hogra

by Filippo Torre

Abstract:

What are you saying? What are you saying?

This is a fight against words

(*Contre paroles* – Ultras Red Men 08)

حقرة هي كلمة صعبة الترجمة، وتعني عمومًا "الإهانة" أو "الظلم" في اللهجات العربية في بلاد المغرب. في السنوات الأخيرة، لقد أصبح مصطلحًا ذا طابع سياسي قوي، وتعبيرًا ذا معنى متغير ينقل فورًا شعورًا بالظلم الاجتماعي والاقتصادي الذي يشترك فيه قطاع واسع من سكان بلاد المغرب: اليوم، يُعد **المحقور** فئة اجتماعية يعرّف بها آلاف الشباب المضطهدين على الضفة الجنوبية للبحر الأبيض المتوسط، من الطبقات العاملة إلى الطبقات الوسطى

Ḥogra (حقرة) is a **difficult word** to **translate**, generally meaning '**humiliation**' or '**oppression**' in the **Arabic dialects** of the **Maghreb**. In recent years, it has become a **strongly politicised term**, an expression with a **floating meaning** that immediately conveys a feeling of **social** and **economic injustice** shared by large segments of the **Maghreb population.** Today, the ***maḥgūr*** (**the victim of *ḥogra***) is a **social category** with which thousands of **oppressed youth** on the southern shore of the Mediterranean **identify**, from the working classes to the middle classes.

Etymology:

Like many words in the Arabic language, ***ḥogra*** does not have a simple and immediate **translation** into English. The best way to catch **its meaning** is to look at the **root** formed by the **three letters** *ḥ-q-r* (ح ق ر). In Standard Arabic, the verb ***ḥaqara*** (Form I) means '**to despise**, **scorn**, **disdain**'; the verb ***iḥtaqara*** (Form VIII) means '**to loathe**, **look down**, **insult**, **ridicule**'. In the **Maghrebi dialects**, the word *ḥoqra* (pronounced *ḥogra*) has taken on the meaning of '**institutional humiliation**', '**structural contempt**', or '**state of injustice**'.

Cultural specificity:

The word ***ḥogra*** is part of the linguistic repertoire of the **Maghreb region** (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia). Although it comes from classical Arabic, there is no trace of the term being used, for example, in other Arab-majority societies in North Africa and the Levant.

The **Maghreb** is a **stratified** and **multilingual context** characterized by the coexistence of Standard Arabic, Arabic dialects, Tamazight (with its regional variants), French, Spanish, Italian, and the influx of other languages. **Maghrebi Arabic** (*darīǧa* or *derǧa* [dialect]) is one of the **defining elements** of the Maghreb, a region that shares certain cultural traits distinct from both the **Mashreq** (the Arab Levant) and the rest of Africa. Indeed, **Moroccan *darīǧa*** is perceived as the '**black sheep**' of the **Arabic languages' family**, often described as **inferior** to **other dialects** or even as **non-Arabic**, due to Berber, French, and Spanish influence (the latter especially in the area of former Spanish protectorate).

The **distinction** between **Maghreb** and **Mashreq** was coined by **medieval Arab geographers**. It was the historian and precursor of sociology **Ibn Khaldun** that spoke of *ǧazīrat al-maġrib*, the western island, to designate the region

bordered by the Mediterranean to the north and the Sahara Desert to the south, from which he excluded Cyrenaica and Egypt (Tamburini, 2023). **Arabs** from the **Levant** and the **Arabian Peninsula** have long regarded the **Maghreb** as a **distinct** and **peripheral region, distant** from the **holy sites of Islam** (Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem), not to mention that the **Mashreq** is considered a **more opulent region** due to its vast **oil resources** and **historically significant** for having given rise to **two empires** that shaped the history of Islam: the **Umayyad Caliphate** and the **Abbasid Caliphate**.

However, Maghreb identity was shaped above all in relation to the **ideology** and **orientalist semantic constructs** produced by the experience of **French colonialism**; **Maghreb** as a region was '**invented**' **racially** and **geographically** through the **orientalist colonial gaze**, aiming at isolating what belonged to France and distinguish it from other regional entities (Hannoum, 2021).

