

# THE HEIRLOOM BEADS OF KALINGA - TRACING HISTORICAL TRADE, CULTURAL MEANINGS, AND CONTEMPORARY INNOVATION

## AS CONTA DE TRADIÇÃO DE KALINGA - UM PERCURSO PELO COMÉRCIO HISTÓRICO, SIGNIFICADOS CULTURAIS E INOVAÇÃO CONTEMPORÂNEA

Article received on: 1/23/2026

Article accepted on: 4/24/2026

**Florida Tabanganay Lao-Aten\***

\*Kalinga State University, Tabuk City, Kalinga, Philippines

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3011-6002>

[ftlaoaten@ksu.edu.ph](mailto:ftlaoaten@ksu.edu.ph)

**Luzviminda M. Wingnga\***

\*Kalinga State University, Tabuk City, Kalinga, Philippines

[wayinnelaoaten@gmail.com](mailto:wayinnelaoaten@gmail.com)

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

### Abstract

The Bongor, also called Kalinga beadwork, is treated as an ongoing process of art-making, as well as a continuing art form in which an individual chooses specific types of beads according to their social status and personal taste. It was discovered that the modern Bongor necklaces carry not only the value and meaning that is contributed by the Kalinga artists but also that contributed by the wearer. Bongor, therefore, is a place where citizens' identities are cared for in ways that relate to each citizen's personal narrative and cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Bongor. Kalinga Beads. Cultural Evolution. Material Culture. Indigenous Innovation. Adaptive Tradition. Cultural Pride. Cordillera Heritage.

### Resumo

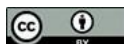
*O Bongor, também conhecido como bordado com miçangas Kalinga, é considerado um processo contínuo de criação artística, bem como uma forma de arte em constante evolução, na qual cada indivíduo escolhe tipos específicos de miçangas de acordo com seu status social e gosto pessoal. Descobriu-se que os colares Bongor modernos carregam não apenas o valor e o significado conferidos pelos artistas Kalinga, mas também aqueles atribuídos por quem os usa. O Bongor, portanto, é um espaço onde as identidades dos cidadãos são valorizadas de maneiras que se relacionam com a narrativa pessoal e a herança cultural de cada um.*

**Palavras-chave:** Bongor. Contas Kalinga. Evolução Cultural. Cultura Material. Inovação Indígena. Tradição Adaptativa. Orgulho Cultural. Herança da Cordilheira.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the study

Among the indigenous people of the Philippines, specifically the Kalinga tribe, Bongor or heirloom beads played a significant role in their culture and history. The beads



were made from carnelian gemstone, believed to have originated from India. The beads also consisted of Ming porcelains from China and glasses and glass objects from Venice. The Kalinga tribes obtained these beads by trading with other tribes from other countries. They obtained these through their pre-colonial trading network, and these heirloom beads have tremendous socio-cultural values to the tribe. The multiple meanings associated with the beads reveal the standard of living, social status, and beliefs of the indigenous community; therefore, the Bongor is a very important material culture of the Kalinga tribe.

The Bongor was originally a religious fashion in the world of ancient cultures. Today, the Bongor has evolved into a secular fashion phenomenon, instigating a fashion revolution that has turned the original ancestral and sacred meaning of this cultural object into pure fashion and identity. This research will reflect on the fashion revolution of the Bongor and how the ancestral meaning of this object has been converted into the personal identity of the wearer, whilst remaining aware of the cultural and symbolic origins of the Bongor and taking into account the new semantics of the fashion item. The research will reflect on a fashion item that forms part of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity, and is therefore part of our shared world cultural legacy. The fashion item in question is everyday adapted and reinterpreted by producers and consumers, to reflect their personal, social, and cultural realities.

