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ҒЫЛЫМИ-САРАПТАМАЛЫҚ ЖУРНАЛ

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THE IMPACT OF TRIBES IN THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION SYSTEM OF NIGERIA

Abstract. The public administration system of any country is inherently shaped by its populace – their intercommunications and historical contexts. Nigeria, as a multi-tribal society, forged through British colonial rule, presents a complex administrative framework influenced by its vast tribal diversity. This paper explores the extent to which tribal affiliations have impacted public administration in Nigeria, tracing their influence from the colonial period to contemporary public administration. Adopting a conceptual methodology, the research is grounded in secondary sources including academic articles, books, newspapers, and legal documents such as the Nigerian Constitution. Although findings show the persistence of tribal conflicts within administrative processes in Nigeria, the study emphasizes that the effective functioning of the public administration system is deeply contingent on fostering tribal unity and promoting interethnic collaboration.

Keywords: *Nigeria, Ethnicity, Tribes, Public Administration, Constitution, Governance.*

Башир Алию Якасай НИГЕРИЯНЫҢ МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК БАСҚАРУ ЖҮЙЕСІНДЕГІ ТАЙПАЛАРДЫҢ ӘСЕРІ

Аңдатпа. Белгілі бір елдің мемлекеттік басқару жүйесі сол ел халқының өзіне қатысты, яғни; олардың бір-бірімен байланысы және белгілі бір елдегі қоғам ретінде шығу тегі. Британдық отаршылдық біріктірген көп тайпалы қоғам ретінде Нигерия оның тұрғындары ретінде әртүрлі тайпалардың үлкен бірлестігін ескере отырып, ерекше мемлекеттік басқару жүйесін көрсетті. Бұл жұмыс осы тайпалардың Нигерияның мемлекеттік басқаруына қандай әсер ететінін зерттейді, отаршылдық тарихына қазіргі Нигерияның мемлекеттік басқаруына қарайды. Қағаз әдіснамада тұжырымдамалық ретінде әзірленді және деректер жиынтығы алдыңғы мақалалар, журналдар, газеттер, зерттеу нысаны мен тақырыбына қатысты кітаптар, сондай-

ақ Нигерия Конституциясы сияқты қосалқы әдістер арқылы жиналды. Зерттеуде талданған деректер жиынтығы Нигерияның мемлекеттік басқару жүйесінде тайпалық қактығыстар туындайтынын дәлелдесе де, зерттеу мемлекеттік басқару жүйесі тайпалық бірлік пен этникалық бірге тұруды қолдау мен дамытуға негізделгенін көрсетеді.

***Түйін сөздер:** Нигерия, этникалық, тайпалар, мемлекеттік басқару, конституция, үкімет.*

Башир Алию Якасай **ВЛИЯНИЕ ПЛЕМЕН В СИСТЕМЕ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОГО** **УПРАВЛЕНИЯ НИГЕРИИ**

Аннотация. Система государственного управления определенной страны связана с самим народом страны, то есть; как они связаны друг с другом и их происхождение как общества в конкретной стране. Нигерия как многоплеменное общество, объединенное британским колониализмом, продемонстрировала исключительную систему государственного управления, учитывая большое объединение различных племен в качестве ее жителей. В этой статье исследуется влияние этих племен на государственное управление Нигерии, рассматривая колониальную историю и современное государственное управление Нигерии. Статья была разработана как концептуальная по методологии, а наборы данных были собраны с помощью вторичных методов, таких как предыдущие статьи, журналы, газеты, книги, связанные с объектом и предметом исследования, а также с Конституцией Нигерии. Хотя наборы данных, проанализированные в исследовании, доказывают, что племенные конфликты возникают в нигерийской системе государственного управления, исследование показывает, что система государственного управления опирается на поддержку и развитие племенного единства и этнического совместного проживания.

