

The burning children of globalization

I've been wondering what would be an appropriate Christmas post for the [Language on the Move](#) blog. Seeing that I'm deeply skeptical about all those claims about the wonderful advantages of bilingualism, [a good news story à la "bilingualism helps to ward off dementia"](#) was never going to be an option. That's when the first issue of [Encounters](#) came my way. [Encounters](#) is published at [Zayed University](#) and dedicated to seeking a critical understanding of the transcultural and transnational factors that shape encounters of cultures, intellectual traditions, and social and political systems across space and time. While the first issue doesn't have anything to say about the role of language in transcultural and transnational encounters (yet!), I'm sure "multilingualism" will make an excellent special issue topic sometime soon. No, the article that touched my heart and is a fitting illustration of language and communication on the move during a season when many people around the world remember Mary's and Joseph's search for shelter is one about children caught between Africa and Europe and neither having a space here nor there. Abdelmajid Hannoum's ethnography with the *harraga* of Tangier provides both a revealing account of the forgotten children of globalization and does so in a beautifully [code-meshed](#) language where the Arabic comes alive in the English.

Harraga derives from the root *hrag* 'burn' and could thus be translated as 'the burners.' The burn is an act of travelling, specifically illegal crossings from North Africa to Europe. A *harrag* is therefore a "person who metaphorically burns himself or herself, that is, one who disregards his or her own self and undertakes the trip to "make it to Europe" even at the risk of death" (p. 232). *Harraga* is the plural of *harrag* and anyone vaguely interested in current affairs knows that at any point in time over the past decade or so there have been a fair number of *harraga* waiting in North African ports to make the crossing to Europe, circulating in Europe with various types of official status but very often without any legal status at all, *sans papiers* 'undocumented,' or in the process of being deported back to Africa. [The BBC has a factsheet which provides a quick overview of Africa-to-Europe migration](#) and [the Boston Globe has a moving photo documentary](#).

There are many different *harraga* and Hannoum's ethnography is with a group whose "burning" is particularly poignant: children. "The *harraga* of Tangier" the title refers to are street children, far away from home, waiting to burn.

They are already immigrants, in exile (*ghurba*) in a city with a strong sense of identity. The people of Tangier view themselves as superior, "people of the North" (*awlad al-shamal*). They have a clearly distinctive accent. The rest, in their view, are people of the inside, the interior, *al-dakhil*, considered by and large a land of "hicks" (*a'rubiya*). [...] if an average Moroccan is looked at as an outsider in Tangier, how would those children be looked at, given their triple status as poor, *a'rubiya*, and *harraga*? (p. 232f.)

The way they burn is as stowaways, mostly by crawling under trucks as they stop at a red light before entering the port. Some of the children attempting to burn are as young as six years old: at an age when the fortunate children of the world still have their hands held when crossing the street, the *harraga* of Tangier attempt intercontinental journeys hidden under a truck. The author quotes a Moroccan policeman as saying "Twenty children burn every day. We catch and return seventeen of them" (p. 238). Those who make it to Algeciras, the Spanish port 14 kilometers away from Tangier, get caught there and deported although some of these child

harraga had made it as far as Amsterdam before being deported back to Morocco. Most of them had burnt many times.

Formal education obviously has a very limited reach with these children and only one of the children Hannoum spoke to had made it to second grade. Sadly, education does not even hold a promise for these children. One of them asks Hannoum: “What have those who went to school gained? Have you not seen educated people and doctors who are unable to find a job? Have you not seen them protesting and asking for employment?” (p. 233) The only hope for these wretched of the earth is actually to go elsewhere. Their dreams are modest and clearly shaped by a tourism economy: “I want at least to learn Spanish and come back and work as a waiter in Tangier” one of them says (p. 241). Bigger dreams include to be able to keep clean, to dress well, to have money, to own a car, to find a girl. It is modest dreams such as these that children are burning for. No wonder they see themselves engulfed by *quhra*.

Misery is not a good translation of *quhra*. *Quhra* means total poverty, owning nothing. But it can also mean the profound feeling of being completely squeezed by misery to the point of despair and utter hopelessness. *Quhra* is defeating. It also wounds one’s dignity, often fatally. (p. 238)

You may have wondered when I’ll finally get round to the Christmas message of my post – well, there is none. At a time when much intercultural communication is constituted by a kind of material striptease of consumption that “the West” broadcasts to “the rest” and when “The Festive Season” is nothing more than an annual spike in this orgy of consumption, it just seemed fitting to spare a thought for the burning spectators.



Abdelmajid Hannoum (2009). The Harraga of Tangier Encounters: an international journal for the study of culture and society, 231-246