

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF MEMORY

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A Jewish–Muslim household in  
colonial Algeria, 1937–1962

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# Introduction: the ethnologist and her double

The idea of writing this book struck me all of a sudden in the spring of 1979. I had a few years of ethnographic work behind me, spent listening to and observing people who were strangers to my personal history and experience. Describing their cultures and histories, my hosts had all recounted intensely human stories. The ‘archeological’ and almost psychoanalytical exploration of the narrative symbolics of their identity awakened the idea of the narrative ‘excavation’ of my own genealogy. Since the early years of my childhood, in the 1950s, I had heard about Dar-Refayil, the multi-family house in which my maternal grandfather’s family had lived in Sétif, eastern Algeria. It was frequently evoked by aunts and uncles who had left it to seek their fortunes in the city, Algiers, where I was born. Their descriptions of this house were enigmatic and tantalizing because I had rarely visited it, the war of independence having made travel in the region very dangerous. Family culture was then in the process of transforming Dar-Refayil into the hearth of its origins. Later, after most of my relatives had left Algeria, leaving behind my grandfather, who died in 1960 and was buried in the Sétif cemetery, the myth of Dar-Refayil continued to feed family memory, now in the framework of the experience of deracination. The house was gradually withdrawing from tangible reality and beginning to take root in genealogical memory. As its story came to include, beyond the adventures of the Senoussi family, those of the Jews of Sétif and of the plural society of twentieth-century Algeria – its peoples and cultures, their religions and their relationships, their joys and sorrows – it was becoming the scene of the family epic and the heart of History.

When I undertook the ethnographic excavation of Dar-Refayil’s memories, my goal was not simply to collect information about the past of a family and a domestic community, but to explore the semantics of

memory as it was articulated by an uprooted and dispersed group. I planned to investigate the relation of an ethnic immigrant minority to its past. In this context, memory becomes the construction of a social and cultural identity whose symbolic terminology tends to challenge the experience of the current reality. The past becomes a strategy for legitimating the present. The house, as it is remembered and described in great material detail, represents a symbolic entrenchment into a human and geographical environment that has vanished. Memory unfolds as a symbolic denial of migration, separation, and cultural strangeness in French society. Dar-Refayil is constructed as an itinerant household, challenging deracination and all the historical upheavals of the second half of the twentieth century.

The house revealed itself, then, as a fascinating repository of culture and meaning. I visited it in my relatives' memories, having missed knowing it physically. Yet this enterprise placed me in an uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the academic discipline in which it had been developed. My previous ethnographic work had been with Jewish groups which shared only part of my personal history; this time I was going to be conducting the ethnography of my own people. As has so often happened in the history of anthropology, my research became a personal quest. Yet was it really different from the ethnographic peregrinations dramatized in *Tristes Tropiques*? In a way, I was going to explore an exotic continent: my Maghrebian tradition and history had become increasingly foreign to me as I had become acculturated into French society and its academic system. The ethnographic survey emphasized my estrangement. My cousins, uncles, and great-aunts, most of whom had not had similar opportunities in French universities, treated me with a mixture of suspicion and admiration. My investigation of our common history at first surprised them: why did I find it worthy of academic interest? They perceived my initiative as a kind of 'astronomy,' observing my genealogy through a telescope as one would a celestial constellation (Lévi-Strauss 1963). Later my project took on a new and ambiguous dimension, evolving as a putting down of new roots alongside my people, subtly intermeshed with the ethnographic distancing. At that point the boundaries between subject and object were blurred by the ambivalence of my position as an observer. I had to question *my* people, in terms of my discipline's methodological conventions. Overall, my research developed as a shuttling between my hosts' and my original culture and the French university culture within which my quest of it arose – between two cultural worlds, that of the colonized and that of the colonizer. This book is the product of this historical and cultural puzzle. Writing it has been an experience of symbolic

'border crossing' (see Behar 1993), but here natives' narratives are not the only ones crossing.