***Ключевые слова:** Нигерия, Этническая принадлежность, Племена, Государственное управление, Конституция, Правительство.*

Introduction

Nigeria encompasses a vast territory inhabited by over 250 distinct ethnic and tribal groups. This ethnic heterogeneity has positioned Nigeria as one of the most demographically diverse countries globally since its independence in 1960. The advent of British colonialism in the mid-nineteenth century marked a pivotal moment in the emergence of modern Nigeria [1]. Although, anthropological records confirm human settlement in the region as far back as 13,000 BCE [2]. Historically, both major and minor ethnic groups—ranging from the Nri Kingdom and Benin Empire in the South to the Hausa and Fulani states in the North—developed autonomous governance structures, which laid the foundation for indigenous public administration systems.

British colonization introduced a centralized administrative model by uniting the previously autonomous northern and southern protectorates in 1914. On October 1, 1960, Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom under a federal constitution that divided the country into three major regions governed by a relatively weak central authority. Subsequently, Nnamdi Azikiwe, a Chairman of the NCNC political party, succeeded colonial Governor-General James Wilson Robertson, while Queen Elizabeth II retained a symbolic role as Head of State [3].

During the colonial era, the British administration established an efficient administrative system, developed postal and telegraph networks, constructed roads, built ports, and created an extensive railway network. Moreover, the colonial regime imposed a cash economy through taxation policies that altered traditional socio-economic relations. Nigeria's ethnic pluralism, which emerged prominently during this period, has since played a defining role in shaping the nation's administrative and political evolution. A retrospective view of the history of the nation suggests that the establishment of a multi-tribal Nigerian state was a natural progression, and that this is the reason why the various tribes have worked in collaboration to achieve economic prosperity. Notably, local administration in Nigeria predates colonialism and was historically embedded in tribal systems as old as the nation's history. It was an integral part of governance among Nigeria's ethnic groups, particularly the Yoruba in the West, the Hausa/Fulani in the North, and the Igbo in the East, with each group operating their system in a way that aligned with their cultural values [4]. The current Nigerian Constitution—particularly the 1999 Constitution (as amended)—reflects efforts to incorporate this diversity through mechanisms such as the Federal Character Principle, which mandates equitable representation of all ethnic and regional groups in public administration [5].

The quota system is a policy instrument that aims to promote equal access to **educational and employment opportunities**. It does so by ensuring that underrepresented groups from different regions have access to opportunities in public institutions. Examples of unity programmes that contribute to this goal include unity schools and the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). It is evident, as a preliminary point, that the numerous Nigerian tribes have coexisted in the public administration and the social and economic aspects of the country from the era preceding independence to the present day. This study investigates the relationship between Nigeria's tribal diversity and its public administration system, focusing on the dual role of ethnicity as both a source of conflict and a foundation for national cohesion. This paper aims to analyse the impact of Nigerian tribes on the public administration system in Nigeria by studying the independent and dependent variables, i.e. the public administration system of Nigeria and the Nigerian tribes. The study sets out to investigate the role played by tribal entities in the public administration systems of Nigeria both prior to and following independence. Its central objective is to address the existing knowledge gap concerning the interplay between Nigeria's system of public administration and the role of tribal entities in the Nigerian government.

Literature of the Study

Nigeria's complex ethnic composition, comprising over 250 distinct ethnic groups, exerts a profound influence on the country's public administration system. Historically, the three largest ethnic groups—the Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo have played dominant roles in shaping the contours of governance and administrative practices. This literature review explores the impact of Nigerian tribes on public administration by analyzing the influence of ethnic politics, representation, and the Federal Character Principle. The history of public administration in Nigeria is inextricably linked to the country's ethnic configuration.

Prior to colonial intervention, each of the major ethnic groups had indigenous administrative systems that were deeply embedded in their cultural values [6]. These traditional systems profoundly influenced the postcolonial administrative landscape, particularly in terms of leadership styles, community participation, and conflict resolution mechanisms.

