

lien Ippān Doon

This Time Together

Monica LaBriola

I was still getting ready when I heard a soft, persistent knock at my door. After a brief pause, I heard the door handle turn and the front door open and close quietly. I knew it was Meria, one of the neighborhood girls, coming to tell me it was time to head over to the birthday party *keemem*.

“De|qñ,” I called out. “Come on in.”

“Kwōpojak ke?” Meria asked. “Are you ready?”

“Kōttar jidik,” I told her. “Wait a few minutes. I’m not quite ready.”

I went into my room to finish getting dressed. I put on the aloha–print dress I had had made the previous year for the Christmas celebration and dance competition. To match, I chose some Marshallese handicraft *amimōñō* jewelry and a pretty, handmade Marshallese *ut*—a style of handicraft floral head wreath that women on Ebeye love to wear, especially to parties and to church. I had received this one from a friend a few months earlier after I had made the mistake of admiring it on her one morning after church.

“Elukkuun aiboojoj ut eo am,” I had told her. “Your *ut* is very pretty.” She immediately took it off her head and placed it gently on mine.

“Am,” she told me with a smile. “It’s yours.”

“I mean, it’s nice on *you!*” I insisted, reaching up to remove the *ut* so I could return it to its rightful owner.

“Marshallese custom,” she said with a smile.

“That’s a tough one to argue,” I said, and we had both laughed as two older ladies passed by and whistled.

“Shwi-shwu! Likatu!” they had teased. *“Em̄man ut ne am̄!”* they said to me. “Nice *ut.*”

Once I finished getting dressed, I made sure I had everything else I needed—the most important thing being a dollar bill to *jiñap*, or line up and present to the baby while singing a version of “Happy Birthday” in Marshallese. I stashed the dollar bill in my purse and then remembered to grab a few extra to give to my friends in case they didn’t have any with them. I had learned to save up dollar bills after the very first birthday I attended on Ebeye, when a woman standing in line behind me had noticed that I didn’t know what was going on and had stealthily slipped a dollar bill into my hand. I was grateful for her kindness to me, and would gladly pass along the favor to anyone at any time.

Just before closing my bedroom door, I remembered to grab my camera. “This will be a good night to take pictures,” I thought. “Everyone will be dressed up and having a great time.”

“Ekwe, ipojak,” I told Meria as I pulled the door shut. “I’m ready. Let’s go!” I was looking forward to having a good time with my friends and family at the *keemem*.

We stepped out of my front door into the sweltering heat. It was already seven o’clock, but the sun had just gone down and it hadn’t rained for almost a month. The air felt heavy and I immediately started to sweat.

“Kōttar m̄ōk,” I told Meria. “Let me get a fan before we go.”

“Kwomaron̄ ke bōktok juon aō?” she asked. “Can you bring me one, too?”

“Aaet,” I replied. “Sure, no problem.”

After I retrieved the fans from my room, we started on our way, taking the usual shortcuts through the back alleys of “Rōk Town” at the south end of Ebeye to the newly built community gym, located at the center of the island close to the dock. By now it was almost completely dark, and I took a small flashlight out of my purse to help us find our way. Luckily there were no muddy puddles for us to avoid, although a bit of rain would have been nice after such a long dry spell. Water catchments were starting to run dry

and boys were missing school in order to fill gallon jugs with water at the filling station, or to take the half-hour ferry ride to Kwajalein to fetch drinking water. The colonel recently had the water faucets relocated so that they were again accessible to everyone from outside the Kwajalein Dock Security Checkpoint (also known as the DSC), rather than just to badge holders, as was often the case. Once it rained he would probably order the faucets to be brought back around to the other side of the DSC, once again making them inaccessible to those without Kwaj privileges.

“Good night,” a man acknowledged us with the standard evening greeting as we passed him on the road.

“Good night,” we replied, even though we weren’t sure who he was.

“Good night, Miss.” This time the greeting came from a group of teenage girls—probably some of my students, I surmised—although I couldn’t see them, since by now it had grown completely dark.