The project of a **regional economic** and **political community** of the countries of the **Greater Maghreb** (Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya), established through the Arab Maghreb Union (*al-Ittiḥād al-Maġribī al-ʿArabī*) and **created in 1989**, has come to a **standstill** in the **mid-1990s** due to the **conflict** between **Morocco** and **Algeria** over the **disputed sovereignty** of **Western Sahara**. To this day, the **border** between Morocco and Algeria **remains sealed**, making air travel the only possible way of moving between the two countries (not to mention the irregular crossings).



The sealing of the border between Morocco and Algeria (Photo by Filippo Torre)

In recent years, **new racial dynamics** and **populist grammars** have evolved around the **divide** between the **Maghreb** and the **Sub-Saharan countries**, reshaping **new ideas** of **(Arab) whiteness** and **(African) blackness**.

In the face of **political fragmentation** and **multiple colonial and post-colonial trajectories**, one of the factors that has helped shape **Maghreb identity** has been the sharing of a **similar dialect**, characterized by a significant **Berber substratum** and a **strong influence** of **French** (and, to a lesser extent, Spanish and Italian). There are **certain words** and expressions that, in spite of some regional variations in pronunciation that do not follow national borders, **are found throughout the Maghreb area** and contribute to creating a **specific sense of brotherhood**.

Ḥogra is an example of a **transnational word** that has reflected, and contributed to, this **process of region-formation**, beginning with the construction of an **awareness** that the **citizens** of the **Maghreb** share a similar **destiny**.

In its most immediate translation, ***ḥogra*** refers to a **state** of **contempt** and **humiliation** favored by the **economic elite** and **political institutions**. Unlike the feeling of personal shame, expressed in Moroccan Arabic by the term *ḥšūma* (embarrassment, shame), which conveys a sense of personal guilt, the ***maḥgūr*** (the victim of *ḥogra*) **does not refrain** from openly **claiming** and **denouncing** his or her **humiliation**. It is a **rhetoric** that bring to the fore the **socio-economic conditions** of **inequality** and **social injustice** perpetuated by the **elites** of **post-colonial States**, whether they have followed openly **pro-Western** political and economic trajectories (such as **Morocco** and **Tunisia**) or policies inspired by **socialism**, as in **Algeria** and in the **early years** of the presidency of **Bourguiba** in Tunisia.

What emerges is a **cross-cutting denunciation** of the **contempt** directed at the **popular masses,** framed and managed by **police** and **State corps** through a **repressive lens**, but also of a complex set of **day-to-day micro-practices** of **humiliation** and **abuses** of **power** carried out within the **family**, the **workplace**, at **school**, in the **streets**, or at the **stadium** by different typologies of ***ḥaggār*** (**oppressor**, **bully**). In his work with middle-class Tunisian youth in the municipality of Ben Arous, **Cordova** (2023: 180-181) describes it in terms of **frustration** arising

from **comparison** with members of wealthier social classes, in which a perception of **annihilating inadequacy** comes to the fore.

Within such a framework, ***ḥogra*** is a word that also **resonates** with **women's lifes** and **experiences** as it indicates a sense of **powerlessness**, **injustice**, and **humiliation** that **women** endure in **different contexts** as the **effect** of **societal expectations** and **inequities**, of the **culpable inadeguacy** of the **State** to **provide basic services -** such as hospital care - and of the **persistence** of **power structures** and **bureaucratic procedures** that **prevent women** to become **active agents** in society. However, due to my research trajectory, I am more familiar with the way it is employed by **young men** from the **urbanized lower** and **lower-middle classes** in Morocco, thus making *ḥogra* a term marked by **gender**, **generation**, and **social class**.



Maḥgūrīn? (Photo by Mourad Ben Cheikh Ahmed)

From the perspective of this social group, it identifies a **living condition** which, because of **economic inequalities** and **political oppression**, does not ensure the fulfillment of **personal aspirations**, access to consumer society and goods, or the attainment of what are considered **rites of passage into adulthood** (such as **marriage** and **procreation** or **stable employment** that would enable them to become the **breadwinners** of their families). It reflects a life lived in a constant sense of o**rdinary humiliation and unfulfillment**; it is the opposite of what is considered the standard of a **dignified life**, expressed in Arabic through the concept of ***karāma*** or ***ʿaysh karīm*** (see Vacchiano, 2022).

