

Identity and empire

Sabnum Dharamsi explores the spiritual insights of a cultural nomad through literature and therapy



I love the feel of a novel, of turning the pages to unfold its stories. I even love how, with some, there's an uncomfortable somatic response – a gut-gripping tension that nevertheless feels safe. Reading fiction can enhance empathic skills,¹ so this *Walking lightly* is about *Leo Africanus* by Amin Maalouf, and how it speaks to the shaping of identity. It begins thus:

'I, Hasan the son of Muhammad the weigh-master, I, Jean-Leon de Medici, circumcised at the hand of a barber and baptised at the hand of a pope, I am now called the African, but I am not from Africa, nor from Europe, nor from Arabia. I am also called the Granadan, the Fassi, the Zayyati, but I come from no country, from no city, no tribe. I am the son of the road, my country is the caravan, my life the most unexpected of voyages.'²

I sometimes encounter this de-territorialisation in clients. Like *Leo Africanus*, they are cultural nomads.³ What's useful for therapists, perhaps, is how Maalouf's novel brings to life Leo/Hasan's psyche. His consciousness is moulded by the intersection of civilisations – the personal woven with the political. Maalouf's novel is based on a true story; *Leo Africanus* (al-Hasan ibn Muhammed ibn Ahmad al-Wazzan al-Fasi al-Granati, 1485–1554) was a diplomat, merchant traveller and Islamic scholar.⁴ His emigration from Granada to Fez happened around Granada's conquest during the Spanish Reconquista, marking the end of 700 years of Muslim rule. Captured by pirates, he was gifted as a slave to Pope Leo X, who gave him his freedom on the condition that he convert to Christianity.

In counselling training, I've shared passages from *Leo Africanus* to explore how the seeming solidity of identities, such as Muslim, Arab, African and Jew, is also ambiguous and intersectional, and how individual subjectivity is constructed in political contexts. As disinformation is increasingly weaponised to polarise society,⁵ I've found it helps to hold space for more fluid ways of being.

This is not to erase the importance of identities, particularly when they are contested in society. There was a time I exclusively read novels by people of colour because I needed to process the experience of difference. I heard their stories and knew they were also mine. I resonated with *Leo Africanus* because it compassionately observed the pragmatism of doing what's expedient, and also highlighted how hegemonic narratives can threaten your sense of self. Through the *Leo Africanus* persona, I was able to perceive – and feel – equivalences in the way power is wielded, policed by state, cultures and religious institutions. Khalifa writes: 'It is a self-defence of an amphibious who...can survive by alternating between land and sea. They are adept at both. Leo... tries to navigate both identities carefully at a time when heretical beliefs were punished by burning at the stake.'³ Leo's story, however, is not simply of resilience; he values, rather than

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pathologises, his social currency. Indeed, in real life, Leo's influential writings antidoted Renaissance views which were prejudiced against Islam while drawn to its scholarship. Like many clients, he journeys through intractable binaries to find his way in the world but also his truth.

It feels fitting to end this column citing the way Leo accounts for his life:

'From my mouth you will hear Arabic, Turkish, Castilian, Berber, Hebrew, Latin and vulgar Italian, because all tongues and all prayers belong to me. But I belong to none of them. I belong only to God and to the earth, and it is to them that I will one day soon return.'² These words, echoing the

Quran, 'From Allah we come and to Him we return' (2:156), touch me; life's vicissitudes reconcile in faith. It's important, as therapists, to recognise spiritual success and to be able to reflect with someone like Leo on how, despite being an adept navigator of identities, he – to use spiritual terminology – divests himself of allegiance to any of them. Freed from narrower perspectives, he finds his soul. ●

References

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- 3 Khalifa MAMA. Amphibious storytellers in *Leo Africanus* and *The Moor's Account*. *Arab Studies Quarterly* 2023; Vol. 45(3): 212-228. <https://tinyurl.com/yukiphfv> (accessed 30 October 2025).
- 4 World History Encyclopaedia. *Leo Africanus*. <https://tinyurl.com/muns7pd2> (accessed 30 October 2025).
- 5 Vasist PN, Chatterjee D, Krishnan S. The polarising impact of political disinformation and hate speech: a cross-country configural narrative. *Information Systems Frontiers* 2023; 17(1). <https://tinyurl.com/2w4mrh8w> (accessed 30 October 2025).

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