Up ahead I could see that the lights were on at the gym and some people were filing in through the back entrance. Others were standing outside by the fence looking in, listening to the electronic keyboards and the familiar Marshallese melodies that filled the air for blocks around.

“Good night,” I told the girls—although *our* evening had just begun.

“The woman sitting up there at the table next to *Bata*,” the old woman informed me,¹ “is the daughter of an *a/ap*. Her family owns land on Ebeye, Kwajalein, Carlos, and many other islands in Kwajalein Atoll. Her father is the *a/ap* for this *wāto*, but could not be here tonight because he is very sick, and so he sent her in his place. That is why she is sitting up there at the head table. My husband’s oldest brother is married to her younger sister.”

I studied the face of the woman sitting up front, convinced I had seen her before. Then I remembered that she had come by the school the week before to pick up her grandson's report card.

I looked around, noticing that the large room now held a couple hundred people. Young children were running around and having a good time together. The rows of white plastic chairs that had been lined up behind the head tables were filling up with women and a few men, although most of the men stood along the sides of the gym, *bwebwenato* (talking story), taking photographs or videos, waiting for things to get started.

More guests were coming in through the back entrance with trays and large plastic containers filled with food. This was going to be a big *keemem*, because the child's grandparents on both sides were well known and highly respected in the Ebeye community. Moreover, the little boy was the first grandchild on the mother's side. Some of their relatives had come from the outer islands, or Majuro, or even as far as Honolulu and the US mainland to attend this important event.

The gym was decorated with balloons, streamers, and coconut-frond *kimej*. A large banner displaying the birthday boy's photograph hung at the front of the room above the stage. The baby was sitting with his mother directly below the banner on the floor just in front of the stage on a woven pandanus-leaf mat, or *jaki*. The band had their equipment set up on the stage and they played one song after another as the guests arrived. The grandfathers greeted people as they entered, and the baby's father walked around nervously making sure everything was in order. I turned around in my seat and noticed the grandmothers and other female family members and family friends at the back of the gym, lining up all the food and plates on long rows of folding tables. The extended family was easy to identify because the men were all wearing matching aloha shirts, while the women wore matching dresses. The baby and his parents also wore clothes made of a similar material and pattern, but a different color from the rest of the family.

The head tables faced the baby's mat area and were decorated with green tablecloths and balloons. A bottle of water and a drinking coconut, *ni*, had been set at each place. Several seats at the tables were still vacant, waiting to be filled by the VIPs who were expected to arrive any minute.

The proposed start time for the *keemem* was 7:00 pm and it was now approaching nine o'clock. Things would start soon.

"Who are the two women taking their seats next to the *aļap*'s daughter?" I asked, even though I knew the answer. I hoped this kind of questioning would show my friend that I was interested in learning more about Marshallese culture.

"That is our *Lerooj* and one of her daughters," the old woman responded. "The *Lerooj* is the most prominent and highly respected woman on this island. Her great-grandmother was older than my grandfather. Her oldest brother is one of the *Iroojļapļap*, or high chiefs for parts of this island and many other islands in Kwajalein Atoll. Her other brother is also a chief, or *Irooj*, and is a senator for Kwajalein Atoll.

"Did you see the way that young girl gathered her skirt and bent over when she walked in front of the table where they are sitting? That is one of the ways we show respect to our leaders, and also to people who are older than us. We must lower our bodies and excuse ourselves as we pass by saying, '*Joļok bōd*,' which means, 'Throw away my mistake'—in other words, 'Excuse me for being disrespectful and walking in front of you.'"

"Do the *Irooj* and *aļap* attend every *keemem*?" I asked.

"For large celebrations like this, we are expected to invite our traditional leaders, and they are expected to attend. If they cannot make it because they are busy or are not on the island, then they send a representative in their place. It would be unheard of for them to be absent without someone coming to represent them. It is our obligation to

invite them, and it is their obligation to attend. Not like our new government leaders—we invite them, but often they do not come or send anyone in their place.”

