

Challenging Fieldwork

Researching Large-Scale Massacres in Algeria

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Abstract

This paper is based on my experience doing research in an area that was the scene of a massacre: Bentalha, a hamlet twenty kilometres away from the Algerian capital Algiers. This massacre took place on 22 and 23 September 1997 during the Black Decade (1991-2001), a period of the Algerian Civil War when 150,000¹ people were killed, some 7,000 disappeared, and approximately one million were internally displaced. After a background section on the history of this conflict, the paper describes the setting where my fieldwork took place. This article discusses my experiences in the field, as well as the emotions such as frustration, fear, anxiety, and vicarious traumatising that I experienced in the process. It also addresses questions of self-reflexivity, positionality, and insider/outsider status. I am writing from the perspective of an Algerian sociologist trained in France, yet my experience of doing fieldwork 'at home' could be useful to other scholars doing or planning fieldwork in dangerous parts of countries or societies with which they are intimately connected.

¹ It is very hard to obtain an accurate estimate of the total number of victims. However, the Algerian President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, declared during a press conference in Paris in June 2000 that the number of victims (persons killed) was 150,000.

Introduction

Over the course of a total of nine months between 2008 and 2010, I conducted fieldwork for my PhD thesis on the Algerian Civil War commonly known as the 'Black Decade'. My research concentrated on issues such as the democratisation process and the birth of political violence in the 1990s. Its principle aims were to focus on the logics of collective actions and to contribute to a better understanding of the radicalisation process of young Algerians who decided to follow the jihadist path. By the time I first met a 'repentant'², who had formerly belonged to one of the most dangerous jihadist groups, it was clear that my understanding of the Black Decade was to a great deal shaped by my personal experience of the conflict and my background. Namely, I had Manichean views similar to several of my interlocutors, who viewed the perpetrators as either 'evil' or 'suffering from mental health problems'. As explained by a lawyer during an interview in Algiers,

I don't understand the usefulness and the sense of your research. Everything has been said about this conflict [already]. There is nothing to add. Nothing to understand. Those people are barbaric, savages, psychopaths who slaughtered hundreds of innocent people. What is the point in trying to find reasons for their acts? Are you trying to justify the acts of those blind with rage [the perpetrators]?

In this paper, I want to shed light on how my understanding of the conflict and my background impacted my research. This essay is an attempt to address issues of bias, subjectivity, and positionality in the field. And, as is detailed in what follows, it took me a great deal of introspection and self-reflexivity to include new dimensions in my analysis, and to even begin to overcome these problems. This paper is also concerned with the issue of insider/outsider positionality, as I was doing fieldwork 'at home' and interacting with a different set of people than I usually would. They were 'my people', and yet our 'differences' were often more apparent than our similarities. Finally, the paper confronts the feelings and emotional challenges that I faced doing fieldwork in Bentalha both as a particular location and as a place that can be categorised as a 'post-war society'. I describe what kind of internal tensions I grappled with in the field and how emotions impacted my research, but also – me.

2 This is what the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation called the members of armed groups who decided to be disarmed and rehabilitated.

From Democratisation to Political Violence

My first memory of the civil war comes from the insurrectional strike of June 1991. That day, the radical *Front Islamique de Salut* (FIS) or, in English, the Islamic Salvation Front, called for a general strike that meant all businesses and institutions had to close. My mother refused to close her art gallery in downtown Algiers. My brother (fifteen years old) and I (eight years old) were with her and the day was going by normally until three bearded men, FIS militants, rushed into the boutique. They asked my mother to close the boutique on FIS's orders. She refused, answering politely that she would not abide by this rule. One of the men approached my mother and told her, 'If you do not close, we will have to take actions against you in front of your kids'. My brother ordered me to hide in the restrooms. I did not. He took a piece of art, a sword that was hanging on a wall, ran towards the three men and said to the one who threatened my mum: 'If you do not leave, it is me who is going to take action against the three of you!' The three men left. We were in disbelief and shock. Less than an hour later, my uncle and several of my male cousins came to keep us company and to protect us in case of another attempt to threaten us. The boutique stayed open as usual until 8pm.

Six months later, in December 1991, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the first round of legislative elections. The government suspended the second round of voting on 11 January 1992, putting an end to the democratic process that had started after the riots of 5 October 1988³. President Chadli Bendjedid resigned under pressure from the People's National Army (PNA), which took effective control of the country. The authorities declared a state of emergency on 9 February 1992, banned the FIS, and arrested its leadership as well as thousands of its sympathisers, who were put/placed in detention centres in the south of the country. The brutal repression and indiscriminate violence by security forces contributed to the radicalisation of thousands of Algerians, many of whom were not previously involved with the Islamist movement. In February 1992, the extremist wing of the FIS launched the first calls for jihadism and began a campaign against the security forces. In the years that followed, the country witnessed the birth of a plethora of jihadist groups, among them the Islamic Armed Movement, the Movement for an Islamic State, the Islamic League for Da'awa and Jihad, the Islamic Front for Jihad in Algeria, the Islamic Salvation Army, and,

3 These riots started on 5 October and ended on 11 October. The direct causes of these riots were the rising in prices, the high rate of unemployment and the austerity measures announced by the government following the fall in oil prices. During those riots, the military fired on riots and killed some 500 people. The state of emergency was declared on the 6th and a curfew was established.

most prominently, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The GIA is believed to have perpetrated most of the massacres during the Black Decade.

The GIA was formed in 1993, when Algerians who fought in Afghanistan, ex-Bouyaliste (members who followed Mostapha Bouyali, the first Islamist who called for jihadism in 1982),⁴ and other radicals of the Islamist movement decided to join their efforts and create a single unified organisation. The GIA called for the fight against *dawlet el taghut* (impious state), and for the establishment of *dawla Islamiya* (Islamic state); they also refused any kind of negotiation with the State. According to the GIA leadership, the only way to achieve the goal of *dawla Islamiya* was to use violence. The group was particularly hostile to other jihadists, as it saw itself as the only legitimate actor either in the country or abroad to perform *jihad*⁵ in the name of the implementation of the divine law – the Sharia in Algeria. The GIA launched a campaign of assassinations against what it perceived as ‘infidels’: members of the government, officials, civil servants, security forces, intellectuals, and organisations that were perceived to contradict the *Sharia* and ‘who deviated from the path of Allah and His Prophet’ (Boukra 2002: 346).

