

Civil Servants and Bureaucratic Culture in Kwara State: A Historical and Institutional Analysis

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Abstract

The civil service plays a vital role in the governance structure of modern states, acting as the administrative machinery through which government policies are formulated, implemented, and sustained. This article probes the historical and institutional culture of the Kwara State Civil Service. This paper uses secondary sources such as scholarly works and government records, the study traces the civil service's evolution, revealing how colonial administrative legacies marked by centralisation, hierarchy, and procedural rigidity continue to shape its operations. Since Kwara State's creation in 1967, its bureaucracy has largely retained the structures and values of the British colonial system, resulting in persistent challenges like inefficiency, weak accountability, and limited responsiveness. Despite several reform efforts, these issues remain deeply rooted. The article recommends key reforms to transform the civil service into a more effective institution. These include enhancing bureaucratic training, adopting merit-based recruitment and promotion, and promoting decentralisation. By resolving these structural and cultural weaknesses, the study argues that the Kwara State Civil Service can become a more dynamic and accountable driver of sustainable development.

Keywords: Bureaucratic, Civil Servants, Culture, Institutional, Historical

Introduction

The civil service plays a vital role in the governance structure of modern states, acting as the administrative machinery through which government policies are formulated, implemented, and sustained. In developing societies such as Nigeria, the effectiveness and efficiency of the civil service are particularly crucial to achieving developmental goals. This is evident in the assertion by Okafor (2005) that while political leaders may make decisions and develop policies, it is the civil service that bears the responsibility for their execution. As such, the strength of a nation's governance and development trajectory is intricately tied to the quality of its civil service.

The role of civil servants in fostering sustainable socio-economic development is increasingly recognised across the globe. As Ogiri (2004) noted, the East Asian development experience underscores the significant contributions of an effective civil service in driving rapid national development. In Nigeria and more specifically in Kwara State, the civil service functions as the backbone of public administration, influencing nearly all aspects of governance and public service delivery. Peggy (2010) emphasises that civil bureaucracy encloses the structured system of authority and procedures through which government activities are carried out, excluding political appointees and judicial officers. The primary function of civil servants is to offer expert advice to political leaders and to implement government policies in a manner consistent with the state's development objectives (Adeyemi & Ademulua, 2009).

The civil service in Nigeria, including that of Kwara State, has colonial roots. The administrative structures established during British colonial rule were designed to extract resources and serve

imperial interests, rather than to promote local development (Alabi, 2019). At independence in 1960, although Nigerian nationals assumed leadership roles within the service, there was no significant overhaul of the inherited colonial bureaucracy to align it with national development goals. Consequently, the entrenched culture of self-interest and elitism persisted, leading to inefficiencies and a disconnect between the civil service and the needs of the populace. Reform efforts began with colonial commissions such as the Harragin Commission of 1945 and the Gorsuch Commission of 1954–55, and continued post-independence with the Adebo Commission (1971), Udoji Public Service Review Commission (1974), Dotun Philips Reform (1988), and the Allison Ayida Committee (1995). These efforts aimed to address issues such as poor remuneration, inefficient structures, and the lack of professionalism among civil servants (Adebayo, 2004)..

In Kwara State, as in other parts of Nigeria, the bureaucratic culture that evolved from this colonial legacy has had profound implications on public administration. Issues such as rigid hierarchies, lack of innovation, patronage networks and weak accountability mechanisms continue to shape the institutional landscape of the civil service. These challenges are not unique to Nigeria; globally, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the rise of “New Managerialism” in advanced economies such as Germany, the UK, and New Zealand, seeking to reform bureaucracies to become more responsive and efficient. In Africa, countries like Ghana and Uganda adopted incrementalist approaches to civil service reform, mindful of their distinct socio-cultural setting (Adamolekun, 1993)..

Thus, a historical and institutional analysis of civil servants and bureaucratic culture in Kwara State provides critical insights into the evolution, challenges and potential pathways for reforming the public sector for better governance outcomes.

