

Power Asymmetry and Community Resistance in Agrarian Conflict: Contesting Land Rights between Indigenous Communities and PT. Pasangkayu in Central Sulawesi

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Abstract: Agrarian conflicts involving indigenous communities and plantation corporations remain a critical challenge to equitable land governance in Indonesia. This study examines how power asymmetries shape agrarian conflict and influence community resistance in the contestation over land rights between indigenous communities in Ako Village and PT. Pasangkayu in Central Sulawesi. Using a qualitative case-study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis involving community members, village authorities, and customary leaders. The findings indicate that the conflict originated from overlapping claims over customary land that had long been occupied by local communities but was subsequently incorporated into the company's plantation concession area. Unequal access to legal authority, political influence, and institutional resources strengthened the company's dominant position while constraining the bargaining power of indigenous communities. In response, local communities developed various forms of resistance, including collective protests, land reclamation efforts, and the mobilization of customary institutions to defend territorial rights. Although village governments and customary institutions supported community claims and facilitated dialogue, their influence remained limited by broader structural inequalities. This study argues that agrarian conflict reflects not only competing land claims but also struggles over power, recognition, and resource access in contemporary rural Indonesia.

Keywords: agrarian conflict; power asymmetry; community resistance; indigenous land rights; customary institutions

1. Introduction

Agrarian conflict remains one of the most persistent socio-political challenges in contemporary Indonesia. The expansion of plantation industries, extractive activities, and large-scale development projects has intensified competition over land and natural resources, often placing indigenous and local communities in direct confrontation with corporations and state institutions. Recent studies indicate that agrarian conflicts in Indonesia are closely associated with unequal land distribution, weak recognition of customary rights, and state-supported concession systems that frequently overlap with indigenous territories (Tohirin et al., 2026; Judijanto, 2025). These conflicts demonstrate that land is not merely an economic asset but also a social, cultural, and political resource that shapes identity, livelihood, and communal continuity.

The increasing prevalence of agrarian disputes has encouraged scholars to move beyond legal interpretations of land ownership and examine the broader dynamics of power that structure access to resources and decision-making processes. Agrarian conflicts often emerge under conditions of unequal power relations where corporations possess stronger legal authority, financial capital, and political influence than local communities. Consequently, communities face substantial barriers when defending customary land claims despite possessing historical and cultural legitimacy over disputed territories (Afrizal & Berenschot, 2022; Fattarawati, 2025). Such conditions reveal the importance of analyzing agrarian conflict through the lens of power asymmetry, particularly in contexts where development agendas intersect with indigenous land rights.

Power asymmetry refers to unequal control over economic resources, legal instruments, institutional authority, and political networks that enable certain actors to dominate decision-making processes and influence conflict outcomes. In agrarian settings, these asymmetries frequently manifest through the state's recognition of corporate concessions, limited protection of customary tenure systems, and restricted community participation in land governance (Sudaryo Putra et al., 2025; Tohirin et al., 2026). As a result, agrarian conflict is often characterized by an imbalance between formally recognized rights and socially legitimate claims rooted in local history and customary practices.

The unequal distribution of power has also shaped the emergence of community resistance as an important mechanism through which marginalized groups articulate claims and defend territorial rights. Resistance may occur through protests, collective mobilization, land occupation, legal advocacy, and the activation of customary institutions. Scott (1985) argues that subordinated groups frequently develop strategies of resistance to challenge domination and protect access to critical resources. Similarly, Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that actors draw upon different forms of capital—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic—in their efforts to maintain or contest positions within social fields. From this perspective, agrarian conflict can be understood as a contest between actors possessing unequal forms and levels of capital, authority, and legitimacy.

The agrarian conflict between indigenous communities in Ako Village and PT. Pasangkayu provides a compelling case for examining these dynamics. The conflict originated from overlapping claims over land that had historically been controlled and cultivated by local

communities but later became part of the company's plantation concession area. According to community narratives, the disputed land constitutes ancestral territory inherited across generations, whereas the company bases its claim on state-recognized permits and concession rights. This overlapping claim has generated a prolonged conflict that has persisted since 2008 and remains unresolved despite various mediation efforts.

Previous studies on agrarian conflict in Indonesia have predominantly focused on legal pluralism, land tenure disputes, customary land recognition, and conflict resolution mechanisms (Sukirno & Wibawa, 2024; Tohirin et al., 2026). While these studies offer important insights into the structural causes of conflict, relatively limited attention has been devoted to understanding how asymmetrical power relations influence community resistance and constrain the role of local institutions in conflict resolution. Furthermore, existing literature rarely examines how village governments and customary institutions navigate conflicting pressures between community interests and broader political-economic structures.

