

Public Service Bureaucracy and the Tradition of Nobility: Cultural Resistance to the New Public Service Ethos

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the influence of aristocratic traditions on leadership and public service bureaucratic practices in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, and examines the forms of cultural resistance that hinder the implementation of the *New Public Service* (NPS) ethos. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, then analyzed thematically using a Weberian theoretical framework and the NPS paradigm. The results show that aristocratic traditions are not merely a cultural identity but also a source of political and administrative legitimacy that shapes paternalistic leadership styles and reinforces patron-client patterns within the bureaucracy. In public service practices, formal procedures such as SOPs and digital systems often experience decoupling from informal mechanisms that still emphasize personal closeness and status symbols. This cultural resistance creates a paradox: the bureaucracy appears institutionally modern, but its practices remain patrimonial. This study emphasizes that bureaucratic reform in regions with a noble heritage must consider the local cultural context, by reinterpreting aristocratic values as social capital to support participatory, inclusive, and egalitarian public services. These findings provide theoretical contributions to contextual public administration studies as well as practical implications for bureaucratic reform strategies in similar areas.

Keywords: *Tradition, Bureaucracy, NPS, Resistance, Patron-client*

INTRODUCTION

New Public Service (NPS) paradigm faces a fundamental contradiction between the ideals of an egalitarian-participatory bureaucracy and local socio-cultural realities still rife with patrimonialism, feudalism, and patron-client practices (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Purwanto, 2020). Post-1998 reforms, the bureaucracy was indeed directed to be more transparent, accountable, and oriented towards the public interest (Dwiyanto, 2021; Nasrullah & Saharuddin, 2022). However, the implementation of these ideals is often hampered because the logic of tradition and personal relationships remain the primary references in government practice, so that reforms often stop at procedural aspects without addressing substantive changes in the ethos of public service.

The context of Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, offers an interesting illustration of the dynamic interaction between aristocratic traditions and modern bureaucracy. Bone

has a long history as the center of the Bugis kingdom, where the nobility system is deeply embedded in the social structure of society. Noble descent not only serves as a cultural identity but also influences leadership patterns, political legitimacy, and bureaucratic governance (Rahman, 2021; Kristiadi, 2021). In practice, the presence of the Bone Regent, who hails from aristocratic circles, creates the perception that the regional bureaucracy often serves as an extension of past aristocratic leadership traditions, rather than simply a modern public institution. The view of some Bone residents that "you cannot become a Regent if you are not of *Arung descent*" demonstrates the existence of cultural barriers governing access to the highest political positions in the region. This raises critical questions about the extent to which meritocracy and the principles of modern public service are truly implemented in the local bureaucracy.

This phenomenon was evident in the 2024 Bone Regent Election, where all registered candidates bore the noble title "Andi." This title is not merely a status symbol, but a strong indicator of how aristocratic traditions still influence political legitimacy and public perception of prospective leaders. The title carries broad socio-political consequences, as it implicitly emphasizes the values of hierarchy, personal loyalty, and respect for authority that have been established over generations.

The battle of the "Andi" is not just a political competition, but also a stage where the tradition of nobility is tested, if one of them is elected, he will occupy a position as a public servant, a role that historically contradicts the custom of nobility who are more often served than serving. Furthermore, modern bureaucracy demands the implementation of the principles of *good governance* and *public service innovation* (Prasojo & Kurniawan, 2020; Suwondo & Ratminto, 2019), emphasizing responsive, accountable, and participatory services. However, ingrained traditional norms such as the *Akkarungeng (Wari') hierarchy*, personal loyalty, and symbolic respect for traditional figures make the bureaucracy have to walk a fine line between reform and tradition.

This often results in bureaucratic reforms becoming mere administrative formalities, failing to address the root causes of organizational culture, which remains oriented toward elite interests. This cultural resistance is evident in public service practices. Employee loyalty is directed more toward political patrons or aristocratic leaders than toward citizens as the subjects of service (Wahyudi & Hidayat, 2019; Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2022). Bureaucratic position placement often follows the logic of patronage, not meritocracy. Furthermore, technology-based public service innovations and citizen participation are often seen as shifting the authority of local leadership traditions, often leading to obstacles in implementation.

