Literacy, Munificence and Legitimation of Power during the Reign of the Party Kings in Muslim Spain
Schippers, A.

Published in:
Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Language and Literature

Citation for published version (APA):

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and turn their backs on her in adversity!
Glory to us who make a stand.
(God has erased our names)

We defy death,
And take to a mountain that does
not die
(they call it the people)

We will not run
We will stay home

My heart criss-crossed with wounds
My heart damned in all texts
Lay now on the wrecks of the city
A putrid rose,
Quiet at hand
Having said “No” to the ark and love the motherland.

Appendix II

In this paper I shall deal with the political situation of al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) during the Mulūk al-Tawdīf period in relation to the occurrence of munificence towards poets and learned men. The little states rivalled each other in munificence and attracted poets to their courts, Seville especially being a paradise for poets. I want to investigate how poets and learned men of lower class origins or those from ethnic groups and religions other than the Arab and Berber aristocracy, were able to acquire important posts at the courts due to their literary merits. Among the special cases I will study are the political careers of Ibn ‘Ammār and Samuel han-Nagid. In eleventh-century al-Andalus it was possible to get on in the world by means of skillful poetry and the knowledge of how to write letters in rhymed prose.

Important sources for eleventh century Andalusian poetry are the anthologies compiled by Ibn Bassām (his Kitāb al-Dhakhīrat) and al-Fath b. Khāqān (his Qalā‘id al-Iqyān). These books give a good impression of the importance of poetry in eleventh-century Andalus, since they are almost contemporary sources. Later sources include the anthologies compiled by Ibn Sa‘īd al-Maghribi, such as ‘Unwān al-Murqiṣāt wa-l-Mutribīt (Patterns of verses which make dance and sing), the Rāyāt al-Mubārīzin (the Banners of the champions) and the Kitāb al-mughrib fī hulā l-maghrib (the Relator of extraordinary things about the Jewels of the West). Among the later anthologies worth mentioning are Līsān al-Dīn b. al-Khāṭīb’s al-Ihāṭah fī Adbhūr Gharānītah (the Comprehensive book about the Events of Granada) which is more a biographical poetical anthology than a survey of the events which took place in Granada, and last but not least al-Maqqārī’s Nāfṣ al-Tīb (Fragrance of Perfume), which, as we know, was originally meant as a kind of biography of the aforementioned Līsān al-Dīn b. al-Khāṭīb. However, the first part of it is an introduction to Andalusian history and poetry.
The Dhakhira is divided according to geographical regions. Part I comprises Cordoba and surrounding territories, part II the western regions of al-Andalus including Seville, part III includes the Eastern region, i.e. the region of Murcia, Denia and Valencia, and part IV includes an anthology of poems from foreign lands who praised Andalusia. The four main parts of the Dhakhira are split up into sections dealing with individual poets, and in many places narrations of historical events of the eleventh century are inserted, based on the authority of the contemporary historiographer Ibn Ḥayyān.

In most cases Ibn Bassām first lists love poetry (nasib), then laudatory poetry (madiḥ), and finally various kinds of descriptive poetry and Lisān al-Dīn b. al-Khaṭīb follows the same system later on in his Iḥātāh. Al-Fath b. Khāqān’s Qalāʿid al-Ḥayān more or less copies Ibn Bassām’s system. He divides his work into four sections headed by the poet he considered the leader of the group. Part I is devoted to the noble qualities of chiefs of state and their sons, with examples of pleasing stories of their lives, led by al-Muṭṭamid, the king of Seville. Part II deals with the splendours of the vizirs and the poetry of the secretaries and masters of eloquence, starting with Ibn Zaydūn, and Part III deals with judges and scholars, headed by Abū l-Walid al-Bājī. The fourth part deals with learned literary persons and excellent poets among whom Ibn Khāfaja is the most prominent.