Empirical findings from Ako Village indicate that local communities have responded to these inequalities through various forms of resistance, including public protests, demands for customary land recognition, and efforts to reclaim disputed land. At the same time, village governments and customary institutions have attempted to advocate for community interests and facilitate dialogue among parties. However, their influence remains limited due to restricted authority and dependence on higher-level governmental decisions. These conditions suggest that local institutions possess social legitimacy but lack sufficient structural power to significantly alter conflict outcomes.

This study argues that the agrarian conflict between indigenous communities and PT. Pasangkayu is not merely a dispute over land ownership but a broader contestation over power, legitimacy, and resource access. By examining the interaction between power asymmetry, community resistance, and local institutional involvement, this research seeks to contribute to contemporary debates on agrarian governance and indigenous rights in Indonesia. Specifically, the study aims to analyze how power asymmetries shape agrarian conflict and influence community resistance strategies while exploring the roles of village governments and customary institutions in navigating unequal power relations in rural Indonesia.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design to examine power asymmetry and community resistance in the agrarian conflict between indigenous communities and PT. Pasangkayu in Ako Village, Pasangkayu Regency, Central Sulawesi. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore social phenomena, meanings, and experiences from the perspectives of participants within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the case study design is particularly useful for investigating contemporary social phenomena within real-life settings where the boundaries between context and phenomenon are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018).

The research was conducted in Ako Village, Pasangkayu Regency, where an agrarian conflict has persisted since 2008 due to overlapping claims over customary land between indigenous communities and PT. Pasangkayu. The case was selected because it provides an empirical context for examining how unequal power relations influence access to land, community resistance, and conflict resolution processes (Saputra, 2026).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews allowed the researcher to obtain detailed narratives regarding the origins of the conflict, land ownership claims, resistance strategies, and the involvement of local institutions. Observation was conducted to understand social interactions and conflict dynamics within the community, while documentary sources were used to verify information and provide contextual evidence regarding the conflict (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Informants were selected using purposive sampling. This technique is appropriate for qualitative research because it facilitates the selection of individuals who possess direct knowledge and experience relevant to the research problem (Patton, 2015). The informants included indigenous community members, village government officials, customary leaders, and other stakeholders directly involved in or affected by the conflict.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved organizing and categorizing information according to key themes, including land contestation, power asymmetry, community resistance, and institutional involvement. Subsequently, the data were presented in a narrative form to identify patterns and relationships among actors and events. Conclusions were continuously verified through interpretation and comparison across multiple sources of evidence.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied source triangulation by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentary evidence. Triangulation is widely recognized as an effective strategy for enhancing the validity and reliability of qualitative research findings (Denzin, 2017).

3. Historical Roots of Land Contestation

The agrarian conflict between the indigenous community of Ako Village and PT. Pasangkayu stems from competing claims over land ownership, territorial authority, and resource access. For the indigenous community, the disputed area constitutes ancestral land that has been inherited and cultivated across generations, forming the material basis of livelihoods as well as the symbolic foundation of collective identity. In contrast, PT. Pasangkayu derives its legitimacy from state-issued permits and plantation concession rights, which formally incorporate parts of the contested territory into the company's operational domain. The coexistence of these competing claims has generated a prolonged land dispute that reflects the broader tensions between customary tenure systems and state-centered land governance in Indonesia (Tohirin et al., 2026; Sukirno & Wibawa, 2024).

The historical basis of community claims is evident in the testimony of a customary leader:

“The community has been cultivating this land since the 1990s, long before the company arrived. Then the company claimed that the area was included in its concession. Before the company entered, we used this land for farming and everyday survival.” (Syarifuddin Ligo, interview, 2025).

This testimony illustrates that community claims are rooted in long-standing patterns of occupation, use, and social recognition rather than formal land titles. Such findings support Ribot and Peluso’s (2003) argument that access to resources is not solely determined by legal ownership but also by historically embedded social relations and mechanisms of control. In this sense, the dispute in Ako Village represents a contest between two different systems of legitimacy: one founded on customary occupation and collective memory, and the other based on state-backed legal authority.

The significance of land for the indigenous community extends well beyond its economic value. As articulated by the customary leader:

“This is customary land passed down from our ancestors. For us, it is not simply land for oil palm cultivation; it is our identity. Our ancestors are buried there, and there are sacred places that we continue to protect. Therefore, it is wrong to accuse us of encroaching on the land—we were here long before anyone else and have safeguarded this forest for generations.” (Syarifuddin Ligo, interview, 2025).