In 1995, Antar Zouabri, the national *emir* (chief) of the powerful and dominant GIA, who equated democracy with ‘unbelief’, excommunicated⁶ the entire Algerian society because of its massive participation in the 1995 presidential elections and its rejection of jihadist violence. This was a turning point in the conflict. To punish the recalcitrant population that was no longer eager to support the armed groups, warn other villagers about the dangers of said recalcitrance, and keep its monopoly over jihadism in the highly competitive jihadist scenery, the GIA turned to extreme violence and started targeting civilians including women, the elderly, children, and even babies. Violence reached its peak at the end of 1996 with large-scale massacres, particularly in the villages around the coastal strip of the Mitidja, and in the centre of the country⁷. On 28 August 1997, a massacre in the district of Raïs situated in Sidi Moussa, a suburb in the southeastern part of Algiers, claimed 300 lives and left

4 Mostapha Bouyali created an armed group called the Armed Islamic Movement (MIA) in 1982. On 7 and 8 November, the group carried out its first attack and stole some 160 kg of explosives in Cap Djanet. On 17 November of the same year, the MIA attacked a Gendarmerie (police) checkpoint. A manhunt started. Meanwhile, Bouyali and his acolytes multiplied the attacks until Bouyali was killed by the security forces on January 1987. His followers were killed or jailed.

5 I am putting this word in quotation marks, as it is the term used by the protagonists themselves to define their struggle. Jihadism is an armed movement that takes advantage of a political ideology with a religious extraction, and which aims to bring down political regimes. In other words, jihadism is an extremist political Salafism.

6 This denotes when one Muslim declares another Muslim kafir or a ‘non-believer’.

7 From 12 July to 12 October 1997, 1,690 people died in massacres: 48% of the total number of victims (from August 1996 to January 1999).

additional 200 people wounded. On the night of 22 September 1997, the GIA attacked the hamlet of Bentalha (thirty kilometres southeast of Algiers), carried out horrendous acts, and killed some 417 individuals with axes, swords, and knives. On 30 December 1997, the villages of Kherarba, Ouled Sahnine, and Ouled Tayeb (in the *Ouarsenis* mountains in north-western Algeria) were attacked by GIA men, and 386 people were massacred. The civil war and its horrors – bombings, collective massacres, thousands abducted, raped, and tortured – lasted more than ten years. It caused the death of more than 150,000 people, whereby some 7,000 persons went missing, and one million were internally displaced, in addition to an estimated twenty billion US dollars in material damages.

The fear that I experienced throughout this conflict, the terror that we lived through on a daily basis, and my parents' ideas about the conflict and their political views impacted me deeply. I grew up thinking about the conflict and violence. I was amazed by the lack of discussion about the Black Decade during my university years. Political violence in general was not taught at a university of political sciences, let alone the Algerian Civil War. But I nonetheless developed an interest in political violence and issues related to extreme violence. Part of my interest in the Bentalha massacre stemmed from my memory of the massacre and my shock after watching horrendous images on television when I was fourteen years old. What further sparked my interest in the subject was my memory of witnessing the death of a policeman who was shot by four jihadists in front of me.

When I went to France to pursue a Master's degree, the books available on the conflict surprised me, and I engaged in intensive reading on the topic. Many books on the Algerian Civil War, but also newspapers and NGO reports, are of a partisan nature. Even many high-quality reads take a dualistic approach: most of the time, it is either the demonic State against the innocent Islamists or the dangerous bearded men against the State, the Protector of Democracy. A majority of authors have sought to explain the political, economic, and social situation that led to the rise of the FIS and to the explosion of violence in the country. However, this has not allowed for any analysis of the reasons why thousands of Algerians joined jihadist groups, nor has it explained the radicalisation process or the extreme violence carried out by the jihadists.

Many authors agree that structural factors are responsible for the explosion of violence in the country (Carrier 1995; Etienne 1998; Stora 2001). Others focus on the rise of Islamism (Boukra 2009; Khelladi 1995; Burgat 1995; Boumezbar 1990; Labat 1995; Tawil 1998), and many discuss socio-economic conditions (Charef 1994; Zaatari 2004; Martinez 1998; Henni 2000; Ouaisa 2010). However, there are very few books on the specific form of extreme

violence that caused and translated into massacres. One could cite Belloula's *Le massacre des innocents* (2000), in which the author gives a voice to the survivors but fails to offer any analysis of the causes of the violence or the conditions that led to it. Charef (1998) describes the massacre of Ouled El Had, but explains neither the historical causes nor the socio-economic and political conditions that led to it. The most valuable academic piece is by Kalyvas (1999) who uses a rationalist-interpretative framework. This piece was of paramount use to me, providing methodological keys to my study.

The Field: Bentalha

The majority of my fieldwork was conducted in Algiers and in the suburb of Bentalha where the 1997 massacre took place. Bentalha, which first supported the FIS, later fell under total control of the GIA in 1994-1995. The People's National Army (PNA), the State's main military apparatus, had intentionally left entire regions and towns, including Bentalha, in the hands of armed Islamist groups (Martinez 1998). By leaving these areas to decay, the army created adverse conditions for the GIA. For three years (1994-1997), Bentalha was a *mantika mouharara* (liberated area), a support base for the GIA that acted as a 'parallel-state': a provider of justice, administration, social aides, tax collection, and protection. As explained by an eyewitness of the massacre who lost several members of her family:

We supported the FIS [...] when the first armed groups appeared, we were happy. They were our saviours. We were proud to help them [...] we were treated very well, as long as we respected the rules [...] to be honest, things here were better than under the government. The GIA gave us everything, even our dignity, back.
(Zahiya, Bentalha, 6 April 2008)

However, the GIA applied the *Sharia* law strictly. Adults as well as children were indoctrinated to denounce behaviour deemed 'un-Islamic', such as smoking, women not wearing headscarves, alcohol consumption, playing soccer or dominoes, listening to music, watching television, and reading newspapers.

