



## THE FOLKLORE OF THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN SHORE: HARRĀGAS’\* POPULAR SONGS IN NORTH AFRICA

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Humans have had a long-lasting connection with the sea, which is a crucial and core part of their relationship with nature and the world. It is indeed a complicated relationship that encapsules a myriad of conflicting emotions that swing back and forth between life and death, love and hatred, serenity, dread and fear, and clarity and uncertainty. For many, the sea is a means of sustenance and crossing over, but it can also be brutal, damaging and even fatal.

It does not come as a surprise to know that the sea has been a muse and a source of inspiration for human artistic expressions (Groueff, 1972; François, 1974) and literary creativity throughout history, such as poetry, storytelling, painting, folktales, epics, and travel literature.

The sea has always been at the core of the human experience: translating human concerns, desires, obsessions and fears. Undoubtedly, sailors, among others, have deciphered its secrets and mysteries, becoming an iconic literary figure in many cultures and civilizations throughout history.

It is worth noting, indeed, that sailors have developed a peculiar artistic form that has its essence throughout all sea-related civilizations, known as sea shanties or simply sea songs chanted by sailors during their long labor periods. These sailing tunes laud the sea’s virtues, generosity, kindness, as well as its toughness, betrayal, and extensive testimonies of its hardness and the deceitful and horrid aspect it can bear. Sailors have created and preserved a unique folkloric heritage for humanity, that societies have passed down from generation to generation.

Over the past three decades, an important and fascinating relationship has grown between the sea and a significant number of the North African

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\* Harrāgas (noun. plural form) is a term used to refer to North Africans migrants who illegally migrate to the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, *i.e.*, *European countries*. - Hargā (noun. singular form) is a term used to refer to the sea journey that the illegal migrants undertake to reach the European shores.

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youth. The latter have found themselves faced with a limited range of opportunities and professional prospects, to ensure a decent living in their own countries. As a result, they embarked on perilous journeys on small dinky boats or makeshift boats, braving the dangers and risks of the sea to reach the other side of the Mediterranean. Getting a visa to enter European territories became increasingly difficult after the implementation of the Schengen Agreement of March 1995 (Neri, 2013), which regulates the issue of crossing the internal and external European borders, so North Africans resorted to illegal immigration by sea.

These clandestine trips include mothers and children, as well as young people, both male and female, whose involvement in these illegal expeditions has gradually expanded in an unusual way.

Several researchers are noticeably becoming interested in the growing number of women who are illegally migrating across the sea. Regardless of their age, old or young, marital status, single mothers with their children or spouses, or just by themselves, are making their way across the sea. So, they see it as a social phenomenon that deserves academic attention to be investigated (Lazaar, 2003: 87, Kim, 2020: 118).

These young *Harrāgas* are seeking to fulfill their dreams through a perilous journey, with an intertwined range of emotions of hope and aspirations with fear and suffering. They know beforehand that crossing the other side of the Mediterranean shore can turn into a tragedy, the happy ending is not always guaranteed. Boats could end up being crashed by the force of the waves and these young people could be swallowed up by the sea with their dead corpses reaching the shores, in the best-case scenario.

During these last three decades, unfortunately, thousands have died in tragic circumstances, many have turned into the sustenance of the sea's underworld. Not all of them are lucky enough to be found on the shores, some remain missing with an imminent certainty of their death. Few fortunate *Harrāgas* are saved, either by fishing boats or rescue crews. As a result, what was intended to be a quest for a brand-new life becomes their final destination.

In North Africa, illegal immigration has evolved into a deeply embedded social issue involving a significant coverage in media, drama, literature, and street arts like graffiti and pop songs. The terms "*Hargā*" or "*Harrāgas*" have been easily adopted and used in the everyday discourses of North Africans, which depict its peculiarity. In a nutshell, *Hargā* is commonly and consensually defined as an illegal journey undertaken through the sea to reach European territories.

Undeniably, the term conveys a multitude of meanings and connotations. *Hargā* is derived from the Arabic verb "*Hrāg*", which literally



means to burn. Accordingly, it a key term associated with fire, symbolizing the youth's feelings of oppression, marginalization, and disdain towards their countries. Moreover, it embodies a rebellious attitude towards the migration laws and regulations, by "burning" and illegally crossing the forbidden frontiers, and embarking on a life-changing adventure.

