

The Historical and Institutional Foundations of Traditional Rulership and Land Governance in Ijesaland Osun State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Traditional rulership in Ijesaland, Nigeria, is a complex system of governance that has evolved over time, influenced by colonial and post-independence state centralization. The Owa Obokun, the paramount ruler, is considered the living embodiment of the ancestors and a symbol of unity for the Ijesa people. Land, a central source of livelihood, status, and power, is held in trust by the community, with traditional rulers serving as custodians. However, the Land Use Act of 1978 has created tension between statutory and customary land systems, leading to overlapping claims, ambiguities, and contestations. Traditional rulers, while maintaining moral legitimacy, have been accused of facilitating land grabbing, selling communal land, and allocating land without proper consultation. This study explores the historical and institutional foundations of traditional rulership and land governance in Ijesaland, examining the intersection of indigenous authority, customary land tenure, and modern governance frameworks. Using an exploratory ethnographic research design, the study reveals that traditional rulers navigate complex relationships between communal expectations, state regulations, and personal interests. The study recommends developing legal guidelines that clearly define the role of traditional rulers in land governance, providing training on land laws, conflict resolution, and community engagement, and promoting collaboration between traditional institutions and state authorities to ensure effective land administration.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional rulership in Africa is one of the most enduring and adaptable systems of governance, predating both colonial and modern state structures. Historically, traditional rulers acted as stewards of community resources, mediators of disputes, and symbols of collective identity (Falola, 2024; Okoye, 2024). Despite the growth of colonial administration and post-independence state centralization, traditional authority remains a vital part of local governance in Nigeria, bridging customary institutions and modern state frameworks (Adiele & Uvere, 2025). In Yoruba societies, including those of the Ijesa people, the monarchy (Obaship) represents both political power and spiritual legitimacy, connecting governance to sacred traditions, land, and community welfare (Enoch, 2025; Ogunode, 2021).

In Nigeria, land remains a central source of livelihood, status, and power. It is not only an economic asset but also a marker of identity and ancestral continuity (Opata & Asogwa, 2017; Solomon Egwu et al., 2025). Under customary tenure systems, land is traditionally held in trust by the community, with the Oba or chief serving as custodian rather than owner. However, the Land Use Act of 1978 significantly altered land relations by vesting

ownership and control in the state governor, effectively redefining the authority of traditional rulers (Okafor & Udobi, 2024; Babalola & Hull, 2021). This tension between statutory and customary land systems has produced overlapping claims, ambiguities, and contestations, especially in the southwestern states where the influence of traditional rulers remains strong.

The Ijesa region of Osun State provides a compelling setting for examining these dynamics. Comprising local government areas such as Ilesa East, Ilesa West, Obokun, Atakumosa East, and Atakumosa West, the region is historically rich, culturally vibrant, and politically significant. Traditional institutions here maintain deep moral legitimacy, and their pronouncements often carry more weight than formal legal judgments. However, the region has witnessed an increase in land-related conflicts, ranging from intra-family disputes to inter-community violence (Oluwasanmi, 2025). Many of these disputes are reportedly linked to the actions or inactions of traditional rulers, who are accused in some quarters of facilitating land grabbing, selling communal land for personal gain, or allocating land without proper consultation (Alade, 2019).

The phenomenon of land grabbing, defined as the acquisition of large areas of land through questionable or non-transparent means, often displacing local populations, has become a global concern, particularly in developing economies (Ashukem & Ngang, 2022; Marzocchi & Arribas Cámara, 2025). In Nigeria, land grabbing manifests in both urban and rural contexts, driven by elite expansion, real estate speculation, and weak institutional oversight (Obuene et al., 2022). When traditional rulers are perceived as complicit in such practices, it undermines their legitimacy as custodians of the people's heritage and erodes trust in indigenous governance systems. This contradiction presents a critical question: how can traditional rulers serve as peacemakers when they are simultaneously implicated in conflicts over the very resource they are meant to protect?

Traditional rulers in Ijesa Land continue to occupy a complex and ambivalent position. On the one hand, they remain vital to conflict resolution mechanisms, presiding over customary courts, mediating family disputes, and fostering reconciliation during communal crises (Babatola, 2021). On the other hand, their proximity to political power, economic actors, and land markets exposes them to pressures and temptations that compromise neutrality. (Falola, 2016; Sango, 2013). The erosion of moral authority among some monarchs has therefore led to increasing contestations of legitimacy, particularly among youths and disenfranchised groups who view them as part of the problem rather than as agents of peace.

