

Islamic Views on Gender (Bissu, Calalai, Calabai, Makkurai, and Urane)

*Afriandi Amir¹, Marlina², Magefiratul Haerah³, Rahmatul Hidayat M⁴, Mirnawati⁵,
Kurnia Azisa⁶*

Imam Bukhori Islamic College of Bulukumba¹, Al-Gazali Islamic College of Bulukumba²³⁴⁵⁶
rhynamrlina@gmail.com²

Abstract

This research examines the relationship between Islamic values and the unique gender system in Bugis society in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, which recognizes five gender identities: makkunrai, urané, calalai, calabai, and bissu. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and literature study methods, this research analyzes the cultural, spiritual, and religious aspects of non-binary gender roles in Muslim society. Data were obtained from scientific journals, books, reports, and relevant digital sources related to the topic. The findings indicate that the Bugis community negotiates between Islamic teachings and local traditions, resulting in contextual interpretations that embrace gender diversity. The bissu figure is viewed as a sacred entity and plays an important role in customary ceremonies and the spirituality of the community. Gender identity in Bugis society is understood not only from a biological perspective but as a result of the dynamic interaction between religion, culture, and evolving social roles. This research contributes to the discourse on Islam regarding gender diversity and emphasizes the importance of preserving local wisdom amid the pressures of globalization and conservative religious ideologies. The study recommends a more contextual and humanistic Islamic approach to understanding the diverse social realities.

Keywords: *Bissu; Bugis culture; gender diversity; Islam and tradition; Non-binary identity.*

INTRODUCTION

The Bugis community in South Sulawesi recognizes a unique and complex gender system. It does not only acknowledge two biological categories but also recognizes the existence of five gender identities: makkunrai (female), urané (male), calalai (females who take on masculine roles), calabai (males who take on feminine roles), and bissu, individuals who are considered to embody both masculine and feminine elements and serve as spiritual figures. This system has long been a part of the cultural structure and religious rites of the Bugis community, even since the pre-Islamic era (Syamsurijal et al., 2024).

In the predominantly Muslim Bugis society, the presence of non-binary genders such as calabai, calalai, and bissu is not necessarily viewed as a deviation. On the contrary, there is a process of identity negotiation through local interpretations of Islamic teachings. For instance, bissu are not positioned as figures in opposition to religion but rather as sacred figures in various customary

ceremonies such as mappalili (Fadillah, 2024). This indicates a dynamic relationship between local culture and religious understanding.

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using library research methods. Data were collected through the exploration of various sources such as scientific journals, books, ethnographic reports, and relevant digital documents, particularly those published in the last ten years. This approach was chosen as it is suitable for deeply exploring the relationship between Islamic values and local gender constructions in Bugis society.

Several previous studies have highlighted this theme. Suheri et al. (2021) explain how puritan Islamic values exert pressure on the existence of bissu. Rokhmansyah et al. (2018) reveal how calabai and bissu are represented in literature as a form of resistance against dominant norms. Ismoyo et al. (2023) also state that the spiritual space of the bissu community is part of the religious queer Muslim identity.

This research aims to analyze how Islamic views—both from theological and sociocultural perspectives—relate to the existence of non-binary genders in Bugis culture. The benefit of this research is to contribute to gender studies in Islam, enrich the understanding of local culture, and promote a more inclusive and contextual Islamic approach.

Theoretically, this study employs the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* approach, particularly in the aspect of protecting human dignity (*ḥifẓ al-'ird*), as well as the Islamic feminist hermeneutic approach to reinterpret religious texts in a local context. The hypothesis of this research is that local gender identities in Bugis society are not essentially in conflict with Islamic values when approached through the principles of inclusivity, culture, and contextual interpretation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using library research methods. The focus of the study is directed towards analyzing the relationship between Islamic values and gender construction in Bugis society, particularly concerning non-binary identities such as *bissu*, *calabai*, and *calalai*. Data were obtained from various written sources, including scientific journals, academic books, theses, and relevant digital publications published within the last ten years. The selection of sources was conducted selectively based on thematic relevance, academic validity, and their contribution to gender studies and Islam. The researcher acted as the primary instrument, actively classifying and interpreting the data. The results of the study were then systematically organized to produce a contextual, reflective, and in-depth understanding of the practices and meanings of gender identity in the Muslim Bugis community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research shows that the gender system in Bugis society is not limited to the dichotomy of male and female but recognizes the existence of five gender identities: *makkunrai*, *urané*, *calalai*, *calabai*, and *bissu*. In the context of the Muslim Bugis community, the relationship between Islam and these local gender identities is not oppositional; rather, it exists within a complex cultural and spiritual negotiation space. These identities not only represent gender expressions but are also tied to important social and symbolic functions within the structure of Bugis society.

One of the main findings is that *bissu*, as a non-binary gender figure, is still respected and serves as a spiritual leader in various Bugis customary rituals. Syamsurijal et al. (2024) mention that *bissu* are considered sacred beings who embody a balance of masculine and feminine elements and act as intermediaries between the human and spiritual worlds. In local religious practices such as *mappalili*, the presence of *bissu* is deemed essential for maintaining cosmic balance. This indicates that although Islam is the majority religion, local interpretations of Islamic teachings allow for the existence of *bissu*'s role without being seen as a deviation.

