

War Heroines: Yet Another Untold Story

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ABSTRACT: *This research focuses on the lived experiences of Algerian women during the War of Independence against French colonialism, drawing from a first-hand account obtained through interviews with my grandmother's sister, a courageous participant in the conflict. Through an oral history methodology, the study seeks to explore overlooked experiences, challenges and emotions anchored in her memories. This research aims not only to accomplish a memory duty and address a historical gap but also to shed light on the participation of women who may not have been directly involved in the armed struggle but played a significant role in combating colonialism behind the scenes. The article highlights the significance of incorporating these Algerian women's voices in shaping a comprehensive understanding of the War of Independence.*

KEYWORDS: Algerian women, War of Independence, Colonialism, Oral History, Collective Memory.

RÉSUMÉ : *Cette étude se penche sur les expériences vécues par les femmes algériennes durant la guerre d'indépendance contre le colonialisme français. Elle se base sur les témoignages recueillis lors d'entretiens avec la sœur de ma grand-mère, une brave participante au conflit. En utilisant une méthodologie d'histoire orale, l'objectif est d'explorer les expériences, les défis et les émotions souvent négligés. Cette recherche vise à accomplir un devoir de mémoire et à combler une lacune historique, tout en mettant en lumière le rôle vital des femmes qui, bien que n'ayant peut-être pas été directement impliquées dans les combats, ont discrètement joué un rôle essentiel dans la lutte contre le colonialisme. Cet article souligne l'importance d'intégrer les voix de ces femmes algériennes pour une meilleure compréhension de la guerre d'indépendance.*

MOTS-CLÉS : Femmes algériennes, Guerre d'indépendance, Colonialisme, Histoire orale, Mémoire collective.

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that it has been over for more than 60 years, the Algerian war of independence remains an extremely relevant topic. Firstly, because the ongoing global climate continues to be deeply marked by the war. Secondly, there are still significant gaps in collective memory that need to be addressed, particularly concerning Algerian women. In fact, Algerian women played such a prominent role in the war and throughout the history of Algeria that if this article were simply titled "Algerian Women", it would surely still hold just as much importance.

While it's undeniable that certain Algerian heroines like Djamila Bouhired or Hassiba Ben Bouali have marked Algerian history and gained a widespread recognition for their influential roles in the war, it is essential to note that other women's contributions have not been equally highlighted. And why shouldn't they, if the dedication and sacrifices made by all these women in the liberation of their country, along with the paths they chose and the emotions they experienced during this period, are likely to have been similar? Thereupon, it is my aspiration to shed light on the participation of my grandmother's sister in the Algerian War of Independence and ensure that her contribution, as well as that of other Algerian women, receives the recognition it deserves.

In narrating this story, I will be employing the method of oral history. Throughout my interviews with my grandmother's sister, I constantly encouraged her to express herself freely and asked open-ended questions to let her delve deeply into her memories. I believe that first-hand accounts offer the most direct access to factual evidence and present a valuable opportunity to unveil previously untold truths, regardless of how insignificant they may appear. Each personal experience brings a stone to add to the building of truth, collective memory and history. As such, my aim with this approach is to create a primary source that is, even though inevitably subjective at times, open to interpretation and from which one can reconstruct some pieces of the past.

2. Life under French Colonialism

Certainly, when discussing the Algerian War, it is impossible not to reflect on the atrocious brutality, profound injustice, and utter misery the

Algerians endured under a French colonial system that denied them the right to exist and relegated them to a status of neither fully French nor Algerian. They were merely natives of a land they did not even own. Thus, the case of Algeria stands out as one of the most complex and unique in colonial history in that unlike its neighbouring countries such as Morocco and Tunisia, Algeria was not considered a colony but rather a legally integral part of France.

The living conditions of Algerians during this particular period were very poor, and even more so as the resistance strengthened, international opinion hardened, and the negotiations for independence advanced. For instance, when Algerians were presented with the option of obtaining French citizenship in exchange for renouncing Islamic law and assimilating into the French Republic, very few took it as the majority of Algerians were holding very dearly to their cultural and religious identity. Circumstances like these only fed and fuelled the Algerians' nationalist spirit, leading them to resist and ultimately fight in what later became known as the Algerian Revolution. In fact, they reached a point where they knew, one way or the other, they had to snatch their freedom from their colonial oppressor. And Given France's overwhelming military superiority, Algerian pro-independence groups resorted to more covert and strategic tactics to offset the immense power imbalance. Among these tactics were guerrilla warfare and, more notably, Algerian women fighters.

