

Traditional Administration and Land Dispute Resolution in Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

The diversity inherent in human nature, particularly in social and political contexts, creates a complex environment where attitudes and behaviours can be influenced and shaped in various ways, often leading to conflict. Peace and harmony maintenance is not an exclusive preserve of government and intergovernmental organisations. Non-state actors equally partake in ensuring peaceful co-existence among groups through multiple peace-building initiatives by traditional administration. This study focused on traditional administration and Land Disputes Resolution in Akwa Ibom State. To achieve this, one objective and hypothesis were raised. Related literature to the study was reviewed in three segments: conceptual review, theoretical framework, and empirical review. The study relied on the Integrated Theory of Peace, while the mixed research designs were adopted. 400 respondents were chosen using Taro Yamane's sample size determination technique. Data were analysed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient analysis at a 0.05 level of significance. Thus, it was concluded that traditional administration significantly influenced land dispute resolution in Akwa Ibom State. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that the Government of Akwa Ibom State should ensure that traditional rulers are properly trained on land survey and map reading to effectively discharge their duties on land dispute-related matters.

Keywords: Traditional administrators, inter-governmental organisations, conflict, community engagement, land disputes

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon that characterises all human societies. This is because wherever human beings are found living in a cultural setting pattern, there is bound to be competition, agitation and rivalry (Olusola & Aisha, 2013). Despite the availability of means of tension reduction, every society experiences struggle or competition between groups attempting to defend or advance their group's interests at the detriment of others. Such interests are material and political; this involves the feeling of worth and dignity as well as access to means of an improved standard of living (Esara, 2021; Ayeni et al., 2025).

The struggle for land and other natural resources is responsible for most communal conflicts in Akwa Ibom State (Akpan et al., 2024). The struggle for the ownership of farmland and natural resources between neighbouring communities brought about perennial communal conflicts as the people resorted to self-help in defence against external aggression. Akpan (2010) posited that the government embraces traditional administration to act as a regulatory mechanism in the management of resources, be it natural, economic or social, and broadly. Thus, traditional administration served as an institution by which authority is exercised in dispute resolution (Essien, 2013).

Dispute resolution is a customary attribute of traditional administration within African communities (Atakpa et al., 2021). Its practice could be more traditional than indigenous in that disputes resolution system is rooted in community culture, traditions and values, whereas the procedure remains indigenous in its trends and trajectory (Chizea & Osumah 2015). In the context of this study, dispute resolution within traditional administration involves fostering reconciliation, addressing root causes of conflict and utilising community-based approaches to build sustainable peace, often drawing on traditional values and institutions. Traditional administration in Akwa Ibom State and other parts of Nigeria often has strong mechanisms for resolving conflicts and fostering reconciliation, which are crucial for land dispute resolution.

Traditional rulers, as heads of their communities, are responsible for maintaining social order, enforcing norms, resolving disputes and defending the vulnerable against the victimisation of the privileged class in the community, often through traditional methods and councils. Traditional institutions, particularly traditional rulers, are seen as guardians of cultural heritage, customs and beliefs, which are crucial for maintaining community identity and social cohesion, facilitating inter-group cooperation and collaboration, especially during times of crisis, through the use of symbols and communication systems to alert communities and mobilise resources (Ezenwoko & Osagie, 2021).

In Akwa Ibom State, traditional administration plays a vital role in promoting community engagement by acting as custodians of cultural values, facilitating community development initiatives, and serving as mediators in resolving disputes, thereby fostering a sense of unity and participation. Traditional administration serves as a mediator in resolving land conflicts and disputes within the community.

Statement of the Problem

The competition for ownership of agricultural land and natural resources creates a unique environment for influencing attitudes and behaviours regarding land conflicts. Land disputes have become a prevalent aspect of relationships between different groups. This is particularly true in regions like Akwa Ibom, where group identities, especially those based on ethnicity and religion, are politicised and manipulated, affecting intergroup dynamics. As a result, the harmful consequences of land disputes on society are severe and immeasurable, making it essential to implement measures to reduce the frequency of conflicts within the community.