Communication strategies:

The feeling of victimhood does not imply only **passivity** and **resignation**. ***Hogra*** has been used as a **protest slogan** within a variety of **social movements,** fueling explicit **demonstrations** against **social injustice** and becoming a well-known term in academic literature and the press. In recent years, it has become a **strongly politicised term**, an expression with a floating meaning that immediately conveys a **feeling** of **social** and **economic injustice** shared by large segments of the **Maghreb population**. Today, the ***maḥgūr*** is a **social category** with which thousands of oppressed youth on the southern shore of the Mediterranean identify, from the working classes to the middle classes. "**Al-hogra** also stands for dissatisfaction and frustration with the status quo and is used as a **vehicle** for **social mobilization** around overlapping **human rights issues** such as the right to **work**, to **education,** to **health**, to **housing**, to **justice**, to **equality**, to **ethnic** and **linguistic diversity**, to **religious freedom**, to **potable water** and **electricity,** to **dignity** and **respect**, and so on" (Ilahiane, 2022: 79).

The quite **vast literature** discussing the term claims that ***ḥogra*** was first known in the **colonial and post-colonial** Algeria (see: https://www.afrik.com/la-hogra-un-mal-algerien), **shifting** from an **individual** and **contextual feeling** to a **political**, **public** and **collective signifier** during the **October 1988 mass demonstrations**, where many reported the use of the slogan "***lā li-l-ḥogra***" [**no to *ḥogra***], (Remaoun & Khouaja, 2012). The **structural adjustment programs** of the 1980s and 1990s, implemented in exchange for IMF (International Monetary Fund) loan lines, **exacerbated economic inequalities** in the countries of the Maghreb, laying the groundwork for the **uprisings of the 2000s**, which erupted with greater force and scale **from 2010 onwards**.

In **December 2010**, the revolt – or revolution – in **Tunisia** was sparked by a **textbook example of *ḥogra*:** a twenty-six-year-old man from Sidi Bouzid (Central Tunisia) working as a **street vendor**, **Mohamed Bouazizi**, literally **set himself on fire** as an **extreme act** of **despair** after **police officers** had **confiscated his vegetable cart** (Aalouach-Belkanichi, 2014). **Bouazizi's self-immolation ignited** not only the rest of Tunisia, where it culminated in the **ousting** of **Ben Ali dictatorship** and the beginning of an **unstable political transition**, but also **many other Arab-majority countries**, which began **protesting** against **economic inequality**, **rampant unemployment**, and the **monopolization** of **resources** by the elites.

In **Morocco**, from February 20, 2011, **leftist** and **Islamist groups** took to the streets to **protest** the **power structure** of the **King** and the ***makhzen*** (literally "**storehouse**", *makhzen* is the most common word used to identify the **royal State apparatus** in Morocco) as the **perpetrator** of ***ḥogra*** (Hannoum, 2020; Vacchiano & Afailal, 2021). Later on, *ḥogra* was one of words appearing in the slogans of the **Hirak movement** in the **Moroccan Rif**

(2016-2017). Vacchiano (2020: 10) reports the display of a sign reading "***al ḥogra taqtal***" (***ḥogra* kills**) at the **funeral** of **Mouhcine Fikri**, a thirty-one-year-old man who **died** while trying to **recover** a **load** of **fish confiscated** by a **police officer** and **dumped** into a **garbage compactor**. His **tragic death**, reminiscent of the circumstances surrounding the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi six years earlier in Tunisia, **sparked** a **wave** of **protests** in the Rif region.

And it is still the word ***ḥogra*** which has resonated in the **Hirak movements** in **Algeria** in 2019 (Nini, 2023) up to the most **recent demonstrations** in **Morocco** by **Generation Z 212** and those in **Tunisia** against the **environmental disaster** in the city of **Gabes**.

From the other side, the **rhetoric** of ***ḥogra* victimhood** can be adopted also by **populist regimes** in a demagogic and paternalistic way. **Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed**, for example, insisted that the "**word *ḥogra*** in colloquial Arabic must **disappear completely**. Tunisians have a legitimate **right to dignity** […] despite the **conspirators inside** and **outside** the **country**" (see: https://shorturl.at/bkBXX).

