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Triadic legitimation in sacred space construction: how theology, indigenous authority, and state power negotiate religious built environments

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how theology, customary authority, and state regulation shape the construction of places of worship in Jayapura Regency, Papua. Using a qualitative multi-case design, it compares GIDI Jemaat Bukit Tabor, GKI Immanuel Ifar Gunung, and GPdI Sion Doyo Baru, selected to capture contrasting configurations of customary, state, and negotiated legitimacy. Informants included Ondoafi, church leaders, FKUB representatives, and affected indigenous community members. Interviews, participatory observations, and documents, including regulations, government records, and land-licensing materials, were analyzed through Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive process of data reduction, display, and conclusion verification; source triangulation strengthened credibility. Anchored in legal pluralism and indigenous governance, "grounding sacredness" is presented as an inductively derived concept describing how religious sacredness is negotiated with customary land sacredness and state legality. Across cases, conflicts centered on land rights, authority, recognition, and participation rather than doctrinal differences. The findings identify three interacting forms of legitimacy theological, customary, and legal-administrative that jointly condition social acceptance of religious construction. This framework positions sacredness as a practical mechanism of governance and clarifies why formal legality alone cannot ensure community acceptance.

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Introduction

The construction of places of worship is more than the provision of religious infrastructure. In plural societies, worship buildings can become sites where religious meaning, cultural identity, political authority, and legal regulation intersect. Studies of worship spaces in other settings show that such buildings may contribute to belonging, collective memory, and community identity (Bonfanti & Bertolani, 2023; Dimodugno, 2023). However, these studies do not address the Papuan indigenous context, where the social meaning of a church cannot be separated from customary land, ancestral relationships, and local structures of authority. Accordingly, the significance of places of worship in Papua should not be assumed from general sociological accounts but examined in relation to the specific institutions that authorize, contest, and sustain them.

This issue is particularly important in Papua because land is not understood only as a commodity or an administratively bounded asset. Customary territories are embedded in historical, cultural, social, and spiritual relationships, and rights over them are connected to collective identity and indigenous authority (Sakmaf et al., 2026; Swardhana & Jenvitchuwong, 2023). Research in Papua further shows that territorial boundaries and governance arrangements are often socially negotiated and adapted through customary

institutions rather than defined solely by formal state administration (Frank & Idris, 2026). At the same time, Christianity has been appropriated and transformed within indigenous social worlds, producing forms of faith that are intertwined with local identities and practices (Dale, 2024). The construction of a church therefore brings together at least three normative domains: Christian theological claims about sacred space, customary claims concerning land and authority, and state claims expressed through law and administration.

A central problem emerges from the tension between the normative promise of religious freedom and the practical conditions under which places of worship are authorized. In principle, state regulation is expected to provide legal certainty and protect the exercise of religion. In practice, however, Indonesia's regulatory regime for places of worship can impose administrative constraints and generate disputes over permits, recognition, and local approval (Crouch, 2010; Handoko & F. Intan, 2022). In Papua, this regulatory problem is compounded by the continuing authority of customary land systems. Formal permission may satisfy state requirements without resolving customary claims, while customary consent may provide social legitimacy without ensuring administrative recognition. This gap between das sollen the expectation that religious freedom is secured through formal legal protection and das sein the reality that religious construction remains contingent on overlapping legal, customary, and social authorities creates the empirical problem that motivates this study.

Jayapura Regency provides a particularly relevant setting for examining this contradiction. Churches operate within communities where customary land rights (hak ulayat), indigenous leadership, Christian institutions, and government administration coexist. From the perspective of churches, a place of worship is a site of faith, fellowship, and religious service. From the perspective of indigenous communities, the land on which it stands may embody ancestral inheritance, collective identity, and obligations to customary authority. From the perspective of the state, construction is governed through legal and administrative procedures. These sources of authority may reinforce one another, but they may also produce competing claims concerning who has the right to authorize construction, whose recognition is necessary, and which procedures make a religious building legitimate.

Existing scholarship has illuminated important parts of this problem but generally treats them separately. Studies of religious freedom and worship-place regulation in Indonesia emphasize legal procedures, minority rights, interreligious tensions, and the political consequences of regulatory implementation (Crouch, 2010; Handoko & F. Intan, 2022; Suhadi et al., 2024). Research on indigenous land governance emphasizes collective tenure, customary institutions, participation, and the historical relationship between indigenous communities and territory (Frank & Idris, 2026; Sakmaf et al., 2026; Swardhana & Jenvitchuwong, 2023). Studies of Christianity in Papua, meanwhile, show that Christian belief is not simply imposed upon local society but is reinterpreted through indigenous political and cultural life (Dale, 2024). What remains insufficiently explained is how these three domains are negotiated simultaneously when a sacred building is planned, authorized, contested, and socially accepted.

Related scholarship on law, religion, and conflict resolution also underscores the importance of dialogue, participation, and recognition of multiple sources of authority. Broader work on law and religion situates religious freedom within changing relations among states, religious institutions, and public life (Ferrari, 2015), while research on religious diversity highlights the governance challenges created by competing claims to legitimacy (Di Placido & Palmisano, 2025). Studies of conflict transformation further emphasize dialogue, local participation, and the recognition of legal, spiritual, and communal authority as conditions for sustainable resolution (LeBaron, 2025; Mekuriaw, 2025; Safi' et al., 2024; Schonthal et al., 2016; Smock, 2010; White, 2018). These insights are important, but they do not by themselves explain how negotiations over a church building in Papua are shaped simultaneously by Christian theology, customary land authority, and state administration.