Despite the ongoing nature of these issues, there is a lack of a coherent long-term strategy to manage conflicts. From the colonial era to the present, both local and national responses have primarily relied on a reactive approach, focusing on short-term solutions that often lead to temporary peace achieved through violence. Furthermore, it can be argued that despite government efforts to resolve conflicts, such as deploying security forces and establishing judicial commissions to investigate the causes of disputes, conflicts continue to resurface. This persistence may be linked to the government's failure to hold those responsible for these conflicts accountable.

Maintaining peace and harmony is not solely the responsibility of the government and intergovernmental organisations. The 1976 Guidelines for Local Government Reform indicate that traditional leaders should play a role in assisting the government with peacekeeping, as many conflicts originate from land disputes where traditional rulers have significant influence. In numerous instances, traditional leaders exert considerable effort through various means to help resolve land disputes. Unfortunately, despite the recognised contributions of traditional leadership to peacebuilding, land disputes remain prevalent in Nigeria. This situation leads to mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness of traditional leadership in resolving land conflicts. Therefore, this study aims to explore the roles of traditional leadership in resolving land disputes in Akwa Ibom State. The study, therefore, hypothesises that there is no significant relationship between traditional administration and land dispute resolution in Akwa Ibom State.

Conceptual Review

Traditional Administration

The concepts of traditional administration and traditional institution are used interchangeably in this study. Traditional administration, in the words of Oriji & Olali (2010), refers to political leaders with proven track records who are appointed and installed in line with the provisions of their native laws and customs. The concept of traditional institutions has to do with the reign of the monarch or titled institutions vested with the authority to lead a people in their affairs of life. It is vital in bringing development closer to the rural people. It has been in existence before the era of the colonial masters in Nigeria. Emeodu (2019) posited that traditional institutions have been very important in terms of resistance against injustice and deprivation. This is largely due to the submissiveness of the people to their rulers in some parts of Nigeria. The indigenous government was considered a platform to orchestrate the imperialist agenda in view of the smooth command structure and powers of the rulers (Umar, 2022). The British colonial authority beckoned on the traditional office holders to assist in colonial administration because they believed that the best avenue for reaching the various colonial subjects was through the traditional rulers, who enjoyed unalloyed respect from their subjects.

Land Dispute Resolution

Land is considered one of the most important economic assets, but it also has political, social and cultural dimensions. One of the main challenges in land administration nowadays is the increase in land disputes, which are an inherent and legitimate aspect of daily life (Cotula et al., 2004). Land disputes can occur at all levels between relatives and neighbours concerning field boundaries, inheritance and rights; between communities in respect of ownership, land rights; between pastoralists and farmers; between states and indigenous people and between companies and local populations (Odgaard, 2006).

Land dispute involves claims to land ownership, land use rights, land laws, and their combination (Kalande, 2008). It involves three main dimensions, which are land administration, land tenure and ownership, and land boundaries (Fonmanu et al., 2023). Wehrmann (2018) noted

that land conflict is “a social fact in which at least two parties are involved, the roots of which are different interests over the property rights to land”. The main issues that often arise are triggered by disagreement over the boundaries, rights and obligations, compensation, and how the land should be divided and reallocated (Robert, 2020). They argue that when the parties fail to have an agreement concerning the rights to the land, it leads to a dispute. In this study, conflict and dispute are used interchangeably.

According to Kombe & Kreibich (2000), dispute resolution is defined as a process that implies the causes of the disputes as well as the resolution of such disputes. One of the most essential issues of land is dealing with the disputes that come over “who” has the rights, “what” are the rights and “how” the rights to the land are managed and enforced (Appendini, 2022). According to Hutabarat (2011), the concept of land dispute resolution can be looked at as a conceptual map of land dispute management. Reiss (2021) stated that the process looks into the general categories that describe the nature of dispute resolution and the substance gives the explanation of a gradient of concepts that starts from the generic (top) categories and moves into the more situation-specific (middle to bottom).