In 1996, the military was able to take back several villages and towns, and began to have a more active presence in Bentalha. Numerous military operations were conducted to eliminate the armed groups. Yet the jihadists were still active in Bentalha, and the military was not able to dislodge them completely. Bentalha was then caught between the violence perpetrated by the military and the violence carried out by jihadist groups⁸. Bentalha's inhabitants, who were exhausted by the jihadists' violence and radical rules, rebelled against them and, with the help of the army, created self-defence units called *Groupes de Légitime Défense* (GLD) to fight against the very armed insurgents that they had supported for years. As explained by a survivor of the massacre:

We lived in fear for years, we were tired of everything [...]. We helped the *mujahedeen* [fighters] for years, and that's how they thanked us. They killed as they pleased. I know people who were very pious, and who had never done anything wrong, yet their heads ended up in a ditch. This is not normal, this is not *jihad*. This is not what Islam taught us. They [the GIA fighters] had nothing to do with Islam. They had become killers, bloodthirsty [...]. We were tired, we had given everything: our children, our money, our jewellery, and in the end, they were killing us like flies without any reason! *Kiffech* [how] our own children! They were our children! We helped them in jihad and that's how they treated us. One day, we decided that it was enough! We decided with other neighbours of Hai El Djilali to ask the military for weapons for self-protection. It was over. We did not want to live like that anymore. (Hlima, Bentalha, 6 April 2008).

In 1997, the army returned and the GIA's monopoly of violence in Bentalha, its status as the only player to hold full sovereignty over the territory, was replaced by the violence of two competing actors: the military and the jihadists. As one villager stated, 'there were two governments per day: the military before sunset and the jihadists before sunrise'. It was this pattern of violence that influenced the GIA's decision to adopt extreme actions to take back the hamlet and its surroundings. In order to sanction the villagers for their defection, the GIA decided to raise the intensity of its violence and planned the massacre. As explained by Kalyvas:

⁸ It should be noted that during the conflict in Algeria, there were several cases of indiscriminate violence perpetrated by some members of the Algerian security forces and state violence was present in places such as Bentalha. Yet, the large majority of violence was carried out by jihadist groups. Despite speculations that massacres were committed by the military, the testimonies collected during my fieldwork among the survivors who identified the local Islamists as the perpetrators, argued that the massacre of Bentalha was perpetrated by the Armed Islamist Group (GIA). All the survivors to whom I spoke were certain about the identity of the perpetrators (as many of them were from the village), even if they also accused the military of failing to intervene and protect them that night.



Photo 1. Bentalha. The side of the orchard where the GIA fighters arrived on the night of the massacre.



Photo 2: Children playing in Bentalha.

A regime of violence conducive to massacres is one in which stable boundaries are replaced by unstable ones and local monopolies of violence move from segmented to fragmented. In fact, this is an incomplete transition between two local rulers, whereby incumbents dislodge insurgents but are unable to eliminate them. This transition is indicated by the ability of rebels to still access areas which they lost to the incumbents (1999: 263).

In short, the people of Bentalha were caught in the crossfire. On the one hand, defecting from the GIA was risky lest the GIA kill them for treason. On the other hand, if they continued to support the jihadists, they would be punished by the security forces.

In my study, I told the story of the massacre of Bentalha and the political meanings of this form of extreme violence. Although the word 'massacre' is commonly associated with 'barbarism' and 'savagery', and is often considered to be the epitome of irrationality, in my fieldsite it could be better understood as an 'operation of the spirit' (Sémelin 2005). The massacre was primarily a way of seeing the 'other', of stigmatising, demeaning, animalising, destroying, and humiliating the 'other' even after death. It was the maturation of this complex mental process that particularly interested me.

A key dimension of my work was to understand the process of radicalisation: why and how did 'normal' and 'sane' individuals turn into jihadists who killed people, including babies and children, in the name of their cause? Other questions of interest for me were why an organisation such as the GIA would kill civilians who supported its cause and why such extreme violence was used, involving the killing of hundreds of men, women, and children, decapitating them, and humiliating them even after their deaths.

My field research was possible because it took place at a time of stability in Algeria. In 2008, the country was safe and 'peaceful'. Indeed, in 2005, so as to 'transcend the national tragedy once and for all' and put an end to the '*the great fitna*' that struck Algeria', President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, elected in 1999, issued a draft of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. The latter suspended legal actions against members of armed groups who surrendered before 5 October 2006 and who did not engage in specified acts of violence, such as massacre, rape, and bombing. It also suspended legal actions against members of

9 Fitna or Fitnah is sedition, a civil strife or discord. It was used to describe the four civil wars that shook the Islamic Caliphate from the 7th to the 9th century AD. The text of the reconciliation charter is available online: <http://www.el-mouradia.dz/francais/infos/actualite/archives/chartereconciliation.htm>

security forces who were responsible for violating human rights. In addition, the Charter compensated victims of the war, families of the missing, and families of members of armed Islamist groups. To a certain extent, the Charter of National Reconciliation brought back peace¹⁰. Other factors that contributed to the return to peace were disarmament and various social and professional rehabilitation processes, in addition to the heavy presence of security forces. Gendarmerie and police roadblocks were so ubiquitous in Algiers that nobody paid them much attention. Yet any sense of security was fragile and remained weakened by the constant fear of jihadist attacks. Sporadic, highly localised attacks by jihadist groups continued. These were mainly the work of Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Indeed, on 11 April 2007, a year before the beginning of my fieldwork, AQIM attacked the Government Palace and police buildings in Bab Ezzouar (East of Algiers), causing the death of thirty-three people and injuring hundreds. On 11 December 2007, AQIM launched simultaneous attacks on the UN headquarters, the Supreme Court, and the Constitutional Council, leading to twenty deaths. It should also be noted that in 2008, Algeria was still under the state of emergency put in place in 1992. This was the norm for almost twenty years and was removed only in 2011, after the wave of Arab uprisings. This violence cannot in any way be compared to that experienced in the 1990s. However, it is necessary to give details to provide context for the environment in which I did my research.

