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The Role of the West Kutai Regional Government in Resolving Indigenous Land Conflict Between the Communities of Muara Tae and Muara Ponaq Villages

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ABSTRACT

Customary land conflicts are one of the structural problems that continue to arise in agrarian resource management in Indonesia, especially in areas with high intensity of resource extraction-based development. In the context of decentralization, local governments have significant administrative authority in determining territorial boundaries and managing social conflicts. This study aims to critically analyze the role of the West Kutai Regency Government in resolving the customary land conflict between Muara Tae Village and Muara Ponaq Village, which is centered on the Utaq Melinau customary forest area. The study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data was obtained through in-depth interviews, field observations, and policy document analysis. Data analysis used Miles and Huberman's interactive model, with Ralf Dahrendorf's conflict and authority theoretical framework and Fisher and Ury's conflict resolution theory. The results show that the local government procedurally positioned itself as a neutral mediator through dialogue facilities and administrative mechanisms. However, structurally, the government remains an authoritative actor that shapes the arena of conflict through policies on the determination of administrative boundaries. The neutrality of the local government is administrative in nature, but does not fully reflect substantive justice because administrative decisions have a direct impact on the legitimacy of customary land claims and the distribution of access to resources. This conflict also has an impact on ecological degradation and changes in the economic structure of indigenous communities. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the development of the concepts of procedural neutrality and structural neutrality in local agrarian conflicts. Practically, this research emphasizes the need to reformulate the of territorial boundary policies based on the recognition of customary rights, participatory verification, and community-based ecological protection.

Keywords: Indigenous Land Conflicts, Local Government, Structural Neutrality, Substantive Justice.

I. Introduction

Indigenous land conflicts are one of the structural issues that continue to arise in the dynamics of agrarian resource governance in Indonesia. These conflicts generally arise from overlapping claims to



customary rights by indigenous peoples and the state's policy of granting land-use permits to other parties, including corporations and development projects. In many cases, the conflict is not only vertical between the community and the authorities but also horizontal, between communities with different historical and territorial claims. This situation places the local government in a strategic yet dilemmatic position as an actor with administrative, mediating, and regulatory authority in the conflict-resolution process. This principle is in line with the mandate of Article 18B paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (Nasional, 2015), which affirms the state's recognition and respect for the existence and traditional rights of customary law communities as long as they are still alive and in accordance with the development of society and the principles of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (Erika, 2018). Customary land conflicts in Indonesia are also often triggered by the lack of synchronization between state law and the customary-based tenure system, resulting in overlapping claims and tenure uncertainty (Bakker, 2023). Within the framework of legal pluralism, customary norms are often inadequately accommodated in administrative policies, thereby giving rise to prolonged structural conflicts (Dhiaulhaq & McCarthy, 2020). Within the framework of decentralization, local governments have significant authority over the management of administrative areas, including boundary determination, natural resource management, and social conflict resolution. This authority gives local governments a strategic position in agrarian conflicts, both as mediators and as authoritative actors with formal legitimacy in administrative decision-making. However, this position also creates a structural dilemma, as local governments not only act as facilitators in conflict resolution but also as actors whose policies can themselves be a source of conflict (Goma et al., 2026).

The literature on agrarian conflict asserts that land disputes are a manifestation of power relations that determine the distribution of access to resources (Hall et al., 2015). Therefore, analysis of the position of local governments in customary land conflicts is important for understanding the dynamics of legitimacy and authority in natural resource governance at the local level (Sari & Hidayat, 2022). Empirical evidence shows a significant gap between this normative framework and the practice of agrarian policy in the field. Various studies and reports from independent institutions indicate that agrarian conflicts in Indonesia have actually increased in line with the expansion of development based on natural resource extraction, particularly mineral and coal mining and large-scale oil palm plantations (F. W. Indonesia, 2017). Previous studies have shown that the resolution of customary land conflicts often faces obstacles in terms of recognition of rights, institutional coordination, and the neutrality of government authorities. Administrative-procedural approaches to conflict resolution are often considered incapable of addressing substantive dimensions of justice and the socio-cultural recognition of indigenous peoples. Previous studies have tended to highlight agrarian conflicts at the national level or conflicts between communities and corporations, while studies that specifically analyze the operational role of local governments in horizontal conflicts based on customary claims are still relatively limited, particularly in the context of mediation practices, claim verification, and administrative decision-making at the local level (Erika, 2018). Based on this gap, this study focuses its analysis on the role of local government in resolving customary land conflicts between two villages, positioning local government not only as an administrative facilitator but also as an authority that produces decisions that directly impact the configuration of social relations and the legitimacy of claims. This study develops a conflict analysis based on perspectives on authority and power relations, viewing conflict not only as a difference in interests but also as a consequence of the distribution of authority and the legitimacy of decisions within the local government structure. Thus, this study offers a strengthened analytical perspective that links customary land conflicts, bureaucratic authority, and local-level conflict-resolution practices (Ritonga et al., 2025).