In most historical texts, the predominant representation of Algerian women fighters remains that of the "maquisardes," the "fidaïyates," or "moussabilates." Far from contesting the merit of these women and the incessant need to reclaim their legacy and honour their heroic fight for independence, I believe it is equally necessary, for a more complete understanding of the war, to incorporate the voice of Algerian women like my grandmother's sister who rather fought for the post-independence period. These women were not as openly rebellious but were deeply involved socially in the construction of a free and sovereign country.

3. Aouicha's First Colonial Encounters

My grandmother's sister's name is Yagoubi Aicha, but everyone calls her Aouicha. When she learnt about the article I intended to write about her, she was thrilled that her story was finally going to be heard and shared.

Born on July 17th, 1939 and raised in the heart of Oran. Aouicha was the youngest among her two older sisters, who married very early. Her older brother, not wanting her to face the same fate, ensured that she received a proper education and pursued her career as an emancipated woman, a privilege she truly appreciates and acknowledges to this day.

From a very young age, Aouicha already knew what she wanted to be: a nurse or a teacher. She chose to become a nurse, but during the war, she ended up being both. During our interviews, she recounts with remarkable clarity all the instances of injustice, discrimination, and inequality she had witnessed since her early childhood and even more when she worked as a nurse and later as a teacher at the “Centre Social Éducatif”¹. For instance, at the end of primary school, she and the other “indigenous” pupils would hear from their French teacher comments like, *“Well done, you’ve completed your schooling; now you can assist your parents with their work,”* suggesting that further education was not intended for them.

The impact of this period on Aouicha was evident in the way she remembered the name of every teacher or director she met. From the moment she realized she and her people lived under the French occupation, she felt a profound rage and a total inability to understand why they were labelled as indigenous, which she expresses in the exact following words, *“We knew we were really colonized and this colonialism needed to scarper, needed to leave; whether we died or we stayed, it had to be removed”*.

Aouicha’s deep sense of duty towards her community rose immediately when, during her internship at the hospital of Oran between 1955 and 1957, she observed the stark contrast in treatment between French and Algerian patients. While the French received preferential treatment in separate rooms akin to a private clinic, Algerians were left in deplorable conditions. She and her female colleagues reported what they saw to their head of department. However, the old Irish woman bluntly

¹ Conceived and created by Germaine Tillion in 1955, the educative social centres served as an ambitious project aimed at repairing the health and social disaster in the country during the war by providing basic education and professional training to disadvantaged populations.

replied, *“you’d better keep it to yourself, ladies.”* Upon hearing this, they decided to swallow their fury and take matters into their own hands, starting with the task of cleaning. Refusing to see her people in such conditions, Aouicha contributed with her colleagues to buy supplies for grooming and hygiene. More remarkably, Aouicha shares that outside of her service hours, she secretly treated the Fiday'in, in mosques or in an abandoned church in Mediouni, at the request of Dr. Medjbeur². Aouicha adds, in a proud tone, that she *“carried out this work with dedication for my community until independence”*.

In 1957, during her last year of nursing school, Aouicha had a memorable encounter with Germaine Tillion, the distinguished anthropologist, Nazi resistant heroine and activist who entered the Panthéon for her lifetime commitment to the defence of human rights and social justice. During her visit at the nursing school, Germaine engaged Aouicha and the other girls in conversation, asking them about their desire to visit a foreign country, to which Aouicha and the girls responded, *“yes, we would be glad to visit a foreign country like France”*, subtly implying that it was a distinct country from Algeria. Struck by the answer, Germaine did not show any position in her response, Aouicha recalls, and preferred to stay neutral.

In response to my question about what motivated her to engage socially in the fight against colonial injustice and inequality, she stated, *“it was almost automatic; we saw that there was a difference; we heard on the radio that the war had started, so we needed to help the neglected Muslim population; there were very few open schools, and even those were very poorly maintained”*.

4. Aouicha’s Experience in the Social Centre

When international sympathy started to shift towards the Algerian side, the French decided to fix their image, by allowing the creation of the “Centres Sociaux Éducatifs”, which Aouicha saw as a great opportunity for the Algerian people to get back on their feet. When asked how she began her work there, she replied,

² Tami Medjbeur (1926-2005) was an Algerian doctor based in Oran and engaged in the FLN.