Positionality

I'm sorry for what happened earlier, but I thought you were a foreigner and we are fed up with all those foreigners coming here to exploit the pain of the kids and their mothers. (Psychologist, September 2008)

My identity, my experience of the Algerian civil war, the person I was at the time of my PhD research, my thoughts and beliefs, and where I came from, not only impacted my research process, but also the drawing of my hypothesis, and interactions with people. As explained by Merriam et al. (2001: 411) '[p]ositionality is thus determined by where one stands in relation to "the other"'.

10 Through the Charter, some 15,000 Islamist fighters out of the 27,000 estimated were reintegrated into society.

Insider/Outsider

In the field, I was an outsider because I did not know the participants prior to beginning my research, meeting the majority for the first time at our interviews. I was also an outsider because I came from a different world, academia, an abstract world that is completely strange to many people. My interlocutors (especially the survivors of the massacre) and I were in two different realities. I analysed my positionality when in the field and tried to find my place. I came to understand that in Bentalha, the group who experienced the night of the massacre constituted a 'we', while all those who were not attacked that night were considered 'outside' of the 'we', namely 'they'. Others, such as the 'repentants', appeared to be 'dangerous outsiders'. I was not part of the group because I did not experience the extreme violence on the night of 22 September 1997.

Yet, my experience of violence in that period as an Algerian who lived in Algeria and who was herself a victim of that violence eventually gave the possibility of being considered a part of the group. I insisted with my interlocutors that I was an Algerian living in Algeria at that time, rather than a foreigner or an Algerian living abroad. At the beginning of each interaction, I made a point to speak *Daridja* (Algerian Arabic). It was important to do so because at the beginning of my fieldwork, people would ask me if I was *bent lebled* (a country girl, meaning 'from Algeria') or not. I was refused entry to a psychology clinic in Bentalha because they thought I was a foreigner. Once I started talking in colloquial Arabic and explaining the purpose of my research, however, they welcomed me and shared information about the women and children who were survivors of the massacre. By speaking *daridja* from the beginning of the interaction with my respondent, I was making the point that I was indeed *bent lebled* and they would recognise my 'Algerianess' and categorise me as their fellow citizen. I was appealing to them by showing our similarities. It was my way of bargaining access to the field (Bondy 2012). Once they understood that I was 'in', I was then, most of the time, granted hospitality and information. My outsider position was tempered by the ways in which I too was an insider, as I am myself Algerian and I shared several cultural attributes with respondents: we were from the same country – my native country – I grew up in Algeria, I studied and lived there until I was twenty-two years old. I have returned to Algeria every year, several times a year, when my schedule has allowed it. My connection with my country was and remains very strong. In addition, I shared a history with my respondents, we spoke the same language, and we had the same religion: Sunni Islam. We also shared common physical attributes. All of this made the respondents overlook the features that made me an outsider and thus accept me as an insider.

On several occasions, especially with officials and prominent individuals, I was referred to as *bentna* ('our daughter' or 'girl of the country'). This helped considerably in legitimising my presence in meetings and in facilitating my interaction with my respondents. Yet, my insider status had its limits. However, as fieldwork is always political, being Algerian, Muslim, speaking Algerian Arabic, and having lived through the civil war did not mean I could access whomever and whenever I wished just because I was an insider. Bargaining has its limits. I have to acknowledge that meeting with former jihadists was complicated despite the support and help of my interlocutors. For instance, many repentants expressed security concerns about participating in the study: they were scared of being arrested by the security forces for 'breaking the Contract'. In fact, when the jihadists surrendered, they made an implicit agreement not to share their experience with journalists, researchers, and so on. Many repentants thus expressed fear for their freedom, as well as for their families' wellbeing. The worries of the repentants were not unfounded.¹¹ That the security forces would crack down on them, their families, or their fellow former jihadists was likely to happen in Algeria, as anti-terror legislation and law enforcement are severe. I had several rejections before I managed to meet any repentants.

Many other qualities — including class and socio-economic backgrounds of both the researcher and the participants — inevitably have an impact on the position of the researcher during fieldwork. I had to leverage different features of my identity according to each group of people I met with (Alcalde 2007). In the field, I was continuously oscillating between several different identities. I accepted that I had to be aware of my 'ambiguity' and of my own 'duality'. As explained convincingly by Chereni (2014: 20), 'throughout fieldwork I inhabited numerous spatial and relational spaces, each illuminating different aspects of my identity', I had to use my 'multiple overlapping identities' (Kezar 2002: 96), which helped me achieve genuine collaboration with respondents. The proof is that several times after the end of the interview my respondent would put me in contact with somebody else. Some of them even called me days after to inquire if my research was progressing well, and to see if I needed further help.

11 By talking to me, the repentants were breaking the "agreement" made with the authorities. It is for this reason that time, patience, and prudence were needed in order to establish a trusting relationship with my interlocutors. Several times, I was presented by a 'dhamen' [sponsor], a person capable of vouching for me, such as a prosecutor who handled their cases. I had to meet some of them on several occasions before starting an interview, and I insisted on respecting their anonymity. I systematically changed their names, their positions, and the places we met. Once the interview started, I chose not to ask direct questions and rather let the interlocutor talk freely, in order to make him or her comfortable. During the interview, I intervened by asking questions when I needed more information to understand my interlocutor's point.

When with officials, I drew attention to my affiliation with a French university and to my upper-middle class, francophone background. I used personal connections that showed I had symbolic capital. My capacity to express myself in both French and Arabic, my ability to discuss my knowledge of the field that I chose to study, as well as my professional identity, played crucial roles in building rapport. It should be noted that appearance and self-presentation (Goffman 1971) played an important role in the field in my relationships and rapport with the research participants. It was very important to appear professional and smart when with officials. I was a twenty-five-year-old female who liked stylish tailored dresses, suits, and make up, and dressing up was a daily ritual for me. I dressed as I was used to when interacting with the people in dominant positions. Doing the opposite would have made me seem less credible, especially since I looked younger than my age. My position as a scholar never came into question and respondents were very respectful of that. Moreover, they expressed their pride to meet a 'highly educated Algerian woman', and seemed impressed. My position as a PhD candidate played in my favour with officials. They called me 'Dr Dalia' or 'Dr Ghanem', and were very respectful. Schwedler (2006: 424) experienced the same dynamic in her fieldwork in the Middle East. She explains that:

[...] High levels of education are universally respected and honoured throughout the Middle East [...] Many of my male and female colleagues have experienced 'instant promotions' during our doctoral field research [...] 'Dr' is used not to denote receipt of the degree, but as a sign of respect for someone with a high level of education.