## 1.2 Review of related literature

This study connects with scholarly work on cultural continuity and innovation:

- **On Cordillera Connectivity:** The work of **Canilao (2018)** on ancient trade routes provides the historical context for how global goods like beads entered the highlands, illustrating a long-standing Kalinga engagement with the wider world.
- **On Cultural Sustainability:** This research aligns with scholars like **Caballero (2016)** and **Molintas (2004)**, who explore how indigenous practices successfully adapt to modernity without losing their core identity. Bongor artistry serves as a strong case study of this positive adaptation.
- **On Material Culture and Meaning:** Drawing from **Acabado (2017)** and **Prill-Brett (2007)**, who detail the link between Kalinga social structure and art, this

paper extends the analysis to beadwork, showing how objects accumulate and transform meaning over time.

This research contributes by documenting the specific mechanisms of this adaptation---how traditional designs are being modified for new contexts and audiences---celebrating the agency of Kalinga artisans in steering their cultural heritage forward.

### **1.3 Conceptual framework**

Cultural curation has been adopted as the underlying theory of this study. Cultural objects are no longer viewed as simple passive symbols; instead, they act as a vocabulary for individuals to fashion their own narratives about themselves. This study merges two separate fields of study.

1. Material Culture Studies: Understanding how objects carry and produce social meaning.

2. Body Adornment and Social Identity Construction: A Theoretical Perspective  
This assignment relates to Learning Strands 1 and 2. In Body Adornment and Social Identity Construction: A Theoretical Perspective, students apply theoretical perspectives to understand how body adornment acts as a tool for social identity construction. They then critique the work of Collins using their own sociological frameworks.

Beads of Identity – This is a strategy that allows exploration of how individuals select beads and meanings from the cultural archive in order to perform or constitute a public and personal identity.

### **1.4 Statement of the problem**

This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. Who are the custodians of the Bongor knowledge system, including its classification, interpretation, and use in Kalinga rituals, and what are the measures being undertaken to protect and maintain the integrity of the system?

2. How do contemporary Bongor artisans and textile wearers transform the traditional to meet the new demands of modern time?

3. How can interest in Bongor among the Kalinga people and the broader public be maintained in a way that sustainable basis meets cultural and local needs?

### **1.5 Objectives of the study**

1. To study the traditional typology of the Bongor beads and their cultural importance to provide a frame of reference to understand the history of Bongor beads.

2. Innovative features of Bongor in use and perception.

3. To outline the modalities that could enable Artisans of Bongor to benefit from the structures enabling them to maintain their independence and continue their sustainable development while safeguarding their professional dignity.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative ethnographic approach in order to explore the practitioners' lived experiences and knowledge.

**KEY INFORMANTS** For this research, a purposive sample of 25 key informants was engaged. These included a master bead maker, who also works in traditional Bead craft and jewelry, a cultural elder, as well as several of the younger bead makers engaged in the production of contemporary beads.

**Data Gathering:** In addition to surveys and literature review, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and visual documentation were carried out to collect qualitative data on traditional and modern practices that are currently in place.

**Data Analysis** Thematic analysis was carried out to identify the residents' perception about the ongoing works towards achieving continuity, innovation and community aspirations related to Bongor of tomorrow.

**Ethics:** This study was approved by the Kalinga State University Research Ethics Committee (KSU-REC-2020-015). Standards of informed consent, assuring that participants are unaware of their participation, getting consent, confidentiality of data, and respect for local culture were observed. The research participants were informed of the purpose, methodology of the study, and how the data collected from them would be used, especially the output that would be published. Written consent to their participation

in the study and to the publication in general, and to the use of their photographs in particular, in anonymous form was obtained from all the research participants. Separate consent to the publication of their photographs was also obtained from those shown in the paper, like cultural advocate Natividad Sugguiyao.

### **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 A living archive: the enduring foundation of traditional Bongor**

The multiplicity of beads in Kalinga culture points to a profound and lasting knowledge of beads. Even for ancient beads such as Adjongan or agate and Venetian Paraggi or chevron glass, Kalinga elders and master bead makers can still pinpoint their identity. Knowing the origin of the bead, its name, and its corresponding ritual, such as the use of the Arubo or carnelian bead during the newborn ritual, forms the basic knowledge that makes way for the creation of new designs of beads. It is these roots that give meaning and authenticity to the new designs of beads that are constantly being made.