Thus, it not only analyzes the problems of regional bureaucracy but also critiques how local culture can become a factor in resistance to the reform agenda. It is important to understand that the failure of bureaucratic reform is not only due to institutional or regulatory weaknesses, but also due to the lack of a cultural approach capable of harmonizing local values and the principles of *the New Public Service*.

Based on the description above, this research focuses on two main questions: How does the tradition of nobility influence the leadership and practices of public service

bureaucracy in Bone Regency? And to what extent does this cultural resistance become an obstacle in implementing the *New Public Service ethos*? In line with the formulation of the problem, this study aims to analyze the influence of the noble tradition on leadership patterns and public service bureaucracy in Bone Regency, as well as examine the forms of cultural resistance that hinder the implementation of the *New Public Service ethos* in regional bureaucracy.

The urgency of this research arises from the fact that bureaucracy in Indonesia, particularly in regions with a strong aristocratic heritage such as Bone Regency, often faces a dilemma between local traditions and the demands of modernizing public services. Aristocratic traditions, rooted in local social and cultural structures, have the potential to influence decision-making patterns, bureaucratic control mechanisms, and interactions between government officials and the public. Meanwhile, the *New Public Service ethos* emphasizes participation, accountability, and public services that are responsive to community needs. The tension between these two aspects can create cultural resistance that slows bureaucratic reform and public service innovation. Therefore, a thorough understanding of these dynamics is crucial not only for the development of public administration theory but also for the practice of improving local government governance.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the interaction between aristocratic traditions and the *New Public Service ethos*, a combination that has not been widely explored in the local Indonesian context. This research offers a contextual approach to analyzing how traditional values influence leadership and bureaucratic patterns, and identifies forms of cultural resistance that may hinder the implementation of modern public service principles. Thus, the research results are expected to provide not only theoretical contributions but also serve as a strategic reference for policy formulation and bureaucratic reform in Bone Regency and other regions with similar cultural backgrounds.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach, because its main objective is to understand in depth how aristocratic traditions shape leadership and public service bureaucratic practices in Bone Regency. The choice of ethnography is based on the belief that bureaucratic phenomena cannot be understood solely through formal structures and regulations, but also through symbols, cultural practices, and daily social interactions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bone Regency was chosen because it is one of the centers of Bugis culture, with aristocratic traditions that still strongly influence local political and bureaucratic life.

Data collection was conducted through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted both in government offices and during traditional ceremonial events and public service activities, allowing researchers to capture symbolic nuances such as the use of noble titles, patterns of respect, and hierarchical etiquette (Triadi, 2019). In-depth interviews were directed at the regent as a representative of aristocratic leadership, bureaucratic officials, public service staff, and

community leaders. Informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques considering experience and relevance, while snowballing techniques helped expand the network of informants who understand patronage and power dynamics within the bureaucracy (Spradley, 2016). Document analysis included regional regulations, bureaucratic archives, and local media reports that capture narratives of nobility in government practices.

Data analysis was conducted through a thematic approach, combining ethnographic perspectives with Weber's theoretical framework on patrimonialism and the New Public Service paradigm. The process included data reduction, thematic categorization, hermeneutic interpretation, and source triangulation. Research validity was maintained through member checking with informants and inter-method triangulation. Ethical aspects were also maintained through anonymity of informants, informed consent, and respect for local values and Bugis etiquette in field interactions.

This ethnographic approach positions Bone's bureaucracy not merely as a formal institution, but as a cultural arena where aristocratic traditions are continually produced and negotiated with the demands of modernization. This framework allows research to uncover the dynamics of cultural resistance that lie at the heart of public service reform in Bone.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Its Influence on Leadership and Public Service Bureaucratic Practices

Field findings indicate that the tradition of nobility in Bone Regency exists not merely as a cultural identity but also as a source of political and administrative legitimacy that shapes local leadership (Triadi & Ismoyo, 2022). The aristocratic status of a regent is not only symbolically respected but also serves as a legitimate source of power for organizing the bureaucracy and maintaining patronage networks within it. This social structure emphasizes that bureaucratic position and political legitimacy are inseparable from cultural symbols and a persistent feudal hierarchy.