The statement highlights that land functions as a repository of historical memory, cultural continuity, and social identity. Rather than merely serving as an economic asset, land embodies a collective relationship between community members, their ancestors, and the territory they inhabit. This finding resonates with Peluso’s (2011) argument that agrarian disputes are fundamentally struggles over territory, identity, and authority. Consequently, the conflict in Ako Village should be understood not merely as a dispute over ownership but as a struggle for recognition in which indigenous communities seek acknowledgment of their historical presence, cultural rights, and territorial identity.

From this perspective, the persistence of the conflict reflects the incompatibility between legal-administrative recognition and customary understandings of land tenure. As long as state institutions privilege formal concession rights while overlooking historical land occupation, the conflict is likely to remain unresolved. Therefore, the roots of conflict in Ako Village lie not only in overlapping territorial claims but also in competing definitions of legitimacy and justice.

4. Manifestations of Power Asymmetry

One of the most significant findings of this study is the existence of profound power asymmetries between the indigenous community of Ako Village and PT. Pasangkayu. These asymmetries are reflected in unequal access to legal authority, administrative mechanisms, economic resources, and political influence. While the company benefits

from formal institutional recognition and state-backed concession rights, local communities rely primarily on customary legitimacy and collective solidarity. Such unequal conditions place the two actors in fundamentally different positions within the conflict arena and shape their respective capacities to influence outcomes (Fattarawati, 2025; Sudaryo Putra et al., 2025).

The unequal distribution of power is evident in community narratives concerning the entry of the company into the disputed territory:

“They entered with location permits and permits issued by the local government. There was never any proper consultation with us. When they started clearing our customary forest, where we collected rattan and sago, we were never involved in any discussions.” (Panggo, interview, 2025).

This statement demonstrates that indigenous communities were largely excluded from decision-making processes affecting their livelihoods and territorial rights. Rather than being recognized as legitimate stakeholders, local residents became passive recipients of decisions made through administrative and legal structures over which they had little influence. Such exclusion reflects a broader pattern of governance inequality in which formal institutions privilege actors with greater economic and political resources.

From Bourdieu’s (1986) perspective, this imbalance can be interpreted through unequal distributions of capital. PT. Pasangkayu possesses substantial economic capital through its investment capacity, legal capital through concession rights and permits, and political capital through its ability to navigate bureaucratic structures. In contrast, the indigenous community primarily mobilizes social capital in the form of collective solidarity and cultural capital derived from customary knowledge, territorial memory, and traditional authority. Although these forms of capital strengthen community cohesion, they are often insufficient to counterbalance the institutional resources available to corporate actors.

Importantly, power asymmetry in this case extends beyond resource inequality. It also concerns the ability to define legitimate knowledge and authoritative narratives regarding land ownership. State institutions tend to recognize documentary evidence and concession permits as valid claims, while oral histories and customary tenure systems receive limited legal recognition. Consequently, legal authority becomes a mechanism through which existing inequalities are reproduced and normalized. This dynamic supports Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power, where dominant actors impose particular classifications of reality that appear legitimate and universally accepted.

The findings therefore suggest that agrarian conflict in Ako Village cannot be reduced to a competition over land ownership. Instead, it should be understood as a struggle over authority, representation, and the power to define legitimate claims to territory. The persistence of conflict reflects the enduring influence of structural inequalities embedded within legal and political institutions, which systematically favor formal concession holders over indigenous communities despite the latter’s longstanding historical connection to the land.

5. Community Resistance and Land Reclamation Strategies

The findings reveal that the indigenous community of Ako Village did not passively accept the expansion of corporate control over their ancestral territory. Instead, community members developed multiple forms of resistance aimed at safeguarding customary land rights and challenging what they perceived as an unequal distribution of power in the governance of agrarian resources. Resistance emerged through collective mobilization, public protests, land reclamation initiatives, and continuous demands for the formal recognition of customary rights. These actions illustrate that local communities are not merely victims of structural inequalities but active agents capable of mobilizing social and cultural resources in defense of their territorial claims.

One of the most significant findings is that community resistance did not initially take the form of direct confrontation. Rather, local residents first attempted to resolve the dispute through dialogue and collective deliberation. However, the perceived ineffectiveness of formal communication channels eventually encouraged more confrontational strategies.

As one community member explained: “Actually, from the beginning, we only wanted to sit together and discuss the matter through deliberation, but nobody ever responded to us. That is why we carried out the road blockade, so that our voices would finally be heard.” (Panggo, interview, 2025).