Colonial rule disrupted indigenous systems and entrenched ethnic divisions by introducing preferential administrative arrangements. Colonial administrators often favored ethnic groups deemed more cooperative or more amenable to British authority, thereby institutionalizing inequalities in resource allocation and access to administrative roles [7]. Consequently, ethnic representation and competition became fundamental features of public administration in Nigeria. It has been posited by scholars such as Suberu [8] that ethnic competition for power and resources has resulted in a fragmented and often inefficient public administration system. This ethnic rivalry manifests in a variety of ways, including political appointments, recruitment into public service, and the allocation of resources. In an effort to address the evident ethnic imbalances within the public administration sector, the Nigerian government instigated the implementation of the Federal Character Principle, an initiative which is further enshrined within the 1999 Constitution (Section 14). The principle stipulates that appointments to public institutions should be made in a manner that reflects the ethnic and regional diversity of the country. According to scholars such as Ekeh [9], the Federal Character Principle is regarded as a mechanism for promoting ethnic inclusiveness and unity within the civil service. However, critics contend that while the Federal Character Principle does indeed promote ethnic diversity within the public administration sector, it also serves to perpetuate mediocrity and inefficiency. Ikelegbe [10] posits that the implementation of the principle has resulted in the recruitment of individuals lacking the necessary qualifications, with an emphasis on ethnicity rather than competence. The research by Mustapha [11] emphasises the necessity for equitable policies that address regional disparities in education and training. In order to ensure that public administration in Nigeria is truly representative, there is a necessity to prioritise capacity-building initiatives in underrepresented regions. This will serve to level the playing field in governance. The divisive nature of ethnicity in Nigerian public administration has also contributed to recurring ethnic conflicts and tensions. Ethnic groups frequently experience marginalisation or exclusion from

pivotal positions of authority, resulting in the emergence of grievances and, on occasion, violent confrontations [12]. Consequently, public administration must address the dual challenge of promoting national integration while ensuring that ethnic groups feel adequately represented. The divisive nature of ethnicity in Nigerian public administration has also contributed to recurring ethnic conflicts and tensions. Ethnic groups frequently experience a sense of marginalisation or exclusion from pivotal positions of authority. This dynamic often gives rise to the development of grievances, which can, in certain instances, culminate in violent confrontations. A number of scholars have posited that the promotion of national integration within the domain of public administration will necessitate a shift from an ethnic-based political framework towards a merit-based system that transcends ethnic boundaries [13]. The promotion of ethnic harmony within public institutions has the potential to serve as a mitigating factor in situations of conflict, thereby fostering a sense of national unity.

Methodology

The present study adopts a conceptual methodology in order to undertake a qualitative exploration of the impact of Nigerian tribes on the public administration system.

The objective of the research is to ascertain the manner in which ethnic diversity exerts its influence on governance practices, decision-making processes, and representation within public institutions in Nigeria. This qualitative approach will provide a nuanced understanding of how Nigerian tribes impact public administration, offering insights into the complexities of ethnicity, governance, and national integration.

The present study relies on **secondary data sources**, which include **government reports and official documents** such as policies, reports and documents on the Federal Character principle. In addition, **academic journals** and books on previous research relevant to the intersection of ethnicity and public administration in Nigeria were reviewed to understand how tribal dynamics affect administrative functions and decisions.

A comprehensive review of extant **historical records and policy papers was undertaken**, with a view to ascertaining the contextual nuances pertaining to the historical evolution of ethnic influence in governance from the pre-colonial era to the present day. The utilisation of secondary data facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the long-standing influence of Nigerian tribes on public administration, thereby contributing to a more nuanced discussion on ethnicity, governance, and national integration.

History of Nigerian Tribes

Although there are numerous minor tribes in Nigeria, the three major ethnic groups—Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo—dominate and play a central role in shaping the country's socio-political landscape. Each of these groups possesses a distinct historical background, cultural system, and governance structure that has significantly influenced Nigeria's public administration.

The Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, primarily concentrated in northern Nigeria, have a longstanding tradition of centralized governance. The Hausa

states originally existed as independent kingdoms before being unified by the Fulani Jihad in the early 19th century, which led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate [14]. The Caliphate introduced an Islamic administrative system characterized by a hierarchical structure headed by emirs—a model that continues to influence governance in northern Nigeria today.

In southwestern Nigeria, the Yoruba people developed a system of government based on city-states, the most prominent being Ile-Ife and Oyo. The Oyo Empire, which reached its peak in the 17th and 18th centuries, had a sophisticated administrative structure combining a strong monarchy with institutional checks on royal authority through the Oyo Mesi council [15]. The legacy of structured governance and communal decision-making of Yoruba tribe has had a lasting impact on public administration in the region.