This omission is theoretically significant because conflicts surrounding places of worship are often framed primarily as disputes between religious groups or as failures of state regulation. Such approaches can obscure the possibility that apparent religious conflict is rooted in land legitimacy, historical rights, indigenous authority, recognition, and participation in decision-making. Legal pluralism provides a useful starting point because it recognizes the coexistence of multiple normative orders, including state law and customary law. Indigenous governance scholarship further emphasizes collective authority and socially embedded decision-making, while the Papuan theological context requires attention to the religious meanings attached to church construction. Bringing these perspectives together allows the construction of places of worship to be analyzed as a process in which theological, customary, and legal-administrative legitimacy are produced and negotiated rather than as a purely regulatory or interreligious issue.

The novelty of this study lies in examining these three sources of legitimacy within a single empirical framework in the Papuan context. Previous studies have addressed worship-place regulation, indigenous land governance, or contextualized Christianity, but they have not adequately explained how Christian theological legitimacy, customary land sacredness, and state administrative authority interact in the construction of churches in Jayapura Regency. This study advances that literature by treating customary land not merely as a legal constraint or potential obstacle, but as a source of legitimacy that shapes the social acceptance of religious construction. It also develops the empirically grounded idea of "grounding sacredness" to describe how religious sacredness becomes embedded in negotiations over land, customary authority, administrative procedures, participation, and local power. The contribution is therefore primarily empirical and analytical: it identifies the conditions under which sacred-space construction becomes legitimate across overlapping systems of authority.

To investigate this problem, the study employs a qualitative comparative multi-case design involving three church sites in Jayapura Regency: Gereja Injili di Indonesia (GIDI) Jemaat Bukit Tabor, GKI Immanuel Ifar Gunung, and GPdI Sion Doyo Baru. The cases were purposively selected because they represent contrasting configurations of customary land recognition, state involvement, and negotiated social legitimacy. Data are drawn from in-depth interviews with customary leaders (Ondoafi), church leaders, FKUB representatives, and affected indigenous community members, supplemented by participatory observations and documentary materials such as regulations, government records, and land-licensing documents. The analysis uses Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification, while comparing evidence across cases through a framework that examines theological legitimacy, customary legitimacy, and legal-administrative legitimacy.

Operationally, the study has three objectives: (1) to identify how theological, customary, and state-based claims of legitimacy shape the construction of places of worship; (2) to compare how these forms of legitimacy interact across the three cases, particularly in relation to customary land, authority, recognition, and participation; and (3) to analyze how local actors negotiate and mediate disputes when the three systems produce competing claims. By linking these objectives to a comparative case strategy and an explicit triadic analytical framework, the study seeks to explain not only whether religious buildings obtain formal approval, but how they acquire or fail to acquire social legitimacy within an indigenous governance setting.

Method

This study used a qualitative comparative multi-case design to examine how Christian theological authority, Papuan customary authority, and state legal-administrative authority interact in the construction of places of worship in Jayapura Regency, Papua. The unit of analysis was the process through which a church construction site acquired, contested, or negotiated legitimacy. Each case was bounded by a specific church site, the actors directly involved in its construction or dispute, the customary-land context surrounding that site, and the relevant administrative and documentary record. This design was appropriate because the research sought explanatory comparison across distinct configurations of authority rather than statistical representation of all churches in Jayapura Regency.

The three cases Gereja Injili di Indonesia (GIDI) Jemaat Bukit Tabor, GKI Immanuel Ifar Gunung, and GPdI Sion Doyo Baru were purposively selected for maximum analytical contrast. Selection required that a site: (1) be located in Jayapura Regency; (2) contain a documented church-construction process involving questions of land, authorization, recognition, or conflict; (3) permit examination of interactions among religious institutions, customary actors, and/or state institutions; and (4) provide access to participants or documentary evidence with direct knowledge of the case. The cases were retained because they represent contrasting legitimacy configurations: customary-land and state involvement, customary donation combined with formal administrative requirements, and stronger state-based land provision and certification. Three cases therefore enabled structured replication across contrasting configurations while retaining the contextual depth required for within-case interpretation. The study makes analytic rather than statistical generalizations, and its claims are bounded to the mechanisms observed across these three cases.

Participants were recruited through purposive criterion sampling. Eligible participants had direct involvement in, decision-making authority over, or first-hand knowledge of at least one focal church-construction process. The sampling frame included customary leaders (Ondoafi and other relevant customary authorities), church or religious leaders, representatives of the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB) or government-related actors where relevant, and indigenous community members directly affected by the

construction process. Individuals without direct involvement or first-hand knowledge of the focal case were excluded. Sampling sought coverage of the three normative systems under study religious, customary, and state/legal-administrative rather than demographic representativeness.