It emerges that ***ḥogra*** is both an **individual** and a **collective term**, expressing a **shared sentiment** while at the same time **meaning different things** to **different people** in **different places**, making its **indeterminacy** both its **strength** and its **weakness**. It has not only been mobilised during the protests of the past twenty years but **has inspired** many forms of **cultural expression** such as books, movies and magazines (see: https://telquel.ma/sommaire/hogra).

In addition to the street protests that periodically erupt in the Maghreb, another significant political arena for **young Maghrebi men** since the 2000s has been **football stadiums,** modeled on Italian and European ultras (Bourkia, 2018). The **ultras groups** of the **Maghreb** – composed of **young men** from different social classes – have progressively become **well-known** on the **international scene** with the advent of **social media**, thanks to their **impressive production** of **choreographies** (*tifo*), the simultaneous **lighting** of **flares** (*krakāğ*), and **coordinated body movements during chants** launched by the leader (*capo*) of the *curva*.



Mural by Raja Casablanca's Ultras Green Boys in Sidi Bernoussi (Photo by Filippo Torre)


Curva Sud "*Magana*", during a CAF Champions League match against Al-Ahly (Photo by Filippo Torre)

The strict **link** between **politics** and football **highlights** how the **belonging** to an **ultras group** (often in rivalry with one another, even when supporting the same team) **goes beyond** a passion for football and love for the local team. With the **repression** of **gatherings** in **squares** and **streets**, **stadiums** have become relatively **protected spaces** and **contexts** in which to **stage criticism** of **power,** the **system, authority**, and **institutions**, with an **emotional intensity** and **involvement** rarely reached elsewhere and amplified by social networks. It is evident that ultras social worlds are not bound by any political ideology, but are **defined** by a **strong stance** against the **police**, **repression**, **corruption, colonialism, unemployment**, and **regimes** (Tuastad, 2014).

Which word could best summarise a feeling of **generalised frustration** toward an **anonymous system of power shared** by the whole **ultras movement** in a **transnational context**?

The **chants** and **songs** composed by **specific ultras groups** have **made extensive use** of the subversive and unifying potential of the **multiple meanings** of ***ḥogra***. **Stadium chants** are often released as **music albums** by musicians associated with the ultras groups, translated or transliterated from *darīğa*, and **posted on social networks**.



Match of CODM at the *stade d'honneur* in Meknes (Photo by Filippo Torre)

Here below are **five excerpts** of **Moroccan ultras songs** that received **millions of views** on YouTube and, through social media, **expanded their message** far beyond the stadiums. These lyrics, which make extensive use of **code-switching** (Miller et al., 2023) and **sarcastic remarks**, form part of a **repertoire** that places the concept of **structural humiliation** at its center, accusing a generalized 'other' (the **police**, the **government**, "**you**", "**they**"…) of **social injustice**, **police daily violence, repression** of ultras, and the **oppression** and **unemployment** of youth, often rallying the entire *curva* around the concept and the **expectation** of **divine justice** and **reparation**.

Contre paroles – Ultras Red Men 08 (CODM, 2015, 1 million views)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKIsNuYzEeQ

maghreb ykhales 3el chomour	A Morocco that pays unemployment benefits [*šumūr*]
maghreb y3awen 3el belay	A Morocco that helps with the [drug] addiction
maghreb koulchi 3ayech fort	A Morocco where everyone lives well
koulchi ygoul denia hania	Everyone says life is easy [*denyā hāniya*]
berlamani fih lkhiiir	In parliament there is only good
kif lef9ir ki lwaziir	The poor is equal to the ministry
blad mafiha fou9ara	A country with no poor [*fuqarā'*]
ghir 40 melion kousala	Only 40 million lazy ones [*kūsāla*]
ch katgoul ntaya ch katgoul	What are you saying? What are you saying?
da klash contre paroles	This is a fight against words [*contre paroles*]
ghayfehmou ghi lmass2oul	Only the person in power will understand
li f karamtou medloul x2	Who is worthless in his dignity
bladi blad tanmia	My country is a country of development
ghi f le7chich lktamia	Only in the *hashish* from Ketama
mamlaka lmeghribya	The Moroccan Kingdom
dik nog3a l2aslya	The original high-quality weed [*noġ a*]
sadrouha lel gawrya	They exported it to the foreigners [*gāwrīya*]
w ychedouna 3la togya	And they arrested us for the bad quality hashish [*ṭogīya*]

