

Professor (Ustatha) Khadidja

October 28, 2011

Gainesville, Florida

Esam Alhadi, Interviewer and Translator

for University of Florida

George A. Smathers Libraries

Edited by Jardee Transcription

Alhadi: Thank you, Professor [Ustatha] Khadidja, for being with us today. I am Esam Alhadi.

This interview takes place in my office in Pugh Hall at the University of Florida. Today is Friday, October 28, 2011. This interview is part of the Arab Immigrants Oral History Project of the University of Florida Digital Library Collection. Thank you for being with us Professor [Ustatha] Khadidja.

Khadidja: Hello and welcome.

Alhadi: We will begin by asking you to share with us whatever you want to share regarding your personal data.

Khadidja: Thank you for contacting me and for your desire to have my voice recorded as an Arab female. My name is Khadidja. I was born in Algeria. I was raised in a very simple family. My father's name is Mohamed Khaidar and my mother's name is Fatima Suwag. They both came from the same city of Dellys which is located on the coast about 100 kilometers east of the capital city, "Algeria." I was born there and lived in the same city until the first years of my elementary education. I was with my grandparents from my father's side. I then moved to the capital city where my father and many brothers used to live. I was raised in the capital and lived around the center of the city as a member of a big family. We were eleven children in the family. My family and my aunt "from my father's side" and her two sons, and a married brother were all living around us in the same area. I was thus raised among this very big family and kept very strong bonds with

each other. Such a neighborhood environment dominated my early childhood where we used to play and walk together to school. My life continued in the capital city up to the higher levels of education. I was among the first dispatch of students who witnessed the Arabization of education. Before that, we used to study science subjects in French because Algeria was a French colony and teaching in French continued up to the early '70s. This is the time when the former president, Houari Boumedienne, proposed that the policy of Arabization of education should be implemented. My own strong desire as a young girl at the time was to go to a middle school and have my entire education in Arabic. This is without my parents' permission. I was proud of myself to make such a decision and I feel that this decision helped me to stay the course in my life to come. I continued my study in Arabic, including the science subjects, up until I earned my baccalaureate. My desire was to study medicine, but my grades were not high enough to get me into the medicine program. I, instead, joined the science program to earn a license degree and to become qualified to teach science in high school. I finished my study at the Science and Technology University of Bab Ezzouar in the Capital city of Algeria, came to know my husband, got married and then came to America. This was the early stage in my life, followed by my period in America.

Alhadi: Before getting into your period in America, I would like to go back to some details in your university education. I want to know the specific field of your study in college.

Khadidja: I earned a license degree in biology. This degree qualified me to teach all biology classes in high school.

Alhadi: Did you work after getting your degree?

Khadidja: In Algeria, everyone who earns a qualifying degree to teach will get a job. I was offered a position to teach in a high school, but that same year happened to be the year I got married and came to America. For that reason, I never worked in teaching in Algeria.

Alhadi: Also, before getting into your period in America, I want to go back to a point you mentioned earlier, which is the Arabization of study. We, in Sudan, went through such a process when the medium of instruction was changed from English to Arabic. Now there is too much of talk about this topic going on in most of the Arab countries. There are many countries that have now moved back and started using foreign languages to be the medium of instruction in college education. You, as a current university instructor and researcher, what do you think about the idea of Arabization?

Khadidja: This is a very delicate and important subject and it is still a subject of many research projects and studies from a varied number of angles such as the linguistic and political ones. The discussion is focusing on how such policies could be applied. Algeria could be considered as the best case study in this field. When I go back to when I, at the age of twelve or thirteen years, took this step, it appears to me like I was making a challenge and that I can succeed. That was the time when I moved from a school in a small rural area to a school in an urban city setting. The challenge came from the fact that most of the students in my new school were “Frenchified,” and they spoke fluent French. I wasn’t like them because I was raised in a village where the French language was, and still continues to be, very weak. At that time, I had a couple of Syrian teachers, husband and wife, who spoke a very beautiful standard Arabic language. This made me more eager to improve my Arabic language. This instinctual love of Arabic language and the problem I had with French pushed me to give more attention to the Arabic language. I was actually