Table 1. Sampling Matrix for the Three Cases

Case	Customary leaders	Church leaders	FKUB/state actors	Affected community	Total
GIDI Jemaat Bukit Tabor	3	1	2	15	21
GKI Immanuel Ifar Gunung	2	1	3	15	21
GPdI Sion Doyo Baru	3	1	2	15	21
Total	8	3	7	45	63

Recruitment continued until the study reached the field-defined stopping criterion and no substantively new code, actor perspective, or case-specific explanation emerged in two consecutive interviews within the relevant participant category. Saturation was assessed within each case and then across the three legitimacy domains so that the analysis did not rely disproportionately on a single institutional perspective. The final sample comprised 63 participants; the case- and role-specific distribution is reported in Table 1. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. The interview guide used the same core domains across cases while allowing case-specific follow-up questions: (1) the history and purpose of the church-construction process; (2) theological meanings attached to worship space; (3) customary land ownership, sacredness, and decision-making authority; (4) permits, certification, and other state administrative requirements; (5) sources of disagreement, recognition, and participation; and (6) negotiation, mediation, and conflict-resolution practices. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted.

Participatory observations focused on meetings, interactions, customary-religious practices, and other situations relevant to the negotiation of church construction. Observation covered 60 days, field notes recorded the setting, participating actors, interactions, claims to authority, decision-making practices, and points of agreement or dispute. Documentary analysis examined regulations, government records, land-licensing or certification materials, and other case-relevant documents identified in the manuscript. For replication, the final manuscript should report the number and type of documents reviewed for each case.

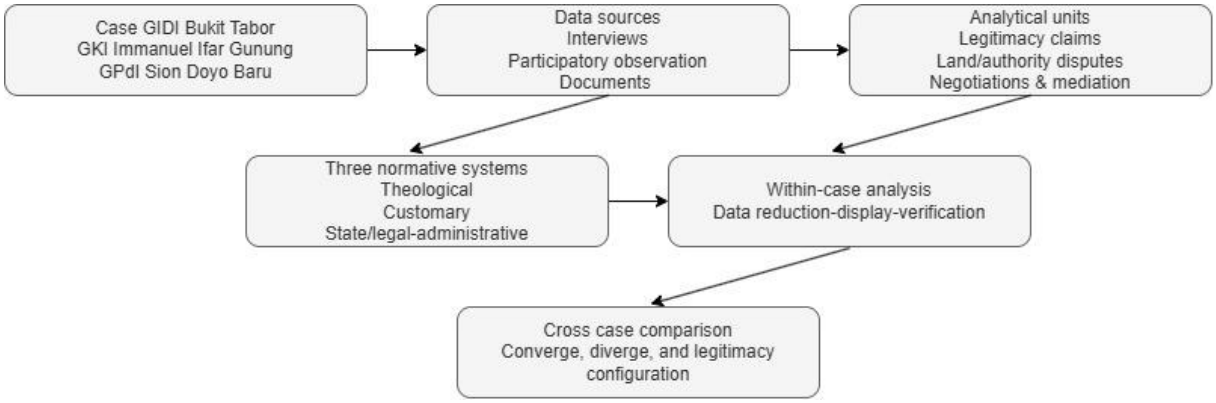


Figure 1. Research design, data sources, analytical units, and comparative analysis

Analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al., (2014) integrating data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification throughout the study. The coding framework combined concept-guided and inductive analysis. First, evidence was organized by case and data source. Second, segments were coded for the three a priori normative domains that structure the study: theological legitimacy, customary legitimacy, and legal-administrative legitimacy. Third, inductive codes were developed for recurrent mechanisms that emerged from the material, including land rights, sacredness, recognition, authority, participation, conflict, dialogue, mediation, certification, and local political influence. Fourth, codes were grouped into within-case displays linking actors, legitimacy claims, sources of tension, and resolution mechanisms. Fifth, cross-case matrices compared convergence and divergence among the three sites.

Conclusions were verified by returning to interview, observational, and documentary evidence and by examining negative or discrepant instances rather than relying only on confirming examples.

The primary comparative questions were: which source of legitimacy was invoked; by whom; in relation to which land, religious, or administrative claim; how that claim was recognized or contested; and what mechanism produced, failed to produce, or restored social acceptance. This procedure operationalized the study's triadic framework by linking each empirical claim to one or more of the three normative systems and then tracing how those systems interacted within and across cases. The resulting cross-case comparison supports theoretical inference about mechanisms of legitimation while avoiding claims of population-level generalizability. Research credibility was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing interview accounts with participatory observations and documentary evidence. Case-level interpretations were checked for consistency across actor categories and data types before cross-case conclusions were drawn.

Results and Discussions

The Dynamics of Theology, Customary Traditions, and the State in the Construction of Religious Houses of Worship

The findings indicate that the construction of religious houses of worship in Jayapura Regency represents an intersection between three normative systems: Christian theology, Papuan customary traditions, and state regulations. According to informants from GIDI Jemaat Bukit Tabor, these three dimensions are interconnected and cannot be separated from one another. Theology provides the spiritual foundation for the establishment of a church as a place of worship, fellowship, and religious service. Meanwhile, customary traditions provide social legitimacy, particularly regarding land ownership, customary rights (*hak ulayat*), and community acceptance. The state, on the other hand, provides administrative and legal legitimacy through formal regulations.

Therefore, the success of religious building construction is not determined solely by the religious needs of the congregation but also by the ability of the church to obtain recognition from customary communities and comply with state requirements. Gaining acceptance and recognition from local or customary communities is critical. Rejection of religious buildings can occur not only from different religious groups but also from within the same faith, often due to theological or social factors (Wahab et al., 2024).

The relationship between theology, customary traditions, and the state demonstrates that religion does not exist outside local cultural structures. Instead, religious institutions must engage with customary authorities and recognize the important roles of Ondoafi, tribal leaders, and indigenous communities in decision-making processes. Respect for customary authority is not perceived as contradictory to Christian teachings; rather, it is considered an essential condition for maintaining social harmony. This finding highlights that theological practice in Papua undergoes a process of contextualization, where religious beliefs are expressed through respect for local cultural structures and social relationships.

