

THE ROLES OF TRADITIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION: A STUDY OF LAND RELATED DISPUTES IN KONTAGORA EMIRATE, NIGER STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the roles of traditional political institutions in the resolution of land-related disputes in Kontagora Emirate, Niger State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by the persistence of land conflicts and the growing interest in indigenous mechanisms of conflict management despite the limited constitutional roles assigned to traditional institutions in contemporary governance. Anchored on New Institutional Theory, the study adopted a qualitative case study design. Data were generated through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including emirate officials, traditional title holders, district heads, village heads, security personnel, vigilante representatives, and experts. The data were analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that traditional political institutions remain central to land dispute resolution in Kontagora Emirate. Their major roles include maintaining peace and stability, serving as custodians of land, receiving and mediating complaints, providing advisory services to government, and collaborating with formal security and judicial institutions. The study found that community members exhibit high levels of trust and confidence in traditional institutions due to their accessibility, cultural legitimacy, reliance on reconciliation, and deep knowledge of local history, customs, and land ownership patterns. The hierarchical structure of authority—from ward heads to the Emirate Council—facilitates effective dispute management and provides avenues for appeal and review. The findings also indicate strong collaboration between traditional authorities, courts, police, and local government institutions, resulting in a complementary system of conflict resolution. The study concludes that traditional political institutions remain indispensable mechanisms for resolving land disputes and sustaining social harmony in Kontagora Emirate. Their effectiveness is strengthened by community legitimacy, institutional adaptability, and constructive engagement with formal governance structures. The study recommends greater institutional support, legal recognition, and integration of traditional institutions into broader conflict resolution and land governance frameworks to enhance sustainable peace and social stability.

Keywords: Traditional political institutions, conflict resolution, land disputes, traditional rulers, customary governance, Kontagora Emirate,

Background to the Study

No society is free of conflict. Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interactions. It is a concomitant effect of choices and decisions made or not made by state and non-state actors in a political community (Zartman, 1991). Conflict may arise over claims to power, authority, influence and scarce resources, in which the aims the parties involved are not only to gain the desired advantage over the other, but also to neutralize, injure or eliminate rivals. Such conflicts may bring individuals and collectivities, the state and the citizens at crossed purposes (Adeniji, 2003; Suleiman, Sivamurugan, Razlini, 2019). Conflict takes various forms and dimensions in different societies, which may require diverse approaches for effective resolution across societies. Different societies experience different forms of conflicts depending on the complex dynamics

that determines the nature of competition for power, limited resources and influence, between among individuals, groups and organizations.

In the contemporary world, the continent of Africa is the most endemic in the prevalence of conflicts. It is also the most dysfunctional in the institutional framework for conflict resolution. Pre-colonial African societies, however like many ancient and traditional societies of Europe, Asia and America experienced different forms of intra and intergroup conflicts. Many famous empires, dynasties and other political entities in Africa emerged, grew, decayed and revived through conflicts and conflict resolution mechanisms. Before the advent of colonialism and its attendant disruption and destruction of some aspects African culture, African societies have had complex political systems that evolved and enforced elaborate conflict resolution mechanisms for peace, harmony, tranquility and stability.

Most studies on conflict resolution in Africa seem to give scant attention to the Traditional Institutions, whereas they are once held in high esteem by African societies. The institution, based on the pedigree of the traditional leaders was known for the preservation of cultural values, maintenance of law and order and effective conflict resolution in their respective domains. They are trusted to give sound judgment and justice that was not legally or judicially biased. In the Pre-colonial period, Traditional Rulers were trusted with the preservation of peace, cultural values, and norms of the society. These values formed the central force where power, governance, influence and authority are exercised by the Traditional Rulers.

In contemporary African societies, however, the powers and roles of the traditional rulers, particularly in Nigeria, appear to have been formally eroded and left with only advisory role. In reality, though, the traditional institutions are seen even in the post-colonial era as the custodian of the culture and traditions of the people. Some scholars argued that the failure of post-colonial states in Africa to provide sustainable solutions to conflicts is traceable to their detachment from their institutional and cultural values (Oladipo, 2022) that once firmed up the people in harmony. Traditional Africa's approaches to conflict resolution are believed to be largely guided by unique norms, values, as well as cultural and traditional precepts of the community. These value systems encouraged people to co-exist peacefully, commune together, respect one another, forgive and reconcile among themselves.. Accordingly, traditional institutions are seen as a veritable instrument for effectively resolving conflicts in African societies, particularly conflicts that are local and community in nature (Suleiman *et. al* 2019). This is the context within which this study is based.

The study examined the place of traditional institutions in conflict resolution in Nigeria with particular reference to land disputes in the Kontagora Emirate in Niger state. As one of the states in the North-central Nigeria that is undermined by violent conflicts, the study investigated the perennial and broken roles of the traditional structures in the emirate, particularly in the resolution of land related disputes. It examined the pattern of intervention of the traditional institution in the resolution of land related disputes in Kontagora Emirate, from 2003 to 2023. It focused on the limited and/or elaborate roles and powers of the traditional institutions in conflict resolution process in the study area. The study is situated within the context of the limited constitutional roles of the traditional institutions in governance process, particularly in the aspect of conflict resolution process. This is against the background of the elaborate roles and powers of the traditional institutions in Northern Nigeria in the pre-colonial and colonial periods.

