

# The Roles of Women in the Iban Ensera

Siah Anak Jingan<sup>1</sup>, Chemaline Anak Osup<sup>2</sup>, Mazura Mastura Muhammad<sup>3\*</sup>, Saripah Banseng<sup>4</sup>, Wesam M. A. Ibrahim<sup>5</sup>, Alexandra Semkina<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>Faculty of Languages and Communication, University Pendidikan Sultan Idris

<sup>5</sup>Applied College Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University Saudi Arabia, Faculty of Education, Tanta University, Egypt

<sup>6</sup>Linguistic Institute, The English Language Department, Altai State Pedagogical University

**\*Corresponding Author**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91100316>

Received: 22 November 2025; Accepted: 28 November 2025; Published: 09 December 2025

## ABSTRACT

Ensera is a literary work of the Iban people that contains the values of the community in ancient times. It was initially created as entertainment, passed down orally from person to person using the Iban language. Women have a specific roles, dignity, and image as depicted in the ensera. This article aims to examine the roles of women in "Ensera Iban". The study employed qualitative methods specifically Text Analysis Method, Library Research Method and interview to unravel and analyze the roles of women in Ensera Iban. The study also examines the roles of women through thematic and sociological approaches. Four Iban Ensera were chosen on namely "Ensera Ayor", "Kumang Betelu", "Kumang Ngiga Lintum" and "Wat Lamba". The findings show that women indeed play a very important role in Iban Ensera. This role is divided into three parts; first, the responsibilities and duties of Iban women as well as the function and contribution of Iban women. It is shown that all categories of women in these Iban Ensera, including girls, mothers, and grandmothers, play their respective roles in daily life, during festivals, for the community, and within the family institution. The findings of this study are expected to contribute significantly to the enrichment of scholarly resources related to women and ensera. This research not only broadens the academic discussion on gender representation in Iban oral literature but also encourages further exploration of linguistic and cultural diversity within the Iban language of Sarawak. Ultimately, it supports the preservation and continuity of Iban literary heritage while inspiring more researchers to engage in studies that highlight the richness and uniqueness of indigenous languages and traditions.

**Keywords:** Gender, Ensera, Iban, Iban Language and Heritage Language

## INTRODUCTION

The Iban community possesses a rich and diverse oral literary heritage, encompassing both prose and rhythmic poetry forms that serve as important vehicles for expressing their culture, values, and worldview. Among these literary treasures, the ensera is the most prominent and influential form of folk literature. Ensera is a type of epic or saga that is poeticized, combining elements of myth, legend, and the life experiences of the Iban people. It is not merely a medium of entertainment, but also serves as a vehicle for education, the dissemination of moral values, and the transmission of social norms inherited from one generation to the next.

As a reflection of Iban society's culture, ensera plays a crucial roles in depicting the social structure, belief systems, and gender relations within the community. In many legends, female characters are depicted with diverse images—some are gentle and caring, while others are wise, brave, and authoritative. Characters like Ayor, Kumang Betelu, Kumang Ngiga Lintum, and Wat Lamba demonstrate how women not only serve as wives or mothers, but also as guardians of honour, conflict resolvers, and symbols of the community's moral strength.

However, despite women often being important characters in *ensera*, their roles are still underrepresented in academic studies.

The study of Iban *Ensera* from a gender perspective, particularly regarding the roles of women, is highly significant in the context of Iban literature and socio-culture. First, it can fill the research gap that still exists in the field of local ethnic literature, as most previous studies focused more on structural, linguistic, or mythological aspects without giving specific attention to the women's dimension. Second, this study aims to raise public awareness about the contributions of women in the Iban social system, thereby supporting national efforts toward gender equality and women's empowerment. Finally, thru an analysis of four selected Iban folktales, this study is expected to strengthen appreciation for Iban literature as a relevant source of knowledge, identity, and cultural values in the development of modern society.

This study focuses on four selected Iban *Ensera*: *Ensera Ayor*, *Kumang Betelu*, *Kumang Ngiga Lintum*, and *Wat Lamba*, as these works portray Iban women rich in various dimensions and human values. Each legend depicts the roles of women within the diverse socio-cultural contexts of Iban society. The female characters in this folktale are not only depicted as loving wives or mothers, but also as intelligent, resilient, brave individuals with high moral authority. They play significant roles in influencing decisions, preserving customs, and maintaining social balance within the community.

Focusing on these four *ensera* is important because it provides a comprehensive platform for examining roles of women through thematic and sociological approaches. Additionally, these works are cultural documents that depict the values, traditions, and gender dynamics within Iban society, making them an important source for understanding how women's contributions are viewed, valued, and expressed in traditional narratives. This study also serves to revive interest in Iban oral literature and highlight its relevance to current discourse on gender, women's empowerment, and cultural identity.

## Problem Statement

Research on the roles of women in Iban folklore is still given insufficient attention by both local and international scholars. Although *ensera* is an important oral literary treasure in Iban society because it reflects the values, culture, and identity of the ethnic group, studies that deeply examine the position of women in this work are still limited and general. Most previous studies have focused more on linguistic aspects, narrative structure, or mythical elements without emphasizing the gender dimension and the roles of women as social and cultural agents in folklore.

Furthermore, young people and the general public are now less and less familiar with and appreciative of Iban literature, including *ensera* which is rich in moral lessons and depictions of social reality. As a result, the value and contributions of women depicted in the posters—as wives, mothers, leaders, and guardians of cultural values—are increasingly forgotten and not given due recognition. This also reflects the imbalance in perceptions of gender within society, where men are still seen as more dominant in social and family institutions.

