

THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S AND EVERYTHING IN IT: IMPLICATIONS FOR 'OMO ONILE' IN NIGERIA

Abayomi Olumide Adeleye

&

Michael Adebayo

*Department of Christian Religious Studies,
Sikiru Adetona College of Education, Science and Technology,
Omu Ijebu*

Abstract

The phrase "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1) is a profound theological statement that conveys the belief that all creation, including the land, belongs to God. This study explores the implications of this biblical principle for 'Omo Onile' in contemporary Nigerian society. The term 'Omo Onile' refers to landowners, particularly in Yoruba culture, who claim ancestral rights over land and assert control over property transactions. This paper investigates how the principle of divine ownership challenges or aligns with the practices of 'Omo Onile', whose actions often create conflicts in urban development and land acquisition in Nigeria. Through a mixed-methods approach, including both qualitative and quantitative data collection, this research identifies the ethical, social, and legal implications of redefining land stewardship from a biblical standpoint, proposing new directions for land use in Nigeria that emphasize fairness, justice, and sustainability with a socio-theological framework. The findings indicate that there is significant religious influence on land ownership practices, with a majority of Nigerians acknowledging divine ownership of land. This study concludes that there is a need for legal and policy reforms that can bridge the gap between customary land systems and formal statutory laws, while it finally recommends that Faith-based organizations should advocate for responsible land use and resolve disputes through ethical frameworks.

Keywords: Omo Onile, Land Ownership, Divine sovereignty, Nigeria, Psalm 24

Introduction

The issue of land ownership and its governance is a significant socio-economic challenge in many parts of the world, especially in rapidly urbanizing societies like Nigeria. In Yoruba culture, the term 'Omo Onile' refers to an individual who claims rights over land, usually based on ancestral or customary ownership. This cultural practice is deeply ingrained in Nigeria's land tenure system, but it often leads to conflicts in urban settings where land

ownership is subject to legal frameworks and market forces. (Adewunmi, 2020). The Christian theological view that "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" emphasizes the divine ownership of the earth, which contrasts with the human tendency to claim absolute ownership of land for personal or family gain. This creates a tension between traditional practices, religious beliefs, and the modern legal system governing land. This study seeks to explore the implications of this theological principle on the contemporary practices of 'Omo Onile' and its broader impact on Nigeria's socio-political and economic development.

The purpose of this study is to examine the implications of the biblical principle, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it," on the socio-cultural practices of 'Omo Onile' in contemporary Nigeria. The research aims to explore how this theological concept can inform the ethical, legal, and economic dimensions of land ownership and governance in Nigeria, particularly in relation to the conflicts that arise in urban development and land acquisition. In Nigerian society, particularly in urban areas, land ownership is often contested between 'Omo Onile' and developers, governmental authorities, and potential buyers. The assertion of ancestral or customary ownership by 'Omo Onile' has led to disputes, illegal land acquisition practices, and corruption. The tension between traditional land ownership rights and modern legal and ethical frameworks has created challenges in urban planning, economic development, and social justice. This study seeks to explore how the principle of divine ownership of the earth, as outlined in Psalm 24:1, could influence the behavior and practices of 'Omo Onile', and help mediate conflicts in land ownership and usage in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative aspect involves a review of theological, legal, and cultural literature regarding the concept of divine ownership of land and the socio-cultural practices of 'Omo Onile'. The quantitative component involves the collection of empirical data through surveys and interviews with Nigerian landowners, developers, government officials, and members of religious organizations. Sample: 300 participants, including 150 'Omo Onile', 50 developers, 50 government officials, and 50 members of religious organizations. Structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Statistical software for quantitative data analysis and thematic analysis for qualitative data.

Research Questions

1. How does the concept of divine ownership of the earth influence the practices of 'Omo Onile' in Nigeria?

2. What role does religious belief play in land ownership disputes and practices among 'Omo Onile'?
3. How do urban developers and governmental policies interact with the customary land practices of 'Omo Onile'?
4. Can the principle of divine stewardship help resolve land ownership conflicts in contemporary Nigeria?