According to Svensson (2009), land dispute resolution is a way to achieve an agreement between the land-disputing parties by influencing opposing preferences on the disagreeable issues. Moreover, dispute resolution mechanisms can be taken on most stages in the strategic management process in order to facilitate participation, to impede the emergence of conflicts or to reduce the impact of the conflicts. The society has evolved various mechanisms for resolving land disputes with varying sanctions and levels of force. Barzel (2020) stated that land dispute resolution refers to the processes used to settle disagreements over land ownership, use, or boundaries. These processes can range from informal negotiations to formal litigation, and often involve a mix of judicial, alternative, and customary dispute resolution methods.

Traditional Administration and Land Dispute Resolution

Traditional rulers often play a significant role in resolving land disputes, particularly in communities where customary law and traditional practices hold sway. They act as mediators, drawing on their authority and understanding of local customs to facilitate resolutions. Their involvement can range from informal mediation to formal arbitration, depending on the specific context and the nature of the dispute (Imobighe, 2002).

A report from the Department of State Service (DSS) cited in Emmanuel & Ukpe (2024) highlights that since Akwa Ibom State was carved out of Cross River State in 1987, there have been several violent communal clashes arising from land disputes. In some instances, these disputes have resulted in only a few deaths or have been resolved before any fatalities occurred. However, the involvement of traditional leaders has been effective in mitigating the violence of these conflicts. Emmanuel & Ukpe (2024) note that if conflicts or crises are not managed effectively, they can turn violent or destructive, which can threaten peace and security in the affected areas. Therefore, it is important to implement effective strategies that can address conflicts early and prevent escalation, as well as to maintain peace to prevent future crises and their associated large-scale impacts. Yecho (2006) notes that traditional administration plays a significant role in land dispute resolution, leveraging its cultural authority and knowledge to maintain peace and harmony within its communities. However, it's important to acknowledge the limitations and challenges they face and to explore ways to strengthen their capacity and collaborate with formal systems to ensure fair and effective land governance.

Liu (2006) reveals that among the Igbo extractions in the Eastern Region of Nigeria, there is a strong belief that land disputes should be resolved peacefully through persuasion and by

following established settlement procedures. According to a study by Afrobarometer (2002) on Nigeria, before the arrival of colonial forces and the unification of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914, land conflicts were monitored, prevented, managed, and resolved through established institutions such as traditional leaders, councils of elders, age groups, chiefs, ancestral cults, and religious beliefs. Nana (2024) notes that traditional rulers utilised *ayeи* as a method for resolving land disputes. In the Ibibio nation, the young palm frond, commonly referred to as *ayeи*, has served as a unique means of communication among the people. As a form of injunction, if the *ayeи* is tied to any object, it signifies "prohibition" in most instances. When it is tied across a road or a compound, it indicates that access to that road or compound is prohibited (Akpan, 2020). *Ayeи* also acts as an injunction when placed on a disputed piece of land until the rightful owner of the property is identified (Anita, 2015). If it is placed around a plot of land, it signifies that the occupants of that plot must vacate immediately. It can also be applied to disputed houses, properties, and inheritance rights. Moreover, when *ayeи* is tied in a ball shape with a stick piercing through it like a cross, it symbolises paralysis for trespassers. When an *ayeи* is secured in a farm with a stick as support and a knot, it represents a scrotal hernia for trespassers. Additionally, when *ayeи* is tied across a road or a compound, it indicates that the use of that road or compound as an access route is prohibited.

Specific Land Disputes Resolved by Traditional Administrators

In Akwa Ibom State, traditional administration has played a significant role in resolving land disputes, often bridging gaps and fostering peace among communities (Ukpe, 2015). An instance is the longstanding boundary dispute between Nung Oku Ekanem and Afaha Nsit Ubom communities, which had lingered for 55 years. The paramount ruler of Onna, HRM Edidem Raymond Inyang, stepped in, and through an MOU, the dispute was finally laid to rest. Similarly, in 2002, traditional administrators mediated a resolution to a land dispute between Ikot Idaha and Osuk Ediene communities in Ikono LGA, showcasing the enduring impact of traditional leadership in conflict resolution. A more recent example is the 2020 boundary dispute sparked by a construction company's placement of misleading signage at the Government Technical College, Abak. The Abaak of Abak, His Royal Highness Oböng Ifiok Umanah, alongside Chief Aniefiok Okoko Udoma, Village Head of Oku Abak, successfully mediated the issue, restoring peace and clarifying boundaries.