In various aspects of government, from the use of noble titles in official events to etiquette that emphasizes extreme respect for leaders, such as the title *Petta* and the popular phrase when speaking to the regent "*Taddampengang'I atanna Petta puang*" (meaning: Servant, please forgive your highness), it is clear how the local bureaucracy is still full of feudalistic values. This structure positions leaders as aristocratic figures (*Arung*), not as egalitarian public officials. This hierarchy is not only visible in formal rituals, but also determines the behavior and orientation of bureaucrats in making daily decisions, including in resource management and appointments.

Consequently, the emerging leadership style is more paternalistic than participatory. Bureaucrats' loyalty is directed toward the leader, rather than toward formal systems or rules. One high-ranking official in Bone even admitted that "closeness" to the regent or aristocratic circles often determines career outcomes more than administrative

performance. This phenomenon reproduces the patron-client relationship within the bureaucracy, where personal loyalty is valued more highly than merit or technical competence. This situation aligns with Weber's description of patrimonialism, a blend of traditional legitimacy and modern bureaucratic structures, and is reinforced by Kristiadi's (2021) findings, which highlight how feudalism remains embedded in Indonesia's local bureaucracy.

In public service practice, the influence of nobility manifests itself in the *decoupling* of formal procedures and informal mechanisms. Formally, local governments adopt reform tools such as standard operating procedures, online service applications, and public complaint channels. However, at the implementation level, personal intervention and patron-client referrals remain dominant in determining the speed and quality of service. Citizens with cultural access, for example, those with noble family names or accompanied by influential figures, often receive faster treatment than those who only present with administrative documents. In this context, technical/field-level bureaucrats act as "honor brokers," weighing not only the completeness of documents but also the status symbols citizens carry.

Aspect	Formal (SOP & Regulations)	Field Practice (Patronage)
Appointment to Office	Based on competency & rules	Based on closeness to the nobility
Public service	Complete documents & procedures	Cultural proximity & status symbols
Legitimacy	Administrative & legal	Traditional & aristocratic
Orientation	Egalitarian & objective	Paternalistic & selective

Table 1 Comparison of Formal vs. Bureaucratic Practices

Despite its paternalistic nature, this nobility-based leadership system is not entirely perceived negatively by the community. For some residents, especially those who still uphold *Akkarungeng values* and respect aristocratic order, this type of leadership is seen as providing stability, social cohesion, and the certainty of a successor to the *Mangkau' ri Bone* (King of Bone). Some Bone communities believe that the presence of nobility as leaders is considered capable of maintaining social balance and preserving long-established traditions (Triadi et al., 2024).

However, when analyzed from the perspective of the *New Public Service* (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015), this practice actually presents several challenges. The paternalistic system has the potential to hinder the emergence of a responsive, inclusive, and egalitarian bureaucracy, because service orientation is more often based on cultural proximity and access to patronage rather than the needs of the wider community. This phenomenon creates a service paradox: aristocrats who were previously accustomed to being served are now required to become public servants. As a result, the service

orientation that ideally places citizens as *citizens* with equal rights in the decision-making process shifts to a service that is selective and exclusive.

Thus, the tradition of nobility in Bone operates in two ways: on the one hand, it provides strong social legitimacy for local leadership, but on the other, it reinforces social hierarchies and undermines the equality-based orientation of public service. This situation reflects bureaucratic reform in Indonesia, where administrative modernization tools continue to be introduced, but patrimonial values remain the dominant logic in daily practice. This is the main challenge of bureaucratic reform in Bone, not just about replacing systems or procedures, but also reforming the leadership culture itself.