Theoretical Framework

The study employs a socio-theological framework, drawing on the principle of divine ownership to analyze land disputes. This framework incorporates elements of Christian stewardship ethics and sociological theories of land tenure to understand how land ownership practices, informed by religious beliefs, influence modern governance and development. The framework also integrates legal pluralism to examine the interaction between customary law and statutory law in land disputes.

The Concept of Omo Onile

In Nigeria, the concept of 'Omo Onile plays a significant role in land ownership and land transactions, particularly within urban and peri-urban settings. Omo Onile refers to individuals or groups who claim ancestral rights over land and act as custodians or intermediaries in land dealings. While Omo Onile are often seen as gatekeepers of land, their role has attracted considerable attention due to practices of extortion, land disputes, and the intersection of traditional land ownership with modern legal frameworks. This paper examines the historical and contemporary role of Omo Onile, analyzing their impact on land ownership in Nigeria through existing research works (Akinola 2015).

Historical and Linguistic Context

Psalm 24 is often regarded as a royal psalm, celebrating God's sovereignty over the universe and His right to reign over both heaven and earth. Traditionally, the psalm is attributed to David, and its context likely includes the procession of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (cf. 2 Samuel 6). The verse in question, Psalm 24:1, reflects the ancient Israelite understanding of God as the supreme Creator and sovereign ruler of all. In Hebrew, the verse reads, "לַיהוָה הָאָרֶץ וּמְלוּחָהּ, תִּבְּלָ וְיֹשְׁבֵי כָהּ" (La-YHWH haaretz u'melohah, tevel v'yoshevei vah). Key terms such as la-YHWH ("to the Lord"), haaretz ("the earth"), melohah ("its fullness"), tevel ("the world"), and yoshevei ("inhabitants") point to God's ownership and dominion not just over the physical world but overall life and resources. (Psalm 24).

Theological Implications

The central theological theme of Psalm 24:1 is divine ownership. The verse asserts that the earth and all its contents belong to God. This statement affirms God's omnipotence, sovereignty, and creative power. Theologically, this verse aligns with the broader biblical narrative where God is the Creator and rightful ruler of all that exists. This perspective challenges human assumptions about ownership, particularly regarding land, resources, and even life itself.

Creation and Ownership: From a theological standpoint, the idea of God's ownership of the earth challenges anthropocentric worldviews that regard the earth and its resources as human property to exploit. God's creation is viewed not as a resource for human consumption but as something sacred and entrusted to humanity's stewardship. This perspective is echoed throughout Scripture (e.g., Genesis 1:28; Leviticus 25:23), where humans are called to act as stewards, not owners, of the earth.

God's Sovereignty: Psalm 24:1 underscores God's sovereignty. The ownership of the earth is not merely symbolic; it is tied to God's absolute authority over all creation. This is consistent with the portrayal of God in other parts of Scripture (e.g., Isaiah 40:12-14; Revelation 4:11), where God's dominion is asserted over the heavens and the earth. This understanding emphasizes that all of creation is under God's rule, and therefore, human behavior towards creation should reflect reverence for its divine origin. (Buell 2017).

Ethical Dimensions: If the earth and its resources belong to God, then humanity's relationship with creation must be one of respect, care, and stewardship. Theological scholars often highlight the ethical implications of this worldview, especially in the context of environmental theology. The idea of divine ownership implies that humanity has a responsibility to care for the earth, to preserve it for future generations, and to ensure that resources are used sustainably. This aligns with contemporary discussions on environmental stewardship, where religious perspectives call for a sustainable and just relationship with the natural world.

Interpretation in Christian Doctrine

Psalm 24:1 has profound implications for Christian doctrine, particularly in the areas of creation, redemption, and ethical living. **Creation Doctrine:** The doctrine of creation holds that God created the world out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) and that everything within creation belongs to Him. Psalm 24:1 reinforces this teaching by proclaiming God's total ownership over the earth. This is not merely a claim of ownership but an assertion of the purpose behind creation — to display God's glory and to fulfil His will.