Some of the interviews on which this account is based were collected in the spring of 1979, during three weeks spent in Marseilles, where most of Dar-Refayil's former Jewish residents had settled in 1962. Over the following two years I collected additional narratives during frequent visits to Marseilles for family celebrations. My fieldwork unfolded through both participant observation and interviewing, for reminiscence proved to be part and parcel of many a gathering. I conducted conversations on several fronts. Family reunions around festive tables were obvious mnemonic stimuli, and here my intervention went relatively unnoticed; the Dar-Refayil epic regularly and spontaneously accompanied ritual gatherings. I also interviewed several members of the former household individually. This procedure revealed the diversified production of collective memory by re-creating individual viewpoints on the communal story. Although individual recollections are incorporated into the collective story, their diversity provided the group's epic with the singular dimension of personal experience and pointed to my hosts' conception of the self as rooted in communal identity. I then directed my interrogations towards smaller groups of former residents, women in particular, who frequently assembled in the kitchen for the ritual preparation of festive meals. One of our encounters with memory occurred in a local *hammam*, the public bath. Joining two of my aunts in one of their moments of relaxation between two festive reunions, I was able to record descriptions of similar preritual ablutions as they were practised in Sétif in the past.<sup>1</sup>

Months after these first fieldwork trips, I interviewed other relatives and friends of the household living in the Paris metropolitan area and in southern France. Around the same period, an ethnographic trip to Constantine in May 1979 gave me the opportunity to visit Dar-Refayil for the first time since the departure of most of its Jewish residents. I undertook the long taxi trip to Sétif from Constantine for just a few hours' visit. When I reached the house, I entered the courtyard where some women were occupied with various domestic chores. One of them came towards me and asked whom I wanted to speak to. I chose at random one of the names which had most often come up in the memories of my Jewish informants, and Zakiya was summoned. She was still living in the room where her Jewish former neighbours had known her twenty years earlier. A group of women gathered in the courtyard around her as she came up to me and asked who I was. 'I am Moushi Senoussi's granddaughter', I answered, and general excitement followed. Zakiya kissed me and

launched a series of vibrant ululations. The house's former 'concierge', Khadidja, who by this time was very old, kissed my arms whilst reciting Koranic blessings. The merry company began to ask me what had happened to all their former neighbours, now living in France. They wanted a vast range of details about each person's life, habits, and personality. The women then invited me on a guided tour of the house, associating every corner with experiences shared with their former neighbours.

I took my leave of this lively company carrying two 'souvenirs of Dar-Refayil': a traditional embroidered *gandoura* (house robe) and a home-made loaf. Through these gifts my hosts were reestablishing contact with their former neighbours. They were presented as symbols of the domestic world – memories turned into fetishes. The house then seemed a relic, an artefact memory. Although spontaneous, my visit had awakened a dormant process in this Muslim part of the former domestic community. The guided tour was the material reproduction of the symbolic one that my Jewish informants had, through their memories, given me in France – a journey into the past, into a timeless history. My Setifian hosts made me an integral part of a process in the making, one that my ethnographic initiative did not create but awakened. They sought, through that enterprise, to establish contact with their past – a past represented in human form by their former neighbours who had reappeared in their lives like a surrealistic vision with my impromptu visit.

A few weeks after my return to France, I was once again immersed in domestic memories when I received a letter from one of Moushi's former neighbours in Dar-Refayil. Bou-Slimo had moved to an apartment elsewhere in town, but his wife and daughters often visited the house and the friends they still had there. They had been told about my surprising visit, and the letter invited me to return to Sétif for a longer stay:

This will surprise you, but it's Bou-Slimo who is writing to you. I don't know whether you remember us. My wife Sa'adiya remembers you very well, Madeleine, Yvette, Claire, Aimée, Claude, Benjamin, Gilda, and what good neighbours you were. When Mademoiselle Joëlle came, we didn't see her. It is a great pity because we no longer live on the Rue Valée; we now live in Cité Lévy. Only Zakiya, Khelifa's wife, and Latifa and her husband, Kassem, are left in the old house. Farida has also moved, and she sends you her greetings. Zakiya was the one who gave us your address. How are the Akouns, Irène, Denise, Michel, Robert, and Little Mouna? Send them our greetings and give us their address. How is Aimée doing? She's about the same age as my eldest daughter, who teaches French. How are Yvette's children? I believe the eldest is called Jeannette. If Joëlle wanted to come, we would be delighted if she would stay with us. Gilda would often come down and sit up with us, and she would fall asleep sitting on her stool. We had a good time together. I hope you will write back. Together with the whole family, I send you greetings. Give our love to all our old neighbours, old and young.