I watched the *Lerooj* and her daughter take their seats. One of the baby’s grandfathers immediately approached them and extended his hand in greeting. Meanwhile, another young woman passed in front of the table. As she did, she lowered her head, bent forward, and gathered her skirt with one hand. She noticeably avoided looking directly at the head table. The young woman—whose clothing indicated that she was a member of the baby’s family—approached the baby’s mother, who gave her a large plastic shopping bag. From it, the young woman took several *amimōño* (handicraft) flowers. Still bent over slightly, the woman approached the head table. Avoiding direct eye contact, she said something to the *Lerooj*, and then placed one of the flowers behind the woman’s ear. She then did the same for the *Lerooj*’s daughter and the *aḷap*’s daughter, and then made her way through the rows of plastic chairs. She approached each woman as she had the women at the head table, repeating the same phrase each time before placing the flower behind each woman’s ear. Just as I began to wonder what it was she was saying, she approached first my friend, and then me.

“Joḷok bōd,” she said as she placed the flower behind my ear.

“Ejjeḷok, komḷool,” I said, thanking her for the beautiful gift.

At that point, the music ended and the room began to grow quiet as a man approached the podium. The young woman continued with her task of distributing the handmade flowers.

“What’s going on?” I asked my friend.

“Ej jinoe,” she replied. “The *keemem* is starting.”

“Who is that up there on the stage?” I persisted.

“Tom?” she asked. “He is the emcee. He is a close relative of the birthday family and is good at speaking in front of people. And he is funny. He is also my relative. My

mother is older than his grandfather. Tonight it's his job to keep the *keemem* flowing smoothly and also to ensure adherence to our custom, our *manit*."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, let's see. He makes sure the *keemem* doesn't start until all the right people are here, like the *Irooj* or *Lerooj* and the *a/ap*, for example. He also sees to it that the *Lerooj* and her family are served their food first before everyone else gets in line to make their plates. *Ekwe, jen jab keroro kiō bwe rej itōn jinoe*. Let's be quiet now, because it's going to start."

"*lōkwe in jota*," the emcee said into the microphone. "Good evening." There was a faint muffled reply from the guests.

"What was that?" he laughed. "*Bar juon mōk*. Let's try it again. *lōkwe in jota*," he said more loudly this time.

"*lōkwe in jota*," the guests responded, this time with a bit more enthusiasm and some scattered laughter.

"*Moktata ikōnaan kam̄moolol Anij kōn iienin ippān doon*," Tom continued. "First, I would like to thank God for this time together, for this opportunity to celebrate the life of baby Christopher, who today celebrates his first birthday. On behalf of Christopher's family, I would like to extend a warm welcome to all of you who have come together to celebrate this occasion, and in particular to our *Lerooj* and her family, and to all the *a/ap* and their families who have joined us here this evening. Let us also take a moment to remember those members of the family in particular who could not be here with us tonight because they are far away from home, as well as those who are sick or have passed away.

"I would like to welcome *Bata* Joe, who is here with us tonight, to start the celebration by offering a blessing over the baby and his family, and to bless the food before we begin our meal together. *Bata* Joe..."

“*Kom̄mool*, Tom,” *Bata* Joe thanked the emcee. “It is my great honor to be present here this evening. *Jen kam̄moolol Anij kōn iienin ippān doon. Im bar kam̄moolol kom̄ kōn ami kar koba tok ilo jōtiin rainiin.* Let us once again thank God for giving us this time together, and for this opportunity to come together this evening to celebrate the life of Christopher. Before I proceed with the blessing, I would like to acknowledge everyone who has gathered this evening to make this event possible, and in particular our *Lerooj* and her daughter, as well as all the *a/ap* and their families. It is wonderful to see so many familiar faces, as well as the many family members who have traveled such long distances to be here this evening. If the father and mother of the baby would please stand, I will proceed with the blessing of the child.”