In contrast, the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria traditionally practiced a decentralized system of governance. Rather than centralized kingship, the Igbo organized themselves into small, autonomous communities where decisions were made collectively through councils of elders [16]. This participatory model of governance, which emphasized consensus, has shaped the Igbo approach to public administration, favoring community-driven and inclusive decision-making.

The British colonial administration, which formally began its rule over Nigeria in 1900, adopted a system of indirect rule that relied heavily on existing tribal governance structures. This policy not only reinforced ethnic identities but also laid the groundwork for ethnic rivalries within the public administration system [17]. Following independence in 1960, competition among ethnic groups for political power and access to public resources became a central feature of Nigerian governance, often leading to tensions in the public sector as various groups struggled for representation and control [18].

Pre-Independence and Post-Independence Public Administration

Prior to Nigeria's independence in 1960, the country's public administration was heavily influenced by British colonial rule. The colonial authorities established a centralized and hierarchical administrative structure designed to serve the interests of the British Empire. This system prioritized the maintenance of law and order, tax collection, and resource extraction, largely excluding Nigerians from meaningful participation in governance [19].

In the northern region, the British implemented indirect rule by governing through traditional rulers such as emirs. In the southern regions, although direct rule was more prevalent, colonial administrators still relied on local chiefs for administrative functions [20].

After independence in 1960, Nigeria largely retained the administrative structures inherited from colonial rule, though efforts were made to adapt them to the needs of a sovereign state. Initially, the system remained highly centralized, with the federal government exerting considerable control over regional affairs. However, in response to challenges posed by ethnic diversity and regionalism, the public administration system became increasingly decentralized, particularly after the adoption of the 1963 Federal Constitution [21].

A significant development in the post-independence period was the "Nigerianization" of the civil service, which aimed to replace expatriate officials with qualified Nigerian personnel. This process, however, faced numerous obstacles, including a shortage of skilled professionals and concerns about administrative efficiency. During the First Republic (1963–1966), public administration was envisioned as a tool for economic development, but these ambitions were often undermined by political instability, regional tensions, and widespread corruption [22].

Another noteworthy phase in Nigeria's post-independence public administration was the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) in governance. The implementation of ICT aimed to address the inefficiencies caused by excessive bureaucratization and to enhance the effectiveness of public service delivery.

The Nigerian Public Service

Since its inception, Nigeria's public service has been profoundly influenced by the country's unique ethnic composition, which continues to shape its operation and effectiveness. As one of the primary mechanisms for implementing government policies, delivering public goods and services, and driving national development, the public service is critical to the functioning of the Nigerian state. However, tribal affiliations have often complicated its smooth functioning, giving rise to issues such as favoritism, nepotism, and unequal representation among various ethnic groups [23].

To address the growing concerns over ethnic imbalance in public appointments, the 1979 Nigerian Constitution introduced the **Federal Character Principle**. This principle was designed to ensure that appointments to public service positions and the allocation of resources reflect the country's ethnic diversity. The principle aimed at ensuring that appointments to public service positions and the distribution of resources reflected the diversity of the Nigerian population. Despite the fact that the Federal Character principle is intended to ensure tribal representation, there have been claims to the contrary. The pervasive role of tribalism in the Nigerian public service manifests through various forms, including nepotism, favouritism, and the marginalisation of minority ethnic groups. In many cases, tribal allegiances have been found to take precedence over national interests in the processes of recruitment and promotion. For instance, there is evidence to suggest that, in certain cases, public service positions are filled based on tribal connections rather than on demonstrable competence. This has the potential to result in the underperformance of government institutions [24].

This practice also perpetuates regional disparities, with some ethnic groups dominating key government ministries and parastatals. Consequently, despite the numerous claims regarding disparities among ethnic groups in the public administration sector, the principle of ethnic representation in the Nigerian public administration system is regarded as a fundamental aspect of the nation's unity. Successive Nigerian governments have initiated various reforms with the aim of addressing the influence of tribalism and improving the effectiveness of

the public service. The most significant of these reforms was the introduction of merit-based recruitment practices and the establishment of anti-corruption agencies such as the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) with the aim of curbing nepotism and favouritism. [25].

