



## Traditional Rulers and Statutory Institutions: Dynamics of Cooperation and Competition in Land Conflict Management in Osun State, Nigeria

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**Abstract.** The study explored traditional rulers and statutory institutions as dynamics of cooperation and competition in land conflict management in Osun state, Nigeria. The study was motivated by the facts that the frequency of land disputes in Osun State is caused by a number of reasons. The study was anchored on Conflict Transformation Theory and Collaborative Governance Theory, respectively. The study employed exploratory ethnographic research design, while purposive and snowballing sampling procedures were employed. Both Key Informant Interview (KII) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were used to obtain information of the sampled participants. The obtained data were content analysed. The results indicated that the major historical role of traditional rulers to include land custodianship and land allocation, mediators in conflicts among others. Greed of individuals, including the traditional rulers, ambiguity in land boundaries, increase in the value of land, among others contributed to the causes of land conflicts among the respondents in the study location. The study recommended that the traditional rulers should institutionalize community-based land governance councils that include youth, women, family heads, and elders. These councils should oversee land allocation, documentation, and conflict resolution to ensure transparency and inclusive participation in decision-making processes.

**Keywords:** Traditional rulers, statutory institutions, land conflict management in Osun State, Nigeria.

### 1. Introduction

Land is widely acknowledged as a fundamental resource for human progress and survival. In addition to providing a physical area for agricultural and habitation, land is a representation of identity, authority, and socioeconomic stability all over the world. Access to land determines economic opportunity, cultural preservation, and food security

in the majority of nations. It is closely linked to both personal and collective livelihoods, especially in agrarian economies where social status and wealth are significantly correlated with land ownership [1].

In Nigeria, land is extremely important base on an economic, political, and spiritual level. It is a fundamental component of traditional wealth systems, especially in rural and peri-urban areas where it is essential to housing, agriculture, and communal identity. Customs and traditional institutions continue to play a significant role in governing land access and ownership, even though the Land Use Act of 1978 consolidated property ownership under government supervision. Formal legislation and indigenous practices coexist and frequently compete in the complicated governing system that has been formed by this dichotomy. Traditional leaders continue to hold sway over communal lands in many places, serving as guardians and facilitators of land-related disputes [2].

A "global land rush" has been attributed to the increased demand for land around the world, particularly in the wake of the food and energy crises of 2007–2008 [3]. Besides, expanding global populations, expanding biofuel usage, increased food insecurity, and wealthy countries' strategic investments in foreign agricultural land all contributed to this surge. As a result, transnational firms and foreign governments frequently targeted millions of hectares in low- and middle-income nations for large-scale acquisitions. Local inhabitants were marginalised and indigenous land rights were violated by these acquisitions, which were often made possible by opaque transactions [4].

The land rush was especially fierce in Africa. African governments frequently implemented pro-investor policies that marginalised local

communities and undermined traditional land tenure systems in an effort to attract foreign direct investment. Ndi, et al., [5] claimed that this led to an increase in land transactions that gave external players ownership of common lands while ignoring traditional ownership patterns. Wide-ranging effects included the uprooting of regional farmers, environmental damage, and escalation of social unrest. Land grabbing is the large-scale land acquisition by dubious legal and ethical means, frequently without the informed permission of local communities.

Nigeria, one of the most populous and economically significant countries in Africa, has not been immune to this trend. In a number of states, such as Lagos, Edo, Ogun, and Osun, the commodification of land has increased due to rapid urbanisation, industrialisation, and private real estate interests. These factors have not only upset traditional land tenure systems but also created an atmosphere in which land conflicts have become more frequent. Traditional rulers, who were once thought to be the guardians and stewards of communal land, are now frequently accused of supporting land grabbing by selling land to outside developers or allocating land without adequate community consultation [6,7].

The severity and complexity of Nigeria's land-related disputes are exemplified by the circumstances in Osun State. Land disputes are common in Osun because of its blend of growing cities, farming communities, and long-standing traditional institutions. According to reports from local courts and traditional councils, the bulk of civil lawsuits in the state involve land-related issues. Land according to Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies is one of the most divisive socio-legal issues in Osun State, accounting for around 60% of civil conflicts.

The frequency of land disputes in Osun State is caused by a number of reasons. First, overlapping claims and encroachments are made possible by the absence of thorough land documentation and boundary marking. Second, the fast growth of cities like Osogbo, Ilesa, and Ife has put more strain on the rural areas nearby, increasing their market value and developer appeal. Third, conventional land ownership claims have become even more complex due to intra family disagreements and succession disputes. Furthermore, traditional rulers' influence has become a double-edged sword, especially in Ijesa country. Although these leaders are supposed to resolve disputes and protect the interests of the community, there are rising questions over their objectivity and participation in land deals that put political or personal benefit ahead of the common good [8].

Traditional rulers in both developing and developed societies are saddled with an essential role in not only mitigating the effects of the insurgency including conflict but also in contributing to the peacebuilding process [9]. Their enduring influence in some of local communities has made it possible for them to serve as successful mediators, promoting communication between the participants to the conflict—including impacted communities, government forces, and insurgents [10].

Traditional leaders typically use their cultural power to encourage tolerance and social cohesiveness by planning gatherings and rituals that help people heal and reconcile. To avert retaliatory violence and promote peaceful coexistence among varied groups, traditional authorities attempt to address the ethnic and religious divisions that the conflict has deepened [11]. By working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to make sure aid reaches those in need, especially internally displaced people (IDPs), and by giving them access to necessities like food, medicine, and shelter, they also support humanitarian initiatives and aid in community stabilisation [12].

Furthermore, by supporting local development projects, traditional leaders help address the underlying reasons of the violence, including social marginalisation, unemployment, and poverty [13]. By doing this, they assist in lessening the allure of insurgent organisations and provide vulnerable groups and young people with alternate routes. By fusing traditional leadership with contemporary peacebuilding techniques, their partnership with NGOs enhances the effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives by creating culturally relevant solutions for economic recovery and conflict resolution. Traditional leaders in Northeast Nigeria play a vital role in the long-term peacebuilding process and the restoration of stability by participating in these multifaceted initiatives [14].

Additionally, the study is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN, which are imperatives for global development. By addressing land conflicts that threaten livelihoods and worsen poverty, especially in rural areas, it advances SDG 1 (No Poverty). By promoting sustainable land governance techniques that improve resilience and inclusivity in local communities, it advances SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). By analysing how traditional leaders might serve as mediators to enhance societal stability and justice while encouraging institutional accountability and openness, it also advances SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

This study is further supported by the substantial vacuum in the literature on the changing

responsibilities of traditional leaders in land disputes [15,16,17,18, 19, 20]. Few studies have examined the dual role of traditional rulers as possible peacemakers and, occasionally, conflict contributors, despite the fact that several have examined land conflicts in Nigeria. This study closes this gap by presenting empirical insights from the Ijesa territory, enabling a detailed understanding of the dynamics at play and adding to the body of knowledge on conflict resolution and governance. In the end, legislators, conventional institutions, community leaders, and academics can all benefit from this study. It aims to improve the efficacy of land governance institutions and promote sustainable peace and development in Nigeria and abroad by providing practical suggestions based on thorough study.

