

Public Perception of the Effectiveness of Traditional Rulers in Mediating Land Disputes and Promoting Social Stability in Lagos State, Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This study examined public perception of the effectiveness of traditional rulers in mediating land disputes and promoting social stability in Lagos State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by persistent land-related disputes arising from competing claims over ownership, boundaries, inheritance, allocation and use, despite the continued involvement of traditional institutions in community-level dispute resolution. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The study population comprised approximately 12.5 million adult residents aged 18 years and above in Lagos State. In contrast, the final valid sample comprised 351 respondents drawn through a multistage sampling procedure covering all 20 Local Government Areas. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with five substantive items measuring respondents' perceptions of traditional rulers' effectiveness in mediating land disputes. The instrument underwent expert content validation and yielded a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .86. On the four-point response scale, a mean of 2.51 or above indicated agreement. Respondents generally perceived traditional rulers as effective in mediating land disputes and contributing to social stability, with a grand mean of 2.92. The strongest perceptions concerned reduced need for court intervention ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.98$) and prevention of escalation of land and boundary conflicts ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.96$). The study concludes that traditional rulers remain relevant complementary actors in land-dispute mediation and recommends stronger collaboration among traditional institutions, courts and land-administration agencies, alongside capacity building in mediation and contemporary land-governance procedures.

Keywords: traditional rulers, land disputes, conflict mediation, public perception, social stability, Lagos State

Introduction

Land is a critical social and economic resource, and disputes over ownership, boundaries, inheritance, allocation and use can undermine peaceful relations within communities. In Lagos State, rapid urbanisation, high land values, population growth, and competing claims to land have made land-related disputes an ongoing governance and peacebuilding concern. Land disputes are therefore not merely private disagreements; when poorly managed, they can have wider implications for community security, social relationships, and public confidence in dispute-resolution institutions.

Traditional institutions have historically provided locally accessible mechanisms for settling disputes through dialogue, negotiation, reconciliation and culturally recognised authority. Contemporary scholarship indicates that traditional institutions can complement formal state structures in resolving communal conflicts. Lamidi and Olaleye (2023) found a continuing complementary relationship between traditional institutions and formal institutions in intra-communal conflict resolution in Southwest Nigeria. Igbokwe-Ibeto and Ogbuagu (2021) similarly reported that traditional institutions retain influence and contribute to conflict prevention despite the erosion of their formal governmental powers. Bawa (2025) further found that traditional institutions contribute to peacebuilding through dialogue facilitation, information sharing, community vigilance and conflict mediation.

The literature on customary arbitration reinforces the relevance of traditional institutions to land disputes. Olorunfemi et al. (2021) demonstrated the continued use of customary arbitration in Nigerian land disputes and highlighted questions of finality, binding force, and enforceability when parties later seek formal judicial remedies. This distinction is especially important in Lagos State, where customary claims may intersect with statutory land administration and formal title documentation. Traditional mediation may therefore reduce hostility and facilitate settlement without necessarily possessing the legal authority to determine every question of statutory land title.

Social stability in this study refers to a community's capacity to manage disagreement without destructive escalation and to sustain confidence in accepted mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution. This conception aligns with the broader social-cohesion perspective, which emphasises trust, relationships, participation, and peaceful coexistence (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020). In this study, social stability is operationalised through perceived outcomes of land-dispute mediation: prevention of escalation, reduced need for court intervention, respect for mediated decisions, sustainability of settlements, and perceived effectiveness in resolving ownership disputes.

The continued relevance of traditional rulers therefore warrants empirical assessment from the perspective of members of the public who experience, observe or are affected by their interventions. This study examines public perception of the effectiveness of traditional rulers in mediating land disputes and promoting social stability in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the continued reliance on traditional rulers as community-level mediators, land disputes remain recurrent in Lagos State. Their persistence raises questions about how far traditional mediation produces durable outcomes and contributes to social stability. The coexistence of customary and formal land-governance systems intensifies the challenge. Traditional rulers may have cultural legitimacy, local knowledge, and access to disputing parties, yet they do not necessarily have the statutory authority to determine or enforce every land-related claim.

