



# LEGENDS OF MICRONESIA

Book Two

MICRONESIAN READER SERIES

# Legends of Micronesia

BOOK TWO

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## Debolār, The First Coconut

Most things of great value in the world have come from ordinary beginnings, and so it was with the coconut tree.

An old Marshallese legend tells that long ago, no one had ever seen a tree. There never yet had been any in all the world. When the first one grew, it was thought to be a wonderful thing. It was a coconut tree, and that great blessing was born from a woman. It grew from a living baby.

Some persons don't believe this, but isn't there on the top end of each coconut a little face with nose, mouth, and two eyes?



Likileo is a place on the ocean side of Woja Island, in beautiful Ailinglaplap Atoll. In Likileo, there once lived a good woman named Limökare, who had several children. She had no idea that one of them would become famous.

Her first child, a son named Lökam, looked much like other boys. But when her second child was born, all the people of the village came to see, for it was a very strange baby indeed. It was a coconut. Small and green, and with a clever little face that had eyes, nose, and mouth, but still—a coconut!

The mother was pleased with her baby. She named him Debolär. No one had ever seen a coconut before, and the people of the village admired the odd little baby. All, that is, except his elder brother, Lökam, who didn't like him at all.

"Why do you keep that queer-looking thing?" he said to his mother, again and again. "Kill it, and throw it away."

"No!" cried his mother. "Debolär is my baby, I love him."

She gave him her milk, and he drank until his little belly grew full and round. If there is a person who doesn't believe that Debolär could drink milk, let him look inside a coconut. It is filled with milk, even as Debolär was, that day long ago. The milk is rich and sweet and is good food. Like Debolär, many babies in the Pacific islands today have no other food but coconut milk. It makes them fat and happy.

The mother gave Debolär the best of care. She wove him a little basket. She used *koba*, or bamboo, which was of great value in those days. It didn't grow in Woja Island but sometimes came drifting in on the tide. Limökare put the baby in the basket and hung it up. She rocked him and sang him to sleep.

Lökam, the elder brother, thought that was very silly. "I won't be a brother to such a thing," he said. "I don't care to be in the same house with it."

After a while, Lökam went away and found another home. All the same, he came once in a while, just to look at the baby.

Debolär grew larger and larger. Soon, he learned to talk and to understand what people said. In that way, he found out that Lökam was asking their mother to get rid of her baby.

"Don't listen to that brother of mine," said Debolär to his mother. "He'll never be of much use to you. I'm small, and I

look odd, it's true. But I'll be valuable some day. I'll make you comfortable and happy. Just wait and see."

"Don't worry, my son," said Limōkare, "I'm not going to throw you away. You came into this world for a good reason."

"And so I did," replied Debolār. "I came into this world to be eaten and worn and used."

"Eaten, my poor child!" exclaimed his mother. "And worn! And used!"

"Yes, Mother," said Debolār. "That's what I'm here for."

One day, he said to his mother, "The time has come for you to bury me under your window."

The window was made of thatch. It swung out, a little way from the ground, making a shelter.

His mother was surprised. "Bury you alive, my poor little baby?" she cried.

"Yes, alive," replied Debolār. "I'm not going to die. I will live. I'll come back to you and stay with you always."

"How can you come back, and how shall I know you, my child?" asked Limōkare.

"I'll be a tree," said Debolār.

"And what's that, my son?"

"Wait and see," he said. "I'll be very small at first, and I'll need your care. But I'll grow, and I'll have many parts. Every one of them will be useful. And I'll have dozens of children and hundreds of grandchildren."

He and his mother had a long talk. He told what the parts of his body would be, and how they could be used. It was a strange story, but his mother believed it.

The mother buried the coconut baby under her window, as he had told her to do. She looked there many times a day.

The people of the village didn't believe that she would see Debolār again. "He's gone forever," they said.

"And so much the better," said the elder son, Lōkam. "You did right to put him into the ground. Just let him stay there."

One day, the mother saw a small, green sprout. "Debolār is coming," she said. It was a leaf, folded around itself. She opened it carefully.

"How beautiful!" she said. "It looks like the wing of the flying fish."

She gave the little coconut sprout a name, *drirjojo*. The word *drir* meant "sprout" and *jojo* meant "flying fish." As the leaf grew and spread open, and other leaves came, she gave the tree new names. The coconut tree has them to this day.

People came from far and near to see the first tree in all the world. They called it *ni*, which became the Marshallese word for "coconut."

The little tree became tall and beautiful and strong. It grew away from the window, high in the air. At its top grew waving leaves that made cool shade for Limökare. She often sat beneath them and wove mats from them.

Limökare told the people the things that Debolār had told her. She told them how the parts of the tree could be used—the leaves, the wood, the bark, the roots, the nuts, the husks, and the juices. The tree was a great blessing to her. It gave her many useful things.

The elder brother, Lökam, no longer wanted Debolār to be killed. He also liked the gifts of the coconut tree. He boasted about his brother.

"We kept him, and we cared for him, and we planted him," he said. "Now the rest of you may have his coconut children and grandchildren. They will be your food, your drink, your oil, your clothes, your wood, and your houses."

He would look around, then, to see if all the people were listening. Then he would say, "Don't forget, I'm his brother."

### Debolār's Brother, Lökām

Stories about the first coconut were told in many places in the Marshall Islands. They were not always told in the same way. Here is another story of Debolār and his family.

At one time, they lived in Enibiñ, a part of Ailinglaplap Island. Limökare was a wise, good woman, the sister of the famous king, Iriulik. They were of the royal clan, or Iroij, and were known to people in many islands.

Limökare had, first of all, a son named Lökam. Then she had a strange baby that was a coconut. He grew to be a tree, the