This gap explains the need to conduct a study that systematically describes the roles of women in Iban *ensera*, not only to fill a void in the field of ethnic literary research but also to strengthen awareness of gender equality, cultural heritage, and human values within Iban society. This study can also contribute to national efforts to empower women and broaden the discourse of local literature from ethnic and gender perspectives. Because of the strength contained in *ensera*, the roles of Iban women were explored through the *ensera* of *Ayor*, *Kumang Betelu*, *Kumang Ngiga Lintum*, and *Wat Lamba*.

## Research Objectives

This study aims to explain and analyze the roles of women as depicted in Iban *Ensera*. Thru research on four selected *ensera* — *Ensera Ayor*, *Kumang Betelu*, *Kumang Ngiga Lintum*, and *Wat Lamba* — this study aims to highlight the position of women within the social and cultural context of Iban society.

Specifically, the objective of this study is to investigate the extent to which the roles of women is depicted in Iban *Ensera*. Through these objectives, the study is expected to broaden understanding of the roles of women in

Iban literature and to strengthen appreciation for the cultural values and beauty of local ethnic literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

"Ensera Ayor: Iban Folk Epic" is a book written by Chemaline Osup and Noriah Taslim (2013). This book is compiled and analyzed based on the Ensera Ayor written by Jimbun anak Tawai in 1994. Studies on Iban folk literature, known to the Iban community as leka main, have already been conducted extensively. This book focuses on one of the unique and often overlooked genres of folklore, namely the ensera or folk epic. Ensera Ayor is a heroic tale that glorifies heroes and heroic devotion. One of these heroic epics is the Ayor legend, which celebrates Ayor as the ultimate hero of the Iban people. However, this study differs from previous studies. This study not only documents the text of the ensera but also places it within the context of Iban folk literature as a whole, including its types, characteristics, and social functions. To enable this text to be used more widely, it has also been translated into Malay. Therefore, this book is considered a significant contribution to folklorists, especially regarding Iban community literature, namely ensera.

Khairunnisa Ghazali (2002) in her book titled "The Wisdom of Woman's Creation". This book tells the wisdom behind the creation of women and the wisdom of their differences from the creation of men. God makes things full of wisdom and certain secrets that humans themselves do not know. In this book, the author explains this wisdom, where God made women suitable for their natural disposition, which is gentle, loving, and wanting to be loved. Women have a unique difference from men, which is that women can give birth and breastfeed babies.

According to Dagun (1992, p. 3), women have various unique privileges because they are willing, ready, able, and even able to be directed to fulfil two roles simultaneously: playing a roles in the household as a wife and mother, as well as playing a roles outside the home, such as working. Generally, women are depicted as having traits such as being resigned, gentle, patient, loyal, devoted, and other qualities like being creative, intelligent, and assertive. Additionally, women are created as gentle, beautiful, emotional, and maternal beings, while men are considered strong, rational, masculine, and powerful beings (Sabri, 2025; Pozian et al., 2025, Tavassoli et al., 2025; Su, 2023). Such occurrences arise because of the concept of gender, which is a characteristic inherent in both men and women, socially and culturally limited thru a long process.

## METHODOLOGY

This article aims to examine the roles of women in Iban Ensera. This study was conducted using a qualitative method to describe and analyse the roles of women as depicted in four selected folk tales, namely **Ensera Ayor**, **Kumang Betelu**, **Kumang Ngiga Lintum**, and **Wat Lamba**. The selection of these four stories is based on their content, which highlights the Iban woman's character, who has diverse roles in society.

In this study, the researcher used Text Analysis Method, Literature Review Method, and Interview Method as the main approaches for data collection and analysis.

Text Analysis methods were used to deeply examine the content of the four selected ensera. Through this method, the researcher identifies elements related to the roles of Iban women in each ensera. Each text was systematically analyzed to identify the main themes related to the roles of women, including dignity, position, power, respect, and women's achievements. This method allows researchers to analyse explicit and implicit data in detail, thus highlighting the cultural values, customs, and personalities of Iban women as depicted in the ensera.