Key Features of Colonial Administration and Influence on Public Bureaucracy

The colonial administration laid the institutional and operational groundwork for modern public bureaucracies in many African states, including Nigeria. Although its primary objective was to serve the interests of the colonial power, the structures and practices it introduced have had long-lasting impacts on administrative systems. The key characteristic of colonial administration and how it shaped the current state of public bureaucracy is crucial for evaluating contemporary governance challenges, especially at sub-national levels like Kwara State.

Key Features of Colonial Administration

One of the defining characteristics of colonial administration was its centralised and hierarchical structure. Authority was highly concentrated in the hands of colonial officials who answered only to the imperial headquarters in Britain. This top-down approach allowed for limited participation from indigenous populations and left little room for flexibility or local autonomy (Adebayo, 2004). It created a bureaucratic culture that emphasised obedience, control, and the implementation of orders without input or accountability to the governed. Another significant element was the adoption of indirect rule, a system implemented most notably in Northern Nigeria by Lord Lugard. Through indirect rule, colonial administrators governed through traditional rulers, who were co-opted into the administrative system and made accountable to colonial officials. While this system preserved some aspects of indigenous governance, it also distorted traditional authority structures and entrenched hierarchical, often patriarchal,

administrative cultures (Crowder, 1968). In regions like present-day Kwara State, where traditional institutions still hold sway, these legacies continue to influence local administration.

Aslo, another key feature was the racial and occupational segregation embedded in the colonial civil service. Europeans occupied senior administrative and decision-making positions, while Africans were confined to clerical and menial jobs. This not only discouraged the development of indigenous administrative expertise but also cultivated a sense of inferiority and dependence among local staff (Nzemiro, 1985). The result was a public service that lacked innovation, initiative, and a sense of ownership.

Moreover, colonial governance focused primarily on law and order and economic extraction not social development. Public services were concentrated in urban and economically strategic areas. Infrastructure, health and education projects were undertaken primarily to facilitate administrative convenience and commercial exploitation, rather than to benefit the indigenous population (Okafor, 2005). The legacy of unequal service provision still resonates today, particularly in underdeveloped and rural regions of Nigeria.

Finally, lack of accountability and citizen engagement was a hallmark of colonial administration. Policies were made with little consultation, and administrative decisions were taken in secrecy. The colonial state functioned with impunity, answering only to metropolitan interests and not to the local populace (Bello-Imam, 2007). This legacy fostered a culture of non-responsiveness and corruption that is still evident in many post-independence public institutions.

Influence on Public Bureaucracy

The post-independence Nigerian civil service inherited and internalised many of the practices and values of colonial administration. One major influence is the continued centralisation and bureaucratic rigidity. Despite Nigeria's federal structure, the administrative machinery remains largely centralised, with decision-making often concentrated in Abuja and state capitals like Ilorin. This impedes the adaptability and responsiveness of bureaucracies to local conditions and citizens' needs (Olowu & Erero, 1997).

Another enduring legacy is the hierarchical, rule-bound, and authoritarian administrative culture. Civil servants are trained to prioritise loyalty and adherence to superior orders over initiative and performance. Promotion is often based on seniority rather than merit, stifling innovation and discouraging youthful participation (Ayoade, 1988). This is particularly evident in state bureaucracies where reform efforts are often resisted by entrenched interests. Additionally, the colonial emphasis on elitism and exclusion has evolved into nepotism and patronage politics in the modern civil service. Recruitment and promotion are frequently influenced by ethnic, regional, or political affiliations rather than competence or experience. This weakens institutional integrity and public trust in bureaucratic institutions (Adebayo, 2004). In states like Kwara, political patronage in civil service appointments often undermines professionalism.

Corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability in contemporary bureaucracy also trace their roots to the colonial administrative experience. The absence of mechanisms for accountability during colonialism set a precedent for impunity in governance. Civil servants were not

answerable to the people but to the rulers, a norm that persists today, as many public institutions operate without transparency or performance-based evaluation (Hope, 2001). Furthermore, colonial administration's focus on compliance over outcomes has led to a civil service that is procedure-heavy and results-light. Bureaucrats often focus more on following rules and processes than achieving measurable public service outcomes. This undermines the efficiency of government programs and frustrates public expectations for development (Adamolekun, 2002).

State Creation and Administrative Inheritance

The civil service of Kwara State inherited its structure not from the Federal Civil Service but from the Northern Nigeria Civil Service. Ilorin used to be a province and Kabba also used to be a province (Kabba Province). The two provinces were merged to form what is now known as Kwara State (Gafari, 2022). The civil service in Kwara State, like in many other Nigerian states, is a direct product of historical legacies shaped by both colonial administrative frameworks and the post-independence restructuring of Nigeria's political geography. Kwara State was created on May 27, 1967, following the restructuring of Nigeria into twelve states by the military administration of General Yakubu Gowon. Formerly part of the Northern Region, Kwara inherited its initial administrative frameworks and civil service structures from the Northern Nigerian regional government. This inheritance included not only the physical infrastructure and personnel but also the governance culture, operational procedures, and bureaucratic norms developed under the colonial and early post-colonial Northern administration (Ola & Offiong, 1999).

What became known as Kwara State was initially named West Central State. The name was later changed to Kwara, which is the Hausa name for River Niger “*Kwara*” which passes through both Kabba and Ilorin provinces. The river is found in Jebba, within the Patigi area, and flows towards Lokoja to merge with the River Benue. Both Ilorin and Kabba Provinces agreed to adopt this indigenous name. There was an early dispute over the location of the state capital. While Kabba Province proposed Lokoja, Ilorin Province pushed for Ilorin. After consultations among elites from both regions, Ilorin was eventually chosen as the headquarters. Kabba Province at the time encompassed the Okun (Yoruba-speaking) area, the Bassange area, Lokoja axis, the Ebira area, and the Igala area, all created by colonial administration. Ilorin Province comprised the old Ilorin division (now split into several local government areas), Lafiaji-Patigi division, and Borgu division part of which now lies in Niger State while the rest remains in Kwara State.

Upon the creation of Kwara State, civil servants from the defunct Northern Region were redeployed to their new home states along with their roles and ranks. A civil servant from Ilorin or Kabba working in the Ministry of Works in Kaduna or Yola, for example, was transferred to the equivalent ministry in Kwara. As such, the structure of ministries that existed in the North was replicated in Kwara. The civil service evolution took place between 1967 and 1968 (Gafari, 2022). However, some institutions, such as Kaduna Polytechnic and Cooperative College in Zaria, could not be replicated in the states due to their centralised structure. Staff from such establishments were transferred to an Interim Common Services Agency (ICSA). Initially, these civil servants were deployed to their home states and subsequently seconded to ICSA. In administrative sectors like education, health, and agriculture, the most senior officers deployed from Kaduna were appointed as Permanent Secretaries in their respective ministries. These individuals were largely generalists capable of adapting to different offices (Gafari, 2022).

Kwara State began with seven ministries: Education, Health, Agriculture, Works, Trade and Industry, Finance and Planning; and Social Welfare and Cooperatives. Commissioners served as the political heads of these ministries. The most senior accountant became the accountant-General; the most senior auditor, the Auditor-General; and the most senior lawyer, the Solicitor-General and Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Justice all transferred from Kaduna (Gafari, 2022). At its creation, Kwara State had to rapidly establish functional administrative machinery to manage governance and development tasks. This involved the redeployment of officers from the defunct Northern Regional Civil Service, many of whom were trained under colonial-era norms emphasising order, hierarchy, and obedience rather than innovation and responsiveness (Adebayo, 2004). These officers constituted the nucleus of Kwara's pioneer civil service and laid the foundations for subsequent bureaucratic practices in the state.

