Mokwan ak Jāānkun: Dried Pandanus Paste*

Ione Heine deBrum

FOOD

Food has many meanings in Marshallese culture. Food is an important part of our lives. It not only keeps us alive and healthy but also we need it for special events. No celebration is a success unless everyone has plenty of food to eat and leftovers to take home. We use food to solve disputes, to welcome visitors, to provide for funerals, and to pay tribute to the *iroij* (chiefs).

Ri Majōl [the Marshallese people] commonly preserved food before modern society sneaked upon us. Although food preservation is not as common as it once was, people still practise these skills and eat the results. People preserve food during seasons of abundance, to eat out of season or in times of famine. Sailors take preserved food on long journeys from atoll to atoll.

MOKWAN AK JAANKUN

People on the northern atolls of Aelok, Likiep, and Mājeej in the Ratak Chain produce *mokwan* (dried pandanus paste). These atolls have less rainfall, thus the soil is not fertile enough to grow many varieties of food. *Bōb* (pandanus), however, grows well and in abundance. *Bōb* on these atolls is very sweet and juicy. People from these atolls need food for droughts and famine.

People on the atolls of Ujae, Lae, and Wōtto in the Rālik Chain *jāānkun* (dried pandanus paste). They are also known as canoe builders and sailors. They have frequently visited one another, taking *jāānkun* on their voyages across the sea.

Mokwan can be kept for years. It was traditionally used for feeding babies and old people. *Jāānkun* can be soaked and mashed so that people without teeth find it easy to swallow. Just a little bit dissolved in a cup of water makes *jōnnōb,* a revitalizing drink. Sailors have found it particularly useful because it does not have to be cooked, unlike *bwiro* (preserved breadfruit), which cannot be eaten without further preparation. They can just slice off pieces as they need them. They have even used the packages as pillows.

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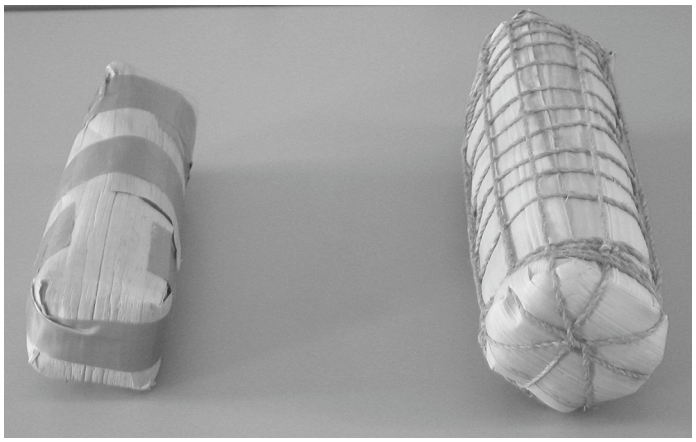


(Figure to left) *Mokwan* or *jāankun* (dried pandanus paste) packages. The paste is wrapped in *maañ* (pandanus leaves), then tied with *ekkwal* (sennit) traditionally, but nowadays with tape and string (Photo by Rito Akilang).

AN HISTORICAL EVENT

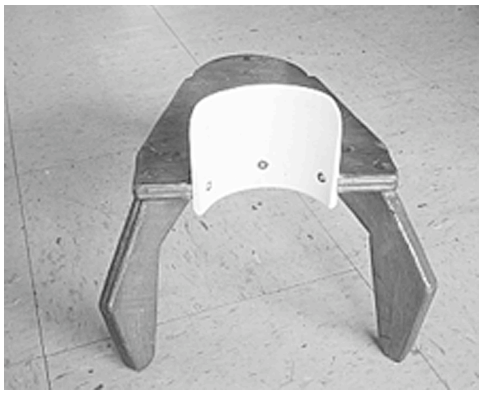
I first tasted *jāānkun* when I was 14 years old. Someone gifted a *jāānkun* package to my dad, Dwight Heine, when he was an administrator during period of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI). The *jāānkun* was five feet long and about ten inches in diameter. When we moved to Saipan to take up his new post in 1968, he took the *jāānkun* with him. The *jāānkun* remained intact during the first year. During Christmas of the second year, he called his Ri Majōl, Micronesian, Pacific Islander, and Ri Belle (White) friends residing on Capital Hill (TTPI headquarters in Saipan) to taste the *jāānkun*. Dr and Mrs Jack Helkena from the Marshalls, Dr and Mrs Hicking from Kiribati, Mr and Mrs Peter T. Coleman of Hawai`i and American Samoa, and High Commissioner and Mrs Johnston were among the many friends and guests who came. He served pieces with coconut for eating, and he made *jōnnōb* as a cocktail. While his guests were eating and drinking, my dad explained the process of *jāānkun* preservation and its importance to Ri Majōl. I will never forget that night and his words. Listening to his story and seeing how the guests were equally fascinated, I realized how important it was to maintain culture through food preservation. Today we can think of *jāānkun* as preserving culture, providing nutrition and food security, and contributing to economic improvement in our lives.

CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Preserving culture through *mokwan* means working together. From start to finish, the process involves many people. When the *bōb* is ripe, men, women, and children gather the huge and heavy *ajjen* (bunches). They gather firewood, cooking stones, leaves, and other necessities (matches, these days) to start the *um* (earth oven). The women pull the pandanus keys off individually, wash them thoroughly, and line them up within the *um*. During the day or overnight, they cook the keys in the *um* until the keys are ready. Although it is

easier to cook when the weather is fine, *bōb* can remain in the *um* for days without spoiling if the weather is bad. After the pandanus is unearthed, the keys are spread on coconut fronds to cool.

It is most practical for the men to *kilok* (extract) the juice from the softened keys before sunrise, in the cool morning air. They use a special tool, called a *wekañ* or *peka*. More than 100 keys are needed to make *kilok* worthwhile, so many men come together to help the process.



(Figure to left) A *wekan* or *peka,* a special tool to *kilok* (extract) the juice from softened pandanus keys, in order to make *jāānkun* or *mokwan* (Photo by Rito Akilang)

Once the juicy paste is extracted, the juice is put into a cooking pot and simmered until the colour turns red or light brown. Rather than timing the operation, the cooks judge by colour and taste when the food is ready. Then the women spread the paste evenly on top of banana leaves placed on tables or surfaces high above the ground and in the sun. They turn over the *mokwan* once in a while to ensure both sides dry evenly. The drying process may take two or three days depending on the weather. When the paste is dry, the men cut the *mokwan* evenly and roll it, peeling off the leaves underneath. Then they tightly wrap the rolls in pandanus leaves and tie them with *ekkwal* (sennit), so that air does not get into the packages and spoil the *mokwan*.

Making and tying the *ekkwal* takes skill. Sennit, although not the subject of this essay, is an important tool in our material culture. Old men make it from dried coconut husk fibre by rolling strands together on their thigh. They braid strands to form strong strings and stronger ropes. We use *ekkwal* in place of nails; we use it to bind canoe parts and lash house poles. We are expanding our use of *ekkwal,* eg in decorating and flower arranging.

First fruits are the right of chiefs. So *mokwan* makers give the largest and longest *mokwan* package to the chief first and ensure that all others that follow are smaller and shorter.

FOOD SECURITY

Jāānkun provides food security because Ri Majōl can grow their own pandanus. *Bōb* grows easily and does not need much attention or even knowledge about cultivating it. It does not require fertilizer. Planting entails

just digging a hole, placing a cutting, and filling the hole with soil. Anyone with muscles can plant pandanus.

As described above, the process of preserving pandanus is not complicated. Groups of people working together can make it with no equipment other than a *wekañ*. *Jāānkun* requires no ingredients other than *bōb*. *Jāānkun* is a natural food that has no manufactured chemical preservatives. Yet, it keeps for years, so people can use it over time or set it aside for emergencies. They can keep this food supply on hand all the time.