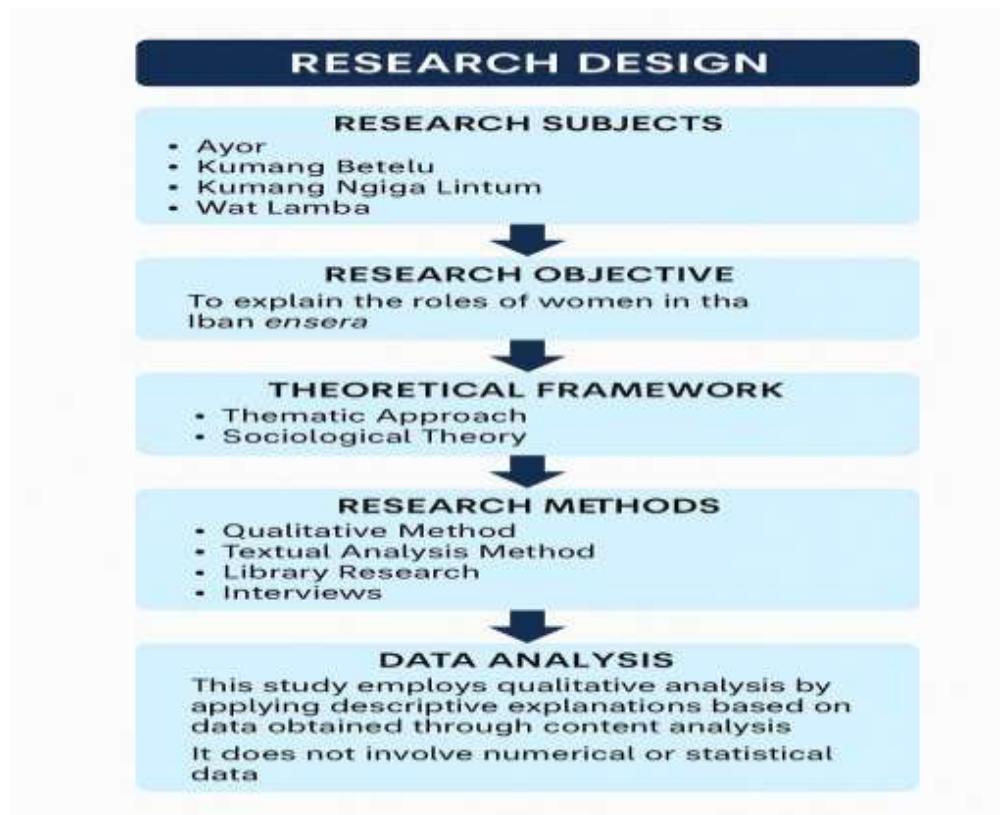
The library research method was used to obtain supporting information from various written sources such as reference books, journals, theses, scientific articles, and archival materials related to Iban folklore and society. References were made at several institutions including the Sultan Idris Education University Library and the Sarawak State Language and Literature Bureau to ensure the validity and breadth of the information obtained (Fariesha and Azlina, 2025).

Additionally, the Interview Method was conducted to obtain additional information from informants knowledgeable about Iban ensera. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with local figures such as Janang anak Ensiring, Edwin Jepon anak Gawan, Jingan anak Unja, Dindu anak Beti, and Tenny anak Jeti. This method

allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the ensera's background, the context of the storytelling, and the community's views on the roles of Iban women as depicted in the work.

From an analytical perspective, this study employs a thematic approach and sociological theory to examine and interpret the data obtained. Thematic analysis was applied to identify thematic patterns related to the roles of women in ensera, while sociological theory was used to understand the relationship between women and the social structures depicted in the works. According to Alan Swingewood (1972), literary works are social documents that reflect the socio-cultural elements of society, making this theory highly suitable for exploring the position and appreciation of women within the context of Iban society.

Overall, the use of a combination of text analysis methods, literature review, and interviews, supported by a thematic approach and sociological theories, enabled this study to be conducted comprehensively and systematically. This method not only helps to detail the roles of women in Iban Ensera but also strengthens understanding of women's social, cultural values, and identity in Iban society in Sarawak. Figure 1 summarise the research design of the current study.



**Figure 1: Research Design**

## FINDINGS

This finding was obtained to fulfil the objective of the working paper, which is to describe the roles of women in Iban folklore. The study findings were analysed from only four selected legends: Ayor, Kumang Betelu, Kumang Ngiga Lintum, and Wat Lamba.

### Roles of Iban Women

In the Ayor legend, the function and contribution of Iban women can be seen during Ayor's wedding ceremony. For example, as guests walked thru the house, all guests were offered tuak or tapai by the young women of the longhouse. This shows the function and contribution of Iban girls in a celebration. According to the legend of Jimbun anak Tawai (1994:152).

*Lebuh bejalai niti rumah dia pengabang lalu diwong bala indu dara ngena tuak.* As the guests walked along the house, all the guests were given tapai water to drink by the girls in the longhouse. This is the function and contribution of young women or unmarried girls in a celebration.

Additionally, women serve to court women or maidens as daughters-in-law, meaning wives for their own sons and for others as well. Asking for a woman's hand in marriage or proposing to a woman is a traditional custom of the Iban people. This custom is still practiced and maintained to this day. The man's side will send a representative to propose to the woman he wishes to make his wife. The person who represented the man in proposing to the woman was not just anyone or an ordinary person. This is because the person representing them must be a good speaker and eloquent. In this legend, Ngelai asks his mother to propose to Kumang as a wife for his friend, Runggai or Rungga. Indai Ngelai agreed to propose to Kumang as requested by her son. After getting ready, putting on beautiful makeup, and wearing suitable clothes, Indai Ngelai went to propose to Kumang. As narrated by Jimbun anak Tawai (1994:172 and 174).

*"Dinga dek indai, peminta sida unggal tu. Alai meh dek indai, nguji ngapa nanya indu kitai serumah ngica sida bisi deka ka seduai tu," pio ko ngelai madah ka indai ia.*

Listen, Mom, this is the request from these two. "Go, mother, and ask for the hand of the women in this house, you never know if any of them are interested in these two," Ngelai said to his mother. The function of a woman, namely Indai Ngelai, is entrusted with proposing to women for marriage.

*Udah puas ke ngelilik-ngelilik, udah puas ke ngemetul-ngemetul ka sanggul enggau ngepan diri, lalu pansut meh tudah indai Ngelai ke ruai laban deka mansang nanya indu ke bini Runggai seduai Rungga.*

After checking everything and fixing her bun and clothes, Indai Ngelai went to propose to women to be Runggai and Rungga's wives. Indai Ngelai agreed to propose to the woman as entrusted by Runggai and Rungga. This can indicate a woman's function and contribution.

The function and contribution of Iban women in the Kumang Betelu legend, namely thru the sacrifice of women to conceive and give birth. A woman has a great function and contribution when she is willing to sacrifice her own life to give birth to offspring. For example, in this legend, Mujong's wife becomes pregnant and gives birth to two sons named Enteran Temiang and Enteran Temali. According to the legend of Henry Gerijih anak Jado (1963:74).

