

Mediterranean ports and literature

Minds as open as ports, in Amin Maalouf's novels

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ABSTRACT

Blue Economy is a cornerstone of the Mediterranean culture and identity as it has provided a positive cultural impact shared between coastal societies.

Stories and experiences, along with some concrete aspects of economy, recur in different narrations of the world, therefore in literature too. For example, economic themes recur throughout many of the novels of the Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf. These themes are so significant that they concur to the development of an actual system of values. This report illustrates some main passages of Maalouf's novels, focusing on suggestions and opinions drawn from *Balthasar's Odyssey* and *Leo Africanus*. This paper is complementary to the [video](#) presented by the author at Blue Planet Economy (BPE) European Maritime Forum 2021.

KEYWORDS: Mediterranean identity, economy and culture in the Mediterranean, Amin Maalouf.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The following paper is mainly the script of the [video](#) *Mediterranean ports and literature: minds as open as ports, in Amin Maalouf's novels* (Emina, 2021)¹. It was presented at the BPE European Maritime Forum 2021, an event focused “on the wider theme of Blue Economy and on its capability to promote and create new market opportunities and economic development in Italy, in the Mediterranean Area [...]”². How does this video contribute to the already multi-faceted issue of the Blue Economy? This paper illustrates some of the links existing between Mediterranean cultural heritage and sustainable economic development. It depicts a specific commercial and entrepreneurial mentality, outlining some positive aspects of a regional way of conceiving economy. Ultimately, it recognises these concepts as sustainable tools for a full individual life and a healthy social organisation.

Generally, Blue Economy is considered to deal with sea and land, that is with fishing and trade routes, or with tourism and port logistics. However, as far as the Mediterranean Sea is concerned, we must also get into Blue culture, because trade has given a strong cultural impact, shared between coastal societies. In *Balthasar's Odissey* (2000; 2008b), published at the beginning of the third millennium, the main character clearly expresses this exact opinion. Through his characters, Maalouf describes his own vision of the Mediterranean world, relying on the traditional practice of commerce.

2 ECONOMY, IMAGINARY AND THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

In alphabetical order, the three key words of this paper are economy, imaginary and the Mediterranean Sea.

The concept of economy is somehow intangible. Its substance is perceived through the results of different actions. Economy is made of inter-related activities of production, consumption, and distribution³. These activities, enacted in a given space by communities, together with their way of life and their tales and myths, embody specific cultures and imaginaries. The definition of a specific imaginary, that is of an intangible heritage, needs a proceeding by synthesis and abstractions. Our third keyword, the Mediterranean Sea, marks a geographical space by its physical boundaries.

Borders delimit a piece of land, a piece of culture, a piece of humanity, but they imply the invitation to be overcome. This fact is graphically shown on the following map (Figure 1).

The aim of his map is to illustrate “medieval trade from northern Europe to the Muslim world by way of the Mediterranean, and the network of land and sea routes that tie them together”⁴. This report considers the opposite direction – from the Mediterranean to Northern Europe – of some of the routes that have been mapped out.

In the Maalouf's novels presented below, the connection with land is widespread and includes the Middle East and Africa.

The first novel we are considering is *Balthasar's Odissey*. Its protagonist is a Genoese Levantine merchant, namely a bookseller. Balthasar Embriaco introduces himself as the descendant of a historic Genoese family. Maalouf uses this character to substantiate his own opinions on his Mediterranean imaginary. The story takes place around 1666, one of the many years in which Apocalypse was supposed to take place, as History had foretold.

¹ The development of the topic is based on previous studies (Emina, 2005; 2008; 2013; 2016).

