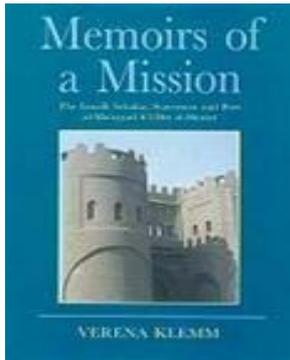




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*Memoirs of a Mission: The Ismaili Statesman  
and Poet al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi*  
By: Verena Klemm

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**A Reading Guide by Yasmin Khan**

**Introduction**

Even though you're the last in our *da'wa*,  
You have surpassed the compass of the earlier (*da'is*).  
The like of you cannot be found among those who have gone,  
From all the people, nor those that remain (p.90).

These are the last lines of the *qasida* with which the Imam-Caliph al-Mustansir bi'llah addressed al-Mu'ayyad while granting him an audience. Al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi, according to the author, "was one of the most distinguished and gifted personalities of the Ismaili religious and political mission, the *da'wa*, under the Fatimids." (p.xiii)

At the zenith of Fatimid power during the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> Century, al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi spent most of his life serving the Imam-Caliph al-Mustansir bi'llah (who

reigned from 427 to 487 AH/1036 to 1094 AD) as a *da'i* in various capacities – administrative, diplomatic, military and religious – finally attaining the highest rank of a *da'i al-du'at* (chief *da'i*) in the year 439/1047.

In this book, Verena Klemm presents an excellent account of the life and achievements of this outstanding Fatimid scholar, *da'i*, poet and politician, using his own rich and personal account of his life through his autobiography, *Sirat al-Mu'ayyad fi'l Din*. She demonstrates that

the *Sira* is not only a rich historical source on the organisation and function of the Ismaili *da'wa*, but it is a valuable source for Islamic history in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century for it was during this time that the Fatimids, Abbasids, Buyids and Saljuqs were competing for political and military leadership in the Muslim world. Klemm highlights the importance of the *Sira* as a masterpiece of medieval Arabic literature since al-Mu'ayyad's literary form was, "based on rhymed prose, interspersed with lively dialogues, self-composed poems, dreams, stories and parables" (p.19). As Klemm puts it:

...al-Mu'ayyad's *Sira* is a highly valuable and authentic source, one written by an eye-witness and active participation in the critical political events of the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> Century. Indeed, the *Sira* fills and enlivens the incomplete and fragmentary information provided mainly by the historiographers of later Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk times (p.xvi).

In the first part of the book, entitled, "al-Mu'ayyad's Mission in Fars", Klemm cites relevant parts of the *Sira* to portray the rise and fall of the *da'i*, then further elaborates al-Mu'ayyad's memoirs as a source for history and finally shows how the *Sira* reflects the aims, ideals and ethical aspects of the Ismaili *da'wa*:

...throughout his report, al-Mu'ayyad is eager to affirm that his mission in Shiraz was not defined by personal aims and reasons, but by loyalty and subordination to his master, the Imam al-Mustansir...he was fully conscious about the religious meaning of his mission...his only intention was to maintain the beliefs of his forefathers, now misjudged in Shiraz, and to re-establish their former reputation (p.63).

The second part outlines al-Mu'ayyad's experiences at the Fatimid court in Egypt and his successes and setbacks in establishing a Fatimid alliance against the Saljuqs during his political mission in northern Syria.

The third part of the book examines "al-

Mu'ayyad at the Pinnacle of his Career" when he was appointed as chief *da'i* in Cairo. This section highlights his major accomplishments by way of works he produced and prominent personalities he influenced. Highlighting al-Mu'ayyad's loyal and competent services and unique talents, Klemm quotes from Imam al-Mustansir bi'llah's *qasida*:

...our followers have lost their right guidance, in the West, O companion, (and) the East. So spread among them what you will of our knowledge And be for them the concerned parent. Even though you're the last in our *da'wa*, you have surpassed the compass of the earlier (*da'is*). The like of you cannot be found among those who have gone, from all the people, nor those that remain (p.90).

