

The Audience Creates the Shame: Public Visibility and the Social Construction of Siri' in Bugis-Makassar Society

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ABSTRACT

Siri' is often translated as shame or honor, although neither term fully captures its place in Bugis-Makassar moral life. Scholarship has examined the defense of shared honor, yet the part played by those who hear, judge, or dispute a reported injury remains less clearly specified. Drawing on published studies of siri' and established work in legal anthropology, this article examines how public visibility may alter the social standing of an honor claim. A qualitative, library-based reading separates three matters that are frequently treated together. A person may experience shame privately, other people may question that person's reputation, and a further claim may arise that someone is obliged to respond. The analysis develops audience-mediated normative activation as a conditional account of the movement between these matters. Iwata's discussion of maseddi siri' establishes the importance of collective action, while work on reputation and social norms helps explain why public knowledge need not produce agreement. Recognition may be withheld, and a recognized injury does not settle what remedy is acceptable. The proposed account therefore treats collective duty as a contested attribution rather than an automatic effect of publicity. Its contribution is conceptual, not a finding about the prevalence of responses among Bugis-Makassar people.



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INTRODUCTION

Siri' cannot be reduced to the feeling a person experiences after being embarrassed. The term is also used in discussions of dignity and conduct, and it can carry a claim about how others ought to behave. Iwata (2008) describes it as a central idea in Bugis-Makassar social life while cautioning, through his study of maseddi siri', against restricting the matter to relations between men and women. The difficulty for legal anthropology begins when a private assessment of an injury is expressed as a demand on other people. An injured person may feel ashamed without announcing the incident. The same incident may acquire a different social standing once relatives learn about it.

Knowledge alone tells us little about what a group will do. Someone who hears an accusation may accept it, doubt it, or regard the alleged insult as too minor to warrant any response. A family member might sympathize with the complainant but oppose the remedy being demanded. Whether the incident is public in the ordinary sense is therefore less important than the kind of judgment made by people whose views matter to the parties. Treating everyone who knows about the matter as one audience would erase that difference. It would also obscure the possibility that a respected listener can refuse a claim even when the event itself is no longer disputed.

Iwata's (2008) account of maseddi siri' gives this problem a specifically Bugis-Makassar setting. His study draws on historical accounts and newspaper materials to describe collective formations connected to the defense of honor. Some of the solidarities he discusses arise among kin, while others extend beyond the family. The difference matters. A relative's participation may be explained through

kinship obligations, whereas participation by others needs another account of why the injury is taken to concern them. The published examples do not establish that all members of such groups agree. They do, however, make it difficult to treat the person who experiences shame as the only relevant moral actor. Group membership alone is not proof of shared assent.

The meaning attached to *siri'* is not uniform across the scholarship. Idris (2021) describes divergent local understandings, and Tangngareng (2017) examines how families pass on the associated values. Anakotta et al. (2025) place moral emotions within practices of mutual regard. More recently, Piara et al. (2026) have interpreted *siri' na pacce* as relational moral regulation, drawing on interviews with academic participants. The newer relational account is especially important for the proposed contribution. A claim that *siri'* already involves other people would add little. The sharper issue is how those other people come to have a say over the injury and its remedy.

Accounts of conflict are more difficult to reconcile. Research on *silariang* associates an alleged injury to family honor with social sanctions, although reconciliation is also part of the documented practice (Israpil, 2016). Triwijati and Amelia (2026) examine how young women negotiate expectations tied to honor. Alghifari et al. (2025), working on child marriage, direct attention to the tension between familial claims and individual rights. Mappaselleng and Kadir (2025) place collective honor at the center of their account of honor-related killing. None of these studies, on its own, explains when an audience becomes entitled to make an injury a collective concern.

Goffman's (1955, 1956) work on face and embarrassment explains why another person's presence matters to a claim about standing. Giordano (2005) approaches honor through the social management of reputation in a different regional context. Their concepts clarify a distinction, but they do not define *siri'*. Moore (1973) provides the legal-anthropological question that follows. Social groups can produce and sustain normative expectations without those expectations becoming rules of state law. An account of audience recognition should therefore ask who can speak for a group and whether that claim to authority is accepted.

The missing connection is not simply between shame and publicity. Bugis-Makassar research already deals with solidarity and social reputation. Less attention has been given to the intervening judgment through which awareness of an event may become an asserted duty of others. This article asks how public visibility shapes the social recognition of *siri'* and how such recognition may turn personal shame into a perceived collective obligation. Its proposed answer is conditional. A claim can be recognized without attracting collective action, and publicity may also expose the claim to disagreement. Those alternatives are necessary to an explanation of normative authority rather than merely public reaction.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study uses qualitative library research and an interpretive approach to legal anthropology. Its materials consist of published research on *siri'* and Bugis-Makassar social practices, read alongside scholarship on honor, reputation, shame, and informal social norms. Sources were identified through targeted searches of journal websites and scholarly indexes, then selected for their relevance to how an injury is understood, who is able to judge it, and when others are said to owe a response. The selection was purposive rather than systematic. It was not intended to represent every publication about *siri'*.

