

## Remembering Colonial Times: an Algerian Oral History

### KHADIDJA ARFI

Last year, I wrote a paper on Algerian remembrance and thoughts of the word *harki*, a loaded word that has strong associations with collaborators and the war of independence. I decided to go beyond that theme and for my dissertation investigate the Algerian colonial past through the postcolonial memory focusing on the people of Dellys. Such an approach allows me to get beyond the specific time of the war of resistance by using people's testimonies, through storytelling, myths, songs, prayers and many other venues by using oral traditions and oral histories in analyzing social phenomena during colonialism.

This summer I spent more than three months engaged in my dissertation fieldwork in the port town of Dellys, Algeria, and its surrounding villages. Located 100 km northwest of Algiers, Dellys is famous for its strategic position, being inhabited for several millennia by various civilizations –Berber, Roman, Vandal, Arab, and French. Despite its historical legacy, cultural diversity, economy and environment, in the last fifteen years Dellys has been neglected and classified as a hub of terrorism, which makes it an excellent case study for postcolonial memory of colonialism.

No matter how I prepared intellectually by reading books on memory and colonialism, postcolonial theory and oral history, when I sat listening to many of the great people of Dellys, we were able to construct unique narratives of a rich and complex life in colonial Algeria. Thanks to an exceptional net of connections, I had close to 100 formal and informal interviews. Eighty personal interviews were conducted with elderly men and women in the town of Dellys and surrounding villages. Though such dialogues, the participants told narratives by digging into their memories and using their landscape to construct these historical narratives.

Being of Dellysian parents, I knew that during my fieldwork I would be obliged to fulfill my social obligations, embracing both advantages and disadvantages. Such events allowed me to



participate in local social life without jeopardizing my data collection. Every moment I spent is part of my fieldwork. I am grateful to the Dellysians for embracing me, trusting me with stories that, for some, have been in their chests for a long time, and for thanking me for my interest in their words and lives.

The data I collected is very significant. It responds to the limitations of many writings that neglect the context and voices of the indigenous population. In my experience, space, remembrance, and human connections are intertwined with gender, religion, class, tradition, and modernity in ways that are inseparable but independently significant. They represent memories of a life embedded within the casbah, gardens, or villages in relation to kinship and community. They construct emotional moments in memory in recalling *colon*, *harki* or *mujahid* as symbols of their colonial

interaction.

The narratives tell the personal experiences of the interviewees, weaving a complex picture of the area in past and present. Thanks to my exceptional narrators, soon the stories from Dellys will flow in the river of human history to settle on its banks as an everlasting *shaahid* or trace.



*Khadija Arfi is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology. She received support for her research from a CAS pre-dissertation research grant and the John M. Goggin Award.*