The central problem is therefore not simply whether traditional rulers mediate land disputes, but whether members of the public perceive such mediation as effective in preventing escalation, reducing dependence on litigation, encouraging respect for settlements and supporting peaceful coexistence. Existing studies have examined traditional institutions in broader conflict-management contexts, but a Lagos-specific assessment of land disputes and residents' perceptions of social-stability outcomes remains needed.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The study examined public perceptions of traditional rulers' effectiveness in mediating land disputes and promoting social stability in Lagos State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study assessed the extent to which respondents perceived traditional rulers as effective in resolving land ownership disputes, preventing escalation of land and boundary conflicts, securing respect for mediated decisions, reducing the need for court intervention, and facilitating sustainable settlements.

Research Question

To what extent do members of the public perceive traditional rulers as effective in mediating land disputes and promoting social stability in Lagos State, Nigeria?

Conceptual Review

Traditional Rulers and Land-Dispute Mediation

Traditional rulers are community-based authorities whose legitimacy derives largely from history, custom, social recognition, and their position within local institutions. Their dispute-resolution role

commonly involves hearing disputing parties, consulting elders or councils, facilitating dialogue, interpreting community norms and encouraging reconciliation. Contemporary scholarship suggests that this role has not disappeared with the development of formal state institutions; rather, traditional and formal mechanisms may operate in complementary ways, especially in intra-communal matters (Lamidi & Olaleye, 2023; Ogbunkwu, 2024).

In land disputes, traditional mediation may be particularly useful where disagreement concerns family land, customary boundaries, community expectations or relationships among residents. It can provide an accessible forum for negotiation before parties resort to litigation. However, customary mediation should not be equated with statutory adjudication. Where disputes involve registered titles, statutory land rights or enforceable legal remedies, formal institutions may remain necessary (Olorunfemi et al., 2021).

Social Stability

Social stability is conceptualised as a community's capacity to maintain peaceful interaction, manage disagreements through accepted institutions, and prevent disputes from escalating into persistent violence or social disruption. It does not imply the absence of disagreement; rather, it concerns social institutions' ability to manage disagreement in ways that preserve peaceful coexistence and institutional confidence. This interpretation aligns with the broader social-cohesion perspective, which emphasises trust, connectedness, participation, and sustainable peace (UNDP, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Structural-Functionalist Theory

The study is anchored in Structural-Functionalist Theory, associated with Talcott Parsons and further developed by Robert K. Merton. The theory views society as a system of interrelated structures that perform functions that contribute to social order, continuity, and adaptation (Merton, 1968; Parsons, 1951).

In this study, the traditional institution represents a social structure that performs conflict-management and social-integration functions. Traditional rulers may facilitate dialogue, interpret community norms, encourage compliance and repair relationships after disputes. The five indicators used in the study reflect these stabilising functions: resolving ownership disputes, preventing escalation, securing respect for decisions, reducing recourse to courts and facilitating sustainable settlements.

The framework is also useful for interpreting institutional limitations. Where a dispute persists because a traditional settlement cannot be legally enforced, or because the matter falls within the jurisdiction of formal land institutions, a gap may arise between the social function expected of the traditional institution and the formal authority available to perform that function. Structural-functionalism therefore supports a complementary rather than substitutional understanding of traditional and formal dispute-resolution institutions.

Empirical Review

Igbokwe-Ibeto and Ogbuagu (2021) examined the role of traditional institutions in curbing insecurity in Nigeria. They found that, despite diminished formal governmental powers, traditional institutions retain substantial influence and can contribute to security and conflict prevention. The study provides a broad national context for understanding the continuing relevance of traditional authority.

Olorunfemi et al. (2021), using doctrinal analysis, examined the efficacy of customary arbitration in settling land disputes in Nigeria. They found that customary arbitration remains relevant, while questions of recognition, finality and enforceability remain important where parties proceed to formal courts. The study directly illuminates the legal boundary between community mediation and formal adjudication.

Lamidi and Olaleye (2023) critically analysed the contemporary role of traditional institutions in intra-communal conflict resolution in Southwest Nigeria. Their findings indicate a complementary relationship between traditional institutions and formal state institutions, with traditional institutions retaining appreciable efficacy in intra-communal matters. The study's geographical focus on Southwest Nigeria makes it particularly relevant to the present research.