Published accounts were compared for statements about private moral judgment and the involvement of others in honor-related conflicts. Particular weight was given to distinctions between the original authors' descriptions and the interpretation advanced here. Contrasting accounts of reconciliation, restraint, and violence were retained because they limit any simple explanation of collective duty. The conceptual analysis draws primarily on Iwata (2008), Goffman (1955, 1956), and Moore (1973), with other works used where they address a specific problem. Where only abstracts or bibliographic descriptions could be inspected, no stronger claim was drawn from them. Jaakkola (2020) provides the methodological rationale for a synthesis-oriented conceptual article.

The unit of analysis is the published account, not a person or community observed by this study. No fieldwork, interviews, experiments, or new case coding were conducted. The tables record analytical distinctions and proposed connections rather than measured patterns. The figure offers an explanation

that could later be tested, not a finding of cause and effect. This approach can examine what follows conceptually from existing descriptions, but it cannot establish how often a response occurs or how particular Bugis-Makassar communities would decide an actual dispute.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Public Visibility and the Social Recognition of Siri'

Translating siri' as shame creates a problem when the English term is allowed to settle the analysis. Shame can name a person's uncomfortable judgment of self. A claim that honor has been damaged may instead concern what others believe about that person, even where the person's own moral judgment has not changed. Tangney et al. (2007) distinguish moral emotions from the conduct that may follow them. Goffman (1956) adds the interactional possibility of embarrassment when an identity presented to others becomes difficult to sustain. Neither account licenses treating these experiences as interchangeable in Bugis-Makassar life. The connection needs to be made through the local literature.

Idris (2021) reports different understandings of siri' in Jenepono. The term can refer to a positive concern with proper conduct as well as an adverse experience of disgrace. A person may feel compelled to avoid an improper act before anybody sees it. Family socialization is important here. Tangngareng (2017) describes efforts to transmit the value in households, a setting in which anticipated judgment may matter even without an actual audience. These accounts also complicate the title of this study. An audience cannot reasonably be said to manufacture an individual's entire capacity for shame. What may be socially constituted is the standing of the injury once other people judge it. Reski et al. (2021) discuss younger people's readings of siri' na pacce. Their work further cautions against treating its meaning as fixed across generations.

A public allegation introduces a further difficulty. The event itself may be known while its moral meaning remains unsettled. Giordano (2005) treats honor as bound to the public handling of reputation, but exposure need not lead to a shared verdict. One group may regard conduct as disgraceful while another finds the accusation misplaced. Lamont and Molnár (2002) help explain why this variation matters. Symbolic boundaries are constructed through classifications that include some judgments and exclude others. The relation to siri' must be proposed with care, since their wider analysis does not establish the specific boundaries operating in a Bugis-Makassar dispute.

The size of an audience is a poor substitute for its social position. A small meeting may include a person whose judgment the parties respect. Wider circulation of a complaint may attract attention without creating any comparable obligation. Goffman's (1955) idea of face-work is useful because standing is sustained in relations with particular others, not simply through a numerical count of spectators. Still, his work concerns interactional order. It cannot tell us which relatives or community figures have standing in a given siri' dispute.

Iwata (2008) places collective honor beyond the immediate family by examining cases of maseddi siri' at different scales. His account therefore raises a question about the boundaries of the audience itself. A person becomes part of an honor-related collectivity through a socially intelligible connection with the claim. That connection may arise without the person witnessing the original event. The published material supports the existence of such group formations, though it does not allow us to establish the beliefs of every participant. What the account makes visible is a possible change in the social ownership of an alleged injury.

An anticipated audience complicates any sharp separation between private and public shame. People can consider how relatives might judge an act even while keeping it secret. Their expectations may later prove wrong. Bicchieri and Xiao (2009) show, in a different setting, why perceived social expectations should not be confused with what others actually endorse. Applied here as a conceptual warning, their work makes anticipated recognition relevant without turning imagined family pressure into observed behavior. It also permits a person to fear disclosure before any accusation is publicly made. The distinction between expectation and an actual collective response must therefore remain explicit.

Comparisons with honor scholarship outside South Sulawesi require attention to local meanings. Kadir (2026b) argues that siri' killing cannot be fully explained by the broader label of honor killing.