NUTRITION

Mokwan has high nutritional value compared with raw or just cooked pandanus. In March 2003 Dr Lois Engelberger conducted a preliminary study about the nutritional values of different pandanus varieties found in the Marshall Islands. Along with a *mokwan* package, samples of different varieties were collected and sent off for analysis for beta carotene. Beta carotene is the most important of pro-vitamin A carotenoids. Lack of Vitamin A causes night blindness and other health problems, which are common in the Marshall Islands. Lack of Vitamin A makes people more susceptible to diseases, such as measles. The results of the analysis from different pandanus and different preparations follow:

Marshallese pandanus raw	**Beta carotene per 100 grams**
Lanlin	901.8
Lamoen	231.9
Lokotwa	218.0
Mejal	201.0
Lojokdad	178.0
Anberia	169.6
Leikmaan	133.9
Joibeb	108.9
Edwaan-en-an-nelu	99.2
Utottot	77.4
Lejemau	21.2
Flour, rice, sugar	0

Marshallese pandanus raw	**Beta carotene per 100 grams**
Jāānkun /mokwan	724.1
Lojokded, raw	178.0
Lojokded, boiled	123.0
Lojokded, juice	118.7
Lejemau, boiled	70.4
Lejemau, steamed (*beru?*)	36.6
Lejemau, raw	21.2

Data courtesy of Dr Lois Engelberger; posted in *Marshall Islands Journal*.

As shown above, *mokwan* has high Vitamin A content. Tests involving eyesight and diet might show a significant difference between those people who have *mokwan* in their diet and those who do not.

ECONOMICS

If people make their own food, they know exactly what is in it. They do not need consumer education. Unlike the plethora of oriental food in packages that few Ri Majōl can read, *jāānkun* does not need food labels. *Jāānkun* needs no monetary input as it has no manufactured chemical preservatives. Packaging can be free with local materials: pandanus and banana leaves and coconut fibre string. Family, friends, and church groups help take *jāānkun* from the outer islands into Mājro and Ebeye, so shipping and handling does not require paperwork. This does take time, but many Ri Majōl have time for these transactions. Half the country's population lives on Mājro and Ebeye, where there are not enough pandanus trees to cater for everyone. Making *jāānkun* and selling it to urban dwellers is a good income-generating project for outer islanders.

REVIVAL

After I returned to the Marshall Islands in 1980, I found a job with the Marshalls Community Action Agency (MCAA). Straight away, I was assigned to work on Wōjjā as a community worker on food and nutrition for women. During my year there, I worked with a women's group concerned with food and nutrition. I realized that people had practically abandoned *mokwan* making. In 1981-1982 only a few older people knew the arts of preserving and packaging. No one used *mokwan* for long journeys or gifts.

I asked one of the few knowledgeable couples, Talilam and Tarwoj Lakjohn to share their skills regarding food preservation. We used ripe breadfruit at that point because pandanus was not in season. Seeded breadfruit can be preserved and packaged with the same process as pandanus. Its taste is mildly

sweeter than pandanus. Ri Wōjjā call it *liped*. Family and friends living nearby came to observe the work and to taste the *liped*. Most of the older people talked about how it had once been part of their food. After that, people began to preserve food, including *mokwan*.

After several years of working for MCAA, I applied to work for the school lunch programme, which I did from 1984 to 1991. During this time, the programme had only US Department of Agriculture (USDA) food for students. In mid-1991 under a new nutrition project established through the Ministry of Social Services, I was re-assigned to take up a new post as nutritionist until April 2000. One of its targets was food preservation, and our *mokwan* network began again. A mobile team with members from the Women in Development, Youth, Population and Family Life Education, Sport, Gardening, and Nutrition programmes was formalized to visit communities, especially in the outer islands. I visited Wōjjā for a second time (since 1981-1982). The nutrition programme focused attention on food and health. Food preservation was a main target activity in the communities as a means of income generation.

Income generation was one of our projects, so we made jams from banana, pumpkin, and papaya. We wanted to demonstrate the process of making *mokwan,* but Talilam and Tarwoj Lakjohn could no longer do hard work. Other people who had the knowledge and skills had moved to Mājro for old-age programmes administered by Social Services. Nevertheless, we made enough *mokwan* for participants to taste it and to keep some packages for showcasing and promotion. Tarwoj could not wrap and tie the *mokwan* the traditional way because there was no *ekkwal* and time was limited. So we wrapped it in plastic to bring it back to Mājro, where Mr Ajnej, a Ri Wōjjā and a security guard for the Ministry of Social Services, wrapped and tied the *mokwan* in the traditional manner. Older people in the aging programme under the same ministry gave the *ekkwal*. The one-week workshop on Wōjjā had more than 30 participants—men, women, and youths. The Resources and Development agriculture agent on Wōjjā participated; he and his wife continue to preserve *liped* and send it in plastic bags to Ebeye for sale.

