

TAMAZGHA GUEST

Noureddine Belhaj Telmta, the producer of the YouTube Program “Sūs al-‘ālima”

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“Sūs al-‘ālima” (The Learned Souss) is a series of 56 episodes about quasi-documentary content posted in the eponymous YouTube channel, which boasts nearly 100,000 subscribers. “Sūs al-‘ālima” evokes and pays homage to the historiographical work of renowned local historian al-Mukhtār al-Sūsī, who authored an encyclopedic book entitled “Sūs al-‘ālima.” A phenomenal record of a wealth of information he culled during his travels throughout his native Souss region, The Learned Souss is a monumental work that these docuseries have brought to wide audiences. Equally fluent in Tamazight and Arabic, al-Sūsī has published numerous multivolume books in which he meticulously chronicled the heritage, traditions, and histories of his Amazigh society in Arabic language.

We are inspired by al-Sūsī’s book titled Hawla mā’idat al-ghadā’ (Around the Lunch Table) to introduce our readers to Tamazghan producers of knowledge through a series of brief interviews. These conversations are an opportunity to learn about our Tamazghan guests’ work in fields as diverse as history, art, architecture, society, culture, among others. We have dedicated this episode to Noureddine Belhaj Telmta. A graduate student from Agadir, Belhaj Telmta is the founder of the YouTube channel “Sūs al-‘ālima.”

The post-independence marginalization of Amazigh language and culture overshadowed Moroccan Imazighen for decades until the constitutional reform in 2011. The constitutionalization of Tamazight and the recognition of Amazigh identity as a central component of national identity have since marked turning point in Moroccan history. While this legal recognition of Tamazight has opened the doors of national television and radio stations as well as newspapers for the culture, the internet is one of the interactive arenas in which Amazigh revival has taking shape. Belhaj Telmta’s The Learned Souss is part of this generalized effort to use social media to teach viewers about Amazigh history and culture in ways that were not possible before.

Belhaj Telmta’s choice of Moroccan Darija to convey Soussi history is a clear indication of the complexity of communication in his multilingual milieu. Like his predecessor, who spoke Tamazight and wrote in Arabic, Belhaj Telmta, a native Amazigh speaker, produces his series in Moroccan Arabic. In featuring his work, we also invite our readers to read and engage with al-Sūsī’s legacy, which has not been entirely explored in academic works beyond Morocco.

Noureddine Belhaj Tilmta, could introduce yourself?

Well, I was born in 1987 in the city of Agadir, but I lived and grew up in the Lamzar neighborhood—a working-class village located about 17 kilometers from downtown Agadir. I grew up in a rather low-income indigenous Amazigh family.



FIG. 1. Noureddine Belhaj Tilmta.

Could you tell us briefly about your educational background?

As is customary in most Moroccan working-class neighborhoods, I started attending a neighborhood Quranic school before reaching the age of seven. After that, I went to elementary school, middle school, and then high school—following the Moroccan public educational system. After receiving my Baccalaureate in the Humanities, I enrolled in the Specialized Institute of Applied Technology in Agadir, where I studied International Trade. After a year of training, I enrolled in Ibn Zohr University’s Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences in Agadir, where I earned my Bachelor of Art in Sociology. Currently, I am pursuing my studies in the Master’s program in Saharan and African Studies in the department of History and Civilization in the same school.

How did the idea for "Sūs al-‘ālima" program emerge?

From a young age, I always asked many questions about our origins and whether there were any narratives related to our ancestors through the oral traditions passed down within my family. I found these narratives quite intriguing.

One of the stories that particularly fascinated me was the journey of my grandfather, known as al-Ḥāj ‘Ali Mumna. His name was derived from his Jewish mother who served the Aït Mahmoud family, a family representing the authority of the Makhzen (State) in the region. After his father married her, she converted to Islam, and people called her “Mumna” (the faithful), adjusting the name to fit the Amazigh pronunciation of the region. This is just a small glimpse of the family narratives that sparked my passion to delve into the history of the region and then the history of the tribe as a whole. (The Ksima tribe, to which the Mzar region belongs, stretches from the southern part of the region to the northern limits of Agadir).

Every researcher interested in the history of a tribe in Souss would directly turn to the works of the renowned al-Mukhtār al-Sūsī, especially his volume *al-Ma’sūl* (The Sweetened (book)). It's in this book that I later found my way, and my eagerness to learn about the history of the region and delve into the details of the historical events our ancestors experienced.

I began with some social media posts on these topics, but the interaction was weak, limited to an educated minority. Given my previous experiences and knowledge of the digital world, especially on YouTube, I thought to myself, “Why not digitize this historical information about the region in a simple and colloquial language that everyone can understand in order to reach everyone without exception?” The journey began with the first video, as the initial episode about the Souss tribes, and the idea evolved to receive a much larger response than I had ever expected.

What do you seek to achieve through Sūs al-‘ālima?

Honestly, the initial goals behind the program were simple, aiming to digitize historical material that had been confined to books and universities and making it accessible to all segments of society. My focus was on local history as the foundation for understanding national history and breaking away from the influx of trivial content that had come to dominate digital platforms, among other objectives.

However, as the program progressed, and, as it was close to achieving its primary objectives, larger goals became apparent. People started searching for their family history through their tribal affiliations. Individuals began looking for the ancestral lands that they had never set foot on, but which they had heard about from their fathers along with stories of their ancestors' achievements. This led to a stronger desire to visit these lands. Feelings of belonging, love for the homeland, and pride in the history of their ancestors were kindled.

