Revitalization of Oral History Narratives: Biography of K. H. Imam Bukhari Blitar

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Abstract. The story of the struggle of KH. Imam Bukhari, a Sufi scholar and anti-colonial fighter, remains deeply rooted in the family and collective memories of the Jatinom Kanigoro Blitar community. This article aims to revitalize and document his biography through oral history research methods supported by *library research*. Revitalization was carried out by collecting sources, exploring, verifying and reconstructing narrative fragments told by his descendants and community members who have emotional and spiritual ties, directly or indirectly. The results of this study indicate that the figure of KH. Imam Bukhari is a figure who is not only focused on mastering religious knowledge as the founder and caretaker of an Islamic boarding school but also carried out the indigenization of Islamic religious values in the Jatinom region. The indigenization of Islam is to bring together Islamic values with local socio-cultural values. The indigenization carried out by K.H. Imam Bukhari succeeded in creating peace and avoiding cultural conflicts and giving birth to sustainable socio-cultural harmony. K.H. Imam Bukhari also continued the baton of resistance against Dutch colonialism. The results of his thoughts on Islamic values were applied in the form of symbolic behavior that was an expression of cultural and spiritual resistance against Dutch colonialism. This narrative revitalization is expected to enrich the methodological treasure in reconstructing the struggles and biographies of regional figures stored in the collective memory of the community.

Keywords: Oral History, Biography, KH. Imam Bukhari, Sufi Scholar, Symbolic Resistance Behavior, Blitar.

1 Introduction

Oral history narratives tend to be highly subjective, often influenced by the narrator's current position or beliefs. They tend to reinterpret the past based on their subsequent life experiences. Revitalization is needed to ensure that oral history narratives have academic validity and can be scientifically validated. This research focuses on the stories of events or individuals from marginalized groups and witnesses overlooked in official documents or populist official histories. The content of oral history narratives is rich with descriptions of psychological states, emotions, and explanations of the reasons behind undiscovered personal decisions. In official documents or archives [7], oral history narratives are more easily understood by absorbing continuous personal messages to the listener, the story is simply repeated without any attempt to analyze and explain its meaning academically. The revitalization of oral narratives is carried

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out in the form of historical reconstruction through appropriate methodology. The revitalization of oral narratives is carried out on a figure who in the construction of oral history is positioned as an important figure in the resistance against Dutch colonialism, but is not popular in the official historical narrative that is developing today. The figure being studied is the oral history of Kyai Imam Bukhari, an educational cleric from Jatinom Village, Kanigoro District, Blitar, fragments of which still exist today.

In the Blitar community, especially in the Jatinom Kanigoro area, the figure of KH Imam Bukhari is known, and every year a commemoration is held in the form of "*haul*". In this event, a biography compiled by the committee (Maftahul Uluum Islamic Boarding School as a direct descendant of K.H. Imam Bukhari) was read. The Maftahul Uluum Islamic Boarding School has made efforts to strengthen the oral narrative that has developed so far about KH Imam Bukhari, both from sources within the direct descendants of KH. Imam Bukhari, as well as from external parties and the involvement of several academics, but the results have not been officially published. Several publications about KH Imam Bukhari have been made, both from research results and in the form of student thesis assignments. This scientific work still needs strengthening from the perspective of historical methods, so that the reconstruction of the biography of KH Imam Bukhari which has been based on oral tradition can be used as a history of life (*life history*) whose existence is recognized.

2 Method

This research uses an oral history approach (*oral history*) and historical methods to reconstruct the biography, thoughts, and role of K.H. Imam Bukhari in the social, religious, and political dynamics of the Dutch colonial period, including his exile in Banda Neira. The research activity began by identifying and describing various oral history narratives that developed in the family, Islamic boarding school, and community environments, and tracing the sources that became the basis for the formation of these narratives. According to Lim et al. [7], oral history not only functions to record past information, but also helps understand the relationship between life experiences, memories, and how an event is interpreted by its speakers. Therefore, this study not only traces the facts of the life of K.H. Imam Bukhari but also examines how the memory of the figure is inherited and constructed in society. Although K.H. Imam Bukhari has passed away, his ideas and thoughts can be traced through various legacies such as manuscripts, poetry, Islamic boarding school documents, family archives, photographs, and narratives that have been passed down from generation to generation.