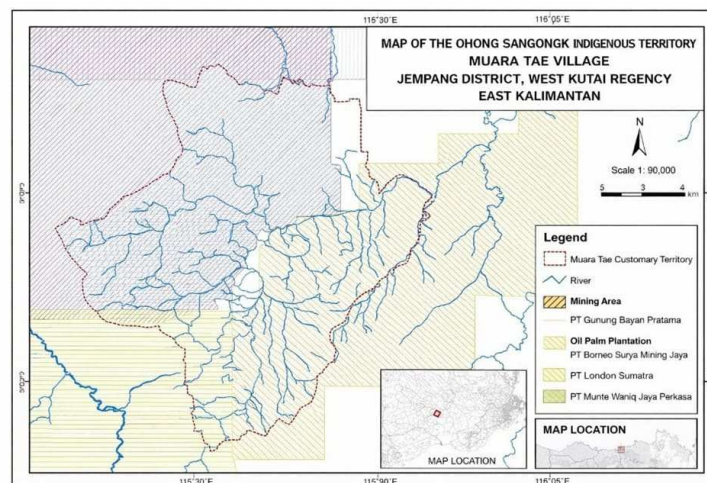


Figure 1. Map of the Customary Territory of Muara Tae Village

The escalation of conflict between Muara Tae Village and Muara Ponaq Village intensified significantly since the issuance of West Kutai Regent Decree No. 146.3/K.525/2012 on the Determination and Confirmation of Administrative Boundaries. This regulation not only served as an administrative instrument to clarify the territorial boundaries of village administration but also became a turning point, structurally altering the configuration of power relations at the local level. Before this policy was implemented, the customary forest area, especially the Utaq Melinau area, had been managed and understood as the collective living space of the Muara Tae community for generations. The forest was not merely understood as an economic asset, but as a space of identity, history, and socio-cultural sustainability. When part of this area was administratively transferred to the Muara Ponaq Village, a disjunction emerged between the state's administrative map and the indigenous community's socio-cultural map. The difference between the state's territorial construction and indigenous territorial construction triggered a deep legitimacy conflict. On the one hand, the state asserted its authority through formal, binding positive law; on the other hand, the indigenous community maintained its historical legitimacy through practices of hereditary control, collective recognition, and customary law. This tension is not merely a matter of physical boundaries, but a battle over sources of legitimacy and the definition of the validity of spatial claims. What was initially an administrative conflict then transformed into a symbolic and identity conflict, because territorial boundaries are not only geographical lines but also representations of recognition of communities' existence. As noted in various studies on agrarian conflicts, the difference between customary claims and state legality often produces protracted conflicts when the state prioritizes a legal-formal approach without integrating mechanisms of socio-historical recognition (Hardjanto, 2015) (Nusantara, 2014). The issuance of this policy also deepened horizontal conflicts between communities that had previously been relatively stable.

Before administrative intervention, relations between Muara Tae and Muara Ponaq were fluid, supported by kinship interactions, economic exchanges, and customary networks. However, when the state's administrative boundaries reframed these relations, each community was compelled to defend its claims through defensive logic. The conflict then became not only vertical between indigenous peoples and the state, but also horizontal between two communities that both had social legitimacy at the local level. This transformation shows that administrative policies can serve as catalysts that transform latent conflicts into manifest conflicts. Efforts by the Muara Tae community to resolve the issue through formal legal channels, including filing a lawsuit with the State Administrative Court and reporting to law enforcement officials, did not yield substantive justice. The litigation process tended to frame the issue solely within a legal, formal framework, thereby failing to fully accommodate the historical, cultural, and moral dimensions of customary claims. Procedural justice is indeed carried out through judicial mechanisms, but substantive justice, which concerns the recognition of collective rights and the sustainability of living space, has not been realized (Substantif, 2018). This condition reinforces the perception that state institutions prioritize administrative

consistency over the recognition of customary rights. Disappointment with the formal legal process has prompted the indigenous people of Muara Tae to reactivate customary mechanisms to articulate their claims and express their distrust of the state. The implementation of customary oaths has become an important symbol in the dynamics of this conflict. This ritual is not merely a spiritual practice, but a form of moral delegitimization of the state's administrative decisions. Through the customary oath, the community affirms that its claims have a moral and social basis that transcends administrative legality. This action shows that the conflict has shifted from the administrative to the symbolic and existential realms.



Figure 2. Customary Oath of Muara Tae Village

The documentation of the customary oath reflects a crisis of trust in the state and serves as a form of moral legitimacy for customary land claims. The ritual confirms that the conflict has extended beyond a debate over administrative boundaries and now touches upon collective identity, community dignity, and the sustainability of indigenous peoples' living spaces (F. W. Indonesia, 2017). In this context, customary law emerges as an alternative source of authority that challenges the dominance of state law. At the same time, this customary land conflict occurs alongside a process of ecological degradation in the Utaq Melinau customary forest area. Changes in land use following the establishment of administrative boundaries indicate the expansion of oil palm plantations around the disputed territory. This transformation has not only altered the ecological landscape but has also shifted the economic structure and livelihood patterns of indigenous communities.