Leung and Cohen (2011) document variation within and between orientations to honor, face, and dignity. Cohen et al. (1996) examine reactions to insults in the American South. Their findings make reputational threat a plausible subject of inquiry, but cannot establish similar consequences for Bugis and Makassar communities. Differences in social position and accepted responses would need to be examined within those communities rather than inferred from cross-cultural comparisons.

An imagined allegation of insult makes this problem concrete. The person concerned might regard the remark as offensive before discussing it with a sibling. After hearing the account, the sibling could ask for clarification and still decline to seek redress. That is an analytical example, not an incident drawn from an ethnography. Its purpose is to separate knowledge from assent. The account does not change simply because someone hears it. What changes, if anything, depends on the judgment the new participant is willing to make.

Control over disclosure may also be unequal. In work on women's negotiations of honor, Triwijati and Amelia (2026) describe the need to navigate expectations imposed by others. This creates room to ask whether those who claim to protect a family reputation also control the account of the alleged injury. The available study supports the relevance of negotiation. It does not provide a general rule about how women in all Bugis-Makassar settings experience siri'.

Public recognition is best understood here as a judgment attributed to an audience whose views can matter socially. It differs from simply hearing news of an offense. Nor does it require agreement among everyone present. Honneth (1992) treats recognition as a matter of moral relations, though his philosophical account should not be mistaken for an ethnographic description of siri'. Recognition can be withheld, and a claim that someone has been wronged can receive sympathy without generating a demand that others take action. An audience may also agree that an act was improper while declining to assign fault to the person whose dignity is said to have suffered. This separation between a moral assessment and the allocation of responsibility is often lost in broad references to public shame.

The distinctions matter when an injured person's experience is treated as a demand on others. Experienced shame concerns how a person evaluates an event. Public discredit concerns an assessment by other people, whether expressed openly or anticipated by the person affected. A normative obligation adds the claim that someone ought to respond. The three ideas may coexist, but none is sufficient evidence of the next. This separation prevents an account of siri' from treating a reported feeling as proof of collective approval or of an enforceable duty. An obligation is not simply a more intense form of shame. It raises a different question about authority, since a demand must be made, understood, and accepted or disputed by others. That distinction matters whenever a speaker claims to represent family honor.

Table 1 Conceptual Distinctions Among Shame, Public Discredit, and Normative Obligation

Aspect	Experienced shame	Public discredit	Normative obligation
Object of judgment	One's own conduct	Standing in the eyes of others	The response owed by a person or group
Role of others	Actual observers may be absent	Judgment may be expressed or anticipated	Others attribute, reject, or dispute a duty
Limits of inference	Feeling does not prove public injury	Discredit does not compel action	A social claim does not confer legal permission

Note. These categories are distinctions made for analysis, not measured characteristics of a population.

From Personal Shame to Collective Normative Obligation

A community may acknowledge an injury without agreeing that every member must answer for it. Iwata's (2008) analysis of maseddi siri' makes the collective dimension difficult to dismiss, but the description of collective action does not settle how the duty was attributed. It matters whether people act because they share the injured party's status, because someone speaks on their behalf, or because refusing participation would draw criticism. These are competing explanations. The available literature raises them more clearly than it resolves them.

Moore's (1973) semi-autonomous social field helps locate this problem in legal anthropology. A family or community can establish expectations through relations that have practical force for its

members. Those expectations remain situated within a wider order of law and institutions. Griffiths (1986) and Merry (1988) explain why unofficial normative practices should be examined in their own right. Yet the existence of a social expectation says nothing by itself about its validity under criminal law. A threat justified in the language of *siri'* does not become legally permissible merely because relatives endorse it.

Claims of authority are also unequally distributed. Who is allowed to speak for a family, and whose interpretation of an incident receives attention, cannot be settled by invoking tradition as a single voice. Alghifari et al. (2025) examine conflicts between family honor and the protection of children in forced marriage. Triwijati and Amelia (2026) describe young women's negotiations within honor-related expectations. Kadir (2026a) examines collective family identity and the uneven burden of honor in the context of *siri'*-related killing. Together, these studies make individual agency relevant to the present framework, but they do not establish a uniform hierarchy of authority in family disputes.

The response considered appropriate may be restraint rather than punishment. Hijriani and Herman (2018) argue that *siri' na pacce* can be used as a resource against persecution, while Israpil (2016) records reconciliation in the discussion of *silariang*. Anakotta et al. (2025) connect moral emotion with reciprocal regard. These sources do not remove the possibility of coercion. They make it harder to interpret solidarity as a standing instruction to retaliate. What counts as defending honor remains open to interpretation within the very literature that documents its force.

