent with the narrators engaging in open

discussions, the author/interviewer has not yet received consent forms from all participants. As a result, they will be referred to as women fighters, Combatants, “Fighting Mothers” *Moudjahidate* or *Mounadilate*.

In order to facilitate a convivial and welcoming atmosphere, and to ensure that they felt comfortable, the interviewees were invited to select the time and venue that best suited their needs. They accepted to recount their stories both individually and collectively. Because they defended the same cause, their motivations and aspirations were the same; they had one single story. Taken apart, each brought her particularity, and therefore recounted a new and different story: her own. These women fighters are literate (the selection is not intentional) and had previously been members of *Ennidham*⁵ when they were at lycée. The first 4 subsequently joined the *Djebel*⁶ where they were assigned to different wilayas and zones depending on the geographical regions in which they were engaged in combat while the 2 others worked in the city, one of them being incarcerated and subjected to torture.

2. Women Fighters

2.1. Who Are They?

So, who are these women who were called *Moudjahidate*, *Mounadilate*, *Moussabilate*, *Fidaiyate* and *Chahidate* and what did they talk about? What did they write? Who were those teenagers who defied the status they inherited from their ancestors, a status that had always relegated them to an inferior position in a patriarchal society ruled by strict traditional regulations? How could they “transgress” rules that were deeply rooted in the Algerian family and society if it were not for a defensible cause? Women fought and resisted next to men in a context that was exceptional, that of war. Their leaders’ attitudes and opinions changed in such circumstances, as they not only accepted the help women offered them but also entrusted the latter with very dangerous tasks such as planting bombs, transporting

⁵ *Ennidham* (translates as organisation). It refers to the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale).

⁶ *Djebel* (translates as mountain): maquis.

and delivering weapons to the FLN activists. According to Franz Fanon in *A Dying Colonialism*, “The woman ceased to be a mere complement for the man. Indeed it might be said that she had pulled up her roots through her own exertions” (1965,109). Algerian women proved to be much more than a complement for men. As Fanon emphasizes, they literally forged a new place for themselves by their sheer strength. When asked why they engaged in the war, they replied with a unified voice that they were fighting for freedom and dignity, just as men were doing.

2.2. Women Fighters Categories

The term “categories” is used here to differentiate the various roles and positions held by Algerian women during the war. The 6 interviewees fall into the first 2 categories (*Moudjahidate* and *Mounadilate*).

2.2.1. *Moudjahidate*: (is derived from the Arabic word *Djihad* meaning effort). *Djihad* carries a religious connotation: a notion of faith, sacredness, total commitment and faithfulness to what one believes in, and in this case an ideal of freedom. The *Moudjahidate* also called *Djoundiyate*⁷ are women who joined the armed wing of the FLN i.e. the ALN (Armée de Libération Nationale). Most of them were educated and worked as nurses, giving first aid care for the wounded, providing food and shelter for combatants. They were also in charge of communication, their mission being to mobilise illiterate, rural women and awaken their consciousness. The latter contributed heavily to the struggle as members of both the FLN and the ALN. Generally, they were attributed the task of cooking, but some of them were formed to assist nurses as well.

The *Moudjahidate* remembered and related their long, incessant walks in the mountains and the desert, in the freezing winters and the hot summers. They talked about their struggle and resistance against thirst, hunger, and fear as well as their encounter with death at any moment. The six of them revealed with much pride : “When we left home, we knew we were going to die and we were ready for that!” Nevertheless, these women also confided how much they loved life, how they longed for their

⁷ *Djoundiyate* means soldiers for women and *djounoud* soldiers for men.

families and how, in very few moments of truce, they evoked home, expressed wishes, dreamed of peace and prayed for a better future.

In the midst of scenes of fear and horror, miracles could occur. The following is one of the most poignant accounts that the author has recorded:

“On the 13th of August, 1957, an extraordinary event took place. On that day, at around 10 a.m. a series of bombs were dropped around the cave where we had taken refuge in that vast Sahara. We were exhausted and almost starving, with no water to drink when, suddenly, the bombs, exploding not far from us, released a water source, as if from Divine Providence!!! We didn't believe what was happening in front of our eyes! It was a miracle!!! We all shouted Allah Akbar! We expected death; we were granted life! That was God's will for sure! He protected us, He saved us!”

This event, the *Moudjahida* said, reinforced their determination to pursue the struggle. She had come from the South of Algeria, embarking on a journey away from home on a hot and sunny August 2nd 1957.

2.2.2. Mounadilate: (is derived from the Arabic word *Nedal* which means militancy). These were women who worked clandestinely in urban areas. They recounted how they first joined *Ennidham*, how they acquired a political consciousness, how they became active members of political parties before they rallied to the FLN. They convened meetings and demonstrations, during which they facilitated the establishment of connections between the revolutionary activists in the city and those in the maquis. The task of sensitisation and mobilisation of women was undertaken in secret and in very organised ways. For instance, meetings were held during ceremonies (in weddings, baptisms), at home, or in the *hammams* (a steam room where women habitually go each week to wash themselves, a very convivial space much appreciated by women). It was during one of these meetings that two of the interviewees had planned a departure to the *Djebel*. As they narrated the minutiae of that

unforgettable day, one could feel profound emotions in their voices and eyes. They were so young and yet so brave.

The *Mounadilate* also evoked incarceration, debasement, and helplessness in the context of the most inhumane and reprehensible scenes of torture and executions. In their memories is engraved one of the most courageous yet deeply traumatic reactions of a militant who was compelled to sever her tongue in order to prevent the disclosure of confidential information pertaining to combatants.

