

The Use of Oral History and Living Testimonies in Writing the Local History of the El-Wancharis Region (Battle of Bouzegza and Bab El-Bekouche as a Model)

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Abstract:

Oral history and living testimonies are among the important sources that document events and details related to the local history of any region in Algeria, particularly in the absence of archival sources and documentary records concerning the period of the Liberation Revolution. This is achieved by exploiting the testimonies of mujahideen who experienced or participated in these events, by recalling their memories through interviews conducted by researchers and historians. However, in order to adopt these testimonies and employ them in historical writing, they must be subjected to a set of controls and standards and used in writing the history of the Liberation Revolution in general, or the local history of any region of Algerian territory. This also applies to writing the local history of the El-Wancharis region during the Liberation Revolution. This region was marked by major events, battles, and confrontations against French colonialism, and it is not possible to cover all the details of these events except through the use of living testimonies of those who participated in or witnessed these battles. In this paper, we will highlight two important battles: the first is the Battle of Bab El-Bekouche, considered the second after the Battle of El-Djurf (1955), due to the heavy losses inflicted on the French army; in addition to the Battle of Mount Bouzegza, which bore witness to the bravery of the Algerian people and their determination to achieve freedom from the French occupier. In order to achieve the objective of the study, which is the use of testimonies for the construction and historical synthesis of the events of both battles, and through which we aim to reach historical truth and verify it as much as possible, it is necessary to establish criteria and conditions to consider them as a primary source for documenting the events of the two battles.

Problematic Questions: What is the concept of living testimonies or oral history? To what extent can oral history be relied upon as a primary source in documenting local history? What are the criteria and standards that must be observed in oral history when writing local history?

Introduction:

The return of Algerians to armed struggle on November 1, 1954, and the adoption of it as the only means to restore sovereignty and achieve independence was a necessity after all forms of resistance in the revolutions of the nineteenth century, as well as the political and cultural struggle undertaken by all components of the national movement regardless of their ideologies. This revolution erupted as a result of the humiliation, misery, poverty, ignorance, and tyranny

experienced by Algerians, who realized that what is taken by force can only be regained by force. The El-Wancharis region bore witness to the intensity and determination of its inhabitants in defending it, especially during the period between 1954 and 1962. The El-Wancharis mountains constituted a strong fortress and one of the main bases for the launch of revolutionaries against the enemy. The Bab El-Bekouche and Bouzegza Mountain battles are among the most prominent and important battles in the region, due to the significant losses they inflicted on the enemy. To highlight the importance of these events, it is necessary to return to oral history to complete the historical reconstruction process.

Research Questions: What is the added value of living testimonies in writing the local history of the El-Wancharis region? What are the criteria and conditions that must be adopted to rely on oral history as a primary source in documenting local history? How were the events of the Bab El-Bekouche and Bouzegza battles documented through living testimonies?

Defining the Concept of Oral History: When we speak of oral heritage, we refer to the third category of historical sources. History is written based on three types of sources: written sources, material sources, and oral history. Oral history is considered one of the most important sources for writing local history in the contemporary period, especially in light of the weakness or total absence of local written sources. It can be described as memoirs, autobiographies, audio-visual recordings, or transmitted accounts of past historical events that were not documented in writing, passed down within society. It is also referred to as oral history or oral heritage.

Criteria and Conditions for Using Oral History in Local History Writing: Oral history has undergone significant development; it is now recorded in audio-visual form and preserved in libraries, becoming a key source for researchers in historical reconstruction. Given the need for writing local history and preserving collective memory, oral testimonies must be used despite criticisms regarding subjectivity. The historian must act like a judge who investigates from multiple perspectives before reaching conclusions. The criteria include evaluating the reliability of memory through comparison with written sources, ensuring interviews are conducted in a comfortable environment, following the stages of selecting the topic, selecting individuals, and preparing questions, ensuring proper interview methodology, and including women's testimonies due to their significant role in the revolution. In conclusion, oral history must be organized and subjected to historical methodology, while being treated cautiously due to human subjectivity and requiring linguistic and contextual expertise from the historian.

Events of the Battle of Bab El-Bekouche (28–31 May 1958):

To fully understand this, we attempted to project it onto oral history in the region of Ouarsenis by taking testimonies from some mujahideen who participated in the Battle of Bab El Bakouch, including the example of the testimony of the mujahid Slimane El Ghoual about the battle, in his following statement:

“The events of the battle date back to the year 1958, between 28–31 May, in the Ouarsenis region belonging to the municipality of Larbaâ, located about 25 km away, situated in the middle of the Ouarsenis mountain range. It was led by the National Liberation Army in the region, and among its leaders were the martyr Mohamed Bounaama, the mujahid Si Hassen

(from Wilaya IV), and the martyr Si Tarek from Historical Wilaya V, and the martyr Si Omar, commander of the ‘El Kremia’ battalion in Wilaya IV.”