The mobile team's next trip was to Likiep, where I met again the wife of the Assembly of God's minister who had attended our Wōjjā workshop. She was making *liped* and sending it to Ebeye for sale as well. Furthermore, women's groups from outer-island churches have taken up preserving food for *ka-budget* (fund raising) and gifting during their missions to Mājro or Ebeye. These women's groups accelerate the promotion and revival of *mokwan*.

Although I was re-assigned to Women in Development in early 2000, I continue to focus on traditional food preservation, specifically *mokwan*. The first National Women's Conference of the new millennium recommended more traditional food preservation.

During a conference on medicinal plants on Mājro in 2001, Mrs Emako Snight from a women's club on Aelok brought a few *mokwan* packages for display. To my surprise, many of the conference attendees,

young and old, wanted to buy the *mokwan*. Three *mokwan,* however, were used for promotion and as such were sent to Ambassador Amatlain Kabua in Japan, Ms Hilda Heine at Pacific Resources for Education and Learning in Hawai`i, and Secretary Fred Muller of the Ministry of Resources and Development. The rest were consumed at tea break during the conference.

For International Women's Day in 2003, the women's club of Aelok sent 20 *mokwan* for marketing. All had sold out by the end of the day. In May the same year, the first-ever trade fair on Kwajalein took place between the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the United States Army Kuwajleen Atoll (USAKA), and *mokwan* were part of the display. Having seen the display at Kuwajleen, Mr Patrick Chan, general manager at the Bank of the Marshall Islands, offered the opportunity to sell *mokwan* at the bank.

DEVELOPMENT

Women's groups were able to revive traditional food preservation by using their determination, dedication, and aspirations. Their actions support development in our country as witnessed by other groups -- youths, families, and even businessmen -- sending *jāānkun* to market. People from Mājeej also send *mokwan* to market in Mājro. *Mokwan* continues to be for sale in the Bank of the Marshall Islands, at Emos Jack's store on Woja, Mājro, in handicraft shops, and through individuals selling in their own time.

Although the art of making *jāānkun* has been revived and packages are in the market, we can do more. We could export *mokwan* to the international market. We could write a cookbook of recipes for preserved foods, including making bread, mixing cocktails, and other specialties. Another challenge in promotion is attractive packaging and labelling. Traditional packaging is attractive and free; therefore, we should produce more *ekkwal*. Older men should teach their skills to others, so that people do not have to buy string or tape. Jewelry makers, flower arrangers, and interior decorators would also like to purchase *ekkwal* for their crafts.

I admire Ambassador Amatlain Kabua in Japan for her continued interest in *jāānkun*. She ordered *jāānkun* three times during the promotion period. Her interest made a big difference in keeping me going with the revival of *jāānkun,* because many people thought its re-introduction was a joke. Now, however, many people are calling to place their orders.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ione Heine deBrum holding *mokwan* (preserved pandanus paste) (Photo by Rito Akilang)

Ione Heine deBrum is the daughter of Dwight and Morgiana Heine. She was born on Mājro but brought up on Epoon. She went to school on Saipan for grades 6 to 12. She attended the University of Hawai`i at Hilo, then the Community Education and Training Centre in Fiji for home economics. She worked in Saipan for the Trust Territory, compiling recipes for Food Services. She returned to the Marshalls to work in the Marshalls Community Action Agency, then Food Services, Nutrition, and Women in Development. She now works in Population and Family Life Education, Ministry of Internal Affairs, PO Box 18, Mājro, MH 96960, MARSHALL ISLANDS, phone +692 625-8240, fax +692 625-5353, rmimia@ntamar.com. She is married to Peter deBrum and has children and two grandchildren. At home PO Box 1711, Mājro, MH 96960, MARSHALL ISLANDS, phone +692 247-7766, ionedebrum@hotmail.com