*Bou-Slimo.*



This letter turned my ethnographic study itself into a system of communication between former Jewish and Muslim neighbours, past and present, France and Algeria, and the two historical parties to colonization. It was sent to my Paris home but was clearly addressed to all the former neighbours; the use of the plural made that clear. My participation in this memory process, suggested and undertaken by my informants themselves, made memory a reversed history: I had been made the bearer of Dar-Refayil's memory. Bou-Slimo had had the letter written by his daughter, the French teacher, in the most elegant and formal language, providing evidence that postcolonial Sétif had not erased French culture as a sign of social advancement.

I accepted the invitation and went back to Sétif the following year, in 1980, to explore the other side of Dar-Refayil's memories. During a month-long stay I saw the Muslim former neighbours of the Senoussi family, some of whom still lived in Dar-Refayil, almost every day. Frequent trips into town allowed me to interview some shopkeepers and other families who were not part of the household itself. During one of my outings in a nearby shopping centre, I visited a bookseller and discreetly enquired about the history of Sétif. Would he have books on the town's history and on its former Jews? He said that he did not know of any such book but suggested that I visit Dar-Refayil and ask the people there. The house was still characterized as a symbolic repository of the Jewish presence in town some two decades after most Jews had left.

Each stage of my enquiry represents a different 'ethnographic encounter' (Crapanzano 1980). The diversity of my contacts, formed in the day-to-day fortunes of fieldwork, ended up being a methodological device that reproduced the cultural, religious, and ethnic plurality of Dar-Refayil's past. My involvement became an integral part of the tale I was asking others to tell me. I was never a mere observer, an outsider to the tale I was excavating. Once again I experienced the ambiguity of the dual position of the outsider engulfed by her object, the position of the native exploring her own ritual from a distance (Altorki and Fawzi-El-Solh 1988).

The reflexive nature of my ethnographic experience was to take on a particular tone when I announced its ultimate goal, writing a book. I came to feel trapped by the consequences of this intervention. From then on I was constantly being questioned about 'the book', its contents, when I would finish writing it, and even who would be acknowledged.<sup>2</sup> This led to a shift in the discourse of my informants, who instead of talking about the *house* now

talked about the *book*. At least for a time, the house became a book. I would be told what its narrative and stylistic structure should be, how it should begin and end. This development gave a new and decisive meaning to my project. I was becoming the scribe of an essentially oral tradition, and in so doing I was enhancing my prestige within the family. My manifest indulgence made it possible for my interviewees to manipulate my ethnography to their own ends. Ethnography became *dictation* and the ethnographer the diligent student trying to avoid spelling mistakes.<sup>3</sup> Was my ethnographic enterprise, which had started as the exploration of a non-literate culture, in the process of modifying its object? Was it signalling the end of a culture – serving as its requiem? After all, what does one do with a vanishing culture but hasten to preserve its remains? The shift that my interrogation had generated from orality to the written word raised fundamental epistemological questions. Yet, paradoxically, writing this hitherto oral culture turned into a ‘lettering’ process. I came to see my project as the granting of a diploma to ‘untutored memories’ (Rubinstein 1979), to a tradition which academic recognition had only partly legitimated.<sup>4</sup> My informants became the heroes of what began to be perceived as a legend; their vanished world was about to be immortalized. I was transforming their banal story of ordinary people into an exemplary and heroic tale through the magic of the written word. Their memories turned into archives, and their past experiences were given the literary form revered and considered sacred in the Jewish tradition. The writing of this memory of struggling to survive the dangers of History ultimately resulted in its sacralization and perpetuation. I had been placed in a position unusual in ethnography. The literary aim of my project did not endow me with the symbolic authority of the author (Clifford and Marcus 1986:17; Herzfeld 1987:40); rather, my object had infiltrated its investigation. What is presented here is not ethnography as objectification (Bourdieu 1977) but ethnography as the subjectification of the object. As formerly colonized people subjugated by the dominant literate word of the colonial power, my informants had never been given a chance to tell their story. My turning on the tape recorder to write an academic book was perceived as a chance to challenge official colonial history. As a certified and educated scribe, I view my written ethnography as participation in this process of cultural decolonization.