In Ijesa land, Osun State, land snatching has become a crucial and divisive issue that undermines not just the legitimacy and authority of traditional rulers but also the socioeconomic well-being of communities. Urbanisation, elite capture, and growing land commodification have all contributed to the alarming increase in land-related disputes in Ijesa territory, which includes towns like Ilesa, Esa-Oke, Ijebu-Jesa, and Iloko. Traditional leaders, who have traditionally protected communal lands and arbitrated disputes over land, are currently at the centre of controversy after being charged with illicit land sales, border manipulation, and cooperation with developers and speculators.

### 1.1 Research Questions

The research questions below guided the study

- What is the history of traditional rulers in land management and conflict resolution in the Ijesa land?
- What are the causes and consequences of land conflicts in the Ijesa land of Osun State?

### 1.2 Objective of the Study

The study's broad objective was to explore the dynamics of cooperation and competition of traditional rulers and statutory institutions in land conflict management in Osun State, Nigeria, while the specific objectives were to:

- investigate the history of traditional rulers in land management and conflict resolution in the Ijesa land; and
- determine the causes and consequences of land conflicts in the Ijesa land of Osun State.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The two main theories that underpin this research are Collaborative Governance Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory, which are pertinent to cooperation, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution. These theories offer a fundamental perspective for comprehending how traditional leaders contribute to peace and stability in the study area.

### 2.1 Conflict Transformation Theory

John Paul Lederach developed this theory in 1995. The goal of the Conflict Transformation Theory is to address the structural, relational, and cultural roots of conflict rather than just putting a stop to violence. Through interpersonal transformation, the advancement of justice, and the reconstruction of conflict-affected communities, the theory places an emphasis on long-term, sustainable solutions. This idea is especially pertinent to Ijesa Land, Osun State, Nigeria, because it emphasises the necessity of comprehensive peacebuilding strategies that include dependable community members like traditional leaders. They may arbitrate conflicts, encourage reconciliation, and restore confidence in communities split apart by violence and insurgency because of their strong cultural ties and moral authority.

### 2.2 Collaborative Governance Theory

The Collaborative Governance Theory offers yet another crucial perspective for examining how various players, such as NGOs and established institutions, might cooperate to accomplish shared objectives. The approach places a strong emphasis on mutual trust, shared responsibility, and cooperative decision-making when addressing difficult societal problems. Collaboration between official institutions (such as NGOs) and informal traditional systems is crucial for effective peacebuilding in Nigeria, particularly in areas devastated by war.

Traditional leaders provide legitimacy and cultural awareness, while non-governmental organisations frequently offer programming support, financial assistance, and technical know-how. This cooperative partnership is essential to attaining long-term peace and progress and is consistent with the ideas of collaborative government. All of these theories contribute to the knowledge that inclusive, context-sensitive, and locally led peacebuilding is more successful than those that rely solely on outside assistance.

### 3. Role of Traditional Rulers in Peacebuilding

In Nigerian history, traditional rulers have acted as cultural guardians, peacemakers in local conflicts, and symbols of solidarity. Their role has expanded to include mediating between armed actors, encouraging community peace, and assisting government and non-governmental organisation initiatives in modern conflict settings such as Ijesa land in Osun State, Nigeria. In regions impacted by the Boko Haram insurgency, traditional leaders are crucial players in fostering communal discourse and rebuilding trust because of their moral authority and grassroots legitimacy [21]. Their participation has an especially significant effect in rural areas where official institutions are either non-existent or very weak. Traditional institutions are perfect for fostering reconciliation and re-establishing community cohesion since they are firmly ingrained in the social fabric [22].

#### 3.1 Collaboration between NGOs and Traditional Rulers

There is hope for inclusive and context-sensitive peacebuilding at the nexus of traditional authority and NGO activity. Technical soundness and local acceptance of peacebuilding interventions are guaranteed when these actors work together. Non-governmental organisations that involve traditional leaders in the planning and execution of projects have a higher chance of gaining the support and sustainability of the community [23]. NGOs may not have the necessary access, legitimacy, and cultural mediation that traditional rulers offer, particularly in conflict-prone areas [24]. When properly managed, these collaborations ensure fair resource distribution, build trust, and have a greater influence on peacebuilding initiatives.

### 4. Materials and Methods

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 focusing cultural description and contextual understanding [25].

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.

The study's population comprises important traditional players who either directly or indirectly participate in dispute resolution or land governance. These actors include chiefs, Baales, and traditional rulers (Obas). Other stakeholders include community leaders, young adults, and landowners; local subsistence farmers who have been impacted by land conflicts or who have taken part in grassroots peace processes; and elders who have a deep understanding of the land crises in the Ijesa land. Their participation guarantees that a range of viewpoints and experiences on land disputes and governance procedures are included in the study.

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. These include traditional rulers (Obas), chiefs, Baales, community leaders, youths, residents, and elders with firsthand knowledge of land conflicts and governance practices in Ijesa land.

The purposive sampling technique allowed the researcher to focus on key informants whose roles and social positions within the traditional and administrative hierarchies provided rich insights into the nuanced dynamics of land grabbing, customary authority, and conflict resolution processes. The snowball sampling was employed to

reach hidden or hard-to-identify participants, particularly in cases involving sensitive or controversial land conflicts where individuals may be reluctant to speak openly. Participants who were initially contacted were asked to refer others who met the study's inclusion criteria, thereby expanding access to insider voices and enabling a deeper exploration of underlying power structures and contestations.

The sample size comprised 41 key informant interviews and 3 focus group discussions. This size was considered sufficient for a qualitative study guided by the principle of data saturation the point at which no new themes or relevant information emerge from additional data collection. The richness of the qualitative data, rather than statistical representativeness, was the guiding principle in determining the sample size.

The decision to select participants from six representative communities across the six local government areas of Ijesa land (Ilesa East, Ilesa West, Oriade, Obokun, Atakunmosa East, and Atakunmosa West) was based on both geographical spread and socio-political relevance. These communities: Ilesa, Ijebu-Jesa, Esa-Oke, Iloko-Ijesa, Osu, and Erin-Ijesa were chosen because they reflect varying degrees of traditional authority involvement in land governance, different histories of land conflicts, and diverse interactions with formal governance institutions.

This study adopts a qualitative method of data collection, relying primarily on Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to explore the complex and sensitive dynamics of traditional rulers' involvement in land grabbing and conflict resolution in Ijesa land, Osun State, Nigeria. The data collected during fieldwork was analysed using content analysis, a qualitative research technique that enables the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of themes and patterns within textual data.

## 5. Results

**Research Question 1:** What is the history of traditional rulers in land management and conflict resolution in the Ijesa land?

For a long time, traditional leaders in the Ijesa territory have served as essential land custodians and mediators in conflicts involving land. Their functions have both persisted and changed since pre-colonial times as a result of the pressures of legal reform, modernization, and sociopolitical dynamics. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) analysis reveals intricate and nuanced viewpoints on these roles among demographic categories such as farmers,

artisans, religious leaders, community leaders, and traditional chiefs between the ages of 30 and 70.

### 5.1 Traditional Roles in Land Management and Allocation

In the past, traditional rulers in the Ijesa land were given vital responsibilities in land distribution and administration. These duties were carried out through a complicated network of practices that included lineage, religious ceremonies, community discussion, and moral stewardship. Their power ensured that land was fairly distributed, conserved for future generations, and utilized in a manner that promoted community harmony.