Thus, theology functions not only as a spiritual framework but also as a mechanism for building social legitimacy within indigenous communities. Christian theology adapts to local socio-cultural realities, especially in indigenous contexts. This process, known as inculturation, embeds Christian beliefs within indigenous traditions, making faith relevant to daily life and spiritual needs (Fung, 2005; Opas, 2017; Rwiza, 2025; Wolff, 2025). There is an ongoing dialogue and mutual learning between Christian theology and indigenous spiritualities, which helps overcome historical tensions and fosters cooperation (Jorgenson, 2020; Wolff, 2025).

A particularly significant finding emerges from the case of GKI Immanuel Ifar Gunung, which reveals differences between state-based and customary-based mechanisms of land legitimacy. The informant explained that the government requires an official permit mechanism (Izin Mendirikan Bangunan/IBM) for the establishment of religious buildings, whereas Papuan customary systems may recognize land donation for religious purposes without formal land transfer procedures. This condition reflects the existence of two parallel systems of legitimacy: customary legitimacy and state administrative legitimacy. A piece of land may be socially recognized as legitimately granted by indigenous communities, yet still require formal documentation according to state regulations. Conversely, state recognition alone does not necessarily eliminate the need for customary acceptance. Therefore, the construction of religious houses of worship in Jayapura occurs within a context of legal and normative pluralism.

The findings further reveal that tensions surrounding the construction of religious buildings are not necessarily caused by religious differences. In the GIDI case, conflicts were associated with different understandings of customary land rights, social relationships, indigenous authority, and concerns regarding cultural and religious transformation within local communities. Similarly, the GKI case indicates that tensions may arise when the interests of landowners or minority groups are not adequately respected. These findings challenge a simplistic interpretation of religious building conflicts as merely conflicts between religious groups.

Instead, they demonstrate that such conflicts are deeply connected with broader issues of recognition, ownership, authority, and participation in decision-making processes. Religious disputes may therefore represent underlying struggles over social legitimacy and cultural rights. Disputes over land and territorial sovereignty frequently involve religious and ethnic groups, with conflicts arising when different groups claim rights to the same land. These disputes are not only about property but also about cultural and religious legitimacy, as land is often tied to sacred sites and community identity (Engerman & Metzer, 2004; Freedman & Fridgen, 2007).

The study also identifies dialogue and deliberation as the primary mechanisms for negotiating relationships between theology, customary traditions, and the state. In the GIDI case, the church established communication with Ondoafi, tribal leaders, and local communities through customary meetings, open discussions, and collective decision-making processes. The church also involved local government institutions to ensure compliance with legal procedures. Similar patterns were found in the GKI case, where coordination with customary authorities and government agencies was emphasized as an important step in securing approval for religious construction.

These findings suggest that the construction of religious buildings requires a process of multilayered legitimacy-building. Churches cannot rely solely on government approval or customary consent; instead, they must create a bridge between different sources of authority. Legitimacy is not a singular concept but a multi-level and multi-sided process involving individuals, groups, and organizations. It is constructed at different levels and through various channels, including legal, social, and moral dimensions (Baranov et al., 2015). The legal framework in some contexts provides for public involvement in church building, highlighting the importance of community consent and participation in shaping the design and acceptance of new religious buildings (Ponomarenko, 2019).

The role of Christian theology in conflict resolution was also revealed as relational rather than doctrinal. The findings indicate that theological values are expressed through principles of peace, compassion, tolerance, brotherhood, and mutual respect. In the GIDI case, informants emphasized that churches must respect customary land rights, while indigenous communities should recognize religious freedom as part of citizenship rights. The government, meanwhile, is expected to maintain justice, social order, and religious harmony. In the GKI case, theology was associated with providing understanding regarding the legality and legitimacy of religious spaces. Therefore, theology functions within the public sphere as an ethical framework for maintaining peaceful relationships rather than merely as an internal religious doctrine.

The case of GPdI Sion Doyo Baru provides an additional perspective by demonstrating a different configuration of religious building legitimacy. In this case, the construction of the church was supported through government involvement, including land provision by the Jayapura Regency government and formal certification of the land. However, despite formal governmental support, challenges emerged when an individual attempted to claim the church land for personal ownership and influenced some members of the congregation not to support the construction process. This case demonstrates that formal legality does not automatically guarantee social acceptance and stability. Legal recognition must be accompanied by social consensus, community acceptance, and protection against competing interests. Various research findings can be summarized in the following table.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Legitimacy, Conflict Sources, and Resolution Mechanisms in the Construction of Places of Worship in Jayapura Regency

Church Name	Type of Legitimacy	Source of Tension	Resolution Mechanism	Theological Values Applied	Government Role
GKI Immanuel Ifar Gunung	Combination (Customary land donation and State IMB)	Discrepancies between state administrative requirements and	Coordination with customary authorities and government	Legality and legitimacy of religious spaces	Enforcing official permit mechanisms (IMB) and

