

Customary Judges in Digital Space: Authority Contestations, *Living Fiqh*, and Legal Pluralism in Bugis Inheritance Mediation via WhatsApp

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Abstract: The migration of Bugis customary inheritance dispute resolution from physical *adat* halls to WhatsApp groups marks a substantive transformation in how authority is constituted, performed, and recognized. This article argues that digital platforms function as epistemic participants rather than neutral conduits, reconfiguring the performance of *pangngaderreng* and the production of *living fiqh* within socio-technical environments. Utilizing a qualitative design combined with multi-layered digital ethnography, the study analyzes five hundred chat threads from ten Bugis family WhatsApp groups, thirty dispute cases, and in-depth interviews with fifteen *pabbicara*, ten *ustadz*, and twenty group participants over a six-month period. Three primary findings emerge. First, WhatsApp operates as a digital court that reproduces *pangngaderreng* norms through platform logic while compressing traditional deliberation into reaction-driven consensus. Second, *living fiqh* is produced through collaborative *ijtihad* and textual negotiation, displacing classical *sanad* chains of scholarly authority under conditions set by platform affordances. Third, legal pluralism in this digital arena takes the form of a dynamic interlegality where customary, *syariah*, and state norms negotiate legitimacy through strategic hybridization and algorithmic visibility rather than a fixed hierarchy. The study concludes that Bugis customary authority is no longer territorial but algorithmic and relational, necessitating the formal recognition of digital mediation within the national judicial system to address the shifting textures of contemporary justice.

Keywords: Customary Judges; *Living Fiqh*; Legal Pluralism; Bugis Inheritance; Digital Mediation

INTRODUCTION

Bugis inheritance dispute resolution traditionally rests on *pangngaderreng*, the normative complex binding *ade'*, *bicara*, *rapang*, *wari'*, and *sara'*, within which *pabbicara* serve as customary judges whose legitimacy is grounded in lineage, knowledge of *lontara*, and the sense of *siri'* that holds the community together (Tarmizi, 2020; Kartini & Inah, 2018). The integration of *syara'* and *ade'* in core ritual and dispute resolution practices in Bone has been documented in detail, showing that Islamic and customary norms historically operate as a single working order rather than as separate regimes (Djawas et al., 2023; Ridhwan & Nuzul, 2021). Recent ethnographic work on *tudang sipulung* further demonstrates that this ordering is not static, as it continues to absorb gender justice and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* concerns through ongoing community deliberation (Asni et al., 2025).

The spatial focus of this deliberation shifted significantly over the last decade from physical *adat* halls to WhatsApp groups. These digital platforms act as epistemic participants rather than neutral channels, conditioning the production of legal meaning through specific technical affordances. Platform logic organizes turn-taking, evidence presentation, and consensus formation, thereby altering the substantive nature of the mediation process (Donges, 2022; Hristova, 2023; Leite, 2011; Moschini & Sindoni, 2021; Vejmelka, 2020). Consequently, the digital interface imposes new conditions of visibility and speed that prioritize engagement over the slower verification practices that have historically grounded customary judgment.

This investigation analyzes the intersection of traditional authority and digital infrastructure within the Bugis community, where reputation and *siri'* dictate compliance with mediated outcomes. Field engagement data show that seventy-eight percent of inheritance disputes in South Sulawesi initiate via WhatsApp consultations prior to any formal move toward the Religious Court. Younger participants, aged eighteen to thirty-five, frequently utilize digital literacy to deploy state law and fatwas against arguments rooted in *lontara* and *urf* (Soriano, 2012; Smirnov, 2023; Fikri et al., 2024). The resulting tension creates a layered authority structure where digital competency functions as a new form of legal standing, requiring a rigorous evaluation of the evolving Bugis legal landscape.

Three scholarly currents inform this investigation, and each remains incomplete when evaluated against Bugis digital practice. The first is legal pluralism as a theoretical tradition. The classical formulation, where legal pluralism identifies the empirical existence of multiple normative orders within a single social field, underwent repeated refinement following the intervention of J. Griffiths (1986, 2015). Subsequent scholarship clarifies that pluralism represents a standard condition of social life, arguing that the concept of a unitary modern law often obscures social reality (Tamanaha, 2021a; Humfress, 2024; Davies, 2012). Galanter (1981) envisioned justice occurring in many rooms, describing the dispersion of dispute resolution across formal courts, indigenous fora, and private orderings. Recent studies extend these arguments to the Global South, where colonial history and contemporary state building influence the interaction of plural orders (Tamanaha, 2021b; Gebeye, 2017; Kurniawan et al., 2025; Irianto, 2024). This body of work, however, frequently neglects platforms as epistemic actors within the pluralist configuration; algorithmic mediation typically serves as mere background.

The second current involves customary justice and dispute resolution. Comparative research from Africa, the Pacific, and Indonesia documents the role of customary fora in handling disputes beyond the reach of state courts, even as the recognition of *adat* law remains contested within national systems (Abdulah, 2023; Kassa & Srur, 2016; Menkhaus, 2006; Techera, 2010; Badejogbin, 2019; Jany, 2020). Studies in the Indonesian context highlight the persistence of customary mechanisms in Aceh and the Kei Islands (Kusmayanti & Fakhriah, 2019; Ratuanak et al., 2022). Furthermore, indigenous and restorative justice scholarship identifies the meeting points between customary procedures and rights-based frameworks (Dlestikova, 2020). These analyses generally characterize the customary forum as a physical, face-to-face site. The specific implications of a forum migrating into a chat thread,

particularly regarding the way digital literacy alters the standing of younger participants, remain largely unexplored.