Irréversible, Outro - Ultras Helala Boys (Kénitra AC, 2012, 4 million views)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAl1DXybNdo&list=RDsAl1DXybNdo&start_radio=1

hada message li lbouliss w l7oukouma	This is a message for the police and for the government
man l7ogra ca y est skhatna w malina […]	from *l-ḥogra*, we are already fed up […]
desole wlidek wlah madloum	Sorry mother, your son is oppressed [*madlūm*],
f bladi wlit n3ich ma7gour	in my country I live humiliated [*maḥgūr*].

Hadi Blad l-Hogra – Ultra Hercules 2007 (IR Tanger, 2019, 5 million views)



Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrEoyOPFc0w

هادي بلاد الحكرة	This is the land of *l-ḥogra*
و دموعنا فيها سالو	Where our tears here have flowed
لهيشة فيها مرارا	Life here is bitter
مكدبوش لي قالو	They didn't lie, those who said…
قتلونا بالهضرة	They killed us with their speech
ما شوفنا والو	We've seen nothing [of it].
فموازين شاكيرا	In Mawazine [music festival] Shakira
راها دات مليار	Took [was paid] a milliard
و حنا طلباتنا صغيرة	While our requests are small
كويتونا بالأسعار	And you killed us with prices
بربي مافيا كبيرة	By God, this is a big *mafia*
كلشي ولا شفار	And everyone has become a thief

F-Bladi Dalmouni – Ultras Eagles 06 (Raja CA, 2018, 24 million views)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LY9RKaW4iqE&t=59s

في بلادي ظلموني	Oh oh oh oh oh oh
اوه اوه اوه اوه	In my country they oppressed me
لمن نشكي حالي	To whom can I complain [*nshki*] for my situation?

اوه اوه اوه اوه	Oh oh oh oh oh oh
الشكوى للرب العالي	The complaint [*al-shakwā*] is to the Most High Lord
اوه اوه اوه اوه	Oh oh oh oh oh oh
غير هو اللي داري	Only he knows my situation
فهاد البلاد عايشين في غمامة	In this country, we live in a cloud
طالبين السلامة	Asking for safety
انصرنا يا مولانا	Help us, oh our Lord
صرفوا علينا حشيش في كتامة	They offered us *hashish* of Ketama
خلونا كاليتامى	They left us like orphans
نتحاسبو في القيامة	We will settle accounts on Judgment Day
مواهب ضيعتوها	You wasted [our] talents
بالدوخة هرستوها	You crushed them with drug
كيف بغيتو تشوفوها	How do you want to see it?
فلوس البلاد گع كليتوها	The country's money, you devoured it all
للبرّاني عطيتوها	You gave it to the foreigner [*bārrani*]
Génération قمعتوها	The generation, you repressed it [*qmá tūhā*]

Qelb 7azin – Winners 2005 (Wydad AC, 2019, 7 million views)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DG3WxbtDPeo&list=RDDG3WxbtDPeo&start_radio=1

ya 9alb 7zine	Oh sad heart
yabki 3la snin yali da3at mani	It cries over the years [I've] lost
mousta9bel fen	Where is the future?
l3mer izid pauvré raho i3ani	The years pass and the poor suffers
tana jtahadt w9rit	I too persevered and studied
bghit nkhdam mal9it	I wanted to work but couldn't find [any job]
bladi ma3tatnich ta3ti lel barani	My country gave me nothing, it gives to the foreigner [*bārrani*]
maranich à l'aise f blad chefara	I'm not at ease in a country of thieves
mat7elmouch bel paradis	Don't dream of Paradise
netla9aw 3and moulana /.../	We will meet with our Lord
l blad zadet fessdat o fi9 yal mass2oul	The country has gone on being ruined, wake up people in charge
la jeunesse ga3 hargat	All the youth have migrated illegally [*hargat*]
men lblad raha harbat	From the country, they fled [*harbat*]
chi 9ta3 lb7ar o chi mat	Some crossed the sea, some died

Subversion:

In the recent years, ***ḥogra*** has been **associated** and **intertwined** with another word that, despite its regional variations (***ḥarga***, ***ḥrīg***, ***ḥreg***), is used and understood mainly among the young people of the Maghreb region (Garnaoui, 2022).