Bata Joe then stepped down from the stage, taking the microphone with him. I stretched my neck up in the hope of catching a glimpse of what was going on, although by that time all the rows of chairs had filled and it was difficult to see through all the people sitting in front of me. By the time I had adjusted myself so that I could see the family, *Bata* had already extended his arm with his open palm resting in midair just over the baby’s head. The mother and father stood quietly with their heads bowed. They must be feeling nervous now that the big event has finally started, I thought to myself.

Bata was speaking a soft blessing into the microphone and, even though the room was almost completely silent by then, it was almost impossible to hear what he was saying. I looked around and saw that most of the adults in the gym had their heads bowed slightly. Some were shushing the little children, encouraging them to be quiet during the prayer. “*lien jar*,” they whispered. “It’s time to pray.” I didn’t dare lean over to ask my friend what *Bata* was saying, although I had a pretty good idea.

When *Bata* Joe finished his blessing, he began to speak a bit more loudly into the microphone. This time, I could hear that he was offering the blessing over the evening and the food.

Then, “*Jouj im jutak*,” I heard him say. “Please stand.”

Everyone who was sitting down stood up as *Bata* began the prayer. When he finished, he asked all of us to join him in a song. This one I knew from church, as did most people, and I was glad to be able to join in the singing:

<i>Anij iɔkwe</i>	God of love,
<i>Anij in jouj,</i>	God of kindness,
<i>oŋaake im</i>	protect us
<i>kojpārok kōj.</i>	and care for us.
<i>Im kōn men in</i>	For this we
<i>kōmij kaŋm̄oolol,</i>	give you
<i>eɭap joñan</i>	our highest
<i>maroñ ba.</i>	thanks and praise.

<i>Kwar kapooɭ iō</i>	You filled me
<i>kōn aŋ iɔkwe.</i>	with your love.
<i>Oŋaake iō</i>	Protect me
<i>jān aō jorrāān.</i>	from harm.
<i>Tōl im dābij iō</i>	Lead me and hold me
<i>ilo lɔpiden.</i>	in the palm of your hand.
<i>Lɔpiden pāin ij aenōm̄man.</i>	In the palm of your hand,
	I am at peace. ²

The perfect four-part harmony filled the gym, growing progressively louder as more and more men, women, and children joined in. It sounded so beautiful that my eyes began to swell up with tears, and the hair on my arms stood up straight for just a second. As the next round started, I stopped singing just so I could stand and listen for a while.

By the time we started getting in line for our food, the gym had grown extremely hot, even though it was almost ten o'clock. Many of the women were carrying *amimōho* fans like the one I had brought and were fanning themselves and their children as we stood in line. I made sure to fan my friend, too, since she had forgotten hers and was obviously very hot.

"*Lale mōk*," she began. "All the people sitting at the head table have their food already. The *Lerooj* and her family were the first to receive their plates and drinks, and then *Bata* and the *aḷap*."

I looked over. Besides his or her bottle of water and drinking coconut (*ni*), each person at the head table now also had a can of soda and two styrofoam take-out plates of food.

"Why do they all have two plates?" I asked.

"One plate is probably filled with meats, or *jālele*," she said, "and the other is filled with rice, salad, and all the best side dishes and local foods. The baby's family has also set aside plates for those members of the families of the *Lerooj* and other *Irooj* who couldn't make it here tonight, and they will deliver them to their homes later on. Did you know that, in our custom, only certain people can cook food for and serve the *Irooj* and his family? This is one of the other ways in which we *kairoojooj* or show respect to our chiefs."

"Wow, they really get special treatment," I said in a lowered voice.

My friend looked a bit surprised at my comment and was quiet for a minute. I wondered if I had offended her. Then she looked around and responded quietly, "We do treat them differently, but that's out of respect for our *mānit*. *Ekar nān jabōnkōnnaan ej ba, 'Jede ak eo.'* This saying reminds us to respect our *Irooj*, who are like frigate birds. But you must keep in mind that, as *Irooj*, they also have special responsibilities and obligations. There are things they are expected to do as well."

"Like what?" I asked in a louder voice, trying to be heard over the noise of the band, which had started playing again right after the prayer.

