

MAPPING IDEA & LITERATURE FORMAT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Performance and Sound of Civil Servant Shoesan: An Ethnographic Note

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the performance of civil servants (ASN) in public service by emphasizing the influence of local cultural values. The research was conducted in North Maluku Province and the Special Region of Yogyakarta using a qualitative approach with ethnographic phenomenology. Data were collected through participant observation, informal interviews with journalists, social activists, and service users, supported by a literature review and documentation. The findings reveal that although civil servants in both regions share similar educational backgrounds and resources, the quality of public services differs significantly. In Yogyakarta, civil servants provide friendly, transparent, and egalitarian services shaped by Javanese cultural values, emphasizing social awareness and equality. Conversely, civil servants in North Maluku demonstrate more hierarchical and distant services, influenced by *dola bololo* values and myths of royal lineage. Simple cultural symbols, such as the sound of civil servants' shoes or the structure of traditional houses, reflect the bureaucratic work ethos. These findings highlight that the evaluation of public service performance should not rely solely on quantitative indicators but must also consider cultural dimensions embedded in society.

**Keywords:** Civil Servants' Performance, Public Service, Bureaucratic Culture.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Public services are one of the leading indicators of the success of regional government administration (Sos, J. P.S. 2020). In North Maluku, the performance of the regional government apparatus (Pemda) is often a topic of discussion among the community. Pemda officials often claim they perform well, pointing to significant regional economic growth data from year to year (Habibi, M. A., & Tahir, M. I., 2025). This economic growth is considered proof of successful development and reflects the quality of public services. However, the public, social activists, and the media often question this claim. They highlight the paradox between economic growth and increasing poverty rates in the region. This phenomenon raises doubts about the validity of the data and the quality of the performance of the local government apparatus. Thus, the assessment of public service performance should not be based solely on statistical quantitative indicators; it also needs to consider the community's real experiences as service recipients. (Aini, N. 2019)

Given the claims made by local government officials regarding good performance, as well as differing assessments from the community based on the same quantitative data, discussions about local government performance cannot rely solely on statistical indicators. This article emphasizes explicit analysis from a cultural



perspective, comparing the public service practices of the North Maluku local government apparatus with those of the local government apparatus in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Assuming that public service performance is greatly influenced by cultural context, this study seeks to reveal how local cultural values color the behavior of the apparatus in providing services to the community. (Setiawati, B. 2016). In this context, public services are measured by development outcomes and civil servants' (ASN) behavior and attitudes when interacting with the community. Performance directly experienced by the community often better reflects the quality of service than statistical figures. This shows a close relationship between bureaucratic culture and the quality of public services.

This article attempts to examine the performance of the North Maluku Regional Government apparatus from a cultural perspective using an ethnographic approach. One aspect reviewed is simple or "trivial" matters, such as shoes and the sound of civil servants' footsteps at work, which can symbolize bureaucratic culture. By comparing these phenomena with the apparatus in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, this study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How do cultural differences affect the behavior and performance of the local government apparatus? (2) To what extent can small symbols, such as the sound of shoes, reflect the ethos of public service? (3) What are the implications of these cultural differences for the quality of public services as perceived by the community?. Based on these questions, the objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze the relationship between bureaucratic culture and the public service performance of local government officials, (2) to identify cultural symbols that influence the service behavior of civil servants, and (3) to explain the differences in public service patterns between officials in North Maluku and Yogyakarta. Thus, this study is expected to provide new insights into the relationship between culture and bureaucratic performance, while offering an alternative perspective in assessing the quality of public services in Indonesia.

## II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

### 2.1. Ethnographies of Public Service: Bureaucratic Culture, Materiality, and Performance

Ethnographic studies of public service emphasize how bureaucratic identities are enacted through daily practices, material artifacts, and embodied routines. Public servants often express authority and institutional culture through language, dress codes, bodily comportment, and subtle material symbols. For example, Shore (2000) highlights how European Union civil servants construct identity and belonging through everyday performances, including clothing and personal artifacts, communicating cultural alignment and professional legitimacy. Similarly, Olivier de Sardan (2015) shows that public service practices in West Africa are deeply embedded in social interactions and cultural logics, rather than being purely administrative or legalistic. These studies suggest that details such as footwear may serve as ethnographic entry points for understanding how bureaucratic authority is performed in subtle, everyday ways.

