

## Reconstructing Honor Killing Through *Siri'*: A Cultural Perspective from Bugis-Makassar Society

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### Abstract

Honor killing within the Bugis-Makassar community cannot be fully understood through the lens of positive criminal law, as it is grounded in the normative system of *siri'*, which holds strong social legitimacy. This study addresses a gap in existing literature that overlooks local value systems as a source of normative justification for violence. It employs a qualitative method with a conceptual approach, using library research to explore *siri'* as a regulatory structure. The findings reveal that *siri'* positions collective honor above individual life, institutionalizing violence as a corrective obligation. The key contribution of this study is the introduction of cultural criminology as an alternative analytical framework to interpret violence legitimized by customary norms. These findings underscore the urgency of reforming criminal law to account for value pluralism within a legally plural society.

**Keywords:** Bugis-Makassar; Honor Killing; *Siri'*

### Introduction

Modern criminal justice systems rest on the foundational premise that a society shares a collective understanding of which behaviors warrant punishment and how such punishment must be justified. Criminal law functions not simply as a mechanism of social control but as an institutional embodiment of the social contract that mediates between individual rights and the maintenance of public order. Within this paradigm, any intentional act of violence resulting in death is classified as murder regardless of motive and is punished based on discernible objective and subjective elements. Vigilante violence, including acts committed in the name of personal or collective honor, is explicitly rejected by universal standards of criminal law (Arison, 2020). The validity of legal norms is tied to formal legislation rather than popular sentiment.

Legal theorists grounded in this tradition emphasize a clear separation between legality and moral acceptability. For them, criminal liability remains an individual matter that cannot be attributed to groups or communities (Robinson & Holcomb, 2022). Honor is treated not as a standalone normative asset but as a motive subordinate to legal criteria (Obaidi, 2021). Under such logic, the killing of a family member to protect honor remains a legal violation without exception. Implicit in this reasoning is the expectation of a single normative order sanctioned by the state and unimpeded by alternative moral frameworks.

A contrasting dynamic emerges in Bugis-Makassar society, where the positivist logic of national criminal justice does not serve as the exclusive normative order. A deeply embedded system of values persists beyond statutory codes (Migdal, 2023). Central to this system is *siri'*, a communal concept of honor understood not as an individual sentiment but as a social obligation (Rees, 2025). *Siri'* delineates what is acceptable and imposes corrective responsibility when communal dignity is believed to be compromised. Within this logic, murder can be interpreted not as a crime of passion but as a socially imposed duty to preserve collective honor (Kadir & Mappaselleng, 2025).

Empirical instances in South Sulawesi illustrate how violations of *siri'* trigger communal responses rather than purely individual ones. In a reported case, a father who killed his daughter after her elopement explained his action as necessary to defend the family's standing rather than personal vengeance (Hajramurni, 2020). Such narratives indicate how violence, under the aegis of *siri'*, becomes framed as moral restoration. A study further emphasizes this trend, noting that many murders in South Sulawesi are directly linked to *siri'*, illustrating how local value systems operate as frameworks for justifying violence (Nursalam et al., 2023). These acts are not treated as criminal transgressions by the community but rather as social corrections aimed at restoring disrupted honor. In these contexts, the communal narrative often validates, rather than condemns, the perpetrator. These occurrences create a normative grey zone where state law labels an act as murder while community logic regards it as justifiable.

The divergence between statutory values and customary norms produces enduring interpretive conflict. The clash between the value orientation of state law and communal systems such as *siri'* yields dilemmas in adjudication (Fadholi & Sari, 2022). In customary settings, loyalty to communal norms persists, and the legal framework cannot fully eliminate their influence. When the state enforces a rigid legalist structure without engaging these realities, normative authority is lost. Violence committed under the banner of *siri'* therefore continues despite its criminalization. This pattern reveals that formal law does not hold exclusive control over behavior in societies marked by legal pluralism.

The failure to engage local normative systems like *siri'* in the formulation and enforcement of criminal law widens the gap between statutory norms and lived social practices. The disconnect is exacerbated by the involvement of customary elites who sometimes offer moral or legal support to perpetrators of honor-based violence (Kadir, 2024). Such dynamics expose the limitations of state law in addressing acts rooted in communal normative frameworks. A system lacking internalization within the community becomes superficial and ineffective at countering underlying socio-normative drivers of violence.