Church Name	Type of Legitimacy	Source of Tension	Resolution Mechanism	Theological Values Applied	Government Role
		customary land recognition	agencies; dialogue and deliberation	as an ethical framework	ensuring compliance with legal procedures
GIDI (Unspecified congregation)	Combination (Customary land rights and state involvement)	Land rights disputes, social relationships, indigenous authority, and cultural transformation concerns	Communication with Ondoafi, tribal leaders, and local communities through customary meetings and open discussions	Respect for customary land rights, peace, compassion, tolerance, and brotherhood	Ensuring compliance with legal procedures and maintaining justice and social order
GPdI Sion Doyo Baru	State-based (Government land provision and formal certification)	Individual claims of private ownership over church land and internal congregational influence	Formal legal certification and pursuit of social consensus	Not in source	Provision of land by the Jayapura Regency government and formal land certification

Most significant empirical contribution of this theme is the identification of a three-layered legitimacy framework in the construction of religious houses of worship: theological legitimacy, customary legitimacy, and state legitimacy. These forms of legitimacy do not operate hierarchically but interact through continuous negotiation. Conflicts emerge when one form of legitimacy attempts to replace or ignore the others. The findings demonstrate that religious construction in Papua is not merely an implementation of religious freedom but a process of negotiating faith, indigenous authority, and citizenship.

Therefore, the construction of religious houses of worship represents a process of grounding sacredness within social realities, where religious meanings, customary values, and state regulations must coexist. The construction and use of these spaces inscribe symbolic dynamics into urban and social environments, reinforcing the dimension of transcendence and the connection between the sacred and everyday life (Ponomarenko, 2019). The construction of religious houses of worship is a process where sacredness is actively grounded in social realities through the interaction of religious meanings, customary values, and state regulations. This process is dynamic, context-dependent, and often contested, reflecting the complex ways in which sacredness is lived and negotiated within society (Salazar & Franco Salvi, 2011; Salura & Clarissa, 2020; Zhang et al., 2026).

The Sacredness of Customary Land and Its Negotiation among Religious Leaders, Customary Authorities, and Local Government.

Customary land is not merely understood as a physical space for building infrastructure but as a sacred entity containing historical, cultural, and spiritual meanings. Customary land is often regarded as sacred, governed by spiritual principles, religious beliefs, and ritual practices. It serves as a site for spiritual governance, ritual continuity, and is seen as a sacred entity that connects people to their ancestors and the spiritual world (Bamidele & Pikirayi, 2026; Bonye et al., 2025; Hamid et al., 2026; Northcott, 2012). Informants from GIDI Jemaat Bukit Tabor emphasized that customary land represents ancestral heritage, cultural identity, collective belonging, and the relationship between human beings, nature, and ancestors. Similarly, the GKI Immanuel Ifar Gunung informant described land as "life itself," emphasizing that land ownership is collective, sacred, and inherited across generations.

These findings indicate that the meaning of land among Papuan indigenous communities extends beyond economic value and reflects a profound social and spiritual relationship. Customary land rights are not just about physical ownership but also embody cultural traditions, practices, and collective memory. Land is managed according to customary laws and is integral to rituals and social cohesion (Runtuboi et al., 2020; Sakmaf et al., 2026). Therefore, any attempt to construct a religious building on customary land must first recognize the symbolic and cultural significance attached to that land.

An important finding of this study is the collective nature of customary land ownership in Papua. The GKI informant explicitly stated that customary land does not belong to individuals but belongs collectively to indigenous communities. This understanding differs significantly from the individual ownership perspective commonly applied within modern land administration systems. As a consequence, approval from

a single individual may not necessarily represent legitimate authorization from the broader customary community. Decisions concerning customary land must consider collective rights, indigenous structures of authority, and the historical relationship between communities and their territories. This finding explains why disputes over religious building construction may continue even when formal administrative documents have been obtained. What is being negotiated is not merely ownership of a physical asset called land, but rather collective identity, historical continuity, and social authority embedded within that land. The results of this study can be presented in the form of conceptual figures.

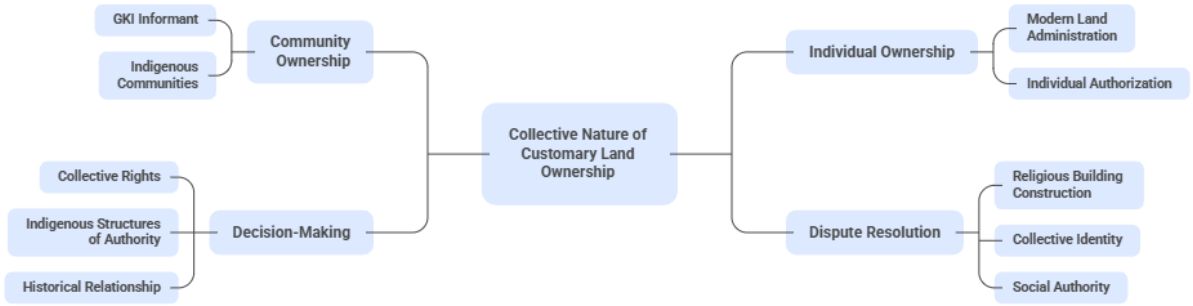


Figure 2. Collective Nature of Customary Land Ownership in Papua

Customary land is owned collectively by the indigenous community (customary law community unit), not by individuals. Rights are inherited and managed communally, reflecting the community's identity and heritage (Azis & Alputila, 2025; Laturette, 2023; Nuar & Lunkapis, 2019). Land tenure and management are regulated by local customs (adat), which dictate how land is used, inherited, and protected (Kurniawan & Hammar, 2018; Laturette, 2023; Nuar & Lunkapis, 2019). Recognition of customary institutions is crucial for legitimate decision-making. These structures often include elders, councils, or other traditional authorities who mediate land use and resolve disputes (Dako et al., 2024).