“Jen etal im bōk kijed ṁōñā ṁokta,” she replied. “Let’s get our food first, and then I will tell you more.”

The line for the food seemed like it was about a mile long, stretching all the way around the gym, and even out the back door. Some people stayed in their seats, waiting for it to get shorter, while others asked their younger friends or relatives to stand in line for them. As I finally approached the table, I noticed that an assembly line of the baby’s family members were dishing up the plates for us. The first person hurriedly grabbed a styrofoam take-out plate, filled one section with plain and fried *raj*, or rice, and then passed it on to the woman next to her, who served one *raj bobo* rice ball and a scoop of potato salad. Next came a small portion of noodles, and then a series of *ṁōñā in ṁaje!* or Marshallese foods including *jaajmi* (sashimi), banana and grated coconut *jukjuk*, arrowroot or tapioca starch and grated coconut *ṁākṁok*, preserved breadfruit *bwiro*, a slice of *kwanjin mā* or roasted breadfruit, and boiled pandanus *peru* with starch, grated coconut, and coconut juice. These local foods were some of my favorites, and I could hardly wait to get back to my seat and try each one.

Just when it seemed like a plate was completely full, one of the servers passed it further down the line where still more women were serving different kinds of meat, which they placed right on top of all the other dishes that had already been served. Some of the choices included barbequed chicken and steak, short ribs, pork, and, of course, fish.

“Where did all the fish come from?” I asked my friend as I picked out a can of soda for her from the enormous cooler at the end of the table.

“Jān ‘outer island’,” she replied. “The baby’s parents’ families sent them and brought them from the outer islands. I think the father also asked some of his relatives to go out fishing around here. They probably brought in some of those small fish from the lagoon, and some of that *jaajmi* might be from the ocean side.”

I quickly grabbed a couple of bottles of water and followed my friend back to our seats.

“I’ll never be able to finish all this,” I laughed as I looked down at my lap, where my plate sat, overflowing with food.

“You are not supposed to finish it,” my friend told me. “Just eat until you are full. Then after everyone gets their food, you can go and fill it up again and take the plate home with you. That is our custom. The family doesn’t want to be left with lots of food at the end of the *keemem*. They want us to enjoy it and take it home to share with our family members who didn’t attend. Tomorrow you won’t have to cook!”

As we began to eat, Tom came back on stage to announce that it was time for the entertainment portion of the evening to begin. By now, it was almost 10:30 pm.

“Several groups have prepared songs and dances for the birthday boy and his family.” He then turned and looked off stage and said into the microphone, “Can the first group please get ready? The first act will start in ten minutes.”

I brought my chair a little closer to my friend with the hope that we could continue the conversation we started in the food line. But she seemed more interested in sitting quietly and looking around to see who was present at the *keemem*. As I sat eating a piece of roasted breadfruit, I felt someone approach us from behind. I turned my head and saw the face of an older man whom I did not recognize. My friend turned around, looked up, and smiled.

“O, *iḡkwe!* *Kwar itok nāāt?!?*” she said, obviously excited to see the familiar face. “When did you get here?” The two of them talked for a few minutes before she turned to introduce me to him. “This is my cousin,” she told me with a smile. “He lives in Hawai`i and hasn’t been back to the island for a long time. My mother is younger than his father.”

I extended my hand to greet him. “*iḡkwe,*” I said, and he returned my greeting with a “*iḡkwe*” and a firm handshake.

Then my friend turned to where her granddaughter was sitting, and brought her around to meet her cousin. “*Eñin ej leddik eo jibū, nājin lio e rūttotata nejū,*” she told her cousin. “This is my granddaughter, my oldest daughter’s daughter.”

The two of them continued talking in this way for several minutes until my friend’s cousin said it was time to return to his seat.

“*Būbū, wōn eo?*” my friend’s young granddaughter asked her inquisitively.

“*Jimam eo,*” she replied. “That’s your grandfather.” The girl looked over at the man for a minute, and then went back to eating preserved breadfruit *bwiro* from a little plastic baggie.