The idea of writing this book exposed me to the double face of ethnography as a literary project (Marcus and Fischer 1986, Marcus and Cushman 1982, Geertz 1988, Jamin 1985). How was I to resolve this dilemma? How could I convey the specific tone of the discourse of an uprooted memory, the stylistic, grammatical, and syntactical awkwardness

in the language used by the narrators, the emotions which accompanied the telling of past tragedies? How could I expose the ambiguity of my own relation to this singular anthropological object in whose history I was personally involved? What devices were available for revealing the censorship, the obliteration, and the embellishment which memory uses to translate the past? At the core of these questions lies the issue of the identity and Otherness of the author (Benveniste 1989:16). Who is the Other in this book? Should one look for it in the voices I intend to broadcast or in my own voice, infiltrating my informants' narratives? Is the Otherness in my investigation, so often incongruent with academic discourse, or is it in the inevitable distance between what follows and the native discourse it attempts to convey? These pages reveal a situation of multifaceted reflexivity in which the voices of the Other have been incorporated into my own (Ruby 1982, Fabian 1983, Herzfeld 1987). The ethnographic writing I present here is indeed pregnant with this reflexive process; my voice and those of my informants are constantly exchanging status and violating the boundaries imposed by academic literary convention, producing what Bakhtin described as a plurilinguistic poetics (1978). Writing memory became the axiom of my experiencing bivocality (Fischer 1986), the overlapping of voices, of subject and object. I made myself my informants' ghost writer, my ethnography their collective autobiography. When, as here, the 'natives' manipulate the ethnographer's work by dictating their culture, ethnography becomes a *meta-interpretation* of culture. The eventual ethnographic text is made up of several layers of cultural discourse, including that of the natives on their own culture.

In his *New Critical Essays*, Roland Barthes declared that Proust's *La Recherche du temps perdu* is a story of writing (1980:55). In this twentieth-century literary monument, translated into English as *Remembrance of Things Past*, the narrative structure unfolds as successive sequences of a rite of initiation in which the narrator first discovers his drive to sense the world and to write it, then experiences impotence as a writer, and finally recovers the initial drive when he reconciles the world of the senses with that of the Book – the Book becomes the world, the world the Book. This reconciliation is a process of memory: literature is a journey through time, and *La Recherche du temps perdu* should have been translated *In Search of Time Lost*. Proust's search presented memory, perhaps for the first time in literature, as a full-fledged literary process. To remember is to recover the original drive for writing. Moreover, in Proust's novel, this search for time lost unfolds as a geographical journey in space between the provincial Combray, a world of learning senses, and Paris, a world of writing them.

The spatial structure of *La Recherche* is articulated, according to Barthes, as a tension between the Combray of the past, of childhood and tradition, and the Paris of literature, maturity, modernity, and social advancement. This structure represents the biographical and geographical dilemma of writing, a tension between past and present which the book aims to resolve as its writing becomes memory resolution. As such, the search for time lost is also a search for space lost, a process that Bakhtin was later to conceptualize in his notion of the 'chronotope' (1978).

As an ethnographer of Dar-Refayil's memories, I have experienced Proustian wanderings into the written rite of initiation, and the process is still going on today. After the French publication of the book in 1992 (Bahloul 1992b), I received several calls from my informants expressing their excitement on reading the volume. They also told me with amusement that they had started to call each other by the fictitious names I had given them in the book. Thus, as Proust's village of Illiers was rebaptized Combray after the publication of *La Recherche*, my ethnographic fiction entered my informants' reality and fiction and reality merged in the writing project. Collective memory claimed to become a historical discourse while being written from an outsider's viewpoint. The distinction between memory and history appeared, then, to be, as Halbwachs suggested (1980), one of symbolic legitimation.

As have other anthropologists who have used the technique of biographical interviewing, I have often wondered as I was listening to my informants' accounts whether the ethnographic situation was not likely to amplify the epic nature of the tale I was being told. Doubtless the presence of the tape recorder and the reference to the book project would have contributed to this process. My informants were trying to bring their answers as close as possible to the literary project that they knew was my goal. Their discourse seemed ready to be heard, recorded, and written, as if memory had already done its rhetorical work before I began to ask.<sup>5</sup> Another bias in my treatment of my informants' narratives is its focus on a particular subgroup. The book focuses on the biography of a particular family, the Senoussis, as if that of the other residents were defined by it. This family appears as a social and cultural kernel, the parent of the narrative. Its history is presented as a narrative seed. This is partially the result of my personal involvement in the ethnographic collection: the Senoussis comprise the maternal side of my genealogy, and my enquiry started with their narratives. At the same time, they are the ones who suggested and facilitated contacts with other former neighbours and served as source-brokers for my fieldwork.