² <https://www.blueplaneteconomy.it/en/the-event/>

³ Cf. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/e/economy.asp>

⁴ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/cambridge-world-history/european-and-mediterranean-trade-networks/D8B8E85342D89A5064B8F9FBABB0B799>

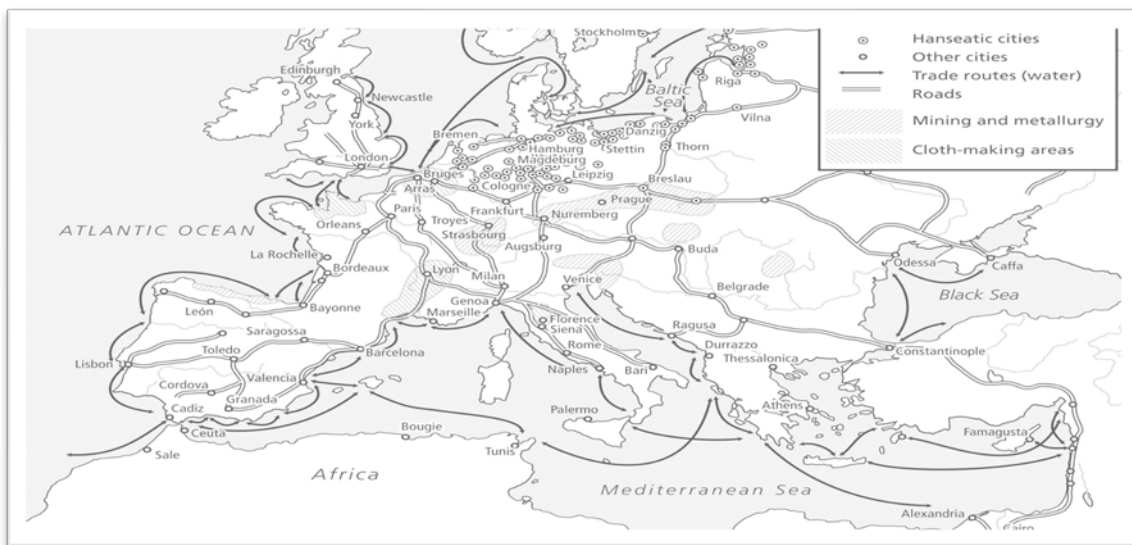


Figure 1. European and Mediterranean trade networks. Source: Balard, 2015.

Balthasar Embriaco embarks on a search for the rarest of books: *The One hundredth Name*, which is supposed to reveal still unknown one hundredth name of God. He sets out on a journey that takes him across the civilized world, making his way to Constantinople and on to Smyrna and Aleppo. Next, he embarks for the Isle of Chios and sails through the Mediterranean. Then, he reaches Lisbon and London. Finally, he settles down in Genoa.

After experiencing life in various Mediterranean societies, often under tyrannical governments, Balthasar Embriaco finds he is a man proud of himself. He proclaims his profession to be more respectable than those traditionally considered as sources of pride, namely military and religious careers.

In fact, Maalouf makes Balthasar say:

I've always thought, and now I'm convinced of it, that trade is the only respectable activity and those engaged in it the only people who are civilized. The scoundrels Jesus drove out the Temple must have been not merchants, but soldiers and priests (Maalouf, 2008b, p. 314)⁵.

3 ETHICS AND BUSINESS

Nowadays, we talk about organizations and infrastructures. Instead, Maalouf's character focuses on the ethical structure underlying his business. Balthasar strongly believes that merchants have some fundamental qualities for worthily inhabiting the world: honesty, as one might easily imagine, but also righteousness, wisdom, and dignity. Moreover, according to Balthasar, the desire for prosperity motivates one's work. The legitimacy of this desire is never questioned, except when it suffocates other fundamental qualities, such as common sense, modesty, and generosity. However, not all the merchants in Maalouf's novel are pious, wise, righteous, and honest. For sure, some cheaters make their apparition, but the main character and his fellows are quite reliable both as merchants and as human beings.