Both Ibn Bassām and Ibn Khāqān’s works were probably inspired by a nostalgic feeling about the greatness of literary activity in the eleventh century when there were so many kings and high functionaries who were Mæcenates of poetry. Poetry flourished because of the support provided by the Party kings. Ibn Khāqān writes in his preface: ‘When I saw that adāb, both prose and verse, grew weak and its scabbards were rusty in their scabbards, and its sparks were full of cinders, I saved what remained of its agonizing spasms and restored to it the spirit which had reached the highest perfection’. In this climate literature was linked with power and power with literature. The latter is not always the case in other cultures, but in Arabic culture this was true from pre-Islamic times. In Christian Western Europe of the time, most kings were not literate and seldom cultivated knowledge or arts, but rather mainly practised war. Their noblemen also limited themselves to the practice of warfare. In the Arabic situation, the kings legitimized themselves with warfare and poetry, which correspond to the pre-Islamic virtues of bravery and generosity. In Western Europe high posts were occupied by noble families and people belonged to the aristocracy by birth and could not switch from one class to another

whereas in Muslim Spain poets could arise to power from a situation of miserable poverty by means of their poetry. One of the well-known examples of a poor poet who became a powerful vizir, was Ibn ʿAmmār, whose life and works I will dwell upon in the first part of this paper.

In Western Europe non-Christians could not rise to power. In al-Andalus some Jews rose to positions of influence at Muslim courts because of their literacy and poetic talents. The most conspicuous case is Isma’il (sometimes called Samaw’al) Ibn al-Naghṭīlah known as Shemu’el the Nagṭīlah, I will be stressing the impact of literacy upon the acceptance of non-Muslims in high posts in the Andalusian states in the second part of this paper, and in the third part I will deal with a poet-king and his preference of poetry above warfare.

Dealing with Ibn ʿAmmār’s career from poet to vizir, shows how a poet of low origins started to make his living. Usually he was educated in a small village, the taste for poetry being given him by some grammarian who liked verse. Soon after, the poet perfected his skill in a larger town, and then began a life as an errant poet until the moment when he achieved success. Not a few of these errant poets came from the countryside.

Ibn ʿAmmār (1031–1084) was born near al-Shīlīb (the present-day Portuguese town Silves) of a poor family. The anecdotes that survive about him show us how he arrived in Silves with a mule as his only possession, not knowing if he would have anything to eat that day. Then he received a sack of barley from a merchant to whom he had addressed some verses. Another time, he presented himself before Abū ṣAbd-al-Rahmān ibn Tāhir, the ruler of Murcia, in a long garment of camel hair, with a hair-covering which made him appear ridiculous.

His miserable existence came to an end when he composed a poem ending with the letter ra’ on the Sevillian ʿAbbadid king al-Muṭṭamid (d. 1068), who had just returned from a successful expedition against the Berber kings of Ronda. As a result of this ra’ tīyya he received a poet’s reward and was enrolled in the register of those who were entitled to receive a poet’s pension. His relation with al-Muṭṭamid’s son, the later king al-Muṭṭamid, was to become legendary. Al-Muṭṭamid expelled Ibn ʿAmmār from his kingdom, because he disliked his ascendancy over his son. Ibn ʿAmmār’s place of exile was the North of Spain (Saragossa) and, during the course of this exile, he composed various poems, now famous, in which he asked repeatedly to be allowed to come back to Seville. After the accession to the throne by al-Muṭṭamid in 1068 he became the new king’s advisor and vizir, but after treacherous behaviour, including
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conspiracy with the enemy, and even composing an invective poem on the origin of al-Mu'tamid's dynasty and his wife Rumaykiyya, he was imprisoned and eventually killed. Although at the end of his life his own treacherous behaviour put an end to his career, we see at least how, in the beginning, he rose to power due to his poetic gifts.

The same holds true for the Jewish poet and learned man Shemuel han-Nagid who originated from Cordoba, where he received his education. Although he issued from a well-to-do and aristocratic family, it was not easy for a Jew to reach a powerful position at the Muslim courts. However, through his knowledge of Arabic poetry and adab he made an impression on the Berber/Sinhaja kings of Granada, so that they appointed him as a vizir and — according to Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic sources — as a general of the army. Apparently the importance of knowing poetry and adab in al-Andalus was such, that a non-Muslim, even a Jew, could rise to considerable power. In a recent publication, Scheindlin emphasizes how the situation in al-Andalus was an extraordinary one in this respect. He makes a comparison between the Jewish vizirs in al-Andalus with those in the East, saying about one of the first Andalusian Jewish vizirs, Hasday ibn Shaprut: 'It is instructive to compare Hasday's career with that of his younger contemporary Ya'aqob ibn Killis, a courtier in the service of the Fatimid caliph al-Mu'izz. Ibn Killis was a Jew who had converted to Islam; while he maintained his personal connections with Jews, he made a point of dissociating himself from Judaism. Hasday's case was quite different: not only he was openly Jewish, but he was also a central figure in the Jewish community itself.'

