

2014

A Traditional Performing Art

**Inscribed on UNESCO's
Representative List
of the Intangible Cultural
Heritage of Humanity**

Al-Ayyala



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Introduction

The folk dance Al-Ayyala has long been established as a popular art throughout the United Arab Emirates, having been passed down through successive generations. It is practiced primarily by males from all ages, with the addition of the participation of a small number of female participants known as na'ashat, who toss their long hair from side-to-side, signifying their faith in the protection offered to them by their chivalrous male counterparts.

Historically, Al-Ayyala has always been linked with the culture and gallantry of the desert, and is considered among the significant social rituals that contribute to the spirit of dignity and honour of the coastal and domestic social groups and communities. Moreover, it has become an integral part of their celebrations of identity and history, a heritage-based tradition, and a cultural show embodying their past and symbolising their national identity.

Al-Ayyala is commonly practised throughout the year, especially during national celebrations and social events. The performances are often held in the presence of heads of state-during their welcome ceremonies, for example-as well as at a variety of conferences and heritage festivities, owing to its high status in society as a key means of social recreation and entertainment.

Furthermore, Al-Ayyala embodies the heritage of Emirati society, hence the participation of male and female groups of all ages from all social classes. Rulers and officials participate in Al-Ayyala shows during national festivities and events at all levels.

Al-Ayyala is practised among communities living in both the desert oases and the coastal and inland cities of the UAE. In fact, there are two types of Al-Ayyala; coastal Al-Ayyala practised by the people of the coastal regions and inland Al-Ayyala practiced by the people of the desert and inland regions.



Al-Ayyala

Al-Ayyala is a popular cultural performance conducted by certain rural and urban communities and groups. It involves performing and the chanting of poetic lyrics accompanied by percussion instruments, notably drums of various sizes. Men standing in two opposite rows perform this show. Each row usually consists of twenty or more men, with the show simulating battle scenes in which performers form rows, holding thin bamboo sticks in their hands that represent arrows or swords. Each row of performers engages in alternate moves, signifying victory or defeat. In the interim, they all chant poetic lyrics on the topic of valour and move their heads and sticks in sync with the rhythmic beat of the drums.

The performance is governed by a set of rules, in which the group is led by a leader known as al-abu (the father), who is responsible for determining and maintaining harmony with the rhythm. Between the two rows stand the drummers (holders of al-zana) and

other performers (known as al-jaweela), who move around in a circular fashion holding swords or guns, which they occasionally hurl to the sky and catch.

In addition, the na'ashat, a group of young women wearing ornate traditional dresses, stand in front of the two rows of men and toss their long hair from side-to-side, signifying their faith in the protection offered by their chivalrous male counterparts.

The chanted poems, replete with feelings of valour and chivalry, are considered an integral part of the show, given that they are related to Nabati poetry. Different types of poetry may be chosen depending on the show. The drums used to produce the accompanying and synchronising rhythmic sounds include both large drums (short one or al-ras) and smaller drums (al-takhmir, al-samaa, al-tar, al-damam, al-duffuf (tambourine), al-tous (brass cymbals), al-rahmani, and al-kassir).



Knowledge transfer

Performances of Al-Ayyala encourage the voluntary and spontaneous participation of audiences of all ages. Furthermore, children usually participate in a number of social and festive celebrations, including the religious, national and private celebrations during which Al-Ayyala is performed. As the children participate, they begin to interact with the traditions of their heritage and acquire knowledge of this popular art. The youth are encouraged to participate in informal presentations in their districts or schools.

The informal transfer process of Al-Ayyala is maintained by skilled teachers, through training courses held in heritage associations, clubs and centres affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development that are open to young participants, and are there to support the trainers' endeavours in conveying this art to new generations.

The domestic communities, folk groups and heritage clubs that perform

Al-Ayyala shows at weddings and other events also play a role in its dissemination, raising awareness in society about the significance of this traditional heritage art, thereby granting more attention to its preservation. Also important is the major role played by television and other mass media in promoting the performance.

Al-Ayyala on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

There is no doubt that the inscription of Al-Ayyala art on UNESCO's representative list is having a positive impact on the propagation of this original heritage art, as it augments the level of awareness of the prominence of intangible cultural heritage at both domestic and official levels. It provides clear opportunities for the continuity and permanence of this popular art, which has already survived generations, strengthening its standing in the field of performing arts, and ensuring its continued practice by current and future generations in the UAE and the Sultanate of Oman.

These expectations and hopes are consolidated by the active participation of a number of civil institutions and societies in both countries. This aided with effectively promoting it as a form of popular literary folk art, highlighting the fact that its candidacy on UNESCO's representative list has imparted a sense of domestic popularity and appreciation, in addition to the international recognition of the art of Al-Ayyala. The global acknowledgment introduces this aspect of heritage to the peoples of the world, reinforcing the cultural roots linking the UAE with the Sultanate of Oman and other countries, given that the art of Al-Ayyala represents an integral part of the heritage of all humanity, with historical implications, cultural values, and social traditions.



