



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

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**A Reading Guide by Yasmin Khan**

**Introduction**

Even though you're the last in our *da'wa*,  
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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**



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-

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).

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 illness" (p.14e03).  
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### **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

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***

Daftary, Farhad. Ismailis in Medieval Muslim Societies. Chapter 4: The Ismaili *Da'wa* and the Fatimid *Dawla*. London, 2005, pp .62-88.

Hunsberger, Alice. Nasir Khursraw: The Ruby of Badakhshan. London, 2000, pp. 62-69.

Nasr, Seyyid Hossein with Aminrazavi Mehdi. An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia. Chapter 7: Al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din Shirazi. Oxford, 2001, pp. 280-290.

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.