From the Arabic root *ḥ-r-q* (ق ح ر) – the same letters that form the root of *ḥogra*, but in a different order – this **term serves** as a **powerful metaphor** for **border crossing** as an act of '**burning**', with both **practical** and **metaphorical**

meanings. In the practical sense, **young Maghrebi migrants**, excluded from the right to travel safely, have been forced to cross the Mediterranean using improvised means, sometimes **burning their documents** to **avoid identification**. In the **metaphorical sense**, these irregular travelers **'burn' prohibition** and **obstacles** in order to bet on an **opportunity** for **social mobility**, seen as unattainable in their place of origin. ***Ḥogra*** started being **associated** with the **burning of borders** and attempts to leave one's country, another **means of protest** or to 'vote with one's feet'.

The **burners of borders** (so-called ***ḥarrāga***, the present participle of the verb "to burn" referring both to irregular migrants and to those who facilitate the 'illegal' journey) **flee from *ḥogra*** (Souiah, 2012; Mastrangelo, 2019). As an emic word, ***ḥogra*** is used to **condensate** the **reasons** why **thousands** of **Maghreb citizens continue to leave** despite the **militarisation** of the **Mediterranean** ongoing since the 2000s, in a way that transcends the dichotomies of analytical and scientific discourse that oppose **political** to **economic migration**, forced to voluntary migration.

In recent years, the **relationship** between ***ḥogra*** and ***ḥarga*** has **grown increasingly close**, with **irregularised migration** becoming both a **political** and **individual response** to a **situation** of **structural injustice** encapsulated in the word *ḥogra* (Equipaggio della Tanimar, 2025). Images of **boats leaving** the **coasts** of Morocco, Algeria, or Tunisia, or **collective attempts** to **climb** the **fences** surrounding the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, are seen as **symbols** of the **failure** of **post-colonial** elites to guarantee **dignified living conditions** after independence.



The fences between Ceuta (Spain) and Fnidq (Morocco) (Photo by Filippo Torre)

In my ethnographic experience, ***ḥogra*** has not only become the **signifier** that best **summarises** the deep reasons why thousands of **Maghrebi people** choose to **cross** the **Mediterranean despite European deterrence policies** and the **externalization of borders**. It is also a **condition** increasingly **experienced during** the **migration process** itself, for example in the conditions through which **irregular migrants are forced** to travel in order to adapt to **mobility restrictions** and **injustice**.

In the short movie ***Hogra. The Struggles for Migrants in Reaching Europe*** (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47ZR9q9MF5Q&t=33s), a film I produced together with **Mustafa Elloud** for my PhD dissertation (Torre, 2025), one of the main protagonists **evokes** the **concept** of ***ḥogra*** to speak of the **violent pushbacks, reclusion** and **deportation** that he experienced by the **Turkish police**, while he was trying to cross the border with Bulgaria to reach Europe through the Balkan routes.

Ḥogra, then, is not only a **condition** of **humiliation** that is 'escaped' through **crossing** the **Mediterranean**; it is something that **attaches itself** to the **lives** of the ***ḥarrāga***, becoming emblematic of the ***double absence*** described by Abdelmalek Sayad (2014): the **migrant** is a **subject discriminated against** in **their place** of **origin** and **rejected** in the **places** of **transit**, **arrival**, and **expulsion**, continuously **pushed back**, **humiliated,** and **oppressed**.

[*I wish to thank **Saida Tayeb** for providing her **insightful remarks** on the **women's experience** of **hogra***].

Discussion:

- Can you think of a word that, in your language/culture/context, expresses a notion/emotion of personal and collective 'humiliation' similar to *hogra*?

- In which occasions and conditions is it used?
- Has it been reappropriated and resignified in some ways? And in case, how and by whom?

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