

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)

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Hogra 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 hogra**) 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, **hogra** 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* the ,Arabic Standard In .(?? ? ?) 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 **hogra** (pronounced **ḥogra**) has taken on the meaning of **'institutional humiliation'**, **'structural contempt'**, or **'state of injustice'**.

Cultural specificity:

The word **hogra** 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** (*darīġa* or *derġa* [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 darīġa** 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-maǧrib*, 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-Ittihad al-Maǧribī al-'Arabī*) 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 and the border between Algeria and Morocco (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**.

Hogra 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, **hogra** 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 *hogra*) **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 lives** 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 inadequacy** 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 aspiration** access to consumer society and goods, or the attainment of what is 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 **ordinary 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 **'aysh kari** (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 **hogra** (Hannoum, 2020; Vacchiano & Afailal, 2021). Later on, *hogra* 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 hogra taqtal**" (*hogra 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 *hogra* 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 hogra victimhood** can be adopted also by **populist regimes** in a demagogic and paternalistic way. **Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed**, for example, insisted that the "**word hogra** 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 *hogra* 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 (krakāġ)**, 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)

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



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

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 *hogra*. **Stadium chants** are often released as **music albums** by musicians associated with the ultras groups, translated or transliterated from *darīġa*, 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
maghreb y3awen 3el belay

A Morocco that pays unemployment benefits [*šumūr*]
A Morocco that helps with the [drug] addiction

maghreb koulchi 3ayech fort
 koulchi ygoul denia hania
 berlamani fih lkhiiir
 kif lef9ir ki lwaziir
 blad mafiha fou9ara
 ghir 40 melion kousala
 ch katgoul ntaya ch katgoul
 da klash contre paroles
 ghayfehmuu ghi lmass2oul
 li f karamtou medloul x2
 bladi blad tanmia
 ghi f le7chich lktamia
 mamlaka lmeghribya
 dik nog3a l2aslya
 sadrouha lel gawrya
 w ychedouna 3la togya

A Morocco where everyone lives well
 Everyone says life is easy [denyā hāniya]
 In parliament there is only good
 The poor is equal to the ministry
 A country with no poor [fuqarā]
 Only 40 million lazy ones [kūsāla]
 What are you saying? What are you saying?
 This is a fight against words [contre paroles]
 Only the person in power will understand
 Who is worthless in his dignity
 My country is a country of development
 Only in the hashish from Ketama
 The Moroccan Kingdom
 The original high-quality weed [nog'a]
 They exported it to the foreigners [gāwriya]
 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
 man l7ogra ca y est skhatna w malina [...]
 desole wlidek wlah madloum
 f bladi wlit n3ich ma7gour

This is a message for the police and for the government
 from *l-ḥogra*, we are already fed up [...]
 Sorry mother, your son is oppressed [madlūm],
 in my country I live humiliated [maḥḡūr].

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

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This is the land of *l-ḥog*
 Where our tears here have flowe
 Life here is bitt
 They didn't lie, those who saio
 They killed us with their speed
 We've seen nothing [of i
 In Mawazine [music festival] Shaki
 Took [was paid] a millia
 While our requests are sma
 And you killed us with price
 By God, this is a big ma
 And everyone has become a thi

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

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

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Oh oh oh oh oh oh

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In my country they oppressed me
 To whom can I complain [*nshki*] for my situation?
 Oh oh oh oh oh oh
 The complaint [*al-shakwā*] is to the Most High Lord
 Oh oh oh oh oh oh
 Only he knows my situation

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In this country, we live in a cloud
 Asking for safety
 Help us, oh our Lord
 They offered us *hashish* of Ketama
 They left us like orphans
 We will settle accounts on Judgment Day
 You wasted [our] talents
 You crushed them with drug
 How do you want to see it?
 The country's money, you devoured it all
 You gave it to the foreigner [*bārranī*]
 The generation, you repressed it [*qma tūhā*]

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

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

ya 9alb 7zine
 yabki 3la snin yali da3at mani
 mousta9bel fen
 l3mer izid pauvré raho i3ani
 tana jtahadt w9rit
 bghit nkhdam mal9it
 bladi ma3tatnich ta3ti lel barani
 maranich à l'aise f blad chefara
 mat7elmouch bel paradis
 netla9aw 3and moulana /.../
 l blad zadet fessdat o fi9 yal mass2oul
 la jeunesse ga3 hargat
 men lblad raha harbat
 chi 9ta3 lb7ar o chi mat

Oh sad heart
 It cries over the years [I've] lost
 Where is the future?
 The years pass and the poor suffers
 I too persevered and studied
 I wanted to work but couldn't find [any job]
 My country gave me nothing, it gives to the foreigner
 [*bārranī*]
 I'm not at ease in a country of thieves
 Don't dream of Paradise
 We will meet with our Lord
 The country has gone on being ruined, wake up people in
 charge
 All the youth have migrated illegally [*hargaf*]
 From the country, they fled [*harbat*]
 Some crossed the sea, some died

Subversion:

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

From the Arabic root *ḥ-r-q* of root the form that letters same the – (ḥ ḥ ḥ) *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 ḥogra**].

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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