Just as it is deeply rooted in the collective memory and popular imagination, *Hargā* dates back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, walking on the footsteps of Tariq Ibn Ziyad during his conquest of Spain. By burning all the ships after crossing the Strait of Gibraltar, leaving no way to retreat, implying a one and only realistic outcome: either victory or martyrdom. Thirteen centuries later, this desire to conquer is still vivid on the *Harrāgas'* boats.

However, the risks and the challenges have turned into an individual concern. Once arrived on the other shore of the Mediterranean Sea, they burn the boats as a symbol of their intention of not going back home (Arab Chadia, the "hrague" or how Moroccans burn the borders?, Human & Migrations , 2007 1266 pp. 82-94/1266 pp. 82-94): it has been a one-way ticket. Moreover, the *Harrāgas'* families, especially their mothers or lovers, are heavily impacted by this perilous journey and this uncertain long period of separation. It comes as no surprise to observe a strong and intense presence of these figures in the "*Hargās'* songs", as a tribute to their pain and sacrifices.

Studies that have been conducted on illegal migration across the Mediterranean Sea to European shores have focused mainly on the economic, social, cultural, psychological, and political causes and consequences of the issue. However, the creative and aesthetic aspect of this phenomenon did not draw that much attention from the academia. This particular attribute has contributed to the creation of a unique, rich, and diverse immaterial cultural heritage that is firmly rooted in its authentic social, cultural, and spiritual setting. It is worth mentioning that this study does not claim in anyway that it encapsulates all the aspects and details of the theme, but rather it draws attention to the issue with its layered dimensions, in the hopes to open new research venues.

Indeed, these *Hargās* from North African countries like Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco to European territories are, as contradictory as it may seem, journeys characterized by the total absence of reason and sense and dominated solely by intense and conflicting emotions that navigate the extremes of human feelings, evoking life and death (URL-1).

A new emerging music genre (Souiah, 2011: 27-33), a new kind of popular songs known as "*Hargās'* songs", encapsulate the essence of this paradox. These songs are either written by the smugglers themselves before embarking on the journey or on the boat, while listening to these songs on the



radio or on their smartphones. For the dreaming youth, the *Hargās*' songs are a motivational booster and an inspirational source. They sing them as they ride the sea, on a journey of search for dignity, freedom, and a better life beyond the southern Mediterranean shore. As their ringtones or a track of their playlists, these popular tunes downloaded from the Internet are a must-have for these *Harrāgas*.

This highly appreciated music genre has a therapeutic impact on the migrants; it soothes their fears and worries, alleviates the risks and the horrors of the sea, and it expresses their dreams and hopes for the new chapter waiting for them, across the other shore. It is a new artistic form that mainly combines two popular music styles that have grown in popularity among the working class and youth. Both, the Rap and Mazoud genres besides Raï music, use mournful and funerary rhythms, with a sad melody or angry beats to spark enthusiasm, dissipate fears, and maintain the adventurous spirit of the young *Harrāgas*

It is important to note that these songs address fundamental concerns for these smugglers: They often remind them of the reasons and the risks of undergoing such a journey, its horrors and their fear of the unknown, with praise and admiration for their boats. In these songs, praying for safety and protection without forgetting to mention their sorrows of parting from their mothers, families and lovers, is highly present. Plus, the lyrics of these tunes convey the hope and dreams of these young migrants, for the upcoming new decent life.

## **I. Themes Addressed in the *Harrāgas*' Songs**

### **1. Country and Immigration (The Motives of Leaving One's Own Country)**

According to some studies, about half of the North African youth aspire to leave their countries. Plus, those belonging to the lower-middle-class have a greater inclination towards opting for *Hargā*, and those belonging to the inferior class are following the same pattern. Undoubtedly, the economic situation is a major driving force behind this social phenomenon, but the cultural and psychological aspects do play a significant part in this deadly game (Ageron, 1985: 64).

By now, we know that the *Harrāgas* leave their countries in hope to reach the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea of Spain and Italy, in particular of Scilly and Lampedusa (Aymard, 1974). Throughout history, the hopes of people choosing to leave, escape or flee their countries, have been an ongoing inspiration for songwriters, and the *Harrāgas*' hopes are no exception. Different music genres have created popular tunes that narrated their struggles and dreams. We can mention the *Mezoud* genre, which is a



North African popular traditional music genre, Rage Rap, and the Sad Rai, which is an Algerian popular music genre describing the harsh country's living conditions that they are going to leave behind. In the latter genre, we find repeated terms such as *Āl Hōqrā* (الحقرة), which refers to feeling as an outcast, *Lōmymā* (لميمة), which refers to the colloquial word of mother in North Africa, and *Šqāf* (الشقف) referring to the boat. The illegal migration has fueled the creative repertoire of songwriters, one of the most iconic Rai songs of 2007 written by Reda Taliani, states the following in its chorus with words in Arabic and French, becoming the motto of thousands of young people (URL-2):

يا البابور يا مونا مور، خرجني من لاميزار

Yā āl bābōr yā mən āmūr ḥrgny mn lā myzār

Oh my ship, my love, take me away from misery!