#### **3.2 From ceremony to daily wear: the drivers of innovation**

This study provides a vivid picture of cultural diversity and the evolving ways that people are creating art and adapting to their new situations. The evolution of art is being driven by a complex interplay between inner feelings of cultural pride that people have in their own work and the recognition they receive from outsiders.

**Internal Demand:** The young generation of Kalinga professionals and youth feel and suit themselves in the contemporary community in which they live. They prefer to use more contemporary jewelry items like smaller, lighter, and more fashion-oriented jewelry items to suit their needs and the event for e.g. in the office, in school or for fashion wear, and thus have moved away from the full ritual costume jewelry items.

- **External Appreciation** The world market, combined with the domestic market, has seen an increase in interest in community art as a commodity, and this is leading to an increased demand for Bongor. Many are beginning to see this interest in

tribal art as an economic opportunity and as a way of validating the worth of tribal art.

### **3.3 Strategic adaptation: guiding a living tradition**

- We are starting to utilise our beads in projects such as creating expertly designed earrings, bracelets, men’s jewellery and other projects in addition to necklaces.
- Material Blending Because heirloom beads are so expensive we like to reserve them for our more luxurious designs. All other materials used are contemporary and we like to combine traditional and modern elements to make more affordable jewelry designs.
- Aesthetic Innovation The new designs are based on the Dalisdis traditional Kalinga pattern, updated with modern and vibrant color combinations and compositions, which are relevant to contemporary tastes while retaining the essence of the Kalinga culture.

### **3.4 The art of curation: personal expression in contemporary Bongor**

For the Bongor of today, it has evolved into a very personal and individualistic ornament that very much reflects the shift of Kalinga culture from its traditional constraints to one of more flexibility and personal freedom. While in traditional times, the form of the bongor was determined by rules that varied depending on the rank or status of the wearer, or the specific ritual that it was used for, contemporary sponsors or wearer and makers have a wide range of choices relative to the form and motifs of the final product that they think will enhance the status and beauty of the final product. Thus, the significance of the ornament will ultimately depend on the decisions of the sponsor-maker-wearer. Individual taste is still a very important criterion for determining the beauty of necklaces, just as it was for the other beads we looked at.”

From the traditional context in which the artisan imposes his design to the needs of the social status of the wearer, to the context in which the artisan acts as an interpreter of the needs of the wearer, even in the case in which the Bongor can be or not worn. In this sense, it is a matter of transforming the needs of the wearer into an object that, at the



same time, reflects the culture of the artisan and his technical skills. Thus, the wearer becomes a co-designer of the Bongor and his preferences, his history, his economic conditions, can all condition its final form. This democratization of the Bongor design is what explains its current vitality and at the same time the fact that it has become an object far removed from its original social connotation as a status symbol. Today, the Bongor is used by a wide range of people to dress themselves and to express themselves.



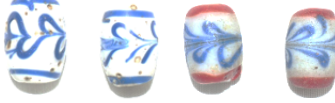

The bongor that is famously worn by the Kalinga community in northern Philippines have managed to keep their traditional craftsmanship thriving while at the same time benefiting from advancements in modern times, the United Nations culture chief Kishan Manocha said in a statement released in New York on 10 March 2008 after visiting the tribe to learn more about their unique practice. He praised the tribe for being innovative and for keeping their traditions alive “so that culture remains a living and vibrant element and a dynamic part of the economy and social development of today as well as tomorrow,” he said.

A detailed typology of key Bongor beads, illustrating their origins and cultural significance, is presented in Table 1.