Literature Review

Traditional political institutions such as chiefs, elders, lineage heads, and customary courts remain central to the governance and resolution of land disputes across much of Africa. These institutions, often described as “customary authorities,” are not relics of the past but dynamic components of contemporary political systems. They embody locally grounded norms and practices that regulate access to land, maintain order, and mediate conflicts. Their continued relevance is explained by their legitimacy among rural populations, accessibility, and ability to provide culturally appropriate mechanisms of justice. Studies by Bruce and Migot-Adholla (1994) and Toulmin and Quan (2000) show that in most rural areas, chiefs and elders serve as the first point of recourse in land conflicts, using oral testimonies, mediation, and compensation to restore harmony rather than enforce punitive measures. Their procedures often prioritize reconciliation and social cohesion, which helps prevent the escalation of disputes into violence.

Ubink (2008) explored how traditional chiefs in Ghana exercise authority over land allocation and dispute resolution. The major finding was that chiefs remain central to land administration, as most disputes are first reported to them before reaching formal courts. Ubink concluded that despite modernization and statutory land laws, traditional institutions continue to command legitimacy among local communities due to their accessibility, flexibility, and cultural alignment with local norms.

Similarly, Chimhowu and Woodhouse (2006) examined land disputes arising from competing customary and statutory land rights in sub-Saharan Africa. The authors found that traditional authorities play a mediating role in resolving conflicts by interpreting and enforcing customary norms in ways that accommodate new economic realities. They concluded that the resilience of traditional institutions is due to their ability to adapt customary laws to changing social and economic contexts.

In the same vein, Knight (2010) found that where customary authorities are formally recognized, land disputes are managed more effectively. His findings show that community trust in traditional dispute mechanisms helps reduce litigation in formal courts. He concluded that integrating traditional institutions within statutory frameworks enhances tenure security and ensures more inclusive conflict resolution processes.

Alao, A. (2014), revealed that traditional rulers such as *Obas* and *Baales* play crucial roles in resolving disputes arising from inheritance, boundary disagreements, and sale of communal land. Findings showed that these institutions emphasize mediation and arbitration grounded in oral testimonies and community consensus. The conclusion was that their continued relevance stems from their cultural legitimacy and the community’s desire for social cohesion. Zartman (2006) investigated traditional conflict resolution systems across Africa and found that indigenous institutions employ restorative rather than retributive justice. In land disputes, elders and chiefs focus on restoring relationships and communal peace. The study concluded that traditional mechanisms are more sustainable in rural settings, where formal legal systems are weak or inaccessible.

Although not focused solely on land, Nnoli (2003) noted that traditional institutions play a preventive role in land-related conflicts by mediating inter-communal tensions before escalation. His findings showed that traditional rulers act as custodians of community norms and land boundaries. He concluded that incorporating traditional authority into local governance structures helps maintain stability and social harmony.

Ayee (2007) found that traditional leaders contribute significantly to local governance through land dispute mediation. The study revealed that these leaders act as intermediaries between

communities and government authorities, promoting peaceful coexistence. He concluded that collaboration between traditional and formal institutions enhances conflict management and reduces bureaucratic delays in resolving disputes.

Babalola (2013) examined how traditional rulers contribute to the resolution of land-related conflicts in various Nigerian communities. Using qualitative interviews with chiefs and community leaders, the study found that traditional institutions remain the first point of call in land conflicts because of their accessibility, cultural legitimacy, and understanding of local customs. However, the findings revealed that lack of legal backing and political interference limit their effectiveness. The study concluded that integrating traditional institutions into formal conflict resolution frameworks would enhance sustainable peace and justice in rural communities.

Similarly, Olaoba's (2002) explored the traditional Yoruba conflict resolution system with emphasis on land-related disputes. The study revealed that councils of elders, family heads, and kings served as effective mediators, using dialogue, oath-taking, and compensation mechanisms. The findings highlighted that decisions made under customary systems were often more accepted and enduring than those from statutory courts. The author concluded that traditional institutions offer context-specific and socially binding solutions to land disputes.

Albert (2001) examined the protracted communal land conflict between the Ife and Modakeke communities in Osun State. His study emphasized the mediatory role of traditional rulers, particularly the Ooni of Ife, in restoring dialogue and peace. Although external interventions sometimes weakened their authority, Albert concluded that traditional leaders remain crucial peace brokers whose legitimacy and cultural authority are essential for long-term reconciliation.

Abubakar's (2019) study investigated the roles played by the Emirate Council in mediating land disputes. Using interviews with district heads, village heads, and litigants, the study found that traditional leaders rely on Islamic and customary principles to settle disputes. The system emphasizes reconciliation, restitution, and community cohesion. The study concluded that traditional mediation provides culturally sensitive solutions that are quicker and less adversarial than formal court processes.

Ikejiani-Clark (2007) analyzed the function of Igbo traditional institutions such as councils of elders, age grades, and titled men in resolving boundary and inheritance conflicts. Findings showed that these structures have maintained communal peace through moral persuasion, consensus, and sanctions. However, colonial and postcolonial administrative changes weakened their influence. The study concluded that re-empowering traditional authorities would enhance justice delivery in rural land disputes.

Otite (1999) discussed the sociocultural mechanisms of conflict management across Nigerian ethnic groups, emphasizing that land disputes are best resolved through locally grounded systems. He found that traditional rulers promote reconciliation by invoking community norms, rituals, and public hearings that ensure social accountability. The study concluded that while formal institutions focus on legality, traditional systems prioritize social harmony and restitution, making them effective in land dispute resolution.

Traditional Political Institutions (TPIs) have historically played a central role in maintaining social order, regulating access to land, and resolving disputes within African, Asian, and other indigenous communities. Rooted in customary law and cultural authority, these institutions—comprising chiefs, emirs, elders, and community councils—serve as custodians of local norms and mediators in conflicts over land ownership and use. However, despite their enduring relevance, TPIs face increasing challenges in performing these roles effectively in contemporary societies. The

pressures of modernization, urbanization, political interference, and the expansion of statutory land administration systems have significantly undermined their authority and efficiency.