The statement demonstrates that resistance emerged not because communities rejected negotiation, but rather because they experienced exclusion from decision-making processes that directly affected their livelihoods. From Scott’s (1985) perspective, such actions can be understood as forms of collective resistance developed by subordinated groups confronting institutional arrangements perceived as unjust. Resistance, therefore, should not be interpreted solely as opposition to authority but as an attempt to establish alternative channels of political participation when institutional mechanisms fail to accommodate local grievances.

Furthermore, the emergence of collective action in Ako Village illustrates how community resistance functions as a mechanism for reclaiming political visibility. In many agrarian disputes, marginalized communities often lack access to formal institutions capable of addressing their demands. Consequently, public demonstrations and direct actions become strategic tools through which communities force dominant actors to acknowledge their existence and interests. Similar patterns have been documented in other agrarian conflicts in Indonesia, where resistance serves not only as a means of defending land rights but also as a struggle for recognition, participation, and justice (Afrizal & Berenschot, 2022; Fattarawati, 2025).

The study also found that resistance generated tangible outcomes despite the persistence of unresolved disputes. Community mobilization contributed to the recovery of a portion of the contested land, demonstrating that resistance can alter local configurations of power and resource control.

As stated by one informant: “Approximately 200 hectares have already been returned to the community, but there are still 548 hectares that remain unresolved. This land is our ancestral heritage and must be protected.” (Muslimin, interview, 2025).

This testimony is particularly important because it indicates that resistance is not merely symbolic. Instead, it constitutes a practical strategy capable of generating material outcomes and reshaping patterns of land access. In this context, resistance becomes a political instrument through which communities renegotiate power relations that have historically favored corporate actors. Scott (1985) argues that subordinate groups frequently employ both overt and covert forms of resistance to challenge domination and defend their access to critical resources. The experience of Ako Village supports this argument by demonstrating how sustained collective action enabled local communities to recover part of the territory previously controlled by the company.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, resistance in Ako Village can also be interpreted as a struggle over capital within the agrarian field. While PT. Pasangkayu possesses greater economic, legal, and political capital, the community mobilizes social capital through collective solidarity and cultural capital through customary legitimacy and historical claims. These resources enable the community to maintain resistance despite unequal structural conditions. Therefore, the persistence of resistance reflects not only opposition to land dispossession but also the capacity of local actors to transform social and cultural resources into political leverage.

Overall, the findings suggest that community resistance constitutes a central dimension of agrarian conflict in Ako Village. Resistance functions simultaneously as a mechanism for defending territorial rights, challenging unequal power structures, and seeking recognition within a governance system that often privileges legally recognized actors over historically embedded communities. Consequently, resistance should be understood as a strategic response to power asymmetry rather than merely a reaction to land loss.

6. The Role of Village Government and Customary Institutions

The findings indicate that village government and customary institutions occupy a critical yet structurally constrained position within the agrarian conflict. Both institutions serve as intermediaries between local communities, corporate actors, and higher levels of government. However, despite their significant social legitimacy within the community, their ability to influence substantive conflict outcomes remains limited. This condition highlights an important contradiction between local legitimacy and institutional authority in contemporary agrarian governance.

The village government has primarily functioned as a facilitator rather than a decision-maker throughout the conflict resolution process. Village officials repeatedly communicated community grievances to district authorities and relevant stakeholders, yet their formal authority was insufficient to determine final decisions regarding land ownership and territorial claims.

As explained by the Village Head: “At the village level, we can only facilitate. We convey the community’s complaints and demands to the relevant parties. However, the final decision is beyond our authority because it is determined at higher administrative levels, either at the district or provincial level.” (Village Head of Ako, interview, 2025).

This statement illustrates the institutional limitations faced by village governments in agrarian disputes. Although village authorities possess detailed knowledge of local conditions and maintain close relationships with affected residents, they remain dependent on higher-level institutions that hold formal decision-making power. From the perspective of governance studies, this situation reflects the vertical fragmentation of authority frequently observed in land governance systems, where responsibility for conflict management is decentralized while decision-making authority remains highly centralized.

The limited role of local institutions is also evident in mediation efforts involving both community representatives and the company. According to a village official:

“Mediation involving both the company and the community has never produced a clear agreement regarding the status of the land. Each side continues to defend its own claim, making it difficult to reach a mutual agreement.” (Rika, Head of Government Affairs Section, interview, 2025).

The inability of mediation processes to generate durable agreements reveals that agrarian conflicts cannot be resolved solely through facilitated dialogue when significant inequalities exist between the disputing parties. The findings suggest that mediation mechanisms often operate within a broader structure characterized by unequal access to legal authority and institutional resources. Consequently, mediation may reproduce rather than reduce existing power asymmetries when underlying structural inequalities remain unaddressed.

