



# LEGENDS OF MICRONESIA

Book Two

MICRONESIAN READER SERIES

# Legends of Micronesia

BOOK TWO

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## The Story Of Aao

Irilik was a great king, long ago in the Marshall Islands, and his descendants are there today. He ruled over many islands and lived in Eeb, a beautiful land of fruits and flowers, of happy life and pleasures. In Eeb, the trees were taller, the leaves greener, and the flowers brighter than anywhere else. The lagoons were filled with the best of fish.

In such a land, King Irilik was happy, but he wanted one thing more. He wanted to bless his favorite son, Bejwak, in a special way.

King Irilik had many children. Some of them would take the forms of birds. One of the king's sons was more lucky than Bejwak. He was Jekkar, who was smaller and quicker than Bejwak.

"Jekkar will always look out for himself very well," said the king. "It's my simple, friendly Bejwak whom I wish to bless. What can I find that will give him good fortune, that will make him handsome and clever, and that will last forever for him, his children, and his children's children?"

Irilik talked about it with wise men. "Bejwak doesn't need anything," some of them said. "A king and his family have everything."

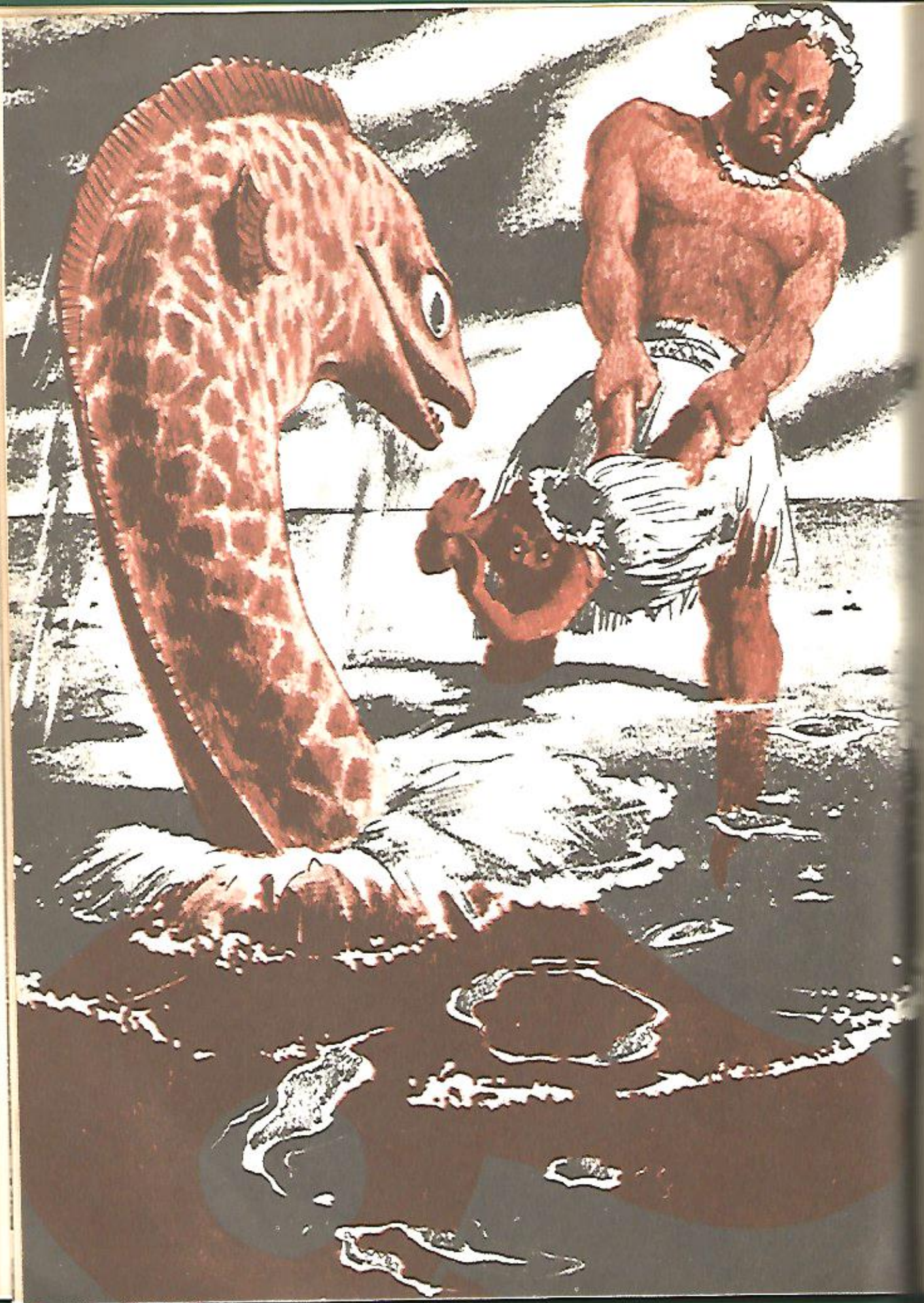
"Oh, no, not everything," replied the king. "Sometimes a person born in a lowly family is more handsome, more clever, and more lucky than a king's child."