Ubink (2008) examined the role of chiefs and customary authorities in Ghana's land administration and dispute resolution. The study found that traditional political institutions face declining legitimacy due to urbanization and increasing monetization of land transactions. Chiefs were often accused of corruption and favoritism in allocating land, undermining their neutrality in resolving disputes. The conclusion emphasized that lack of accountability, political interference, and competition from statutory institutions erode the authority and trust once enjoyed by traditional institutions.

Lund's (2002) research in Niger and Burkina Faso revealed that traditional authorities are challenged by overlapping jurisdictions between customary and formal legal systems. Findings indicated that ambiguity over land ownership and competing claims of authority create confusion and weaken enforcement of traditional rulings. The study concluded that the duality of land tenure systems undermines institutional coherence, leaving traditional leaders vulnerable to losing control over local land governance.

Babalola's (2013) findings showed that traditional rulers in Nigeria struggle with political manipulation, lack of formal legal backing, and generational disconnect. The study observed that youth and educated elites increasingly prefer formal judicial systems, perceiving them as more credible. The conclusion drawn was that the absence of legal recognition and standardized procedures reduces the enforceability of traditional rulings, while political interference further compromises their impartiality.

Knight (2010) investigated the interface between customary and statutory tenure systems. He found that in countries where traditional political institutions are not formally recognized, their authority in dispute resolution is diminished. Communities often disregard traditional decisions due to lack of legal enforceability. Knight concluded that the marginalization of customary institutions within national land laws limits their ability to provide lasting resolutions to land disputes.

Ayee (2007) Explored challenges faced by traditional leaders in integrating with modern governance systems. The study found that TPLs lack financial resources, training, and administrative support to effectively manage land conflicts. Findings also revealed generational shifts and modernization as factors weakening the respect once accorded to traditional rulers. Ayee concluded that strengthening their roles through legal reforms and institutional capacity building is necessary for more effective land dispute resolution.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the new institution theory popularly known as governance theory. It is meant to complement the rational conflict theory in understanding the roles of traditional political institutions in the resolution of land related disputes in Kontagora emirate. One of the advocates of the new institution theory is North (2005). According to him, institutions encompass the rules of the game of a society which include formal rules (statute law, common law, regulations), informal constraints (norms of behaviour, conventions and self-imposed codes of conduct), and the ways in which they are enforced.

Institutional theory, as a framework for understanding organizations, emphasizes the importance of institutions, which comprise regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements. These elements, in conjunction with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning

to social life (Scott, [1998](#)). Institutions play a dual role by offering guidelines and resources to enable specific actions while also imposing constraints to prohibit others (Scott, [2008](#)). They are essentially the rules of the game in society, shaping human interactions in political, social, and economic contexts. The new institutionalism emphasizes not only the adoption of formal rules but the integration of informal rules as determinants of social and political interactions.

The new institutionalists focus on why and how institutions evolve, the process of institutional reproduction and more importantly that of institutionalisation (Micheal J. Gorges, 1999:2). Institutionalisation is seen as a process in which social processes, obligations, or actualities takes a rulelike status in social thought and action (Meyer and Rower, 1977:341). In institutionalised organisations, practices and structures are taken for granted; they are not questioned or compared with alternatives (Powell, 1991: 1994).

Based on the conviction that conflicts are inevitable in human life, human societies therefore ought to be governed by set of entrenched rules to regulate human life and resolve conflicts. On this account, institutions are regarded generally as the embodiments of rules and regulations that set the standards for human interactions necessary for the peaceful resolution of conflicts for peace, stability and prosperity of human societies. The most striking strength of the new institutional theory is its recognition of informal rules such as norms, conventions, customs and practices as guide for human behavior. To this end, this theory fits perfectly in understanding the roles and constraints of traditional political institutions in the resolution of land related disputes in the study area.

Research Methodology: Qualitative Approach

This study adopts qualitative approach in the conduct of the research. Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research. In the case of this study, which focuses on the role of the traditional political institutions in conflict resolution, the unit of analysis constitutes the Kontagora Emirate and the communities under its influence. The rationale behind the choice of qualitative approach is born out of the utility of the approach in understanding and analysing concepts, opinions and experiences in relation to the phenomenon investigated. In this case, the study of the role of traditional political institutions in conflict resolution in Kontagora Emirate can best be situated within the qualitative tradition, as it afforded the researcher the opportunity to interrogate concepts, opinions and experiences of the major stakeholders that include members of the traditional political institutions at various levels in Kontagora Emirate of Niger state.

Research Design: Case Study

The case study design has evolved over the past few years and developed into a valuable quality research with distinctive benefits of depth for generalization. As the name suggests, it is used for studying and explaining an organization or an entity. This type of research design is used within a number of areas like education, social sciences, and other disciplines in humanities. This research thus adopted a case study design, which provided in-depth analysis of the relationship between the traditional political institutions and conflict resolution, particularly land related disputes in Kontagora Emirate of Niger State. It examined the contributions of Kontagora Emirate Council in the resolution conflicts over time.

