



# Bodong Holders in Contemporary Conflict Resolution

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**Abstract**— The study examined the role and effectiveness of Bodong Holders in the indigenous conflict resolution system of the Kalinga ethnolinguistic groups. For centuries, the Bodong system played a crucial role in resolving disputes, maintaining peace, and promoting social cohesion within and between Kalinga ethnolinguistic groups. The Bodong is based on a bilateral peace pact and represents a sacred covenant of non-aggression maintained by the wisdom and authority of the Bodong holders, who are considered guardians of the system. Despite its historical significance, current challenges such as evolving societal disputes, legal complexities, and resource limitations pose significant obstacles to the effectiveness of the system. These challenges, coupled with the limited literature on the effectiveness and challenges faced by Bodong Holders, require a closer examination of their crucial role in resolving disputes and maintaining community harmony. This study aimed to address this gap by examining how Bodong Holders deal with disputes, maintain their legitimacy, and address the challenges that affect their ability to mediate effectively.

**Keywords**— Bodong system, Indigenous conflict resolution, Kalinga natives, Bodong holders, Restorative justice, Pagta (by-laws), Tribal disputes



## I. INTRODUCTION

Conflict, an inherent feature of human interaction, manifests in various forms—from interpersonal disagreements to large-scale sociopolitical disputes—and arises from competing interests, values, and limited resources (Coser, 1967; Schelling, 1960; Smith, 1966). While formal mechanisms often emphasize adversarial justice, indigenous systems of conflict resolution prioritize reconciliation, consensus, and restorative justice (Mokonen, 2016; Ramani & Liu, 2010). These culturally embedded practices, mediated by elders or respected leaders, are particularly effective in contexts where state institutions are limited or lack legitimacy (Olowu, 2018).

In the Philippines, indigenous conflict resolution practices remain vital, with the Kalinga Bodong system standing out as a sophisticated, time-tested governance mechanism (Barton, 1973; Billiet, 1970; Flavier, 2003). The Bodong, a bilateral peace pact between ethnolinguistic groups, is governed by the Pagta, a set of customary laws outlining rights, responsibilities, and conflict settlement procedures (Revised Prototype Pagta, 2024). Beyond legal provisions, the system is enriched by rituals, ceremonies, and the

central role of Bodong Holders, who perform legislative, executive, and judicial functions to uphold peace and order within and across communities (Budaden, 2006; Sugguiyao, 2024).

Despite extensive literature on the Bodong's structure and historical roots, little empirical research has assessed the actual effectiveness of Bodong Holders in facilitating justice, especially amid challenges like modernization, jurisdictional overlaps, and shifting generational values (Wacnang, 2024; Alsiyang, 2023; Guadamar & Martinez, Jr., 2017). Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the types of disputes managed under the Bodong system, evaluates the effectiveness of Bodong Holders' interventions, identifies the challenges they face, and offers policy recommendations to strengthen their role in indigenous governance.

The study contributes to broader discourses on peacebuilding, legal pluralism, and indigenous governance. It highlights the enduring relevance of traditional mechanisms in contemporary conflict resolution and underscores the importance of formal recognition and integration of such systems within national legal and policy

frameworks (Flavier, 2004; Calsiyao, 2023; Naganag, 2021).<sup>4</sup>

## II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEMS

This study aimed to investigate the role and effectiveness of *Bodong Holders* in the indigenous conflict resolution system of the *Bodong* within the Kalinga Ethnolinguistic groups. Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. What types of disputes are commonly resolved by the *Bodong Holders* through the Bodong system?
2. How do *Bodong Holders* effectively fulfill their roles in resolving conflicts in terms of:
  - a. maintaining their motivation to serve,
  - b. preserving their integrity, credibility, and competence,
  - c. ensuring disputants' satisfaction, and
  - d. fostering long-term community cohesion?
3. What are the primary challenges and issues faced by *Bodong Holders* in their efforts to mediate conflicts and maintain peace?