The only point of federal involvement came in April 1976, when a federal decree mandated that the federal government would assume responsibility for paying pensions and gratuities of civil servants who had joined the regional service before April 1, 1976. Since there was no longer a regional government in Kaduna, the federal government calculated and paid pensions for service up to that date. Meanwhile, the respective states paid pensions from April 1, 1976, to the date of retirement. This arrangement made it possible for some civil servants to receive pensions from two sources (Gafari, 2022).

Continuity of Colonial Structures

Despite the end of colonial rule in 1960 and the subsequent regionalisation and state creation processes, colonial administrative legacies have endured in the structure and functioning of Kwara State's civil service. The civil service in Kwara retains the fundamental characteristics of the British colonial bureaucracy, including centralisation, hierarchy, rigidity, and impersonality. One major continuity is the *preference for procedural compliance over performance outcomes*. This trait, inherited from the British colonial administrative philosophy, emphasises rule-following and the maintenance of records, often at the expense of innovation and service delivery. Civil servants in Kwara are typically evaluated based on years of service and adherence to rules, rather than on their productivity or contributions to policy outcomes (Adamolekun, 2002).

Another notable colonial legacy is the *dualism between administrative elites and the citizenry*. Much like during the colonial period when administrative officers were detached from the local population, contemporary bureaucrats in Kwara often operate with limited interaction or accountability to the public. This fosters a top-down governance style and weakens participatory engagement in policy formulation and implementation (Adeyemi & Ademulua, 2009). Additionally, the *language and documentation styles* used in official communication and record-keeping remain heavily Anglicised and formalised, reflecting colonial linguistic norms. While English remains the official language, the continued reliance on archaic bureaucratic expressions sometimes hinders effective communication, especially at grassroots levels where local dialects dominate.

Furthermore, *training and promotion structures* in the Kwara State civil service are modelled after colonial systems that value seniority and educational attainment in traditional fields over skill-based or sector-specific competencies. This has made it difficult for the civil service to adapt to modern governance challenges that require specialised knowledge and flexible

management practices (Hope, 2001). Despite various reform efforts, the *institutional culture* of Kwara's civil service remains largely conservative and resistant to change. Reform initiatives, often championed at the federal level, are met with bureaucratic inertia at the state level due to entrenched administrative routines and fear of displacement among career officers.

Bureaucratic Structure and Work Culture

The bureaucratic structure of the Kwara State civil service mirrors the classical Weberian model of bureaucracy, which was originally imposed by the British colonial administration. This structure emphasises a hierarchical chain of command, specialisation, formal rules, and impersonality in administrative procedures (Weber, 1947). These characteristics, although designed to ensure order and control in colonial governance, have been largely retained in Kwara State, long after the departure of colonial authorities.

A notable colonial imprint is the rigid hierarchy that defines power relations within ministries and departments. Decision-making is concentrated at the top echelons of the service, especially in the offices of Permanent Secretaries and Directors. This top-down administrative model fosters an organisational culture where lower-level officers rarely contribute to policy development, reducing opportunities for innovation and responsiveness (Adamolekun, 2002). Consequently, the civil service in Kwara tends to exhibit slow decision-making processes and limited adaptability to change. Furthermore, the work culture in Kwara's civil service remains steeped in formalism and rule-bound procedures, a hallmark of colonial bureaucracy. This has resulted in a service culture where compliance with procedures often outweighs the actual delivery of results. Employees are rewarded for following rules and maintaining records rather than for solving problems or improving service delivery (Ola & Offiong, 1999). The emphasis on procedure over performance is a direct carryover from the colonial administration's obsession with administrative order and control.

Another cultural remnant is the absence of a citizen-centric service orientation. During colonial rule, the civil service was designed to serve the interests of the colonial authorities, not the local population. This tradition has persisted subtly in the attitudes of many public servants, who often see themselves as superior to the citizens they serve. This alienation between the civil service and the citizenry undermines democratic accountability and weakens trust in public institutions (Adeyemi & Ademulua, 2009).