Figure 3. Oil palm plantations around the customary forest (2015)

Field documentation indicates the conversion of forests into oil palm plantations, pollution of the Nayan River as the community's primary water source, and a decline in the overall quality of the living environment (B. B. C. N. Indonesia, 2015; F. W. Indonesia, 2017). This ecological degradation demonstrates that administrative boundary conflicts have tangible material implications for the socio-ecological sustainability of local communities. In other words, these conflicts are not only legal and political in nature but also ecological and economic. Previous studies have examined customary land conflicts in Indonesia primarily from the perspective of vertical conflicts between indigenous peoples, the state, and corporations (Anas et al., 2019; Zakie, 2017), as well as from the perspective of participatory communication and customary forest management (Maliki, 2021). These studies generally emphasize the weak recognition of customary rights by the state and the dominance of a legal-formal approach as key factors that prolong agrarian conflicts. However, most research still positions local governments as neutral external actors or merely as facilitators of conflict resolution. Critical analyses of how local government administrative policies may shape, reproduce, and institutionalize conflicts—particularly horizontal conflicts between indigenous communities—remain relatively limited. This gap forms the starting point of the present study. The research gap lies in the limited empirical and theoretical investigations that explicitly position local governments within the authority structures that produce conflict, rather than viewing them solely as neutral mediators. In the context of the Muara Tae–Muara Ponaq case, administrative policies cannot be understood merely as technocratic instruments; instead, they should be viewed as practices of authority distribution with significant political and social consequences. Furthermore, the application of Ralf Dahrendorf's theory of conflict and authority in the analysis of customary land conflicts remains relatively underutilized in Indonesian agrarian studies. Dahrendorf's framework enables a more critical examination of the relations of domination and subordination structured within local government systems. From this perspective, conflict is not regarded as an anomaly but as an inherent consequence of the unequal distribution of authority. Within such a framework, the procedural neutrality of local government can be interpreted as a mechanism that indirectly legitimizes the dominance of state law over customary law. Through this perspective, the present study positions the Muara Tae–Muara Ponaq conflict as an analytical arena for examining the illusion of local government neutrality. The conflict is not interpreted merely as an administrative misunderstanding or as tension between communities; rather, it is understood as a structural manifestation of unequal authority distribution.

The procedural neutrality claimed by local government in facilitating dialogue and mediation may function as a stabilization mechanism that maintains existing power configurations. Consequently, administrative policy should be understood not only as a technical product but also as a political instrument that shapes the direction, intensity, and duration of conflicts in both latent and manifest forms. Conceptually, this study contributes to research on agrarian conflict and local governance by treating authority, decision legitimacy, and procedural neutrality as central analytical variables. Unlike many conflict-resolution studies that focus primarily on normative negotiation models, this research emphasizes how local government actions and policy choices shape the direction, escalation, and de-escalation of conflicts. The novelty of this study lies in its analysis of the role of local government in horizontal conflicts over customary claims through the framework of conflict and authority, as well as in its use of qualitative field data that illustrate the dynamics of mediation and decision-making processes in context. From a practical perspective, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to improving the practice of resolving customary land conflicts at the local level, particularly in relation to mediation design, claim verification, and the strengthening of institutional neutrality mechanisms. The results are also relevant for the formulation of agrarian conflict-resolution policies that are more sensitive to social contexts and local authority structures. Moreover, the analytical framework employed in this study has the potential to be applied to similar conflict cases in other regions characterized by communal land-claim disputes. This study employs a qualitative case study design, utilizing in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. Informants were selected purposively based on their involvement in and knowledge of the conflict and its resolution process. Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and iterative conclusion drawing. Although this approach enables a deeper contextual understanding, the study is limited by the scope of the case and is

not intended to produce statistical generalizations, but rather contextual and analytical insights. Based on this framework, the study formulates the following main research question: How is the role of local government carried out in the process of resolving customary land conflicts between communities, and to what extent do these practices reflect the functions of neutral, effective, and fair authority? This question forms the basis for the analysis presented in the following sections

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Customary Land Conflicts and Agrarian Governance Dynamics