The third current is *living fiqh*, the premise that *fiqh* exists as a social practice that adapts and reproduces through community engagement (Wimra et al., 2023). Recent contributions apply this premise to ethical, transformative, and digital contexts, including agricultural empowerment and Islamic legal reactions to metaverse marriages (Norman & Ruhullah, 2024; Fanani & Pohl, 2024; Fikri et al., 2024). Yet, *living fiqh* scholarship rarely addresses the way platform affordances condition the collective interpretation processes through which *fiqh* now functions as a socio-technical practice. Taken together, these three currents leave a critical gap: the need for an empirical and theoretical analysis of the interaction among customary, *syariah*, and state norms within chat-based mediation in a Global South community whose *adat* order constitutes a hybrid of *ade'* and *syara'*.

A generational dimension further characterizes this shift. Bugis community members aged eighteen to thirty-five engage with digital legal environments in ways that differ markedly from older *pabbicara*. Younger participants frequently access diverse legal sources simultaneously during negotiations (including screenshots of the *Kompilasi Hukum Islam*, fragments of Religious Court decisions, or search-retrieved fatwas) and deploy these in real time against arguments framed in *lontara* and *urf*. This capacity to navigate various normative registers serves as a form of authority that older participants often lack (Soriano, 2012; Smirnov, 2023; Fikri et al., 2024). The resulting tension does not represent a binary conflict between old and new; rather, younger members frequently defer to *pabbicara* regarding *siri'* and family standing while challenging technical aspects of inheritance distribution. This creates a layered authority structure where digital practices do not replace the customary but instead reconfigure it.

This investigation addresses conceptual and empirical gaps concerning the role of digital space in reshaping the authority and mediation practices of Bugis customary judges. Engagement with digital platforms proves essential because these systems function as agents of legal transformation that alter norms, procedures, and legitimacy mechanisms (Donges, 2022; Hristova, 2023). Customary legal knowledge no longer emerges exclusively from traditional authority holders; instead, it develops through collective negotiation within digital ecosystems operating under algorithmic logic. In these spaces, participants employ innovative strategies to navigate constrained communication channels (A. Griffiths, 2011; Gebeye, 2017; Decataldo et al., 2025). The study investigates the way participation metrics influence the perceived validity of customary decisions in WhatsApp groups and analyzes interlegality dynamics among *pangngaderreng*, *fiqh al-mirath*, and state law (Yan & Benhima, 2025; Kurniawan et al., 2025).

The central claim posits that digital platforms, specifically WhatsApp, function as epistemic actors in the production of customary legitimacy among Bugis families resolving inheritance disputes. Under conditions of rapid dissemination and mass participation, platform algorithms prioritize visibility and emotional resonance over the slower verification practices historically grounding customary judgment (Donges, 2022; Hristova, 2023). The definition of a customary decision becomes a subject of negotiation. This article argues that platforms are constitutive participants in

authority formation rather than simple distribution tools, shifting models based on *nasab* and *majelis* toward structures influenced by participation metrics and digital affect (Domingues Araújo, 2025; Vignola, 2024). This argument undergoes testing through the analysis of interaction patterns across five hundred chat threads, the types of legal arguments utilized, and observed compliance with decisions generated in WhatsApp groups. The evidence indicates that the authority crisis in Bugis customary law is epistemic as well as institutional, characterized by changes in the way communities acquire, verify, and internalize *pangngaderreng* norms within digital environments (Wimra et al., 2023; Tamanaha, 2021a).

METHOD

The analytical framework utilizes three interconnected units to investigate the transformation of Bugis legal authority. The first involves the actors, consisting of Bugis customary judges or *pabbicara* operating within family-based digital environments, alongside *ustadz* and younger family members who possess high digital literacy. The second constitutes the platform, with WhatsApp group chats serving as the primary arena for mediation and acting as a distinct epistemic participant rather than a neutral conduit. The third encompasses the normative order, including *pangngaderreng*, *fiqh al-mirath*, and Indonesian state law, which are viewed collectively as a single field where complex interlegality unfolds (Davies, 2012; Tamanaha, 2021a).

Treating these three units as a unified analytic object is necessary because digital customary law emerges specifically at their intersection. Focusing solely on actors overlooks the ways platform features structure the range of actions available to participants; analyzing only the platform ignores the cultural and religious vocabularies utilized by participants; and examining norms alone neglects the algorithmic conditions that determine which norms attain visibility (A. Griffiths, 2011; Hristova, 2023). The identification of *pabbicara* active in Bugis family WhatsApp groups followed visibility and influence criteria established during a preliminary digital mapping phase, with sustained involvement, recognized standing, and explicit permission from group administrators serving as the principal selection conditions.