These instances underscore the pivotal role traditional administration plays in addressing land disputes in Akwa Ibom State, leveraging local insights and respect to achieve lasting resolutions. By drawing on their deep understanding of local customs and traditions, traditional leaders are able to bring parties together and facilitate mutually acceptable solutions, often where formal systems have failed. This approach not only resolves disputes but also strengthens community cohesion and promotes social harmony.

Theoretical Framework

The Integrated Theory of Peace

The study is predicated on the Integrated Theory of Peace (ITP), proposed by H.B. Danesh in the early 2000s. It emphasises that peace is not just the absence of violence but also the presence of positive conditions that promote well-being and justice. Integrated Theory of Peace also highlights the role of worldviews in shaping our understanding and experience of peace. The theory posits a worldview of inclusive peace through peace education; individuals strive for inner peace and peaceful coexistence between groups, varying religions, races and cultures, governments, and nations worldwide.

In essence, the Integrative Theory of Peace provides a framework for understanding peace as a complex phenomenon that requires a holistic and transformative approach in the traditional administration. Integrated Theory of Peace recognises that peace is not a singular concept but a state that manifests in various aspects of human life, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, inter-group, international, and global levels(Mnookin, 1998). The theory suggests that our worldview, which is shaped by cultural, familial, historical, and religious influences, significantly impacts our perception of peace and our interactions with others.

The theory illustrates methods for achieving positive peace, which include elements such as peace education, development, employment, gender equality, and religious tolerance, all of which can help prevent and reduce disputes and conflicts. Tackling the root causes of disputes and conflicts is a much more effective strategy for fostering harmony and peaceful coexistence in society than the negative peace approach, which aims for the absence of conflict. The theory describes the roles of traditional administration, which involve mediation, reconciliation, peacebuilding, and healing. Furthermore, it highlights how traditional leaders can choose the best strategies during mediation to facilitate healing and reconciliation in a society experiencing conflict. According to the theory, in initiating peace, all group interests must be protected. The rural dwellers, through their traditional rulers, are made to participate in various stages of decision-making regarding the development of their rural communities. Thus, every group is carried along in the process. This gives the people a sense of belonging in matters affecting them. The implementation of the policies and decisions taken will not be hindered by their attitude and behaviours.

Empirical Review

Joseph (2025) explored the involvement of traditional rulers in peacebuilding initiatives in Northeast Nigeria. The research focused on the states of Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, and Gombe, utilising a qualitative case study methodology. This design facilitated a thorough investigation of real-life interactions, contextual influences, and the lived experiences of communities affected by conflict. The study's participants included representatives from local and international NGOs, traditional leaders (such as emirs, district heads, and village chiefs), and community leaders engaged in peace and reconciliation efforts. A purposive sampling method was employed to choose participants with relevant knowledge and experience in peacebuilding. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs), yielding rich qualitative insights into the roles and contributions of significant stakeholders. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, identifying recurring themes and patterns related to peacebuilding and collaboration. The findings underscored the vital role of traditional rulers in mediating conflicts and the beneficial effects of partnerships between NGOs and traditional leaders. Challenges such as limited resources, security issues, and the diminishing authority among younger generations were noted. The study emphasised the necessity of strengthening these collaborations to improve peacebuilding results in the region.

Okoye & Abah (2022) examined the roles and challenges faced by traditional rulers in resolving land disputes in Enugu State, Nigeria. The sole ownership and management of land in Nigeria had become increasingly difficult at the community level. Traditional rulers address domestic and communal disputes within their communities but lack the legal authority to manage land effectively. Most disputes in Enugu State revolve around land access and ownership. Traditional leaders work to maintain peace and the survival of communities amidst various land conflicts through mediation. However, their decisions are not always binding due to the lack of

constitutional powers. Given their demonstrated ability to administer justice at the grassroots level, they should be granted constitutional authority to decisively handle land issues.