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-exploratory design to investigate the effectiveness of Bodong Holders in the indigenous conflict resolution system among the Lubo and Tulgao ethnolinguistic groups in Kalinga Province, Philippines. Given the culturally embedded and nuanced nature of the Bodong system, a qualitative approach allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and perspectives. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group

Table 1: Types of Disputes Commonly Resolved

Category of Dispute	Description	Examples from Manuscript
<b>Murder/ homicide</b>	Inter-community conflicts, misunderstandings, or resource disputes are central to the Bodong system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Boundary disputes escalating to deadly violence.</li> <li>– Revenge murders/homicides managed through amicable settlements.</li> </ul>
<b>Physical Injuries</b>	It is often interconnected with personal conflicts, alcohol-related incidents, and tribal misunderstandings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Injuries due to alcohol-related violence.</li> <li>– Youth disputes leading to physical harm.</li> </ul>
<b>Theft</b>	This encompasses both traditional forms of theft, such as livestock, and modern forms, such as electronics and vehicles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Theft of cattle and crops.</li> <li>– Cases involving stolen motorcycles and mobile phones.</li> </ul>

discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with 8 Bodong Holders, 4 tribal elders, 4 local government officials, and 3 academics, while FGDs involved 16 community members segmented by age, gender, and role. Though the study initially proposed larger FGDs and additional disputant participants, these were adjusted due to logistical and ethical considerations, resulting in in-depth interviews with 3 disputants instead. Supplementary data were obtained through the analysis of the newly adopted 2024 prototype Pagta.

Research was conducted primarily in the Kulligong sites of Bulanao and Nambaran in Tabuk City, where many Bodong Holders now reside, ensuring cultural relevance and accessibility. Thematic analysis was used to code and interpret qualitative data, with triangulation and member checks employed to enhance validity. Ethical procedures, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly followed, and cultural protocols were respected throughout the study. Despite limitations such as the lack of participant records and the inability to observe live Bodong sessions, the researcher's community ties and prior academic engagement with the Bodong system enriched the study's depth and authenticity. Overall, the methodology ensured a robust understanding of the Bodong system's effectiveness, challenges, and socio-cultural context.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents, analyzes, and interprets data on the types of disputes resolved through the Bodong system, the roles of Bodong Holders in conflict resolution, and the challenges they face in maintaining peace.

### Types of Disputes Commonly Resolved by Bodong Holders through the Bodong System

<b>Fraud (Estafa)</b>	Economic disputes, often involving land sales or deceptive practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Land sales fraud between ethnolinguistic groups.</li> <li>– Scams affecting economic stability.</li> </ul>
<b>Boundary Disputes</b>	Conflicts over land and resource control are often a major cause of inter-tribal tensions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Disputes over water sources and territorial expansion.</li> <li>– Clan boundary conflicts rooted in resource access.</li> </ul>
<b>Vehicular Accidents</b>	This is a modern addition, reflecting changes in transportation practices and urbanization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Car accidents leading to property damage and personal injuries.</li> <li>– Cases involving reckless driving and deaths.</li> </ul>
<b>Alcohol-Related Homicides</b>	The issue is becoming increasingly significant, especially in urban areas, and has been linked to intoxication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Murder/homicides and injuries resulting from drunken brawls in public spaces like bars.</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual Assault and Rape</b>	Among the most complex and sensitive cases, requiring contemporary ethical solutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Traditional remedies, such as forced marriages, are challenged.</li> <li>– The shift towards victim-centered resolutions.</li> </ul>

The Bodong system, an indigenous conflict resolution mechanism practiced among Kalinga communities in the Philippines, plays a pivotal role in addressing various disputes that threaten peace and harmony. Guided by the principles of restorative justice and community involvement, this traditional system operates as a critical framework for ensuring social order, fostering reconciliation, and preventing the escalation of conflicts. The study examines the types of disputes commonly resolved by Bodong Holders, emphasizing the system's adaptability to both traditional and contemporary challenges.

Through an analysis of historical and contemporary cases, the findings reveal that the Bodong system addresses a diverse range of disputes, including those deeply rooted in inter-tribal conflicts and those arising from modern socio-economic developments. These disputes encompass issues such as murder/homicide, physical injuries, theft, boundary disputes, vehicular accidents, alcohol-related violence, fraud, sexual assault, and inter-tribal violence. Each category highlights the dynamic scope of the Bodong system, reflecting its evolution from a mechanism primarily focused on tribal warfare to a comprehensive

system capable of addressing modern societal complexities.

The discussion illustrates how the Bodong system balances traditional values with practical approaches to conflict resolution. By analyzing these cases, the study underscores the system's role in maintaining peace and its enduring relevance as a culturally grounded yet adaptable framework for dispute resolution in Kalinga communities.

In summary, the *Bodong* system demonstrates an impressive capacity to adapt from its origins as a mechanism for resolving inter-tribal conflicts, like murder, to handling modern issues like vehicular accidents. The system's flexibility allows it to address a broad range of disputes, all while maintaining its central objective of ensuring peaceful relations and restorative justice within the community.