The same is true for Samuel han-Nagid. Let us quote another sentence by Scheindlin which points at the importance of Arabic culture in their rise to power. He says: 'The Jewish courtiers would not have been able to achieve their public positions if they had not been prepared for them by an Arab education similar to that enjoyed by their Muslim peers.'

The Jewish courtier Samuel han-Nagid alias Isma'il ibn Naghrila, who was also a general, is praised in Arabic sources mainly because of his intellectual activities. The Cordoban historian Ibn Ḥayyān says about him:

'This cursed (i.e. non-Muslim) man was a superior man although God did not inform him about the true religion. He possessed extensive knowledge and bore unpleasant behaviour with patience. He paired a solid and wise character with a clear mind and polite and friendly manners. Gifted with refined courtesy, he was able to flatter his enemies under all circumstances and to disarm their hatred because of his pleasant behaviour. He was a man of extraordinary gifts. He wrote in both languages: Arabic as well as Hebrew. He knew the literatures of both peoples. He went deeply into the roots and basics of the Arabic language and was familiar with the words of the most subtle grammarians. He spoke and wrote Classical Arabic with the greatest ease, and used this language in the letters he wrote in the name of the king. He made use of the usual Islamic expressions, the eulogies of God and Muhammad, our prophet, and counselled the addressee to live according to Islam. In brief, you would imagine that these letters had been written by a pious Muslim. He was excellent in the ancient sciences, in mathematics as well as astronomy. He also possessed ample knowledge in the field of logic. In dialectics he overwhelmed his adversaries. In spite of his lively spirit, he spoke little and reflected much. He collected a beautiful library. He died on 18th Muharram 459. The Jews honoured his bier. They bent their heads in humility. They gathered and wailed openly because of him.'

I now interrupt this notice, which was transmitted by Lisan al-Din b. al-Khatib in his Iḥāta as well as al-'Idhari's Bayān al-Mughrib for a while, in order to refer to the education of his son Yūsuf or Yosef, before continuing to render this passage.

Shemuel han-Nagid took great care of the intellectual education of his son Yosef. From the battle grounds he addressed a poem in Hebrew to the little Yosef, whom he urged to read anthologies of Arabic poetry, because one was only suitable for court life when one knew thousands of lines of Arabic poetry by heart. Thus the poet writes to his young son on this occasion:  

1. Yosef, receive this book which I have chosen for you from the best of the language of the Arabs.
2. I copied it — while the deadly spear was whetted and the sword was drawn.
3. Whilst Death decreed that one army should be replaced by another one, every time anew.
4. I do not cease teaching you, although Death's mouth is open all around me . . .
5. In order that wisdom may come upon you, for that is dearer to me than discovering my foes defeated.
6. Take it and reflect upon it, and quit the crowds who deride language and speech.
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7. Know that the man of understanding is like a tree of sweet fruit whose leaves are healing remedies, while the fool is like the tree of the forest whose limbs and branches will be consumed by fire in the end.

This endeavour to educate his son in order to prepare him for later statesmanship is also mentioned in the passage by Ibn Ḥayyān quoted above, which I interrupted for a while. It reads: 27

'[Samuel han-Nagid/Isma'il ibn Naghrila] had encouraged his son Yūsuf, who bore the kunya Abū Ḥusayn, to read books. For him he brought together masters and writers from all directions, who instructed him and taught him. The art of writing was also part of this. Thus he prepared him for his first job, namely being secretary of [Buluqṣīn], the son of his master, who was the candidate to take [his master's] place. This served as a preparation for the basics of his work. When Isma'il [Samuel] died on the above-mentioned date, Bādis approached Yūsuf. Bādis showed himself to be satisfied with him, as a replacement for his father at [Bādis'] service.'