Tchatchhoua-Djomo & Dijk (2022) investigated the complex outcomes of land dispute resolution and restitution for returnees in war-affected Burundi, emphasising the political and historical challenges that influence the resolution of long-standing land disputes. Data was collected from field research conducted in Burundi between June 2013 and November 2014, and again in April 2019, using an ethnographic approach. The purposive sampling method targeted Makamba province in Southern Burundi, which had experienced a high incidence of land-related conflicts involving returnees since 1992, along with a significant number of land claims and restitution requests. The study revealed that the gradual exclusion or replacement of local authorities led to a competitive jurisdictional structure and confusion regarding land authority. The authors recommended that instead of relying on standardised post-war solutions for ongoing displacement and land conflicts, the focus should shift towards identifying sustainable, equitable, and locally acceptable methods for resolving competing land claims and securing land rights.

Sunjo (2020) examined traditional authorities and land conflict resolution in Nso, Cameroon: a historical appraisal. The paper made a historical appraisal of the factors that drove land-related conflicts in the pre-colonial and immediate post-colonial periods. It argued that conflicts over land were caused by the constant rise in the value of land, population pressure, inheritance-related struggles, farmer-grazier disputes and the illicit sale of land. Using an array of methods, traditional authorities with the Fon of Nso at the helm managed and resolved many of these conflicts. The paper argued that despite significant challenges like the lack of cooperation from the Mbororos, limited resources and no recorded evidence to make concrete ownership decisions, the traditional authorities did a reasonably good job. This is more glaring, especially when we compare with what the civil administrators have been doing in post 1974 era, when a new land tenure ordinance all but dislodged the traditional authorities from the process. The paper concluded that in order to reduce the frequency of land-related conflicts in Nso and Cameroon in general, traditional authorities should be given a more prominent role.

Ukpong-Umo et al. (2019) researched the impact of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) on trans-boundary land disputes, focusing on the Ikot Idaha and Osuk Ediene communities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The objective of the paper was to explore and identify the key factors that lead to ongoing trans-border conflicts between the two communities, as well as the use of ADR, particularly the mediation technique, in resolving these conflicts. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and analysed using content analysis. The findings indicated that the mediation process enabled both parties to settle their differences, allowing them to peacefully share the Ibime water resources for over thirty years. To align with conflict resolution theory, the study introduced impact-sensitive outcome mapping as a monitoring and evaluation tool to provide a sustainable solution for harmonious living between the two communities.

In a separate study, De-Juan (2017) examined the traditional methods of resolving land disputes, highlighting the endurance of pre-colonial dispute resolution practices in Burundi. The research posited that understanding the historical, political, and cultural contexts is crucial for analysing the reasons behind the survival or decline of pre-colonial institutions. Utilising geocoded survey data from 2014 and historical spatial information from ethnographic studies on pre-colonial Burundi, the study found a strong correlation between the geographic distribution of the pre-colonial kingdom and contemporary resource-related conflict resolution methods. Additionally, it revealed that individuals residing in the former pre-colonial kingdom area are 11% to 18% more inclined to utilise pre-colonial conflict resolution mechanisms compared to those in other parts of the country.

Methods and Materials

The mixed research designs were adopted for the study. The descriptive research design was used in explaining major variables of the subject under study and their relationships. The survey research design was used in the collection of data and analysis. The population of the study was 18,806. This constitutes the traditional leadership and some selected respondents in Akwa Ibom state. This comprises 2,664 certified village heads, 13, 992 family leaders, 119 clan heads and 31 paramount rulers. (Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, 2024). The sample size of the study was 392. It was determined using the Taro Yamane (n) Formula. The data used for the study were both primary and secondary. A well-structured questionnaire was used in collecting data for the study. After the return of the questionnaire by the respondents, the data were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), with interpretation made using frequency tables and percentages. Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient-analysis was used in measuring the hypotheses of the study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Completed and returned copies of Questionnaire

Senatorial District	No. of questionnaires distributed	No. of questionnaires completed and returned	Percentage (%) of Questionnaires completed and returned
Uyo Senatorial District	131	129	32.9%
Ikot Ekpene Senatorial District	131	129	32.9%
Eket Senatorial District	130	128	32.6%
Total	392	386	98.4%

Source: Field Survey, 2025

From the table, 392 copies of questionnaires were distributed to the participants in the Senatorial Districts using the purposive sampling technique. Out of the 392 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 386, representing 98.4%, were adequately completed and properly returned. The table below shows the distribution of the completed and returned questionnaires, which were used for the data analysis.

