

The First Coconut Tree

This story, "The First Coconut Tree: A Tale from the Pacific Island of Micronesia," is from the book *From the Mouth of the Monster Eel* by Nancy Bo Flood and was published on September 10, 1996.

NANCY BO FLOOD

Tier 2 terms

imagine, embarrassed, explain, malformed, perhaps, spirit, cleverness, caring, unexpected, valued, plead, wisely, tenderly, nourished, useful, satisfying, mat, sprout, rapidly, toward, towering, supple, sturdy, swaying, chattering, woven, honor, essential, survival

Tier 3 terms

atoll, gourd, frond

Web Version: <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/the-first-coconut-tree>

Long ago on the islands in the Pacific Ocean, there were no trees. No one could even imagine what a tree might be. One day, on the tiny atoll of Ailinglaplap, a baby was born. Debolar was mostly a face on a very round, green tummy. He had no arms or legs.

Debolar's older brother was embarrassed. "Kill it! Kill it," he shouted to their mother, Limokare.

Limokare was unsure and asked the other women. "Who can explain why this strange child was born to me, malformed, and so ugly? Perhaps it is a spirit-child that will bring harm to all of us."

As the baby stared up at her, Limokare saw that his eyes were full of cleverness and caring. "I cannot kill you. Sometimes when someone comes into the world unexpected and not understood, they are laughed at instead of valued. Grow, little round one, and let us see what is within you."

People came from every village to see the strange baby, and the older brother again pleaded, "Before this thing brings evil, act wisely and kill it!"

But Limokare cared for Debolar tenderly. He drank and drank the sweet milk from his mother. But he grew only rounder and browner, always with his middle full of milk.

One day Debolar said to his mother, "Bury me in the sand."

“Bury you? But you will die!”

“No, no, mother, I will not die. Bury me in a shady place, and each day bring clear water for me to drink.”

“Bury you alive? How can I do such a thing?”

“So I can live. I have been nourished by your milk and love. Now I must eat and drink of the earth and be warmed by the sun. I will grow and reach toward the clouds until my fingers can dance in the wind. Then every part of me will be useful. From me, our people will have satisfying food, roofs for their huts, strong rope for building boats and soft mats on which to sleep. My middle will always hold milk for the little children.”

Limokare shook her head but did as her son asked. She buried Debolar in the sand and each evening brought him fresh spring water. Every day she looked for some change but, sadly, she saw none.

One evening, when she was pouring a gourd of water, she saw a small, green sprout that had pushed through the sand.

“How beautiful. But what are you? Could you really be my child, my Debolar?”

Limokare gave the folded leaf a name, *drir-jojo*, words meaning sprout (*drir*) and flying fish (*jojo*). Each evening, she brought more water. The green shoot grew rapidly toward the clouds.

Many months passed. Debolar grew into a towering tree. His trunk was strong yet supple like the sturdy legs of island children. He sprouted green fronds that reached in all directions. His arms were sometimes quiet, but often they were wild and noisy, swaying and laughing in the sea winds, dancing and chattering to his mother who sat in his cool shade.

Limokare remembered what Debolar had once said. She told the other villagers, “Every part of this coconut palm is useful. New fruit will continue to grow. Some we will plant, and some we will eat. The long fingers of the fronds can be woven into mats, sails and even

roofs. The oil in its meat can flavor our food and protect our skin. Honor this tree, this thing that began as an ugly round baby. Take care of him, and he will serve us always.”

And thus the coconut tree, or *ni*, became essential to the survival of life in the Pacific Islands.

Source

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TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

1. Question
Why doesn't Limokare kill Debolar?
2. Question
What does Debolar say will happen if his mother buries him alive?
3. Question
What does Debolar turn into?
4. Question
In this paragraph, Limokare says, "Honor this tree." Restate this part of the sentence in your own words.

TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Question

Why doesn't Limokare kill Debolar?

Answer

She wants to see what Debolar brings to the world. She says that people who aren't understood are often laughed at rather than valued, and she does not want to make that mistake.

2. Question

What does Debolar say will happen if his mother buries him alive?

Answer

He says that he will grow tall toward the cloud and every part of him will be used by their people: He will provide food, shelter, ropes for building boats and soft mats for sleeping.

3. Question

What does Debolar turn into?

Answer

He turns into a coconut tree.

4. Question

In this paragraph, Limokare says, "Honor this tree." Restate this part of the sentence in your own words.

Answer

Take care of this tree. Respect this tree. Value this tree.