Scholars such as Dotsey et al. (2024) and Oladipo (2022) argue that while traditional institutions remain resilient, their functions are being renegotiated in light of modern governance structures. This hybrid governance context, where customary and statutory laws overlap, creates both opportunities and challenges for conflict transformation. According to Boone (2015), the politics of land in Africa often reflect broader struggles over authority, citizenship, and belonging. Thus, examining land conflicts in Ijesa Land is not merely about property rights; it is about power, legitimacy, and identity within the evolving landscape of Nigerian governance.

Globally, discourses on peacebuilding emphasize the need for context-sensitive approaches that integrate local institutions and cultural practices into conflict management framework (Oyekanmi, 2025). The Conflict Transformation Theory, advanced by John Paul Lederach, posits that sustainable peace necessitates transforming relationships and social structures that perpetuate conflict, rather than merely resolving

disputes. Applying this framework to Ijesa Land, traditional rulers can be viewed as both potential agents of transformation and sources of structural tension. Their engagement or mismanagement of land-related issues has direct implications for the prospects of sustainable peace.

At the same time, Institutional Theory (Boone, 2015; Oladipo, 2022); provides insights into how traditional authorities adapt to or resist changes in governance frameworks. It suggests that institutions, formal and informal, shape behavior by defining what is considered legitimate, acceptable, or deviant. Within Ijesa Land, the evolution of traditional rulership reflects a negotiation between indigenous norms of custodianship and modern pressures of commercialization and political influence. Understanding this negotiation ethnographically allows for a nuanced appreciation of how traditional rulers navigate competing expectations from their communities and the state.

Extant scholarship has comprehensively documented the historical trajectory of Ijesa chieftaincy and customary land tenure systems; however, there remains a notable dearth of empirical inquiry into the operational interface between statutory legal frameworks and indigenous institutional mechanisms at the micro-level. Specifically, limited attention has been directed toward elucidating the procedural role of village-level traditional authorities in mediating land-related conflicts post-1978 Land Use Act, nor toward examining how marginalized groups—particularly women and youth—negotiate entrenched patriarchal inheritance customs despite progressive legislative reforms. Moreover, prevailing analytical models tend to conceptualize “tradition” as a fixed construct, thereby eliding contemporary transformations driven by digital geospatial technologies and environmental stressors that are actively reconfiguring land use and ownership paradigms in Ijesaland.

Statement of the Problem

Across Africa, traditional rulers occupy a paradoxical position in the governance landscape, simultaneously revered as custodians of peace and culture, yet increasingly contested as actors in contemporary political and economic struggles (Dotsey et al., 2024; Oladipo, 2022). In Nigeria, this paradox is evident in land governance, where the authority of traditional rulers intersects with statutory laws, elite interests, and community expectations (Babatola, 2021; Falola, 2016). Historically, the Oba, or king, served as the moral and administrative custodian of communal land, ensuring equitable access and social justice (Falola & Heaton, 2008). However, in recent decades, this role has been complicated by the pressures of urbanization, political patronage, and the commodification of land, which have led to widespread allegations of land grabbing and abuse of customary authority (Obuene et al., 2022; Zubair, 2021).

In the Ijesa region of Osun State, comprising communities such as Ilesa, Obokun, and Atakumosa, land remains both a sacred inheritance and a vital economic asset. However, increasing population growth, infrastructural expansion, and real estate speculation have heightened competition for land. In this context, traditional rulers, who once served as impartial mediators in land-related conflicts, have been accused of complicity in unauthorized sales, illegal allocation, and dispossession of communal land (Dotsey et al., 2024; Oladipo, 2022). This has generated a climate of distrust and contestation, with several communities witnessing violent confrontations, youth protests, and protracted litigations. The erosion of moral legitimacy among some traditional rulers has, in turn, undermined their ability to act as credible agents of conflict resolution and peacebuilding

(Oluyemi & Akinwunmi, 2025).

The problem is further compounded by Nigeria's dual governance structure, in which statutory and customary systems operate concurrently but often in tension with one another. The Land Use Act of 1978, while vesting ownership in the state, fails to recognize the social legitimacy of traditional land tenure systems adequately (Dotsey et al., 2024). Consequently, ambiguity in land administration creates opportunities for exploitation, overlapping claims, and manipulation by both political elites and traditional authorities (Boone, 2015). The resulting conflicts are not merely about land boundaries or ownership, but about power, legitimacy, and justice, issues that go to the heart of community governance and social order.

Despite the growing prevalence of such conflicts, there remains a limited amount of ethnographic research that critically examines how traditional rulers in southwest Nigeria navigate these competing pressures. Most existing studies have approached the subject from legalistic or political perspectives (Babalola, 2023; Babalola & Hull, 2021), often overlooking the cultural and relational dimensions of conflict transformation. However, understanding how traditional rulers exercise authority, justify their actions, and negotiate legitimacy requires an inquiry into their lived experiences and community interactions, a gap that this study seeks to address.