Despite these methodological manipulations, my ethnographic rendition aims to focus on the power of the collected word over ethnographic discourse. Rather than complacently deciphering the literal aspect of my ethnographic text (Crapanzano 1980, Rabinow 1977), my goal is to retain the textuality of the collected document and to be 'faithful to the text' (Lévi-Strauss 1987b:117). In the following pages voices should resonate between the lines. I found the structure of my ethnographic writing in the narrative devices used by my informants. This gives me the opportunity to address the central issue in this study: the articulation of identity in narrative memory.

The collective memory presented here is a specific type of memorial elaboration mainly supported by narrative. It is also an *oral* narrative memory. The analysis thus straddles several human scientific approaches – the theory of narrative, life-history ethnography, and oral history. My ethnographic account crosses the strict boundaries of these diverse methodologies to produce what I would call a reflexive ethnographic text. The question of collective identity is obviously at the core of this problematic, and it assumes a special character when viewed through the prism of the theory of narrative. Although focused on the past of a group of families, this account deals mostly with their identity in the present: the way they have chosen to express it underlines the power of oral narrative in the construction of ethnic identity (Boyarin 1991, Fischer 1986). It is also founded on a specific conception of time, which is made *identity time* in uprooted memory: in a sense, remembered time is a substitute for geography in migrants' cosmology. Narrative memory negotiates time and space to locate the migrant group – to create a new symbolic place for it in history. Another structural aspect of the relation between narrative memory and ethnic identity is to be found in its performative construction: the oral narration of Dar-Refayil's story suggests the presence of an audience and a transmission system with specific social procedures. Ritual and family gatherings are the key moments for the emergence of narrative recollections. The procedure points to the identity function of both narrative memory and the social settings in which it emerges (ritual and the family).

Narrative memory involves two levels of signification: that of historical discourse and consciousness, and that of the reconstruction of factual historical data. The specificity of narrative is that it combines these two levels, and I have chosen to do the same. What follows is a typical ethno-historical account that does not simplistically transform and manipulate the past but essentially reappropriates global history phenomenologically

(Sahlins 1981): history is here particularized through the re-enactment of past *experiences*.

The voices heard here have rushed into my tape recorder with the particular rhythm and sound of the place that inspires and structures them. I have tried to write this book accordingly, following the physical, visual, and spatial tone of my hosts' words and incorporating the sounds and images of the lost domestic space. Along these material lines, the household takes shape as a social and cultural entity. Human beings and their lives gradually emerge from the descriptions of physical space. This is particularly clear in the story of the group's founding. The epic begins with the Senoussis' arrival in Dar-Refayil, and this arrival is presented as the logical result of the settlement there of members of the same family stock as far back as the beginning of the century. The settling in the house is the founding motif of the genealogical tale. The house is like a family, and in its history the family appears as solid as a built structure. As we go through the house, memories not only describe physical space but also tell a social history. Domestic space serves as a metaphor for the human entity that inhabits it. Domestic space is the space of memory.

As these recollections were narrated to me, they focused upon three narrative structures: the spatial, the social, and the temporal. The structure of the book follows this narrative order. The first chapter explores the events selected as the commencement of the domestic epic. The second chapter aims to convey the memories' sense of space and discusses the significant way in which places 'speak' about the past and people re-enact their past by rebuilding past places. The third chapter is concerned with the social contents of the epic. Here memories humanize the domestic space with people's movements, interactions, and fates. They sketch the image of the house along social lines, and built structure is physically and socially occupied. The fourth chapter deciphers the temporal structure of the memorial narratives; it discusses the meaning of dates and of the pacing of domestic time as it is narrated and indicates how a household's story becomes History. Finally, the last chapter proposes an analysis of the multidimensional functioning of the poetics of remembrance.