**Table 1**





*Typology of Key Bongor Beads*





	<p>Manwit</p>	<p>Multi-faceted carnelian Origin: Possibly India Earliest carnelian beads were found in Western Asia (4000-2000 BC)</p>
	<p>Arubo</p>	<p>Round Carnelian Used to bring good health and growth for children Routinely tied to the wrist of a newborn by a female shaman (mandadawak) in a ritual called</p>




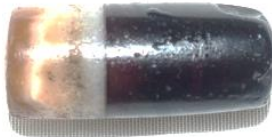
		sipat ni anak to drive away malevolent spirits (paniyao and kak)
	Ballurong	Irregularly shaped carnelian Origin: Possibly India Earliest carnelian beads were found in Western Asia (4000-2000 BC)
	Burod	Large round Agate Beads Also Known as Jar Beads since they frequently carved as jars. Frequently worn as pendant with equal significance to Sung, Ming, Ching porcelain jars
	Gangao	Translucent banded agate Maybe 200 to 800 years old Origin Possibly in India
	Binukkawan Ming Beads	Porcelain white with blue and red design Origin China
	Paraggi Chevron Beads	Six layered Opaque glass with complex arrangement of blue, white and red Origin Venice Italy Early 16 <sup>th</sup> Century
	Campig	Opaque Glass with Mosaic Design Red, Orange and white design Origin Venice Italy It's a brittle beads due to its design. Because of its delicate constitution, a lot of this beads chip off easily






	<p>Buginikan Fish Eggs</p>	<p>From the word bugi meaning egg and ikan fish. With tiny dots in various colors</p>
	<p>Pangao</p>	<p>Also called pang-aw in Ifugao Gold glass beads wherein a foil of beads is sandwiched between 2 layers of glass. Approximately 2000 years old Some were excavated in Luzon</p>
	<p>Karkalakat Opaque Glass Beads</p>	<p>The most expensive beads are sourced from Lubo Kalinga</p>
	<p>Battakang</p>	<p>Dull, Opaque Glass Beads Black on a whitish base Origin Possibly in Africa</p>
	<p>Sinamling</p>	<p>Shiny Translucent glass beads Dark brown or black in a whitish base Origin Bohemia Possibly made during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century</p>
	<p>Morda-u</p>	<p>Yellow opaque glass bead Origin: Later copies from Europe This bead is a popular addition to traditional Kalinga necklace designs especially the Dalisdis (multi layered choker or beaddress). A</p>

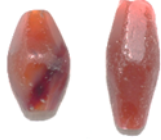

	Kinubar	<p>Opaque terra-cotta</p> <p>Origin India Pacific Later copies from Europe</p> <p>A Kalinga Necklace staple, most of the bead arrangements are done using Kinubar and Morda-u. It is a very simple bead but it is highly prized in Kalinga</p>
	Dinugdugway	<p>Fruits of the Forest</p> <p>Translucent glass. Melon shaped</p> <p>Blue green or aquamarine in color</p> <p>Origin Possibly China</p> <p>From the Itneg who claim the beads were dug from graves since they were considered as food for the afterlife</p>
	Dumat	<p>Also pronounced as Jumat</p> <p>Opaque glass bead with red, white and blue vase design.</p> <p>It is a chevron-inspired bead with waves and is given value as the Paraggi</p>
	Barukkakka	<p>Off-white opaque, glass origin, venice, Italy</p> <p>these beads are usually combined with silliyon (white heart) to make single-strand Kalinga bead necklaces.</p>
	Kamuntara	<p>Eye of the Forest</p> <p>Opaque glass</p> <p>Black with spots of many colors</p> <p>Origin Venice Italy</p> <p>Typically used in single strand Kalinga necklaces.</p> <p>It is called “ eye of the forest” due to the eye shaped patters made by the layered dots on the beads.</p>