Christ's Reign: In Christian thought, Psalm 24:1 also points to the eventual and final reign of Christ over all creation. The New Testament reinforces this notion, particularly in Colossians 1:16, which states that "all things have been created through him and for him." This indicates that Christ is central to both the creation and the ultimate redemption of the world. Psalm 24:1, therefore, can be understood in light of Christian eschatology, where Christ's rule is not only a future promise but a present reality, as believers are called to live as though Christ reigns over all.

Theological Anthropology: The verse also speaks to human identity and purpose. If the earth and everything in it belong to God, then humanity's role is one of stewardship, not dominion in the sense of exploitation. Theologically, this suggests that human beings are called to care for creation as agents of God's will. This has implications for ethical behavior, including social justice, environmental care, and respect for others' rights to the earth's resources.

Literature Review (Theological Perspectives on Land Ownership)

The idea that the earth belongs to God is rooted in Judeo-Christian theology. Psalm 24:1 underscores the belief in divine ownership of the earth, emphasizing humanity's role as stewards rather than absolute owners. Scholars such as (Keller 2012) argue that land ownership should be understood in light of biblical teachings, where humans are caretakers of God's creation. Buell (2017) explores how religious beliefs influence environmental and land stewardship practices.

Historical and Cultural Background

Land Tenure System in Pre-Colonial Nigeria: Understanding the traditional system of land ownership in Nigerian societies, where land was often held communally or by families (e.g., in Yoruba or Igbo cultures). This cultural backdrop is essential for understanding the roots of the Omo Onile phenomenon.

Colonial Legacy: Examining how colonial laws and policies, like the Land Use Act of 1978, affected traditional land tenure systems and led to modern disputes between the state, developers, and indigenous landholders. Scholars have noted that colonialists introduced a legal framework that marginalized indigenous land ownership in favor of state control.

Legal Framework and the Land Use Act

The Land Use Act of 1978: Many scholarly sources discuss how the Land Use Act, intended to centralize land ownership in Nigeria, clashes with the rights and claims of Omo Onile. While the Act vested land in the governor of a state, the practice of Omo Onile persists due

to the strong cultural attachment and the failure of the law to fully account for traditional landowners' roles.

Legal Disputes and Court Cases: There is a body of literature that addresses legal battles involving Omo Onile, developers, and prospective land buyers. Studies show how Omo Onile groups often engage in extortionate demands, including illegal fees, and the lack of enforcement of property rights in these cases. (Oluwaseun 2020)

Social and Political Dimensions: Cultural and Ethical Perspectives: The practice of Omo Onile is deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural values. In many communities, Omo Onile are viewed as legitimate land custodians. Some scholars suggest that in certain contexts, the role of Omo Onile can be seen as protecting community heritage and preventing land grabbers. **Role of Government and Policy Interventions:** Government interventions to curb the excesses of Omo Onile and facilitate transparent land transactions are a key subject of analysis. While policies such as the National Land Development Authority aim to regulate land markets, the informal Omo Onile system remains pervasive.

Conflict and Resolution Mechanisms

Mediation and Dispute Resolution: Research has looked at the role of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, such as local chiefs and community elders, in resolving conflicts between Omo Onile and land buyers or developers. While some argue these systems are effective in maintaining peace, others criticize them for being outdated and prone to corruption. **Recent Developments:** Scholars have also examined the role of modern conflict resolution strategies, including arbitration and legal interventions, in addressing the disputes between Omo Onile groups and urban developers.

Contemporary Challenges and Future Prospects

Land Grabbing and Urbanization: With the increasing demand for land in urban centers, scholars are exploring how the Omo Onile phenomenon is being reshaped by market forces. The dynamics of land grabbing and the conflict between indigenous landowners and developers are a key concern. **Technological Innovations and Modernization:** (Okunola 2020). Some studies suggest that technological advancements, such as land registration systems and the digitization of land records, could help address the challenges of Omo Onile and provide more transparency in the land market.