Recruitment and Promotion Systems

The colonial influence is also strongly evident in the recruitment and promotion systems of the Kwara State civil service. During colonial rule, civil servants were recruited largely based on loyalty to the colonial administration, educational attainment in Western-style institutions, and social affiliations. This created a narrow and elite-oriented entry system that excluded the majority of the indigenous population (Adebayo, 2004). Although there have been efforts to reform the system, meritocracy in recruitment remains limited, and the processes are often opaque and susceptible to political influence. The formal structure of recruitment still emphasises academic qualifications over skills, competencies, and relevant work experience. This system favours individuals who are part of elite networks or who have had access to formal education in ways reminiscent of colonial patronage structures (Hope, 2001).

In terms of promotion, the civil service in Kwara continues to adhere to a seniority-based system, a practice rooted in colonial administrative norms. Promotions are primarily awarded based on years of service and academic certifications rather than demonstrable performance or innovation. This has cultivated a culture of complacency and reduced the incentive for excellence in public service delivery (Olowu & Erero, 1997).

Moreover, the assessment of civil servants rarely includes mechanisms to measure output or productivity. Like the British colonial system, performance appraisals in Kwara's civil service are largely procedural and not outcome-based. This entrenches a bureaucratic mindset that values positional advancement over performance enhancement and reinforces stagnation in public service innovation. Reform efforts, such as those recommended by the Udoji Commission (1974) and the Dotun Philips Reform (1988), aimed to address some of these inefficiencies by advocating for more dynamic, performance-driven human resource practices. However, their implementation in Kwara State has been partial and inconsistent due to institutional resistance and the deep-seated nature of colonial administrative cultures.

Efforts at Decolonising the Bureaucracy

The earliest reform attempts post-independence were aimed at replacing expatriates with indigenous professionals and reorienting the service from colonial administration to national development. One of the first reform efforts was the Morgan Commission (1963), which addressed disparities in wages and emphasised the need for uniformity across the civil service. This was followed by the Adebo Commission (1971), which sought to enhance efficiency and professionalism in the service, especially in relation to conditions of service and staff development (Adebayo, 2004).

The most ambitious effort was the Udoji Public Service Review Commission (1974). It introduced modern administrative practices such as Management By Objectives (MBO), performance appraisal systems, and computerised data management. The commission also emphasised training and retraining to equip civil servants with the requisite skills for effective service delivery (Adamolekun, 2002). At the state level, these reforms were expected to be adopted and localised. In Kwara State, efforts were made to restructure ministries, improve working conditions, and increase budgetary allocation for administrative modernisation. In 1988, the Dotun Philips Reforms during the Babangida military regime aimed at further professionalising the civil service. It introduced a clear distinction between political appointees and career civil servants and sought to decentralise authority to enhance responsiveness. However, these reforms were largely top-down and poorly implemented, leading to confusion and institutional resistance (Adamolekun, 1993).

Enduring Colonial Influences

Despite multiple reform efforts, colonial legacies continue to shape the structure and behaviour of Nigeria's civil service. A key feature of the colonial bureaucracy that persists is its rigid hierarchical structure. Designed for control and command, this system discourages innovation, stifles bottom-up communication, and slows decision-making (Hope, 2001). In Kwara State, this has translated into centralised administrative systems where key decisions are often delayed due to excessive bureaucratic layers. Another lasting influence is the emphasis on procedures over

outcomes. The colonial system was built on strict adherence to rules and regulations, with little concern for performance or citizen satisfaction. Today, Kwara State civil servants often prioritise compliance with administrative formalities over efficient service delivery. This culture promotes inertia and undermines public confidence in government institutions.