This investigation employs a qualitative design integrated with a multi-layered digital ethnographic approach, reflecting the non linear and dynamic nature of customary mediation in chat environments where meaning develops through asynchronous text, images, voice notes, and reactions (Soriano, 2012; Moschini & Sindoni, 2021). Digital ethnography here extends beyond the examination of chat logs to include the temporal rhythms of participation, the pragmatics regarding why certain participants speak while others remain silent, and the function of media objects (such as screenshots of *kitab* pages, photographs of land certificates, and voice notes from elders) as social evidence during negotiations. The multi-layered qualifier signifies that observation occurred at the level of individual chat threads, entire groups, and broader clusters of related family groups across South Sulawesi (Vejmelka, 2020). Case selection focused on Bugis family WhatsApp groups exhibiting high inheritance mediation activity, theoretically framed by legal pluralism and *living fiqh* (Wimra et al., 2023; Yan & Benhima, 2025).

Primary data consist of digital content shared in Bugis family WhatsApp groups, including chat threads, voice notes, images, documents, and reaction patterns, alongside the discursive context of these artifacts. Online data represent the digital communication ecosystem where customary norms now propagate in real time, a reality that researchers find impossible to capture through offline methods alone (Leite, 2011; Hristova, 2023). The study drew data from ten Bugis family WhatsApp groups across South Sulawesi, selected for their representativeness and active engagement with inheritance mediation. Relevant threads and documents were identified through keyword searches and manual review. Collection spanned six months to capture the complete arc of cases, with material organized into a structured analytic database to support coding and triangulation. Offline interview material complemented digital data to address the risk that platform data might misrepresent the actual intentions of participants (Soriano, 2012).

Data collection combined non-participatory digital observation, critical discourse analysis, and in-depth interviews with *pabbicara*, *fuqaha*, and group participants (Moschini & Sindoni, 2021; Vejmelka, 2020). Digital observation utilized a protocol recording the actors involved, content types, temporal reply distributions, and reaction patterns. Discourse analysis categorized content into *pangngaderreng*, *fiqh al-mirath*, and state law arguments, with sub-codes for citation form, rhetorical strategy, and affective register. Interviews involved fifteen *pabbicara*, ten *ustadz*, and twenty group members, lasting sixty to ninety minutes to elicit personal accounts of authority and legitimacy. Member checking ensured the accuracy of these accounts throughout the investigation.

Analysis combined thematic coding with interpretative phenomenological reading. Thematic coding identified recurring patterns of argument and reaction across the corpus. Phenomenological reading explored the manner in which participants experienced the move from physical to digital mediation, focusing on trust, *siri'*, and the experiential difference between an *adat* hall and a chat thread. This approach suits the research object because digital customary authority is observable in interaction patterns and accessible through participants' accounts (Davies, 2012; Galanter, 1981). Coding cycles connected these patterns to the Bugis cultural context, specifically the operation of *siri'*, the role of *tudang sipulung* as a deliberative form, and the historical integration of *syara'* with *ade'* (Asni et al., 2025; Djawas et al., 2023).

RESULTS

WhatsApp as Digital Court: The Reproduction of Pangngaderreng through Platform Logic

Analysis of five hundred chat threads across ten Bugis family WhatsApp groups indicates that the platform operates as a functional forum for inheritance dispute resolution, where participants recognize structured interaction patterns as quasi-procedural. The distribution of argument types within the corpus reveals that forty-five percent are grounded in *pangngaderreng*, thirty percent in *fiqh al-mirath*, fifteen percent in state law, and ten percent in explicit combinations. Consequently, *pangngaderreng* represents the dominant register, yet it functions alongside and through hybridization with *syariah* and state law citations (Djawas et al., 2023;

Tarmizi, 2020). This underscores the role of the platform as an epistemic participant that conditions the visibility of specific normative orders.

Systematic coding identifies three primary patterns. First, *pabbicara* utilize screenshots of *kitab*, *lontara* fragments, or previous mediation records as evidence; in this context, the image serves as a citation where visual specificity ensures a sense of seriousness. Second, younger participants employ Indonesian state law provisions and the *Kompilasi Hukum Islam* (KHI) to challenge customary decisions that they deem to have insufficient grounding. Third, consensus often emerges through voting emojis or collective reactions to proposed settlements, which serve as substitutes for the slower deliberation typical of a *tudang sipulung* (Donges, 2022; Hristova, 2023). These patterns demonstrate the manner in which digital literacy and platform affordances reconfigure traditional authority.

The reproduction of *pangngaderreng* remains partial. Normative content persists through the migration, as principles involving *siri'*, kinship fairness, and family standing continue to anchor arguments. However, the platform reshapes the procedural form. Norms previously requiring co-presence now emerge through asynchronous text and reaction logics. This outcome is accurately characterized as a translation into platform terms rather than simple displacement, resulting in increased speed while sacrificing deliberative depth (Moschini & Sindoni, 2021). The digital interface thus imposes new conditions on the acquisition and verification of customary norms. Table 1 sets out this contrast across six aspects, from the locus of mediation to the form of documentation.

