

A Traditional Performing Art

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

Al-Razfa



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Introduction

Al-Razfa, a popular performance art practised in the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman, is truly an important addition to the intangible cultural heritage, as it is performed on a large scale in both countries. This delightful art gives performers a sense of identity and communication through their performance, songs and rhythms that have been maintained in their cultural and heritage for many years, passed down through generations of different ages at social events, occasions and national festivities.

Though this unique art emerged among the Bedouin communities and groups in the desert areas of the Al Dhafra Region of Abu Dhabi, it has spread far and wide throughout the UAE, including major cities and districts, and in the coastal areas of Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain and Ras Al Khaimah, in addition to the mountainous areas around Al-Fujairah and the oases in the city of Al Ain.

Al-Razfa is practised by many parts of society, which may be one of the reasons behind its longevity and prominence, as it has been transmitted directly from one generation to another through participation and learning. In fact, parents are keen to encourage their children to practise and perform. They can be observed on different occasions assigning to their children specific roles suitable for their age. Hence, children learn this heritage art through stimulation and gradual practice, as well as by watching the groups that perform Al-Razfa at social events such as weddings, festivals and anniversaries, not to mention the fact that it is a public performance based on mass participation.

On the other hand, many heritage associations in the UAE and the Sultanate of Oman have committed to teaching young children and individuals who are not familiar with this genuine traditional art. Furthermore, cultural, educational and media institutions (especially satellite television and radio stations specialising in heritage-based programmes) play a significant role in raising awareness of Al-Razfa and other traditional performing arts. In addition, the Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development, the Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi and other heritage associations and institutions in the UAE are exerting their full effort to attract popular folk art troupes specialising in this heritage art to present their performances at festivals, celebrations, social occasions and other events. These troupes are increasing in number, and even the number of individuals joining them is on the rise as these folklore groups witness wide geographic diffusion.



Al-Razfa

When Al-Razfa is performed, two lines of men face each at a distance of 10-20 metres where the drummers, musicians and Al-Razeefa or Al-Muzafnen gather. These are male performers of Al-Razfa, of different ages, performing movements with their swords or daggers, with the participation of the young girls adding to the beauty and rhythm. The latter, known as na'ashat, toss their long hair from side-to-side in time to the music.

Al-Razfa performance commences with a few individuals, quickly joined by others. In the two opposite rows, the performers line up side-by-side in a conspicuous indication sign of their unity and cohesion. This refined regularity is accompanied by the recitation of poetic stanzas of short sentences exchanged between the two lines with rhythmic, musical tones, giving the scene an air of harmony and synchronisation. Although in the past Al-Razfa was performed to the rhythmic beat of drums alone, certain musical instruments have since been introduced to the performance while still preserving the genuine, authentic aspects of this ancient heritage art.

The Inscription of Al-Razfa on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

As a popular performance art, Al-Razfa has a prominent and vital role in many social and cultural fields in the UAE and the Sultanate of Oman. Though it is mainly a recreational art, it boosts societal participation and the gathering of community members, imbuing them with a profound feeling of belonging and establishing a national identity. Furthermore, it is a significant means for the preservation of the vitality of traditional poetry. Due to the great significance of Al-Razfa in heritage, it has become a complementary and integral aspect of weddings, national occasions and leaders' welcome ceremonies, as it eloquently expresses glee, national celebration, gratitude, valour and sincerity. Poets who compose verses and poems for Al-Razfa performances are keen to stress and highlight these values, designing their stanzas to identify with the occasions and festivities at which they are performed. The great recognition and high status of Al-Razfa among other popular arts-and its prominence as an art deeply-rooted in the heritage of the UAE and Sultanate of Oman-have necessitated the promotion and introduction of Al-Razfa by UNESCO, with this cultural platform for peoples' heritage. Al-Razfa has been inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in December 2015, thus solidifying its status as a prominent aspect of cultural human heritage.