Violence makes the assumption of automatic enforcement especially consequential. Mappaselleng and Kadir (2025) examine the cultural legitimization of lethal violence through collective honor. Kadir (2024) interprets honor-based killing through the idea of cultural retribution. Such accounts describe the rationale attributed to violence, not proof that a whole community endorsed the act. Piara et al. (2025) discuss the relation between *siri' na pacce* and conflict, while Rahmi R. et al. (2025) examine the value's contemporary application in Rappocini. Neither establishes that public knowledge alone produces aggression. Vandello and Cohen (2003) discuss harmful honor scripts in another setting, which cannot serve as direct evidence about South Sulawesi.

Acceptance of an injury does not settle who owes redress. Other people may believe that a person's reputation has suffered without agreeing about who should intervene. Lapinski and Rimal (2005) distinguish aspects of the operation of social norms. Bicchieri and Xiao (2009) further separate beliefs about what people do from beliefs about what they think ought to be done. The distinction matters here because an obligation can be attributed to a family even when some members quietly reject it. It would be wrong to report a unified customary command on that basis.

Collective action is not evidence of a single motive. Ostrom (2000) documents variation in people's responses to shared social arrangements. The relevance for *siri'* is limited but useful. A person may join a process of reconciliation out of concern for relatives, while another seeks to avoid public criticism. This remains a hypothetical contrast. It illustrates why participation cannot be read backward as proof that everyone assigned the same meaning to the original offense.

Audience-mediated normative activation names the contested movement from public knowledge to the attribution of duty. It begins with an alleged violation that is available for others to evaluate. Recognition, when it occurs, is a judgment about the claim rather than a response determined by the number of observers. A further decision is involved before anyone can say that a family or other group is obliged to act. The model is distinctive insofar as it locates that decision within the changing social reach of *maseddi siri'*, not in a general assumption that public embarrassment produces retaliation.

Recognition and collective authorization require separate judgments. Table 2 records those possible judgments without claiming they have been observed in sequence. A person may feel shame without disclosing an incident. Disclosure may attract criticism of the original accusation. An injury may be accepted while a proposed remedy is rejected. Those possibilities are not minor exceptions. They are reasons to distinguish collective recognition from the collective authorization of a particular response. The distinction is also necessary if *siri'* is to be discussed as a source of ethical restraint rather than identified exclusively with violence. No particular outcome follows from the diagram alone. The underlying claims remain open to challenge.

Table 2 Audience Judgment and the Conditional Attribution of Collective Duty

Question	Possible judgment	Consequence for the claim
Who knows about the event?	Disclosure or anticipated disclosure	Visibility creates an occasion for assessment
Is an injury accepted?	Recognition, doubt, or refusal	Discredit may be acknowledged or rejected
Who owes a response?	Duty accepted, disputed, or unassigned	Collective obligation cannot be presumed
What response is acceptable?	Agreement or disagreement about redress	Restraint and coercive demands require separate treatment

Note. Entries state possible interpretations, not observed sequences or frequencies.

The legal issue arises when a social demand is described as binding. Kadir et al. (2026) examine how narratives of siri' enter judicial accounts of killings involving women in South Sulawesi. Their analysis makes the distinction between cultural explanation and legal permission especially important. Tyler (2006) examines perceived legitimacy and felt obligation, but the psychological perception of authority differs from legal authorization. A request for mediation can be socially credible without being mandatory. A demand for violence may receive approval from some participants while remaining prohibited under criminal law. The model therefore offers no cultural defense to an offense. Its narrower value is to identify the assertions of authority that need examination before an entire community is said to approve a response.

An audience can accept or refuse the same alleged injury, as represented in Picture 1. Even when an audience accepts an account, it may stop short of assigning any collective duty. Later disagreement may concern the remedy, not the injury itself. The diagram is not an observed chronology. Its arrows separate questions that have been joined too easily in accounts of honor. Further research would need to document who actually made these judgments and whether other participants accepted their standing to do so.

CONCLUSION

Siri' is experienced and discussed within relationships, but the involvement of other people does not mean that they create every feeling of shame. Published studies distinguish private moral conduct from the protection of shared honor. Iwata's discussion of maseddi siri' makes the collective dimension especially clear. What has remained less carefully explained is the interval between hearing about an alleged injury and claiming that someone else must respond. Public visibility makes a matter available for judgment. An audience may recognize the claim, challenge it, or decline to treat it as a collective concern.

Audience-mediated normative activation offers a limited explanation of that interval. The model separates reputational evaluation from the attribution of duty and leaves the remedy open to disagreement. It also draws a boundary between informal social authority and state-law permission. Library-based interpretation cannot determine which response is most common in Bugis-Makassar communities, and the evidence reviewed here does not establish a causal effect of publicity. The contribution lies in identifying the judgments that require closer attention when collective honor is invoked. A future case study could test whether an audience accepted an injury yet refused the demand made in its name.

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