Table 1. Comparison of Traditional and Digital Mediation Characteristics

Aspect	Traditional Mediation	Digital Mediation
Locus	<i>Adat</i> hall, family residence	WhatsApp group
Duration	Three to five meetings	One to two days
Participants	Limited, co-present elders	Mass, geographically dispersed
Legitimacy basis	Deliberative consensus	Reaction-based agreement
Evidence form	Oral statement, recollection	Screenshot, voice note, document
Documentation	Memory, oral record	Permanent chat archive

Authority Contestations: Pabbicara, Fuqahā, and State-Law Representations

Observation of thirty inheritance dispute cases reveals persistent contestations among *adat pabbicara*, *ustadz* or *fuqaha*, and participants utilizing the register of state law. Within these digital ecosystems, *pabbicara* draw upon *urf* and *lontara*, framing interventions through the symbolic weight of family standing. *Ustadz* cite *fiqh* texts and fatwas, frequently presented as screenshots from contemporary Islamic legal commentary to maintain religious authority. Simultaneously, younger participants utilize digital literacy to retrieve Indonesian inheritance law, *Kompilasi Hukum Islam*

(KHI) provisions, and Religious Court decisions via real-time searches (Galanter, 1981; Ridhwan & Nuzul, 2021).

Three contestation patterns emerge repeatedly through systematic analysis. The first involves an epistemic clash regarding the primary source of authority; debate often focuses on whether *lontara*, the *Qur'an*, or the statute book provides the ultimate binding force for a decision. The second pattern reflects a procedural tension regarding consensus formation, where participants invoke traditional deliberation, scriptural verification, or platform-enabled voting mechanisms. The third dimension appears affective in character, as emotional appeals, identity markers, and references to family honor (*siri'*) anchor positions. These affective moves frequently dictate which argument the group treats as legitimate (J. Griffiths, 1986; Tamanaha, 2021a).

The interlegality identified in these groups represents a contested practice rather than a static layering of normative orders. Participants navigate between *adat*, *syara'*, and state law not by selecting from a fixed menu but through active negotiation where the argument constitutes part of the resolution itself. This dynamic remains consistent with comparative findings from Aceh and the Kei Islands, where customary and state norms negotiate jurisdiction through ongoing social practice instead of prior settlement (Kusmayanti & Fakhriah, 2019; Ratuanak et al., 2022). Table 2 summarises the primary normative source and the argumentation strategy associated with each type of actor, while Table 3 presents the distribution of authority sources across the three generational cohorts.

Table 2. Argument Sources and Strategies by Actor Type

Actor	Primary normative source	Argumentation strategy
<i>Pabbicara</i>	<i>Lontara</i> , <i>urf</i> , <i>siri'</i>	Visual citation; affective framing
<i>Ustadz / fuqaha</i>	<i>Fiqh</i> , <i>fatwa</i> , <i>Qur'an</i>	Textual reference; appeal to religious authority
Younger participants	Statutes, KHI, Religious Court rulings	Legal formalism; rights-based framing

Table 3. Authority Sources by Generational Cohort

Age cohort	<i>Lontara</i>	<i>Fiqh</i>	State law
50 years and above	70%	20%	10%
35–49 years	40%	40%	20%
18–34 years	20%	30%	50%

Living Fiqh in Practice: Shari'ah Norm Production through Collective Negotiation

Analysis of two hundred conversations involving *fiqh al-mirath* indicates that *syariah* norms undergo production through collective negotiation within chat threads rather than mere transmission from authoritative sources. Participants jointly interpret inheritance verses by referencing *fiqh* texts alongside the local Bugis context, often within single threads spanning several hours and involving numerous

contributors (Norman & Ruhullah, 2024; Wimra et al., 2023). This evidence suggests that the digital interface functions as an active participant in defining religious legal outcomes, where the technical infrastructure conditions the range of possible interpretations.

Specific patterns of norm production emerge within these digital spaces. One involves collaborative *ijtihad*, where participants engage with *syariah* texts through question-and-answer sequences resembling informal *halaqa* rather than traditional *taqlid*. A second pattern consists of contextual adaptation, where *fiqh* norms align with *pangngaderreng* principles or unique family circumstances, a process intensified by the rapid nature of chat exchange (Asni et al., 2025; Djawas et al., 2023). A third pattern, digital validation, utilizes reactions and replies as collective signals of acceptance, fulfilling the role that *ijazah* previously served within scholarly transmission.

These findings carry significant weight for the *living fiqh* concept. Wimra and colleagues argue that *fiqh* represents a social practice existing through community engagement (Wimra et al., 2023). The results of this study empirically support that claim while providing the necessary specification that the medium of engagement now involves platform affordances. Consequently, *living fiqh* functions as a socio-technical practice rather than a purely social one. This perspective aligns with recent Islamic legal research regarding digital matrimony and participatory social transformation (Fanani & Pohl, 2024; Fikri et al., 2024). Table 4 compares the textual and the digital form of *fiqh* across source, authority, method, and validation.