Indigenous land conflicts in Indonesia are a manifestation of the unequal power relations between the state and indigenous communities within the national agrarian system. Various studies confirm that agrarian conflicts do not arise naturally. Still, they are produced by the positivistic domination of state law over the indigenous legal systems that exist and function within indigenous communities. Through agrarian and spatial policies, the state often provides legal legitimacy to large-scale economic actors without considering the existence of historically established customary rights, thereby placing indigenous peoples in a structurally vulnerable position (Nusantara, 2014). In recent literature, customary land conflicts are no longer understood solely as ownership disputes, but as governance conflicts involving legal, administrative, social, and political dimensions simultaneously. This approach emphasizes that conflicts arise from the lack of synchronization between the formal legal system and the customary-based claim system, as well as from weak mechanisms for recognizing and verifying communal rights at the local level of policy implementation. In this context, customary land conflicts cannot be reduced to mere ownership disputes; they must be understood as structural conflicts over the distribution of power and access to resources. (F. W. Indonesia, 2017) shows that the state's weak recognition of customary territories has led to the fragmentation of indigenous peoples' living spaces and accelerated ecological degradation, reinforcing the argument that customary land conflicts are a direct consequence of development policies that favor extractive economic interests. Contemporary studies also show that indigenous land conflicts often develop into multi-layered conflicts involving the state, corporations, and local communities simultaneously. However, most studies still focus on vertical conflicts between communities and the state or corporations. In contrast, horizontal conflicts based on indigenous claims with the active involvement of local governments as administrative decision-makers are still relatively limited in depth. This gap indicates the need for a more contextual analysis of local authorities' practices in agrarian conflicts.

2.2. The Role of Local Government in Agrarian Conflicts

At the policy implementation level, local governments are often positioned as neutral mediators in resolving agrarian conflicts. However, this position is problematic because local governments structurally have the authority to determine boundaries, issue permits, and exercise administrative legitimacy over space control. The emphasis on administrative legal certainty often overlooks the historical and cultural dimensions of indigenous peoples' land control (Agraria et al., 2023). In horizontal agrarian conflicts, local government administrative policies can even transform structural conflicts into conflicts between local communities, thereby deepening social tensions (Muhammad Ikhwan et al.,). This condition confirms that local governments are not neutral actors but rather part of a power structure that actively shapes conflict dynamics. Hence, their role needs to be critically analyzed from the perspective of substantive justice (Rencang et al., 2026). Thus, the analysis of customary land conflicts needs to position local governments not only as administrative facilitators but also as authoritative actors whose decisions and procedures directly contribute to the escalation or de-escalation of conflicts. This approach broadens the analytical framework from mere dispute resolution to an analysis of the practice of authority in conflict governance.

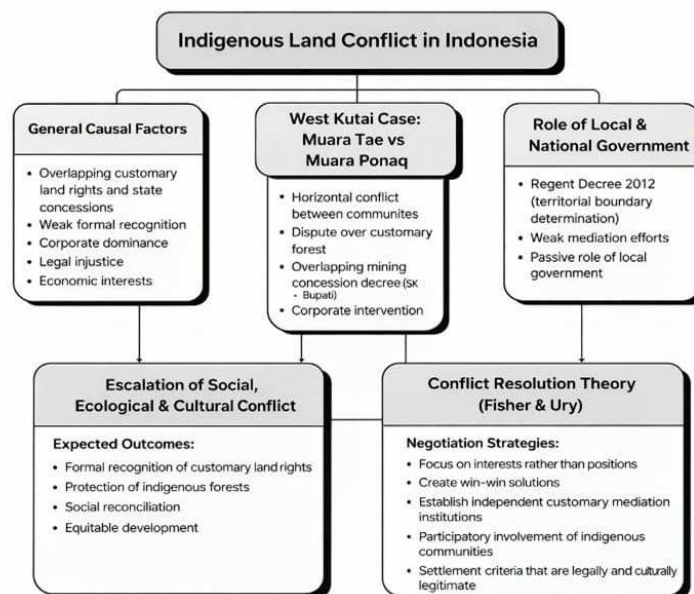


Figure 4. Conceptual framework

On this basis, this study uses Ralf Dahrendorf's theory of conflict and authority to dissect the power relations at work in customary land conflicts. Dahrendorf views conflict as an inherent condition of social structures that are constantly changing due to the unequal distribution of authority. Authority is not attached to individuals but rather to structural social positions, thereby creating relations of superordination and subordination legitimized by the social system. This imbalance of authority is the main source of conflict, as subordinate groups are in a position of domination and coercion that encourages resistance (Dosen & Universitas, 2019). In indigenous land conflicts, local governments hold formal authority over regional regulation and agrarian policy. When this authority is exercised without recognition of indigenous peoples' rights, conflict becomes inevitable (Sejarah et al., 2022). Dahrendorf's theory was chosen because it allows for a critical reading of local government's claims of neutrality by positioning the state as a structurally involved actor in agrarian conflicts (Ar, 2021). The development of contemporary conflict theory expands the analysis of conflict from mere conflicts of interest to institutional analysis and governance conflict, in which institutional design, bureaucratic procedures, and authority structures become key variables. This perspective is relevant for explaining how government administrative actions can function as mechanisms for stabilization or sources of conflict escalation. To complement this structural analysis, this study also draws on Fisher and Ury's conflict resolution theory to assess the strategies local governments pursue to resolve conflicts.