The song begins by reminding the listener of the Algerian Revolution and the martyrs that gave up their lives for this country, saying:

Men have sacrificed for my country, one and a half million martyrs fought and brought us independence, and today, we live in emptiness.

Taliani's masterpiece described the sad reality of today's youth that is torn between unemployment, suffering, and corruption on a higher scale. In a nutshell, the song summed up the situation of North African young men and women:

All doors of goodness have been closed, it has reached a point of no return, and I will not live in misery. Since I was a child, I have been suffering and it has been difficult. I thought of leaving to secure my future as long as I am young. The truth is, the *Hargā* is very difficult. We will meet under better circumstances.

## 2. The Sea in Hargās' Songs

The *Harrāgas*' relationship with the sea is quite similar to that of sailors in its essence and aspects. It is a relationship characterized by the total absence of reason and sense, because the sea abides by its own rules that are beyond human's understanding. The *Harrāg* or the person who chooses to embark on this adventure, has already opted for imagination rather than the mind. It is a relationship dominated solely by intense and conflicting emotions that navigate the extremes of human feelings.

The sea with its brutality has inspired an Algerian amateur band named Hibo. They released a track entitled حكاية مهموم, A Tale of a Worried Person,

"في وسط لبحر بين الأمواج والرمل غير ربّي لي عالم وبين راني، جيت اليوم نحكي حكاية مهموم، كنت ناوي الخير شوfoo واش صرالي"



In the middle of the sea, between the waves and the sand, only my Lord knows where I am. Today, I am about to tell a tale of a worried person. I had good intentions, but look what happened to me.

In addition to songs that are a crucial part of the narrative, there is a wide range of videos on YouTube that capture the whole journey of the *Harrāgas*: Scenes of leaving Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco to reach European territories, singing in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, or getting close to the shores of Sardinia, Lampedusa, or Spain. These videos play a pivotal part in documenting the lives these young people and how they influence the viewers including their relatives and surroundings: They watch them "fleeing" their homeland, where they were barely surviving.

The relationship of the *Harrāgas*, their families and loved ones with the sea is a complicated and paradoxical one, filled with contradictory emotions. From love, affection, trust, hope, and appreciation to hatred, anger, tension, uncertainty, and rage. The sea turns to be cruel, crushing and destructive when the journey fails and results in death or tragedy, leaving behind anguish and sadness in the hearts and homes of their loved ones. If the boat reaches the northern shore without any misadventures, it marks the start of something new, the sea will embody the symbol of ambitions, hopes, freedom, emancipation, and a decent life that many young people had so long dreamed about.

### 3. Boats in Hargās' Songs

The means used to crossover sea borders are GPS for navigation and boats: fishing boats, fast boats, and less common commercial boats, yachts, and Zodiacs.

Algerian, Tunisian, and Moroccan artists have written songs about their desire to illegally migrate to European countries in search of a better life abroad. Boats are associated with freedom and dignity (URL-3).

In his 2007 hit, Reda Taliani portrayed in his chorus the Bābō, the ship, as the ultimate solution to save him from the misery he is experiencing in his country. "*La Misère*" as the term is mentioned in French, means the feeling of humiliation rather than the general connotation of injustice and oppression.

The song carries on with French phrases, most notably "*J'en ai marre*", which denotes the youth's situation of being overwhelmed, fed-up, and tired. It is a call of frustration, hopelessness, total disinterest in life.

Many other young artists crafted their lyrics around the symbolism of the "boat". We can include these well-acclaimed songs such as "*As Safina*" (The Ship), "*Flouka w GPS*" (Boat or GPS) by Cheb Faycel Mignon and Hichem Smati or "*Babour Ellouh*" (URL-4) (The Wooden Boat) by Ski



(URL-5)... These songs often reflect the aspirations and dreams of the youth seeking a better life outside of their countries.