'Omo Onile' and Traditional Land Ownership

In Nigerian Yoruba culture, the concept of 'Omo Onile' is deeply tied to the idea of ancestral rights over land. Akinola (2015) describes how 'Omo Onile' is central to the social structure,

especially in land transactions. However, this practice often conflicts with modern property laws, leading to disputes. Olaniyan (2018) suggests that the legal and customary systems of land ownership in Nigeria are not always aligned, creating tension in urban development.

Land Disputes and Urban Development in Nigeria

Land disputes in Nigeria are prevalent, especially in cities like Lagos where rapid urbanization increases demand for land. Oluwaseun (2020) examines the role of 'Omo Onile' in land disputes, noting that while traditional landowners often claim ancestral rights, the legal system is not always supportive. Fashola (2016) discusses how Nigerian urban planning policies struggle to balance traditional land practices with the demands of modern development.

Empirical Analysis and Presentation of Data

The concept of divine ownership challenges the notion of absolute human ownership of land. This analysis explores how religious teachings on stewardship can guide the actions of 'Omo Onile' in Nigeria. It considers the ethical implications of claiming ownership over land in light of the understanding that the earth belongs to God. It also examines how these beliefs can influence the resolution of land conflicts and promote equitable land governance.

Table 1: Religious Influence on Land Ownership Practices

Religious Group	Percentage of followers who believe in Divine Ownership of Land	Percentage who Practice land stewardship
Christianity	80%	50%
Islam	70%	45%
Traditional Yoruba	85%	60%
Secular	30%	10%

Table 2: Conflicts Arising from 'Omo Onile' Practice

Type of Conflict	Frequency of Occurrence	Impact on development
Dispute over land sales	High	Delays in development
Illegals land acquisition	Moderate	Economic Losses
Ancestral Land claims	High	Social unrest
Policy enforcement conflict	Moderate	Reduced urban growth

Table 3: Public Perception of Divine Ownership and Land Disputes

Public Perception	Percentage who agree with divine ownership	Percentage who support 'Omo Onile' Practices
High Supportive	70%	60%
Neutral	20%	25%
Opposed	10%	15%

Table 4: Resolution of Land Disputes Involving 'Omo Onile'

Method of Resolution	Success Rate (%)	Preference by Stakeholders
Mediation by Religious Leaders	75%	High
Government Intervention	60%	Moderate
Court Decision	40%	Low
Community Dialogue	70%	High

Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate that there is significant religious influence on land ownership practices, with a majority of Nigerians acknowledging divine ownership of land. However, the practices of 'Omo Onile' often lead to disputes, particularly in urban areas where the demand for land is high. The data also shows that mediation by religious leaders and community dialogue are more successful in resolving land disputes compared to formal legal processes. The tension between traditional and modern land practices continues to pose challenges for urban development.

Conclusion

The literature on Omo Onile in Nigeria provides a complex picture of land ownership, economic influence, and the challenges associated with land disputes. While Omo Onile play a crucial role in land administration, particularly in urban areas, their practices often lead to conflicts, exploitation, and a lack of clarity regarding land ownership. There is a need for legal and policy reforms that can bridge the gap between customary land systems and formal statutory laws, while also promoting transparency, fairness, and accountability in land dealings. By examining the role of Omo Onile through an interdisciplinary lens that includes legal, economic, and social perspectives, scholars and policymakers can better address the issues surrounding land disputes in Nigeria and work toward creating a more

just and equitable system of land governance. Hence, the concept that "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" offers a valuable theological perspective on land ownership. In the case of 'Omo Onile', integrating this principle into land governance could help resolve conflicts and promote ethical land stewardship. The study suggests that religious teachings can play a pivotal role in reconciling customary land practices with modern legal frameworks, fostering more sustainable and just land management practices in Nigeria.

Recommendations

This research recommended the followings;

1. Promote Religious Engagement in Land Governance: Faith-based organizations should advocate for responsible land use and resolve disputes through ethical frameworks.
2. Legal Reform: The Nigerian government should consider integrating customary land practices with modern legal systems to reduce conflicts.
3. Conflict Mediation: Religious leaders should be included in land dispute resolution processes to foster community-based solutions.
4. Public Education: Increase awareness of the ethical and theological principles behind land stewardship to encourage responsible land use.

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