But Yūsuf was not as modest as his father in his behaviour. Or, to put it in the terms of the Bayān al-Mughrib quoted in al-Iḥtāḥ:

' [Isma'il or Samuel] left behind a son, named Yūsuf, who had never known the humility of the dhimma, nor the filthy situation in which Jews must normally live. He was a good-looking man, sharp of wit. He started to improve his situation with enthusiasm. He collected taxes and extracted money and appointed Jews to all kinds of functions.'

It was his alleged cooperation with the enemy which brought an end to his life and power.28 He was murdered in a riot by members of the Ṣinḥaja of Granada and crucified at the gate to the town and many other Jews were killed. But then the source speaks about the cultural impact of both:

'The original location of his grave - and that of his father - is known even to-day by the Jews who consecutively transmitted this in their circles. Before the gate of Ilbira, at the distance of a bow-shot, across the road. On his grave is a piece of limestone, roughly shaped. He was famous because of his rank in enjoying a delicate life, his refined behaviour, elegance and literacy. These qualities added to his reputation so that he deserves mention with important intellectuals and unique men. He had the same stature except for his religious beliefs.'

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The cultural impact of the clan of the Nagid was such that the loss of this family was felt as a great cultural loss. Moses ibn Ezra in his Kitāb al-Muhādara wa-l-Mudhakara compared this to the loss of the pre-Islamic leader Qays ibn 'Āsim, about whose death the following well-known poetic line was recited:29

'His Death was not the loss of one person/ but with him the building of a whole people was demolished./ (Mā kāna Qaysun hulku-hu hulku wāhidin/ wa-lākinna-hu būnīyān qawmin tāḥaddamal-a/)' 30

Finally I will deal with one of the poet-kings of the period of the Party-Kings, al-Mu'tamid b. 'Abbād, king of Seville.30 While the kings in the Christian West had their legitimacy of power mainly as defenders of the Faith, the Muslim kings in al-Andalus associated themselves more with the pre-Islamic or ancient Arab virtues of generosity and bravery. They fell short in defending their faith. In their virtues of generosity and bravery, they deviated from the middle course. They were not only generous towards poets, receiving them in drinking bouts and donating slave-girls to them, but were also generous towards themselves, indulging in drinking wine and making love to slave-girls. As far as their bravery is concerned, they did not fight with their Christian enemies to whom they instead paid tribute, but had continuous wars with each other.

Al-Mu'tamid (1040–1095) the poet-king of Seville, was a prolific poet and also a valiant king. He ended his life in exile in Aghmāt, where Yūsuf ibn Tashūfīn sent all the Andalusian kings deposed by him around 1091.

He is a good example of a poet king who gained most of his repute as a hero in the battlegrounds of his time. Nevertheless, he was also a poet who considered poetry to be the most important aspect of statesmanship. Poetry gave the Andalusian king his prestige, although not in the eyes of Ibn Tashūfīn, who did not even know Arabic,31 and who - according to various contemporary sources - criticised al-Mu'tamid because of his indulgence in wine drinking and womanising (he occupied himself only with the ajwāfayn, the two holes, i.e. the belly and the vulva, so relates al-Ḥimyari), and not devoting enough forces to save Islamic Spain from the threat of the Christian king Alfonso.

The role of poetry in his life was conspicuous. In his adolescence, during his father (al-Mu'taḍid's) reign he became a friend of the former errant poet Ibn 'Ammār and remembers their life in Silves in a poem ("How many nights I have spent at the barrage of the river in pleasure with a girl like the bending of the river with bracelets").32 During his
father's reign he had to make use of his poetry for political reasons. He
lost the city of Malaga, when on expedition against Bâdis of Granada in
1064 and, in order to avoid punishment tried to flatter his father al-
Mu'tamid by composing a poem which has since become famous.24
Likewise poetry played a role in his initial acquaintance with his wife
Rumaykiyya.25 The romantic anecdote is well known. Along the Great
River (Guadalquivir) al-Mu'tamid and his vizir Ibn 'Ammâr were play-
ing ijdza ('continuing a line of poetry with the same rhyme and metre').
At one point Ibn 'Ammâr was not quick enough to continue al-
Mu'tamid's hemistich (sana'a l-rihu min al-md'i zarad or 'the wind
has spun a coat of mail of water') and a girl who was washing some linen
in the river, suddenly appeared with the desired continuation (ayyu dir^n
li-qitdlin law jamad or 'What a shield it would be for battle, if it
stiffened'). She was the daughter of a muleteer called Rumayk ibn
al-Hajjâj, and al-Mu'tamid immediately wanted to marry her. She sub-
sequently became his wife, was called I'^mad, and was later famous for
her capriciousness.