Beyond the legal implications, *siri'*-based violence challenges the epistemological assumptions of criminal law itself. Conventional frameworks assume individual autonomy, fixed legal categories, and unified normative reference. In the Bugis-Makassar context, honor is treated as a communal asset with normative weight, and its violation as a structural rupture requiring collective redress. Legal definitions of murder rooted in individual agency thus fail to capture this communal logic.

Addressing this misalignment requires moving beyond descriptive legal critique to theoretical reconstruction. Rarely do studies on honor-based killings focus on value systems such as *siri'* as normative frameworks rather than cultural backdrops. Most scholarship centers on regions such as the Middle East and South Asia and emphasizes religion, patriarchy, or human rights violations (AlQahtani et al., 2022; Gregory et al., 2020). These perspectives offer important insights but leave unexamined the role of localized normative systems in legitimizing violence.

This study seeks to fill that gap by treating *siri'* as a normative system in its own right. It proposes that honor-based killings in the Bugis-Makassar context represent a form of violence legitimated by communal values rather than solely by personal motives. By interpreting *siri'* as a normative order that regulates the legitimacy of violence, the research offers an alternative reading of the relationship between honor and homicide. Its theoretical contribution lies in expanding the epistemological boundaries of the concept of honor killing within criminal law and cultural criminology, while its policy contribution points toward the need for a legal structure that is responsive to locally grounded normative systems in plural legal settings.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is an approach designed to understand social realities by interpreting the meanings embedded in actions, symbols, and value structures that evolve within society. The study adopts a conceptual approach, which emphasizes the exploration and analysis of key concepts relevant to the topic, particularly *siri*’ as a normative value system that shapes the legitimacy of violent acts. Data collection was conducted through library research. All data were analyzed qualitatively to identify patterns of meaning and value constructions underlying honor-based killings in Bugis-Makassar society. This study employs a qualitative research method aimed at understanding social realities through the interpretation of meanings embedded in actions, symbols, and value structures within society. A conceptual approach is applied with the following steps: first, the identification of the concept of *siri*’ as a normative value system through textual analysis of literature; second, the categorization of norms emerging from that concept by mapping dimensions such as collective honor, obligation of retribution, and legitimacy of violence; third, a critical analysis of the construction of honor killing in both local and global literature to highlight how the norm of *siri*’ regulates actions that are legally classified as murder. Data collection was conducted through library research, using selection criteria that included scholarly articles and empirical studies in national and international journals addressing honor killing or honor-based violence. All data were analyzed qualitatively to identify patterns of meaning and value constructions underlying honor-based killings in Bugis-Makassar society. The results are presented in a descriptive-argumentative form and aim to reconstruct the understanding of the legitimacy of violence within a cultural criminology framework that takes into account the plurality of value systems.

## Result and Discussion

### 1. *Siri*’ as a Normative Value System

In Bugis-Makassar society the concept of *siri*’ functions as a socially enforced normative system rather than a mere symbolic construct (Nonci et al., 2023). It assigns individuals roles inside a communal framework in which personal autonomy is subordinated to the collective reputation of family and community. The authority of *siri*’ does not depend on legislative enactments but emerges from a value system in which individuals assume positions of subordinate accountability to communal ethics. A breach of *siri*’ is thus interpreted as disruption of communal equilibrium rather than as a mere personal failure. While the etymological root of *siri*’ may echo Western notions of shame or dignity, reducing it to such frameworks overlooks its normative imperatives (Handayani et al., 2024). Shame tends to be construed as individual and psychological in modern scholarship, yet *siri*’ imposes collective obligations and structural responses. Violation of *siri*’ does not stop at emotional embarrassment; it generates a duty to act. In many cases, the only socially sanctioned path to restoration is the killing of the perceived transgressor.

The *Lontaraq* manuscripts, which preserve Bugis-Makassar moral teachings, document *siri*’ as a central component of social ethics. In texts such as *Lontaraq Ade*’, *Pangngaderreng*, and *To-riolo*, *siri*’ is placed alongside values such as *alempu*’ (honesty), *mappadeceng* (kindness), and *warani* (courage), forming the ideal moral structure (Suwindia, 2022). Yet among these, only *siri*’ explicitly mandates retribution for violations. Oral and written traditions describe the loss of *siri*’ as more severe than death itself. The expression *mate siri’ nasaba mappakasiri*’, translated as “better to die than to live without honor,” illustrates its uncompromising position (Mariani, 2024). Honor is regarded as irreplaceable, and any violation cannot be overlooked without damaging the reputation of one’s family or community.