Furthermore, recruitment and promotion systems remain largely influenced by colonial models. While reforms have advocated for merit-based processes, in practice, recruitment in Kwara State's civil service often reflects political patronage, nepotism, and favouritism (Adeyemi & Ademulua, 2009). This not only demoralises capable personnel but also erodes professionalism in the system. Additionally, the elitist culture instilled by the colonial administration continues to persist. The colonial civil service was designed to serve the colonial elite and not the broader population. Today, many civil servants still exhibit attitudes of superiority, detachment, and limited public accountability. This has contributed to a wide disconnect between the government and the governed, with citizens often perceiving the bureaucracy as aloof and unresponsive.

Conclusion

The civil service in Kwara State, like in many post-colonial African societies, remains a critical institution for policy implementation and socio-economic development. However, its evolution and current dynamics are heavily influenced by its colonial antecedents. The analysis of bureaucratic culture in Kwara State reveals a civil service that, despite several reform efforts, continues to grapple with the structural and cultural legacies of colonial administration. Historically, Kwara State inherited the administrative framework and bureaucratic practices of the larger Nigerian federation at the time of its creation in 1967. This structure itself was a derivative of the British colonial system, which emphasised centralisation, hierarchy, and loyalty to authority rather than efficiency or public service responsiveness. The bureaucracy was primarily designed to serve colonial interests through rigid adherence to procedure, elitism, and a lack of accountability to the native population. Upon gaining independence, this colonial structure was maintained with minimal structural or ideological reorientation, thereby embedding a culture that persists to this day.

The colonial influence is particularly evident in the hierarchical organisational structure, recruitment and promotion systems based more on seniority and connections than merit, and the rule-bound, slow-moving administrative processes. Reforms such as the Udoji Commission (1974), Dotun Philips Commission (1988), and other post-independence efforts aimed at professionalising and democratising the civil service were introduced to address these concerns. While these reforms yielded some progress in areas such as training and personnel management, they fell short of achieving a comprehensive transformation due to weak implementation, political interference, and institutional resistance to change (Olowu et al, 2002) In contemporary Kwara State, the bureaucratic culture continues to reflect these colonial legacies. Civil servants are often more concerned with fulfilling routine administrative requirements than with citizen-focused service delivery. The emphasis on procedure over results has contributed to inefficiencies and poor public perception of the bureaucracy. Additionally, the recruitment and promotion process, while formally standardised, is still marred by favouritism and inadequate performance assessment mechanisms.

To address these persistent issues and reposition the Kwara State civil service as an effective driver of development, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. **Reinvigorate Bureaucratic Training and Reorientation:** Regular capacity-building workshops and reorientation programs should be institutionalized by the government to instil public service values centred on accountability, efficiency and citizen responsiveness. Training should also emphasise ethical conduct, innovation and digital governance.
- ii. **Merit-Based Recruitment and Promotion:** There is a pressing need to fully implement a merit-based recruitment and promotion system. Objective performance evaluation criteria should be adopted and enforced, and political interference in civil service appointments must be minimised to restore professionalism and public confidence.
- iii. **Decentralisation and Empowerment:** The rigid, centralised structure should be reviewed to allow for more decentralised decision-making and operational flexibility. Departments and units should be empowered to take initiative and implement context-specific solutions without excessive bureaucratic bottlenecks.
- iv. **Digitisation of Public Services:** Adopting e-governance tools can help reduce red tape, promote transparency, and improve service delivery. This would also support the monitoring of staff performance and enhance access to government services for citizens.
- v. **Institutionalise Reform Implementation Mechanisms:** Reforms must go beyond policy pronouncements. Dedicated units or reform task forces should be established within the Kwara State Civil Service Commission to ensure that reform policies are effectively monitored, evaluated, and adjusted as necessary.
- vi. **Foster a Service-Oriented Culture:** A deliberate effort should be made to cultivate a culture where civil servants see themselves as public servants rather than rulers. This cultural shift will require leadership by example, strong ethical standards, and reward systems that recognise integrity and performance.

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