Sample of the Study

In this case, the critical stakeholders of the research were identified and interviewed. These included the representative of Emir of Kontagora (Sarkin Sudan), all levels of traditional rulers in

the hierarchy of the traditional institutions (Ward Heads, Village Heads and District Heads) and other prominent traditional title holders that are central to the administration of the Emirate. The title holders included the Secretary to the Emirate Council, Bunun Kontagora, Sarkin Gobir, Magayakin Kontagora, Kofar Sarkin Sudan, Makaman Kontagora and Zagin Sarkin Sudan. In addition to these categories of respondents, six District Heads, one each from the Six Districts in the Emirate were interviewed. Others are the Village Heads, one each from the six Districts. The officials of the Nigeria Police and the Nigeria Security, Civil Defence Corps and Vigilante official. (Table 1)

Table 1 List of Respondents for IDIs showing the Categories and the number of People

S/No	Category	No. of Participant
1.	Emirate Officials	02
2.	Traditional Title Holders	05
3.	District Heads	06
4.	Village Heads	06
5.	Conventional Security Personnel	03
6.	Vigilante	02
7.	Experts	01

Instruments of Data Collection

In the conduct of this research, the study employed the use of diverse data collection techniques. As a qualitative research, the study adopted qualitative techniques of data collection. These techniques guide the researchers to generate both primary and secondary data that are qualitative in nature. While the secondary instruments will be generated from textbooks, journals, memoir and autobiographies, official speeches, the primary instruments used in the collection of qualitative data for this study is In-depth Interviews (IDIs). The instrument was developed, validated and finalized with the help of experts, before their application in the field. The participants for the study were purposively selected. The researcher targeted productive members of the communities, mainly men, as the subject of land disputes and the involvement traditional authority have been largely the affairs of men in traditional societies of Northern Nigeria.

Analysis of Empirical Data

As indicated in the background of the study, empirical data was generated on the roles of the traditional political institutions in the resolution of land disputes in Kontagora emirate. The Interview Guide interrogated the major issues that relate to the import of traditional political institutions, particularly the different layers of traditional authority in the determination and resolution of disputes related to land in the study area. This section thus interprets the empirical data generated from the field under relevant subheadings, as coded in the transcribed interview data.

Maintenance of Peace and Stability

From inception, in the pre-colonial Africa, communities were governed by traditional authorities. In the pre-colonial Northern Nigeria, traditional institutions have been central in the maintenance of peace and stability through administration of justice, which created order for peaceful co-existence. Even after colonial conquest, the colonialists relied largely and extensively on the existing traditional institutions for the governance and administration of the conquered territories. The roles of traditional political institutions in the maintenance of peace and stability

have been historically and culturally sanctioned. Thus the traditional institutions have been playing a paramount role in maintenance of peace and stability as emphasized by a respondent in the following words: "Our roles are numerous and we take them seriously. The traditional institutions bear primary responsibility for maintaining peace and stability. We work constantly to resolve conflicts out of court, seeking win-win solutions through mediation, reconciliation, and dialogue. People travel great distances to seek our intervention, particularly on land matters, which are central to the maintenance of peace and stability in local communities" (R1).

In addition a respondent remarked that "traditional political institutions are vital in ensuring justice and peaceful coexistence. For example, in cases of land inheritance or sales, traditional leaders intervene to prevent exploitation and uphold fairness" (R4). Similarly, an informant added that: "the primary role of traditional political institutions is to mediate conflicts and deliver fair judgments without necessarily court involvement, thereby preserving community relationships" (R3).

Custodians of land

The traditional institutions are also regarded as the custodians of land in their domains. Empirical data from interviews suggest that control of land and symbolic authority over land rests on the traditional rulers. Indeed, the symbol of authority of the traditional authorities, particularly in Northern Nigeria is the expanse of land controlled by a ruler. Therefore all cases of land disputes are initially referred to him for determination and settlement as deemed, appropriate. The institutional memory of the status of land ownership and transfers has been traditionally in the custody of the traditional institutions. One of the respondents revealed that:

We serve as custodians of all natural resources, including land and mineral rights. Our responsibilities include land allocation and usage permissions. Additionally, we resolve disputes through arbitration and reconciliation processes. We hear all parties involved and settle most cases locally, with only rare exceptions going to court. Even then, courts often allow us to handle cases through traditional mediation, that is, to resolve issue out of court (R2).

This viewpoint resonates across respondents who reiterated the kind of respect earned by traditional institutions on matters of land ownership. The different levels of traditional authority reflects the extent of delegation of powers and authority over communities, whose most important aspect of livelihood has been the land resources. Most local communities are traditionally governed by people, clans or families that founded the communities. They therefore remain the custodians of the land they founded and determined the rules that govern ownership, transfer and loss of land resources. The traditional institutions are also in the best position to determine the better framework for the resolution of land related disputes. The traditional political institutions are literally the custodians of land in their space of authority and influence.

Traditional Rulers as Recipients of Complaints on Land Matters

This is also another sub-theme that featured in the empirical data generated from the field. From the responses of the key stakeholders interviewed, it became obvious that most people prefer to submit their complaints or grievances on land matters to the traditional authorities closer to them. Most complaints on land matters are reported first to the traditional authorities before escalating it to the formal authorities such as the police and courts. The traditional rulers therefore regularly receive complaints from the populace. This viewpoint is stressed by the following empirical opinion:

We usually receive complaints from masses on land disputes among themselves or disputes that involve common man complaining about traditional ruler. This may start with the ward head to the village head to district head and finally to the Emir. Some may take the case to the court when they are not satisfied with our decisions (R5).

The hierarchy of traditional authority reflects the appeal system that exists for the people to explore in the determination and resolution of land disputes among themselves or even against a traditional ruler. This suggests that the people are well aware of the institutional capacity of traditional rulers on land matters. Most cases related to land are first referred to traditional rulers before contacting conventional dispute resolution agencies. There are even instances where disputants are referred back to the traditional authorities for mediation and reconciliation by the police and the courts.