“It must be hard for children to keep track of all their relatives,” I said to my friend, partly joking.

“*Aet,*” she replied. “Yes, especially these days. That’s one of the reasons parties like these are so fun and important for us Marshallese, us *rimaje!* They give us a chance to see our relatives and get to know people we didn’t even know were members of our family or our clan—our *jowi*. If we see someone at a *keemem* or a funeral, we might ask, ‘Why is that person here?’ And then we find out they are also related in some way. In Marshallese we call it *jitdam kapeel.*”

“What is *jitdam kapeel?*” I asked her.

“*Jitdam kapeel* means something like learning about who your family members are—like learning about your family tree. But it also means learning about custom, about Marshallese culture, about our role and our place in our family and in our society. *Jitdam kapeel* can mean learning what it is to be a daughter or a brother, how to show respect to people who are older or from older generations, how to respect our *lrooj*, and much more. It also means teaching young people who their relatives are so they can know who they can and cannot marry or date—who can be *koba* and who cannot—according to our *manit*.

“*Jitdam kapeel* is kind of like what we have been doing here tonight. You have been asking me questions, and I have been trying to explain our customs and our

culture to you. If you were my own daughter, I would point out our relatives and explain how they are related to us, much as I have been doing with my granddaughter. Parties and especially funerals are the perfect opportunities to do this because there are so many people present and so much is going on. We tell our children about certain people and customs every day at home, but it is during large gatherings like these that we have the chance to actually see peoples' faces and put many of our customs into practice."

Tom came back on stage to announce the first performance. Before the music started, my friend leaned over and finished what she had been saying to me. "These are not things you can learn in a book," she said. "You can only learn them by asking, seeing, and doing. That is our custom. These parties are times to ask, to listen, to see, and to do."

I laughed and cheered along with the rest of the crowd as my friend made her way up to the front of the gym with my *amimōho* fan in one hand and a bottle of perfume in the other. She had her arms up in the air, and was dancing along to the beat of the music as she went, stopping every few feet to shake her hips a bit and smiling all the way. The crowd roared with laughter each time she paused to try out a new move.

My friend's son was up on stage performing a dance number with some of his classmates, and she was heading straight for them. Once up on stage, she placed herself directly behind her son and began imitating his every move in a slightly exaggerated fashion. When the dancers reached one of the more complex portions of their dance number, my friend began to vigorously fan her son as the audience cheered her on. She then proceeded to spray each of the dancers with perfume. Throughout all this, the boys tried their best to keep straight faces and to go on dancing without interruption, but they found it increasingly difficult as one of the baby's grandmothers joined my friend on stage with yet another bottle of perfume and a bag full of T-shirts, one of which she began to drape over each boy's shoulders.

And then, just as quickly as she had gone up, my friend returned to her seat. She had a huge grin on her face and people were still laughing at her antics on stage. After she sat down, I noticed she was sweating from the heat, so I handed her a bottle of water and told her to keep the fan. As if nothing had happened, she turned her attention back to the stage. By then a group of young girls had started a hula dance. We heard laughter erupt on one side of the gym, and when we looked over to see what was going on, we saw another old woman making her way up to the stage.

After several more dance numbers, Tom returned to the stage to announce the last performance. I noticed the baby's relatives (many of whom had been serving food earlier in the evening) off to one side of the gym getting ready to make their entrance. They were all dressed in the matching clothes I had noticed earlier—the women in dresses and the men in aloha shirts and dark pants—and each was carrying a plastic shopping bag in one hand. The music started, and after a brief pause, the dancers formed two lines and began to slowly *maaj* or parade up to the front of the gym to the rhythm of Marshallese electronic keyboard music. The baby's father led the men and the mother led the women with the baby in her arms.

This performance would be different from all the others. As soon as the two lines of dancers got to the front of the gym and began to dance, an old woman approached the baby's mother and started undressing the baby—right down to his diaper. The audience erupted in laughter and people began to clap and cheer. A minute later, the baby's grandmother appeared with a new outfit and helped the mother dress him. The baby and his mother then rejoined the dancers, but a few minutes later another woman went up, again stripped the baby down to his diaper, and took the clothes with her to her seat. By now, the audience was excited, and everyone was having a good time laughing and cheering.

