

2017

**The Art of Reciting Poetry of  
Praise, Pride, and Fortitude**

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**Inscribed on UNESCO's  
List of Intangible Cultural  
Heritage in Need of Urgent  
Safeguarding**

**AL AZI**



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## Introduction

Al Azi is the traditional Emirati art of poetry recital, performed by desert dwellers and poets from the Al Ain Oases region of Abu Dhabi. Although concentrated around the Al Ain Region, the art has spread to many parts of the United Arab Emirates and has been adopted by many tribes, such as the Shuhouh tribe of Ras Al Khaimah. Among the most prominent Al Azi poets are Obaid bin Mohammed Abdullah Al Neyadi, Sultan bin Saud Al Kuwaiti, Saeed bin Mesaieed Al Neyadi, Abdullah bin Salem Naaman Kaabi, Alkasir and Saeed bin Hilal.

Al Azi poetry does not comprise structured intonation, percussion or other instrumental backing. It is delivered by a lead poet or performer, backed by a chorus of male vocalists. The lead performer recites a prearranged piece of traditional rhythmic poetry, in which the rhythm of each verse varies from the previous, and which is usually infused with verses and sayings of traditional wisdom.



## Al Azi Poems and Performance

There are three main types of Al Azi poems:

**Al Alpha (Alphabetic):** This is the oldest and most complex form of the art. It requires long-drawn breathing and inspired creativity by the poet. Verses are arranged alphabetically, and a single poem may comprise up to 68 verses.

**Numeric:** This form depends on counting from one to ten, and so the numeric poem is short and specific.

**Al Mu'allak:** This is the newest and most widespread form of Al Azi poetry. It is more of a freestyle performance that is not bound by a specific number of verses or a particular structure.

These forms of poetry are rearranged in the performance of the Al Azi, and then delivered as a song or chant. Practitioners of this art form agree that delivery, which is usually accompanied by expressive motions and gestures, is the most important element of Al Azi performances, and is what inspires enthusiasm in the audience.

The poet begins by reciting a set piece invoking Almighty God and a prayer for the Prophet (Peace be upon him). The chorus behind him responds with chats of slimt (peace be upon you) and al milk lillah (all possessions are unto God), accompanied by the ritualistic raising of swords or sticks.

Al Azi production is usually a collaboration between the poet, who writes and arranges the poems, and a trained performer with a strong resonant voice and mastery of the art. On occasion, and depending on his inclination, the poet himself may perform the Al Azi.

The third element in the art of Al Azi is the male chorus, which moves in step with the poet or performer. The chorus, sometimes referred to as al sufouf (the lines), echoes specific words and phrases in response to, and in rhythm with, the lead performer.

The fourth element of the Al Azi is the mutalakeen (recipients), and can be men, women or children, as well as tribal chiefs or honoured guests.



## Al Azi on UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding

Al Azi is classified as an oral performance art and is associated with social rituals and relations, and a deep understanding and rituals related to nature and the universe. Al Azi is an important folk art for Emiratis, and one that fosters social cohesion and unity, and strengthens affinity to their homeland. It is an art that has been passed down through the ages, with each generation of poets and performers inheriting it from those who came before them. For this reason, Emirati society is keen on safeguarding it as an art form and to preserve the writings of the great poets of the country's past.

Although Al Azi is a traditional performance art that has been part of Emirati society since ancient times, it is witnessing a revival among contemporary audiences, artists and troupes, with new poems being written and fresh elements being added to

some of the better-known poems. Newly introduced elements include themes like courtship, national pride and praise for the nation's leadership. This traditional art form helps to foster long-held values and principles of Emirati culture, such as courage, generosity, sacrifice and affinity to country and leadership. As such, it is a living and evolving form of traditional art.

Al Azi continues to be a popular centrepiece of many occasions, such as weddings and national celebrations, and as a reception ritual for officials and state guests. In view of its importance, Al Azi was listed as a national feature by UNESCO in December 2017, and is inscribed on the 'List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding'.