2.3. Conflict Resolution and Transformation Approach

To complement this structural analysis, this study also draws on Fisher and Ury's conflict resolution theory to assess the strategies local governments pursue to resolve conflicts. Fisher and Ury emphasize interest-based conflict resolution through the separation of actors and issues, a focus on substantive interests, the creation of mutually beneficial options, and the use of fair criteria in decision-making (Agus Ariana Putra, 2023). This approach aims to produce win-win solutions that not only stop open conflict but also build long-term relationships between conflicting parties (Sudira, 2022). In recent literature, the conflict resolution approach has also evolved towards a conflict transformation paradigm that emphasizes changing social relations, recognizing identities, and building long-term trust. The debate between conflict management and conflict transformation is important for assessing whether local government interventions merely alleviate surface conflicts or address their structural roots. However, in structural indigenous land conflicts characterized by unequal power relations, procedural approaches to conflict resolution tend to be limited

unless accompanied by substantive recognition and protection of indigenous rights. By combining Dahrendorf's theory of conflict and authority with Fisher and Ury's theory of conflict resolution, this study provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding indigenous land conflicts as products of structural inequality while critiquing the roles and strategies of local governments in resolving them.

2.4. Position of Research in the Literature Map

Based on a synthesis of the literature, studies of customary land conflicts have developed conceptually and empirically but remain limited to those that specifically link horizontal conflicts over customary claims to the practices of local government authorities in the resolution process. Most studies emphasize legal aspects, recognition of rights, or social movements. At the same time, the operational dimensions of local administrative decisions have not been widely analyzed through the framework of conflict and authority. This study fills this gap by integrating the perspectives of conflict, authority, and conflict resolution into the analysis of local government practices. Thus, this study expands the empirical basis for studies of customary land conflicts while also contributing to the theoretical debate on the role of local authorities in conflict management and transformation.

III. Research Method

The customary land conflict between the communities of Muara Tae Village and Muara Ponaq Village cannot be understood as a sudden event, but rather as the result of a long historical process involving the transformation of the spatial control system from a customary to a state-administrative system. Before state administrative intervention, the Utaq Melinau region was managed under a customary legal system that regulated the collective distribution of access to, use of, and protection of forest resources. This system functioned not only as an economic mechanism but also as a social system that regulated inter-community relations, collective identity, and the legitimacy of customary authority. In the customary system, territorial boundaries were not always formally defined cartographically, but were recognized through collective knowledge, historical use of the territory, and social recognition between communities. The legitimacy of customary territories was social and historical, not administrative. However, when the state began to integrate these territories into the formal administrative system, a shift in territorial legitimacy from social to administrative legitimacy occurred. This process creates tension between the customary legitimacy system and the state legitimacy system. The establishment of administrative boundaries by local governments is a critical point that triggers open conflict. These policies do not fully account for the customary boundaries recognized by local communities. As a result, areas previously under customary control are now part of different administrative areas, leading to conflicting claims.

In Dahrendorf's structural conflict theory, this situation reflects a process of authority redistribution that creates groups of superiors and subordinates. Local governments, as holders of administrative power, have the authority to determine territorial boundaries formally. Conversely, indigenous peoples are in a subordinate position because the legitimacy of their territories is not fully recognized in the state administrative system. The conflict that arises is a logical consequence of this imbalance in authority. In addition to administrative factors, this conflict is also influenced by the strategic value of the Utaq Melinau region, which has significant natural resource potential. The economic value of the region intensifies the conflict because it has become an object of economic interest for both local communities and external actors. Thus, this conflict is not only about identity and legitimacy, but also about resource distribution. The genealogy of this conflict shows that agrarian conflicts cannot be understood solely as horizontal conflicts between communities, but also as vertical conflicts involving the state authority structure. The local government is not only a mediator of conflict, but also part of the structure that produces the conditions for conflict through administrative policies.

This study adopts a qualitative case study design, as described by Siregar & Murhayati, (2024) This methodological choice is based on the consideration that a qualitative approach allows researchers to understand social dynamics in depth, especially in the context of conflicts involving power relations, distribution of authority, and complex mediation practices. The case study design was chosen because it provides space to explore the decision-making process in depth, interactions among actors, and local government administrative practices for handling conflicts over customary land claims. Through this approach, the study not only captures the conflict as a static phenomenon but also traces the processes, contexts, and meanings constructed by the actors involved. Conceptually, this research design is grounded in the theoretical framework of conflict and authority, which holds that social conflict cannot be separated from issues of authority distribution and legitimacy within social structures. This perspective examines how local government's position as the holder of administrative authority shapes the direction, pattern, and outcome of conflict resolution. Thus, this study does not merely describe agrarian conflicts but examines how local authority practices operate in situations of dispute. Compared to previous studies of agrarian conflict, which generally focus on vertical conflicts between communities and corporations or the state, this study places horizontal conflicts based on customary claims at the center of its analysis. The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on the practices of local government authorities in conflicts between indigenous communities, thereby broadening the analytical perspective and unit of observation in the study of agrarian conflicts.