### 2.2. Performance Ethnography: Shoes as Embodied Cultural Expression

Performance ethnography provides an analytical lens through which artifacts such as shoes can be seen as performative extensions of identity and institutional practice. Jones (2002) argues that performance ethnography situates cultural meaning in embodied acts, where objects and movements carry symbolic weight. In the context of footwear, shoes are not neutral items but are active participants in social performances. For instance, wearing polished, formal shoes in bureaucratic spaces signifies professionalism and discipline, while walking—accompanied by sound—becomes a performance of authority. Denzin (2003) describes performance ethnography as transforming lived experiences into cultural texts reflecting power, identity, and social meaning. Thus, shoes can be understood as literal and metaphorical "scripts" enacted in bureaucratic life, signaling adherence to institutional norms.

### 2.3. Sound Ethnography and the Sensory Dimension of Bureaucratic Life

Sound ethnography extends this analysis by emphasizing how auditory experiences shape cultural meaning. Feld (2015) describes sound as a sensory modality through which ethnographers can capture everyday practices and the atmospheres of social life. The sound of shoes in public offices—echoes in hallways, the rhythm of steps, or the silence of waiting rooms—constitutes more than background noise; it represents a sonic landscape of bureaucracy. Samuels, Meintjes, Ochoa, and Porcello (2010) argue that listening ethnographically allows researchers to uncover how sound structures social relations and cultural practices. Applied to civil service, the sound of shoes may reveal hierarchies, discipline, or cultural expectations within the institution. In this sense, auditory traces become a critical dimension of ethnographic interpretation, linking materiality, embodiment, and institutional culture.

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with an ethnographic phenomenological method (Muktaf, Z. M. 2016). This approach was chosen because the phenomenon being studied is closely related to the cultural meanings that underlie the behavior of civil servants (ASN) in providing public services. Phenomenology allows researchers to understand the community's and officials' subjective experiences in public service practices. At the same time, ethnography provides space to interpret cultural symbols reflected in the daily behavior of ASN. The research was conducted in two regions, namely North Maluku Province and the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY). The selection of these two locations was based on differences in bureaucratic culture and community culture, which are believed to influence the quality of public services. North Maluku was chosen as the central location for the research, while Yogyakarta was used as a comparison location.

This study's primary and secondary data sources are primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through direct observation of civil servants (ASN) behavior in providing public services, both in North Maluku and in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. In addition, primary data was also obtained through discussions and informal interviews with journalists, social activists, and communities directly involved with public services, enabling researchers to capture their perceptions and authentic experiences. Secondary data was obtained from official documents, government reports, media articles, and relevant academic literature, particularly theories of culture and public services, which were used for analysis. The data in this study were collected through several complementary techniques. First, participant observation was conducted to record the behavior of officials in their daily activities, including simple things such as the way they walk, the way they dress, and even small symbols such as the sound of their shoes, which became the focus of analysis. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted informally with social activists, journalists, and members of the public who receive public services to gain a broader understanding of the performance of ASN from an external perspective. Third, a documentation study examined official documents, media articles, public discussion records, and relevant supporting literature to make the information obtained more comprehensive. (Rahardjo, M. 2011)

Data analysis was conducted using a phenomenological approach that emphasizes the discovery of meaning behind social experiences. The analysis process began with data reduction (Agusta, I. 2003), which involved filtering information relevant to the research focus, then categorizing the data into specific themes such as cultural symbols, officials' attitudes, and public service interaction patterns. Next, the categorized data was interpreted to reveal the cultural meanings behind the behavior of officials in providing services. This interpretation was then verified through comparison with cultural and public service theories to ensure the consistency of the findings. Data validity was maintained through triangulation techniques by comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation, so the research results were more reliable. To ensure validity, this study uses source and method triangulation techniques. Triangulation is carried out by comparing observations with data from interviews and documents. In addition, the researchers also cross-check information between the results of conversations with social activists, journalists, and the public who receive public services.