Appendix I details all the known works of al-Mu'ayyad which have been preserved while Appendix II highlights the Hierarchy and Pedagogy of the Fatimid *da'wa* through a partial summary of al-Nisaburi's treatise entitled, *The Brief and Sufficient Epistle on the Code of Conduct and Etiquette of the Missionaries*.

## **Part One: Al-Mu'ayyad's Mission in Fars**

### **The Rise and Fall of a *da'i***

The author very succinctly uses al-Mu'ayyad's accounts in his *Sira* to illustrate the events in his homeland of Fars, an autonomous principality under the Abbasids in southern Iran. Al-Mu'ayyad, an active regional Fatimid *da'i* in Fars, was able to win the heart of the then Buyid ruler, Abu Kalijar who eventually became convinced by the superiority of his knowledge and at one point even became his student. The Buyids, who mostly belonged to the Twelver-Imami Shi'i and Zaydi persuasions, successfully established their sovereignty in the Iranian lands of Fars, Kirman and Khuzistan. Even though the Buyids regarded the Fatimids as their

political and religious rivals, in Fars they seemed to be tolerant of Ismaili missionaries working as agents of the Fatimid caliphs (p.3). Al-Mu'ayyad found support among the Daylamis, a national force supporting the Buyid claim to power in Iranian lands, who also shared Ismaili convictions. However, Turkish soldiers, mostly Sunnis who backed the Abbasid claim to power, conspired against him and persuaded Abu Kalijar's to go against al-Mu'ayyad and the Fatimids.

The author highlights the threatening letters that Abu Kalijar constantly received from the caliph in Baghdad. In one such letter the caliph threatened to mobilise the Turkomans against the Buyids. The caliph complained that never before had an Ismaili *da'i* dared to spread his religious beliefs so openly and ignore the mentioning of the name of the Abbasid caliph during Friday sermons. Abu Kalijar was also accused of breaking 'the contract of belief' in accepting the religious sovereignty of the Sunni caliph (p.39). Thus, al-Mu'ayyad's activities in Fars were full of strife and tension in a very hostile and dangerous environment. Eventually, in spite of initial victory, al-Mu'ayyad was unsuccessful in convincing Abu Kalijar to shift his loyalties to the Fatimid cause and was consequently forced to leave Fars.

### **Al-Mu'ayyad's Memoirs as a Source for History**

Klemm points out that al-Mu'ayyad composed his *Sira* narrating his experiences at the Buyid court in Fars, after he had spent nearly a decade at the Fatimid court in Egypt (p.45). Al-Mu'ayyad, upon reaching Egypt had high expectations that his efforts in Fars as a committed *da'i* would be recognised and that he would be assigned an elevated position in the Fatimid *da'wa*.

This did not materialise. In his *Sira* he talks about his dissatisfaction with the administrative position as the head of the Ministry of Seals which leads Klemm to the conclusion that he wrote his memoirs later in Egypt rather than in Fars. Klemm further elaborates on the parallels between al-Mu'ayyad's information in his memoirs and the political turn of events which led to the rise and fall of al-Mu'ayyad. She uses another contemporary geographical and historical source, namely Ibn al-Balkhi's *Fars-nama* (Book on Fars) to establish the connections. Ibn al-Balkhi writes about the existence in Fars of a strong, well-established Sunni orthodoxy which was oriented towards the Abbasid caliphate (p.47). Accounting for the short period of time that Abu Kalijar was open to al-Mu'ayyad's ideas, Klemm explains that between 430/1038 and 433/1042, Abu Kalijar used the unauthorised title of *shahanshah* (King of Kings), to openly assert his independence and autonomy from Baghdad, and this period corresponded to the time he accepted al-Mu'ayyad as his teacher and religious-political adviser (p.48). Furthermore, 433/1042 saw the death of Abu Kalijar's *wazir* al-'Adil, probably of Shi'i origin, who had sided with Daylami soldiers and acted as a mediator between al-Mu'ayyad and Abu Kalijar. Klemm assumes that it was the *wazir* who had, "advised Abu Kalijar to embark on a policy of openness towards Egypt and to establish contact with the ... representative of the Fatimids" (p.51). The *wazir*'s successor, a Sunni official, advocated allegiance to the Abbasid caliph. Klemm points out that it was at this time that the Abbasid caliph was propagating the controversial genealogy of the Fatimid Imams during this era of Sunni restoration, to which Abu Kalijar had to submit especially because he was willing to take military power at the Abbasid capital.