Research informants were determined using techniques *purposive sampling*, namely the selection of informants based on their knowledge and connection to the life of K.H. Imam Bukhari. Informants include family members, administrators of the Maftahul Uluum Islamic Boarding School, students, and community leaders who understand the life history of the figure. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, documentation studies, and literature reviews. The research was conducted at the Maftahul Uluum Islamic Boarding School, Blitar, as the main location because it is the center of activity and historical traces of K.H. Imam Bukhari. The validity of

the data was tested through source triangulation by comparing information from interviews with colonial archives, Islamic boarding school documents, manuscripts, photographs, and various other written sources. Data analysis was carried out through stages of historical methods which include heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The heuristic stage was used to collect oral and written sources, source criticism to assess the authenticity and credibility of the data, interpretation to understand the meaning and historical context of the research findings, and historiography to compile a reconstruction of the biography of K.H. Imam Bukhari systematically and based on historical evidence.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 The Character of K.H. Imam Bukhari: An Oral Perspective

K.H. Imam Bukhari is thought to have been born around 1853 in Kaligintung, Yogyakarta, with the nickname Samsuri. His father was a prominent cleric, Muhammad Kahfi Ats Tsani, known as one of Prince Diponegoro's followers during the Java War (1825-1830). After the war ended, some of Diponegoro's followers left Yogyakarta for the Mancanegara Wetan region, such as Tulungagung, Kediri, and Blitar, as part of the process of spreading da'wah and rebuilding socio-religious life. To this day, the identity of K.H. Imam Bukhari's mother remains uncertain due to limited historical sources.

The exact time of the family's move from Yogyakarta to East Java is also unknown, other than the statement that the move occurred after the end of the Java War, namely after 1830. Several oral sources mention that while still in Yogyakarta, K.H. Imam Bukhari was married, but his marriage ended in divorce before he decided to migrate to East Java. On his way to Blitar, he first stopped in Ponorogo to deepen his religious knowledge with Kiai Zaid in Njalen, then continued his intellectual journey at the Keling or Ringin Agung Islamic Boarding School, Pare, Kediri, under the guidance of Kiai Nawawi (Interview with Ali in 2026).

After completing his studies at the Ringin Agung Islamic Boarding School, K.H. Imam Bukhari settled in Jambe Wangi and around 1883 began pioneering an Islamic education center by establishing the Daarus Salaam Islamic Boarding School, which means Peaceful Village. On a plot of land given to him, he built a simple mosque and several boarding rooms as a center for religious learning for the students. As the number of students and educational activities grew, in 1923 K.H. Imam Bukhari led the construction of a more suitable mosque and boarding school, which later became known as the name of the Maftahul Uluum Islamic Boarding School. To this day, the Islamic boarding school continues to exist as a successor to the Islamic preaching and education he pioneered. In addition to his role as a scholar and educator, K.H. Imam Bukhari also left behind several religious manuscripts, including copies of the Tafsir Jalalain and the Ummul Barahin, which are still preserved as part of his intellectual legacy (Interview with Fuad in 2026). Several remaining books provide clues regarding Imam Bukhari's background and thinking.

Another aspect that emerged from the oral tradition is K.H. Imam Bukhari's involvement in the struggle against Dutch colonialism. The oral tradition narrative relates that K.H. Imam Bukhari's form of resistance was carried out through religious

studies and teaching the concept of jihad based on the holy book.*Fath al-Qarib*. This teaching, according to oral tradition, contains the view that Dutch rule in the archipelago lacked legitimacy and could therefore be resisted. Furthermore, resistance was also symbolically manifested through the rejection of eating attributes considered part of Dutch culture, such as refusing to use plates. K.H. Imam Bukhari's involvement in the resistance against colonialism was influenced not only by his family background, which had the blood of fighters, but also by his ideological background with the Sufi Order.*Syattariyah Akmaliyah*(Bobby, 2026). One of the teachings of this order instills a belief that encourages a spirit of equality and a rejection of all forms of exploitation, slavery, and oppression.