Customary institutions play a different yet equally important role. Unlike village governments, customary authorities derive legitimacy from collective memory, ancestral history, and cultural recognition rather than administrative authority. Their primary contribution lies in maintaining the historical narrative of land ownership and reinforcing community solidarity around customary territorial claims.

This role is reflected in the testimony of a customary leader: “This is customary land passed down from our ancestors. For us, it is not simply land for oil palm cultivation; it is our identity.” (Syarifuddin Ligo, interview, 2025).

From Bourdieu’s (1986) perspective, customary institutions possess significant symbolic capital derived from community recognition and cultural legitimacy. However, the influence of such symbolic capital remains restricted when it is not adequately recognized within formal legal frameworks. As a result, customary institutions enjoy high legitimacy at the local level but possess relatively limited capacity to influence state-centered decision-making processes.

The findings therefore highlight a fundamental tension between social legitimacy and structural authority. While village governments and customary institutions continue to support community claims, their effectiveness remains constrained by broader political and legal arrangements that privilege formally recognized actors. This situation represents one of the most important contributions of the present study. Rather than viewing local institutions merely as mediators, the findings demonstrate how their capacity to resolve agrarian disputes is fundamentally shaped by asymmetric power relations operating beyond the village level.

Ultimately, the case of Ako Village suggests that sustainable agrarian conflict resolution requires more than local mediation initiatives. It necessitates institutional reforms capable of strengthening the recognition of customary tenure systems, enhancing the authority of local institutions, and creating more equitable mechanisms of participation in land governance. Without addressing these structural asymmetries, conflict resolution processes are likely to remain procedural rather than transformative, leaving the underlying causes of agrarian disputes unresolved.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the agrarian conflict between the indigenous community of Ako Village and PT. Pasangkayu extends beyond a mere dispute over land ownership. Rather, it represents a broader contestation over legitimacy, authority, and access to agrarian resources shaped by unequal power relations. The conflict originated from overlapping claims between customary land tenure systems and state-recognized concession rights, creating a prolonged struggle over territorial control and recognition. Community narratives reveal that the disputed land embodies not only economic value but also historical memory, cultural identity, and ancestral heritage, making the conflict inseparable from broader questions of indigenous recognition and social justice.

The findings further reveal that power asymmetry constitutes a central mechanism shaping the dynamics of the conflict. PT. Pasangkayu occupies a structurally advantageous position through its access to legal authority, administrative recognition, economic resources, and political networks. In contrast, the indigenous community relies primarily on social solidarity, customary legitimacy, and collective memory to defend its territorial rights. These unequal distributions of economic, legal, political, and symbolic resources significantly influence both bargaining capacity and conflict outcomes, demonstrating that agrarian conflicts are fundamentally embedded within broader structures of inequality and governance.

Despite these structural constraints, the indigenous community has developed diverse forms of resistance, including collective mobilization, protest actions, land reclamation efforts, and the activation of customary institutions. The study shows that community resistance should not be understood merely as a reaction to land dispossession, but rather as a strategic mechanism through which marginalized actors renegotiate access, recognition, and authority within contested agrarian spaces. In this regard, resistance functions simultaneously as a defense of territorial rights and as a political strategy for challenging dominant structures of control.

The study also highlights the paradoxical position of village governments and customary institutions within agrarian conflict governance. While both institutions enjoy strong social legitimacy and play important roles in facilitating dialogue and representing community interests, their capacity to influence substantive outcomes remains constrained by broader legal and political structures. Consequently, local mediation mechanisms often operate within institutional arrangements that reproduce rather than transform existing power asymmetries.

The principal contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that the persistence of agrarian conflict in Ako Village is sustained not only by competing land claims but also by institutional arrangements that systematically reproduce unequal power relations. This finding advances existing scholarship on agrarian conflict by showing how power asymmetries simultaneously constrain formal conflict resolution mechanisms and stimulate community resistance as a means of defending indigenous territorial rights. Therefore, sustainable conflict resolution requires not only administrative clarification of land status but also stronger recognition of customary tenure systems, greater community participation in land governance, and institutional reforms capable of reducing structural inequalities between corporations and indigenous communities.

Acknowledgments

The authors sincerely thank the indigenous communities of Ako Village, Pasangkayu Regency, for their trust, participation, and willingness to share their experiences regarding land contestation and agrarian conflict. The authors are also grateful to village officials, customary leaders, and local stakeholders whose insights greatly enriched this study.

Appreciation is extended to the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Tadulako University, for providing academic support throughout the research process. The authors further acknowledge the anonymous reviewers and editors for their constructive comments and recommendations, which helped improve the quality and clarity of this manuscript. Any remaining errors or interpretations are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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