*Kedua taun udah nya bini Mujong lalu betubuh bisi baru, lebuh ia beranak ka anak lelaki siku da, lalu nama ia digaga ka sida Enteran Temali.*

After two years, Mujong's wife became pregnant again. She gave birth to another son named Enteran Temali. A woman has a special function and can make a unique contribution, which is to conceive and give birth to offspring.

In the legend of Kumang Seeking Lintum, Ngelai instructed his mother to propose to Kumang as a wife for his guest, Jawing Betaring Manjai Lungga, Tempan Duduk di Luan Dunga-Dunga. Indai Ngelai is a friendly, articulate woman with a charming personality and diverse abilities. Indai Ngelai's friendly demeanor and unique personality can instill trust in her guests, allowing them to entrust her with the task of proposing to women on their behalf. As narrated by Teni, Geboh's child (1976:79).

*"Badu enda meh, anak. Bisi temuai datai ba kitai di setak din. Nama ia kenu ko ia madah ka diri nya Jawing Betaring Manjai Lungga, Tempan Duduk Di Luan Dunga-Dunga," ko indai Ngelai, ke lalu nusui batang pejalai diri ke diasuh temuai nanya Kumang ka bini.*

"Well, son. There are guests coming over there. "He told me his name is Jawing Betaring Manjai Lungga, and he is from Tempan Duduk Di Luan Dunga-Dunga," said Indai Ngelai, explaining the purpose for which the guest had sent him to propose.

Kumang as a wife. Indai Ngelai serves to propose to Kumang as a wife for his guests.

Women play a very important roles in daily life, especially their roles in the family. The roles of women can be divided into three parts based on these four Ensera. This is because the responsibilities, duties, and functions of Iban women change according to specific needs and situations. Iban women are always prepared and carry out

---

their duties with sincerity and dedication in any matter. Iban women, whether old or young, are always ready to play their respective roles for the common good.

### Iban Women's Tasks

The proverb 'better to get lost in the wilderness than to get lost in customs' is indeed apt in describing the Iban community in Sarawak, who strongly adhere to their customs and culture. The leaning ceremony is a custom and culture quite synonymous with the Iban community in Bumi Kenyalang. Miring is a ceremony of offering or prayer to God or Petara to bless a request and obtain protection. According to the definition in the Iban language, the word "miring" means to bless the people, protect, and bring happiness, peace, and harmony to the community. The tilting ceremony is held before an important activity takes place or after a disaster or undesirable event occurs. In this legend, the leaning ceremony is held when Jenong is setting up a gawai or celebration. Women were tasked with carrying and preparing the dishes as described by Jimbun anak Tawai (1994:153).

*Udah nya orang indu lalu nanggung piring bealu-alu. Udah tembu bealu-alu, nyau nasak sereta nuduk ka pandung meh orang.*

After that, the women carried the plates (with offerings) in a row. After the ceremony, everyone sat down. Only women are assigned to carry the plates.

Weeding, or pulling grass, is one of the activities done in the swidden field after nugal, which is planting rice seeds. Mantun (weeding) is the activity of cleaning and pulling out the weeds found in the fields. In the past, mantun activities were performed by women. Women work together in carrying out the activity of bouncing in the swidden fields. Bikung is a tool commonly used by the Iban people to cut grass in their swidden fields. In the Ayor legend, the women of Gelong worked together to harvest the family's dry rice fields, as explained by Jimbun anak Tawai (1994:161).

*Ari siti diak indu orang Gelong turun mantun beduruk ngagai sida Tutong Ulup Demong Bujang Lemandau Gendang.*

The next day, the women of Gelong worked together to pull weeds in the family's Tutong Ulup Demong Bujang Lemandau Gendang's swidden fields. Weeding is one of the major tasks for women to help their families and husbands when cultivating swidden fields.

Next, the roles of Iban women can be seen in the Ayor folktale, specifically during the departure of Runggai and his followers to go headhunting. The women in their longhouses didn't stop beating the gong and scattering rice confetti to celebrate their men going on a headhunting expedition. Women who stay at home do not feel distressed when left by men who go on long journeys because they like brave men. According to Jimbun, Tawai's child (1994:196).

*Sekumbang bala Runggai nurun ngayau, orang ke indu-indu di rumah panjai nya sigi enda ngetu-ngetu nabuh tawak sereta nabur orang ke nurun pegi ngena rendai. Sida nadai tusah ati kena tinggal ka orang lelaki nurun ngayau laban sida rindu ke orang lelaki ke berani.*

While Runggai and his followers were going on a headhunting expedition, the women in their longhouse continuously beat gongs and sprinkled the head-hunters with rice husks. They didn't feel sad about being left by the men who went on long journeys because they liked brave men. Women were tasked with beating the gong and scattering popped rice at the men who went hunting.

According to the Ayor legend, Endu Gemalai brought a mosquito net for Ayor's guests who were sleeping on the veranda. Endu Gemalai followed her brother's instructions to prepare the mosquito net for their guests, namely Ayor, as described by Jimbun anak Tawai (1994:138).

*Enda lama udah nya, peda ada pansut Endu Ngemalai ari bilik lalu mai kibung ke nyau baka ke udah disalai setaun.*

Not long after that, Endu Ngemalai also came out of the room carrying a mosquito net that looked like it had been smoked (turned black) for a year. Endu Ngemalai was carrying out her duty of providing mosquito nets for their guests to sleep in, as requested by her brother.