K.H. Imam Bukhari's involvement in the struggle against Dutch colonialism was then manifested in real terms through his activities in the national movement, particularly through the Sarekat Islam (SI) organization. He was appointed as one of the leaders of SI (*Executive Board*), and in 1914 Blitar hosted*Meeting*(Grand Meeting) of the SI and the inauguration of the Blitar Branch of the SI. When the Sarekat Islam experienced an internal conflict that led to its split into the White SI and the Red SI, K.H. Imam Bukhari chose to join the Red SI which later transformed into the People's Sarekat. In this organization, he served as a member of the Advisory Council of the Blitar region of the People's Sarekat. K.H. Imam Bukhari's political activities were continuously monitored by the colonial government. Various reports regarding his actions in the national movement led to his arrest and exile to Banda Neira in 1928. After returning from exile in 1933, K.H. Imam Bukhari was no longer actively involved in the national political movement, mainly due to his age, which at that time had reached 75 years. Since then, he has focused more on developing Islamic education through the Islamic boarding school he ran was in Jatinom, Blitar. K.H. Imam Bukhari died there in 1946, leaving behind a legacy of struggle that integrated education and involvement in the national movement.

3.2 The Missing Narrative from the Historiography of National Islamic Figures

Oral history often faces criticism regarding the unreliability of memory, the subjectivity of the narrator, and the limitations of the verification process. As a historical research method, oral history relies on human memory, which is subject to degradation, reconstruction, and distortion over time. Furthermore, oral history inherently represents a particular perspective that is never entirely free from personal or social bias [4]. However, these weaknesses do not diminish the value of oral history as a historical source. In fact, the primary value of oral history lies not only in its factual accuracy but also in the meanings, experiences, and ways in which communities construct the past. In this context, oral history provides an important platform for presenting voices that have been excluded from official historiography [8].

This perspective gave birth to the concept *missing narratives* or lost narratives, namely historical stories not recorded in state archives or official documents because they originate from marginalized groups. Oral history serves to restore their experiences to the historiographical space by presenting memories, life experiences, and local knowledge that were previously ignored [11]. The phenomenon of lost

narratives also arises due to the dominance of ruling groups in the production of historical knowledge, the limitations of written sources, and the threat of the loss of oral traditions amidst modern social change [12]. Thus, oral history not only complements the lack of archives but also offers an alternative perspective to established historical narratives.

The first dimension of the missing narrative in the oral history of K.H. Imam Bukhari is evident in his position as a figure from a marginalized group in national historiography. During the Dutch colonial period during the 19th and 20th centuries, K.H. Imam Bukhari could be categorized as an anti-colonial figure, so his existence was not given space in the historical narrative produced by the colonial government. After Indonesia's independence, his role as a figure of resistance against colonialism also did not find a place in official narrative and is never even mentioned in the Indonesian National History textbook. One factor that likely influenced this situation was his political struggle, which was later associated with communist groups, especially after K.H. Imam Bukhari joined the People's Union, an organization that developed from the Red Islam Union and was affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party. This situation further reinforced the omission of his narrative during the New Order era, when state historiography was constructed through a politics of memory that excluded figures and organizations associated with communism [2].

The second dimension of the missing narrative relates to the limitations of reconstructing chronology and historical context due to the lack of written sources. Oral histories about K.H. Imam Bukhari still leave many gaps, especially regarding his birth, adolescence, and educational process. The story of his wanderings seeking knowledge in various regions of East Java has not been fully reconstructed. Oral tradition states that Ponorogo and Kediri were the main destinations of his intellectual wanderings, which is linked to the impact of the Java War and his family's genealogical relationship, given that K.H. Imam Bukhari's father is said to have been a follower of Prince Diponegoro (Bobby, 2026). However, this narrative still requires proof through the exploration of written sources and supporting archives so that the relationship between collective memory and historical facts can be reconstructed more fully.

The same limitations are also evident in the reconstruction of K.H. Imam Bukhari's political struggle against the Dutch colonialists. Oral tradition states that he was once a member*Executive Board*or Sarekat Islam (SI), then merged with Sarekat Rakyat (SR), was involved in the dynamics of the rebellion linked to the Communist Party in 1926 and was even mentioned in various events in Blitar starting in 1904, until his arrest and exile to Banda Neira. However, the entire series of events still exists as fragments of a story that have not been fully connected factually and chronologically. From an oral history perspective, this condition is not a weakness that should be ignored, but rather a starting point for a critical dialogue between memory, archives, newspapers, colonial documents, and other sources. As emphasized by Portelli (2010), oral history does not serve to replace archives but rather opens the possibility of discovering previously hidden historical dimensions. Therefore, the oral history of K.H. Imam Bukhari serves as a foundation it is important to reconstruct local historical narratives that have been lost from mainstream historiography through a process of triangulation with various other

historical sources.