"That's true," agreed his friends. "How can that be?"

"It's because such a person has *aao*," said the king. "Just that one thing, *aao*!"

The Marshallese word *aao* is something like the English word "halo." The person with *aao* has a special glow, a shine, about his person. The Marshallese thought that *aao*, like a halo, was fastened to the head or floated above it. "It's a rainbow, rising over a person," they said.

A man with *aao* has a fine personality. There are women with *aao*. They charm all those who come near them. No one can explain *aao*, but all feel it. It brings luck too. A fisherman



who always catches fish is said to have *aao*. He and his family will never go hungry.

"I must send a messenger to get some *aao* and have it put on Bejwak's head," the king said.

He learned that the only *aao* in the world was near the island of Jemo, far to the north of Eeb. It was kept in the throat of the great Mother Eel. She lived in a deep cave in the ocean, near Jemo. She was a large sea monster, the mother of fish, giant eels, and human beings. But she was dangerous, for she ate both fish and men. No ordinary person would dare to reach into her mouth and take out some of the *aao*.

"I'll have to send a giant to get it," said King Irilik.

In those days, there were giants, ghosts, and other monsters on earth. Irilik called one of them, an enormous giant.

"Go to Jemo Island and get some *aao*," he said. "Put it on Bejwak's head."

The giant started from Eeb, wading northward in the Pacific Ocean. He was so tall that the water came up only a little above his knees. To get to Jemo Island, he had to wade around among many of the Marshall Islands. He tried to squeeze himself between the atolls of Jaluit and Ailinglaplap, but there wasn't enough space. They were only about a hundred miles apart.

Then he tried to get between Ailinglaplap Atoll and Namu Atoll, but that was impossible too. He tried to push his body between the atolls of Namu and Kwajalein, but he couldn't get through there, either. At last, he had to go between Kwajalein Atoll and Rongelap Island, which are about two hundred miles apart. He could just squeeze through.

He went north of Likiep Atoll to the island of Jemo. He found a wise man named Lāwin Bikar, sitting outside his thatched house, making rope from fibers. As he rolled them upon his leg, his hand went back and forth, back and forth.

The giant sent by King Irilik was so large that he hid the sun, but he was still not so large as Lāwin Bikar. Lāwin was so large that the wind, made by his hand passing over the rope, blew the giant backwards, clear out of sight in the ocean. And when he moved his hand the other way, the wind brought the giant back to him.

The giant blew back and forth for quite a while. Finally, Lāwin Bikar stopped rolling the rope fibers.

"Who are you, and what brings you here?" he asked.

"I'm from Eeb, and King Irilik sent me," replied the giant. "He wants me to bring back *aao* for his son, Bejwak."

Lāwin Bikar said, "Well, there is only a little *aao* in the world, and it's in the mouth of the great Mother Eel."

"Where does she live?" asked the giant.

"In a deep hole at the end of the reef," replied Lāwin Bikar.

The reef lay ten miles north of Jemo Island. The giant started to walk along on the top of it, but there were hundreds of eels lying there, children of the great Mother Eel. They bit his feet, and he ran back.

"What's the matter? Didn't you get the *aao*?" asked Lāwin Bikar.

"No, the eels on the reef bit me," said the giant.

"Then I'll go with you," said Lāwin Bikar.