Although modernization and legislative land changes have changed these dynamics, many community members, particularly in rural and peri-urban lands where ancestral ties to land remain strong, continue to respect and refer to traditional land governance systems. Obokun, and Oriade. One of the respondents, for example, said that the traditional procedure was one *"where the ruler, through his chiefs, identified families with unoccupied land, and consent was sought before any allocation was made"* (KII R1, 63 years, Male, Traditional Ruler, Atakunmosa East). This suggests that authority is structured hierarchically, with lineage heads frequently holding operational control and the ruler serving as a final arbiter or caretaker. *"Traditional ruler primarily maintained peace by facilitating land sharing among families, especially when conflicts arose,"* said one respondent. In some instances, they *functioned more as mediators than regulators, only stepping in when lower levels of traditional authority (such as compound or village chiefs) were unable to settle a conflict"* (KII R3, 67 years old, male, traditional medical practitioner, Atakunmosa West).

In addition, it was stressed that *"traditional monarchs had the power to lease, mortgage, or sell communal lands as long as they did so in consultation with elders and other appropriate traditional institutions"* (KII R2, 58 years, Male, Theologian, Atakunmosa West). This custodianship, he noted, was not solitary but communal, frequently necessitating several levels of discussion.

One of the respondents emphasized another important traditional practice, stating that *"land allocations traditionally required symbolic gestures such as offering a hen, ram, or small monetary gift to the Oba and relevant compound chiefs to show appreciation and recognize authority"* (R4, 65, Male, Clergyman, Oriade). These practices fostered community ties and transparency in a land tenure system that was not written.

A different observer said, "Traditionally, rulers were accountable for not only distribution but also ensuring sustainable and equitable use of land." *They oversaw how the allotted land was used and stepped in if it was left vacant or used improperly*" (KII R5, 64, Male, Traditional Ruler, Obokun). Their function in advancing environmental stewardship was also highlighted in his account.

(KII R11, 52, Female, Businesswoman) and (KII R9, 60, Male, Businessman) noted that *"the roles were shared between the king and the family units"* in several communities, most notably Ilesa East and Ilesa West. In cases of boundary determination and land inheritance, the king often had the last say, even if the family owned the property.

The respondent also described the customary practice of land distribution on an *"Isakole basis, which refers to a traditional annual tribute or rent paid by the landholder to the original landowning family or king"* (KII R13, 59, Female, Trader, Ilesa East). This behavior supports the idea that, under traditional tenure, land is held more in trust than in ownership.

However, the traditional system was not praised by everyone without reservation. Although many respondents emphasized its fairness and communal focus, some, such as Respondent 31 (KII R31, 54, Female, Civil Servant, Ilesa East), claimed that *"traditional rulers sometimes exploited their position by favoring certain families or using land to reward loyalty, thereby sowing seeds of inequality."* In the past, traditional rulers in the Ijesa land were given vital responsibilities in land distribution and administration. These duties were carried out through a complicated network of practices that included lineage, religious ceremonies, community discussion, and moral stewardship. Their power ensured that land was fairly distributed, conserved for future generations, and utilized in a manner that promoted community harmony. Although modernization and legislative land changes have changed these dynamics, many community members, particularly in rural and peri-urban lands where ancestral ties to land remain strong, continue to respect and refer to traditional land governance systems.

## 5.2 Evolution of Traditional Rulers' Roles with Modernization and Urbanization

In the Ijesa land, the traditional responsibilities of rulers in conflict settlement and land administration have changed significantly as a result of the forces of modernization and urbanization. Historically seen as the supreme keepers and mediators of land within their communities, these rulers have seen their traditional authority steadily diminish and their roles

change due to the development of formal legal systems, legislative land reforms, increasing population pressure, and economic shifts. Respondents from many municipal government districts, including Atakunmosa East, Atakunmosa West, Ilesa East, Ilesa West, Obokun, and Oriade, agreed that the functions of traditional monarchs in land administration have changed, albeit not consistently throughout all communities. The way traditional authority is used in locations like Ilesa East and Obokun has been greatly impacted by urban development, rising land prices, and the establishment of documentation and title registration systems.

For instance, Respondent 2 observed that modernization has encouraged land grabbing and weakened the traditional ruler's unilateral authority. He explained that, *"in the past, kings had the final say in land matters, but now their influence is increasingly challenged by legal requirements, government regulations, and even the courts"* (KII R2, 58, Male, Theologian/Health Technologist, Atakunmosa West).

Also, respondent 3 echoed a similar sentiment, stating that the growth of urban settlements has encouraged opportunistic behavior, even among traditional elites, thereby compromising customary processes. In his words, *"modernization has fueled the greed behind land conflicts," making rulers' mediation roles more complicated* (R3, 67, Male, Traditional Healer, Atakunmosa West).

Respondent 5 described a dual system where modern legal procedures now coexist with customary norms. He acknowledged that *"while his authority is still respected, his decisions must align with broader legal expectations, especially in towns where land values have escalated due to urbanization and infrastructural development"* (KII R5, 64, Male, Traditional Ruler, Obokun).

Some respondents observed that modernization introduced tools that helped strengthen accountability among traditional rulers. Respondent 8, for instance, noted that *"modern land transactions now involve formal agreements and documentation, which reduces ambiguity and the risk of exploitation by any party, including traditional rulers"* (KII R8, 61, Male, Farmer, Oriade).

However, not all communities experienced the same degree of transformation. In more rural or peri-urban areas like Iperindo and Erin-Ijesa, traditional rulers reportedly retain substantial influence. Respondent 7 stated that *"traditional methods of land allocation and conflict resolution remain largely intact, as modernization has not deeply penetrated those areas"*. He added that *"the king is still widely seen*

*as the final arbiter in land matters, especially among older community members” (KII R7, 60, Male, Farmer, Atakunmosa East).*

Meanwhile, in highly urbanized centers like Ilesa township, younger residents and elites increasingly rely on legal documentation and courts, often bypassing traditional rulers entirely. *“Urbanization has contributed to mistrust of traditional processes, especially where transparency and fairness are in question” (KII R11, 52, Female, Trader, Ilesa West).*

Another respondent also highlighted the impact of urbanization on the commercialization of land. *“Modernization has emboldened some traditional rulers to act outside customary boundaries, turning land into a political and economic commodity rather than a communal heritage” (R13, 59, Female, Businesswoman, Ilesa East)*

A contrasting viewpoint was provided by respondent 4 who insisted that modernization and urbanization have had minimal impact in some quarters. *“Traditional rulers continue to play the same roles as they did in the past, though now with some consultation from local government structures” (KII R4, 65, Male, Clergyman, Oriade).*

The transition of traditional rulers' roles in the Ijesa land as a result of modernization and urbanization has been characterized by a change from unquestioned customary authority to a more debated and hybrid position. Traditional rulers are still respected for their wisdom, cultural knowledge, and conflict resolution abilities, but they now function within a larger institutional framework that includes legislation, politics, and public accountability. Their influence over land issues has grown more symbolic and consultative in urbanized environments, but traditional norms continue to hold strong in more rural lands. In order to ensure both cultural legitimacy and legal security in land governance, this development necessitates a clearer integration of traditional and statutory systems.