The sacredness of customary land has practical implications for the governance of religious building construction. Because land possesses historical and spiritual significance, churches are required to establish meaningful relationships with Ondoafi, tribal leaders, and customary landowners before initiating construction. In the GIDI case, this relationship was developed through respectful communication, customary meetings, visits to customary authorities, and discussions regarding the purpose and social benefits of the proposed religious building. Similar practices were found in the GKI case, where coordination and communication with multiple stakeholders were considered essential. These findings demonstrate that sacredness is not merely a symbolic concept but is translated into institutional practices through consultation, negotiation, and collective decision-making. Respect for sacred land is therefore manifested through social procedures that recognize indigenous authority.

The negotiation process further demonstrates that no single actor possesses absolute authority over customary land use. The church has a religious interest in providing worship facilities for its congregation; indigenous communities possess customary rights over ancestral territories; and the government maintains administrative authority through legal regulations. Churches and religious institutions often seek to establish worship facilities to serve their congregations. However, the process of establishing these facilities can be complicated by legal regulations and local conflicts, especially when these facilities are built on or near indigenous territories or sacred sites (Ardiansah, 2018; Van Coller, 2019).

Differences in perspective emerge because each actor operates based on different forms of responsibility and legitimacy. However, the findings indicate that these differences do not necessarily represent irreconcilable conflicts. Instead, they create a negotiation space where shared agreements can be developed. The GKI informant emphasized the importance of collective meetings to establish agreements regarding religious building construction. This demonstrates that land legitimacy in Papua is not determined exclusively through formal ownership but through processes of social recognition and collective acceptance.

A significant finding emerges from the statement of the GKI informant that customary ownership in Papua existed before the establishment of modern governmental structures; therefore, customary authorities must be respected. This statement highlights the importance of historical legitimacy as a foundation of indigenous authority. While the state possesses contemporary legal authority, indigenous communities derive legitimacy from historical continuity and ancestral relationships with the land. This explains why government regulations cannot simply replace customary mechanisms of recognition.

Land is central to Indigenous cultures, serving as a source of nourishment, strength, and sovereignty. These relationships are maintained through traditions, ceremonies, and stewardship practices passed down through generations (Atleo & Boron, 2022; Donaldson, 2022; Throne, 2020). Religious building construction in Papua takes place within a social landscape where indigenous authority predates modern state institutions. Therefore, state legality operates within an existing framework of historical and cultural legitimacy rather than replacing it.

The study also reveals a significant tension between customary recognition and formal legal requirements. The GKI case demonstrates that customary communities may consider land legally and socially granted for religious purposes, while state institutions may require additional administrative procedures to formalize ownership and construction rights. This condition reflects the coexistence of two different systems of legitimacy: communal legitimacy and bureaucratic legality. Customary recognition provides social acceptance, while state documentation provides formal legal certainty. However, either form of legitimacy alone may be insufficient. Formal documentation without customary acceptance may generate social resistance, whereas customary approval without administrative clarity may create legal uncertainty. Therefore, sustainable religious construction requires integration between customary mechanisms and state legal frameworks.

The GPdI Sion Doyo Baru case provides another perspective regarding the relationship between land legitimacy and conflict. Unlike the GIDI and GKI cases, this case involved stronger government-based land legitimacy, including land allocation by the Jayapura Regency government and formal certification. However, challenges still emerged when an individual attempted to claim the church land as personal property and influenced some congregation members to oppose the construction process. This case demonstrates that land disputes are not resolved solely through certification. Legal documents must be supported by social recognition, institutional protection, and collective commitment. Interestingly, the church responded not only through administrative and social approaches but also through spiritual practices, including prayer and fasting, reflecting the religious interpretation of land-related conflicts.

The main empirical contribution of this theme is the finding that the sacredness of customary land functions as a governance mechanism rather than merely a cultural symbol. Land becomes sacred because it contains ancestral memory, collective identity, intergenerational responsibility, and social authority. Consequently, sacredness determines who should be involved, how decisions should be made, and what boundaries should guide land utilization. This study contributes a deeper understanding of religious building construction by demonstrating that two forms of sacredness must be negotiated simultaneously: the sacredness of the religious space as a place of worship and the sacredness of customary land as a space of indigenous life.

The construction of a church, therefore, does not simply occur on customary land but emerges through a relationship with customary land. This process represents a form of negotiated sacredness in which religious, cultural, and legal meanings are continuously constructed. Sacredness is not a static attribute of land but emerges from ongoing interactions between people and their environment. In some cultures, sacredness is a dynamic accommodation of beliefs, behaviors, and environmental affordances, suggesting that churches do not simply exist on customary land but are constituted through these relationships (Dillon, 2026). The process of constructing sacredness involves both religious and cultural practices, which are continuously negotiated and redefined as communities interact with their land.

The Dynamics of Local Power and Politics in the Mediation and Resolution of Religious Building Construction Disputes.

The findings indicate that local power and political dynamics play a significant role in shaping the process of religious house of worship construction in Jayapura Regency. However, the influence of political actors does not operate in a linear manner as either a supporting or obstructing factor. Instead, political involvement demonstrates an ambivalent character, depending on how power is exercised and whose interests are represented. In the GIDI Jemaat Bukit Tabor case, informants acknowledged that local political figures and elites possess considerable social influence and institutional connections that may facilitate the construction process. They can act as intermediaries between churches, customary communities, and government institutions, assist administrative procedures, contribute to maintaining public order, and support conflict resolution. This finding demonstrates that local political power can function as a form of social capital when it is oriented toward mediation and collective interests.