## IV. ANALYSIS RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Results

#### a. Differences in the Performance of Civil Servants in North Maluku and Yogyakarta

Observations and discussions show differences in civil servants' performance in North Maluku and the Special Region of Yogyakarta. In Yogyakarta, public services tend to be characterized by a friendly, transparent, and accountable attitude. This is evident in the experiences of the community, for example, taxi drivers who honestly explain travel route options so that passengers can save time and money. Another example is postal workers greeting pensioners with simple questions about their impressions of living in Yogyakarta, which shows personal attention and friendliness in service. In contrast, public services in North Maluku are often considered to pay less attention to the community's needs. Although local ASNs appear neat in their official uniforms and shiny shoes, the services provided tend to be more formal, rigid, and less humane towards the community receiving the services.

#### b. Cultural Symbols in Public Service

Field data shows that simple things, such as the sound of civil servants' shoes, can become symbols of bureaucratic culture. Civil servants in Yogyakarta walk on tiled floors without making loud noises, while civil servants in North Maluku often produce a distinct "tap tap tap" sound that can be heard even before they are seen. This symbol is interpreted as a representation of the work ethic and attitude of the bureaucracy. Civil servants in Yogyakarta tend to display restraint and modesty and do not draw attention to themselves. In contrast, civil servants in North Maluku unconsciously display a more prominent style, which creates a distance between the apparatus and the community.

#### c. The Influence of Local Cultural Values

These differences cannot be separated from the influence of local cultural values. In North Maluku, the values of *dola bololo* and myths about the origins of royal descendants have given rise to hierarchical social relations. As part of the bureaucratic structure, ASN often positions itself above the community, resembling kings or nobles who are "served" rather than "serving." In contrast, civil servants in Yogyakarta are influenced by Javanese cultural values that emphasize simplicity, social awareness, and the concept of *jumbuhing kawula Gusti*. These values encourage civil servants to view themselves as part of the community, so that public services are carried out more humanely, egalitarianly, and with greater awareness of other people's positions.

#### d. Cultural Representation in Social Space

Observation of material culture reinforces these findings. Traditional Javanese houses, with joglo roofs that hang down to cover most of the doors and windows, represent an attitude of "hiding oneself" as a form of self-control. This pattern is reflected in the behavior of civil servants, who tend not to stand out in public service. In contrast, houses in North Maluku are generally open, with chairs or benches placed on the terrace so that the occupants are visible to passersby. This pattern of openness is interpreted as a form of full exposure to the public, which in bureaucratic practice is reflected in civil servants who place themselves more prominently than the people receiving services.

#### e. Social Criticism of Local Government Performance

Data from conversations with journalists and social activists in North Maluku shows sharp criticism of the local government's claims of success. Although the government claims that economic growth is increasing yearly, the community questions the validity of these claims because poverty rates are also increasing. This criticism emphasizes that public service performance cannot be measured solely by quantitative data, but must be viewed from the concrete experiences of the community that directly feels the quality of service.

## 4.2. Discussion

This study confirms that the performance of civil servants (ASN) is not only determined by technical capacity and resource support, but is also greatly influenced by the cultural values inherent in the society where the bureaucracy operates. This finding aligns with Geertz's (1992) view that culture is a "web of meaning" woven by humans and forms the basis of every social action. Thus, the behavior of ASN in providing public services can be understood as an expression of the cultural values they live by daily. The phenomenon of ASN footsteps as a symbol of bureaucratic culture shows a difference in orientation between North Maluku and Yogyakarta. ASN in Yogyakarta walk without making loud noises, reflecting an attitude of restraint and consideration for the comfort of others. In contrast, civil servants in North Maluku often make loud footsteps, which seem to assert their presence. This is in line with Mulder's (1996) concept, which states that Javanese society has a high social awareness, characterized by a sense of shame and self-control, while societies with hierarchical social structures tend to display more prominent self-expression.

This difference becomes even more apparent when linked to cultural values. In North Maluku, the values of *dola bololo* and the myth of royal descent form a hierarchical social relationship pattern. As part of the bureaucracy, civil servants often place themselves higher than the community, resembling noble figures who must be respected. This is in line with Laksono's (1986) research findings on the structure of Javanese society, which rejects the concept of rigid castes, unlike other societies that still maintain hierarchical patterns. In contrast, Javanese culture emphasizes equality through *jumbuhing kawula Gusti*, which views the king and the people as equal entities in social and spiritual relationships. This value is then transformed into bureaucratic practice, where civil servants see themselves as part of their community, not as figures who must be served. This aligns with Murdianto's (2020) research, which found that public services in Yogyakarta are relatively more humanistic because egalitarian local cultural values influence them.