*Siri'* contains both corrective and coercive dimensions. It is corrective in that it guides behavior through incentives for compliance and penalties for deviation. It is coercive because individuals are not at liberty to choose whether to observe it. Within Bugis-Makassar communities, a breach of *siri'* demands a reaction, and failure to respond may lead to a loss of social legitimacy. In many instances, the appropriate response involves the killing of the violator, particularly when the violation stems from a family member. The normative framework of *siri'* legitimizes such acts as a socially sanctioned form of correction. When state law fails to offer a path of restitution that aligns with communal expectations, killing in the name of *siri'* is regarded as a valid resolution.

The social structure of Bugis-Makassar society is hierarchical and patronage-based with emphasis on family reputation, lineage and honor (Ahmadin, 2021). Individual acts are constantly mediated through collective identity. Moral violations are never purely personal but impact the status of the entire family. *Siri'* forms a symbolic boundary between those who are socially accepted and those who are ostracized. Narratives show that individuals failing to uphold *siri'* are not just disgraced but considered unfit for communal life. Therefore corrective operations are driven not by individual intent but by communal pressure demanding restoration, at times through the most extreme forms of violence.

In practice *siri'* acts as performative social pressure rather than moral abstraction. When a person is accused of violating communal honor rational negotiation or formal arbitration rarely matters. Instead decisions to act including lethal violence derive from institutionalized expectations. Family reputation cannot be restored by apology alone demonstrable action is required. In that domain formal law becomes subordinate to the value system of *siri'*. Framing *siri'* as a fully operational normative system redirects attention from culture as background to culture as driver of action. It explains why violence under *siri'* is not deviant from community logic but part of its regulatory mechanism. This sets up the foundation for understanding how honor-based violence functions as internal community governance rather than external legal aberration.

## **2. *Siri'* and Violence as Corrective Action**

Within the Bugis-Makassar context when a family member is perceived to have breached *siri'* particularly through sexual transgression the event is framed not as a private moral failure but as a communal threat to dignity (Sharma & Kumar, 2023). The pressure on the family to act is intense; failure to respond is itself considered a further affront to honor. On many occasions the family chooses lethal means to restore standing. In this framework violence sanctioned by *siri'* becomes a social obligation rather than personal vengeance (Nawaz et al., 2022). Under such conditions the act of killing transforms from deviance into communal duty.

The perpetrator shifts from criminal outlier to family guardian responsible for safeguarding community dignity. In the logic of *siri'*, collective honor becomes a higher moral priority than individual life. The transgressor's life is thus subordinated to the imperative of restoring communal integrity. In a Bugis-Makassar society, if a daughter were to elope with a man without her family's consent, this act could be perceived not merely as personal disobedience but as a public stain on the family's honor. In such a scenario, the father might feel socially obligated to commit a retaliatory act, including lethal violence, to reinstate the family's status. Rather than facing social condemnation, the perpetrator might be morally affirmed by local elders as having fulfilled a cultural mandate. The perpetrator may be socially rewarded as one who restored integrity rather than punished. Such narratives reinforce the normative logic and promote reproduction of similar acts (Jamaluddin et al., 2021).

From the legal viewpoint the act qualifies as homicide, yet the community interprets it as justified action. The state legal apparatus treats the act as criminal, but its moral legitimacy within the community remains unaffected, rendering judicial intervention ineffective *siri'* (Bustan & Jumadi, 2024). The enforcement of law loses normative traction when divorced from the value systems that govern the local realm. The lens of cultural criminology helps interpret this phenomenon. Instead of viewing violence solely as deviance from communal norms, this perspective shows how local value systems like *siri'* produce, regulate and justify violent acts. In this sense honor killing aligns with normative expectations of the community rather than contradicting them. A legal framework ignoring this normative dimension misclassifies the act as deviant and fails to engage with its internal logic.