#### 4. Mothers in Hargās' Songs

Mothers have a vital and prominent presence in the lyrics of the Hargās' songs. In his famous song "Goodbye Annaba", *وداعاً عنابة*, Slim Chaoui expresses the sadness and the emotional farewell of a young Algerian leaving his hometown Annaba. He bids farewell to his parents, especially his mother by and asks for her forgiveness. Embarking on this perilous journey was an easy decision, knowing beforehand the danger and challenges, but he equips himself with hope and will to start over in order to fulfill his dreams.

Don't cry mother, please don't cry, oh my beloved mama, as we are out in the sea, things have become complicated, and whatever happened, happened. Amin, Lamine and Ramzi disappeared in the sea. May God have mercy on you (referring to his friends). You are not the first, nor will you be the last. Anabbi Harrāg until the Day of Judgment, flee if you can.

Other songs such as *يالمیمة متلومنيش في بلادي ما نقدرش نعيش*, which translates as Mother Don't Blame Me, I Cannot Live in my Country, or in another song entitled *يا ناري على ولدي مات في الطليان*, in which the mother laments her drowned son in Italy and the lyrics go as the following:

يا كيدي (URL-6)...*قطعت حدود للطليان خليت أمك في حيرة... قالوا يا ما روما توذي  
ويا ما ضررت ناس... الله يرحمك يا كيدي... تبكي عليك أمك ومن الطليان جاني خيرك*

Oh, my son... You crossed Italian borders and left your mother in disarray... They said: "Oh, Rome has taken away many things and caused distress to so many people" ... May Allah has mercy on you my son... You mom is crying over you and the Italians have brought me the news (of your death).

These songs encapsulate what it means to opt for illegal immigration: The intense emotions of departure, sorrow and longing to their loved ones especially their mothers, the struggles and sacrifices faced by their families, and the uncertainty of the situation overall. Slim Chaoui's song shed lights on how the illegal migration impacts both the young *Harrāgas* and their mothers, hoping to have a decent life and a better future.

#### 5. The Other Mediterranean Shore in Hargās' Songs

Alongside popular songs highly viewed on YouTube and Facebook, there are multiple videos of young *Harrāgas* who successfully reach the other side of the Mediterranean Sea or bid farewell to their friends in the homeland.

**The other side is the Promised Land!** (URL-7; Bernardie & Malte, 2004: 34-43)



For these young people, the other side is the Promised Paradise, the land of freedom, love and decent living. It is their adoptive country after their original country has failed them. However, many of them end up disappointed, and their dreams crashed once they set their foot on the “perfect side”. They enter a foreign land where culture, customs, and traditions are different, and they are lacking what is needed for integration and success. Risking their money and lives, with their chances of survival and the probabilities of death are equally matched, *Harrāgas* feel doubt and dread of failure. Indeed, many of them have experienced the harsh realities of the “promised land” and they have witnessed their dreams evaporating (Limousin, 1988: 5).

### 6. Love in Hargās’ Songs

The wide circulation of songs that narrate the sad stories of the drowning and death of young people wanting to cross the other shore, the sea’s hardships, and the aspirations of a whole generation, has a significant impact on the audience, whether it is those who are willing to embark on the journey or their families.

These songs use genuine images, authentic voices, painful events, which undoubtedly touch the listeners or those who watch the videos.

These emerging artistic expressions give a truthful representation of what it takes to board on the “boat of salvation” hoping to escape the harsh and miserable reality of their countries. It is worth noting that love is strongly present in the lyrics. Love in this genre is dedicated to mothers and lovers left behind in the countries; they are one of the main reasons they chose to consider the boat as a lifesaving option. For their sake, they went to secure a better life, a respectable income, and providing not only life's necessities but also luxuries. Some look forward to meet new lovers on the other shore, with the hope they will make up for their previous life of poverty and deprivation.

In a well-acclaimed song titled *Gawria Mi Amomé*, The European My Love, released by the Liberta Band in 2020, explores the love theme. The singer encourages younger people to illegally immigrate to European countries for a better life, and the ultimate way of guaranteeing a great future is meeting a European woman. The song goes as the following:

My European love, her fire is strong in my heart. For my country, I am sorry; my future lies in the hand European woman. Wait for me, I am coming. I spent my youth with you (through the internet), Remember me from me Marseille or Paris, the party is wonderful. I forget my worries, work, and build my future. I get married, have children, and return to my homeland, Algeria. Oh, dear parents, forgive me. I live in a strange country while I am in my own country, I lived as a sick man. Let us spread these words on our radios, in our documentaries, and also on the pages of our blogs. So that their words become





our words. Hoping that these words help us create a new aesthetic about borders. Because if one day the world chooses freedom of mobility, as I believe, the Harrāgas will be the heroes and the martyrs for our grandchildren. And now, let's get in the music.