Collaboration

Since the colonial conquest of territories in Africa, particularly in Northern Nigeria, the traditional institutions lost absolute power of control over their territories. Their involvement in the Native Authority system, however made them retain considerable influence over the people. To this end, they were treated as collaborators of the colonialists in the governance and administration of their territories. This also continued even after independence. Subsequent post-independence governments both civilian and military treated the traditional authorities as important institutions of great influence on the people. As such, government at various levels collaborates with the institution for the smooth administration of the country. This is the context within which traditional institutions are conceived as collaborators of government in governance, particularly on matters of land disputes. This standpoint has been highlighted by respondents in explaining the roles of traditional political institutions in the resolution of land disputes. One of the respondents argued:

As traditional leaders we work closely with political leaders on issues that affect our people, we consult each other to resolve issues affecting our communities. They refer cases to us, they listen to us, indeed there is mutual understanding between the political leaders and traditional rulers, including formal security agencies in the collective efforts to respond to the challenges of conflicts and disputes in our communities (R20).

The collaborative roles of the traditional political institutions have been instrumental to the peaceful resolution of complex conflicts for harmony, peaceful co-existence and stability of the society. Because the bulk of the population resides in the rural areas, the traditional political institutions are closer to the people through their different layers of authority that ensure minor disputes at community level are resolved traditionally and peacefully to avoid escalation of dangerous magnitude.

Advisory Role

As from the perceived and concrete roles of the traditional political institutions in the resolution of conflicts, particularly land related disputes, data from the field suggests that traditional political institutions perform the essential advisory role to the formal governmental authorities. Although, the institution of traditional authority is limited in terms of concrete governmental powers to facilitate governance in their domains, they are often relied on for useful and meaningful advice in the governance process by the constituted authority. This is a grandchild node that emerged from the empirical data analysed. A respondent retorted thus:

We cannot ask anybody to obey what we have said or done, we only offer advice, provide solutions and make judgments and those who feel that they are not satisfied with what we have done or said they can move their case to court or any other level of formal authority beyond our symbolic authority (R13).

To strengthen the advisory roles of the traditional political institutions, they are constituted into formally recognized platform such as the Emirate Council and District Council. Their roles have been to advise the government on matters of great concern to their communities. The traditional political institutions are also constituted at the state level as Council of Chiefs under the Ministry for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs. The institution is also represented at the Local Government and State Security Committees. Their inclusion into the security architecture is to extract useful advice that could be of significant value for any decision on security and stability of communities in the society.

Acceptance and respect for Traditional Institutions

Closely related to the issue of the advisory roles of the traditional political institutions is the high rate of acceptance and respect enjoyed by traditional rulers. Both the issue of collaboration and the advisory roles of the traditional political institutions are borne out of the high rate of acceptance and tremendous respect enjoyed from the public by the institution. As the custodians of the traditions, customs, practices, values and norms of communities, the traditional rulers are highly respected and accepted not only as symbolic authority but as a significant source of authority for conflict resolution. This viewpoint is corroborated by the empirical data, as a respondent argued that:

The acceptance rate is 100%! His Royal Highness is an exceptional conciliator. Although, conflict management has been in existence even before his reign, but he has wonderfully elevated our conflict resolution processes. Community members consistently prefer bringing disputes here rather than to police stations or courts (R1).

Additionally, an informant stated that “We face no challenges in this regard. The community consistently respects our rulings and seeks our mediation. They hold traditional institutions in high esteem and voluntarily bring disputes to us” R2. Indeed, a respondent further revealed “the people of Kontagora under Sarkin Sudan's rule consistently demonstrate gratitude and support for how the council maintains peace, harmony, and addresses their concerns. They show us tremendous respect as well” R3. People's respect for traditional institutions has been high as the argued by a respondent thus:

It may further interest you to note that people have so much respect on the traditional political institution, as the institution has very good strategies of handling these matters because we settle disputes using reconciliation approaches and it last longer. For instance; this dispute happened in 2018 but this position remained valid till now (R11).

Considering the above, an informant added that “Absolutely! People appreciate that district heads are now more accessible. Before, they could not be easily approached. However, now they bring complaints directly. Some of them even visit just to greet us” R4. Another respondent further states that “Actually, most people prefer taking their matters to the traditional institutions than to take their cases to the police or court. This is largely because traditional institutions prefer

reconciliation with all sense of justice in it” R5. In addition “Yes, we really enjoyed a lot of respects and acceptance from people both indigenes and settlers, no doubt on this” (R6).

Layers of Authority and Influence of Traditional Political Institutions in Kontagora Emirate

The layers of authority and influence of traditional political institutions in Kontagora Emirate is another area that reflects the deep seated roles of the traditional authority in the administration of justice, particularly in matters of resolving land related disputes. The layers of authority signify the provision for appeal of cases from the lower to the higher level of traditional authority. To understand the complexity of the traditional authority system in Kontagora emirate, a respondent described the system in the following words:

His Royal Highness the Sarkin Sudan stands at the apex, followed by the Madawakin Kontagora (who oversees affairs in the Emir’s absence), then the Galadima, Waziri, Magajin, Kofa, and Marafa. For local administration, we have Ward Heads, Village Heads and District Heads who consult the Emirate Council on complex matters brought before them (R1).

This is further clarified as follows:

His Royal Highness the Emir of Kontagora stands at the apex with his council members. Below this are district heads and village heads - my district currently has five major village heads, each overseeing between 18-20 ward heads depending on the area (R2).

The roles of the traditional authority in Kontagora are better explained in the context of the layers of authority and the multiplicity roles assigned to various officials. It is argued that “The structure includes the ward head (*mai unguwa*), district head (*dagaci*), village head (*hakimi*), and the Emir” R4. Considering the above, a respondent added that:

In this land, we have a hierarchy; first we have the Sarkin Sudan Alh. Muhammadu Barau Muazu who is the Emir of Kontagora, he the seventh Sarkin Sudan of the Usmaniya density which comprises Sakkwato, Gwandu, and some other Emirates. The land of Kontagora is ruled by Atikawa clan. After the Emir we have district heads and village heads, followed by ward heads, respectively (R5).