Merchants' scale of values allows Balthasar to draw a pattern for assessing the events looming over the confused European and Middle Eastern world in the second half of the seventeenth century. The occasion is provided by having incurred a debt with his Genoese host, Gregorio

⁵ "J'ai toujours pensé, mais aujourd'hui je le pense encore plus : le Négoce est la seule activité respectable, et les marchands sont les seuls êtres civilisés. Ce ne sont point les marchands que Jésus aurait dû chasser du Temple, mais les soldats et les prêtres!" (Maalouf, 2000, p. 408).

Mangiavacca. This debt would have been expired after the expected apocalypse. The end of the world would have erased everything. At that point, he would have disappeared himself without being able to pay off his debt. The possibility that he may not be able to meet his commitments, albeit for higher reasons, raises many questions:

What will have become of our debts? Yes, how will it be with our debts when the world together with all its men and all its wealth is extinct? Will they just be forgotten, or will they be taken into account in deciding each man's fate? Will bad debtors be punished? Will those who pay up on time get into Heaven more easily? Will bad debtors who keep Lent be treated more kindly than good payers who don't? Just like a merchant to bother his head with such questions, you'll say! Perhaps, perhaps. But I have the right to ask them because it's my own fate that is at stake. Perhaps the fact that I have been an honest merchant all my life will it earn me the right to some of Heaven's mercy? (Maalouf, 2008b, p. 232)⁶.

The attention to money related matters, and the feeling that pecuniary debts are debts of honour that must always be paid, whatever it takes, are not trivial matters that concern only the person of Balthasar, an honest merchant. They are moral imperatives that involves each individual within his social context.

4 INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE: A FICTIONAL SUBJECT FOCUSING ON INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE WELL-BEING

These economic themes recur throughout several novels by Maalouf. For example, in *Leo Africanus*, set between 1492 and 1526, there is a large number of references to various activities. This great amount of information acquires itself a symbolic value that characterizes societies and individuals in the concerned countries. The main character of this novel thinks that commerce (great trade and small business) is included in a set of different economic activities such as craftsmanship, services, and agriculture, which becomes a sort of enterprise.

In both novels, the characters observe that the smooth running of these businesses depends on the good organization of every aspect.

Two more key words taken from Maalouf's novels should be introduced to explain this point of view: simplicity and competence. An excellent organization, based on the fundamental principles of honesty and dignity, results in an easier and more productive activity. To achieve this, Mediterranean people must rediscover their own competencies.

5 CONCLUSIONS

From these works, we can draw at least two main interpretative hypotheses. On the one hand, Maalouf communicates nostalgia for historical eras that allowed individuals and groups to carry out economic actions, which provided them prosperity and dignity. On the other hand, these novels are perhaps intended to encourage a return to the traditional spirit of craftsmanship and commerce, which seem congenial to Mediterranean populations.

We are not implying here that novels always provide readers for technical solutions to today's questions, but we are suggesting that Mediterranean people should take what these books can really offer, such as hints for re-building common traditions and opportunities to see new ways of co-existence and to imagine socially sustainable growth. Above all, they should embrace some

⁶ "Que deviendront alors nos dettes? Oui, que deviendront les dettes quand le monde se sera éteint, avec ses hommes et ses richesses? Seront-elles simplement oubliées, ou bien seront-elles pris en compte pour fixer le sort ultime de chacun? Ceux qui paient leur dû à échéance gagneront-ils plus facilement le paradis? Les mauvais payeurs qui observent le carême seront-ils jugés avec plus d'indulgence que les mauvais payeurs qui ne le font pas? Voilà bien des préoccupations de marchand, me dira-t-on? Sans doute, sans doute. Mais j'ai le droit de me poser ces questions, puisque c'est de mon sort qu'il s'agit. Cela me vaudra-t-il quelque clémence aux yeux du Ciel d'avoir été, ma vie entière, un commerçant honnête?" (Maalouf, 2000, p. 299).

fundamental pre-economic feelings such as self-esteem and confidence in the future or, at least, hope.

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