During celebrations or festivities, women are responsible for serving a variety of food to guests who visit their homes. In Iban society, a woman's good manners are judged by her efficiency and the service she provides to guests. This can be seen as described by Jimbun Tawai (1994:203).

*Udah pemakai diidang ka orang indu, nyau belabuh sida sebuah makai nengali damai, gempa menulang pinggai. Ngisi buni selipi apong, enda berasai makai ensepi perut pan udah ga kenyang besayang suyong.*

After the food was ready to be served by the women, they ate to their hearts' content until they were completely full. Women usually perform their duties to serve food to guests.

Tuak or tapai is a type of drink consumed by the Iban community since ancient times. Usually, tuak is made from glutinous rice thru a fermentation process that takes at least two weeks. Usually, tuak is served during the Gawai Dayak, Gawai Antu, Gawai Burung, and other festivals. Air tuak is a traditional drink of the Iban people in Sarawak. Typically, women offer guests tuak to drink after meals, as written by Jimbun anak Tawai (1994:203).

*Udah badu makai sereta udah mega ngirup tuak ti diberi orang indu di bilik, lalu mupuk mega sida tiga pansut ke ruai.*

After finishing the tapai given by the women in the room, the three of them sat on the veranda. Giving drinks and treating guests well is a woman's duty.

Iban women cannot escape their duties as wives, homemakers, and mothers to their families. This is because Iban women place great importance on their families. The tasks of pounding rice and drying rice are essential duties for women. For example, in the legend of Kumang Betelu, Kumang pounded rice on the ruai floor. Henry Gerijih, son of Jado (1963:18).

*Kumang nutuk beras ba tempuan ruai sida ia empu.*

Kumang is pounding rice in the middle of their own ruai. Kumang pounded rice for her family to fulfill her duties as a woman.

In the legend of Kumang Seeking Lintum, Kumang was drying rice on the veranda. The rice that has been separated from its stalks will be dried first before being pounded. Drying rice is usually done by women, as explained by Teni, Geboh's child (1976:49).

*"Aku deka nganchau padi, Keling," pia ko Kumang.*

"I want to dry the rice, Keling," said Kumang.

Additionally, Kumang and her mother made a plate of repelling food and seven-grain ketupat as provisions, as requested by the Geruna Bird. Kumang and her mother performed the task well and sincerely for the safety and common good of the residents there. Averting plates are made to prevent something bad and undesirable from happening. This is as Teni, Geboh's child, wrote (1976: 62-63) in this ensera.

*"Tang enti kita deka ngasuh aku jampat angkat ari menua tu, uji seduai indai aku Inya kedua nama ensumbar Kumang ngaga ketupat tujuh iti, ka bekal aku belelang. Nya baru menua kita tu enda angat agi. Enti seduai indai enda meri aku bekal ketupat kita serumah tu abis aku empa," pia ko Burung Geruna ke di perabung.*

If you all want me to leave this place quickly, my mother, Inya or Kumang, must make seven ketupat to be my provisions for my journey. This place will be safe and peaceful. "If my mother doesn't prepare those ketupat, I'll eat all of you up," said the Garuda Bird on the roof of the house. Women have the task of preparing all the necessary dishes.

*Nya alai seduai ia lalu belabuh ngaga piring penulak. Lebuh ninga indai ia Kumang seduai ini ia Anggil ngaga piring, nya ngasuh Burung Geruna balat agi dekut-dekut, nyau munyi ke malu setawak.*

Therefore, the two of them continued to make plates (food for worship). When he learned that his mother Kumang and his grandmother Anggil were preparing plates, the Geruna Bird sounded even louder, like a gong being struck. Kumang and her mother were preparing plates for the Garuda Bird, which was a woman's task.

In the Wat Lamba legend, the roles of women can be seen in Indai Lelipai. Indai Lelipai went fishing to catch fish for her family's food. This marking activity is done in the river by women using a tool called a kemansai. Kemansai is woven and made from a type of plant called pantu. As written by Dunstan Entingi (1967:1).

*Pagi siti Indai Lipai nyau nurun mansai.*

One morning, Indai Lelipai went fishing in the river. Indai Lelipai is very busy getting food for her family's meal.

In addition, Indai Kumang and Indai Lelipai together provided all the materials used to make plates for Wat Lamba, who had gone abroad. Before someone goes to work in another place, the Iban community will hold a ritual ceremony, namely the miring ceremony. This ceremony is performed to bring good luck, ward off misfortune, and safely accompany those who are traveling. Typically, five-part plates are used to ask for something or to accompany journeys like traveling. As written by Dunstan Entingi (1967:12).

*Nya alai tumu pagi ari siti, sida Indai Kumang lalu mupuk nyendia ka perengka piring. Barang utai ke nadai di rumah, digiga ka tanah. Semua utai cukup magang. Tudah Indai Lipai kenanas dadas ga enggau orang ngereja utai dia.*

One morning, Indai Kumang prepared the plates. The necessary items for the plates that were not at home were also searched for on the ground. All essential items are fully stocked. Indai Lelipai worked tirelessly and also helped prepare the plates. Indai Kumang and Indai Lelipai performed their duties as women perfectly and diligently.

Kumang and Keling performed the same task of maintaining their good manners in welcoming and serving the guests who attended their adopted son's wedding, Wat Lamba. The Iban community places great importance on communication and high standards of etiquette. During the betrothal ceremony or the Wat Lamba wedding, Kumang performed her duties as a woman to serve the female guests in the room, while her husband Keling served the male guests on the veranda. As written by Dunstan Entingi (1967:126).