The beginning of the events goes back to the issuance of orders by these commanders to leave the villages and move to the surrounding mountains, specifically Mount Bab El Bakouch, in order to avoid any possible siege of the area, which was characterized by its strategic location as a transit zone for mujahideen. The French colonizer was unable to enter it until the end of 1958, after intensifying aerial reconnaissance, which was monitored by the intelligence services of the National Liberation Army, according to living testimonies of mujahideen who experienced the battle, namely “Serbah Kadour” and “Chadouli,” who planted mines on the slope of Mount Sidi Daoud, because it was likely that occupation soldiers would pass through it, which indeed happened, as a mine exploded, killing 60 French soldiers and destroying a truck. On the following day (30 May), the colonial forces began to advance toward the mountain from all directions without knowing the locations of the mujahideen, which led to clashes with the colonial forces using heavy fire, forcing the French to call in aircraft, which dropped hundreds of tons of prohibited bombs indiscriminately.

Eyewitnesses reported that the French artillery carried out heavy shelling of various areas of Mount Bab El Bakouch, and helicopters deployed paratroopers in the highlands toward the positions of the National Liberation Army fighters, who had split into small groups after being forced by aerial bombardment to abandon their positions. The fighting took place intermittently and stopped by nightfall. To break the siege on the area, the El Hamidia battalion, led by “Slimane El Ghouli,” launched attacks against the occupation army centers spread across Bordj Bounaama, Ain Bahlal, Sidi Abed, and Larbaâ on 31 May 1958. The mujahideen, through their bravery and courage, managed to encircle the colonial forces, which were forced to leave the area and return to their camps, suffering heavy losses. On the side of the National Liberation Army, more than 360 martyrs fell from the units present in the Bab El Bakouch area, led by the commander of the El Kremia battalion, Si Amar. In addition, 240 civilians were martyred, most of them elderly people, children, and women.

Battle results:

According to some testimonies, this battle is considered the second largest after the Battle of El Djorf in terms of magnitude and its severe consequences for the enemy.

- The mujahideen and the National Liberation Army in the Ouarsenis region inflicted heavy and significant losses on the French army. Local statistics from the municipality of Larbaâ indicate that the number of dead among the French army exceeded 400, including senior officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers, while other statistics mention 334 dead.
- The destruction of two “Jaguar” aircraft and military equipment.
- As for the National Liberation Army, losses were estimated at 34 martyrs from the El Kremia battalion, 120 martyrs from other units, and 350 civilian martyrs.
- The destruction of hospitals and the burning of people’s property and homes.

Oral narration and its role in documenting the battle:

The mujahid Slimane El Ghouli, who was one of the officials of the El Kremia battalion in the third region of Historical Wilaya IV and who participated in the Battle of Bab El Bakouch, emphasized that this battle was the main reason that forced the French occupation forces to

retreat from the Ouarsenis region (Bab El Bakouch, Sidi Rabah, Ain Bahlal, and El Hattail). He pointed out that the El Kremia battalion, commanded by the martyr Si Amar Misbah, succeeded in inflicting defeat on the French colonial forces, which were supported by a large arsenal of heavy weapons, as well as fighter, bomber, and helicopter aircraft, which allowed it to break the siege imposed on National Liberation Army centers.

In his testimony, he mentions that the Ouarsenis region, specifically Mount Bab El Bakouch, was similar to a “capital,” as it was a meeting point for mujahideen. At that time, the mujahid “Mohamed Bounaama” and “Si Tarek” attended a meeting in which it was decided to move toward Mount Bab El Bakouch and fortify themselves there.

He also mentioned that France surrounded the region from all sides with large forces, which in other sources are estimated at 8,000 French soldiers in addition to air forces.

This testimony is considered the most important, given that this mujahid was one of the makers of the event and one of the prominent leaders of the El Kremia battalion, which contributed to breaking the siege on the region. Its importance lies especially when subjected to verification, scrutiny, and comparison with other testimonies that confirm the validity of this account. It thus constitutes a new historical addition and an important source for documenting this battle, giving weight and significance to many studies related to the Ouarsenis region.