My class functioned differently in Bentalha, where I was in some respect an outsider because I came from a different part of Algiers, than it might have had, had I carried out research in the area where I grew up. Prior to fieldwork, I knew Bentalha by name only. I had never visited the hamlet before. I was from the city, the capital. I was also from a different socio-economic background. I was an outsider because I was an upper-middle class city girl, who was educated and was furthermore studying at a French university in Paris. I was perceived as 'rich' because I could afford to study abroad. There was a distance with many of my respondents, notably the survivors and the repentants, who frequently possessed a lower economic status and a low level of education.

I grew up in a privileged household in a wealthy suburb in the outskirts of Algiers. My father's position at one of the most important metal firms, a branch of the main oil company Sonatrach allowed us to have a very comfortable life and several benefits that I enjoyed: I lived in a three-floor villa of more than 1000 square metres and travelled a lot from an early age. When I finished my Bachelor's degree, my parents could afford to send me to



Photo 3: Me in Hai Djilali, Bentalha.

live and study in the French capital. Yet, I did not live in a gated community. I had a great knowledge of the streets of Algiers and was perfectly aware of Algiers' inequalities. I went to a public school and my parents made sure that my two siblings and I grew up sensitive to the socio-economic problems in Algerian society. I interacted like this every day until I left Algeria when I was twenty-two. As a young girl, I was gathering clothes, toys, shoes, and other items to distribute to deprived students in my school. My father, a self-educated man who came from a very modest family and who grew up during the war of independence against the French colonialists (1954-1962), wanted me to think about inequality and to value the chances that I had. This prepared me to interact with people like the villagers of Bentalha and the repentants; I could bridge the differences in socio-economic situation and cultural capital between me and my interlocutors. In doing so, I also had to be aware of my appearance and pay attention to very small details. This was consonant with theories that the researcher should adopt the style of those with whom she wishes to identify (Olesen 1975). My hair, my style, my way of talking, my very appearance, showed my class position.

I had to adapt. I wanted the villagers of Bentalha to understand that I belonged; I was myself a member of the community. As Mazzei and O'Brian (2009: 6) explain, there is a 'distinction between being a presence in the field, and being recognised as a member of the community'. When I went to see the survivors, I decided to appear as simple and as humble as possible in order to build a relationship based on equality and respect. I dressed in modest attire: black trousers and a black blouse, clean and neat. I put on a veil when needed, but it was mostly to protect myself against the sun. I avoided any display of wealth (jewellery, branded clothes, fancy accessories). Nonetheless, their generosity towards me as they welcomed me despite their humble conditions with coffee, lemonade, and sweets made me feel the discomfort of my wealth and the pain of their poverty.

Subjectivities and Self-Reflexivity

My personality, my understanding and experience of the conflict, my political views, and my socio-cultural background shaped my study. When I started my fieldwork, I had an unfavourable opinion of the Islamists, of the FIS who had turned to jihadism, and I was influenced by my political views and my values. But then again, 'there's no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all' (Hall 1991: 18).

After meeting with a survivor for the first time and transcribing his account, I started to ask myself questions about my subjectivities. When I met the first repentant and spent more than four hours with him, I realised I had dichotomies in my head when I thought about the conflict: the 'good guys' vs. the 'bad guys', 'the State' vs. 'the terrorists', the 'innocent civilians' vs. the 'barbaric rebels'. Starting the fieldwork with a 'clean slate' is a myth. But in my department of political sciences and sociology, the rule was to maintain silence about our subjectivities, our fears, and our emotions in the field¹², not to mention that I was doing

12 It should be noted that during my PhD defence, which lasted some five hours with 45 minutes of deliberation, some members of the panel criticised me for not 'saying the truth'. My question to them would be: which truth? It is the one that they deemed as such, and the ones who said that the military and the State ordered the massacres to get revenge from the inhabitants who voted for the FIS. For them, my work was 'immoral' and 'incomplete'. They were so certain of their answers that during the five hours of my PhD defence, they asked few questions about Bentalha or the radicalisation process in favour of asking 'who killed whom?' As explained by Kovat-Bernat (2002: 218-19), 'There must be a clean line of distinction that separates anthropology from activism if anthropology is going to continue to be taken seriously as a social science and thus a source of cultural date [...] If ethnography itself is nothing more than a methodology for political advocacy, then why should we trust the data it puts forth any more than we trust the heavily biased data produced by partisan policy research ...that seek to advance platforms instead of build knowledge?'

fieldwork 'at home', and so it was assumed that I knew what to expect and how to deal with the unexpected. Yet my experiences illustrated how one cannot ignore the degree to which 'we are socialised and institutionalised into given ways of structuring and labelling the empirical context we explore' (Funder 2005: 2).

The first meeting with a repentant was a turning point in my fieldwork. I was finally mindful of my subjectivities and I understood after those first two interviews (with a survivor and a repentant) that I was clearly in favour of the military's confrontation with the Islamists, who I thought were the only ones responsible for the violence in 1990s Algeria. I was also in favour of the survivors of the massacre in their confrontation with both the perpetrators who killed their families and the military who did not intervene in time; yet, I was also against them in other respects because I could not understand how they supported first the FIS and later the GIA.

Self-reflexivity brought to light my prejudices and pushed me to meet with a different set of people. I interviewed civilians such as the survivors of the massacre of Bentalha, former jihadists and their families, officials such as prosecutors and military officers, in addition to members of NGOs such as associations of victims of terrorism, human rights activists, psychiatrists, and medical examiners. I was able to observe several meetings of local organisations like the Association of Families of the Disappeared in Algeria (*Le Collectif des Familles de Disparus en Algerie*), Resistance (*Somoud*), Our Algeria (*Djazairouna*), and SOS Disappeared (*SOS Disparus*). I interviewed all respondents about the same period and events, compared their arguments and understandings, and looked at their views and thoughts side-by-side. Through interviews, as well as participant observation and desk research, I documented the history of one of the bloodiest conflicts in modern Algerian history.