	Kumlis	<p>Opaque glass; aquamarine</p> <p>Origin: Venice Italy</p> <p>Use in Kokko-on and single-strand Kalinga bead necklace</p>
	Abuliliki	<p>“Feather” beads</p> <p>Black, green or light blue. In color</p> <p>Origin: Venice, Italy</p> <p>Late 19<sup>th</sup> century</p> <p>Abuliliki, much like the campig, is a brittle glass bead that chips off easily. A lot of beads such as these rarely survive the years without any chips or damage on the surface.</p>
	Bitug	<p>Russian blue beads with large holes</p> <p>Origin: Venice, Italy</p> <p>The Bitug is tied to the neck of 4 day old infants in a ritual called “kontad,” it is the counterpart of the Arubo (Carnelian) and is believed to give strength. It is given by mothers to their month-old boys.</p>
	Galliyak	<p>Crumb bead</p> <p>Opaque glass: black with spots of many colors</p> <p>Origin: Venice, Italy</p> <p>Also one of the highly prized beads of the Kalingas. It is used in various jewelry designs and textile decoration</p>
	Magataboy	<p>stone or glass bead with gold flecks</p> <p>Onyx or onyx imitation</p> <p>Origin: Bohemia</p> <p>Possibly 19<sup>th</sup> century</p> <p>Used as accent for different Kalinga jewelry designs. Also a highly prized bead of the Kalinga considering its small size (approx 5 mm only).</p>

	<p>Inasi</p>	<p>Translucent glass; aquamarine Origin: Venice, Italy</p> <p>Commonly used for Dalisdis and kokko-on bead arrangements (layered bead necklaces).</p>
	<p>Kinotban</p>	<p>Stone or glass beads, onyx imitation Origin: Bohemia Possibly 19<sup>th</sup> century</p>
	<p>Pinispisao</p>	<p>Opaque glass with red, white and black stripes Origin: Venice, Italy</p> <p>Used in various Kalinga jewelry designs and palced on the back of necklace arrangements (Takray).</p>
	<p>Goryagoy</p>	<p>Longer and more tubular compared to the pinispisao Origin: Venice, Italy Possibly 20<sup>th</sup> century</p> <p>Used in various Kalinga jewelry designs and palced on the back of necklace arrangements (Takray).</p>
	<p>Bacao</p>	<p>Opaque glass, yellow Resemblances corn kernels Origin: Venice, Italy</p> <p>Used in Dalisdis (multi-layered choker or beaddress arrangement) as accent beads.</p>

	Silliyon	<p>Also called cornaline, d' Aleppo or "white Heart" because of its white center  Origin: Venice, Italy or Bohemia  1830 to present</p> <p>Used in necklaces to ward off witchcrafts (Kodot) because of the belief that witches or evil entities that fear the color red</p>
	Pisao	<p>opaque glass with red, green, and white stripes  origin: Venice, Italy  Probably later 20<sup>th</sup> century</p> <p>Used as accent for necklace arrangements and usually goes to the back of the arrangement (Takray).</p>
	Kur-is	<p>Opaque glass with black and white  Origin: Venice, Italy</p> <p>Used as accent for necklace arrangements and usually goes to the back of the arrangement (Takray).</p>
	Adjongan	<p>Most valuable Kalinga bead  Made from agate or onyx  Considered thousands of years old  Origin: Vietnam, Cambodia, India</p>

	<p>Namut</p>	<p>slender, octagonal carnelian origin: possibly India earliest carnelian beads were found in Western Asia (4000-2000 BC)</p>
	<p>Barara</p>	<p>rounded carnelian origin: possibly India earliest carnelian beads were found in Western Asia (4000-2000 BC)</p>
	<p>Porpag</p>	<p>Rough-hewn octagonal carnelian Beads that old women usually wear Origin: possibly India  Earliest carnelian beads were found in Western Asia (4000-2000 BC)</p>
	<p>Impit</p>	<p>Small adjongan Considered thousands of years old Origin: Vietnam, Cambodia, India</p>
	<p>Omoryong</p>	<p>Slender-octagonal carnelian Origin: possibly India Earliest carnelian beads were found in Western Asia (4000-2000 BC)</p>