Aspect	Positive Impact of Royal Traditions	Negative Impact of the Tradition of Nobility
Legitimacy of Leadership	Provide a central figure who is respected and trusted	Limiting public participation in decision making
Social Cohesion	Maintaining community unity through symbols and rituals	Maintaining a rigid and exclusive social hierarchy
Public Service Orientation	Leadership clearly leads and regulates society	Prioritize loyalty and patronage over equality of service
Bureaucratic Reform	Traditional structures facilitate symbolic adaptation.	Patrimonial values hinder administrative modernization

Table 2 Traditions of Nobility in Bone and Their Implications for Bureaucratic Reform

Aristocratic values that have long been symbols of social legitimacy must be reread: aristocrats are no longer merely symbols of power or traditional protectors, but must truly serve all citizens, without favoritism or patronage. Otherwise, administrative modernization will be merely a mask of formality, where new structures operate on old, exclusive logic (Ismoyo et al., 2025). In other words, the success of reform is not measured by how neat the new rules are, but by how effectively old values can be aligned with the ethos of democratic, inclusive, and egalitarian public service, a process that requires the courage to criticize tradition while still respecting it.

Cultural Resistance in the Implementation of the New Public Service Ethos

Efforts to implement the *New Public Service ethos* in Bone Regency have faced serious challenges due to cultural resistance rooted in Bugis aristocratic traditions and social structures. *The New Public Service* emphasizes citizen participation, transparency, and equality in public services (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). However, these principles are often incompatible with local norms that place social hierarchy as the basis for relations between leaders, bureaucrats, and the public.

Field data demonstrates a *cultural mismatch* between the NPS ethos and everyday bureaucratic practices. For example, digital service systems designed to minimize face-to-face interaction are perceived as “cold” and disrespectful to *the Pangadereng*, who

prioritize direct interaction (Irmawati et al., 2020). One resident noted that online services “don’t provide space for heart-to-heart conversations,” which in Bugis tradition is a crucial mechanism for negotiating respect and trust. Thus, service innovations designed to increase efficiency are perceived as diminishing the bureaucracy’s social legitimacy in the eyes of local communities.

NPS Principles	Bugis Local Norms	Impact of Practice in Bone
Citizen participation	Social hierarchy	Digital services are considered “cold” and reduce face-to-face interaction.
Transparency	Loyalty to the leader	Meritocracy is perceived as threatening the social structure
Egalitarianism	<i>Commander</i> ,	Reduction of social legitimacy of bureaucracy

Table 3 Comparison of NPS Principles vs. Bugis Local Norms

Resistance is also evident within the bureaucracy itself. Bureaucratic apparatuses tend to maintain patronage practices because they are perceived as aligning with the moral obligation to respect and maintain loyalty to aristocratic leaders. Meritocracy-based reforms are often viewed not as objective mechanisms, but as threats to the established social order. This aligns with the findings of Nasrullah and Saharuddin (2022), who demonstrated how political patronage in regional bureaucracies undermines the principles of reform and *the merit system*.

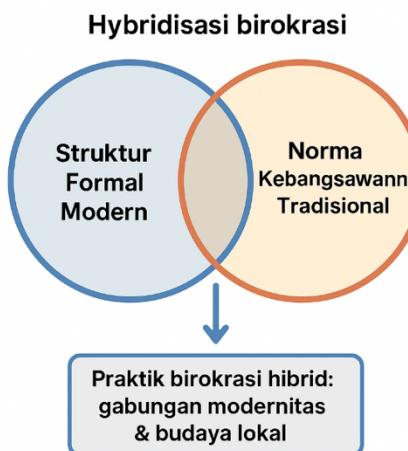
Within a Weberian analytical framework, this resistance can be understood as an attempt to maintain traditional legitimacy in the face of modern rational-legal demands. However, contrary to Weber’s prediction that rationalization would replace tradition, the Bone case demonstrates hybridization: the bureaucracy adopted a modern formal structure, but cultural logic continued to dominate its practices (Cahaya et al., 2022). Consequently, the *New Public Service* ethos did not completely fail, but underwent a process of adaptation that often weakened the values of egalitarianism and public accountability.