Thus, Klemm concludes, that al-Mu'ayyad's mission, "failed due to an international political dynamic that far outweighed his own influence" (p.52).

### **The Self-Portrayal of a *da'i***

In the final chapter of Part One, the author suggests that in the absence of other verifiable sources, the memoirs should be treated with caution, "...a *Sira* does not correspond to the Western understanding of a 'biography' or even 'autobiography,' one that portrays the character and development of an individual in their dialectical relationship with the surrounding world. A *Sira* is, in contrast, a biographical work that only covers those events and character traits of a person which have political or religious significance" (p.57). A *Sira*, thus apart from being a good historical source and a reflection of the ideology at the time it was written, raises the question of whether it can be used as an authentic historical source. Klemm asserts that in his *Sira*, al-Mu'ayyad wanted to write an official report – he probably wanted to show his talents, loyalty and motivation to his superiors in the *da'wa*. This self-portrayal, Klemm explains, was important for al-Mu'ayyad since he wanted to prove how he had consistently worked hard to meet the requirements and fulfill the ideals of his mission by portraying the qualities of *taqwa* (piety), *siyasa* (authority) and *ilm* (knowledge) which every *da'i* must possess. Notably, there existed an epistle, entitled, *The Brief and sufficient Epistle on the Code of Conduct and Etiquette of the Missionaries* written by Nisaburi, a *da'i* who lived a few decades before al-Mu'ayyad, which describes the professional requirements and ethics of the *da'wa*.

"I leave for you two weighty things (*thiqalayn*) – the Book of God and my family, the people of my household...become learned by a learned one of the people of my household, or from somebody who has learned from a learned one of the people of my household – thus you will be saved from hellfire."  
(p.27)

## **Part Two: Al-Mu'ayyad in Egypt and Syria**

### **Al-Mu'ayyad at the Fatimid Court in Cairo**

Klemm elaborates on al-Mu'ayyad's *Sira* which covers events spanning over twelve years, starting from his arrival in Cairo to the Fatimid occupation of Aleppo. These years were of significant disappointment and frustration for him. First of all, he was disappointed because he had hoped to be rewarded for the unique contributions that he had made in Fars. Secondly, he was unable to gain access to Imam al-Mustansir bi'llah. He was eventually appointed to the chancery, although he hoped to become the chief *da'i* since he felt that he was competent and loyal. It was at this time that he began to write his *Sira*, highlighting his commitment and dedication to try to attract the Imam's attention. Al-Mu'ayyad vented his frustrations during the first decade at the Fatimid court through a series of poems (p.76).

### **Al-Mu'ayyad's Political Mission in Northern Syria**

Klemm points out that this section of his memoirs, focuses once again on the political arena in that it documents the successes and setbacks al-Mu'ayyad experienced as he tried to establish a

Fatimid alliance against the Saljuqs. Al-Mu'ayyad's strategy of forming an alliance with al-Basasiri, leader of the Turkish troops in Baghdad, proved successful. He helped to prevent the Saljuqs from pushing into Fatimid territories in Syria and Egypt. In the meantime, the Oghuz Turkomen tribes, under the leadership of Toghril Beg from the Saljuq clan, took over Baghdad. Al-Mu'ayyad was successful in convincing the Syrian and Mesopotamian Bedouin amirs and princes, "to form a common front with the Fatimids and al-Basasiri, with the ultimate aim of capturing Baghdad" (p.81). Klemm mentions that, "on the last pages of the *Sira*, al-Mu'ayyad gives a summary of al-Basasiri's spectacular but brief occupation of the Abbasid capital" (p.85).