As we were surrounded by doctors who trained us like Dr Medjbeur or Dr Balaska, it was they who contacted us to take care of children and women in the social centres. Moreover, the war was raging and I did not want to stay in the hospital because there were lots of pied noirs³ and the climate was becoming more and more tense, especially during the three months of the ceasefire. I preferred to integrate social centres into poor neighbourhoods; it felt safer.

At the 'Centre Social Éducatif', Aouicha worked wholeheartedly for 3 years, making significant contributions to the education and treatment of unschooled children and young illiterate women considered among all the deprived 'indigenous' people whose social and health conditions were in dire need of improvement. Since there were no teachers available at the time, Aouicha voluntarily gave classes to children in the morning and worked as a nurse in the evening. She claims, *"those centres helped us a lot; we taught young children at least to know how to write their names"*. Indeed, Aouicha did everything to lift those children out of illiteracy. She cared about their well-being by constantly advising their mothers not to let them roam the streets.

Aouicha mentioned that these mothers and other women attended sewing sessions at the 'Centre Social' provided by her colleague. They sewed many flags, bringing white and green fabrics and sewing the two pieces together. At home, they sewed the crescent and the star in secret. From Aouicha's viewpoint, these flags were surely meant to prepare for the independence parade or to give them to members of the Maquis. When I inquired why these women only wanted to sew, she explained that they were illiterate, and it was the only skill they could acquire. However, I realized that perhaps that wasn't the only reason. These women were living in a war, and yet still found time to sew. Undoubtedly, it was important for them during such a tumultuous period; they needed to sew. Aouicha remembers that the word 'independence' during the sewing sessions was taboo due to the prevailing tension and fear, but despite this, they figured

³ Literally meaning « black feet », the term pied noir refers to all French settlers born and raised in Algeria from 1830 to 1962.

out ways to communicate and express their fervent desire for independence—through their eyes, through a hum, through sewing. It became their language. Thus, it was quite evident, in a poetic and symbolic sense, that these women were stitching together the country's independence.

Among Aouicha's most treasured memories at the Centre⁴ was a particular morning when a man from Algiers paid a surprise visit to her class. This gentleman turned out to be Mouloud Feraoun⁵. Surrounded by his colleagues, Feraoun expressed his appreciation and thanked Aouicha for her serious devotion and commitment in her work, adding with a cheering smile, "*We need young women like this in our country*". Aouicha's recollection shows how fondly marked she remains by what she considers an unforgettable morning.

Her time at the "Centre Social Éducatif" also left her with an unforgettable night. In Saint leu -today Bethouia-, she was set to work with her friend for six months, spending the whole day as it was far from home. In a spirit of rebellion, she began collecting alcohol, cotton, and ointments secretly in case they were needed by her people in the fight. She and her friend would also buy supplies from pharmacies, making sure to visit multiple ones to avoid suspicion. Once, they helped a young fighter from Sidi Belabes, by providing him with cotton and first aid kits. However, their female director noticed their actions, and she conspired with members of the OAS⁶ who falsely suspected them of inciting a demonstration held in the village near the centre. It was a village that housed a 'zawiya'⁷ and

⁴ The Centre where Aouicha first worked and received Feraoun's visit was in Hai el Hamri. The building still exists today as a primary school, opposite the stadium of Ahmed Zabana, Oran.

⁵ Mouloud Feraoun (1913-1962). Besides being a renowned Algerian poet and writer who obtained the *Prix Eugène-Dabit du roman populiste* in 1953 for his novel *La Terre et Le Sang*, he was an inspector of the educational social centres which, seen as a separatist institution, led to his assassination by the OAS a few days before the ceasefire.

⁶ Organisation Armée secrète (Secret Armed Organization)

⁷ Zawiya (or Zaouïa) is a religious compound consisting of a mosque, chambers designated for study and contemplation, and a hostel for housing the needy. It serves as a site for spiritual rituals and as the final resting place for the revered saints who established Sufi orders.

Aouicha and her friend used to go there during their lunch break to enjoy the festive atmosphere. As part of the scheme, the director invited them to stay overnight for dessert, a request they accepted naively. While returning to their room down the hallway, they were suddenly shot at by machine guns through the fence dividing the hallway from the courtyard. Reflecting on the ordeal, Aouicha recalls, *“the gunfire was so intense that the gravel in the courtyard was spewing into the air; it was a night of endless fear and anticipation, and I truly believe it was a miracle that we survived”*. Aouicha and her friend fled before sunrise and never returned, ultimately staying for only a month.