The internal structural organization of the traditional system of governance provides the mechanisms that help maintain peace and understanding among the communities. This is further clarified thus:

This is because cases usually go through a proper traditional structure: from the Ward Head, to the Village Head, to the District Head. Only if the issue remains unresolved, it is then forwarded to the Emirate Council, and from there, the court becomes the last resort. It is rare for a case to pass through all four stages without being resolved. In fact, even when parties go directly to the court or police, those authorities often refer the cases back to the Emirate council for resolution especially in land disputes and other local matters (R.8).

According to many respondents, exhausting the traditional options for disputes resolution is very hard. Most members of the community prefer to go through the layers of traditional authority for the resolution of their disputes. The courts are the hard options for dispute resolution.

People's Confidence on the Traditional Political Institutions on Matters of Land Disputes in Kontagora Emirate

A sub-theme was also developed on the level of Confidence of the people in the traditional political institutions on matters of land disputes in Kontagora Emirate. This subtheme integrates the views of respondents on why people often refer their cases to traditional political institutions for their intervention and mediation as, appropriate. Many respondents submitted that the confidence level of the people on the institution is very high. Most people are confident that disputes between and among them can best be resolved by the traditional rulers, who are vast in the knowledge of their traditions, practices, customs and indeed the history of their families and communities and what belongs to them. This opinion is expressed by a respondent in the following words:

When such issues are brought before the Emirate Council, the council will carry out investigations to determine the original ownership. Through historical inquiry, they often identify the initial cultivator. If questioned, the person may testify that the land was inherited from their ancestors. In some cases, the user may even write a false letter stating that he purchased the land from someone who is now deceased. Before you know it, a crisis arises. These are a few of the cases I can recall (R1).

In spite of the complications associated with conflicts among the locals, particularly in relation to land disputes, the confidence in the traditional institutions can be explained in the context of their commitment to informal and customarily sanctioned procedural process in the investigation of cases and the analysis of information obtained from a variety of sources regarding cases brought before them. A respondent affirms that:

"We resolve land conflicts by contacting the neighbors around the disputed land. We ask them who the rightful owner is, and they usually identify the original owner. From there, the problem is resolved" R8. Without a doubt, the interview added that "They have complete confidence in us since we are the original allocators of these lands. For undocumented cases, we summon ward heads, village heads, and witnesses to establish rightful ownership through collective testimony" R2.

Therefore, "People referred their cases to us because they are more confident in the traditional rulers than any formal authority. These cases were mostly reported during rainy season" (R5). In particular, another informant put it that

People are very confident in the traditional political institutions, impact where ever you see land disputes whether in court or with the police it most reached there through us. In situation where we could not finish a case our level we send to Court and/or police for further investigation (R6).

Similarly, the strict adherence to the guiding principles of conflict resolution by the traditional authorities contributes immensely to the increased levels of confidence on them with regards to conflict resolution.

Strategies of Traditional Political Institutions in Conflict Resolution

The increased levels of confidence on the traditional authorities, particularly on matters of conflict resolution may be the result of the strategies adopted by the institution in resolving conflicts in their domains. The relatively acceptable outcomes of conflict resolution by the traditional

authorities could be informed by the appropriate strategies adopted, which deliver authoritative decisions that are found to be highly respected and obeyed. Strategies adopted by the traditional political institutions in the resolution of conflict, therefore constitutes another sub-theme that explained the roles of traditional authorities in conflict resolution in Kontagora emirate. A respondent submitted thus:

Our approach begins with thorough consultation and investigation. We then facilitate negotiations between parties, emphasizing the costs of prolonged or escalated conflicts, and believe me we always produce lasting agreements with no residual disagreements. We also make documentation on case and the agreements (R1).

In addition to the above assertion, many respondents described the transparent steps taken by the traditional authorities as strategies for effective determination and resolution of conflicts in their various areas of control and influence. One of the traditional rulers opined that:

We employ a thorough process: First, we summon all involved parties and require them to bring witnesses. We also consult their respective village heads and their councils - elders with deep community knowledge. After hearing all perspectives, we mediate for balanced solutions and make final rulings (R2).

Moreover, the strategies are also reflective of the structure of the traditional political institutions in Kontagora emirate. The near complex structure shows the hierarchy of the traditional political institutions, where instructions are given top to bottom and obedience is expected bottom-up. A prominent traditional ruler explained thus:

Our structure includes the Ward Head (Mai Unguwa), District Head (Dagaci), Village Head (Hakimi), and the Emir. We also have council members who contribute to decision-making according to their specific responsibilities. For instance, while we have Ward Heads, some matters come directly to me. If a case requires Ward Head attention, I guide the process up through the hierarchy to the Emir when necessary. The palace title holders also have systems for resolving issues that do not require escalation to the village head (R3).

Other stakeholders within the traditional political institutions, however emphasized on the virtue of wisdom as the quality required of traditional rulers to effectively resolve conflicts brought before them. One of the stakeholders in the study area clarified on this as follows:

Wisdom is key to successful conflict resolution. It is not a taught strategy. It is wisdom passed down and guided by God. To rule and resolve disputes is something that you have inherited and grown up to see your predecessors doing even before you become the ruler. So, when you emerge as the leader, God gives you the wisdom to settle things the way they should be. As far as you are not ambitious or corrupt, divine wisdom helps in delivering justice. Its not a strategy, just wisdom from God R4.