Nonetheless, tribal loyalties remain deeply entrenched, and these reforms have had limited success in transforming the public service into a fully professional and meritocratic institution. A significant barrier to reform is the politicization of the public service, where political leaders often exploit tribal affiliations to secure electoral support. This pattern is particularly visible during election cycles, when public appointments and resource allocations are used as tools to garner votes from key ethnic constituencies [26]. As a result, reform efforts are frequently undermined by political patronage and the vested interests of ethnic elites.

To establish a more effective and equitable public service in Nigeria, a balance must be struck between ethnic representation and meritocracy. While the Federal Character Principle is well-intentioned, it requires substantial reform to ensure that it promotes inclusivity without sacrificing competence. This can be achieved by strengthening oversight mechanisms to monitor public service appointments and ensuring that ethnic representation does not override merit-based standards [27]. Additionally, there must be a concerted effort to depoliticize the public service by insulating recruitment and promotion processes from political interference. Empowering independent bodies, such as the Civil Service Commission, to oversee these functions objectively is essential. Moreover, public service training programs should emphasize professionalism, national cohesion, and loyalty to the state above tribal or ethnic affiliations.

Unity Institutions and Ethnic Associations

Given Nigeria's extensive ethnic diversity, the existence of organizations that promote unity, national integration, and equitable representation is essential. Various institutions and ethnic associations play critical roles in shaping the political and socio-economic landscape of the country while advocating for their respective regional interests. Among these are the **Federal Character Commission, the Northern Elders Forum, Ohanaeze Ndigbo, and the Yoruba group Afenifere.**

Federal Character Commission (FCC)

The Federal Character Commission (FCC) was established to ensure the fair representation of Nigeria's diverse population in public service appointments and the allocation of socio-economic resources. The guiding principle of "Federal Character" is enshrined in **Section 14(3) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria**, which mandates that appointments and promotions in government institutions reflect the federal character of the country, thereby avoiding the dominance of any particular ethnic or regional group [28].

The FCC plays a vital role in mitigating ethnic and regional marginalization by advocating for balanced representation from Nigeria's six geopolitical zones.

Its goal is to foster a sense of national inclusion and unity through equitable participation in governance. However, the commission has faced criticism for sometimes promoting mediocrity. The emphasis on ethnic balancing has, in certain cases, resulted in the appointment of individuals based on quotas rather than merit [29]. Despite these shortcomings, the FCC remains a key institution in Nigeria's effort to manage its complex ethnic composition and to promote peace and stability within the federation.

Northern Elders Forum (NEF)

The **Northern Elders Forum (NEF)**, formally established in 2010, is a political and socio-cultural organization that advocates for the interests of northern Nigeria. It emerged in response to perceived marginalization of the North in Nigeria's political and economic spheres. The NEF has been vocal in promoting northern unity and addressing regional challenges such as insecurity, poverty, and equitable resource distribution [30]. As a counterbalance to other regional bodies, the NEF engages in national discourse, particularly on matters of security, including insurgency and banditry affecting the North. Through such advocacy, the NEF has remained a significant player in Nigeria's political landscape. However, critics argue that its activities are sometimes overly focused on advancing northern dominance rather than tackling the socio-economic issues confronting the region [31].

Ohanaeze Ndigbo

Ohanaeze Ndigbo is a socio-political organization that represents the interests of the Igbo people—one of Nigeria's three major ethnic groups. Founded in 1976, the organization has been a prominent advocate for Igbo rights and inclusion within the broader Nigerian federation. It is particularly known for pushing for a restructured federal system that allows for greater regional autonomy and for addressing the marginalization of the South-East region [32]. Ohanaeze Ndigbo has consistently called for the rotation of the presidency to the South-East as a means of fostering national unity. Additionally, it advocates peaceful coexistence among Nigeria's ethnic groups while demanding equitable federal appointments. Critics, however, claim that the organization occasionally heightens ethnic tensions through its assertive positions on national political matters [33].