*Bakanya ga Kumang di bilik beranda enggau orang ka indu.*

Kumang also entertained and communicated with the female guests in her room. Kumang performed her duties as a woman to serve the female guests in the room, while her husband served the male guests in the hall.

Young girls and teenagers were given the task of welcoming guests who came to the longhouse during a celebration. This has become an obligation and custom for the Iban community. They greeted guests in pairs at the top of the stairs or in their respective foyers. For example, during the wedding ceremony at Wat Lamba in the Wat Lamba enclosure. Young girls and teenagers stood together and lined up at the side of the stairs to offer drinks to guests ascending to their longhouse. In this legend, women and men have their respective duties according to certain circumstances and needs. According to Dunstan Entingi (1967:137) in his book.

*Dara enggau bujang sama mayuh bediri berintai ba tisi tangga ari sepiak-sepiak, ngelanggar bala pengabang ke niki.*

Many young men and women stood together and lined up at the side of the stairs, offering drinks to guests ascending to their longhouse. These girls and young men were tasked with welcoming guests who were coming up to the longhouse.

*Berapi* or baking has been a woman's inherent responsibility since time immemorial. Iban women are known for their agility and skill in cooking. They cook using a wood-burning stove and prepare rice and side dishes using

bamboo or copper pots. Every guest who comes to their home, whether during a festival or not, will be treated to food and drinks. It has become a tradition, custom, and way of life for the Iban people. Endu Peduman in the Wat Lamba legend cooks for his guests, namely Wat Lamba who came to his hut. As written by Dunstan Entinggi (1967:71).

*"Nuan duduk ditu temuai. Aku deka ngarau berapi ka tua dulu," pia ko indu nya. Indu nya lalu nyau ga berapi. Lebuh semua utai mansau udah sedia magang, dia indu nya pan pansut baru ngangau ngumbai makai.*

You sit here. "I want to cook for the two of us," said the woman. The woman continued to cook. After everything was ready, the woman called her guests to eat. Women have the task of cooking and preparing food for guests who come.

### Iban Women's Responsibilities

The responsibility of women in the Ayor tale is to pound rice. Pounding rice, or nutuk padi, is done by women. Before the invention of machines for mechanically processing rice, the Iban people used a mortar and pestle to process rice into grains. The mortar and pestle are traditional tools for processing rice into grains. These tools are used to separate the rice husk from the grains. The mortar is made of wood and is shaped like a small boat, measuring about 2 meters long, 0.5 meters wide, and about 40 centimeters deep. Rice is pounded repeatedly with a pestle until the grains separate from the husks. The rice is pounded into grains and serves as the staple food for his family. Typically, Iban women pound rice on the ruai. In the Ayor legend, Endu Leletan helps her mother pound rice on the ruai, as told by Jimbun anak Tawai (1994:100).

*Lebuh maya tu, Endu Leletan benung nulung indai ia nutuk padi di lesung.*

At that time, Endu Leletan was helping his mother pound rice using a mortar. Referring to the traditional era at that time, the Iban community '**nyauk**' (fetch water) to the river for their water supply. **Nyauk**, which means fetching water from the river using a genuk.

A **genuk** is a mature gourd with its contents removed, used by the Iban community in the past to store water. Nyauk is usually performed by young or old women. Water taken from the river is used for cooking, drinking, and various other daily purposes. Ngemalai Pesepai Bungai Sugi, Kumang Penengkebang Bali, went down to the river in the Ayor legend because there was no piped water facility as written by Jimbun anak Tawai (1994:128).

*"Au meh, wai. Nganti aku udah nyauk ke genuk tu dulu," pia ko indu nya.*

Oh my, water. "I even scooped up some water from this jar first," the woman said. "Wait for me to store water in the 'genuk' first," said the woman.

**Endu Peduman** in the Ayor legend, was generous in providing food for his guest, Ayor. Preparing or serving food is a woman's responsibility to her family and guests. This shows a woman's good manners when treating guests who come to her home well. Dishes and bowls are neatly arranged when serving food. Usually, berenah makai is done by women. Just as Endu Peduman did in Jimbun anak Tawai (1994:134).

*Ayor meda pinggai endang udah dirintai ka orang indu manah-manah.*

Ayor saw the plates and bowls neatly arranged by the woman. Women, whether they are already mothers or young girls, wake up early in the morning to prepare breakfast for their families. They will cook rice and side dishes for breakfast before starting their daily tasks. This rice and side dishes will also serve as food supplies when they work in the fields or go elsewhere. This task is carried out every morning because it has become their obligation and tradition. This responsibility is carried out with complete sincerity, as described by Jimbun, the son of Tawai (1994:142).

*Sida indai orang pan nyau ga bekedanggai betimang lantang. Orang ke dara-dara pan nyau ga begerancha dani ngeredandang.*

Like a mother, she was also singing loudly. The people, especially the young women, were all bustling about getting ready.

All groups of women, whether mothers or unmarried, get up early to prepare breakfast. Women have the responsibility of cooking and serving food for their families. In the Kumang Betelu legend, women's responsibilities can be seen through their roles in their families. A woman is responsible for managing each household. The responsibility of a woman who is a wife is to perfectly care for and manage their household in the absence of their husband. This responsibility rests entirely on the woman's shoulders during the absence of their husband from the home, according to Henry Gerijih anak Jado (1963:55).

*Sekumbang laki sida pegi, semua bini sida ia tinggal di rumah magang, lalu ngibun ruang bilik diri empu.*

Throughout their husbands' travels, all the wives who stayed at home managed their respective households. A wife's responsibility is to manage and maintain their household perfectly during their husband's absence.

