

Livin' on a prayer: Champion Pakistan Quran reader in full voice

Hassan Ali Kasi was recently named champion of an international online qari competition hosted by Afghanistan

● Ali Kasi was tutored in the Quran by his father, and his recitation skills quickly earned him recognition at national level

● Boys who complete their studies can go on to become teachers or lead prayers at mosques around the world

AFP | Islamabad

To master the art of Quran recitation, 21-year-old Hassan Ali Kasi had to follow a strict regime of yoga, hours of rehearsing vocal scales -- and a total ban on biryani.

His dedication is paying off, and he was recently named champion of an international online qari competition hosted by Afghanistan, where he was up against men from 25 other countries.

Revered in Pakistan, qaris are professional reciters of the Quran, called upon to lead prayers at mosques and also to teach the Muslim holy book to students.

They are in particularly high demand during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting currently being observed around the world.

"It was a job of the prophets," Ali Kasi told AFP in the capital, Islamabad.

"One of the very first elements of preaching was recitation. It is as old as Islam."

Qaris require perfect Arabic pronunciation, a difficult feat in Pakistan where Urdu is the national language.

A finesse of rhythm and intonation produces the slow, melodic sound similar to the distinctive adhan, or call to prayer, delivered through loudspeakers



x Hassan Ali Kasi, a qari or professional reciter of the Quran, practices yoga as part of his training regime in Islamabad

from the top of mosques five times a day.

Recitations during competitions can last for 15 minutes, so Ali Kasi practises yoga to help

with breath control, and vocal exercises to strengthen his voice.

"A qari should be able to recite for a minimum of 50 seconds without taking a breath," said Ali

Kasi, an Islamic Studies student at a university in the capital.

"The throat is very sensitive, a qari should avoid cold water and fatty food as it produces too much mucus, which causes abrasion when you touch high notes," he cautioned.



Hassan Ali Kasi, a qari or professional reciter of the Quran, recites verses from the Muslim holy book in Islamabad



Hassan Ali Kasi, a qari or professional reciter of the Quran, practices yoga as part of his training regime in Islamabad

He was tutored in the Quran by his father, and his recitation skills quickly earned him recognition at national level where he won numerous awards before making it onto the international stage.

'The voice is a gift from God'

Many qaris emerge after being taught at religious schools known as madrassas, where young boys are taught to memorise the Quran -- often with little understanding of the Arabic language and also at the expense of other subjects.

Boys who complete their studies can go on to become teachers or lead prayers at mosques around the world -- even if they earn little money from it.

"One has to be meticulously hardworking," said Abdul Qudus, from the Wafaq-ul-Madaris al-Arabia, the country's largest group of madrassas.

"The voice is a gift from God, but one has to polish it."

He said hundreds of prayer leaders in the Middle East are madrasa graduates, while oth-



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HASSAN ALI KASI

ers are now teaching the Quran online to Pakistanis living overseas in Europe or America.

Ali Kasi, who spends hours practising verses ahead of competitions, said quality teachers were the key to his winning voice.

"When you follow a good qari, you can spread your voice across the world," he said.

YOU KNOW WHAT

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Ramadan cooking

Berber Skillet Bread

Ingredients

For the garlic starter

2/3 cup (104 grams) plus 1/2 cup (70 grams) regular semolina flour (pasta flour)

3/4 cup (85 grams) all-purpose flour

2 garlic cloves, peeled

For the bread

2 2/3 cups (400 grams) extra-fine semolina flour

1/2 teaspoon (1 1/2 grams) dry yeast

1 1/2 teaspoons (15 grams) fine salt

1/3 cup (52 grams) regular semolina flour or all-purpose flour, for handling the dough

Moroccan Almond-Argan Butter, for serving

Method

For the garlic starter

Make the starter: In a glass or ceramic bowl, combine 2/3 cup semolina flour with the all-purpose flour. Gradually stir in 3/4 cup water to make a wet dough. Mix in garlic, cover, wrap in a towel and leave in a warm place, like an unheated oven, for a day.

Uncover the starter, add 1/4 cup water and the remaining 1/2 cup semolina flour, and mix. Cover, wrap in a towel, and leave for 12 to 24 hours. The starter will get a crusty top and blossom underneath. Scoop out 1/2 cup starter and discard the rest, including garlic cloves (otherwise, as it continues to ferment, the smell would drive you out of your home).

Make the bread: In a food processor fitted with the metal blade, combine extra-fine semolina flour, the 1/2 cup of starter, the yeast and salt. Pulse once or

twice. Add 1 cup warm water and process for 15 to 20 seconds to knead. Let rest 10 minutes. Pulsing food processor, trickle in another 1/4 cup water. Sprinkle a work surface with flour and turn dough onto it. Cover with an upside-down bowl for 10 minutes. Cut 4 1-foot squares of waxed or parchment paper and sprinkle with flour. Divide dough in four and put each piece on a piece of a floured paper, turning to coat. Press each into an 8-inch circle. Cover with kitchen towels and let rise 1 hour.

For the bread

When ready to cook, gently flatten each disk, then prick the tops all over with a fork. Heat an 8- or 10-inch nonstick skillet or griddle (or two, if you have them) over medium-high heat. Sprinkle the pan's surface with flour, then pick up a dough round and flip it into the pan, paper side up. Peel off the paper



and adjust the heat so that the bread sizzles gently. When it is browned and blistered on the bottom, about 5 minutes, flip the bread out onto a plate, then slide it back into the pan to cook the other side. Cook about 2 minutes, shaking the skillet often to prevent sticking. When browned, firm and fragrant, slide onto a platter and serve immediately, or cover with a towel to keep warm while you cook the remaining breads. Serve with Moroccan almond-argan butter.