3.3 Historical Perspective: An Attempt at Revitalization

The heuristic phase yielded important, complementary findings in reconstructing the biography of K.H. Imam Bukhari. From a spatial perspective, the research successfully identified that Kaliglintung Village, Kulonprogo, long believed by oral tradition to be his birthplace, can still be found today. The existence of this location demonstrates a continuity between the community's collective memory and verifiable geographical evidence. This finding was further reinforced by primary sources in the form of Dutch newspaper reports.*The Indische Courant*which states that Haji Imam Bukhari alias Haji Mohamad Imam was a farmer, member and advisor of the People's Union (SR), born in Kaligintung Village, Yogyakarta region, and at the time of his arrest was domiciled in Djatinom Village, Blitar [5]. This information is very important because it not only confirms the geographical origins of K.H. Imam Bukhari but also provides social and political identification based on contemporary documents.

This discovery also opens a new perspective on the narrative of K.H. Imam Bukhari that has been developing for some time. Various writings generally state that K.H. Imam Bukhari was born in 1823. However, if we refer to *the Indische Courant*, which lists his age as 75 when arrested and interned in 1928, then his birth year is more likely to be around 1853. Thus, information sourced from contemporary newspapers provides a stronger historical basis. The same report also notes that K.H. Imam Bukhari was exiled along with several other Sarekat Rakyat figures, including Kyai Abdullah Fakih from Plosokerep, Blitar, who was then 60 years old. Meanwhile, the newspaper *The Courier* reported that the colonial government designated Boven Digul, which at the time was considered a cursed exile area, as the primary destination for political internment. Thirty-eight people were recorded as being exiled to Boven Digul, while two others, including K.H. Imam Bukhari, were interned in Banda Neira in 1928 (De Koerir, 1928). The exile area corresponds to what is described in oral sources.

Reconstruction of the ideological history of K.H. Imam Bukhari using oral sources verified with contemporary documents. Before settling in Jatinom, Kanigoro, Blitar. Oral traditions circulating among family and community members indicate that his scholarly journey did not take him directly to Blitar. Imam Bukhari is said to have stopped in Ponorogo, Nganjuk (formerly Berbek), and Pare, Kediri. In Ponorogo, he is said to have studied with Kiai Zaid at the Njalen (Jalen) Islamic Boarding School, while in Pare he continued his studies with Raden Sekupuh or Kiai Nawawi at the Keling Ringin Agung Islamic Boarding School (Bobby, 2026). Both Islamic boarding schools still stand today and are an important part of the collective memory of the educational network that shaped Imam Bukhari. This oral narrative also aligns with information that before arriving in Blitar, Imam Bukhari came from the Berbek area, now part of Nganjuk Regency (De Locomotief, 1904; [3]. This region became an important node in the trajectory of ulama mobility from the late 19th to early 20th centuries.

However, colonial sources provide slightly different information. In his report to the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, G.A.J. Hazeu (1910) stated that

Imam Bukhari's teacher was Mohammad Badal from the Kebonsari Islamic Boarding School. This discrepancy in information does not necessarily indicate a contradiction but rather indicates that Imam Bukhari may have had more than one teacher during his education. This is a common pattern in the Javanese pesantren tradition, where a student moves from one pesantren to another to deepen his knowledge of a particular discipline. Thus, the oral sources mentioning the Njalen and Ringin Agung Islamic Boarding Schools can be read as complements to the colonial archives, not as refutations. If arranged chronologically, Imam Bukhari's intellectual journey can be understood as moving from Nganjuk (Berbek), to Ponorogo, then Pare, before finally settling and developing his da'wah activities in Jatinom, Kanigoro, and Blitar.

This educational background is important because it is closely related to the attention the colonial government later paid to Imam Bukhari. In the 1910 memorandum by G.A.J. Hazeu, Imam Bukhari was recommended as a figure who needed to be closely monitored because he was considered to have great influence and could potentially endanger the interests of the Dutch East Indies government. In fact, the contents of the memorandum indicate that surveillance of him may have begun around 1904. This suspicion is strengthened by the appearance of Imam Bukhari's name in several colonial newspapers in 1904, such as*Batavia Newsblad*, *The News of the Day*, *The Locomotive*, And *Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad*, which regularly reported on the activities and developments of cases involving Imam Bukhari [3] [8]. The political turmoil and conditions in Blitar during the early 20th century were indeed unstable, with various eruptions of conflict such as robbery, social movements, and strikes occurring after several injustices and social inequalities. In these conditions, the Islamic Union began to emerge as a forum that articulated the aspirations of farmers through protests to the colonial government.