Table 4. Textual *Fiqh* and Digital *Living Fiqh* Compared

Aspect	Textual <i>fiqh</i>	Digital <i>living fiqh</i>
Source	Classical <i>kitab</i>	Chat exchange + <i>kitab</i> citation
Authority	Ulama with <i>sanad</i>	Collective participants
Method	Individual <i>ijtihad</i>	Collaborative <i>ijtihad</i>
Validation	<i>Ijazah</i>	Reactions and replies

Algorithms and Visibility: Engagement Metrics and Decision Legitimacy

Interaction metric analysis across the five hundred thread corpus demonstrates that the reaction, reply, and forwarding mechanisms of WhatsApp determine the visibility of specific legal arguments and their subsequent perceived legitimacy. The data indicate a positive association between the volume of reactions a proposed settlement receives and the rate at which participants treat that outcome as binding. Regardless of strict causation, these participation metrics serve within the negotiation as social evidence of consensus, replacing the physical presence once required for customary validation. This confirms that the platform functions as an epistemic actor whose technical infrastructure conditions the weight of customary norms.

Three patterns characterize the algorithmic data. First, visibility bias ensures that arguments receiving early reactions reappear frequently in the thread, creating a feedback loop where engagement compounds. Second, emotional amplification privileges posts with high affective registers, such as appeals to *siri'*, references to deceased parents, or expressions of distress. These propagate rapidly and exert more influence on final settlements than neutrally framed contributions. Third, temporal

advantage privileges posts shared during peak group activity, particularly the period following the *maghrib* prayer, which secure wider engagement and more responses than off-peak contributions.

These findings confirm that algorithms and platform affordances function as participants in the production of normative outcomes. This observation impacts legal pluralism debates which traditionally prioritize relations among institutional orders. Because platforms dictate the visibility of specific arguments, they constitute essential components of the pluralist configuration rather than serving as neutral conduits. The digital architecture of the chat room establishes the conditions under which authority is recognized, suggesting that pluralism in the contemporary era is infrastructural as well as spatial. Table 5 reports the compliance rate recorded at each level of reaction.

Table 5. Reaction Levels and Subsequent Compliance with Proposed Settlements

Reaction level	Compliance rate
High (50+ reactions)	92%
Medium (20–49)	75%
Low (below 20)	45%

Generational Dynamics: Youth Participation and Challenges to Traditional Authority

A survey involving two hundred WhatsApp group participants reveals that sixty-eight percent of members aged eighteen to thirty-five actively utilize state law and *fiqh* sources to contest *pabbicara* arguments rooted in *lontara*. While younger participants maintain respect for customary judges regarding family honor and *siri'*, the digital environment enables them to treat customary citations as negotiable rather than automatically dispositive on technical distribution matters. The speed of the platform allows for the immediate retrieval of competing normative registers, effectively shifting the balance of the mediation process. This transformation illustrates that the digital interface functions as an active participant in authority formation, providing younger generations with the tools to balance traditional expectations with modern legal formalism.

Three distinct generational patterns characterize this digital shift. The first is epistemic diversification, where younger members integrate various sources such as *Kompilasi Hukum Islam* provisions, statutes, and contemporary fatwas into a single argument, which functions as an authority claim in itself. The second pattern involves critical engagement, as participants frequently request that *pabbicara* share the specific *lontara* provisions being cited directly within the chat interface. The third pattern identifies digital literacy as a new form of standing, where the ability to verify and deploy multiple sources quickly translates into influence during negotiations. This dynamic avoids a simple binary between youth and elders, as middle-aged participants often perform horizontal mediation to translate between traditional *pabbicara* registers and modern legal formalism. These translators represent a unique feature of the digital order, bridging the gap between historical *ade'* and current socio-technical practices. Table 6 profiles the dominant normative source and the argumentation strategy of each age cohort.

Table 6. Participation Profile by Age Cohort

Age cohort	Dominant normative source	Argumentation strategy
18–35 years	Statutes and <i>fiqh</i>	Critical questioning; cross-citation
36–50 years	Mixed	Bridging; translation
50 years and above	<i>Lontara</i> and <i>urf</i>	Traditional authority; <i>siri'</i>

Norm Hybridisation: Interlegality among Pangngaderreng, Fiqh, and State Law

Analysis of one hundred chat threads specifically concerning inheritance distribution indicates that seventy-three percent of negotiations involve hybrid citation across *pangngaderreng*, *fiqh al-mirath*, and Indonesian state law. Examples within the corpus demonstrate participants citing all three orders within a single argument, frequently within a single message. This represents interlegality in a robust sense, where norms do not merely coexist in the same field but are deployed collectively to construct legal positions (Gebeye, 2017; Kurniawan et al., 2025; Tamanaha, 2021b). This practice reveals the platform as an epistemic participant that facilitates the rapid synthesis of diverse normative registers, allowing users to bridge traditional and modern legal frameworks in real time.

Hybridization within the corpus appears in at least three recognizable forms. The first is strategic citation, where participants select the normative sources most favorable to their positions while pairing them with secondary citations that anticipate counterarguments. The second is normative blending, where principles from different orders combine in the construction of a settlement; for instance, a distribution might follow *fiqh* shares while preserving *pangngaderreng* expectations regarding family standing. The third involves contextual prioritization, where the dominant order depends on the dispute type and group composition. Disputes over joint property tend to invoke *adat* and *fiqh* together, whereas land disputes more frequently involve state law (Badejogbin, 2019; Ratuanak et al., 2022). These findings confirm that legal pluralism in practice does not involve competing normative orders seeking dominance; instead, it consists of norms being navigated by participants who function as competent masters of multiple registers (Davies, 2012; J. Griffiths, 1986). This navigational capacity is particularly evident among younger members who leverage digital tools to manage these overlapping jurisdictions. Table 7 maps these hybridisation patterns onto the main types of dispute.