The research was conducted in areas experiencing conflicts over customary land claims between communities, with the active involvement of local government as a mediator and administrative decision-maker. Cases were selected purposively based on three main criteria: the existence of clearly documented conflicts over claims, the direct involvement of local government in the mediation process or policy-making, and the availability of access to field data. This case selection strategy enabled an in-depth exploration of the dynamics of actor interactions and conflict-resolution mechanisms in a real-world context. Informants were selected using role-based purposive sampling, which involves selecting informants based on their knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in the conflict being studied. This approach is considered relevant in qualitative research because it focuses on the depth and quality of information rather than statistical representation (Patton, 2015). The selected informants included local government officials involved in mediation or claim verification, representatives of the conflicting communities, traditional or community leaders, and supporting parties such as regional officials or community facilitators. The variety of informant sources was intended to enrich perspectives, broaden analytical viewpoints, and enhance the accuracy of data interpretation. This study also acknowledges the potential for informant bias, particularly positional justification bias and group interest bias. Therefore, each statement was analyzed comparatively and cross-referenced to minimize information distortion.

Data collection was carried out using three main techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were used to explore the actors' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of the conflict and its resolution process. A semi-structured format was chosen because it provides a systematic yet flexible framework of questions for further exploration in line with the dynamics of the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview guidelines were compiled around the themes of conflict, authority, and dispute-resolution mechanisms, with key questions on the role of local government, claim verification procedures, decision-making mechanisms, and parties' perceptions of the authorities' neutrality. Observations were conducted in a limited participatory manner to understand the context of social interactions, meeting forums, and ongoing mediation practices. This technique allows researchers to capture actual dynamics that are not always revealed in interviews (Miles et al., 2020). Meanwhile, document studies were conducted on regulations, meeting minutes, administrative archives, and territorial claim maps. Document analysis served as a complementary data source and verification instrument to confirm or clarify information obtained through interviews and observations. In this study, the researcher acted as the main instrument (human instrument) who was directly involved in the process of collecting, selecting, and interpreting data. To maintain consistency and systematicity, the researcher used interview guidelines, observation sheets, and document analysis matrices. These instruments were developed based on

the theoretical framework of conflict and authority to identify forms of authority, decision legitimacy, and conflict-resolution practices. Limited testing was conducted to ensure question clarity and reduce ambiguity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data used included both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through interviews and observations, while secondary data were sourced from policy documents, administrative archives, and other written sources. The data were then categorized by actors, action types, and conflict-resolution stages to support systematic thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2014).

The data analysis process followed an interactive model that included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Azhar et al., 2023). The analysis was conducted simultaneously from the early stages of data collection. In the reduction stage, data were coded based on the themes of conflict, authority, and resolution mechanisms. Data presentation was carried out in the form of thematic matrices and actor relationship maps to facilitate pattern identification. Conclusions were drawn gradually through an iterative process, comparing findings across data sources to ensure consistency. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and informant confirmation (member checking). This strategy aimed to increase the credibility and accuracy of the findings by comparing various perspectives and data collection methods (Maxwell, 2018)). Confirmation of key statements was carried out to ensure that the researchers' interpretations did not deviate from the informants' intentions. This study has limitations inherent to the case study design, particularly regarding the scope and number of informants, which are restricted to key actors. Therefore, the research findings are not intended to be generalized statistically, but rather analytically and contextually (Yin, 2018). Although various validation strategies have been employed, the potential for narrative bias remains. These limitations are recognized as methodological characteristics of case-based qualitative research, which emphasizes depth of analysis over breadth of coverage.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1. Historical Context and Genealogy of Customary Land Claims

The customary land conflict between Muara Tae Village and Muara Ponaq Village did not arise suddenly; it was the culmination of a history of customary-based control of space that later intersected with state administrative policies. Based on documentary studies and local archive research, the Utaq Melinau customary forest area has been managed for generations by the Muara Tae community through a communal control system. This system refers to a pattern of spatial management regulated by customary norms, land function distribution, and internal social legitimacy within the community. In this study, the term customary territory is defined as a living space recognized and managed in accordance with customary norms, passed down genealogically. Meanwhile, administrative boundaries refer to territorial boundaries established through formal local government decisions. The lack of synchronization between these two boundary regimes is the source of conflict. Interview data with Muara Tae customary leaders (November 4–6, 2025) shows that the establishment of administrative boundaries through local government policy is perceived as a disregard for the history of customary control. Field observations and participatory mapping reinforce this claim by showing shifts in access to forest areas. These findings are consistent with the literature on tenure conflicts, which states that overlaps between state law and customary law often trigger agrarian conflicts. However, this study provides new empirical contributions to the context of local government in East Kalimantan, which has been discussed more at the national level.



Figure 5. Satellite image of the Utaq Melinau customary forest

The spatial configuration of this area can be observed through satellite imagery, as shown in Figure 5. The image shows the forest cover structure of Utaq Melinau and the surrounding area, including indications of vegetation fragmentation and land use changes at the edge of the area. Visual analysis reveals a shift in the landscape that aligns with policy dynamics and land-use activities around the disputed area. This spatial representation not only serves as a geographical illustration but also as empirical evidence of spatial transformation that has become the locus of conflict. In this study, satellite imagery serves an analytical function, reinforcing field findings on shifts in access and discrepancies between customary claims and formal administrative boundaries. This spatial data serves as a verification tool for historical narratives and informant interviews that indicate changes in control and access to parts of customary forests. Thus, the customary land conflict in Muara Tae Muara Ponaq can be understood as the result of an interaction between genealogically based constructions of customary space and administratively based state territorial policies. The integration of historical data, interviews, observations, and satellite image analysis reinforces the view that this dispute is not only about boundary delimitation but also a structural consequence of the meeting of two distinct spatial legitimacy regimes.