Women play a variety of roles that are very important to their families for mutual benefit. Women have the responsibility to provide food and supplies for their husbands, children, and families. Provisions consist of food, clothing, and all necessary items. The Queen Mother of Sawa prepared provisions for her son, King Sawa, in the story Kumang Ngiga Lintum. As described by Teni anak Geboh (1976:10).

*"Oi Indai! Tungkus bekal ka aku," ko ia. Indai ia lalu beguai-guai nungkus bekal.*

Oh mother! "Prepare food supplies for me," he said. His mother also prepared the supplies immediately. A mother is responsible for packing her son's lunch.

Additionally, breastfeeding is one of the responsibilities of being a mother and a woman. Kumang is breastfeeding Pentik, her baby, with her own breast milk. Teni anak Geboh (1976:59-60) describes the following situation.

*Benung Kumang nusu ka pentik, datai Bunga Nuing lalu ngerampas pentik ari jari ia, dibai seduai ka tanju, lalu ditambun seduai ia enggau bulu burung.*

While Kumang was breastfeeding her baby, Bunga Nuing came and snatched the baby from Kumang, threw it outside, and covered her body with bird feathers. Breastfeeding is a responsibility as a mother.

In the Wat Lamba legend, the responsibilities of Iban women can be seen thru the responsible attitude shown by Indai Pau. Indai Pau is willing to take care of the baby she found while fishing in the river. The baby was Keling, who had transformed himself into a baby boy. Dunstan Entingi (1967:1).

*Nyadi menya, lebuh rambau Keling ke mali diri nyadi anak mit. Ia ditemu sida Indai Pau ke mansai lalu diidup ka sida.*

When Keling manifested himself as a baby, he was found by Indai Pau, who was fishing, and raised by her. Indai Pau is responsible when she is willing to take care of a baby she found.

Additionally, Indai Kumang fulfills her responsibilities as a woman. This can be seen when Indai Kumang and her family wake up early in the morning to prepare all the necessities for Wat Lamba who is going to travel. They cooked and made all the preparations for Wat Lamba. This is one of the responsibilities of women toward their families in this era. A woman must fulfill her responsibilities perfectly for the common good, as described by Dunstan Entinggi (1967:25).

*Nya alai pagi siti sida Indai Kumang tumu dani. Sida beguai ngemas Wat Lamba ke deka nurun pegi pagi nya. Sereta dani sida lalu berapi.*

So, one morning, Mother Kumang woke up early. Sida were busy cleaning Wat Lamba, which was going to be visited that morning. They were both happy and excited.

One morning, Indai Kumang and her family woke up early. They wanted to prepare for Wat Lamba, who would be traveling quickly that morning. After waking up, they immediately started cooking. It is the responsibility of women to cook and prepare everything for family members who will be going far away to work.

Additionally, a sense of responsibility is evident in Indai Kumang when she expresses her concern about Indai Lelipai's condition, which resembles that of a pregnant woman. Indai Lelipai is a servant to Indai Kumang's family but is treated like one of their own. Indai Kumang has a high sense of responsibility when she feels worried and anxious seeing the condition of her servant, Indai Lelipai, who looks like she's pregnant. This is because Indai Lelipai has no husband and has never been married. As described by Dunstan Entinggi (1967:1).

*Nya alai lebuh ke berandau nya, dia Indai Kumang bisi ngenang pengirau ati diri. Ia irau meda gaya Indai Lipai.*

While discussing this, Indai Kumang expressed her concerns. He was worried to see Indai Lipai's condition. Indai Kumang felt a sense of responsibility when she was worried and concerned to see the condition of her employer, Indai Lelipai, who looked like she was pregnant.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of a study on four Iban folktales, namely Ensera Ayor, Kumang Betelu, Kumang Ngiga Lintum, and Wat Lamba, it is clear that the involvement and role of women play a very important function in the family institution, society, and daily life. This role can be divided into three main aspects: the functions and contributions of Iban women, the duties of Iban women, and the responsibilities of Iban women. This group of women serves as the backbone for men and the cornerstone of social stability in society.

The female characters in the Iban Ensera are depicted as individuals capable of fulfilling their responsibilities wisely and prudently. They not only play domestic roles such as managing the household, preparing food, and caring for children, but also contribute to the well-being of the community by participating in agricultural activities, fishing, processing crops, and engaging in customary and religious ceremonies. This aligns with Mohd.'s view. Kipli Abdul Rahman (2017) who emphasized that folklore serves as a platform to showcase the division of social roles between men and women in traditional societies.

This study also shows that women in folklore are not symbols of weakness, but rather emblems of wisdom, resilience, and loyalty. In this context, the study's findings align with the research results of Fatimah Kari and Nor Hafizah Selamat (2021), which state that women in Malay folklore are often depicted as characters who are adaptable, play an important role in maintaining family and social harmony, and serve as moral agents in society. Similarly, Roselina Shakir's (2016) study found that traditional literature positions women not merely as complements to men, but as determinants of value and cultural balance within the community.

Additionally, the findings of this study also support Aini Hassan's (2019) argument that the portrayal of women in ethnic literature serves not only for entertainment but also as a social document reflecting power structures and gender relations within a society. In the context of Iban legends, women are depicted as guardians of customs, preservers of honour, and bringers of spiritual stability within families and communities. Their roles encompass various dimensions – from economic aspects (agriculture, food production), social (interaction and customs), to spiritual (religious ceremonies and fertility symbols).