The findings of this study are also consistent with Spradley's (1997) view, which emphasizes the importance of understanding small symbols in ethnography. The sound of shoes, the way of dressing, and simple greetings have deep cultural meanings. Similar research was conducted by Susanti (2018), who examined cultural symbols in public services in Bali, where the friendly attitude and polite speech of civil servants are seen as a reflection of the local cultural value of *tatwam asi* (togetherness). Material culture also plays an important role in shaping bureaucratic behavior. Javanese *joglo* houses, which tend to be closed, represent the value of "hiding oneself" as a form of social control. This is reflected in the behavior of civil servants who do not stand out. In contrast, North Maluku houses, which are open, with chairs on the terrace, show an attitude of appearing fully in public. These findings reinforce Peursen's (1988) view that culture is present not only in the form of art or religion but also in daily activities and spatial arrangements, which then influence people's mindsets.

Public criticism of the North Maluku Regional Government's claims of economic growth reveals a discrepancy between quantitative indicators and the community's social experience. This aligns with Ricoeur's (2006) view that culture is an intersubjective phenomenon whose meaning cannot be reduced to mere statistics. Arifin's (2019) research on bureaucratic performance evaluation in Sulawesi also shows a similar finding: macroeconomic indicators often fail to represent the quality of public services at the community level. By comparing North Maluku and Yogyakarta, this study shows that local culture can be a key differentiating factor in bureaucratic performance, even though human resources and technology are relatively the same. This supports Dwiyanto's (2011) view, which emphasizes that bureaucratic reform in Indonesia is not enough to improve the administrative system, but must also pay attention to the cultural dimensions that shape the behavior of the apparatus.

The practical implication of this study is the need for a cultural approach in evaluating and improving public services. Bureaucratic reform must take into account the local values that exist in society. Otherwise, changes will only be formal without changing the mindset of the civil service. Rahmawati's (2021) research on public services in Central Java proves that training based on local cultural values is more effective in improving

the work ethic of civil servants than administrative regulations alone. Thus, this study enriches the discourse on the relationship between culture and bureaucratic performance in Indonesia. Small symbols such as the sound of shoes, greetings, or the architectural style of houses can explain different patterns of public service. A comparison between North Maluku and Yogyakarta proves that culture shapes community identity and forms the foundation for building bureaucratic performance. These findings support classical cultural theories (Geertz, Mulder, and Laksono) and align with contemporary research on the importance of a cultural approach in public service reform in Indonesia.

## V. Conclusion

This study shows that civil servants' (ASN) performance is not solely determined by administrative factors and resource support, but is also greatly influenced by underlying cultural values. A comparison between North Maluku and Yogyakarta reveals fundamental differences in work ethic and quality of public services. First, public services in Yogyakarta are characterized by a friendly, transparent, and more community-oriented attitude. This is influenced by Javanese cultural values that emphasize social awareness, simplicity, and equality through *jumbuhing kawula Gusti*. In contrast, public services in North Maluku tend to be distant and hierarchical, influenced by the values of *dola bololo* and the myth of royal descent that places officials higher than the community.

Second, small symbols such as the sound of civil servants' shoes, the way they dress, and even the architecture of traditional houses have proven to have cultural meanings that influence bureaucratic behavior. Civil servants in Yogyakarta tend to be reserved and not flaunt their status. In contrast, civil servants in North Maluku display a more prominent style, unconsciously creating distance from the community. Third, public criticism of the North Maluku Regional Government's claims of economic growth shows that quantitative indicators are insufficient to represent the quality of public services. The concrete experiences of the community as service recipients are the primary measure in assessing bureaucratic performance. Thus, it can be concluded that public service performance reflects the culture underpinning it. The differences between civil servants in North Maluku and Yogyakarta prove that culture plays a significant role in shaping bureaucratic behavior and the quality of services experienced by the community. Therefore, efforts to improve public services in Indonesia need to pay attention to the cultural dimension and technical and administrative aspects to make bureaucratic reform more effective and sustainable.

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