When he was deposed, al-Mu'tamid composed poems about his
miserable condition in exile in Aghmat,26 but this poetry -- although
famous in the anthologies -- failed to save him from this situation and
bring him to power again. This, however, was because the period of the
Party Kings had come to an end and the Almoravids rose to power,
whereupon the poetic climate deteriorated.

There were political and social reasons for this gradual deterioration
of the poetic climate in the courts of al-Andalus. The Almoravid rulers
did not have such an interest in poetry, if they knew the sophisticated
language of Arabic poetry at all. Monroe describes the arrival of the
Almoravids and their effect in the following terms:27

'The political failure of the refined mulâk al-tawâd'if produced a
violent reaction by the urban middle and lower classes. The reli-
gious ideals of Islamic universalism were by now strongly opposed
to those of secular Arab culture, and with the aid of the Almoravids
unity and commercial prosperity for a time replaced the earlier
fragmentation and extravagance. The Almoravids were a funda-
mentalist Islamic brotherhood founded in the upper Senegal in the
middle of the eleventh century which soon spread from the
western Sudan to the north African coast, from the Atlantic to
Algiers. They were Sinhâji Berbers, and wore the veil like their
modern descendants the Tuaregs. ( . . .)'28

'The irruption of the Almoravids had profound and even
dislocating effects on Andalusian culture. The former were strictly
orthodox and they recognized the 'Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad.
Their government was conducted through the support of the
Malikite faqih' who constituted an intolerant, narrowly legalistic
theocracy and imposed a tight control on the free expression of
ideas. (. . .)'29

'Aristocratic poetry fell out of favour with the loss of royal patronage.
Ibn 'Abîdtîn, a secretary under the Aftasid dynasty of Badajoz, wrote a
long elegy to mourn the fall of his sovereigns who were murdered by the
Almoravids. ( . . .)'29

'Poets were often forced to entertain less-refined audiences than
formerly and so they naturally tended to cultivate the lighter forms. For
this reason the muwashshahât enjoyed a great vogue at this time.'

To sum up my conclusions, during the period of the Party Kings in
al-Andalus, the mastery of Arabic poetry and literature could break
trough the usual pattern of the layers of society: men and women of
poor descent could come to power thanks to their skill in poetry and
could become part of the aristocracy. We have seen how Ibn 'Ammâr -- a
poor itinerant poet -- came to power, or how Rumaykiyya -- the daughter
of a muleteer -- became the wife of a king solely because of their poetic
skill. We have also seen how members of a religious minority like the
Jews could become influential in the Muslim courts and even acquire the
status of vizir thanks to their knowledge of Arabic culture. This special
situation came to an end with the arrival of the Almoravids who gave the
religious sciences a higher status than Arabic poetry and literature. I do
not know whether the period of the Andalusian Party kings is unique in
Islamic history or whether there are other periods and countries in which
similar situations can be found. However, if we compare al-Andalus with
Christian Western Europe, intellectual activities had more status in the
former than in the latter. The aristocracy in Christian Western Europe
seemed too closed upon itself to make it possible for a poor, literate man
to move towards the aristocracy. The survival of the Ancient Arab virtues
in al-Andalus during the reign of the Party-kings brought a flourishing
period of Arabic literature into existence which even now fires our
imagination.

I am grateful that in the present-day Muslim world some of those who
are in power take an interest in poetry and Arabic literature just as the
Muslim kings of al-Andalus did. Otherwise the present Shaban
Memorial Conference would not have been possible.
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