Moreover, while conflict-resolution mechanisms in Nigeria have received scholarly attention, less attention has been paid to the transformative potential of indigenous governance systems. As Lederach (1996) posits, conflict transformation goes beyond settlement or management; it involves reshaping relationships, attitudes, and structures that sustain conflict. Traditional rulers, when functioning effectively, can embody this transformative capacity by leveraging moral authority and communal norms to restore harmony. However, when legitimacy is compromised, they may instead perpetuate grievances and deepen structural inequalities (Babatola, 2021; Babalola & Hull, 2021). The persistence of land conflicts in Ijesa Land thus raises critical questions about the future of traditional rulership as a means of promoting peace and justice. Are traditional rulers still viewed as trustworthy mediators, or have they become politicized actors driven by self-interest? What institutional and socio-economic factors enable or constrain their roles in conflict transformation? How do local communities perceive and respond to their authority in the face of perceived injustice? These questions lie at the center of this study. Addressing this problem is both timely and imperative. Land disputes threaten not only community cohesion but also Nigeria's broader development goals, particularly Sustainable Development Goals 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), 1 (No Poverty), and 15 (Life on Land). Without a grounded understanding of the evolving roles of traditional rulers in land governance, efforts at institutional reform and peacebuilding risk being superficial or counterproductive. This study, therefore, seeks to ethnographically investigate how indigenous authority and customary land tenure evolved and how these intersect with statutory laws and modern governance frameworks, by exploring the historical and institutional foundations of traditional rulership and land governance in Ijesa Land, Osun State, Nigeria.

Research Question

The question below guided the study.

- i. What are the historical and institutional foundations of traditional rulership and land governance in Ijesa Land?
 - This explores how indigenous authority and customary land tenure evolved

and how these intersect with statutory laws and modern governance frameworks.

Specific Objective

The study seeks to:

- i. Trace the historical evolution and institutional foundations of traditional rulership and customary land governance in Ijesa Land.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used an exploratory ethnographic research design. Understanding the social environment and culture of the issue under study is the aim of the ethnographic method. This method combines fieldwork and participatory observation to examine the traditions, values, and behaviours of a certain group or community. Ethnography allows researchers to fully and thoroughly document and portray social reality by focussing cultural description and contextual understanding.

The ethnographic research approach is highly relevant to the study of traditional rulers in Ijesa region, Osun State, Nigeria, as either peacemakers or perpetrators, because it allows for a comprehensive analysis of the social dynamics and cultural context that underpin land grabs and disputes. Through community immersion, interviews, and participant observation, ethnography provided profound insights into the perspectives and experiences of community members as well as the roles, behaviours, and intentions of traditional rulers. The power dynamics, cultural norms, and historical legacies that impact conflicts and peacebuilding efforts were revealed by this approach, which shed light on the complex issues at hand.

The researcher, who was also an ethnographer, spent a significant amount of time observing and interacting with traditional rulers in Ijesa land, Osun State, Nigeria, to learn how their roles and behaviours are influenced by the cultural structures and relationships of the community. The researcher also looked at the rulers' roles as either peacemakers or as perpetrators of land grabbing and conflicts. This prolonged involvement enabled the researcher to gain a thorough understanding of the intricate dynamics of power, tradition, and social norms that influence conflict and peacebuilding processes in the study area. It also allowed the researcher to gain a thorough understanding of the complex issues surrounding land grabbing and the roles traditional rulers play in these conflicts.

Study Population

The population of this study comprises all individuals and institutions directly or indirectly involved in land governance, traditional rulership, and conflict transformation processes within Ijesa Land. This includes traditional rulers and chiefs, local government officials, community elders, family heads, land committee members, youth and women leaders, landowners, and victims or beneficiaries of land conflicts. Given the ethnographic orientation of this research, the study population is conceived as both socially and spatially bounded, focusing on the six Local Government Areas of Ijesa Land: Ilesa East, Ilesa West, Obokun, Oriade, Atakunmosa East, and Atakunmosa West. These areas encompass diverse governance settings, demographic profiles, and land-use systems, making them ideal for a comparative, multi-sited ethnography. The population size is not limited numerically but defined functionally by actors' relevance to the research questions. The emphasis is on information-rich participants (Patton, 2022),

whose lived experiences, authority, or expertise illuminate the interplay between traditional leadership, land disputes, and peacebuilding dynamics in their communities.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The study used sixty-two (62) participants. This comprised traditional rulers (14), Palace officials and council members (12), Family heads / Land trustees (12), Youth leaders / Women leaders (12), Local government / Land officers (6) and Religious / Community mediators (6), respectively. The study used **purposive and snowballing sampling procedures**. These procedures were appropriate due to the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research, which required the intentional selection of individuals who possess direct, in-depth knowledge and lived experiences relevant to the research questions.