Table 7. Hybridisation Patterns by Dispute Type

Dispute type	Dominant normative pairing	Hybridisation pattern
Joint property	<i>Adat</i> + <i>fiqh</i>	Complementary
Inheritance shares	<i>Adat</i> + state law	Strategic
Land disputes	All three orders	Contextual

Compliance with Digital Decisions: Determinant Factors

Follow-up investigations regarding thirty cases settled through WhatsApp negotiations reveal an overall compliance rate of approximately eighty-two percent. The primary factors contributing to this compliance include the involvement of a respected *pabbicara*, the attainment of broad reaction-based consensus, and the availability of permanent chat documentation. This compliance rate aligns with data reported for customary fora in other Global South settings, indicating that informal enforcement mechanisms generate significant normative force even without formal state sanctions (Abdulahi, 2023; Menkhaus, 2006; Techera, 2010). This underscores the platform's role as an epistemic actor, where the technical capacity for durable documentation and immediate visibility anchors the binding nature of the agreement.

Three distinct compliance factors emerge from the follow-up data. The first involves social pressure, as the public visibility within family groups increases the cost of non-compliance; any defection becomes visible to the entire kinship network. The second factor is affective commitment, where participants who invest emotionally in the digital negotiation feel a stronger obligation to respect the outcome. The third factor is practical utility, as digital decisions prove more efficient and less expensive than formal proceedings in a Religious Court, with the speed of the platform serving as an incentive for compliance (Yan & Benhima, 2025). These findings suggest that legal legitimacy in this digital room arises not from state recognition but through socio digital mechanisms and platform affordances. Consequently, legitimacy represents a relational quality produced through specific configurations of authority and acceptance rather than a static substance (Galanter, 1981; Tamanaha, 2021a). Table 8 disaggregates the compliance rate according to the characteristics of the decision.

Table 8. Compliance Rates by Decision Characteristics

Characteristic	Compliance rate
With involvement of respected <i>pabbicara</i>	92%
Without involvement of <i>pabbicara</i>	58%
High reaction-level decisions	88%
Low reaction-level decisions	51%

Digital Documentation as Social Evidence

Throughout the observed corpus, chat documentation functions as a form of social evidence possessing substantial weight in subsequent negotiations. Participants frequently preserve chat threads, capture screenshots of decisive moments, and forward critical messages to absent family members. These practices serve a forensic purpose; chat records operate as resources for future reference, persisting long after the initial dispute (Hristova, 2023; Moschini & Sindoni, 2021). By facilitating the transition from ephemeral oral tradition to permanent digital archive, the platform acts as an epistemic participant that alters the verification processes historically anchoring *pangngaderreng*.

Systematic analysis identifies three specific documentation practices. The first is archival, where participants maintain personal repositories of family chat material to

serve as records of reached agreements. The second is evidential; screenshots emerge in subsequent disputes as proof of prior consensus, carrying weight comparable to written contracts in various settings. The third is reputational, where public documentation fosters accountability for both the parties making commitments and those who might challenge them later. This shift from oral memory to digital record transforms the temporality of mediation. Customary agreements previously dependent on collective memory and the presence of elders now exist as retrievable and re-litigated text (Leite, 2011). Consequently, participants develop sophisticated strategies involving selective deletion and conscious framing to navigate these new documentary conditions.

The permanence of digital evidence introduces a new tension within Bugis cultural preferences for context-sensitive accommodation. While the public visibility of a chat-based decision raises the cost of subsequent defection through reputational mechanisms, it also locks participants into earlier framings that may no longer fit evolving family circumstances. This documentary turn extends the witness function of *tudang sipulung* to include geographically dispersed family members, ensuring that the legitimacy of a settlement remains anchored in the collective gaze of the kin network. Thus, the digital room possesses an architecture that conditions the nature of social evidence and the very possibility of consensus. Table 9 records the frequency of each documentation practice among the surveyed participants.

Table 9. Documentation Practices among Surveyed Participants

Practice	Frequency among participants
Save chat history	87%
Take screenshots	72%
Print or back up chats	34%
Forward to other family	45%

DISCUSSION

Recap of Main Findings

The findings support the proposition that Bugis customary inheritance dispute resolution has migrated from physical *adat* halls to WhatsApp groups, shifting the basis of customary authority from territorial and lineage grounds to relational and algorithmically conditioned ones. WhatsApp functions as an active **epistemic participant** where *pangngaderreng* norms are reproduced through platform logic, and *living fiqh* emerges through collective negotiation rather than traditional *sanad*-based transmission. This transition is not a simple replacement of the traditional with the modern; instead, older *pabbicara* continue to anchor the legitimacy of major settlements while *lontara*, *urf*, and *siri'* remain the affective scaffolds of compliance. The Bugis case demonstrates a customary order absorbing platform conditions and producing a hybrid order whose operation depends on specific articulations between cultural commitments and technical affordances (Tamanaha, 2021a; Wimra et al., 2023).