Battle of Jebel Bouzegza, January 1958:

Among the battles also witnessed in the Ouarsenis region is the Battle of Jebel Bouzegza, carried out by the heroes of the region who merged into the revolution with its loyal and strong men such as Mohamed Bounaama, Djilali Boudrnan, and many mujahideen and activists whose blood filled this pure land. This battle, which took place in the Wilaya of Tissemsilt in January 1958, was a heroic epic that disrupted the French colonial army and confused its calculations due to its results, particularly the breaking of the siege on the Ouarsenis region and the infliction of heavy losses on the French army, as stated in the testimony of the mujahid Turki Kouider, known as Nour Eddine, who participated in this battle and was the commander of the first sector battalion, which included 140 mujahideen.

According to the current administrative division, the battlefield is located in the municipality of El Maâlab, Larbaâ district, Tissemsilt province, specifically east of the municipal headquarters at a distance of about 10 km. During the Liberation Revolution, it was located within the second section of the second region, seventh zone, Fifth Wilaya.

The area is a rugged mountainous region with steep slopes, covered by dense forests, and its heights overlook flat lands crossed by the Bouzegza valley, part of which is known as the Sidi Said valley. Along the edges of the valley are several populated villages, such as the village of Ouled Ali on the western side of the valley and the douar of El Ayayda on the eastern side. The peak of Ouled Ali is considered the highest summit in this mountainous region.

Given these favorable natural features, among others, the area was an ideal location for the National Liberation Army to establish positions and centers, such as the Dalia center near the village of Ouled Ali, supervised by the activist Hawash Abdelkader (martyr), and the El Ayayda center supervised by the activist Haj El Tayeb. There was also, to the north of the region, the regional command headquarters and a field hospital.

Strength of the National Liberation Army:

It consisted of:

1. The first sector battalion, totaling about 140 mujahideen, led by the mujahid Turki Kouider, known as Nour Eddine, assisted by faction commanders:
 - Khetal Abdelkader (martyr), commander of the first faction.
 - Antar Ibrahim (Ibrahim Lakhdar), commander of the second faction.
 - Lazreg Yahia, commander of the third faction.
2. A commando unit: led by Amara Djilali, known as Haroun, with a total of about 40 mujahideen.
3. A group of supporters (mussabiline).

The battalion factions possessed four collective weapons, including two of type MG 42 and 34, a Soviet-made AFM-D piece, and another Czech-made weapon, in addition to individual automatic and semi-automatic weapons. The commando unit was equipped with various automatic weapons.

The distribution of mujahideen forces in the region was as follows:

On the banks of the valley, elements of the first faction were positioned alongside a group of supporters. At the upper heights of the village of Ouled Ali, elements of the second faction were stationed. In the southwestern part of the battlefield, elements of the third faction and battalion command were positioned, while commando forces were stationed on the opposite side of the valley.

Enemy forces:

This operation falls within the framework of major sweeping operations carried out by colonial forces against mujahideen strongholds during the Liberation Revolution, known as “Operation Gemini (Gimal).”

The enemy force consisted of various units of ground and air forces, such as infantry, paratroopers, Foreign Legion units, armored units, and field artillery, etc.

In the days preceding the battle, extensive movements of enemy forces were observed in the region, including the movement of military trucks between centers spread across the area and the arrival of soldiers to reinforce these centers with new battalions from major bases in the western part of the country, in addition to a doubling of air force sorties over the region. It became clear to the mujahideen, after studying the situation, that these daily movements would inevitably be followed by a large-scale offensive targeting areas where the National Liberation Army was expected to be present.

In this context, the battalion leadership received an order from the regional command to be on alert and prepare for all possibilities resulting from this enemy operation. At the same time, they were instructed to move immediately toward the El Maâlab area due to its strategic importance and favorable conditions. When the forces arrived, they were ordered to head toward the Bouzegza valley and occupy its strategic points. During this, a reconnaissance patrol surveyed the situation from nearby peaks and found that the enemy was present on the surrounding heights. After careful monitoring of all positions, it became certain that confrontation was imminent, and after consultation with the leadership, it was decided to

remain in the area and prepare to face the enemy under all circumstances, especially since enemy forces had surrounded and blocked all routes in and out of the region.

In line with the situation, the mujahideen were compelled to expand their deployment in the area and move toward the depths of the Bouzegza valley due to suitable natural conditions for such cases. The deployed National Liberation Army elements continued to monitor enemy movements and activities in nearby areas.