5. The Main Influences on Aouicha’s Journey

With all the risks involved, Aouicha confided in me that she was sometimes tempted to join the armed struggle. However, she couldn’t abandon her elderly parents who had no one else to provide for their needs. During her first year at nursing school, Aouicha bitterly turned down an invitation to join the maquis on a piece of paper tossed on the sidewalk by some students from Ben Badis high school. Despite her internal struggle, Aouicha was convinced that she was already fighting colonialism in her own way, by serving her community, caring for her parents and providing free treatment to her people.

What led Aouicha to be so dedicated to assisting, teaching, and treating those children and women was her ambition *“to prepare them for the future”*. Of course, by future she meant the time they would attain their independence.

In the meantime, the conditions in which Aouicha lived and worked were far from ideal. When asked about how she coped with the psychological and emotional pressure that was caused by the oppressive colonial environment, she responded, *“hope, through our growing hope and belief that independence was near”*. The fact that it was purely and simply hope that sustained them through those challenging times indicates that the strength of mind has probably been Algerians’ primary weapon against the French enemy.

Regarding the extent to which the war has shaped her as a person, Aouicha confessed that it has profoundly marked her, elaborating in the following words:

I became an adult during the war. We had to assume adult responsibilities prematurely; we witnessed a lot, took on many responsibilities, and handled everything we could. I wasn't surrounded by my older sisters to learn from them, so I learnt from the war. And the reason I refused to join the maquis is that it would have brought a lot of suffering to my parents... If my parents weren't a burden, I would have been more involved in the struggle. I would have been a nurse in the maquis, that's for sure.

Aouicha's words serve as a clear reminder that caring for one's parents and community in wartime is just as noble and heroic as directly combatting colonialism. Her statement inspired me to seek a deeper understanding of her definition of a woman fighter, and her response was resolute:

There is the woman fighter in the maquis, who fights with arms, and there is the woman fighter who is civilian and does everything for her community, who gives a lot of herself. This woman treats, educates, emancipates other women... Nothing was missed, we made sure that the Algerian woman was ready on Independence Day, and that we had a fairly mature and autonomous population.

Significantly, everything Aouicha did was to prepare our future and free the Algerian woman from her "assisted status". She explained furthermore, "we have been too much under the shoes of colonialism; we agreed that at least when we saw the light of day, we were ready, us and our children".

It is interesting to note that, both in the civil and the maquis, Algerian women have not only been present in the revolution, but they were also conspicuously evolving parallel to the war, if not thanks to it,

too. The more the war progressed, the more the role of women became paramount.

6. Aouicha's Final Message

Since there couldn't be a more appropriate way to end a story than with a message, it was vital to hear Aouicha's words concerning the preservation of the memory of this period in Algerian history. Her message is simply as follows:

I ask this generation to take care of this country, to preserve it because we have paid too high a price for this country; there has been too much bloodshed, too many deaths, and too much damage, both material and moral. If we have suffered and worked too much, it is to preserve it, so you must continue to preserve it until the end of your life. If today, as an elderly person, I am asked to do anything for my country, I would do it... Colonialism has been an indelible scar. Personally, when I think back to the past, to colonialism, I am disgusted, I am tired because we were slaves in our own country, we never had freedom, we didn't know what it was, we had no say. Today, I am proud of what my country has become, I am proud of all our children, today and tomorrow. All I can say is Vive l'Algérie⁸!

Aouicha's utmost sincerity and unwavering loyalty and attachment towards her country are clearly reflected in her final words. All she hopes for is that future generations will cherish and honour the values that have shaped Algeria's history and identity much as she does.

7. Conclusion

Having recounted Aouicha's untold story, it remains crucial to highlight the kind of struggle and work women like her did with all their heart, body and soul in the pursuit of building a free nation. More importantly, Aouicha's narrative truly helps broaden the perception and notion of an Algerian woman fighter and further shapes our understanding of that particular period in

⁸ Long live Algeria

Algerian history. The courageous and noble tasks she fulfilled to help her community, along with the sacrifices made for her parents, reveal that as long as the enemy is the same, fighting can take as many forms as possible. In this regard, Aouicha was a fighter through the hospital, through the social centre, through her vehement opposition to colonial injustice, through every single action that she carried out and every single risk that she took. In retrospect, it can be asserted that while men and other extremely brave women were fighting the enemy face to face, it was women like Aouicha who laid the groundwork of a liberated, resilient and independent Algeria.



Portrait of Yagoubi Aicha, affectionately known as Aouicha, 1957.

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