part of a pilot study in this field. The former president, Houari Boumedienne, announced this new policy of Arabization, and started it with an experimental phase. It was still an experiment when I finished my college study, but soon after that some problems started to appear. I am not sure about this, but there might have been some political problems, because we have the Berber Amazigh who were completely Frenchified, and only very few of them spoke Arabic. The problem was that when students move to the university level, they won't be able to follow up with their study because it was completely in French unless they chose to study subjects such as philosophy, law or humanities. I believe it was a good idea to start using Arabic as a medium of instruction. Algerian people were not very good in Arabic, and most of them when listening to the news in Arabic were unable to understand it. One advantage after this Arabization policy was enforced is that people were forced to learn the Arabic language and it gave them the opportunity to read many valuable books that they were unable to read before. This is one big and amazing advantage. People now know Arabic much better than they used to. The discussion around the Arabization policy focused on the problem of how this transition could be implemented. When some people noticed that the implementation of the Arabization policy kept moving from one experimental program to another, and that new ideas came forth every time, they proposed to stop this program altogether. I believe the problem doesn't lie in the idea of Arabization, but rather in the people who are implementing it.

Alhadi: Very good. Following this line of thought, we look at education as a tool for personal empowerment, and also for achieving social and cultural benefits. Looking at education within this frame, do you think it might be better for the students in Arabic countries in

general to be taught in the Arabic language or in a foreign language? In order to create a competitive student, is it better for him to have his studies in Arabic or in a foreign language? I know there is a debate that has been going on for some time on this topic, but I want to know your own opinion and also because I know that you are a mother.

Khadidja: I think it is very important to know the mother language, although the standard Arabic in Algeria is not historically the mother tongue. It is, however, generally speaking the spoken language which is closer to the standard Arabic than to French. I believe every child and every student of those who are in Arab countries, and not the ones who live in the West, should make their Arabic language perfect to the degree that he becomes capable of reading any book, understanding any talk he may listen to, and to become prepared to show a level of creativity either in writing or other forms of performing arts such as song. This will make them feel internally secure and will give them a feeling of belonging to this limitless and beautiful culture. On the other hand, I don't think there is any Arab country that doesn't encourage using foreign languages in education. This is true in Algeria and in all other Arab countries who seek to have one of the two dominant foreign languages—French and English—or even other languages such as Italian and Spanish. I believe the interest in having a progressive economy and a life standard similar to other countries will make it impossible to abandon teaching in other languages. I believe this is what most of the people do. For instance, I recently had a conversation with a sister of mine who works as a teacher in Algeria. We talked about the methods of making the students learn technology-related terminology. She told me that high school teachers are now instructed to always present technical vocabulary in two languages such as Arabic and French, or Arabic and English. I believe this is a good method while the

mother tongue remains the medium of instruction. This will eventually make their level of understanding of the Arabic language grow to a higher standard and will make them able to use it in any topic that they want to talk about.

Alhadi: Thank you. Let us now move to the American phase of your life. Why did you make the decision of coming to America and who was behind this decision and when?

Khadidja: I came here with my husband when he came here to do his Ph.D. in physics. We finished school at approximately the same time. I obtained my degree in biology and he did physics at the same university. We were raised in the same neighborhood and got to know each other since we were young children. We got married and I came with him to America. As I said earlier, I was going to get a teaching job in Algeria, but I cancelled this idea because of my coming here. I did have the opportunity to join a graduate program soon after I arrived, but I chose not to. I gave birth to my daughter and I decided to give my time to my newborn daughter. Instead of joining a graduate program at that time, I decided to work on other issues such as teaching Arabic and Quranic subjects to the Arab communities and other international students. I also did some babysitting and childcare work. It was a good and long experience and I feel those were among the best days that I have spent here in America.

Alhadi: Which city was your first home here in America?

Khadidja: We started in the American West in Seattle for a year. Then we kept moving to different cities for different reasons relating to my husband's study. We lived in Albany, New York; then in Ann Arbor, Michigan; but the longest period for us was in Champaign-Urbana, [Illinois], where my husband finished his Ph.D. in physics.

Alhadi: When did you move to Florida?

Khadidja: We came to Florida in 2005. In fact, we returned to Algeria in 1988 and my husband worked as a professor and researcher in physics for two years. Then we decided to come back to America when my husband got a postdoctoral position in physics. He then decided to start another program of study. He earned another doctorate degree in political science and got a job as a professor of international studies here in Florida in 2005.