The absence of formal recognition of *siri'*-based killings in criminal taxonomy further complicates policy and research. Legal records rarely code such acts under honor-based categories, and academic studies often ignore local value systems' role in violence. As a result the dominant discourse relies on generalized definitions that do not capture the specificity of the local system. *Siri'*, despite driving many acts of violence, remains outside the formal juridical gaze. To remedy this policy makers must recognize the normative logic whereby *siri'* legitimizes violence. Reforming criminal law involves acknowledging these acts not simply as unlawful events but as outcomes of communal normative orders possessing their own legitimacy. Only by integrating such insight can the law become responsive rather than alien to the social realities it seeks to govern.

### **3. Honor Killing as a Corrective Response to Normative Violation**

In Bugis-Makassar society, acts of violence committed under the name of *siri'* are not isolated, impulsive crimes but socially constructed responses to perceived violations of collective honor. These acts are embedded in a value system where honor is not a symbolic aspiration but a binding norm that structures communal obligations. When *siri'* is deemed violated particularly through acts considered sexually deviant family members are not simply motivated by personal shame. Rather, they experience pressure to perform a corrective action that restores communal equilibrium. In this context, violence emerges not as deviance but as compliance with the local normative system (Huda & Kamal, 2025).

This mechanism is upheld by the social architecture of Bugis-Makassar communities, where individual identity is subordinated to family reputation. Any breach of *siri'* casts a shadow not only on the transgressor but on the extended kin network. The consequence is the activation of collective responsibility, which, in many instances, necessitates murder as a publicly acknowledged act of restitution. This correctional function of violence is deeply ritualized and often celebrated within the community. Honor killing in such contexts operates not as criminal resistance but as the ultimate affirmation of group loyalty and moral order (Razack, 2021).

Such acts are interpreted not as spontaneous or irrational but as governed by structural rationality that emerges from shared values rather than individual reasoning (Thomas et al., 2022). Within the epistemology of *siri'*, honor may carry more normative weight than life itself. Thus, the killing of a sibling or daughter who has violated communal honor is seen not as homicide, but as moral restoration. The refusal to act could result in social ostracism, reputational collapse, or perceived emasculation of the family unit.

Moreover, the normalization of this violence is sustained through intergenerational socialization. Community members are raised within a value system that conditions them to understand *siri'* as absolute, and its violation as warranting drastic

consequences. This explains why perpetrators often show no remorse and are celebrated as custodians of family dignity. The institutionalization of violence under *siri'* thus reflects not just moral acceptance, but cultural necessity response demanded by the logic of survival within the normative framework of the community (Ge et al., 2024)

#### **4. Legal Pluralism, Normative Tension, and the Cultural Criminology Perspective**

The persistence of *siri'*-based violence also exposes the structural limitations of the Indonesian criminal justice system in managing norm conflicts within a plural legal order. While the national penal code criminalizes all forms of premeditated murder, it operates from a universalist assumption that all citizens adhere to a singular legal norm. In contrast, Bugis-Makassar communities recognize a dual legitimacy such as state law and customary ethics. The result is a profound legal dissonance in which acts considered criminal by the state are interpreted as normative obligations by the community (Jihad, 2023)

This tension between legality and legitimacy reveals a core blind spot in positive criminal law. Legality is determined by codified rules, but legitimacy is grounded in collective moral endorsement (Coca-Vila & Irarrázava, 2021). In honor killings legitimated by *siri'*, the state's criminal classification is rendered ineffective because it lacks the normative resonance required for enforcement. Legal interventions that disregard *siri'* risk being interpreted not as justice but as cultural intrusion or moral betrayal.

The inability of formal law to integrate local epistemologies results in a partial withdrawal of state authority. Law enforcers are often hesitant to pursue legal action when local norms conflict with legal mandates. For example, in the case of a daughter's murder by her father to "protect the family's dignity," the investigation was delayed or hampered by the communal consensus that legitimized the act. These practices, though informal, reveal the fundamental reality that legal authority is negotiated, not absolute, in pluralistic societies. Cultural criminology offers a more adaptive analytical framework to decode this phenomenon. This approach foregrounds the cultural contexts in which crime is defined, rationalized, and enacted (Chancer, 2024). Unlike classical criminology, which sees crime as an aberration, cultural criminology sees crime as a performance of meaning within specific social settings. Honor killings based on *siri'* fit this model, as they conform not to state norms but to localized codes of behavior. The perpetrator, in this case, is not a deviant but an agent of cultural reproduction.