Meeting with all of these actors brought a new dimension to the research, and a better understanding of the conflict and the motivations of the perpetrators, as well as those of the survivors in their support for the jihadists. Talking to the survivors of Bentalha was crucial if one wanted to understand what happened during that period and the enormity of the violence. The survivors' testimonies helped in my understanding, even if they could not demonstrate what thousands of victims of radical Islamism in Algeria witnessed. More importantly, talking to the survivors allowed me to understand that a 'neutral position' in the case of the villagers was not possible as it was a synonym for 'death'. They were trapped

between the violence of the insurgents and that of the military and thus had to choose one side in order to be protected from the other. Thanks to my meetings with the survivors of Bentalha, I understood how the village became a 'pro-GIA' area. For more than three years, the GIA established itself as a 'parallel-state', a provider of security against the security forces among other things. I started slowly to grasp these new dimensions. I was also able to gather data on the history of the area, the origins and evolution of armed groups both in the region and more specifically in Bentalha, and analyse how and why the relationship between the armed groups and the population shifted in 1995-1996.

Meeting with former jihadists allowed me to analyse their socio-political trajectories and their motivations for joining the GIA. It was only when I met several of the perpetrators that I understood, for instance, the role of the indiscriminate violence of the security forces against civilians and how it greatly contributed to the radicalisation of thousands of young Algerians, including many from Bentalha. Self-reflexivity and the choice to meet with the perpetrators allowed me to understand the complexity of the radicalisation process and the intertwined factors that led thousands of men (and women) to follow a jihadist path. It is hard to draw a profile of the perpetrators, as every life story is unique. Yet, many of the trajectories I followed had commonalities. In my study, various factors were coupled with each other, as one factor cannot explain such high-risk activism. Among these, there are socio-political factors (i.e. a deep sense of injustice, perceptions of being ruled by corrupted leaders, feelings of exclusion and marginalisation, rejection of democracy seen as an impious ideology), religious-ideological factors (desire to raise the banner of Allah in Algeria and apply the *Sharia*), and economic reasons (the lack of professional prospects or thirst for a perceived 'easy gain'). In addition, there are philosophical reasons such as self-seeking and a feeling of having a 'purposeless life'. Joining the GIA allowed many to acquire status, to have a purpose in life, and a sense of belonging to a community that is devoted to God and His Prophet. Many had a strong desire to live in a utopian society where there is social equity, *zakat* (religious tax), equity, no corruption, no disparities, no prejudices or discrimination. Other factors included psychological conditions such as trauma, emotional states like thirst for revenge, boredom, an appetite for adventure, and a longing for marvel. Self-reflexivity enabled me to suppress the Manichean vision of the conflict, to internalise these new dimensions, and to adopt a multidimensional approach to explain the radicalisation process among other themes. In short, self-reflexivity helped me understand my biases. It was a 'medicine that I took to treat an infested set of data' (Kalir 2006: 245).

Challenging Moments of Rapport

The Manichean vision that I had at the beginning of my fieldwork was at work in the society where I did my fieldwork more broadly. The conflict was so intense and brutal that the dehumanisation of political actors overwhelmed the whole divided society. The Islamist groups referred to the security forces and its allies as *kleb zeroual* ('the dogs of Zeroual', who was then president), and the Government and some media referred to the jihadists as *hlalef* (pigs). A person was either a hero or a coward, a good guy or a bad guy, a victim or a perpetrator. My self-reflexivity allowed me to be aware of these dichotomies and what I tried to do at the beginning of my fieldwork was to make people understand that this process of dehumanisation greatly contributed to the birth of extreme violence. My point was not to advocate for any actor, neither the military nor the Islamists nor the victims, but to make those whom I met understand the nuances of the situation, and that dehumanising the other led to the belief from both sides that the only solution is its extermination. However, whatever the researcher says will be used in the service of one group or another. The mere act of talking to a person and being introduced by this person to another made me appear partisan to the person I was introduced to. I was hence frequently presented as 'the researcher who is studying massacres and trying to prove the military's responsibility' or 'the researcher who is studying massacres and working for the victims'. People were systematically placing me in the position of the 'good guy' who is trying to understand the 'villains'. Sometimes, I was refused access to data because of the views of an associate. One day, a man who was helping me obtain video recordings of former jihadists broadcast on Algerian Television, changed his mind and explained:

I really thought about what you were going to do with those recordings. You were going to see so-called terrorists talking about their jihadist experience and confess things in front of a camera. So what? What did that prove? They are without any doubt undercover agents of the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS) who benefited from the amnesty in order to return to civil life [...] those recordings are totally useless and wrong. The truth is not in those video recordings (Interlocutor, September 2008).

My gatekeeper's point of view was shared by several French and some Algerian news outlets in the mid-1990s. Speculations that the GIA was an 'invention' of the security forces were legion at that period. The DRS supposedly invented this group and practiced extreme

violence in order to disgust the population in the hope of turning them away from the Islamists. Once they reached their objective, they allegedly invented the amnesty in order to let their agents go back to their civilian lives. It is commonly held in Algeria that the DRS infiltrated the GIA, but so far there is no evidence that they created the group. The DRS allegedly placed sleeping agents in GIA's cells. After several months, even years, some of these agents made their way up the ranks and were eventually able to take decisions. It is also alleged that some agents were so well assimilated that it became near impossible to differentiate them from real GIA jihadists. Through infiltration tactics, the DRS sleeper agents contributed to the implosion of the group. The speculations that the GIA was the invention of the intelligence branch has been fuelled by a lack of communication from the security forces, the scarcity of information about the conflict and counterinsurgency methods, the culture of secrecy of the military, which was dubbed by some francophone media such as *Le Matin ou Liberté La grande muette* (the great silent one), and finally by the deep belief in the omnipotence and omnipresence of the DRS. As Nassif Tar Kovacs (1998: 270) writes about the civil war in Lebanon, when violence reaches its peak, it is vital for people to look for a scapegoat as it helps them to unburden themselves, getting rid of pain, fear, and doubt. The security services make a good scapegoat. They are both ubiquitous and invisible, part of society while remaining impenetrable; they are seen by many as a dark and occult-like force. In sum, '[...] the intelligence services would be the secular version of the religious concept of Satan; evil is everywhere and it has other purposes than itself' (Nassif Tar Kovacs 1998: 270). The associate I mentioned previously was influenced by his experiences, and this impacted my data collection process. Indeed, he made the decision for me about what is important and what is not, what is true and what is not. He was, consciously or not, guiding my investigation.