Nevertheless, the involvement of political interests may also complicate the construction process when religious issues become connected with competition for influence and group interests. The findings show that

disputes over religious buildings may become more complex when political actors use such issues to strengthen their social position, gain community support, or maintain particular interests. Political actors often leverage religious issues, including disputes over religious buildings, to bolster their legitimacy, consolidate power, or appeal to specific communities. This instrumentalization can intensify conflicts, as religious symbols and sites become tools for political mobilization and identity politics (Blackford, 2014; Gasparyan, 2025; Haynes & Hennig, 2013).

In this situation, the construction of a religious building is no longer perceived merely as a religious necessity but becomes embedded within broader struggles over authority and representation. The GKI Immanuel Ifar Gunung case provides an important illustration, where the informant expressed concern that powerful groups may prioritize the voices of the majority while neglecting certain regulations or the interests of other groups. This finding highlights that local politics may reproduce unequal power relations in decision-making processes.

The findings further reveal the existence of unequal distributions of authority among actors involved in religious building disputes. Although the state possesses formal administrative authority, this does not necessarily mean that government institutions are always the most influential actors in resolving conflicts. Disputes often involve overlapping claims to authority state, religious, and customary each with its own legitimacy and mechanisms for conflict resolution. The effectiveness of each depends on the context and the actors' perceived legitimacy within the community (Warman et al., 2023). The GKI case demonstrates that when disputes involve customary land, customary landowners may become the most influential actors in determining the outcome of negotiations. The informant emphasized that discussions must involve those who hold customary authority over the land. This finding illustrates that authority in Jayapura operates through multiple centers rather than a single hierarchical structure. Formal state power, religious authority, and customary legitimacy coexist and interact depending on the nature of the dispute.

The mediation process identified in this study reflects a multi-actor governance system. The findings from GIDI indicate that conflict resolution requires the involvement of various stakeholders, including Ondoafi and tribal leaders, church leaders, local government, community representatives, and the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB). Each actor performs a distinct role: customary leaders protect customary rights and social relationships; religious leaders promote peace and explain the purpose of religious construction; government authorities manage legal procedures and public order; and community leaders facilitate communication among different groups.

This pattern indicates that resolving disputes over religious buildings is not a state-centered process. Instead, it operates through a network of actors who possess different forms of legitimacy, authority, and social influence. Religious communities have developed their own principles and norms for resolving disputes, often relying on negotiation and mediation rooted in tradition and dogma, rather than formal state mechanisms (Mukhametzaripov & Kozlov, 2024). Disputes over religious buildings often carry symbolic weight, involving questions of cultural and religious pluralism, and are influenced by both local and national actors (Zhang et al., 2025).

The church occupies a unique position within this network because it simultaneously functions as an interested party and a mediator. On one hand, the church has a direct interest in obtaining recognition and constructing a worship facility for its congregation. On the other hand, the findings show that churches are expected to maintain peace, preserve social harmony, and build constructive relationships with customary authorities, government institutions, and surrounding communities. In the GKI case, the informant explicitly stated that the church acts as a mediator and contributes to resolving disputes. This dual role represents an important finding because it demonstrates that churches in Papua are not merely religious institutions seeking physical spaces for worship but also social actors involved in negotiating relationships among different sources of authority. Various research findings are illustrated in the following figure.

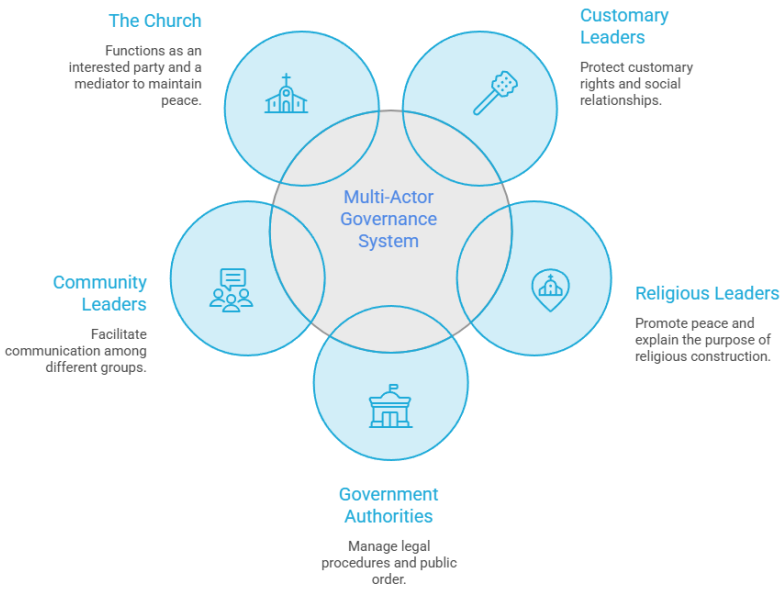


Figure 3. Multi-Actor Governance in Religious Building Disputes

The preferred mechanism for resolving disputes identified in this study is deliberative dialogue rather than coercive decision-making. Participants reflect on and respect the views of others, aiming for the best possible resolution (Afshar et al., 2008; Blanco Torres et al., 2026). The findings emphasize the importance of open discussions, collective meetings, respect for different religious and cultural perspectives, involvement of customary and religious leaders, avoidance of political provocation, and prioritization of social unity. Dialogue functions not only as a communication strategy but also as a mechanism for producing mutual recognition among conflicting parties. The objective is not simply to determine whether a church can be built, but to ensure that all actors connected to the land and social environment are acknowledged and included. Therefore, successful mediation depends largely on the quality of participation and acceptance among stakeholders rather than solely on administrative decisions.