	Lumiyang	<p>Hexagonal or octagonal carnelian</p> <p>Given by grandparents to their firstborn</p> <p>Origin: possibly India</p> <p>Earliest carnelian beads were found in Western Asia (4000-2000 BC)</p>
	Piniyapiyas	<p>Hexagonal carnelian</p> <p>Origin: possibly India</p> <p>Earliest carnelian beads were found in Western Asia (4000-2000 BC)</p>

The photograph features the former Kalinga NCIP Director Natividad Sugguiyao wearing a Dalisdis and Winayway, a customary Kalinga garments that embodies cultural identity and craftsmanship. As a Bongor advocate, she plays a vital role in championing the preservation and promotion of indigenous traditions, ensuring that cultural heritage remains alive and valued within the community.



## 4 CONCLUSION

The Bongor tradition is one of the cultural traditions practiced by the Kalinga people. What was originally a ritualistic object of worship gradually developed into an art form per se, that is now practiced as a viable cultural industry by the Kalinga people of today. Although Bongors are being proliferated by Kalingans and non-Kalingans all over the globe, their values and significance have in fact, increased, thus giving meaning to the social and economic value of Bongor as a highly regarded work of art.

Bongor's future is bright. Artisans today, are people living in the here and now, rooted in their culture and society. They understand their culture, but also know how to handle social issues. They have the freedom to create whatever they choose, and as long as traditional woodcarving is alive and kicking, the tradition itself has a bright future. This is Bongor's story, a story about self-confidence, creativity, and power.

## 5 RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure that the Bongor tradition is moving in the right direction the following must be done:

1. - Promotion Create engaging, beautiful digital and print promotional materials (such as the online The Art of Bongor exhibition and short films) to celebrate and raise awareness of the artisans involved and to celebrate both traditional and contemporary art forms, increasing the pride of local communities and also of the international client.

2. Creative Enterprise, mentorship, business skills, and marketing for the artisans, especially for the youth. The training will cover aspects such as creating a personal brand, digital marketing, and sustainable business, and ways for the artisans to be able to make a living through their craft in today's market.

3. Invite cultural centers, galleries, and fashion schools to partner with the Curating Cultural Showcases of Bongor Fashion Philippines, an innovative project that brings to the forefront the cultural and design values of Bongor to the global community of fashion, design and culture. Through the Bongor Fashion Philippines Cultural Showcases, not only will the Filipino people have the opportunity to experience and appreciate the cultural and design essence of Bongor, but the international public will also

get to learn and appreciate the value of Bongor as a truly Pinoy fashion brand that embodies the history of the Philippines through design principles.

4. Ethical Appreciation Develop a simple Code of Ethics that can be applied to Kalinga artisan members working in partnership with designers and retailers outside the Kalinga community ensuring that ethical values are upheld, including cultural respect, recognition of indigenous ownership and fair remuneration.

5. Education as Living Culture The history of Bongor must be incorporated into the educational curriculum of schools so that students learn about the creation of Bongor in a meaningful way and not as something remote in time. Something that can boost pride and make students aware of the inventive, entrepreneurial spirit of Bima in the past.

### AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

**Florida Tabanganay Lao-aten:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Visualization, Project Administration.

**Luzviminda Membrot Wingnga:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Resources, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

### REFERENCES

- Acabado, S. (2017). The archaeology of pericolonialism: Responses of the “unconquered” to Spanish conquest and colonialism in Ifugao, Philippines. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 21(1), 1–34.
- Caballero, J. (2016). Cultural resilience and adaptive practices in the Cordillera. *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 64(2), 273–302.
- Canilao, N. (2018). The role of the Igorot gold trade networks in the development of the early Luzon kingdoms. *Journal of History*, 63(1), 1–28.
- Molintas, J. (2004). The Philippine indigenous peoples’ struggle for land and life: Challenging legal texts. *Arizona Journal of International & Comparative Law*, 21(1), 269–306.

Prill-Brett, J. (2007). *Tradition and transformation: Studies on Cordillera indigenous culture*. Cordillera Studies Center.