### **5.3 Conflict Mediation and Conflict Resolution by Traditional Rulers**

Using their established power, community trust, and understanding of indigenous laws and histories, traditional rulers in the Ijesa land have historically acted as mediators and peacemakers in conflicts involving land. Their role in conflict mediation is still valued and pertinent in many communities in Atakunmosa East, Atakunmosa West, Ilesa East, Ilesa West, Obokun, and Oriade, despite the erosion of some traditional powers as a result of modernization and legal reforms.

The Key Informant Interviews' respondents disclosed that traditional chiefs are essential in settling land conflicts using culturally ingrained methods that prioritize conversation, community engagement, and indigenous wisdom. Respondent 1 described how conflicts are typically brought before the Oba-in-council, where both parties are given an opportunity to state their cases. *“The council, comprising chiefs and elders, deliberates based on communal memory, land boundaries, family histories, and oral evidence” (KII R1, 63, Male, Traditional Ruler, Atakunmosa East).*

Respondent 2 explained that conflict mediation often involves summoning the affected parties and tracing the land's history through elders and family heads. In his words, *“we don't just listen to stories; we examine how the land came into their possession.” (KII R2, 58, Male, Theologian/Health Technologist, Atakunmosa West).* This process is deeply consultative and seeks reconciliation rather than punishment, thereby preserving social harmony.

The communal aspect of conflict resolution was emphasised by respondent 3, who noted that many conflicts are settled by gathering parties on a *“peace mat,” where discussions occur face-to-face, guided by elders, and concluded with traditional prayers or sacrifices” (KII R3, 67, Male, Traditional Healer, Atakunmosa West).* This approach emphasizes emotional resolution, honor, and the reintegration of parties into the community, rather than adversarial outcomes.

Respondent 11 also shared that *“the palace is often the first port of call when land conflicts arise in her area” (KII R11, 52, Female, Trader, Ilesa West).* She praised the process for being culturally familiar and less intimidating than court procedures, especially for elders and women who may lack formal education or legal literacy.

Interestingly, respondent 10 highlighted that while traditional rulers still mediate conflicts, their neutrality is sometimes questioned due to alleged favoritism or external influence. *“Some rulers are perceived to lean toward influential families or individuals, which undermines confidence in the process” (KII R10, 56, Male, Artisan, Ilesa East).*

Despite such concerns, many respondents continued to affirm the effectiveness of traditional mediation, particularly in cases involving inheritance, boundary demarcation, and overlapping land claims. Respondent 5 explained that *“traditional rulers often rely on a combination of oral testimony, site visits, and witness accounts from elders or neighboring landowners to arrive at decisions” (KII R5, 64, Male, Traditional Ruler, Obokun).* The

emphasis is not just on ownership but on fairness, peaceful coexistence, and moral accountability.

Respondent 13 remarked that *“the traditional conflict resolution process is typically quicker and more accessible than going through formal courts, which can be slow, expensive, and disconnected from local realities”* (KII R13, 59, Female, Businesswoman, Ilesa East). However, she noted that when rulings from the palace are not accepted, parties often escalate the case to the modern legal system.

Some respondents emphasised that traditional rulers' effectiveness in conflict resolution depends on their integrity and historical knowledge. Respondent 8 stated, *“a king who knows the stories of our ancestors and is not greedy will always bring peace.”* (KII R8, 61, Male, Farmer, Oriade). Others such as respondent 6 confirmed that *“where the ruler is widely respected, their word is final, and their decisions are upheld by the community without resistance”* (KII R6, 60, Male, Farmer, Obokun).

Nonetheless, modernization has introduced new complexities. Respondent 31 noted that *“cases involving land sales, especially those influenced by modern contracts or real estate developers, are increasingly being taken to statutory courts”* (R31, 54, Female, Civil Servant, Ilesa East). In such cases, traditional rulers may act as witnesses or cultural interpreters rather than final arbiters.

*“Kings and chiefs play a crucial role in resolving land conflicts... I trust them to make a fair and just decisions.” “While some kings and chiefs are genuinely interested in resolving land conflicts, others are more interested in lining their own pockets.” “Kings and chiefs need to be accountable and transparent, and they should respect everyone’s right.” Chiefs and Kings should be mediators, but some are biased. If they were more transparent, people would trust them more.”* (FGD 2, Youth, Ilesa West)

In the Ijesa land, traditional rulers are still involved in mediating land conflicts through culturally-based approaches that prioritize reconciliation, communal memory, and respect for elders. Their function remains essential, especially in rural and semi-urban lands, even if modern legal systems and changing social norms have questioned their authority. Integrating traditional mediation into the larger land governance framework, reinforcing their capabilities, and guaranteeing their impartiality may improve legitimacy and efficacy in settling land conflicts.

#### 5.4 Existence of Customary Rules and Practices in Land Management in the Ijesa Land

Traditional norms and procedures, which predate official land legislation and written documentation, historically constitute the cornerstone of land management in the Ijesa land. These conventional systems are firmly established in communal norms, cultural history, and ancestral lineage, even if they are mostly unwritten. They continue to have an impact on land allocation and conflict resolution, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas. Key Informant Interviews conducted across the six local government areas of Ijesa land Atakunmosa East, Atakunmosa West, Ilesa East, Ilesa West, Obokun, and Oriade revealed that, despite a potential lack of documentation, traditional laws governing land use and transfer are well known and consistently upheld within families and communities. Traditional leaders, elders, and family heads, who serve as cultural repositories of land tenure history, frequently pass down these rituals orally through generations.

According to respondent 3, *“Customary rules are not written in books, but everyone born in the land knows them. They are part of our upbringing.”* (KII R3, 67, Male, Traditional Healer, Atakunmosa West). This underscores the unwritten but widely accepted norms that guide land ownership, inheritance, and transfer.

Respondent 13 described the customary practice of land tenure known as *“Isakole, where individuals or families granted land are expected to pay annual tribute usually in the form of farm produce, poultry, or small sums of money to the original land-owning family or the traditional ruler”* (KII R13, 59, Female, Businesswoman, Ilesa East). This payment is not considered rent in the modern legal sense but a token of loyalty and acknowledgment of authority.

Respondent 5 noted that the allocation of land typically followed clan and lineage structures, with each extended family having recognized boundaries known only to elders. *“Before a parcel of land is allocated or sold, it is customary for the consent of the family head and, in some cases, the ruler or Baale, to be obtained”* (KII R5, 64, Male, Traditional Ruler, Obokun). This process is both symbolic and procedural, aimed at preventing intra-family conflicts.

In addition, Respondent 4 stated that *“traditional land allocation often involved ritual or symbolic acts such as handing over a cutlass, kola nut, or white cloth to signify transfer of land rights”* (KII R4, 65, Male, Clergyman, Oriade). These rituals served as culturally binding contracts, witnessed by community members and preserved in oral memory.

However, several respondents acknowledged the absence of documented rules as a major weakness of the customary system, particularly in the face of modernization and external land pressures. Respondent 10 remarked that *“many conflicts happen today because there are no written records. Some families come later to claim what was already given out”* (KII R10, 56, Male, Artisan, Ilesa East)

Despite this limitation, customary practices are still preferred by many residents for their perceived transparency, speed, and moral grounding. Respondent 11 shared that *“trusted customary land processes more than the modern legal system because the traditional heads are familiar with ancestral boundaries and would not allow injustice within the community”* (KII R11, 52, Female, Trader, Ilesa West).