The GPdI Sion Doyo Baru case provides an additional perspective on the role of informal power in religious building disputes. Although the available data do not explicitly identify this case as a political conflict involving formal political elites, it reveals how informal influence at the community level may affect construction processes. The findings indicate that an individual attempted to claim church land for personal ownership and influenced members of the congregation not to support the construction of the church building. This case expands the understanding of power beyond formal political institutions. Power may emerge from an individual's ability to influence perceptions, mobilize support, and shape community attitudes. Therefore, disputes over religious buildings may involve not only state actors and political elites but also local actors who possess social influence.

The main empirical contribution of this theme is the identification of a polycentric mediation model based on multiple sources of legitimacy. The resolution of religious building disputes in Jayapura is not controlled exclusively by the state, nor is it determined solely by religious institutions. Instead, authority is distributed among government agencies, churches, Ondoafi, customary landowners, community leaders, FKUB, and other influential actors. The most influential actor may vary depending on the nature of the dispute; when the issue concerns customary land, indigenous authorities may possess stronger legitimacy than formal administrative institutions. Indigenous or customary authorities often possess stronger legitimacy in resolving disputes over customary land compared to formal administrative institutions. This is because their authority is rooted in local customs, traditions, and community recognition, which are highly valued in matters concerning customary land rights (Medase & Sifuna, 2026; Seko & Soa, 2025; Suprianto, 2025).

This finding contributes to a deeper understanding of religious governance in indigenous contexts by demonstrating that conflict resolution operates through negotiation among multiple centers of authority rather than through a single dominant power structure. Across the three themes, this study demonstrates that the construction of religious houses of worship in Jayapura Regency is fundamentally a process of negotiating multiple forms of legitimacy. The findings reveal that a church building requires at least three interconnected forms of recognition: theological legitimacy from religious communities, customary legitimacy from

indigenous societies, and legal-administrative legitimacy from the state. These forms of legitimacy do not operate independently or hierarchically; rather, they continuously interact and shape one another.

The study contributes a conceptual understanding of "grounding sacredness" (*membumikan sakralitas*) as a process through which religious sacredness is negotiated within social, cultural, and political realities. Sacredness is not confined to theological meanings or religious symbols but becomes embedded in practical issues such as land ownership, customary authority, administrative procedures, community participation, and local power relations. The findings challenge conventional interpretations that frame religious building disputes primarily as conflicts between religious groups. Instead, this research demonstrates that such disputes are often rooted in deeper questions of land legitimacy, historical rights, indigenous authority, political representation, and recognition. Religious tensions may therefore represent broader struggles over whose values, rights, and forms of authority are acknowledged within a plural social environment.

The empirical novelty of this research lies in demonstrating that customary land sacredness is not an external obstacle to religious development but a central governance mechanism that determines whether religious construction can achieve social acceptance. Religious buildings become legitimate when religious sacredness is negotiated with indigenous sacredness and state legality. Therefore, the construction of religious houses of worship in Papua represents not merely the establishment of physical structures but the creation of negotiated spaces where theology, customary traditions, and state authority coexist.

However, the contribution of this study should primarily be positioned as an empirical contribution rather than a fully developed theoretical contribution. To strengthen the theoretical novelty, future analysis should further connect these findings with broader scholarly debates on legal pluralism, sacred landscapes, indigenous land governance, religious freedom, and state–society relations. In addition, because the GPdI Sion Doyo Baru case contains more limited narrative data compared with GIDI and GKI, theoretical claims should remain proportionate and grounded in the available evidence.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the construction of places of worship in Jayapura Regency, Papua, is not merely a process of establishing religious infrastructure but a complex negotiation among theology, customary traditions, and state authority. The findings reveal that the legitimacy of religious buildings depends on the interaction of three interconnected forms of recognition: theological legitimacy from religious communities, customary legitimacy from indigenous societies, and legal-administrative legitimacy from the state. These forms of legitimacy do not operate independently or hierarchically; rather, they continuously interact through negotiation processes. The study further shows that conflicts surrounding religious construction are not primarily caused by theological differences but are deeply related to issues of customary land ownership, historical rights, indigenous authority, social recognition, and participation in decision-making processes. The main contribution of this research is the development of the concept of "grounding sacredness", which explains how religious sacredness is negotiated within social, cultural, and political realities. Sacredness is not limited to theological meanings or religious symbols but becomes embedded in practical issues such as customary land ownership, indigenous authority, administrative procedures, community participation, and local power relations. The study highlights that customary land sacredness should not be viewed as an obstacle to religious development but as a governance mechanism that determines whether religious construction can achieve social acceptance. Religious buildings become legitimate when religious sacredness is harmonized with indigenous sacredness and state legality, creating negotiated spaces where theology, customary traditions, and state authority can coexist. Therefore, sustainable religious development in indigenous contexts requires recognition of multiple sources of legitimacy rather than the dominance of a single authority system.

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