Test Hypotheses

Hypothesis One:

H_{01} Traditional administration has no influence on land dispute resolution in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 2: Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient analysis table for hypothesis one

		Correlations	
		Traditional administration	Land Dispute Resolution
Traditional administration	Pearson Correlation	1	.667**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	386	386
Land Dispute Resolution	Pearson Correlation	.667**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	386	386

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) statistical technique was adopted in testing all the hypotheses. While traditional administration remains the independent variable (X), land dispute resolution remains the dependent variable (Y). The result of the analysis, presented in Table 2, shows a Pearson Correlation Coefficient of 0.667 while the p-value was 0.000 using the sample size (N) of 386. The result ($P<0.05$) indicates that traditional administration has a significant influence on land dispute resolution in Akwa Ibom State. Thus, traditional administration accounted for 66.7% influence on land dispute resolution.

Discussion of Findings

The aim of this research was to assess the relationship between traditional administration and land dispute resolution in Akwa Ibom State. It was hypothesised that traditional administration has no influence on land dispute resolution in Akwa Ibom State. The result of the analysis, as presented in Table 2, shows a Pearson Correlation Coefficient of 0.667 while the p-value was 0.000 using the sample size (N) of 386. The result ($P<0.05$) indicates that traditional administration has a significant influence on land dispute resolution in Akwa Ibom State. Thus, traditional administration accounted for 66.7% influence on land dispute resolution. The findings aligned with Ng'etich's (2016) research, which focused on resolving community land disputes through traditional justice systems in Kenya. This study determined that the informal and community-oriented characteristics of traditional justice systems, along with their approach to dispute resolution aimed at restorative justice, create the most effective environment for addressing community land conflicts. Additionally, Nwazi (2017) explored the effectiveness of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) in resolving environmental disputes in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. This research also indicated that traditional methods of administration are impartial when it comes to resolving land disputes.

Likewise, De-Juan (2017) examined the traditional methods of resolving land conflicts, emphasising the survival of pre-colonial dispute resolution practices in Burundi. The study argued that understanding the historical, political, and cultural contexts is crucial for comprehending the patterns of both the endurance and decline of pre-colonial institutions. It demonstrated a strong

connection between the geographic distribution of pre-colonial kingdoms and contemporary approaches to resolving resource-related conflicts.

From our research findings, it was revealed that traditional administration in Akwa Ibom State plays a significant role in settling land disputes, leveraging their cultural authority and influence to broker peace and promote understanding.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Traditional peacebuilding and land dispute resolution methods have a longstanding presence in Africa, particularly in Akwa Ibom State. Indigenous approaches to resolving land conflicts have been in place before the colonial era and are deeply intertwined with Africa's historical, cultural, and traditional fabric. Over time, these practices have adapted as a result of interactions with the outside world. Utilising the potential of these traditional methods today could significantly enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of conflict transformation efforts. The findings reveal that Akwa Ibom State heavily depends on chiefs, traditional leaders, and councils of chiefs, along with established precedents, to mediate land disputes and achieve resolutions. This largely unwritten, community-oriented, and custom-based system is readily accessible to the people. The research underscores the important role of traditional leadership, cultural processes, institutions, and values in peacebuilding within Akwa Ibom State. Most individuals, families, and communities prefer indigenous conflict resolution methods because they are more familiar and can quickly resolve disputes before they escalate into major conflicts. Additionally, traditional land dispute resolution is founded on cultural concepts, values, and procedures that are understood, practised and accepted by all citizens. The study, therefore, recommends that the government of Akwa Ibom State should ensure that traditional rulers are properly trained on land survey and map reading to enhance land disputes settlements.

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