Another time, a lawyer with whom I spoke accused me of trying to justify the acts of the perpetrators because I informed him that I was interested in speaking with repentants. Explaining to that lawyer and some other people that jihadism was a social phenomenon to be understood and that the reasons for violent activism were multidimensional, was useless. In that highly alienated society that suffered for a decade, there was no place for dialogue about how understanding the jihadists' motives could help find peaceful solutions. They were the 'dangerous', the 'barbaric', and the 'monsters', and there was nothing to explore. Engaging with the 'terrorists' was seen as giving them legitimacy and a means to spread their propaganda. I was caught between 'competing complicities' (Pettigrew et al. 2004: 20) and decided that the best solution was to avoid telling my interlocutors that I was

meeting with their antagonistic counterparts in order to acknowledge the situation of all actors (villagers, army, perpetrators, and so on) in my writings and later in my talks and conferences.

Several times, I had to explain that I was not in Algeria to look for 'the truth', or to provide an alibi or establish guilt of anyone. I did not have any political agenda, and my purpose was not to enter into a sensationalist debate invented by the media about 'who is killing whom'. I wanted to talk to the various actors involved in the conflict in order to comprehend their understandings of the event that shook Algeria for more than a decade. I wanted the victims to explain what their lives were like before, during, and after the Islamist groups took over Bentalha. I wanted the jihadists to explain their position and tell me how and why in a certain moment in their lives they decided to join a jihadist group. I came to realise that I was not there to convert anyone to my opinion; rather, I was there to listen to their fissured subjectivities and objectivities. As Suárez-Orozco (1992: 367) has noted, 'testimony is a ritual of both healing and condemnation of injustice – the concept of testimony contains both connotations of something subjective and private and something objective, judicial and political'.

During the interviews, I decided to stick to the place that my respondent gave me; 'I had to agree to be there, present, full stop. Let people appoint me one place or another which would seem suitable to them, according to the moment and to the interlocutor' (Favret-Saada 2004).¹³ I did not become partisan, but I used my emotional intelligence during each interview and showed the interlocutors that I was touched by, and sympathetic to, their views and their stories. I followed this strategy when meeting both with victims and perpetrators. One of the latter welcomed me and my gatekeeper to his place. He had an in-depth knowledge of Algerian history and the nature of the State. I was touched by his kindness expressed also in his prayer for the success of my PhD. At the same time, I was aware that I was completely opposed to his belief in establishing an Islamic state; on his side, he was opposed to my beliefs, such as the prospect of having a diversified public sphere in Algeria. I was also utterly opposed to his 'othering' that saw the police and the security forces as an 'enemy' that should be destroyed. Yet, I could understand (but not justify or excuse) how and why people like him followed the jihadist path and killed in the name of their cause. My rapport with him and with some other respondents was

13 My translation from French.

challenging. During interviews with perpetrators and the military, I tried to adopt 'a non-argumentative approach in the interview' (Klatch 1987: 17), despite my anger and a deep position against violence. I tried to understand their opinions and values, and made it clear that I was doing so before the beginning of each interview. My position was welcomed and respondents were generous with time and stories. Two of the perpetrators even thanked me for letting them 'tell their stories' and 'not thinking that they were monsters'. Specific topics such as the killings of members of the security forces and their supporters or the indiscriminate violence against civilians were painful to hear and made me uncomfortable but even if I strongly disagreed with them, I never showed it, I listened to them and took notes – despite the recorder – because it was my strategy to hide my face in order not to show my emotions. In short, 'I did not lie, but I did not tell the whole truth' (Herman 1994: 14).

Emotions

Being cognisant of my subjectivities was very important for the research process. Yet in the field I also had to deal with my emotions. At the beginning, I was struggling with my emotions (fear, anger, sadness, etc.) and in order to do away with my anxiety, I preferred to put them aside, ignore them, and collect data. I did what I had been told to do, meaning, 'staying neutral' and 'scientific'. So I had to play down the emotional challenges of the field as '[...] the very concept of a researcher with emotions was anathema to the true scientist [...]' (Stoler 2002: 269).

However, after six months in the field, 'putting my feelings aside' was no longer possible. I decided to return to Paris, not only because I had reached a saturation level in the data, but also because I was physically and psychologically exhausted. The accounts of brutality and cruelty that I had been gathering for months were very graphic and disturbing. All my respondents from the survivor set had lost members of their families, sometimes their entire family including babies as young as one year old. They lost all they had, including their pride: women were systematically raped in front of their male siblings and neighbours who were obliged to watch and could not do anything about it. They saw children being killed or thrown out of windows, their babies thrown against walls, and they were unable to protect them. Several women saw their men being slaughtered and their genitals put into their mouths. It was painful to hear these horrendous stories of rape, decapitation, emasculation, and evisceration.

My several encounters with survivors of the massacre and former jihadists, face-to-face, full and heavy with sadness, loss, grief and anger, had a major emotional impact on me. Not only did I have to do the interviews but, back home, I had to listen to them again and again, interpret them, translate them from Arabic to French, and transcribe them. It was so tedious that several times, I found myself avoiding and delaying the task. As explained by Stoler (2002: 272):

[...] when doing trauma research it is important to recognize that the motivation for avoidance and procrastination is going to be stronger, more pervasive and often more subtle in its manifestation because it is, at a simple level, a healthy, self-protective response.