Similarly, an informant added that "They trust our judgments and rarely complain because we prioritize fairness. We do not joke with their affairs and they also do not joke with the authority" R4. A respondent also added that:-

Most land disputes stops at the ward or district head level, though serious cases may reach the Emir. Yes, it's a respectful place of authority, and people will not joke with

the authority or the leader to joke with people's problems. Therefore, people respect the council's authority, and leaders take disputes seriously R11.

To further elaborate on the strategies that are commonly adopted by traditional leaders in conflict resolution, a respondent emphasized on fair hearing and transparency in the process of resolving conflicts between and among parties.

Effectiveness of Strategies for resolution of Land Disputes in Kontagora Emirate

The effectiveness of the strategies for conflict resolution by traditional rulers is another subtheme developed from the main theme of the roles of traditional political institutions in conflict resolution. Having interrogated the strategies adopted in conflict resolution, this subtheme deals essentially on the effectiveness of the strategies adopted. From the empirical data, a respondent argued on how effective the strategies of conflict resolution, in particular the use of historical memory for resolving conflicts. He argued thus :

The cases for land are mostly on family ownership rather than individual claims. Ideally, village elders maintain historical knowledge of land ownership that helps verify claims. People prefer our mediation because they perceive courts to be for the highest bidders, whereas we focus on fair resolution without corruption or bribery R2.

In addition, a respondent reported that invoking religious precepts in providing witnesses and testimonies helped a lot as a strategy to obtain truthful witnesses and historical accounts regarding disputes over land.

Fundamentally, all council decisions follow Allah's guidance and Prophet Muhammad's (SAAW) teachings. We emphasize that all testimonies must be truthful, with the fear of God and Judgment Day. Unless someone lacks proper faith (iman), false witnesses are very unlikely. From this foundation, the council hears both sides thoroughly before rendering judgment R3.

Moreover, another interviewee said that "Yes, we rely on elders who have more life experience. Their insights are invaluable in determining guilt or innocence" R4. Besides, a participant also revealed that "They are very effective indeed, because whenever we take position people do agreed with it and they also thank us on how we listened to them, the way we do justice. Sometime we even involved our legal advisor" R5. Accordingly, a respondent added that the introduction of documents to be signed by traditional ruler and local government representative has helped checked the excesses of unscrupulous land agents. He argued thus:

They are very effective indeed, because the land disputes have been reduced to the barest minimum. Before the introduction of this single document by the Emirate and local government, you may find that four distinct people holding four different papers for a single land but the introduction of this method reduced the problem (R6).

In order to make conflict resolution smooth, particularly the strategies adopted by the traditional political institutions in Kontagora emirate, the issue of lease helps to make mediation and resolution of land disputes very effective.

Relationship between the Traditional Political Institutions and Formal Security and Judicial Institutions in Matters of Land Disputes in Kontagora Emirate

The Relationship between the traditional political institutions and formal security and judicial institutions in conflict resolution, particularly in matters of land disputes in Kontagora Emirate constitute a subtheme that evolved from the empirical data. Many respondents suggest that the relationship is smooth and cordial. A respondent noted that

“Our relationship is highly consultative. We hold regular meetings to assess our collaboration. These institutions frequently refer civil cases to us and value our feedback, creating an effective network for conflict resolution” R1.

Similarly, a traditional ruler described the relationship as one that has been very mutual and cooperative. He argues that “Yes, highly recognized, because they rely on our intervention. Their success depends on the synergy with traditional institutions. They cannot really succeed without good relationship with traditional institutions” R9. Another stakeholder added that “We collaborate closely on relevant matters. While we are the land custodians, formal authorities grant ownership rights (though they do not handle allocations). Our roles are complementary” R2. In addition “We have a strong relationship. Serious criminal cases go to the police, while they refer minor disputes back to us” R4.

Admittedly, a respondent argued that “Our collaboration is exceptionally cordial, efficient, and effective. Security agencies often seek our counsel, and we have dedicated council members who handle matters with fairness and commitment” R11.

Empirical data from diverse sources suggest that relations between the traditional institution and formal authorities have been reciprocal and symbiotic. It has been stressed by multiple respondents how they support one another in conflict resolution and on security issues. A respondent argues thus:

We have a symbiotic relationship. Courts often refer cases back to us or allow out-of-court mediation. Many judges come from royal families themselves and understand traditional jurisdictions. They readily acknowledge cases better handled through traditional systems (R13).

Stressing the support system that enjoyed by the traditional authorities, a respondent noted that “Frankly, people trust us more than formal authorities. Political officials come and go, while we remain constant. Most importantly, we prioritize truth and justice over political expediency - unlike some politicians who make false promises” R14. Another stakeholder reported that in terms of smooth handling of disputes, a respondent argued that the traditional institutions are faster than the police. He argued that “Generally yes, because at a police station you might visit 3-4 times without resolution, whereas the council can often settle a case within a day or two, compared to months in court. Therefore, they strongly prefer bringing cases to us” R3. On a general note, all of the agencies and indeed the traditional authority need one another to achieve the goal of conflict resolution. The nature of interdependence is to be explained in terms of the mutual respect and support that exist among them Both the formal and informal institutions cooperate between and among themselves in the pursuit of the goal of peaceful resolution of conflicts in the study area.

Thus the findings of this study is consistent with studies by Bruce and Migot-Adholla (1994), Toulmin and Quan (2000), Ubink (2008), and Chimhowu and Woodhouse (2006), which ascertained that traditional political institutions are not peripheral but remain the primary arena

for resolving land disputes, particularly in rural settings where formal courts are distant, costly, and procedurally complex. The preference of community members for traditional institutions in Kontagora is evident in the high rate of referrals, confidence, and acceptance, which corroborates Lund's (2002) argument that authority over land is socially constructed and sustained through legitimacy rather than statutory power alone. The reliance on oral testimonies, historical memory, community witnesses, and reconciliation-oriented outcomes aligns strongly with Zartman's (2000) characterization of African traditional dispute resolution systems as restorative rather than punitive.