Alhadi: That means your husband has a Ph.D. in physics and another one in political science.

Khadidja: True. He is a double-doctor.

Alhadi: You mentioned earlier that you have a daughter. Was she born here?

Khadidja: Yes.

Alhadi: Would you please tell us a little about her? Although this is a private matter, I am interested to know, because she was born here and, I believe, had her education here.

Khadidja: My daughter's name is Sumayia. The meaning of this name in Arabic is "highness." In addition to being a beautiful name, I picked it also because it is the name of the first woman who was martyred in Islam for the cause of her religion. This is what made me love this beautiful name. My daughter is very lovely, well-mannered, sane and good-hearted. I am not saying this because she is my daughter, but that is the truth about her.

Alhadi: How about her education?

Khadidja: From the very beginning, we were against putting her in a private Arabic or Islamic school. We decided that she should have her education the same way we did, in public schools. It is true that there might be many things that we may dislike or disagree with in public schools, but, at the end, school is school. It is about education and challenge. I and my husband agreed to have a lifestyle based on constant communication, not only

when there is a problem. We continued using the same style with our daughter. We always had her with us at the dinner table every day. We talked about different subjects such as her school and her relations with her classmates. This style continued throughout her school life. She always comes back and tells us about what goes on in school. She started school in Algeria in Arabic for two years. When we came back, she forgot her English to a degree. This made her fall under heavy pressure when she went back to school here. I am proud of the time that I gave to my daughter to help her with school work. I used to sit with her every day and together read the school books and prepare any report she was required to do. In a period of two or three months, she became very good and got back on track. I helped her a lot with the language issue. Regarding school culture, she took part in most of the activities as long as they were class subject-related. There were some cases that I had to make a personal decision. One of these was when she was still in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade [not sure], and they were supposed to take a lesson about sexuality. The teacher contacted me and told me about this lesson. I asked the teacher about the contents of this lesson, and after releasing these details I told the teacher that I prefer to teach my daughter about these issues according to my own Islamic traditions. The teacher welcomed the idea and asked her to write another report about another topic. It was very interesting that she chose to write about diabetes after her father was diagnosed with diabetes. She wrote a very nice report. At the same time, I taught her what she needed to know about sexuality. This is how we used to deal with her and she continued having her education in public schools until she was done and with no problem at all.

Alhadi: How far did she go with her education? I believe she now lives in California?

Khadidja: She earned a B.A. in psychology. She lives in California after she got married. She now has two children.

Alhadi: Time is passing very quickly, and now I want to touch on the subject of your life among the Arabic community here in Florida. How do you see the Arabic community here, and what positive contributions they might be making to the bigger Floridian or American society?

Khadidja: To say the truth, I don't have that much knowledge of the Arab community here in Florida, unlike the case in Champaign-Urbana. I can talk about my role in the university as a North African Muslim woman and also the role of other colleagues who teach here. We, as teachers and educators, make a contribution through our Arabic language teaching and also through the communication and contacts we establish with other instructors and students. I think our role is that we communicate some of our ideas and thoughts, and we challenge some of the dominant ideas that people have against Arabs and Muslims. We try to keep the debate alive and continuing. I don't think the role for us as Arabs only is that big. You may find some Arab restaurants such as Gyro Plus or Falafel King. Many people here know Arabic food. I, myself, have taken my students many times to these restaurants. It is hard to find Arab contributions other than that.

Alhadi: I still have two or three questions. One of them is What do you think you may have offered to America, and what America might have offered you at the personal level?

Khadidja: I spent half of my life here in America. I feel I am a global person. What is good about America is that you get to meet with people from different ethnicities, cultures, religions and schools of thought. This makes me feel that we can learn from each other. America gave me this opportunity to communicate with other people. It is true that since

I came to America, I met with many people who opened new horizons for me. I will never forget this favor. I, even met with other Arab nationals, either Muslims or non-Muslims. I also met with Muslims from other ethnicities and with worshipers from other religions and from nationalities other than Arabs. This gave me new understanding of other cultures and also gave me the opportunity to get closer and communicate with people from these different cultures. As for my contribution, it was the same as I was speaking about earlier. This will continue to be my role not only in America, but wherever life takes me, by speaking my mind and being honest with others regardless of where and who they are.