Moreover, cultural criminology helps articulate how *siri'* operates not only as a value system but as a form of symbolic power. The decision to kill is embedded in rituals of social redemption, where violence is transformed into a narrative of moral triumph. This performative aspect reinforces the authority of customary law and simultaneously undermines the monopoly of state-defined legality. Without acknowledging this symbolic dimension, reform efforts are unlikely to gain legitimacy at the grassroots level (Carvalho, 2023).

The phenomenon also reveals the limitations of conventional criminological theories that explain crime as a form of individual deviance. In *siri'*-based killings, the actor does not deviate from community norms but performs them. This challenges criminological models that rely on the classification of the offender as a deviant subject (Garcia et al., 2024). Cultural criminology offers an alternative perspective that recognizes crime as part of a dominant value system in a particular community (Maghniwi & Oukassi, 2025). Criminal acts may serve not to destabilize society but to preserve its moral fabric. This understanding calls for a redefinition of crime in legally plural societies, where state law is not the sole source of moral authority.

From a policy perspective, *siri*'-based honor killing also presents critical implications for the design of criminal law. Criminalization of honor-related violence must be informed by the sociological contexts that produce such actions. Policies that criminalize without accounting for local values tend to deepen the dislocation between formal legal frameworks and the normative systems that govern community behavior (Situmeang, 2022). In the context of *siri*', legal policymaking must go beyond principles of deterrence or retribution and incorporate approaches that understand the internal logic by which communities maintain normative order (Imam, 2022). Without this, legal interventions will continue to encounter resistance and fail in their implementation. Policy reforms should not treat *siri*' as a justification for violence but as a normative structure that requires transformation through legal education and culturally sensitive mediation.

Ultimately, honor killing legitimated by *siri*' serves as an extreme example of how law can function outside the formal boundaries of the state. It demonstrates that the legitimacy of violence may be rooted in value systems that are internal to the community and transmitted across generations. In communities such as Bugis-Makassar, state and social law do not always operate in parallel. In some cases, social law exerts stronger influence over behavior. Recognizing this reality is essential for redefining how criminal law should operate within plural societies. Criminal acts do not always stem from malicious individual intent, they may emerge from normative structures that compel action. For this reason, effective legal policy must be grounded in a full awareness of the local value systems that shape behavior alongside the state's legal norms.

Ultimately, the issue is not simply one of legal contradiction but of epistemological divergence. State law and *siri*' are grounded in different worldviews. While the former prioritizes individual rights, the latter upholds communal integrity. Effective reform, therefore, requires more than doctrinal alignment. It demands dialogical engagement, an acknowledgment that cultural values like *siri*' function as alternative sources of legal meaning. Without this cultural integration, legal reforms risk becoming tools of domination rather than emancipation (Insani et al., 2024).

## Conclusion

Acts of violence carried out in the name of honor within the Bugis-Makassar community cannot be reduced to individual violations of criminal law. Rather, they must be understood as expressions of the *siri*' value system, which holds strong social legitimacy. *Siri*' does not operate as an abstract moral ideal but as a collective normative code that actively delineates the boundaries of socially accepted behavior. When a violation of honor occurs, the community demands a corrective response, which often takes the form of violence. In this context, honor killing is not a manifestation of deviance but a culmination of normative compliance within the local value system. This perspective reveals the limitations of positive criminal law in addressing criminal acts shaped by living normative systems that exist beyond the reach of formal legal frameworks. Honor killings legitimated through *siri*' highlight the need for a paradigmatic shift in the formulation of criminal policy within plural legal societies. A legal system that fails to acknowledge the existence of localized normative structures loses its capacity to regulate behaviors that are generated and perpetuated through communal norms. In such contexts, cultural criminology provides a more appropriate analytical framework to interpret violence as a product of socially institutionalized relations. Reformulating criminal policy in multicultural settings requires the integration of value systems like *siri*' into normative considerations, not as acts of cultural tolerance but as epistemological preconditions for designing effective law. This shift in perspective offers the foundation for constructing criminal norms that resonate with local dynamics and possess stronger social legitimacy.

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