The role of women as depicted in this tale aligns with the findings of Teeuw (1980) and Hooker (2003), who stated that in the oral traditions of Nusantara societies, women are often portrayed as catalysts for stability and the continuity of civilization. In many Southeast Asian ethnic epics, women play a crucial role in creating social harmony and preserving the continuity of cultural heritage.

Therefore, based on the analysis of these four folktales, it can be concluded that Iban women play a balanced and complementary role with men. They are not only symbols of love and loyalty, but also emblems of inner strength, wisdom, and moral leadership within the community. This study not only highlights the contributions of women in the Iban social structure but also enriches our understanding of their role as cultural and moral agents in traditional society.

## CONCLUSION

The roles of women in Iban folklore can be proven with four selected stories. Additionally, *ensera* is a literary work of the Iban people that represents the true life of the Iban community in Sarawak. The roles of women in Iban folklore should be exposed and highlighted to various segments of society. Therefore, *ensera* must be preserved and the positive messages conveyed through *ensera* can be accepted by listeners and readers. In addition, this paper can increase the amount of scientific reading materials in the development of *ensera* and the Iban language in Sarawak. Indirectly, it can be used as a reference material for any student, community, and institution. With this, it is hoped that this study can serve as a guideline for all parties from time to time. Therefore, with studies like this, the number of researchers studying the literary works of the Iban community, especially *ensera*, can be further increased, particularly studies related to women. It not only tells the story of the human condition, but also recounts the customs, culture, economy, education, social life, and dynamic activities within Iban society. Indirectly, the *ensera* culture and the Iban language in Sarawak can be introduced to the outside community.

### Research Acknowledgement

This work is supported by the matching research grant **2025-0140-108-01** between Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia and Universitas Lambung Mengkurat, Indonesia under the Research Management Centre (RMIC) entitled 'Dialectal Variations and Lexical Analysis of Banjar Language: Comparative Study of Malaysia And Indonesia'.

## REFERENCES

1. Aini Hassan. (2019). Wanita dan sastera etnik di Malaysia: Cerminan budaya dan gender dalam teks tradisional. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
2. Benedict Sandin, 1964. Gawai Antu. Borneo Literature Bureau, Kuching.
3. Chemaline Anak Osup, (2006). Leka Main: Puisi Rakyat Iban - Satu Analisis Tentang Bentuk Dan Fungsi. Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia.
4. Chemaline Anak Osup & Noriah Taslim, (2003). *Ensera Ayor: Epik Rakyat Iban*. Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia.
5. Dagun, Save M. Dagun, (1992). Maskulin dan Feminisme: Perbedaan Pria dan Wanita dalam Fisiologi, Psikologi, Seksual, Karier dan Masa Depan. Jakarta: PT. Rineka Cipta.
6. Derek Freeman, 1970. Report On The Iban (Sarawak). Published by Athlone Press, London.
7. Dunstan Entinggi, 1967. Wat Lamba. Borneo Literature Bureau dan Caslon Printers, Ltd Hong Kong : Sarawak.
8. Fatimah Kari, & Nor Hafizah Selamat. (2021). Citra wanita dalam sastera rakyat Melayu: Analisis gender dan budaya. *Jurnal Melayu*, 20(2), 45–63.
9. Addanan, F. A., & Abd Aziz, A. . (2025). A Systematic Literature Review of the Oral History Used in Education Settings. *AJELP: Asian Journal of English Language and Pedagogy*, 13(1), 61-74.
10. <https://doi.org/10.37134/ajelp.vol13.1.4.2025>
11. Henry Gerijih Jado, 1963. Kumang Betelu. Borneo Literature Bureau dan The South Post, Ltd Hong Kong : Sarawak.
12. Hooker, V. M. (2003). A Short History of Malaysia: Linking East and West. Allen & Unwin Jimbun Tawai, 1994. *Ayor*. Borneo Literature Bureau: Sarawak.
13. Kamarovsky, M., 1946. Cultural Contradictions and Sex Roles. *American Journal Of Sociology*, Amerika.
14. Khairunnisa Ghazali, 2002. Dalam bukunya *Hikmah Kejadian Wanita*. Malaysia: UPSI.
15. Mohd. Kipli Abdul Rahman. (2017). Sastera rakyat sebagai cerminan nilai dan identiti budaya masyarakat Sarawak. *Jurnal Akademika*, 87(1), 1–15.
16. Pozian, N. M., et al. (2025). Availability and utilisation of family-friendly work conditions for Malaysian employees. *Jurnal Statistik Malaysia*. Department of Statistics Malaysia. <https://ilsm.dosm.gov.my/>
17. Roselina Shakir. (2016). *Imej dan peranan wanita dalam sastera tradisional Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.

18. Sabri, S. K. (2025). Balancing work and family: Lived experiences of professional working mothers in Malaysian higher education (Qualitative study). *Asian Journal of University Education.* <https://ajue.uitm.edu.my/>
19. Su, Q. (2023). The relationship between work–family conflict and job satisfaction among female college teachers: The moderating roles of perceived organizational support. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1187568. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/>
20. Soerjono Soekanto, 2009. *Sosiologi Sesuatu Pengantar*. PT Rajawali, Jakarta.
21. Tavassoli, T., et al. (2025). The impact of work–family conflict and burnout on satisfaction and turnover intentions across two countries. *Administrative Sciences*, 15(3), 81. <https://www.mdpi.com/>
22. Teeuw, A. (1980). *Modern Indonesian literature*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
23. Teni Geboh, 1976. *Kumang Ngiga Lintum*. Borneo Literature Bureau dan Kion Ming Press Kuching : Sarawak.