This transformation must be understood within the historical arc of Bugis legal life, where *pangngaderreng* has functioned as a composite of *ade'*, *bicara*, *rapang*, *wari'*, and *sara'*. This structure integrates Islamic and customary norms into a single working order rather than placing them in opposition (Djawas et al., 2023; Ridhwan & Nuzul, 2021; Tarmizi, 2020). Inheritance practices have traditionally combined *fiqh* shares with *pangngaderreng* expectations regarding family standing, while recent work on *tudang sipulung* illustrates how this deliberative form adapts to contemporary concerns like gender justice (Asni et al., 2025; Kartini & Inah, 2018). The digital turn introduces a **socio-technical** dimension to these established practices, where the authority of the *pabbicara* is now negotiated alongside the digital literacy of younger participants who utilize platform features to challenge traditional interpretations.

The digital migration interacts with these cultural resources by providing semi private spaces where reputational concerns are addressed without full public exposure, aligning with the cultural sensitivity of *siri'*. While the speed of digital communication satisfies expectations for rapid social equilibrium, the permanence of digital records creates new tensions with traditional preferences for context-sensitive accommodation. Public visibility within a chat group raises the cost of non-compliance through reputational mechanisms that extend the witness function of *tudang sipulung* to include geographically dispersed family members. Consequently, the platform is not a neutral conduit but a participant that reshapes the size and composition of the public sphere within which customary decisions are validated, imposing new conditions of visibility that prioritize engagement over slower, traditional verification practices.

Theoretical Interpretation: Legal Pluralism and Living Fiqh Reconsidered

The findings of this study engage two primary theoretical conversations. The first involves legal pluralism, where classical formulations identify pluralism as the empirical coexistence of multiple normative orders within a single social field, focusing on how these orders interact, compete, or accommodate one another (J. Griffiths, 1986, 2015). Recent scholarship has extended this analysis to colonial and postcolonial contexts, feminist critiques, and peacebuilding in fragile states (Ada Tchoukou, 2025; Domingues Araújo, 2025; Obani & Gupta, 2014; Tamanaha, 2021b; Yan & Benhima, 2025). However, this body of work has yet to adequately accommodate the role of platforms as active participants in pluralist configurations. The results suggest that platforms do more than merely transmit communication among orders; they act as epistemic participants that determine which arguments become visible, which propagate, and which secure perceived legitimacy through algorithmic engagement (Donges, 2022; Hristova, 2023). If pluralism is the empirical fact of multiple normative orders in a social field, then in Bugis digital practice, the platform itself constitutes a structural condition, or its own order, that any account of pluralism must address.

The second conversation concerns *living fiqh*. Wimra and colleagues argue that *fiqh* must be understood as a social practice that lives through community engagement (Wimra et al., 2023). The findings here empirically support and extend this proposition. If *fiqh* exists through social practice, and if that practice now involves

asynchronous text exchange influenced by reaction logics, then *fiqh* functions as a socio-technical practice. This implies that the *living fiqh* concept should evolve in dialogue with science and technology studies, as well as legal anthropology and Islamic legal theory. Recent research on Islamic legal responses to digital matrimony aligns with this view (Fikri et al., 2024), and studies regarding *fiqh*-based participatory action research in agricultural settings reinforce the claim that *fiqh* is co-produced within its context of application (Fanani & Pohl, 2024).

A third theoretical implication bridges both conversations. Galanter (1981) famously envisioned justice occurring in many rooms, describing how dispute resolution disperses across formal courts, indigenous fora, and private orderings. The Bugis case adds a digital room with an architecture determined not by participants alone, but by a platform whose features condition the nature of speech and consensus. In this context, pluralism is not merely spatial; it is also infrastructural. This reflects a shift where the authority of *pabbicara* and the validation of *pangngaderreng* norms are increasingly tied to participation metrics and digital affect, prioritizing visibility over the slower, traditional verification practices of the *adat* hall (Tamanaha, 2021a; Wimra et al., 2023).

Insights and Scholarly Implications

If customary legal authority emerges in part through engagement metrics and digital affect, the conventional vocabulary of legal sociology requires significant supplementation. Updating this framework involves at least three critical moves. The first is methodological; digital ethnography must attend to the way chat data exists as a co-production of users and platforms rather than a neutral transcript (Moschini & Sindoni, 2021; Soriano, 2012). The second is conceptual, requiring a re-examination of categories such as *sanad*, *ijazah*, and *ijtihad* in light of digital practices that produce functional equivalents through algorithmic means (Norman & Ruhullah, 2024; Wimra et al., 2023). The third is normative; *adat* institutions and Religious Courts need new vocabularies for assessing digitally produced decisions, including the grounds for their recognition (Irianto, 2024; Vignola, 2024). These implications demand that legal anthropology takes infrastructure seriously, while Islamic legal studies must develop empirical accounts of how *fiqh* is lived within chat-based community practices (Davies, 2012; Humfress, 2024).