## **II. The most famous and widely known Hargās songs in North Africa**

### **1. The Lyrics of “Harrāgas”, a song by the Algerian Raï singer Cheb Khaled: (URL-8)**

I cried over my children  
 I cried over my country  
 I cried over my children  
 I saw my tears on my cheeks

I have raised them and educated them  
 I grew old and tired to see where they are today (Grownups and well-educated)

My good wishes for them for happiness have no limits.

They said: "father, mother we have to go (Referring to the illegal immigration)

There's no future here  
 We don't like this life anymore

We prefer to be food to the fish than the worm (Referring to crossing the other side of the Mediterranean than dying in our country)

My children are gone and they were very young  
 Reda and Hedi crossed the sea (and drowned)

My candle is extinguished and my stars are gone (faded)  
 My candle is extinguished, my dears, and the sky is cloudy

I cried and cried till I became blind  
 I searched but I could not find them  
 My children didn't come back

Allah, we implore you to have mercy on them  
 Allah, we are indeed patients



Allah, we beg you ..., you're the Highest, all of us will and to You we shall return

**2. The Lyrics of “Should I Leave (referring to illegal immigration) or not?” by the Tunisian Rap Singer Balti (URL-9)**

I am really considering of Harga

Should I illegally immigrate or not?

I am living as a destitute

I cry and the tears are floating (They will not stop)

Should I illegally immigrate or not?

They oriented me towards Rome (Referring to Italy and European countries in general)

You will find there your friends from your neighborhood

Selling a poisonous good (referring to drugs)

(...)

Lying awake, anxious in my sleep,

I am not sleeping well

Oh Foreigner! Oh, Foreign Land!

They belittled me and they undervalued me.

Men were negotiating and bargaining

(...)

In the sea, I breaking through the waves that surround me with determination

I am afraid of drowning, Oh, mother! What if all of my sacrifices go in vain?

**3. Lyrics of a Tunisian Popular Mezoud Song “Woe is Me, My Son died in Italy” (URL-10)**

Oh, my dear son, you are ill-fated because of money (the lack of it)

Without a visa, you crossed the Italian borders.

You left your mother in disarray.

You thought your path would be scattered with roses

But you left me, my dear son, hurt

They said: “Oh, Rome has taken away many things and caused distress to so many people”



Tunisia is my consolation and solace

Tunisia is our mother, now as it was yesterday and it will remain the same tomorrow (nothing has changed)

May Allah has mercy on you my son

You mother is crying over you and the Italians have brought me the news (of your death).

**4. The Lyrics of “Partir Loin”, by the Algerian singer Reda Taliani (URL-11)**

Oh Boat, My Love! Take me far away from this misery

In my country, I am belittled (undervalued), I have had enough, I am fed up

I missed the opportunity by being loyal (referring to staying in the country)

It is been a long time I forgot who I am, I work on it day and night

Oh Boat, My Love! Take me far away from this misery

A special invasion from Algeria to the West

Leave me alone, like Robinson on an island

Leaving far away without my cousins

Farewells are tough

I consider myself lucky to be alive, I hope it lasts

I grew up with thieves

I'll always have the ululations resonating

In my mind, I am looking for happiness

Oh Boat, My Love! Take me far away from this misery

A special invasion from Algeria to the West

In my country, I am belittled (undervalued), I have had enough, I am fed up

A special invasion from Algeria to the West (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia)

Come, I'll take you with me.

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URL-1: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk> Harraga songs, Algerian artists flirting with boats

URL-10:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNE3WHsHnXs&ab\\_channel=%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNE3WHsHnXs&ab_channel=%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A)

URL-11: <https://www.youtube.com>, the song “Yalabbour Ya Mon Amour” “Oh Boat, My Love” by the Algerian singer Reda Talian.

URL-2: <https://assafirarabi.com/ar/22985/2018/10/29>

URL-3: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk> Harragas songs, Algerian artists flirting with boats

URL-4 :

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQXIu2F1RIA&ab\\_channel=SKI7](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQXIu2F1RIA&ab_channel=SKI7)

URL-5 :

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vahzAx0axT0&ab\\_channel=AnouarOavlogs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vahzAx0axT0&ab_channel=AnouarOavlogs)

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URL-9 :

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