The refusal of residents of Kesambi Village to re-rent their land and the actions of the Ploso Kerep community, now next to Jatinom Village where Kyai Imam Bukhari established the Maftahul Uluum Islamic boarding school. Most residents who were members of the Islamic Union stopped the sugarcane seedling carts belonging to a sugar factory and prohibited them from passing through the village road on the grounds that the vehicles had damaged the road and bridge. This action then triggered a complaint from the company to the Assistant Resident. After mediation, the colonial government allowed the carts to continue to pass but required the sugar companies to cover all repair costs if there was any damage to the infrastructure [13]. The resistance of the Blitar people at this time was no longer individual but had developed into a collective movement.

Social movements in the Blitar region in the early 20th century grew in response to injustices, one of which was caused by the colonial sugar plantation system. Colonial newspapers*The News of the Day*In 1914, reports emerged that sugarcane plantation fires, whether caused by negligence or suspected deliberate acts, triggered escalating agrarian conflict. Although the sugarcane plantations had been destroyed, the company continued to withhold land from its owners until the contract period expired. Farmers lost the opportunity to replant their rice fields with secondary crops and suffered significant economic losses [13]. It was in this context that Djatinom Village became a focal point for community resistance. A 1918 appeal from the Central Islamic Union to the Blitar regional administration noted that a meeting to accept new members of the Islamic Union in Djatinom was disbanded by the

sub-district head (wedana), assistant sub-didana, security guards, and sugar factory supervisors.*Amsterdam Trade Association* (H.V.A) Koetoredjo. At the same time, Sarekat Islam strongly denied accusations that its organization was behind the burning of sugarcane plantations or the theft of agricultural produce. The rampant cassava theft was a result of the food crisis that forced the people of South Blitar, or Lodoyo, to survive. Meanwhile, colonial authorities implemented repressive measures by arresting residents who simply passed by the burning sugarcane plantations without going through a judicial process [1]. Thus, the events in Djatinom demonstrated that the people's movement was beginning to be organized through Sarekat Islam.

K.H. Imam Bukhari held a key position in the development of the Sarekat Islam in Blitar as an advisor to the organization alongside Abdullah Faqih. This position led to his continued appearance in colonial intelligence reports as Sarekat Islam developed into a socio-political force capable of uniting farmers, Islamic students, and rural communities. Various Dutch East Indies government archives later linked Imam Bukhari to Sarekat Islam activities, which were accused of being behind unrest in the sugar plantation area, including the issue of sugarcane burning and community incitement. However, Sarekat Islam Blitar's own reports denied these accusations and pointed out that the root of the problem lay in agrarian conflict, poverty, and repressive actions by the colonial government [1][13]. In this context, the colonial political construction of figures with social influence tended to be biased.

Suspicion of social movement figures prompted the colonial government to commission G.A.J. Hazeu to investigate Imam Bukhari's religious background. Unlike the security forces, who focused on action, Hazeu instead explored the intellectual sources taught in Islamic boarding schools. He assumed that *Fath al-Qarib*or the Islamic law book is the main book studied by students, accompanied by teachings about*Ahkam al-Jihad*or fighting in the way of God, and*Jizya*or colonial demands for compensation from native Indonesians, which the colonialists saw as potentially inspiring a spirit of resistance. Ironically, Hazeu himself admitted that *Fath al-Qarib*is a Shafi'i school of jurisprudence commonly used in almost all Javanese Islamic boarding schools and does not have a political content that differs from other Islamic boarding schools. Thus, the problem faced by the colonial government was not the content of the book, but rather the concern that the authority of a kiai alone could give political meaning to the Islamic teachings he taught [6]. In fact, Imam Bukhari had carried out the process of indigenization of Islam through Islamic boarding schools. The teaching of Islamic jurisprudence was combined with practical practice.*Syattariyah Order*thus forming a religious tradition that is rooted in the life of the Jatinom community, not in a large political movement of a revolutionary nature.

4 Conclusion

The use of primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the biography of KH. Imam Bukhari will make the historical presentation of KH. Imam Bukhari and all his struggles academically sound. There has been a significant strengthening of oral history into a history with a methodologically sound basis. This revitalization of the

narrative is expected to enrich the methodological repertoire in reconstructing the struggles and biographies of regional figures stored in the collective memory of the community. Many other figures who played a role in the Indonesian struggle have not been revealed, especially those considered not to be part of the mainstream writing national history.

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