However, this dynamic does not always proceed without conflict. Suheri et al. (2021) reveal that in recent decades, waves of puritan Islam entering through transnational preaching have influenced some people's perceptions of the existence of *bissu*. They have begun to be viewed as contradictory to Islamic law due to their gender identities that do not conform to binary norms. As a result, many *bissu* communities have experienced marginalization and prohibitions in carrying out customary rituals. However, as explained by the same authors, resistance to this pressure has emerged through cultural processes that preserve the symbolism and spiritual values of *bissu*.

In the context of *calalai* and *calabai*, which represent females in masculine roles and males in feminine roles, respectively, the research shows that their existence serves specific social

functions. Rokhmansyah et al. (2018) state that in local literature, such as the novel "Calabai," these identities are not only maintained but also reconstructed as a form of resistance against the increasingly dominant heteronormative hegemony due to the influence of conservative Islam. In social life, calabai are often found participating in performing arts and makeup, while calalai take on roles traditionally associated with men, such as farming or being heads of households.

In this regard, an inclusive and contextual Islamic approach becomes key to building a religious understanding that appreciates gender diversity. Fadillah (2024) shows that the Bugis community does not outright reject non-binary gender identities but negotiates values through flexible and culturally-based religious interpretations. Islam, in its local practice, is interpreted not as a rigid legal system but as ethical and spiritual values that can engage in dialogue with culture.

This analysis is also reinforced by the theoretical approach of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, particularly the aspect of *ḥifẓ al-'ird* (protection of human honor and dignity), which allows for an interpretation of Islam that upholds humanity, respects identities, and protects minority groups. In this approach, the existence of bissu and other non-binary genders can be seen as part of the richness of God's creation that should be valued and nurtured, rather than rejected or marginalized. Ismoyo et al. (2023) even explain that the queer spirituality experienced by the bissu community can be part of an authentic Islamic religious experience, even if it does not align with mainstream interpretations.

Furthermore, the process of Islamization in Bugis does not erase local identities but gives rise to hybrid and pluralistic forms of Islam. This aligns with the theory of the indigenization of Islam, where Islamic values adapt to local cultures without losing their substance. Therefore, in the Bugis context, gender identities such as bissu, calabai, and calalai not only endure but also symbolize the resilience of local culture against the currents of global homogenization and religious conservatism.

In addition to these findings, the study by Haris and Maulidia (2019) shows that the Bugis community does not simply erase the existence of calabai and bissu despite normative pressures from conservative Islamic groups. On the contrary, local communities tend to accommodate Islamic values into customary structures in flexible and cultural ways. This indicates that Islamic teachings can harmoniously engage with the rich Bugis traditions of gender expression.

Research conducted by Nuraini, Syakir, and Anwar (2020) uses the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* approach to analyze the existence of non-binary genders in Indonesian Muslim society. They emphasize that the principle of protecting human dignity (*ḥifẓ al-'ird*) can serve as a normative basis for accepting the existence of bissu as God's creatures with important spiritual and social functions. With this approach, the spirituality of bissu is not seen as deviant but as part of the richness of local Islam that is *rahmatan lil 'ālamīn* (a mercy to the worlds).

Rahim and Abdullah (2022) also examine the existence of calabai and calalai within the structure of modern Bugis families. They find that these identities still hold important social

functions and legitimacy, such as calabai in the arts and marriage, and calalai in roles as breadwinners or household leaders. This shows that the gender structure in Bugis society is not solely based on biological identity but also on social and cultural functions integrated with Islamic values.

Meanwhile, Ma'ruf (2017) highlights how local scholars in South Sulawesi interpret Quranic verses about gender. He concludes that the concept of fitrah in local Islam is understood more inclusively, as a form of inner and social balance, rather than merely biological sex. In this context, bissu are seen as representations of the sacred balance of masculine and feminine, possessing high spiritual value in Bugis tradition.

Rosdiana and Wahyudi (2023) add that social media has become a new space that allows for the emergence of more inclusive and open Islamic discourse regarding gender diversity. The younger Bugis generation tends to interpret Islam progressively, including in their acceptance of calalai, calabai, and bissu as part of legitimate cultural and spiritual identities. This reinforces the finding that Islam in Bugis society is dynamic, contextual, and open to local values.

Thus, the results of this research indicate that the understanding of gender in Muslim society is not singular but highly dependent on social, cultural, and local interpretations of Islamic teachings. An inclusive understanding of Islam rooted in maqāṣid can open space for diverse gender expressions, as demonstrated in the practices of the Bugis community.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This research concludes that the gender system in Bugis society is not binary but encompasses five identities: makkunrai, urané, calabai, calalai, and bissu. In the context of the Muslim Bugis community, the existence of non-binary gender identities such as calabai, calalai, and bissu is accepted through a process of cultural and spiritual negotiation of Islamic values. The local Islamic perspective, which is contextual, allows for interpretative space regarding gender diversity without necessarily conflicting with the fundamental values of religious teachings. Despite the pressures from conservative Islamic currents, the Bugis community continues to uphold customary values that appreciate the spiritual and social roles of non-binary identities. Therefore, gender in Islam is not solely understood from a biological standpoint but as a result of the interaction between religious values, culture, and a dynamic social structure.

Suggestion

A more contextual and inclusive Islamic approach is needed to understand local gender diversity, such as that found in Bugis society. Future research should deepen the exploration of local and multicultural interpretations of Islam to prevent the imposition of homogeneous values in a society that has historically practiced diversity. Additionally, it is important for academics, religious leaders, and local governments to promote cultural-religious dialogue to preserve local heritage such as bissu, which is rich in spiritual values, and to create a just social space for all gender identities.

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