Utile and Tarnongo (2024) investigated traditional institutions and the management of communal conflicts in Gwer-East Local Government Area of Benue State. They found that traditional rulers remain relevant to communal conflict management but face institutional and practical constraints. Their structural-functionalist orientation is relevant to the present study's concern with the stabilising functions of traditional institutions.

Ogbunkwu (2024) examined government agencies and traditional institutions in peace and conflict resolution in Nigeria and argued that collaboration between state institutions and traditional institutions is necessary for effective conflict management. This supports the present study's emphasis on institutional complementarity.

Bawa (2025) examined the role of traditional institutions in peacebuilding and curbing insecurity in Borno State. The study found that traditional institutions contribute through dialogue facilitation, information sharing, community vigilance and conflict mediation and recommended their formal integration into relevant security and peacebuilding frameworks.

Taken together, the reviewed studies establish the continuing relevance of traditional institutions to conflict management and community stability. However, much of the literature addresses traditional institutions broadly or focuses on insecurity and communal conflicts outside Lagos State. Comparatively less survey-based evidence focuses specifically on how Lagos residents perceive traditional rulers' effectiveness in mediating land disputes and the social-stability outcomes associated with such mediation. This study addresses that contextual and measurement gap.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design because it sought to describe respondents' perceptions without manipulating any variable. The population comprised approximately 12.5 million adult residents aged 18 years and above in Lagos State. The final valid sample comprised 351 respondents.

A multistage sampling procedure was used to obtain geographical coverage across the 20 Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Lagos State. At the first stage, all 20 LGAs were treated as geographical clusters and retained in the study to ensure statewide representation. At the second stage, communities or wards within the LGAs were selected. At the third stage, eligible adult residents were recruited from the selected communities. Where household listings were available, households were systematically selected and one eligible adult respondent was selected from each participating household. In locations without usable household listings, respondents were recruited at designated community points. Accordingly, the final-stage procedure combined household-based probability selection with community-point recruitment where complete sampling frames were unavailable.

The achieved sample was distributed across all 20 LGAs, with most LGAs contributing 17 respondents and Ikorodu contributing 28 respondents. This distribution ensured that no LGA was excluded while allowing a larger allocation to Ikorodu within the achieved sample.

Table 1
Distribution of Respondents by Local Government Area

S/N	Local Government Area	Male	Female	Total
1	Agege	9	8	17
2	Ajeromi-Ifelodun	8	9	17
3	Alimosho	9	8	17
4	Amuwo-Odofin	8	9	17
5	Apapa	9	8	17
6	Badagry	8	9	17
7	Epe	9	8	17
8	Eti-Osa	8	9	17
9	Ibeju-Lekki	9	8	17
10	Ifako-Ijaiye	8	9	17
11	Ikeja	9	8	17
12	Ikorodu	14	14	28
13	Kosofe	9	8	17
14	Lagos Island	8	9	17
15	Lagos Mainland	9	8	17
16	Mushin	8	9	17
17	Ojo	9	8	17
18	Oshodi-Isolo	8	9	17
19	Shomolu	9	8	17
20	Surulere	8	9	17
	Total	174	177	351

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing five substantive items measuring perceived effectiveness of traditional rulers in land-dispute mediation. Responses were recorded on a four-point scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1).

The instrument was subjected to expert content validation by specialists in Peace Studies and Social Rehabilitation. Corrections relating to clarity, relevance and appropriateness were incorporated before administration. Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha yielded an overall coefficient of .86, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, mean scores and standard deviations. For interpretation, the four-point scale was divided into equal intervals: 1.00-1.75 = Strongly Disagree; 1.76-2.50 = Disagree; 2.51-3.25 = Agree; and 3.26-4.00 = Strongly Agree. Accordingly, a mean score of 2.51 or above indicated agreement.

Results

Research Question: To what extent do members of the public perceive traditional rulers as effective in mediating land disputes and promoting social stability in Lagos State, Nigeria?