He picked up the giant from Eeb and put him under the belt of his leaf skirt, like a doll. He didn't walk. He jumped quickly from one spot to another, so the eels could not bite him. The giant was terribly frightened, for the eels rose up and snapped all around him. He hung on tight to Lāwin's belt, so that he wouldn't fall and be eaten.

When they got to the end of the long, rocky reef, they saw the great, ugly head of the Mother Eel. It came out above the water from her cave among the rocks of the ocean. Her mouth was open. Lāwin Bikar took the giant out of his belt and put his head into the water.

"Swim under the water and get some of the *aao* from the eel's mouth," he said.

The giant would not do it. He shook like a child when he saw the huge mouth and terrible sharp teeth of the Mother Eel. Lāwin Bikar picked up the giant and swung him close to the mouth of the eel, back and forth, back and forth. The eel opened her mouth wider with each swing.

The poor giant nearly died. He was afraid to put his hand into the eel's mouth and take out the *aao*, so Lāwin Bikar did it. When the eel's mouth was wide open, he put in his arm and

reached far back in her throat. With his finger, he took some of the *ao*. It was shiny, white, and sticky.

"Here it is!" he cried, holding up his finger.

Then he carried the giant back across the reef and gave him the *ao* to take back to the land of Eeb.

The giant waded back, holding the *ao* on his finger. He remembered that the king had said to him: "When you come back, I'll send my son Bejwak to meet you. Put the *ao* on top of his head."

When the giant got back to Eeb, a small dark sea bird came flying. He recognized it as one of the sons of King Irilik. He didn't see that it was smaller and quicker than Bejwak. He didn't know that it was Jekkar, the clever one. He had come, ahead of his brother, and had met the giant first.

"Greetings, my good friend!" Jekkar said, trying to talk like his brother.

"Are you Bejwak?" asked the giant.

"Yes," said Jekkar.

And so the giant spread the *ao* over the top of Jekkar's head. It was Jekkar who received good looks and good luck. With the white *ao* on his head, he flew away to the west.

Then along came a larger, dark-brown bird. "I'm Bejwak," he said to the giant. "Have you *ao* for me?"

"Oh, oh, I've been fooled, I've been fooled!" cried the giant. "I've given your brother the *ao*!"

He looked at his finger and saw that just a little of the *ao* was still there. He put it upon Bejwak's head. There was just enough for two lines of white, from front to back, one on each side. So Bejwak also had *ao*, but his luck was not so good as Jekkar's, and he was not so handsome.

Bejwak's descendants can be seen today in the Marshall Islands. They are large, dark sea birds, that are slow in catching fish. But they are quite tame, and the people like them. They have lines of white on the sides of their heads.

Bejwak kept on being the favorite son of the great Iroi, Irilik. In olden times, when the Marshallese heard the *bejwak* crying before sunrise, they said, "There will be plenty of food

and fruit this year. Bejwak has just come from his father Irilik in Eeb and told us."

When they heard that crying before dawn, the king and the people came together and gave prayers of thanks to Bejwak and Irilik for the coming harvest. The priests talked to the people. Afterwards, there was a happy feast.

The *ao* on Jekkar's head brought him luck. It passed on to his children and his children's children. They too can be seen in the Marshall Islands today. They are small, dark sea birds, each with a white cap on its head, that looks something like a halo. They are handsome birds that move fast, and they are the best fishers among all the bird children of Irilik.

As they fly over the waves, their bright eyes look into the blue water. Their beaks are turned downward, ready to snatch. Each dive brings up a fish.

### Lijakkwe, The Beautiful

The island of Ebon, in the Ebon Atoll of the Marshall Islands, has so many food trees and other plants that many persons believe it once was the land of Eeb, a heavenly place.

The richest part of the island is Jitaken, in the west. At the other end of the island, Jittoen, the soil is poor. Coconut trees, which usually grow well in any kind of place, are few and poor in Jittoen.

There is an old legend about this. Once upon a time, many years ago, there lived in Jitaken a young woman named Lijakkwe. As she grew up, her mother and father saw that she was more beautiful than anyone else on earth. Light seemed to shine from her. She was so shining that people could hardly bear to look at her. She was not only beautiful, but she had a strange, magical charm.

No one could think or work near her. Her *ao* dazzled the people.