During its intensive reconnaissance of passages and routes leading to the region, the enemy forces discovered traces of mujahideen footprints, which led them to storm the area on the morning of the battle.

Beginning of the battle:

A French infantry unit advanced toward the mujahideen positions, accompanied by a bulldozer to level and open the terrain in preparation for the advance of a convoy of military trucks and armored vehicles. While the unit was carrying out its task, it suddenly discovered new traces indicating the presence of the National Liberation Army in the area, near its working positions. Fearing confrontation, the unit's elements retreated backward and informed their command, while the National Liberation Army fighters remained in their positions awaiting the evolution of the situation, for the third consecutive day. Within the framework of precise reconnaissance of enemy positions, a group of National Liberation Army fighters moved toward the Douar El Chahawra located south of Douar Ouled Ali to survey the situation from there, and before dawn that group returned to its positions. At around seven in the morning, an enemy force composed of infantry protected by an armored corps was observed moving toward the mujahideen positions, and before reaching the line of contact with the mujahideen positions, the colonial forces positioned themselves at strategic points on the peaks overlooking the valley.

After sunrise, it was confirmed to the mujahideen that enemy forces had taken control of the important positions of the valley and its surroundings. Shortly afterward, the colonial forces began advancing, at which point they collided with the commando force, which initiated fire on the advancing troops. Fighting between the enemy forces and the commando elements continued for nearly one hour. During this confrontation, the commander of the commando unit, known as Benamara Djilali, and some mujahideen were killed. Due to the enemy's superiority in manpower and equipment, the commando elements were forced to withdraw toward the depths of the Bouzegza valley, where the battalion forces were stationed. Indeed, the enemy forces continued their advance into the valley under air cover and armored battalions. After a short time, the area erupted into intense fighting in which both sides used all available resources, and the fighting continued in this manner until evening.

When the enemy forces failed to achieve victory on the battlefield despite their superiority, they resorted to bombing mujahideen positions with warplanes and heavy weapons. However, this did not weaken the determination of the mujahideen, who remained steadfast in their positions and responded strongly to the enemy forces. The latter were forced to withdraw and allow field artillery to shell mujahideen positions. Then ground forces stormed the battlefield supported by armored battalions, achieving some advance toward the mujahideen defenses. Fighting continued in this manner until nightfall, when the battle stopped after the enemy forces

withdrew, which allowed the mujahideen to retreat toward the summit of Mount Hammou adjacent to the battlefield.

Despite the vast disparity between the strength of the National Liberation Army and the French army, the National Liberation Army inflicted major losses on the French army, consisting of the death of more than 60 soldiers, including an officer with the rank of major, a similar number of wounded, and the damage of a fighter aircraft.

As for the losses of the mujahideen, 17 fighters fell on the battlefield, including: Zoubeir Lakhdar, Ben Sghir Sahraoui Djelloul, Bouajjaja Tahar, Ben Aouda Melliani, Benamara Djilali, Benkhalfa known as Lattani, Abdelkader Tefazi, Ahmed El Khallafi, Boualem, Rezoug, Ben Tata.

Among the reasons for the success of this battle, we mention:

- ♣ Good positioning of the National Liberation Army factions.
- ♣ The mujahideen's possession of a spirit of courage, initiative, and fierce defense of their positions.

All these facts were based on the testimony of the mujahid "Turki Kouider," known as "Nour Eddine," born on 20 May 1928 in the Chouala tribe, municipality of Mendas, district of Relizane, as well as the mujahid "El Tithri Mostafa," while the events of the battle were transmitted and verified by "Zoubir Bouchlaghem."

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we say that oral narration and the testimonies of mujahideen have great importance in historical documentation and are considered a fundamental source for it. They represent added value through which we strengthen historical information, in addition to their major role in writing local history related to the Ouarsenis region, more precisely the testimony of the mujahid Slimane El Ghouli in the Battle of Bab El Bakouch, and we have shown its impact as a new contribution, along with other testimonies of mujahideen such as "Addan Abdel Karim" and "Ahmed Tayebi" and others, by transmitting facts they personally experienced and then conveyed as living accounts to the generation of independence.

In order for historians to benefit from oral narration, it must be produced audiovisually and subjected to legal frameworks and preserved in audiovisual archives.

To benefit from this source, the scientific method must be applied to it, relying on observation (vision and witnessing), direct observation of events, and questioning through examining the circumstances of the incident.

The oral heritage held by mujahideen (the youngest of them today are between 80 and 85 years old) must be preserved using scientific methods, because the generation that comes after us may no longer find anyone to narrate these events to them.

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