#### How Bodong Holders Effectively Fulfill Their Roles in Resolving Conflicts

The results for the second sub-problem of this study are presented in Table 2 highlighting the multifaceted roles of *Bodong Holders* in resolving conflicts and maintaining peace in their communities.

Table 2:

Research Question Aspect	Key Findings
Maintaining their motivation to serve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Motivated by the safety and well-being of their community and families.</li> <li>Driven by intrinsic motivation rather than financial gain.</li> <li>Emphasis on fostering peace, harmony, and the well-being of younger generations.</li> </ul>
Preserving their integrity, credibility, and competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strict adherence to the <i>Pagta</i> (Bodong by-laws) ensures fairness, impartiality, and consistency.</li> <li>Transparency through community involvement in decision-making fosters trust.</li> <li>Respect for the community strengthens credibility.</li> </ul>
Ensuring disputants' satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on restitution and compensation to restore balance and justice.</li> <li>Dialogue and mediation encourage mutual understanding and reconciliation.</li> <li>Community involvement enhances fairness and shared responsibility.</li> <li>Community involvement prioritizes peace and harmony over individual satisfaction.</li> </ul>
Fostering long-term community cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enforcement of the <i>Pagta</i> builds accountability and prevents disputes.</li> <li>Community respect for <i>Bodong Holders</i> and their role reinforces unity.</li> <li>Swift conflict resolution prevents escalation.</li> <li>Practices like <i>Dornat</i> (reciprocal visits) and intermarriages promote bonds and solidarity.</li> <li>Upholding the role of <i>Bodong</i> holder ensures continuous peace and community development.</li> </ul>

*Bodong Holders* effectively fulfill their roles in conflict resolution through a combination of personal commitment, adherence to traditional practices, and community engagement. Their motivation to serve is rooted in a sense of cultural responsibility and a desire to contribute positively to their community. This motivation is further driven by the understanding that their efforts are vital to the well-being and stability of their ethnolinguistic groups. To maintain their integrity and credibility, *Bodong Holders* must demonstrate impartiality, honesty, and a deep understanding of the *Pagta*, or by-laws of the *Bodong*. They are expected to act as moral leaders, ensuring fairness in all decisions and processes. Competence in their role is achieved through a combination of proven leadership, economic stability, and respect from the community. Furthermore, *Bodong Holders* are expected to act as the "eyes, ears, and mouth" of the *Bodong*, faithfully implementing the agreements and managing cases effectively. This obligation requires them to manage cases effectively and consult with community members, particularly elders, to ensure broad support for their decisions.

Ensuring disputants' satisfaction is important, but it is

often secondary to the primary goal of maintaining peace and harmony between ethnolinguistic groups. The *Bodong* system prioritizes restorative justice, focusing on mending relationships rather than solely imposing punishments. *Bodong Holders* facilitate dialogue and negotiation, aiming for solutions that are advantageous for all parties involved. Long-term community cohesion is fostered through several key practices, including the implementation of *dornat* (reciprocal visits) among *Bodong Holders* to strengthen their bonds of friendship and brotherhood, and the facilitation of intermarriage between ethnolinguistic groups to enhance unity and peaceful coexistence. By fulfilling their responsibilities as outlined in the by-laws and engaging in community consultation, *Bodong Holders* contribute significantly to the maintenance of peace and unity.

#### Primary Challenges and Issues Faced by *Bodong Holders*

The results and discussion for the third sub-problem of this study, the *Bodong* system, a traditional conflict resolution mechanism integral to the cultural fabric of Kalinga communities, face numerous challenges and issues in their contemporary applications, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Challenges and Issues Faced by Bodong Holders