From a societal perspective, this cultural resistance is ambivalent. Some citizens view an aristocratic approach to public service as providing a sense of security due to the guaranteed protection of noble figures. However, for other groups, particularly the younger generation and urban residents, this model is seen as an obstacle to obtaining fast, transparent, and discrimination-free services. This dynamic emphasizes that cultural resistance is not simply a technical barrier, but rather an arena for negotiating values between tradition and modernity. Cultural resistance in Bone functions as a “social brake” on bureaucratic modernization. It does not completely reject innovation, but filters it through local cultural logic.

The primary challenge of bureaucratic reform in Bone is not simply building a new system, but rather reinterpreting aristocratic values to transform them into a democratic,

inclusive, and citizen-oriented public service ethic (Ayub et al., 2020). Without such reinterpretation, bureaucratic reform will remain mired in the shadow of patrimonialism and will struggle to achieve the ideal of equal public service for all citizens.

Theoretically, these findings enrich the literature on bureaucracy in developing countries, particularly by demonstrating how traditional values are not merely remnants of the past but actively shape the direction of contemporary bureaucratic reform. Classical Weberian research emphasized the dichotomy between traditional and rational-legal legitimacy, assuming that modernization would gradually erode the influence of tradition. However, the case of Bone Regency demonstrates a hybridization in which modern bureaucratic structures and traditional aristocratic norms coexist, even complementing each other. This context offers an important correction to the linear modernization perspective and emphasizes the need for a more culturally sensitive approach to the study of bureaucratic reform (Dwiyanto, 2021; Prasojo & Kurniawan, 2020).



Practically, this research has implications for formulating public service reform strategies in regions with a strong cultural base. Efforts to implement the New Public Service cannot be carried out without ignoring local logic, as this will encounter resistance that will weaken the policy's effectiveness. Bureaucratic reform in Bone demands adaptive strategies, for example, through reinterpreting the value of nobility as a leadership ethic based on exemplary behavior and citizen protection, rather than merely as a symbol of social hierarchy. Thus, tradition is not positioned as an obstacle but can be transformed into social capital to support a more participatory and egalitarian public service (Rahman, 2021; Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2022).

Furthermore, these findings are also globally relevant, particularly in the discourse on contextual public administration in Global South countries. Cultural resistance to the NPS ethos in Bone demonstrates that universal concepts such as participation, egalitarianism, and transparency need to be contextualized to achieve local acceptance. This opens up space for the development of bureaucratic reform models that do not simply adopt Western theories but also draw on local cultural dynamics. In other words, this

study emphasizes that effective public administration practices must always be the result of a dialogue between global principles and local cultural realities.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the tradition of nobility in Bone Regency still plays a central role in shaping leadership and public service bureaucratic practices. The Regent's aristocratic status serves not only as a cultural symbol but also as a source of political legitimacy, fostering a paternalistic leadership style and reinforcing patron-client patterns within the bureaucracy. Consequently, public service orientation is more focused on loyalty to the leader than on the principles of meritocracy and citizen equality.

Cultural resistance to the New Public Service ethos emerged not simply as rejection, but as a process of selection and hybridization of values. Although bureaucratic reform has brought modern instruments such as standard operating procedures (SOPs), digital systems, and accountability mechanisms, practices on the ground remain influenced by hierarchical and patronage norms rooted in aristocratic traditions. This situation creates a paradox: the Bone bureaucracy appears institutionally modern, yet remains patrimonial in practice.

The implication of these findings is the need for bureaucratic reform strategies that are sensitive to cultural context. The tradition of nobility should not be viewed solely as an obstacle, but can be transformed into social capital—for example, by reinterpreting the role of aristocrats as guardians of integrity and protectors of citizens within the framework of the New Public Service ethos. In this way, the ideals of inclusive, participatory, and egalitarian public service can be achieved without eliminating the cultural identities deeply rooted in Bone society.

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