Similarly, the study corroborates Nigerian empirical works by Alao (2014), Babalola (2013), Abubakar (2019), and Olaoba (2002), which highlight the effectiveness of traditional rulers in resolving inheritance, boundary, and land sale disputes through mediation and arbitration. In Kontagora Emirate, traditional institutions are deeply embedded in the social fabric, enabling them to draw on genealogical knowledge, moral authority, and religious legitimacy—particularly Islamic principles—to deliver decisions that are widely accepted and rarely appealed. This reinforces Nnoli's (2003) and Otite's (1999) assertion that traditional institutions play a preventive and stabilizing role by addressing land conflicts before they escalate into broader communal crises.

Beyond corroboration, the study also extends the literature in important ways. Unlike many studies that emphasize the marginalization or erosion of traditional authority due to colonial and post-colonial state interventions (Okoth-Ogendo, 1999; Ikejiani-Clark, 2007), the Kontagora case reveals a highly functional and adaptive traditional system that operates through clearly defined layers of authority—from ward heads to the Emirate Council—allowing for internal appeals, checks, and balances. This layered structure enhances procedural fairness and accessibility, making it difficult for disputes to bypass customary mechanisms unresolved. While Knight (2010) and Ayee (2007) advocate hybrid governance models, the Kontagora case shows that such hybridity is already operational in practice rather than merely aspirational.

A particularly distinctive contribution of this study lies in its detailed exposition of institutionalized collaboration between traditional authorities, formal security agencies, courts, and informal vigilante groups. While existing literature acknowledges collaboration in abstract terms (Adebayo, 1992; Ayee, 2007), the Kontagora evidence demonstrates an unusually high level of reciprocal referral, mutual recognition, and operational synergy. Courts and police frequently defer land matters to the Emirate Council, while traditional institutions escalate cases involving criminality or violence to formal authorities.

This bidirectional flow of authority challenges dominant narratives that portray customary and statutory systems as competing or antagonistic. Instead, the study suggests a complementary governance ecosystem, in which each institution operates within recognized boundaries.

Another unique aspect of the Kontagora case is the formal regulation of land transactions through standardized documentation jointly recognized by the Emirate and local government. This local innovation directly addresses a gap frequently identified in the literature—namely, the vulnerability of customary systems to land commodification and fraudulent sales (Chimhowu & Woodhouse, 2006; Deininger, 2003). By harmonizing customary authority with bureaucratic oversight, the Kontagora Emirate has reduced multiple sales and overlapping claims, demonstrating a pragmatic adaptation rarely documented in existing studies.

Furthermore, this study highlights the strategic role of informal security outfits (vigilantes) as extensions of traditional authority rather than autonomous actors. While vigilante groups are often

portrayed in the literature as problematic or prone to abuse, the Kontagora case shows them functioning under the supervision of traditional rulers, primarily as enforcement and intelligence-gathering mechanisms. This arrangement enhances compliance with traditional rulings and prevents violent escalation, offering a nuanced perspective that complicates generalized critiques of informal security actors.

Overall, the study confirms the core arguments of the empirical literature regarding the relevance, legitimacy, and effectiveness of traditional political institutions in land dispute resolution. However, it also demonstrates that the outcomes of customary land governance are highly context-dependent. The Kontagora Emirate stands out not merely because traditional institutions exist, but because they are trusted, adaptive, well-structured, and deeply integrated with formal governance and security systems. This uniqueness suggests that the problem in many African contexts is not the persistence of customary institutions per se, but the absence of enabling conditions—such as trust, collaboration, and institutional clarity—that allow them to function effectively.

In this regard, the contribute original empirical insight by showing that traditional political institutions, when supported by social legitimacy and constructive state engagement, can serve as robust, efficient, and socially embedded mechanisms for sustainable land dispute resolution in plural legal systems.

Conclusion

This study concludes that traditional political institutions remain indispensable in the resolution of land disputes and the maintenance of peace and social order in Kontagora Emirate. The analysis demonstrates that the institution is not merely residual or symbolic but constitute the primary and most trusted arena for managing land-related conflicts. Through their roles as custodians of land, receivers of complaints, mediators, and arbiters, traditional authorities provide accessible, culturally legitimate, and socially accepted mechanisms for dispute resolution. Their reliance on reconciliation, historical memory, community testimony, and moral authority ensures outcomes that are widely perceived as fair and just, thereby reducing the likelihood of prolonged disputes or violent escalation.

The study further establishes that the effectiveness of traditional political institutions is reinforced by their layered structure of authority, which allows disputes to be resolved at the lowest possible level while providing internal avenues for review and appeal. This hierarchical arrangement enhances accountability, procedural fairness, and confidence among disputants. Equally significant is the strong and complementary relationship between traditional institutions and formal authorities, including courts, security agencies, and local government. Rather than operating in isolation or competition, these institutions engage in reciprocal referrals and collaboration, creating a functional plural legal system that leverages the strengths of both customary and statutory frameworks.

Moreover, the findings highlight the adaptive capacity of traditional political institutions in responding to contemporary challenges in land governance. Innovations such as standardized land documentation jointly recognized by the Emirate and local government, as well as the supervised involvement of informal security outfits, demonstrate pragmatic efforts to curb fraudulent land transactions, enforce decisions, and prevent conflict escalation. These practices underscore the relevance of traditional institutions in a changing socio-economic context marked by population pressure, land commodification, and increased competition over land resources.

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