4.2. Position of the Local Government: Procedural Neutrality and Structural Authority

The triangulation results show that the West Kutai Regency Government normatively positions itself as a neutral mediator in the Muara Tae–Muara Ponaq land conflict. This procedural neutrality refers to an administrative stance that formally shows no open partiality and prioritizes dialogue mechanisms. However, when analyzed through the perspective of conflict and authority theory, this neutrality is administrative, not structural. In this framework, authority is attached to positions that have the power to set and implement policies. Since the determination of administrative boundaries is the authority of the local government, the government is structurally within the arena of conflict. Thus, this study confirms the ambivalent position of the local government: formally acting as a mediator, but structurally contributing to the configuration of conflict through its regulatory authority. Interview data, policy documents, and an analysis of authority relations support this claim. Unlike previous studies that cast the state as the dominant actor in agrarian conflicts, this study shows a subtler form of domination, namely through administrative procedures that appear neutral but carry structural implications.



Figure 6. Documentation archives of mediation at the West Kutai regent's office and in Siluq Ngurai subdistrict, with representatives from both villages

Figure 6 documents the mediation process conducted at the West Kutai Regent's Office and in Siluq Ngurai Subdistrict, involving representatives of the two villages in conflict. The documentation shows the presence of local government officials, subdistrict officials, village officials, and traditional leaders in a deliberative forum formally facilitated by the government. Procedurally, this forum represents the local government's institutional efforts to mediate and maintain social stability at the local level. The existence of the mediation forum, as documented in Figure 6, shows that the local government did not take a passive stance towards the conflict, but rather actively provided a space for dialogue as a non-litigation resolution mechanism. However, a thematic analysis of the interview results shows that the mediation was more focused on reducing the escalation of conflict than on resolving the structural root causes underlying the recognition of customary territories. The discussion agenda tends to focus on affirming administrative boundaries and maintaining social order. At the same time, the historical validation of customary claims and the integration of participatory maps have not yet fully become the basis for policy decisions. From the perspective of conflict and authority theory, this mediation forum reflects the state's procedural neutrality. The local government acts as a facilitator of dialogue, but remains in a structural position as the holder of administrative authority that determines the legitimacy of territorial boundaries. Thus, although mediation demonstrates an administrative commitment to conflict resolution, it has not yet fully delivered substantive justice for those affected by territorial boundary policies. The policy implications of these findings suggest that mediation will be more effective if participatory verification mechanisms for customary territories follow it, the harmonization of administrative boundary policies with communities' historical claims, and the strengthening of regulations recognizing communal rights. Without these steps, mediation can become an instrument for short-term conflict stabilization rather than long-term structural transformation.

4.3. Fragmentation of Legitimacy and Perceptions of Justice

Thematic analysis of interview data shows fragmentation of legitimacy regarding the role of local government in customary land conflicts. This category emerged from the coding process of informants' narratives, which consistently showed differences in assessment between the groups involved. Informants from Muara Tae Village assessed that the local government had not optimally fulfilled its duty to protect customary land rights, particularly in securing historical recognition and access to customary forests. Conversely, informants from Muara Ponaq Village viewed the government as having acted professionally and proportionally through dialogue and administrative facilitation mechanisms. Legitimacy fragmentation in this study is defined as a condition in which state authority is recognized and accepted by one social group but questioned or even considered unfair by another group in the context of the same policy. Thus, legitimacy is not understood as a quality inherent in state institutions but as a relational construct formed through social

experience and the distribution of policy impacts. these findings reinforce the theoretical approach that states that state legitimacy in resource conflicts is contextual and depends on perceptions of substantive justice. When administrative policies produce perceived unequal impacts, the authority's legitimacy tends to be fragmented. In the context of customary land conflicts, legitimacy is not only measured by procedural compliance with regulations, but also by the extent to which policies recognize the historical claims and communal rights of indigenous peoples.

Compared with previous studies on tenure conflicts, this study's results show a similar pattern: a crisis of trust in state institutions when boundary policies are not in line with customary practices. However, this study makes an additional contribution by highlighting how legitimacy fragmentation occurs at the local government level in the context of decentralization, not solely at the central government level. Alternative perspectives still need to be considered proportionally. Local governments operate under pressure to maintain social stability while complying with regulatory limitations. Within the framework of decentralization, the recognition of customary forests is not entirely within local governments' discretion but requires cross-sectoral coordination and higher-level regulation. This explains why the approach taken tends to be oriented towards administrative procedures and conflict stabilization, rather than more profound structural transformation. Thus, the fragmentation of legitimacy that occurs is not solely the result of local government failure, but also a consequence of limited authority structures and the complexity of natural resource governance. Nevertheless, these findings confirm that without integrating substantive justice dimensions into boundary policies, the legitimacy of local governments in customary land conflicts will remain partial and vulnerable to challenge.