Comparative Perspectives

Evaluated against comparable studies, the Bugis findings occupy an instructive intersection within the Global South. Comparative research on customary justice in Somaliland, Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa, and Aceh demonstrates that customary fora frequently produce binding outcomes despite contested formal recognition (Abdulah, 2023; Badejogbin, 2019; Kassa & Srur, 2016; Kusmayanti & Fakhriah, 2019). Similarly, literature regarding the Pacific and Indonesia highlights comparable patterns in marine resource and inheritance disputes (Jany, 2020; Ratuanak et al., 2022; Techera, 2010). These studies collectively emphasize that decoding pluralism requires careful attention to local pragmatics rather than the application of imported templates (Gebeye, 2017).

What distinguishes the Bugis digital case is the explicit role of platform infrastructure in producing the outcomes that customary authority subsequently ratifies. Comparative work on online dispute resolution in Chile, assisted negotiation in family settings, and indigenous online activism in the Philippines provides parallel observations (Hauri & Rojas, 2024; Soriano, 2012; Vejmelka, 2020). The convergence of these studies suggests that platform-mediated dispute resolution does not merely add a digital channel to existing forms; instead, it produces new normative textures conditioned by technical affordances (Donges, 2022; Hristova, 2023). This digital migration shares a structural feature with colonial inheritance, where external infrastructures become embedded in local legal practices in ways that local actors must negotiate (Kurniawan et al., 2025; Tamanaha, 2021b). Under these conditions, the platform acts as an epistemic participant that reshapes the very nature of consensus and legitimacy.

Recommendations and Action Plan

Several recommendations follow to address the evolving Bugis legal landscape. The first concerns formal recognition: given the substantial volume and high compliance rates of inheritance mediation within WhatsApp groups, the national judicial system should acknowledge these digital environments as functional arenas where binding decisions are produced (Ada Tchoukou, 2025; Yan & Benhima, 2025). This recognition must treat the platform as an active epistemic participant whose technical architecture conditions the production of legal meaning. The second recommendation focuses on digital literacy in *adat* education; *pabbicara* require institutional support to master the technical competencies and algorithmic logics that now govern norm visibility (Smirnov, 2023; Soriano, 2012). Third, an ethical code of practice for digital *adat* mediation (developed collectively by *pabbicara*, *fuqaha*, and the Religious Court) is necessary to address the durability of chat records as social evidence and the power imbalances stemming from digital affect (Hauri & Rojas, 2024; Kurniawan et al., 2025). Finally, further research should employ longitudinal and comparative designs to clarify the extent to which these socio-technical shifts are uniquely Bugis or represent a general feature of digital customary practice (Domingues Araújo, 2025; Irianto, 2024). Collectively, these actions underscore that digital mediation is no longer a transient phase but the defining condition under which *pangngaderreng* and *living fiqh* now operate for many Bugis families.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Bugis customary inheritance dispute resolution is fundamentally shaped by the affordances of digital platforms, which function as active epistemic participants rather than neutral conduits. The migration of mediation from physical *adat* halls to WhatsApp groups illustrates a shift in customary authority from territorial and lineage-based grounds to relational and algorithmically conditioned ones. Within these digital environments, *pangngaderreng* norms are reproduced in compressed and reaction-driven forms, while *living fiqh* emerges through collective negotiation in chat threads rather than traditional *sanad*-based transmission. Legal pluralism in this setting manifests as a dynamic interlegality,

where *pangngaderreng*, *fiqh al-mirath*, and state law are deployed in hybrid combinations that depend on the specific technical and social conditions of the chat thread.

These findings reveal that customary law possesses significant adaptability, as community members exercise agency in reconfiguring traditional institutions to suit digital conditions while maintaining core normative commitments such as *siri'*. The research complicates deterministic views of technology by showing an ongoing process of negotiation where digital literacy functions as a new form of standing. By facilitating the synthesis of diverse normative registers in real time, the platform enables younger participants to balance traditional family expectations with modern legal formalism. Consequently, the digital interface imposes new conditions of visibility and speed that prioritize immediate engagement over the slower verification practices that historically grounded customary judgment.

The study contributes to legal pluralism scholarship by treating platforms as active participants in pluralist configurations, suggesting that pluralism in the contemporary era is infrastructural as well as spatial. It extends *living fiqh* scholarship by framing religious legal production as a socio-technical practice conditioned by platform logic. Methodologically, the combination of digital ethnography with offline interview material provides a robust framework for investigating the “digital room” as a site of justice. Practically, the study makes visible a form of dispute resolution occurring at a significant scale that the formal judicial system has yet to adequately engage. Recognizing that family WhatsApp groups now serve as inheritance fora for a substantial proportion of Bugis families is a necessary precondition for meaningful policy and legal reform.

This investigation acknowledges limitations regarding statistical representativeness and the inherent constraints of digital interfaces in capturing participants’ internal nuances. To address these, future research should integrate digital and physical fieldwork to analyze platforms as epistemic participants that actively condition legal outcomes (Donges, 2022; Hristova, 2023). Comparative, longitudinal, and cross-platform studies are essential to clarify the generalizability of these socio-technical transformations in *pangngaderreng* and *living fiqh* (Tamanaha, 2021a; Wimra et al., 2023). Furthermore, examining the digital divide remains critical for addressing the exclusion of non-digital members from the contemporary mediation process. Ultimately, this study serves as a foundation for a broader research program investigating how infrastructure reshapes the performance and recognition of customary law.

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