At the beginning, to cope with the procrastination, I was very careful to have a routine and after every transcription I would reward myself (hang out with my cousins, have a drink with a friend, go to visit a family member, watch a movie, etc.). However, I soon forgot about my self-reward routine. I was too drawn into my work and did not find it 'interesting' anymore to hang out with other people and to listen to their 'insignificant' and 'trivial' problems. I was losing empathy and becoming misanthropic. I did not take enough steps for self-care and all those stories of massacres, decapitations, executions, rapes, that 'block of abyss' (Le Brun 2010: 637), eventually swept through me and 'infected' me. After weeks in the field, I too started to experience what the inhabitants of Bentalha described during our interviews: nightmares, dreams of being kidnapped and raped, paranoia, and sleeping disorders. I suffered from what is called 'vicarious traumatising', the 'psychological process of becoming traumatised as a consequence of empathetic engagement with survivors and their traumatic stories' (Pross 2006: 86).

I had to take heavy medication to sleep after several days of insomnia or only intermittent napping. Because of the nature of the topic, I had difficult moments when I lost faith in humanity. I suffered from chronic fatigue and apathy. There were days when I could not find enough strength to get out of my bed. I suffered from anxiety and could not cope in a social setting. My spirit was as weak as my body, and I even had suicidal thoughts.

I yielded to panic and hysteria during a night power outage at my family home. Having listened to my interviewees' horror stories for hours, fear finally had me in its grip. My fear was visceral and I could not suppress it. I tried to convince myself that there was no danger,

that we were no longer in the 1990s when my mother used to hide us under the bed at the sound of gunshots or bombs. I tried to convince myself that the time when we almost got killed in a fake checkpoint was over. Nonetheless, I was terrified. I could not think of anything other than that day when a policeman was killed by four men in front of me, about that day when I saw a decapitated body for the first time in my life. I was thirteen years old.

What this episode taught me was that one cannot 'manage' and 'control' such emotions. I was scared from the first day, but I refused to admit it and instead convinced myself that dealing with my fear and anxiety was neither urgent nor too demanding. To boot, the most important reason to disregard my emotions was my desire to 'be scientific'. Admitting fear and anxiety was out of the question, as I thought that that would portray me as an inept and emotional researcher. Indeed, remaining 'emotionless' and 'scientific' was what I thought to be the 'right' and 'correct' way of being in the field. Because of the academy's 'emotional regime' (Reddy 2002: 129), I felt obliged not only to ignore my fear, but also to not share it with anyone. I wanted to acquire 'legitimacy', and I was scared of being seen as not 'scientific enough'. But as Stoler (2002: 270) explains, 'Emotional needs or responses do not simply disappear as one declares oneself a "researcher"'. The power cut offered me an opportunity to analyse my feelings rationally. After a few days, I first recognised my fear and decided to confront it. I realised that feelings were part of the research and I stopped thinking of them as a bad thing, an obstacle to objectivity, and an anomaly. It is true that I lived through the war for more than ten years; it is also true that for years, I lived almost daily to the sounds of bombings, guns, rumours, tears, and that I lost a number of friends, neighbours, and classmates. I was, for years, unable to talk about that war, and I still have difficulties today. However, the power cut made me appreciate the difference between me and my respondents in the 1990s during the Black Decade, but also at the time of my research. I found it hard to live and survive through the Black Decade, but I did not experience the extreme violence of the night of 22 September 1997 in Bentalha. I also came to realise that living with fear was not part of my daily life since I left Algeria in 2005 for a peaceful city in France. I had forgotten what it was like to live in constant fear, but being in the field uncovered these feelings of worry, paranoia, and anxiety. I came to realise that these emotions were what my respondents were experiencing ever since that fatal night. They had and still have no other choice. I was scared for my participants, myself and my family who were, with the exception of my sister, still living in Algeria. I could, at any time, take the first plane to Paris and just leave. My respondents could not. They had to live there all the time, every day with the memory of that night. It was the bitter reality of their lives.

I also understood that I had a connection to my site that was linked to my previous life. My fieldwork, my topic, and my choice of study were all part of my own experience of the war, of the fear. Indeed, I witnessed the violence that tore Algeria apart, and that was my life for more than a decade. When the civil war started in 1992, I was nine years old; when I first heard about the massacre of Bentalha, I was fourteen years old. I do remember what I felt back then, when I saw the images of the event on television. It was both a shock and a revelation. It allowed me to understand at an early age what humankind is capable of. The trauma that I experienced as an eyewitness of violence was buried somewhere inside. However, it was so significant that I chose to conduct my PhD field research in a village where the bloodiest massacre in modern Algerian history took place. And once in the field, the trauma resurfaced. The feelings that overwhelmed me during the power cut made me think about who I was, what I was studying, and why. As stated by Hedican (2006: 2), 'Fieldwork, like psychoanalysis, is capable of facilitating an understanding of who we are as people and, in a wider sense, about the cultural milieu in which the ethnographer works and lives'. I thought about who I was at that moment: a young Algerian student with a very enjoyable life in Paris, a peaceful European capital. I felt guilt about leading such a good life while my interlocutors were still living in Bentalha. All those years I thought I was healed – I was not. Not only had I buried memories so as not to have to deal with them, but I was also suffering from survivor's guilt. Why did I survive that war when others did not?

The power-cut episode made me think about my life as a young teenager. My family managed to survive and to keep a 'normal life', as my father used to repeat. During the Black Decade when we were scared for our lives, living everyday in a state of terror and fear, we never talked about violence. Violence was part of our daily lives and my parents did their best to act as if everything was still normal. Everything was still normal even when you opened your mailbox and you discover a threat letter addressed to your father and mother with a piece of soap and shroud. Everything was still normal when going to school and seeing from the back seat of the car that there are heads of human beings in the gutter. Everything was normal even when you witness the execution of a policeman. Everything was still normal when you do not see your mother for two years because her life is in danger and she has had to leave for neighbouring Tunisia. We never talked about what was going on in our country. Silence was the rule, and silence was our way to keep a certain normalcy and thus protect ourselves. A few days after the power cut, when I confronted my feelings, I understood that my personal experience of violence was caught up in the analysis of my fieldwork data. For me, analysing the massacre was a matter of survival all over again. My

research was connected to my history (Stanley and Wise 1993), it was above all a personal analysis a ‘... “self-analysis” ... not always well controlled and even if it [was] a “wild” undertaking it remain[ed] a very personal work’ (Sayad 1999:15).

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