There were also variations in understanding and application of customary rules depending on geography and generational knowledge. In urban areas like Ilesa township, younger respondents, such as respondent 21 expressed concern that *“the erosion of customary knowledge was creating confusion, as younger family members were unfamiliar with traditional land procedures”* (KII R21, Youth Leader, 37, Male, Ilesa East).

Interestingly, respondent 20 noted that *“customary rules were effective in earlier times but have become vulnerable to manipulation in recent years due to the rising value of land”* (KII R20, Teacher, 51, Male, Atakunmosa West). He argued for the documentation and formal recognition of customary rules to ensure consistency and protect community rights.

In contrast, a few respondents questioned the existence or relevance of customary rules altogether. Respondent 31 stated that *“customary rules now depend on who is in charge,”* suggesting that the authority of those rules is sometimes influenced by personality or political connections rather than established norms (KII R31, 54, Female, Civil Servant, Ilesa East).

Despite such criticisms, the consensus across most interviews is that customary rules though unwritten remain a living and functional system of land governance in the Ilesa land. They offer continuity, moral authority, and social legitimacy that formal institutions have not fully replaced. As respondent 8 aptly put it, *“our land system is like our language; even if not written, it is still spoken and understood.”* (KII R8, 61, Male, Farmer, Oriade)

In the Ilesa land, there are actual and long-lasting traditional norms and procedures for managing land. These customs continue to govern property

transactions, settle conflicts, and uphold community peace. Although the absence of documentation presents difficulties in today's legalistic context, the efficacy of these methods is based on their cultural legitimacy and historical ties to community life. In order to establish a land governance system that is more equitable and responsible, attempts should be made to codify important elements of traditional land law without compromising their native character.

#### Impact of Colonial and Post-Colonial Land Reforms on the Authority of Traditional Rulers in Land Management

Through legislative tools like the 1978 Land Use Act, colonial and post-colonial land reforms have brought about significant changes in the authority of traditional rulers over land administration in the Ilesa land. Prior to colonial intervention, land in Ilesa land was held communally and managed by a strong indigenous system in which traditional leaders and family heads regulated access, allocation, and use in accordance with customary rules. The introduction of colonial legal frameworks, and their persistence in post-independence Nigeria, however, established a central land tenure system that gradually reduced the functions of traditional rulers as guardians of ancestral land. Respondents from the six Ilesa local government districts of Atakunmosa East, Atakunmosa West, Ilesa East, Ilesa West, Obokun, and Oriade expressed a profound understanding of how these reforms have undermined traditional authority, upset community control, and caused uncertainty in land administration.

According to respondent 5, *“colonialism replaced the spiritual and communal understanding of land with bureaucratic and individualistic models”*. He emphasised that traditional rulers once had *“total moral and spiritual control over land, but now their authority is mostly ceremonial because the government, through legal reforms, has taken over legal control”* (KII R5, 64, Male, Traditional Ruler, Obokun).

Similarly, respondent 2 pointed to the introduction of government land registries and courts as a turning point. He noted that *“even though traditional rulers are still consulted in some land matters, their decisions can be easily overturned by court rulings, thereby reducing their power and relevance”* (R2, 58, Male, Theologian/Health Technologist, Atakunmosa West).

One of the most cited reforms was the Land Use Act of 1978. Several respondents explained that the Act centralized all land ownership in the hands of the state governor, thereby stripping traditional

institutions of legal ownership or authority over land. Respondent 13 expressed concern that “*this reform disrupted the historical connection between land and lineage, allowing external actors and political elites to intervene in local land affairs without due regard for tradition*” (KII R13, 59, Female, Businesswoman, Ilesa East).

Respondent 4 described the reform as “*colonial inheritance passed to Nigerian leaders,*” arguing that post-independence governments merely replaced colonial authorities without restoring land control to its traditional custodians. He stressed that these legal changes have opened the door to abuse and exploitation by people who lack historical or spiritual ties to the land (KII R4, 65, Male, Clergyman, Oriade).

On the other hand, a few respondents acknowledged that while the reforms weakened traditional power, they were introduced to reduce land conflicts and promote standardized land transactions. Respondent 10 noted that “*the formalization of land ownership through legal titles reduced fraudulent claims and made land more secure for development and investment*”. However, he also conceded that these benefits mostly favor the educated elite and often exclude grassroots community members (KII R10, 56, Male, Artisan, Ilesa East).

Respondent 31 also expressed that land reforms were necessary to curtail the unchecked powers of some traditional rulers, especially those who began to treat communal land as private property for personal enrichment. She stated, “*before the Land Use Act, some Obas were selling land indiscriminately and creating confusion.*” (KII R31, 54, Female, Civil Servant, Ilesa East)

Nevertheless, most traditional leaders and community elders viewed the impact of reforms as largely negative. Respondent 3 explained that the reforms undermined the moral and ancestral foundations of land management, creating a disconnect between community identity and land rights. He lamented that “*we now have strangers allocating what they don’t understand.*” (KII R3, 67, Male, Traditional Healer, Atakunmosa West)

A nuanced perspective was provided by respondent 8, who advocated for a hybrid model that blends customary law with statutory recognition. He proposed that “*the government should legally recognize the roles of traditional rulers in land allocation and conflict resolution, while also establishing regulatory frameworks to prevent abuse*” (KII R8, 61, Male, Farmer, Oriade).

In rural communities where formal land reforms are not effectively enforced, traditional rulers still wield

considerable influence. Respondent 7 shared that in such areas, “*the king’s decision on land is final, and land allocation continues to follow customary norms regardless of formal legal statutes*”. However, this influence is fragile and may not withstand external pressures, especially from government agencies or private investors with legal backing (KII R7, 60, Male, Farmer, Atakunmosa East).

In the Ijesa land, land reforms under colonial and post-colonial rule have had a significant impact on the power of traditional monarchs in land management. These reforms shifted land ownership from a spiritual and communal approach to a centralized, state-controlled one. Although the goal may have been to regulate and standardize land administration, the outcome has frequently been the erosion of communal identity related to land and the marginalization of indigenous institutions. Future reforms to policy and constitutional recognition might integrate traditional roles into the official legal structure, thereby reestablishing balance, improving accountability, and safeguarding cultural integrity in land governance.

**Research Question 2:** What are the causes and consequences of land conflicts in the Ijesa land of Osun State?

The Ijesa land is seeing a rise in land conflicts as a result of a combination of historical, socioeconomic, legislative, and political causes. Using information provided by important informants from the six local government lands of Atakunmosa East, Atakunmosa West, Ilesa East, Ilesa West, Obokun, and Oriade including traditional rulers, chiefs, farmers, clergy, artisans, youth leaders, traders, and community elder this chapter examines the underlying causes and far-reaching effects of land conflicts, as well as the people involved in either resolving or making them worse.

### 5.5 Main Causes of Land Conflicts in the Ijesa Land

A complex mix of traditional customs, socioeconomic strains, and institutional shortcomings are the main causes of land conflicts in the Ijesa territory. In the past, land was managed communally under the supervision of family heads and traditional rulers, with boundaries defined by natural landmarks and local agreements. However, the once-stable customary system has become a source of conflict and conflict as the worth of land has risen as a result of urbanization, population expansion, and market demands.

