



LEGENDS OF MICRONESIA

Book Two

MICRONESIAN READER SERIES

Legends of Micronesia

BOOK TWO

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Etao And The Great Mother Tortoise

Etao, the clever god, who sometimes lived on earth as a human being, had an elder brother. He was called Jemeliwut, which is the Marshallese word for "rainbow."

When they were young men, the two brothers went on a sailing trip to find their mother, who was a goddess. She had become the Great Mother Tortoise and lived in undersea places in the Pacific Ocean. Her name, Lijöbake, meant a special kind of tortoise, which carries on its back the most beautiful tortoise shell.

It was Etao who first thought of finding her. "She can give us magical power," he said.

They heard that Lijöbake was living in the ocean east of the island of Bikar, far to the north. Bikar Atoll lay lonely and apart in the Pacific Ocean. It had low, sandy islands covered with thousands of birds' eggs, turtle eggs, flapping little baby birds, crawling little baby turtles, and their parent birds and turtles.

Almost every foot of the sands was covered with them. Hundreds of large sea turtles and tortoises crawled from sea to land and back again. When a strange sound frightened the birds, they rose in a thick cloud that darkened the sky. Then they went slowly back to the sands and water again.

The two brothers sailed to Bikar Atoll. Jemeliwut said, "I'm thirsty, but I don't see any drinking water here."

"Wait awhile," said Etao. "Our mother will give us some."

Lijöbake came out of the sea and met her sons. She was glad to see them. "We're thirsty, Mother," said Etao.

"I'll bring some drinking water," she said.

Although Lijöbake lived in the ocean, she liked to drink fresh water. She kept some in a basin. She brought it to her sons. The basin was rather dirty on the outside, and Jemeliwut would not drink from it. "It isn't clean," he said.

"Oh, I'll drink from it," said Etao. He shut his eyes, so that he couldn't see the dirt, and drank.

Then Lijöbake thought that her younger son, Etao, was the better man. She gave each son a piece of tortoise shell to wear.

The one that she gave Etao was made of fine shell from around her shoulders. The one that she gave Jemeliwut was made of the poorer shell that grew near her tail. She gave Etao wonderful powers, even the power of life and death.

Etao was happy. He could change himself to a leaf, a tree, a child, a fruit, a fish, a monster, a pretty girl, or anything else. But when Lijöbake, the Great Mother Tortoise, gave her son, Etao, magical powers, she forgot to make him wise and kind. He often used the power of life and death for sport or cruelty.

Etao Gave Fire To The People

Etao and his brother Jemeliwut sailed and sailed, visiting the atolls of the Marshall Islands. They came one day to Likiep Island. They were hungry, but they had no fishing gear. They were glad when they saw men out fishing.

Etao asked a man if he might use his fishing pole. "Use your own pole and get your own fish!" said the man. All the others said the same. Not one would lend the two strangers a pole.

"Very well, then," said Etao to the first man. "You can stand on that rock, where you are."

He changed the man into a *koñe* tree, that grew in the shallow water, among rocks. It was solid and heavy. The man's feet were stuck to a rock. He couldn't move. And so it was with the other fishermen. All became *koñe* trees among the rocks. They stood there a long time, before Etao let them go.

The two brothers walked along the shore. Some young boys were fishing, but had caught no fish.

"Lend me your pole," said Etao to one of the boys, who gave him the pole.

Etao caught many fish, and he shared with the lad. Then he said, "I'll show you something strange and new. I'll show you how to make fire and cook food. You'll be the first one in Likiep Island to learn."