Category	Details
Financial Challenges	High costs for hosting kaBodong and resolving disputes.
	Personal financial burdens with no formal compensation.
	Insufficient community support; reliance on personal or family resources.
	Lack of adequate government financial support.
	Financial difficulties can limit the effectiveness and selection of Bodong Holders
Disrespect for the Pagta	Disregard for the Pagta by disputants, elders, and leaders, leading to breaches.
	Unreasonable demands for compensation and counterclaims weaken the system.
	Prioritization of personal interests over collective agreements undermines traditions.
	Younger generations and disputants often bypass the Bodong system for formal legal avenues.
	Erosion of traditional values and the rise of individualism diminish respect for the system.
Complexities of Disputes and Mediation	Expansion of disputes to include theft, traffic incidents, defamation, sexual assault, and drug-related offenses.
	Family involvement creates conflicts of interest.
	Managing difficult disputants with diverse attitudes and behaviors adds complexity.
	Emotional and social dimensions of conflicts complicate mediation.
	Balancing traditional methods with formal legal systems introduces new challenges.
External and Systemic Challenges	Victims seeking resolution in formal courts undermine the Bodong system.
	Government regulations restrict Bodong Holders from addressing certain serious offenses.
	Lack of collaboration with government ADR entities leads to fragmented conflict resolution efforts.
	Limited training in parliamentary procedures and mediation techniques affect quality.
Personal Burdens and Sacrifices	Personal sacrifices in time, finances, and effort are expected for conflict resolution.
	Time-consuming role requiring extended mediation and hosting responsibilities.
	Risks of personal harm in upholding peace.
	Emotional stress from navigating difficult conflicts.
Maintaining Community Trust and Legitimacy	Community trust is crucial for the effectiveness of Bodong holder.
	Demonstrating integrity, impartiality, and consistency is essential.
	Failure to resolve disputes fairly or perceived bias risks breaking down the Bodong system.
	Fair application of the Pagta strengthens community respect and system legitimacy.

The *Bodong* system, while deeply rooted in Kalinga culture, faces significant challenges that threaten its effectiveness in maintaining peace and resolving disputes. A central issue is a lack of respect for *Bodong* by-laws and the authority of *Bodong Holders*, particularly among the youth. This disregard can lead to violations of the *pagta*, which weakens the system's integrity and undermines its ability to enforce agreed-upon resolutions. The problem is further exacerbated by the financial constraints faced by

many *Bodong Holders*, who often must shoulder the expenses of hosting meetings and providing compensation, making their role a significant burden, especially for those lacking financial stability.

Moreover, the conflict resolution process is often hindered by unreasonable demands from victims or excessive counter-bargaining from offenders, which makes it difficult to reach a fair settlement and adhere to the *Bodong* by-laws. This behavior undermines the system's ability to provide

fair and equitable resolutions, leading to dissatisfaction among the involved parties and weakening the system's overall credibility. Another key challenge lies in the complexities of integrating traditional practices with modern legal systems. The *Bodong* system struggles to navigate the formal justice system and cooperate with governmental bodies, such as the Barangay Justice System (BJS), Municipal Peace and Order Council (MPOC), and Kalinga *Bodong* Council of Elders (KBCE), due to the philosophical and methodological differences between the two systems.

Additionally, many *Bodong Holders* lack formal training or experience in mediation, negotiation, conflict management and parliamentary procedures, hindering their ability to resolve complex disputes effectively and undermining public confidence in their ability to fulfill their roles as peace agents. This lack of essential skills can weaken the dispute resolution process, diminish the *Bodong* holder's credibility, and hinder the restoration of peace and harmony. The *Bodong* system's effectiveness also depends heavily on active community participation, yet there are instances where community members fail to fully engage in the resolution process or show full commitment to the by-laws, thereby reducing the authority of *Bodong Holders* and limiting their capacity to effectively perform their duties.

Finally, and critically, the sources highlight the potential for tribal conflict if cases are not resolved, which could lead to the severance of the *Bodong* agreement and jeopardize peace between ethnolinguistic groups. The pressure on the *Bodong Holders* to resolve disputes promptly and effectively is intense, given the risk of escalation and the potential for wider conflict.

These interconnected challenges underscore the urgent need for capacity building and robust support systems to enhance the *Bodong* system's ability to maintain peace and harmony within Kalinga communities. Training in mediation, negotiation, conflict management, and navigating formal legal systems, as well as fostering greater community engagement, are crucial to the long-term viability and effectiveness of the *Bodong* system.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the *Bodong* system remains a vital indigenous mechanism for resolving both traditional and modern disputes in Kalinga communities, with *Bodong Holders* demonstrating integrity, impartiality, and commitment to peace. They effectively address a broad range of conflicts—from homicide and inter-tribal disputes to contemporary issues like vehicular accidents and fraud—by upholding the *Pagta*, practicing restorative justice, and fostering inter-tribal cohesion through customs

like *Dornat* and intermarriage. However, the emergence of complex, modern cases and alignment challenges with formal legal systems strain traditional practices and highlight the need for updates to the *Pagta*, as well as greater support for *Bodong Holders* in navigating emotional, legal, and financial limitations.

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