Moreover, it became evident that there was another noble objective to be pursued. People began to uncover historical documents and oral narratives. As it is well known, there is still a shortage of written accounts of the history of the region. We need more insights to unveil the secrets of this history. People started finding logical explanations for social phenomena, and the cultural blend that characterizes the region through the discovery of its history. This ties into another important

goal: understanding that history is the link between geography, society, and culture, enabling us to comprehend the development of societies and capitalize on previous accumulations.

In order to reach developed societies' cultural awareness, it is crucial for all segments of society to be involved in discovering and understanding their own history. Rather than isolating themselves and accusing society of backwardness, researchers, journalists, and intellectuals should convey and disseminate these ideas. Achieving this goal ultimately is contingent on people's discovery of themselves and on their breaking free from the imprisoning negativity.

The undeniable truth is that we are societies that don't read, and the illiteracy rate remains high in our ranks. What has exacerbated this is the rapid spread of trivial content on digital platforms. Wisdom tells us that if you want to outmatch your enemy, new tools are always better than older ones. Digitization is the new weapon available to disseminate scientific knowledge and share content in a simple and engaging manner to prevent boredom from seeping into the audience and driving them away. As I mentioned earlier, I initially tried written blog posts, but they had limited audience and interaction.

Can you explain the stages of preparing any given episode?

The first stage is identifying the episode's topic (historical figure, historical event, tribal history, etc.) and gathering information related to the topic from historical sources, oral narratives, or other less common sources, then conducting thorough research.

The second stage is organizing the information and writing it in the form of a script for the given episode. This is the most challenging and, at the same time, the most exciting stage. Writing the script requires a strong historical background in addition to the creative aspect of writing, because you are addressing both people's minds and their emotions.

The third stage is recording the script in a dedicated audio studio and selecting suitable audio effects for the episode's topic.

The fourth stage is the editing phase, where the search for appropriate videos as well as the preparation and processing of maps and images begin. This is when the outlines of the episode's video start to take shape.

The fifth stage is reviewing the video and paying attention to every detail to ensure the video is ready to be uploaded on YouTube and be presented to the audience.

How has *Sūs al-‘ālima*, the book, inform *Sūs al-‘ālima*, the channel?

The relationship between *Sūs al-‘ālima* and the name of the channel is significant. I believe that al-Mukhtār al-Sūsī undertook a monumental task, despite all the challenges and criticism levelled at his work. We cannot deny that this man paved the way for future generations to delve deeper into the history of the region. His writings were a revival of historical writing about the region, even though many researchers consider his works as indirect historical sources that may not directly target historical aspects yet contain a wealth of information and historical narratives.

His work was a remarkable collection, and this in and of itself was a significant achievement. That's why al-Mukhtār al-Sūsī served as an inspiration for the *Sūs al- 'ālīma* program, and it was an important gesture that the channel was named after one of his works *Sūs al- 'ālīma*.

What sources do you use to prepare the episodes?

The sources used in preparing the episodes of *Sūs al- 'ālīma* are quite diverse. There's also a degree of freedom in utilizing local oral narratives and extracting various historical information from what is known as hidden sources. This involves delving into jurisprudential issues, historical accounts, family documents, oral traditions, and even poetic verses from the *ahwāsh* art. For example, like the story of the historical city of Tamdoult, celebrated in *ahwāsh* poetry.

However, this doesn't exempt us from the responsibility of fact-checking and scrutinizing the accuracy of the information. We are well aware that historical knowledge is relative. Therefore, after the information-gathering stage, we seek consultations with specialized university professors and researchers in the field to discuss and verify the accuracy and suitability of the content before presenting it to the audience.

How's the channel funded?

It's clear from watching one of the episodes of the program that the operational mechanisms are simple and do not require substantial funding. I initially started executing idea for the program from my home computer. However, I benefited from prior experiences and skills in the field of digital content, which allowed me to bring the concept to reality without the need for significant funding.

There is a significant factor in this, which is my utilization of a recording studio for audio materials. The studio, owned by cousin Ibrahim Belhaj, is readily available to me. My cousin's experience in this field has surely assisted me. I've also received support from other friends. Many people have told me that my voice and delivery style have had an impact on them, making them more receptive to listening to this type of content. Therefore, this work has indirectly been funded by my family and received strong moral support from both family and friends.

After the program's success, I've received several proposals for funding in order to enhance it and use new and advanced technologies. However, I've declined these offers for fear that they might influence the content or the perspective of the program.

Have you done any specific training on how to produce documentary programs?

I haven't actually received any specific training on how to produce documentary programs. However, I've always had a strong interest in documentaries and have spent many hours watching them. It's possible that my passion for this genre of programs is what motivated me and led me to explore the idea from the beginning. I've transitioned from being an ordinary viewer to a creator of content, which is now watched by thousands of people around the world.

The world has of course become a global village thanks to technology. The reactions I received were truly astonishing. Initially, I thought that my content targeted only the local audience, and I believed it would not even extend beyond the local interest in the Souss region. However, the opposite proved to be true. In many comments, people suggested that this content should be translated into other languages because its detailed presentation of the rich local history appeals to people from all around the world. The channel's viewership from various parts of the world is a clear testament to this, and the channel is now approaching 100,000 subscribers.