"The *majalis* were weekly sermons, to be carefully composed and thought out by the chief *da'i* on the basis of texts of the Ismaili tradition. He selected and interpreted his text according to an actual occasion, such as a religious festival or an important political event...beforehand, they were presented to the Imam who approved and released them for a public audience. The *majalis* can thus be considered a public forum reflecting the official position of the state on religious and political matters." (p.73)

### **Part Three: Al-Mu'ayyad at the Pinnacle of his Career**

#### **Al-Mu'ayyad as Chief *da'i* in Cairo**

Klemm elaborates, using the Yemeni *da'i* and historian, Idris 'Imad al-din's '*Uyun al-akhbar*' as the main source, that soon after al-Mu'ayyad returned to Cairo, he

began to be appreciated and his work came to be recognised. The Imam praised his knowledge and competence through a *qasida* that he himself composed (p.89). He was then appointed *bab al-abwab* (Supreme Gate), the highest religious rank in the Ismaili *da'wa* hierarchy functioning directly under the Imam. Some of his responsibilities included training *da'is* through the various stages of the *da'wa*, assigning individuals to take over specific assignments and transmitting specialised knowledge, expertise, training and instruction to those coming from distant lands. The *da'i*, philosopher and poet, Nasir-i Khusraw, trained by al-Mu'ayyad for three years, praises him in a poem, "then praise to the one who has freed me, my teacher, the healer of my soul, the embodiment of wisdom and glory. O thou, whose face is knowledge, whose body is virtue and heart-wisdom, O thou, instructor of humanity and its object of pride!" (p.101) Nasir-i Khusraw then returned to Balkh (present-day Mazar-i Sharif) as the *hujjah* for the entire region of Khurasan.

Klemm goes on to narrate al-Mu'ayyad's influence on the Tayyibi Ismaili community in Yemen and Gujarat by training Lamak b. Malik al-Hammadi for five years who eventually succeeded in leading the *da'wa* in those regions.

The eventful life of the remarkable diplomat, statesman and scholar came to an end at the age of over eighty. Having received three honours (unique in the history of the Ismaili *da'wa* and *dawla*), and notably dying as the grand chief of the mission, al-Mu'ayyad was laid to rest in the Dar al-'Ilm, both his place of residence and work, by Imam al-Mustansir bi'llah who personally led his funeral ceremonies.

*Memoirs of a Mission* is a lucidly written personal account of the remarkable life of an outstanding personality. It is a story of invincible willpower, unfettered deter-

mination, unflinching devotion and loyalty to the cause of faith. Al-Mu'ayyad faced tremendous challenges in his mission, but throughout his life he persevered, never swaying from his commitment to the Fatimid cause. His loyalty to the Imam of the Time and his unfaltering faith is truly exemplary. Qutbuddin, in her book, "Al-Mu'ayyad al shirazi and Fatimid *Da'wa* Poetry", referring to a verse in al-Mu'ayyad's *Diwan* concludes:

...the greater the faith, the harsher the trials. Thus, al-Mu'ayyad was 'purified', stage by stage in the fire of his trials, until he became as pure gold in his allegiance to the *da'wa* and the Imam. He now challenged his enemies to do their worst – he was not going to be shaken in his faith. 'Far be it for fire to consume gold!' (p.100)

"...Our followers have lost their right guidance, in the West, O companion, (and) the East. So spread among them what you will of our knowledge And be for them the concerned parent. Even though you're the last in our *da'wa*, you have surpassed the compass of the earlier (*da'is*). The like of you cannot be found among those who have gone, from all the people, nor those that remain." (p.90)

### ***Questions to Consider***

- 1) Why did al-Mu'ayyad's initial success as a Fatimid *da'i* in southern Iran lead to his expulsion from the province?
- 2) What lessons can we learn from the life of al-Mu'ayyad which have relevance in our lives?
- 3) Why is al-Mu'ayyad's *Sira* important as a historical source and as a resource of study in the Jamat today?
- 4) How have the roles and responsibilities of a *da'i* evolved over time?

### ***Suggestions for Further Reading***

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Qutbuddin, Bazat-Tahera. Al-Mu'ayyad al-Shirazi and Fatimid *Da'wa* Poetry. Chapter 1: Al-Mu'ayyad's Life and Career in the *Da'wa*. The Netherlands, 2005, pp. 15-100.