Conflicts over intra-family inheritance, according to the respondents, are one of the most common reasons for land conflicts. Disagreements over who

has the legal right to own or manage inherited land are common in many extended family or polygamous family arrangements. Respondent 3 explained that *“conflicts typically begin when one family member sells a piece of family land without consulting the others”* (KII R3, 67, Male, Traditional Healer, Atakunmosa West). This action often results in open disagreement, legal tussles, or even violent confrontations, particularly when the other members discover the transaction after the land has changed hands.

Another frequently cited issue is the lack of proper land documentation and boundary clarity. Respondent 2 emphasised that *“many people in the land still rely on oral agreements and ancestral memory to determine land boundaries”* (KII R2, 58, Male, Theologian/Health Technologist, Atakunmosa West). This informal method, while once sufficient, has become unreliable in a context where land is increasingly seen as a valuable commodity. Conflicts now arise over overlapping claims, with different parties providing conflicting accounts of ownership based on oral history.

*“Conflicts around land are often caused by greed and selfishness. Some individuals and even traditional rulers are willing to do whatever it takes to acquire, even if it means displacing communities or ignoring traditional rights.”* *“Some families sell the same land multiple times to different buyers.”* *“Conflicts around land are also caused by corruption and poor governance. When officials are bribed or have personal interests in land deals, it can lead to unfair and unjust outcomes.”* (FGD 2, Youths, Ilesa West)

The economic transformation of land into a source of wealth and investment has further exacerbated tensions. Respondent 8 observed that *“the commodification of land has awakened interest from people who never previously claimed ownership”*. With land prices reaching unprecedented levels, even distant relatives now assert dubious claims to parcels of land that were left fallow or unused for decades (KII R8, 61, Male, Farmer, Oriade)

Commercialization has also encouraged land speculation and fraudulent transactions. As respondent 11 noted, *“cases abound where a single plot is sold multiple times by different individuals, each claiming to be the rightful owner”* (KII R11, 52, Female, Trader, Ilesa West). These multiple sales often lead to physical confrontations and litigation, undermining trust within communities.

Boundary conflicts between families, and sometimes between entire communities, are also common. Respondent 7 recounted *“cases where traditional boundaries have been forgotten or distorted, resulting in violent clashes when farming*

*or building activities encroach on conflictd land”* (KII R7, 60, Male, Farmer, Atakunmosa East).

Compounding these issues is the increasing breakdown of traditional structures and disregard for the authority of family heads or community elders. Respondent 31 noted that *“younger generations often bypass elders and traditional rulers, opting instead to deal directly with lawyers or real estate agents”* (KII R31, 54, Female, Civil Servant, Ilesa East). This shift has not only created confusion but has also eroded communal oversight and respect for customary land allocation processes.

Migration and demographic changes have also intensified competition for land. Respondent 10 explained that *“as outsiders move into Ijesa towns seeking land for residence or business, tensions rise between indigenous families and newcomers”* (KII R10, 56, Male, Artisan, Ilesa East). This competition often leads to contestations, particularly when settlers claim land that locals believe to be under customary ownership.

External interference from government agencies and politically connected individuals has contributed significantly to the problem. Respondent 29 pointed out that *“land is sometimes reallocated by government officials without consulting the traditional authorities or rightful customary owners”* (KII R29, 40, Male, Artisan, Oriade). Such decisions, especially when enforced with state backing, can create deep resentment and long-standing legal conflicts.

The primary factors contributing to land conflicts in the Ijesa territory are deeply ingrained in shifting family dynamics, economic avarice, legal uncertainty, and the erosion of traditional institutions. The stakes have changed and the conflict has grown more intense as a result of the transition of land from a community resource to a commercial item. Land conflicts are likely to continue and put more pressure on the social structure of communities in the land without clear documentation, inclusive decision-making, and greater coordination between the statutory and traditional systems.

## 5.6 Economic Factors and Rising Land Value as Drivers of Land Conflicts

The rising monetary value of land and economic transformation have become key factors exacerbating land conflicts in the Ijesa territory. Land in the area has historically been valued for its subsistence utility, which was mainly utilized for agriculture, the construction of family complexes, or the performance of religious and ancestral rituals. However, as real estate markets grow and cities

become more urbanized, land has gone from being a shared resource to a valuable economic commodity. This change has increased rivalry, generated new conflicts, and exacerbated old resentments, particularly within families and between communities.

The economic redefinition of land that causes disagreements was made plain by several participants in the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Respondent 8 observed that *"once land began to fetch money, everybody wanted to claim it even those who had never worked or farmed on it."* (KII R8, 61, Male, Farmer, Oriade). His comment captures a widespread concern that land is increasingly viewed as a commodity to be exploited for personal gain rather than as a shared heritage managed by lineage heads or traditional authorities.

Several informants linked rising land value to greed, dishonesty, and fraudulent land sales. Respondent 11 explained that *"the prospect of making quick money leads individuals to sell family land without consensus"*. In many cases, *"a single parcel is sold to multiple buyers, or land is sold secretly, only for the rest of the family to discover it too late"* (KII R11, 52, Female, Trader, Ilesa West). Such unauthorized sales, motivated by financial desperation or opportunism, often ignite protracted conflicts within and between families.

This trend was also emphasised by respondent 13, who noted that *"greedy siblings now act as land agents within their families," cutting out other relatives and triggering hostility"* (KII R13, 59, Female, Businesswoman, Ilesa East) *"I think conflicts around land are also caused by a lack of clear policies and regulations."* (FGD2, Youths). In the past, decisions around land allocation or sales were made collectively or through family heads, but the growing financial appeal has undermined that process.

The influx of private developers and land speculators has also contributed to escalating tensions. As communities around Ilesa and other urbanizing parts of Ijesaland attract real estate investors, traditional communal lands are being sold off often without the informed consent of the original owners or the broader community. Respondent 6 lamented that *"farmers are being pushed out by people who don't even live here,"* describing how long-held farmlands are now being fenced off for construction by outsiders (KII R6, 60, Male, Farmer, Obokun).

Another respondent, Respondent 31, stressed that the monetary allure of land has led to *"a rush to sell, claim, and re-sell"* plots sometimes by unqualified or unscrupulous individuals, including lower-level

traditional functionaries (KII R31, 54, Female, Civil Servant, Ilesa East). She explained that even some community members who formerly respected lineage-based land ownership are now questioning ancestral rights if they see an opportunity to profit.

The issue is not just individual but also institutional. Respondent 3 warned that *"some traditional rulers or chiefs, driven by economic pressure or greed, have been implicated in questionable land sales"* (KII R3, 67, Male, Traditional Healer, Atakunmosa West). In such cases, the economic value of land overrides customary caution, resulting in overlapping claims and erosion of trust in traditional authorities.

Respondent 10 added that land conflict is now common even among close relatives. *"Everyone now sees land as their pension. They don't care if it divides the family,"* he said, reflecting how the commodification of land disrupts family unity and traditional landholding values (KII R10, 56, Male, Artisan, Ilesa East).

The rapid rise in land value, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas of the Ijesa land, has drastically altered how land is viewed, utilized, and contested. A context in which land grabbing, intra-family betrayal, and dishonest transactions flourish has been created by the desire for profit, combined with inadequate documentation and ineffective enforcement procedures. Economic development and urban growth have brought prospects, but they have also turned land from a shared inheritance into a commodity, leading to novel patterns of conflict. According to responses from all across the Ijesa communities, the growing value of land is not just fostering conflict but also eroding trust, displacing traditional authority, and endangering social harmony. To balance economic growth with fairness, accountability, and peace, land commodification must be approached in a more regulated and culturally sensitive manner.