Alhadi: I want to know about your work here at the University of Florida. I know that you teach and do research. Let us put on tape your contributions here in the university. What is your research topic and what subjects do you teach?

Khadidja: I am actually a Ph.D. student in anthropology. I had an M.A. degree in languages. My M.A. study research focused on comparing the use of language by the Algerian immigrants in the USA and France. The research studied the ways those immigrants deal with their main language and other languages that they brought with them to their new home. It was, indeed, a very good study. I then decided that I should focus my Ph.D. study not on languages, but rather on the way Algerians deal with their memories about their life during the period under French colonization. In the summer of 2010, I went back to Algeria to make interviews with the elders there. I went back to the same village where I was raised, close to the city of Dellys. I met with many people there in their '70s and '80s. They talked about their life under the French colonization. I picked this topic because I felt that the writings about Algerian people under colonization were, to some

extent, inaccurate and reflected an image that is far from the truth. This is the reason that led me to do my dissertation on this topic. I am hopeful that I will be done in one or two years from now.

Alhadi: Another question I have is that you and your husband are a product of mixed Arabic-American education systems. I want to know how you see the comparison between the two educational systems in America and the Arab countries in general, and the Algerian system in particular, and which of the two systems appears to be better?

Khadidja: Do you mean at the university level?

Alhadi: I mean in all levels, including the university.

Khadidja: I don't think I can make a judgment on the elementary education here, except from the experience I had through my daughter's study. What I liked most about the school system here is that the students have the freedom to move around in the classroom. This is different from the way we were trained in school where we had to stay in one assigned place. I don't know how it is now, but in my school days in the village and in the capital city, we used to sit in one place, but we also had many extracurricular activities such as painting, sports, and educational tours. We also used to have assigned periods for reciting or chanting poetry, and these had a great impact of our learning of Arabic language perfectly. I think there are similar topics in the American system. What I like about the university system here is that whatever the student's field of study might be, he will be required to take philosophy and humanities subjects. In my university study of biology, and also in the case of my husband's study of physics in Algeria, we never had even a single lesson of philosophy. I think the last philosophy lesson I had was in high school. This also applies to history. I believe that the student at the university level is

mature enough to know the importance of these subjects for the development of his character. We heard lately that the governor of Florida, Governor Scott proposed to cut funds for humanities including anthropology. This will be a big problem. That has to be addressed. I believe that such studies are important to help the student understand about his identity.

Alhadi: Thank you. Although I have more questions, I know that you have another commitment to go to.

Khadidja: One or two questions will not be a problem.

Alhadi: In that case, I will ask one question—and I believe you may have touched on this topic in your last reply—but what I noticed is that you shifted from the biology field to anthropology, and this also happened with your husband who shifted from physics to political science. Why this shift?

Khadidja: This is exactly what I was talking about earlier, about how our education system works. The leadership in Algeria, like all countries that are socialist, thought that the country needed to create technocrats from graduates in different fields of science. These ideas are commonly rooted in the political thought in many Arabic countries. These countries believe that we have enough heritage and traditions of philosophy and religious studies and no more are needed. When we arrive at the university educational level, we were not given the opportunity to study that heritage, and in fact we didn't feel we were missing anything. As we grew up and arrived at the stage of giving back, we started to feel that there are many things that we should have learned to be able to address a wide range of topics. It is this that is important to address to our leadership—that they apply policies that that will lead to true change in our society, and to make it richer than how it

now looks. This is what led me to shift from being a biology teacher to the field of humanities.

Alhadi: My last question will be about your contacts and communication with your family in Algeria. Is this happening all the time, and do you visit your home country?

Khadidja: Yes. When we came here, we benefited from a policy that the Algerian government was implementing between the 1970s and 1990s which allowed all the students who were delegated for a period of study here in America to have an annual ticket to go back home and visit their families. When my husband came back to work here, we kept the tradition of visiting back home, but not every year. Now we use the modern technology such as Facebook and Skype to give us a room to communicate and talk to our relatives.

Alhadi: Does this apply to your daughter as well?

Khadidja: Yes, of course. She and her family go back to Algeria. Her elder daughter started to develop a level of knowledge of the country. They also visit us. I think technology gave us the opportunity to be in more contact and communication.

Alhadi: Thank you very much, Professor [Ustatha] Khadidja for this wonderful interview. We hope to see you again.

Khadidja: I hope so. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]