4.4. Ecological Impact and Policy Consequences



Figure 7. Condition of the Utaq Melinau customary forest in 2025

Field observation data from 2025, as shown in Figure 7, indicate significant changes in the ecological condition of the Utaq Melinau customary forest area. In this study, ecological degradation is defined as a decline in environmental quality characterized by reduced natural vegetation cover, changes in land use, and forest fragmentation. The visual documentation in Figure 5 shows land clearing and traces of land-use change toward plantation areas, indicating a spatial transformation from customary forest function to commercial economic function. Claims of ecological degradation are not assumptive, but are supported by direct observation, photographic documentation, and narrative confirmation from local informants. Triangulation between visual data and interviews shows that changes in land cover correlate with increased territorial tensions. Thus, customary land conflicts in this context are not only social and administrative in nature, but

also have ecological impacts. These findings are consistent with the literature on natural resource conflicts, which shows that unclear tenure rights often accelerate land conversion and weaken ecological protection. However, the contribution of this study lies in its assertion that ecological degradation at the local level is also related to the ambivalence of local government policies in managing territorial boundary conflicts. In other words, when administrative policies do not explicitly integrate customary claims and environmental protection, the space for conflict becomes vulnerable to economic exploitation. The policy impacts identified in this study include:

- a. Reduced community access to forest resources, which impacts the community's ability to maintain a forest-based economy.
- b. Increased conversion of land to commercial plantations alters the spatial control structure and narrows customary management space.
- c. Changes in community economic strategies towards subsistence farming, as a form of adaptation to the narrowing of access to customary forest areas.

This change in economic strategy shows that conflicts over customary land have direct consequences for communities' socio-economic resilience. From the perspective of structural conflict theory, these ecological changes can be understood as a manifestation of the unequal distribution of authority over resources. However, alternative perspectives also need to be considered. Local governments face investment and economic development pressures that often prioritize plantation expansion in regional development. In this context, the dilemma between ecological protection and economic growth becomes a factor that influences policy direction. The policy implications of these findings emphasize the need for a more integrative and substantive approach, namely:

- a. Integrating customary land maps into administrative boundary determination policies to prevent overlapping spatial claims.
- b. Implementing participatory verification mechanisms before the ratification of territorial boundaries, so that administrative decisions do not ignore historical claims.
- c. Strengthening community-based ecological protection through recognition of the role of indigenous peoples in maintaining forest sustainability.
- d. Without these measures, administrative mediation can mitigate only short-term conflicts, leaving long-term ecological consequences unaddressed. Therefore, this study contributes by emphasizing that the resolution of indigenous land conflicts must be understood as a spatial governance issue, social, legal, and ecological in nature. As a direction for further research, participatory spatial analysis and quantitative data-based land-cover change mapping are needed to strengthen the validity of ecological findings and to longitudinally evaluate the impact of policies.

4.5. Data Analysis Framework and Validity

Data analysis in this study uses an interactive model that includes data reduction, data presentation, and cyclical conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out through open coding of interview transcripts, observations, and policy documents, which were subsequently categorized into main themes: administrative authority, customary land claims, perceptions of justice, and ecological impacts. Data presentation is arranged in a matrix comparing perceptions between actors to ensure that the analysis patterns are systematically readable. Conclusions are drawn iteratively with verification through triangulation of sources and techniques. Informants are selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement and structural position in the conflict, so that the data obtained is relevant and substantive. Potential biases, such as interest bias and position justification, were anticipated through cross-party narrative comparisons, document confirmation, and direct observation.

V. Conclusion

This study concludes that the West Kutai Regency Government occupies an ambivalent position in the customary land conflict between Muara Tae Village and Muara Ponaq Village. Procedurally, the government acts as a mediator through dialogue forums and non-litigation mechanisms to maintain social stability. However, structurally, as the holder of legal-rational authority that sets administrative boundaries, the government also shapes the arena of conflict and influences the distribution of access to the Utaq Melinau Customary Forest. Using the perspectives of conflict and authority theory, the findings show that the government's neutrality is administrative rather than structural. Territorial boundary policies that are not fully integrated with the historical legitimacy of customary territories result in fragmentation of legitimacy and reinforce tenure tensions. This conflict is not merely a matter of territorial delimitation, but a consequence of the interaction between the state's legal regime and the customary-based communal control system. The contribution of this research lies in the conceptual distinction between procedural neutrality and structural neutrality in the governance of local agrarian conflicts. The policy implications emphasize the importance of integrating participatory maps of customary territories, historical verification, and harmonization of administrative boundary policies to achieve substantive justice and prevent the reproduction of conflicts at the regional level.

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