### **5.7 Role of Government Agencies and Private Investors in Land Conflicts**

The dynamics of land conflicts in the Ijesa land have been heavily influenced by the participation of government organizations and private investors in land governance. These performers have frequently been viewed as intrusive, politicized, or exploitative, even though they are meant to give structure, uphold the law, and promote growth. In many cases, government officials and private investors have exacerbated land conflicts by ignoring conventional channels, disregarding established procedures, or supporting influential interests to the detriment of marginalized community members, rather than acting as impartial regulators.

Respondent 7 voiced deep frustration with government agencies, accusing them of allocating land without consulting indigenous owners. He recalled instances where *“bulldozers and security personnel arrived to demolish farms,”* claiming legal backing from state land allocations, yet ignoring the voices of those who had cultivated the land for generations (KII R7, 60, Male, Farmer, Atakunmosa East).

Similarly, respondent 4 explained that private investors often exploit legal ambiguities by sidestepping customary protocols. According to him, *“these investors negotiate directly with politicians or officials, rather than community leaders, thereby triggering community backlash when landowners discover that their ancestral land has been sold or taken”* (KII R4, 65, Male, Clergyman, Oriade).

Several respondents pointed to political interference and elite capture of land processes. Respondent 29 stated that *“politicians use their power to allocate land to their allies,” even when the land has historical ties to local families*. He noted that such actions not only breed resentment but also destabilize the legitimacy of both government institutions and traditional structures (KII R29, 40, Male, Artisan, Oriade).

Respondent 19 highlighted how the promise of development such as *“the construction of roads, estates, or markets often leads to the displacement of local farmers without adequate compensation or community dialogue”* (KII R19, 51, Female, Farmer, Atakunmosa West). She stressed that while development is necessary, its implementation should respect community interests and traditional authorities.

On the other hand, a few respondents offered a more nuanced view. Respondent 10 acknowledged that *“government regulation and private investment can help streamline land administration and reduce chaos, especially in urban areas”* (KII R10, 56, Male, Artisan, Ilesa East). However, he insisted that these benefits are often undermined by corruption, favoritism, and lack of transparency.

Respondent 31 also noted that *“while government authorities are supposed to help regulate and formalize land ownership, they sometimes complicate matters by issuing certificates of occupancy (C of O) to people with no historical claim to the land”* (KII R31, 54, Female, Civil Servant, Ilesa East). These official documents, when issued in disregard of customary claims, tend to override traditional decisions, leading to prolonged legal conflicts.

Respondent 5 emphasised the marginalization of traditional rulers in land governance. He lamented that local chiefs are now *“treated as figureheads,”* consulted only after major land decisions have been made (KII R5, 64, Male, Traditional Ruler, Obokun). This not only reduces their relevance but also makes conflict resolution more difficult when they are brought in after the damage is done.

Respondents also pointed out that private investors sometimes intentionally create confusion by negotiating with multiple parties, especially when there is no centralized or codified ownership structure. Respondent 13 remarked that land speculators often *“play families against each other,”* exploiting intra-family tensions to acquire land cheaply and quickly (KII R13, 59, Female, Businesswoman, Ilesa East).

In rural communities, displacement without resettlement or compensation was a recurring theme. Respondent 6 recounted how several farmers lost their land to *“projects that never materialized,” yet the government has done little to restore their livelihoods or offer alternatives* (KII R6, 60, Male, Farmer, Obokun).

Despite these challenges, some respondents, including respondent 11, recognized the potential of collaboration between government and traditional institutions if proper frameworks are put in place. *“Community consultations and stakeholder forums be made mandatory before any land project is approved”* (KII R11, 52, Female, Trader, Ilesa West).

Land conflicts in the Ijesa land are influenced in a double-edged way by the involvement of government organizations and private investors. Although these actors have the resources and capacity to formalize and advance land systems, their actions, which are frequently marred by corruption, insensitivity, and exclusion, have made a major contribution to conflicts over land. The respondents favor a more inclusive, open, and culturally sensitive strategy in which traditional authorities are not just consulted but also given the power to co-manage community land. In the absence of such collaboration, government and private sector actions are likely to continue to spark conflicts and erode social harmony in the country.

### 5.8 Social and Economic Consequences of Land Conflicts on Local Communities

Land conflicts in the Ijesa land have far-reaching social and economic repercussions that have a significant impact on community stability, development, and livelihoods. Land, which was previously a source of shared identity, inheritance,

and economic survival, has now turned into a source of conflict that breaks up families, weakens communal trust, and hinders socioeconomic advancement.

Interpersonally, land conflicts have weakened family harmony and intergenerational ties. Conflicts frequently occur between siblings, cousins, or in-laws, typically over the illegal sale or distribution of inherited property. Respondent 3 lamented that land conflicts “turn brothers into enemies” and have led to “lifelong grudges and spiritual disconnection” within extended families (KII R3, 67, Male, Traditional Healer, Atakunmosa West). As land is increasingly seen as an economic asset rather than a shared heritage, mutual trust among family members is eroded, and long-established lines of authority within families are challenged or disregarded.

Respondent 13 shared similar experiences, explaining how families become fractured when one member sells land without the knowledge or consent of others. She emphasised that “*this betrayal often results in permanent rifts, legal conflicts, and even physical altercations, which ripple across generations*” (KII R13, 59, Female, Businesswoman, Ilesa East).

At the community level, the breakdown in trust and increased suspicion have weakened social ties. Respondent 5 noted that “*land conflicts reduce the effectiveness of traditional authorities and community elders, who are often accused of bias or corruption*”. In such situations, “*the palace once seen as a place of refuge and justice is viewed with skepticism, leading to reduced communal harmony and respect for customs*” (KII R5, 64, Male, Traditional Ruler, Obokun).

On the economic front, the consequences are equally devastating. Land serves as the primary economic asset for farming, building, and inheritance in the Ijesa land. When conflicts arise, these activities are disrupted, sometimes for years. Respondent 10 highlighted how families lose income when they are unable to farm conflicted land or are forcefully evicted by court injunctions or rival claimants. He noted that in many instances, “*families exhaust their savings pursuing legal redress, often without resolution*” (KII R10, 56, Male, Artisan, Ilesa East).

For many households, land conflicts translate into increased financial burdens. Respondent 31 (KII R31, 54, Female, Civil Servant, Ilesa East) explained that “*land-related court cases demand legal fees, transportation costs, and even bribes, placing a strain on families who may already be economically vulnerable*”. She added that “*women, especially widows and single mothers, are disproportionately affected, as they are frequently*

*sidelined or cheated during inheritance distribution and land conflicts*” (KII R31, 54, Female, Civil Servant, Ilesa East).

Respondent 19 emphasised that land conflicts threaten food security, particularly when productive farmlands are left unused or when community members are too afraid to access land due to threats or ongoing legal conflicts. She noted that such “*disruptions reduce food supply, drive up local prices, and push younger people to migrate in search of alternative livelihoods*” (KII R19, 51, Female, Farmer, Atakunmosa West).

Furthermore, land conflicts can undermine local development and deter external investment. Respondent 11 shared that “*investors often pull out of land deals when they sense unresolved ownership issues or local tension*” (KII R11, 52, Female, Trader, Ilesa West). This hampers infrastructural projects, commercial expansion, and employment opportunities within the land.