I leaned over to my friend. "Why are they taking the baby's clothes?" I asked her.

"That is our custom," she told me. "Some guests will even go up and take the *jaki* mat and blankets from where the baby and his family have been sitting tonight. And the

family must give them freely. You see, a *keemem* is about celebrating, which for us *rimaje!* means giving and sharing, and practicing our customs. These are some of the ways the family celebrates the life and well-being of their child.”

By this time, the baby was in his diaper again, and would stay that way until the dancing was over, since it appeared the grandmother was out of new outfits. At this time, one of the father’s relatives opened up his plastic bag, took out a T-shirt, and threw it into the audience. Several people jumped up and tried to catch the shirt, but it landed in the lap of an old man who was sitting close to us. Everyone’s attention went immediately back to the front of the room, because by that time all the dancers had opened up their bags and began throwing more things out into the audience. There were T-shirts, Marshallese-style “*nuknuk in Guam*” or “Guam dresses” as they are called, *jodi* flip-flops, sandals, and socks, and even a few packages of plastic cups and plates. Guests stood up to catch the items as they flew through the air, and children dove for the things that landed on the floor. My friend nudged me and pointed to the front of the gym, where I saw a woman run up and take the *jaki* mat from the floor. One person ran up and jokingly reached for the birthday banner, although he couldn’t reach it. Another woman went up and took the *jodi* sandals right off the baby’s mother’s feet, and held them up in triumph as she ran back toward her seat. The dancers and the audience all laughed and cheered as the woman hurriedly ducked into her seat, laughing but no longer wanting to be the center of attention.

As we stood in line together, my friend pulled a dollar bill from her purse and handed it to me.

“*Ej emman wōt,*” I told her. “It’s okay, I have one.”

“*Āinwōt juon,*” she said. “Never mind, just take this one.” By now, I had learned it would be rude to refuse this kind of offer, so I took the dollar bill from my friend’s hand, even though I had been hoping to share one with her this time.

As we stood in the long line, which by this time stretched all the way around the gym, the band concluded a local rendition of “Happy Birthday” and transitioned into one of my favorites:

lien em̄man, 'm̄man,

joj ej llo doon.

A' etto ad jab

itwale³ tok eok.

Kwon jijet tok

ljo 'jo iturū ilo

m̄ool in am̄ m̄ool.

This wonderful moment,

as we see each other here.

It has been such a long time

since you have gathered together with us.

Come and sit here.

next to me,

and bring with you all

that you are and

all the truth that you hold.⁴

“This song represents what I was telling you about earlier,” my friend began. “It is all about *'iien em̄man,*’ that wonderful moment when families, clans, and communities come together during parties, sometimes meeting each other for the very first time.

“lien ippān doon,” she continued. “This time we spend together is precious because it gives us an opportunity to work together, to get to know each other better, and to learn about and celebrate our families, our customs, our history. *Ekar n̄an jabōnkōnnaan ej ba, 'Amān akā eo.*’ This saying means that times like these are not just meant for remembering important events like the birth of a baby or the life of someone who has died. They also represent new beginnings, new opportunities. These moments, these *iien ippān doon,* are important because they represent the coming together of many generations of people, as well as their stories, their memories, and their knowledge of our history and of our *m̄anit.* These events give everyone a chance to learn

a little bit more about *m̄antin m̄ajeļ* and what it means to be *rim̄ajeļ*. On nights like these we ask, we listen, we see, and we do. This is how we learn. This is how we know. This is how we celebrate.”



Photo 1. Iien keemem. Rim̄ajeļ consider the first birthday the most significant and celebrate accordingly. While some commemorate the day with small, private *keemem* in their homes, others invite their extended families, friends, and neighbors for the special event. Here, two families hold a joint *keemem*, hosting not just their families and friends, but also the entire Queen of Peace Parish community. Ebeye, 2001. *Photo by Brian Green.*

My friend nudged me forward, as I had fallen behind a bit in line. As we approached the front of the gym, I took out my dollar. As I shook Christopher’s tiny hand, I dropped the dollar on the pile of money and gifts that had accumulated on the floor next to the family.