Afenifere (Yoruba Group)

Afenifere is the leading socio-political organization representing the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria. Established in the post-independence era, it has historically championed democratic governance, federalism, and the preservation of Yoruba cultural heritage. The group is widely recognized for its progressive stance, particularly in advocating for the devolution of powers and restructuring of Nigeria's federal system [34]. Afenifere has been instrumental in opposing military rule and remains a key advocate for democratic reforms and regional autonomy. The group has been actively involved in opposing military rule and has continued to advocate for democratic reforms. The organisation frequently engages in collaborative efforts with other regional bodies to advocate for national unity, albeit from the perspective of regional autonomy [35]. The

group's vision for a restructured Nigeria emphasises the necessity of enhancing national unity through the decentralisation of central government power.

These regional organizations, while representing their regional interests, also contribute to the broader goal of national unity. Collectively, they represent approximately 70% of Nigeria's population. However, they are not the only ethnic or regional bodies active in the country. The Federal Character Principle was introduced to ensure that minor ethnic groups are also adequately represented in governance structures. While each of these organizations acknowledges the importance of a unified Nigeria, their strong regional focus often raises concerns about their actual impact on national integration. The enduring challenge is how to strike a balance between regional advocacy and the pursuit of national cohesion. In a country grappling with deep-seated ethnic diversity, economic disparity, and security challenges, these institutions will remain central to shaping Nigeria's political trajectory.

Constitutional Laws

The intricate relationship between tribal laws and public administration in Nigeria reflects the country's deeply rooted cultural diversity. These tribal or customary laws coexist alongside the formal legal system established by the Nigerian Constitution, creating a complex legal structure that influences governance at various levels. Nigeria's colonial history plays a central role in this configuration. Under British colonial rule, the system of indirect rule allowed traditional leaders to administer justice and governance based on local customs, particularly in northern Nigeria. This framework had a dual impact: on the one hand, it formalised the tribal governance structures; on the other hand, however, it also led to the entrenchment of ethnic divisions [36].

In the post-colonial period, the Nigerian Constitution incorporated elements of customary and statutory law, thereby recognising the importance of traditional institutions in public administration [37]. While the Nigerian Constitution acknowledges the legitimacy of customary law, it also establishes a framework that allows for the non-conflict of customary law with statutory law or the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution. Section 12 of the Constitution stipulates that customary law is applicable in civil matters. Section 38, meanwhile, protects the freedom of religion, a right which is often intertwined with tribal customs. [47]. This dual legal framework facilitates the coexistence of traditional and modern legal systems, thereby enabling a hybrid model of governance. The influence of tribal laws on public administration in Nigeria is significant, particularly in rural areas where traditional leaders wield considerable authority.

Traditional leaders play a crucial role in public administration by serving as intermediaries between the state and local populations. In rural areas, where formal institutions are often less accessible, traditional rulers are seen as more approachable and trustworthy. For instance, in the case of many tribal communities, the authority for decision-making regarding land use, conflict resolution and resource management is traditionally held by local tribal leaders. These leaders possess the capacity to ensure the implementation of these decisions. [38].

Furthermore, the integration of tribal laws into public administration has implications for gender equity. A significant proportion of customary legislation is characterised by patriarchal structures, frequently resulting in the restriction of women's entitlements and their involvement in the decision-making process. Tribal laws have the capacity to enhance local governance. However, they can also have the effect of perpetuating inequalities. [39]. Furthermore, conflicts between tribal laws and constitutional guarantees—especially concerning human rights—frequently arise. The lack of uniformity in customary law applications can lead to inconsistencies, legal uncertainty, and even injustices [40].

To address these challenges, Nigeria must develop a more inclusive legal framework that harmonizes tribal and constitutional laws. This could include the establishment of legal mechanisms for conflict resolution between the two systems, ensuring that traditional practices are aligned with human rights protections.

Rule of Law

The rule of law is a fundamental concept in the realm of effective governance and public administration. In Nigeria, where tribal affiliations and traditional governance structures coexist with formal state mechanisms, the application and interpretation of the rule of law can differ significantly. The interaction between tribal and national laws gives rise to a multifaceted legal framework that exerts a significant influence on public administration at both the local and national levels.

Traditional Governance Structures

Traditional governance systems in Nigeria predate colonialism and are characterized by communal leadership, respect for elders, and the prioritization of collective well-being. According to Okafor [41], traditional rulers serve as influential actors in local governance, helping mediate disputes, maintain order, and enforce communal norms. These roles, however, can sometimes clash with statutory laws and national legal standards [42].