Respondent 6 also pointed to economic displacement, stating “*that families who lose land to conflict are often forced to relocate to urban slums or become dependent on others*” (KII R6, 60, Male, Farmer, Obokun). This not only affects individual dignity but also increases social pressure on already struggling relatives or local welfare systems.

Families and communities in the Ijesa territory bear significant social and economic expenses due to land conflicts. They hinder agricultural output, discourage investment, destroy family ties, undermine traditional trust and governance structures, and exacerbate societal instability. These repercussions are closely connected, and sometimes they feed into one another. For example, a damaged livelihood can make social tensions worse, while a weak social infrastructure can prolong conflict. The combined insights from respondents highlight the critical need for comprehensive reforms that integrate legal recognition of traditional rights, enhance transparency and documentation, and reestablish community-based conflict resolution frameworks rooted in fairness, inclusion, and cultural integrity.

### **5.9 Impact of Land Conflicts on the Relationship Between Traditional Rulers and their Subjects**

Traditionally, the Ijesa land has revered the institution of traditional rulership, with monarchs and chiefs playing crucial roles in land allocation, conflict resolution, and community leadership. Nonetheless, the increasing frequency of land conflicts has put a strain on this connection by eroding confidence, eroding power, and making the role of traditional monarchs as impartial protectors of land more difficult. The perception of bias or

corruption among traditional chiefs, especially in matters of land distribution and conflict resolution, is a recurring topic in the interviews. Many members of the community think that certain leaders have broken with tradition by selling land unlawfully or by siding with affluent elites and outsiders at the expense of regular families.

Respondent 2 captured this concern succinctly: *“The people no longer see our kings as fathers to all they now see them as businessmen who sell land for their own benefit”* (KII R2, 58, Male, Theologian/Health Technologist, Atakunmosa West). His comment reflects growing cynicism, especially where traditional rulers are accused of secretly allocating communal or family lands without consultation or equitable distribution.

Similarly, Respondent 11 observed that *“once a land case enters the palace, the outcome is often determined by who can offer the bigger gift.”* (KII R11, 52, Female, Trader, Ilesa West). This perception of partiality undermines the traditional ruler’s role as a trusted mediator and drives disputants toward litigation or violence, rather than local conciliation.

For some, the perceived commercialization of land by traditional rulers has transformed the palace from a center of cultural stewardship into an administrative hub of land speculation. Respondent 29 (KII R29, 40, Male, Artisan, Oriade) noted that *“some monarchs now act like land agents, prioritizing profit over peace”*. This shift has made it difficult for the community to accept their rulings, especially when conflicts involve relatives of palace officials or land that was previously communally owned.

Respondent 8 (KII R8, 61, Male, Farmer, Oriade) acknowledged that the involvement of some rulers in land transactions has diluted their moral authority. *“People now challenge the king in open meetings,”* he said, adding that *such public dissent was rare in the past*. This open defiance signals a breakdown in the traditional structure that once guaranteed order, respect, and peaceful conflict resolution.

However, not all traditional rulers are perceived negatively. Respondent 7 (R7, 60, Male, Farmer, Atakunmosa East) emphasised that traditional rulers who uphold fairness, avoid personal enrichment, and involve community stakeholders in land decisions still enjoy respect and support. He stated, *“If the ruler follows the customs and treats everyone equally, the people will protect his name even in times of conflict.”* This view suggests that the erosion of trust is not universal but linked to the conduct and accountability of individual rulers.

Several respondents, including respondent 31 (KII R31, 54, Female, Civil Servant, Ilesa East), expressed disappointment that the traditional leadership no longer holds the same moral weight or spiritual authority it once did. She pointed out that in many cases, *“community members bypass the palace and head straight to the police or courts because they no longer believe in the impartiality of traditional channels”*.

This loss of faith in traditional rulers has broader implications for communal cohesion. When monarchs are perceived as compromised, they become less effective in mediating not just land conflicts, but other social matters as well. Respondent 5 (KII R5, 64, Male, Traditional Ruler, Obokun) acknowledged this challenge, noting that some rulers are caught between cultural expectations and modern economic pressures. *“People expect us to protect the land, but they also pressure us for money and influence,”* he said, highlighting the difficult balancing act faced by today’s traditional leaders.

In some cases, the tension has resulted in outright protests and petitions against traditional authorities. Respondent 13 (KII R13, 59, Female, Businesswoman, Ilesa East) cited a case where *“community members demanded the dethronement of a chief accused of selling communal land to outsiders”*. Such actions were previously unthinkable but are becoming more common as communities seek greater transparency and accountability.

## 6. Discussion

Results showed some of the major historical role of traditional rulers to include land custodianship and land allocation, mediators in conflicts, while the historical roles of traditional rulers as we know it have evolved due to modernization and changes that have happened over the years. Thus, there seems to be challenges in trusting the decisions and intentions of traditional rulers in discharging their duties, while the enactment of land laws after the colonial rule has also affected the roles of traditional rulers.

This result is consistent with that of Hassan, [26] who discovered that the legal systems of colonial and post-colonial legal systems sporadically eroded traditional land governance in many African countries, especially Nigeria and Ghana. In the same vein, Oomen [27] found an overlapping between traditional institutions and statutory laws, thereby leading to low level of trust in the authorities of traditional rulers. The perception of trust erosion is further worsened by the perception that traditional rulers decide and operates to favour their personal interests above collective benefits.

Conversely to this result, Logan [28] opined that traditional rulers in many African communities still command respect. This is especially so where the institutions of state and government are weak. Differences in the result in this regard may be due to the peculiarity of locations (i.e., urban and rural locations), exposure to modern law and power relations in different contexts and locality.

Results further showed that the greed of individuals, including the traditional rulers, contributes to the causes of land conflicts among the respondents. Ambiguity in land boundaries, increase in the value of land, external individuals and systems such as political figures and wealthy individuals contribute to the causes of land conflicts in the study area. This result is consistent with that of Alden Wily [29] found that commercialization of land and capture by elites as potent factors leading to land conflict in African communities. The study of Chigbu [30] found that traditional rulers in many communities have shifted their focus from being custodians of the communities to economic actors, leading to land conflicts. These findings suggest that the more the commodification of lands, the more the traditional norms regulating land allocation are undermined.

Also, some of the consequences of such conflicts include economic and social instability, lack and reduction of trust in traditional rulers and authorities. This result is in line with the findings of Boone [31] claimed that land conflicts usually lead to displacement, livelihood destruction and distrust. Such negative consequences arise from lack of transparency and favouritism perceived by community members in the way traditional rulers handle land issues.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed that historically, traditional rulers were regarded as the custodians of land and mediators in communal and other conflicts, especially in relation to land matters. Their influence has however declined as a result of rise in statutory laws, modern structures of governance and distrust from community members. Also, land conflicts are fueled by greed, ambiguities in boundaries, economic values of land and interference from political and wealthy elites, leading to consequences such as economic instability, social conflict and unrest and lack of trust in traditional authorities. Therefore, the following recommendation are raised.

Traditional rulers should institutionalize community-based land governance councils that include youth, women, family heads, and elders. These councils should oversee land allocation,

documentation, and conflict resolution to ensure transparency and inclusive participation in decision-making processes.

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.

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