“Happy Birthday,” I said as I pinched his cheeks.

“Happy Birthday *im jeraam̃mon ilo raan in am̃*,” I heard my friend say as I turned to head back to my seat. “Happy Birthday and congratulations on your special day.”

As I gathered up my things, I looked around and noticed that most of the people had already left. One of the baby’s aunties was walking around with a container full of leftover rice, spooning it onto peoples’ plates. Several other women were scattered around the room distributing salads, meat, and drinks. Some of the younger girls were already busy picking up trash and sweeping the floor, while the men took down tables and chairs, helped the band disassemble their equipment, and began loading empty containers and coolers into the back of several pickup trucks. Baby Christopher was fast asleep in his father’s arms.

“*Etal wōt*,” my friend told me as she gathered up her things. “You go ahead. I am going to stay here for a while to help clean up. And here, you take this T-shirt. It’s your size.”

“*Ejjab!*” I exclaimed. “You keep it. Won’t it fit someone in your family?”

“*Āinwōt juon*,” she said. “Never mind. You just take it.”

“*Ekwe, kom̃mool*,” I told her once again. “Thank you.”

“My son is going to walk you home,” she told me. “It’s too late for you to walk by yourself.”

“Are you sure I shouldn’t stay and help out?” I asked.

“*Ejjab*,” she replied. “*Etal im kiki*. Go home and get some sleep. You look tired.”

“*Ekwe*, good night,” I told my friend. “*Im kom̃mool kōn am̃ kar jitdam̃e eō*. Thank you for teaching me so many things.”

“*Kōn jouj*,” she said with a smile. “You’re welcome, with pleasure.”

By the time my friend’s son and I started to walk toward my house, it was almost two o’clock in the morning. The streets were quiet and only a few people were out. The heat had subsided and a cool breeze was blowing.

“Good night,” a man said as we passed him on the sidewalk.

“Good night,” we responded in unison.

My friend’s son looked up at the sky and smiled. “*Enaaj wōt*,” he said. “It’s going to rain. Tomorrow will be another day of celebrating, as the rain fills our catchments with fresh water. Everyone will be busy cleaning up and doing their laundry.”

“*Em̄man*,” I said as we approached my front door. “That’s good. *Ekwe, kom̄mool bwe kwar āñintok eō ñan m̄weo im̄ō*. Thank you for walking me home.”

“*Kōn jouj*,” he said walking down the stairs.

As I shut the front door, I heard tiny drops of rain begin to fall one by one on the tin roof. By the time I closed my eyes to fall asleep, it was pouring.

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MONICA LABRIOLA is an East–West Center graduate degree fellow pursuing her PhD in Pacific history at the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa. She recently completed her master’s degree in Pacific Islands studies at UH Mānoa; her thesis won the prestigious Norman Meller Research Award for the 2005–2006 academic year. Born in Dayton, Ohio, Monica moved to San Francisco when she was in high school. She attended the University of California at Berkeley, where she earned a BA in peace and conflict studies. After working as a grants assistant at the James Irvine Foundation in San Francisco, she lived and traveled extensively in the Marshall Islands, teaching for two years at Queen of Peace High School with Jesuit Volunteers International, and for one year at Ebeye Public Elementary School. Monica now lives in Honolulu with her husband and stepson. In addition to pursuing full–time graduate study, she works part–time as a policy and legal researcher for the UH Mānoa Chancellor’s Office.

Notes

¹ “The old woman” and “my friend” in the rest of the piece represent a composite of all the kind elderly women who took the time to *jitdam kapeel* with me.

² Thank you to John deBrum for his help with this translation.

³ Actual spelling unknown (*“itwale”*).

⁴ Thank you to Maryia deBrum and John deBrum for their help with the transcription and translation of this song.