Table 2

Public Perception of the Effectiveness of Traditional Rulers in Mediating Land Disputes (N = 351)

S/N	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Sum	M	SD	Decision
1	Traditional rulers are effective in resolving land ownership disputes.	112	105	80	54	977	2.78	1.06	Agree
2	Mediation by traditional rulers helps prevent escalation of land and boundary conflicts.	140	120	60	31	1071	3.05	0.96	Agree
3	Decisions made by traditional rulers in land disputes are respected by the parties involved.	105	98	95	53	957	2.73	1.05	Agree
4	Traditional mediation reduces the need for court intervention in land matters.	155	115	45	36	1091	3.11	0.98	Agree
5	Settlements facilitated by traditional rulers in land disputes are usually sustainable.	120	130	60	41	1031	2.94	0.99	Agree
	Grand mean						2.92	1.01	Agree

Note. Field survey data; analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 25.

The results indicate that respondents generally perceived traditional rulers as effective in mediating land disputes, with a grand mean of 2.92. The highest-rated item was that traditional mediation reduces the need for court intervention in land matters ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.98$), followed by the perception that mediation helps prevent escalation of land and boundary conflicts ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.96$).

The lowest-rated item concerned respect for decisions made by traditional rulers ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.05$), followed by perceived effectiveness in resolving land ownership disputes ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.06$). All five item means were at or above the 2.51 agreement threshold and were therefore interpreted as agreement.

Discussion of Findings

The study found that members of the public generally perceived traditional rulers as effective in mediating land disputes and contributing to social stability. The overall mean of 2.92 indicates a positive public assessment. This result should, however, be interpreted as perceived effectiveness rather than evidence that traditional mediation independently causes social stability.

The strongest result concerned reduction in the need for court intervention ($M = 3.11$). This suggests that respondents recognise the accessibility and practical value of community-based mediation. The finding is consistent with Lamidi and Olaleye (2023), who found that traditional institutions continue to complement formal institutions in resolving intra-communal conflicts, and with Ogbunkwu (2024), who emphasised collaboration between government agencies and traditional institutions.

Respondents also agreed that traditional mediation helps prevent escalation of land and boundary conflicts ($M = 3.05$). This supports the conflict-prevention function identified by Igbokwe-Ibeto and Ogbuagu (2021) and Bawa (2025). Traditional rulers may therefore be particularly valuable at early stages of disputes, when dialogue and local legitimacy can prevent disagreement from developing into more serious conflict.

The comparatively lower ratings for respect for traditional decisions ($M = 2.73$) and resolution of land ownership disputes ($M = 2.78$) reveal an important limitation. Traditional mediation may be socially legitimate without possessing the legal authority required to settle every land-title question. This interpretation is consistent with Olorunfemi et al. (2021), who identified legal issues surrounding the finality and enforceability of customary arbitration awards in Nigerian land disputes.

The findings therefore support a complementary, rather than substitutional, understanding of traditional and formal dispute-resolution institutions. Traditional rulers may provide culturally accessible mediation, relationship repair and early conflict prevention, while courts and land-administration institutions remain necessary for disputes involving statutory rights, formal titles and enforceable legal remedies.

Conclusion

The study concludes that traditional rulers remain relevant actors in mediating land disputes and promoting social stability in Lagos State. Respondents generally perceived them as effective, especially in reducing reliance on formal court intervention, preventing escalation of land and boundary conflicts and facilitating sustainable settlements. Nevertheless, the comparatively lower ratings for respect for decisions and resolution of land ownership disputes indicate that social legitimacy does not automatically translate into formal legal enforceability. Traditional mediation should therefore be understood as an important complementary mechanism within a broader dispute-resolution system, with its contribution likely to be strongest where traditional institutions work collaboratively with formal justice, land-administration and community-governance institutions.

Recommendations

Government should establish or strengthen coordination mechanisms linking traditional rulers with courts, alternative dispute-resolution centres and land-administration institutions, particularly for cases requiring enforceable agreements or statutory land documentation.

Traditional rulers should receive periodic capacity-building in mediation, negotiation, alternative dispute resolution and contemporary land-governance procedures so that community-level interventions are better aligned with formal requirements.

Public education should clarify the complementary roles and limits of customary mediation and formal adjudication, especially in disputes involving registered titles, statutory rights or enforcement questions. Traditional institutions should maintain transparent records of mediated settlements and referrals, subject to applicable legal and privacy requirements, to improve accountability and continuity.

Future studies should examine whether perceptions vary by age, length of residence, location within Lagos State, experience with land disputes and trust in traditional institutions, using inferential statistics where the research design supports such analysis.

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