While the Nigerian Constitution enshrines the rule of law and protects human rights, customary laws—often unwritten and varying between communities—can conflict with national laws. This is particularly evident in matters like marriage, inheritance, and land disputes, where customary practices may contradict statutory provisions [43]. In such situations, public administrators are frequently required to navigate between conflicting legal expectations. For instance, a land dispute might be resolved by a traditional ruler using customary law, while the formal judiciary may demand adherence to national legal standards. This results in legal ambiguity and undermines the consistent enforcement of the law [44].

The interaction between tribal governance and public administration has profound implications for the rule of law in Nigeria. Conversely, traditional leaders have the capacity to enhance the legitimacy of government policies by aligning them with local customs and practices. In contrast, an overreliance on tribal structures has the potential to compromise the consistent implementation of legal policies, resulting in instances of discrimination and unequal access to legal services [45].

Public administrators must strive for inclusive governance that respects cultural traditions while upholding constitutional principles. As Ezeani [46] notes, effective public administration in Nigeria necessitates a synergistic approach that integrates customary and formal legal systems.

In order to comprehend the rule of law in Nigeria's public administration in its entirety, it is necessary to consider the influence of tribal systems. The coexistence of customary and statutory laws presents both challenges and opportunities for governance. In the future, it is essential to implement policies that promote legal pluralism, thereby ensuring the rule of law is upheld while respecting the cultural diversity that characterises Nigeria.

Conclusion

The exploration of the impact of tribes on Nigeria's public administration system reveals a complex and multifaceted interplay that significantly shapes governance, policy implementation, and national cohesion. This study, based exclusively on secondary data, examined the influence of tribal institutions, the rule of law, and the evolution of the public service in Nigeria. The findings underscore the critical role of unity institutions, which serve as platforms for dialogue and cooperation among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups. These institutions promote mutual respect, facilitate conflict resolution, and contribute meaningfully to the goal of national integration. However, their effectiveness is often hindered by entrenched tribal loyalties, which can undermine national interests. Strengthening these institutions through inclusive policies and capacity building is essential for fostering more effective and cohesive governance.

Furthermore, the study highlights the complexities surrounding the rule of law in a pluralistic society where tribal customs and statutory legal systems coexist. While the Nigerian Constitution enshrines the principle of legal equality, the widespread application of customary law creates inconsistencies in legal interpretation and enforcement. This duality gives rise to critical questions concerning access to justice and equitable treatment under the law. In order to address these challenges, there is an urgent need for legal reforms that recognise and harmonise customary laws with national statutes. This would ensure that all citizens, regardless of their tribal affiliations, enjoy the protections afforded by the rule of law.

The analysis of Nigeria's public service further reveals how tribal affiliations can influence recruitment, policy implementation and service delivery. In some instances, nepotism and favoritism based on ethnic ties have led to inefficiencies, undermining public trust in government institutions. However, tribal leaders can also play constructive roles by mobilizing grassroots support for public policies and facilitating community participation. Thus, a balanced approach that promotes meritocracy while leveraging the positive aspects of tribal engagement is critical for improving service delivery and institutional performance.

This study also traced the historical evolution of public administration in Nigeria, from decentralized pre-colonial governance systems, where authority resided in local chiefs and councils, to the centralized structures introduced

during colonial rule, which often sidelined traditional institutions. Despite the transition to a modern bureaucratic system, the legacy of this duality continues to influence administrative practices. Recognizing this historical context is essential for crafting policies that integrate traditional governance mechanisms within modern public administration frameworks.

In conclusion, the influence of tribes on Nigeria's public administration system is both profound and enduring. It is essential for policymakers to acknowledge the strengths and challenges of tribal affiliations within governance frameworks. By doing so, they can formulate strategies that enhance unity, uphold the rule of law, and strengthen public institutions. The promotion of an inclusive approach that respects tribal diversity while promoting national cohesion is ultimately essential for the advancement of public administration in Nigeria. This comprehensive understanding will contribute to a more effective governance and the establishment of a just society for all Nigerians.

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