Data Collection Methods

The study adopted a multi-method qualitative approach, consistent with the ethnographic design, to obtain rich, contextualized, and triangulated data on traditional rulership, land grabbing, and conflict transformation in Ijesa Land, Osun State. The data collection process spanned eight months, from February to September 2024, and involved in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and document review. These methods were selected to capture diverse perspectives from key stakeholders, validate findings through triangulation, and ensure credibility and dependability of the research outcomes (Burns et al., 2022).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, following the iterative and inductive logic of ethnographic research. The aim was to distil participants lived experiences and institutional narratives into coherent patterns that explained how traditional rulership, land grabbing, and conflict transformation interacted within the sociocultural context of Ijesa Land. Analytical procedures combined manual interpretive reading with computer-assisted coding in NVivo 14, guided by the principles of grounded theory and thematic analysis (Paapa & Kambona, 2025).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was central to this ethnographic inquiry, given its engagement with traditional rulers, landowners, community members, and state officials in contexts of contested authority and sensitive land disputes. The study was guided by the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as outlined by the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, 1979) and further contextualized by the British Sociological Association (BSA) as stated by Mead Jasperse and Kelly (2025) and the American Anthropological Association (AAA) ethical guidelines. Approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the researcher's university. At the same time, formal letters of introduction were presented to relevant local councils and traditional authorities in Ijesa Land. Ethical issues were addressed at every stage of the research process, from participant recruitment to data dissemination, ensuring the protection of participants' rights, autonomy, and cultural dignity.

Results

Historical Foundations of Traditional Authority

Participants consistently traced the legitimacy of Ijesa traditional rulers to ancestral heritage and spiritual mandates that define kingship as both divine and communal. The Owa Obokun Adimula was described as the "living embodiment of the ancestors" and

“symbol of unity” for all Ijesa descendants. One palace historian explained: “The Owa is not just a king; he represents the link between the living and our ancestors. His authority is not political alone—it is sacred and ancestral.” (IDI/Palace Historian/Ilesa, 2024). This conception aligns with Falola (2019), who posits that Yoruba rulership is anchored in ritual continuity and collective spiritual legitimacy. The persistence of this worldview across generations explains the enduring respect accorded to traditional rulers, even amidst modern governance changes.

Participants repeatedly located contemporary chiefly authority in ancestral, ritual, and historical foundations: the Owa Obokun and subordinate Obas were described as custodians of land by virtue of lineage, ritual continuity, and community memory (Theme 1). Oral histories, palace archives, and elder testimonies established uninterrupted practices of communal stewardship (land as trust rather than absolute private property), long-standing procedures for allocation, and a layered dispute-settlement ladder (Baale → Ijoye/chief council → Oba/palace). Colonial and post-colonial transformations had altered formal powers). However, they had not erased customary moral authority: while statutory reforms (for example, Land Use reforms) reallocated legal title, traditional roles persisted in everyday allocation, boundary demarcation, and dispute adjudication.

These findings confirmed Beetham’s emphasis on legitimacy derived from shared normative beliefs and historical continuity: legitimacy for Ijesa rulers rested on cultural belief, ritual performance, and expressed consent. Historically grounded custodianship also provided the cultural resources that Lederach identifies as essential to elicitive conflict transformation, that is, solutions originating from indigenous norms rather than externally imposed remedies (Lederach, 1996). In Boone’s terms, the persistence of customary practice despite legal reform illustrated hybrid governance: customary institutions continued to exercise *de facto* authority within a plural legal order (Boone, 2015).

CONCLUSION REMARKS

The study revealed that the role of traditional rulers in land governance remains essential yet contested. Land, in the Ijesa worldview, is not merely an economic asset but a spiritual and ancestral trust, *ilé baba wa* (our fathers’ land). Within this framework, the study found that traditional rulers acted as mediators, custodians, and negotiators of moral legitimacy, navigating between communal expectations and state regulations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are raised.

- i. The government, in collaboration with customary institutions, should develop legal guidelines that clearly define the role, limits, and responsibilities of traditional rulers in land governance. There must also be sanctions and enforcement mechanisms for misuse of authority, including legal prosecution or deposition in cases of misconduct or land grabbing.
- ii. Periodic training should be provided for traditional rulers and their aides on: Land laws and regulations, conflict resolution and mediation, community engagement techniques. This would enhance their capacity to manage land affairs effectively in line with both statutory and customary principles
- iii. Traditional rulers should work closely with local government land authorities, land use planning agencies, and the judiciary to harmonize customary practices with formal land administration systems. This partnership would help avoid duplication of authority and reduce conflict arising from overlapping jurisdictions.

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