2.2.3. *Fidaiyate* (derived from the Arabic word *Fidaa*, meaning sacrifice or death volunteers) refers to a group of women who, like the *Moudjahidate* and the *Mounadilate*, were willing to sacrifice their lives for an ideal and a cause. These were involved in urban guerrilla warfare including in the bomb network. For the French, they were terrorists whereas for the Algerians they were heroines. Among the 6 interviewees, there was no *fidaiya*. However, as they explained, they would have accepted to undertake the same tasks if they were asked to do so. It is important to understand that these women were predisposed to achieve any mission they were attributed. It was their choice and determination to fight against the enemy at whatever price, be it death.

It would be a significant omission not to recall here the *Djamilate* of Algeria who carried out attacks against the French colonisers. *Djamila Bouhired*, *Djamila Boupacha*, *Djamila Bouazza*, were arrested, jailed, and subjected to torture with *Boupacha* being raped and sentenced to death (to the guillotine). Another famous *fidaiya* is *Zohra Drif*, the first woman fighter to publish her memoirs 56 years after the independence of Algeria: 600 pages to tell her story and the stories of her *khoutate*, *Samia Lakhdari*, *Djamila Bouhired*, *Oukhiti*, *Hassiba Ben Bouali*, the latter being killed in the *Battle of Algiers* in 1957.

In her oeuvre, *Mémoires d'une combattante de l'ALN: Zone autonome d'Alger*, whose narrative is so captivating that it can be read like a historical novel, *Zohra Drif* writes back to recount, recall, reclaim, reaffirm and confirm the motives of her revolt. She describes *Algiers*, the *Casbah*, its inhabitants, its culture, its beauty, the genius and bravery of

its women, their extreme generosity, their solidarity, but also their suffering and patience as widows and as mothers. Clearly, Zohra Drif, was a rebel who very early questioned the veracity of the slogan *Liberté-Egalité-Fraternité*- values which never made sense for those who were called “indigenous” and even less for the *Fatmas*⁸.

Zohra Drif plunges the reader into a past she remembers intensely. It is a past that still resonates in her mind and heart, a past that will always send her back to the day she exploded “the Milk Bar”, which cost her the label “poseuse de bombes”(the bomber). It is an act she has never regretted and that she justifies as follows:

Whatever our enemies say, we are neither murderers nor cold and brutal criminals. We are men and women, human beings, too human to lack a grain of sand and emotion, especially when we are driven by love: love of this earth, of this country, of these people, of freedom. That is love of life. Furthermore we are not born fighters, we become thus⁹ (Drif 2013, 193).

It is also a past she returns to in order to assert her identity as a woman and to give a voice to many of her *Khouatate*’, “bearers of the same biological, historical, cultural and political chromosome”(2013, 422), who are still alive but remain anonymous. She revisits the past in memory of those who died as martyrs, and in the name of all those whose voices once vibrated through the youyous¹⁰ “*this formidable weapon, this shrill cry of triumph that galvanized Algerian fighters and terrified the enemies.*”¹¹ (2013,422)

2.2.4.Chahidate (derived from the Arabic word *Istishhad* meaning martyrdom). The participants expressed profound respect and pride for the

⁸ *Fatma* is a name that was given to Arab women. It was used pejoratively to mean the servant while in the arabo-moslem world *Fatma* is the prophet’s (pbuh) daughter and so requires respect and admiration.

⁹ Translated by the author of the article.

¹⁰ Youyous: long, high-pitched, modulated cries made vocally. They are exclusively practised by women to express joy or anger at special events.

¹¹ Translated by the author of the article.

numerous martyrs they had known and fought alongside. These women were regarded as symbols of freedom and sacrifice, having offered their lives so that the Algerian people might live.

Among the *Chahidate* cited by three of the author's interviewees, is Saliha Ouldkablia. One of them had met her in the *Djebel* and recalled her courage, temerity and sense of duty. Her testimony supports that of Ali Amrani, her brother in arms, who has devoted a book to recounting and honouring her memory: *Périple en Zone 6, Saliha Ould Kablia Martyre de la Révolution* (2013). Saliha was in charge of the ALN's health service. She was the first Algerian university student to fall on the field of honour with her arms in her hands. As reported in his book, her SDRG follow-up sheet for Mascara bears the following note: “*N. B/ File to be closed. The individual in question was fatally shot in uniform and with weapons in hand on the night of 19 to 20 September 1958, 7 km N.W. of Mascara. Please maintain file no. 3563.*”¹² (in *La Patrie News*, 2021à.<https://lapatrienews.dz/saliha-ould-kablia-une-martyre-de-la-revolution/>).

Hassiba Ben Bouali, Bahia Yantrene, Ratiba Allami, Cherifa Mehalli to cite but a few, like Saliha Ould Kablia died for the noblest cause.

Conclusion

Advocating for justice, freedom and dignity, Algerian women have always been fighting for a free and independent Algeria. Whether in the north, the south, the east or the west of the country, their patriotism has been expressed through acts and actions that deserve to be recorded. Writing back 60 years later is a challenge that must be taken up as a way to honour the memory of our “Fighting Mothers”. It is of the utmost importance to document their experiences in order to ensure that they are not lost into oblivion. As Gloria Anzaldua rightly states, “I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you..... to show that I can and that I will write, never mind their

¹² Translated by the author of the article.

admonitions to the contrary...Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing, but I am more scared of not writing¹³.” (1983,74)

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¹³ Emphasized by the author of the article.