

TALES FROM THE ISLAND OF ROTI*

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Providing moralistic training as well as entertainment, folk tales represent an important part of oral and written culture in Indonesia. As a multilingual and multicultural society, Indonesia has a wealth of such tales. Over the years, concerted efforts have been made to collect and preserve as many of them as possible. The Balai Pustaka, for example, has issued five volumes of folk tales collected from nearly all the islands in the archipelago. In another effort to preserve the varied cultural heritages of Indonesia, the Indonesian Department of Higher Education, in 1977, instituted a research project to describe and record the major dialects throughout the country. A secondary goal of the project was to collect folk tales and other folk literature in the original dialects. While the tales gathered for this project have not been published, other collections from single language and dialect groups have appeared in Indonesian. Among such collections are the following tales from the eastern island of Roti.

1. How Two Children Turned into Pigeons

Once upon a time the sky and earth were so near to each other that people from the earth could climb up to the sky and people from the sky could go down to earth. By means of a wooden ladder, crowds of people went up and down, each going about his own business. In the sky, not very far from the ladder, lived a grandmother with her two grandchildren. One day the old woman sent the two grandchildren down to earth to get some fire.

When the children reached the earth, they walked here and there, wondering which place or house might have some fire. Finally, after a long time, the two of them reached a hut with some fire. Then the older said, "Ah, are we lucky! We've found some fire. Let's take it back to grandmother. She'll really be glad to get it."

"Right, but how are we going to carry it?" asked the younger.

"Easy," answered her brother picking up the still burning coal. "Watch out!" he cried, flinging the hot coal away. "This fire has teeth. It almost bit my hand in two!"

"Teeth?" asked the youngest. "I'll get some string to tie it up and then we can drag it behind us." When she found the string, she tied the coal up and

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called to her brother, "Let's go! Now we can pull the fire behind us." But even before she finished speaking, she saw that the fire had burned the string in two.

"Wow! The fire's teeth have already cut the string in two," continued the younger sister. "Now what are we going to do?"

"Easy," answered her older brother. "Let's grab the coal again and put it into my pocket." The two of them then grabbed the coal and put it into the elder brother's pocket, but in a second the coal burned through and fell out. The children became increasingly desperate as they discovered that a fire, even as small as that one, could not only hurt their hands but also burn a string in two and make holes in pockets.

"Just where are the fire's teeth?" asked the youngest.

"I don't know," answered her brother, "but if I did, I'd knock them out."

Both of them turned the coal over and over to see whether it had any teeth. When they could not find any, they sat down in desperation. Suddenly the older child cried out, "I have an idea. Let's grab the fire and put it into my blanket. I'll wrap it up so tightly that it can't bite." Then he took the coal again, wrapped it up with his blanket, and said to his sister, "Let's go home. This fire can't do anything more now."



The flames got bigger

Carrying the coal wrapped up in the blanket, brother and sister walked toward the ladder. What they did not know, however, was that the coal was already burning through the blanket. When he felt the heat, the older child cried out, "Hey, let's run, little sister; the fire's beginning to bite again!" Both of them then ran toward the ladder, but before they reached it, the coal burned through the blanket and burned the older child. Throwing the burning coal down, the children let it burn all the grass and dried leaves piled up near the ladder. The flames kept getting bigger and bigger, and soon even the ladder burned up. Then the people from the sky could no longer go down to the earth, and the people on the earth could no longer go up into the sky. When the children saw the ladder burn up, they became frightened and ran away to hide in the forest.

As soon as the old woman heard the news about the ladder, she knew that it was her two grandchildren's fault. In a fury she went to the burned ladder and shouted to them, but no one answered. As her anger increased, the grandmother cursed her two grandchildren. After she cursed them, the sky raised up higher and higher. Changed into pigeons, the cursed grandchildren flew toward the sky. Unfortunately, before they could get there, the sky was out of reach. So, returning to earth, the two grandchildren lived as a pair of

pigeons and gave birth to the thousands and thousands of pigeons that we see today.

2. How Seven Boys Turned into Stars

Once there were seven boys who came from the sea searching for work on the land. Walking about, they went from village to village asking if anyone needed help. Several of them were lucky and found work searching for firewood while others found work herding ducks. Those who succeeded in finding work stayed on the land while those who did not returned to the sea.

Among those who stayed on the land was one who lived in the king's palace and worked as a cow herder. He was said to be a clever and obedient child, and because of that, he was much loved by the king. Early in the morning he would herd together the king's cattle and take them out to pasture, and then in the afternoon he would lead them back into the corral.

At that time the people from the sea and the people from the land were enemies; thus, when the land people learned that the king's clever herder came from the sea, they captured and killed him. Afterwards, they threw his corpse into the forest. No one from the palace knew where the herder had disappeared to, although there were some who guessed that perhaps he had died from some disease.

The king ordered his people to search for his beloved herder, but all their searching was in vain, for the cow herder's body had already been eaten by the wild beasts of the forest and only his bones remained scattered about. When the other six boys heard the sorrowful news about their friend's disappearance, they came to search for his body.

Never knowing exhaustion, the boys searched for their friend, going in and out of the forest and crossing rivers and wide fields. Several days later, when they were near desperation, they found the bones scattered in the forest. Sadly, the six friends gathered the bones together and put them under a banyan tree. Then the oldest said, "Go to the sea and bring some water here." Obeying, the five other friends went to the sea and in a short time returned carrying the sea water. They poured the water on top of the pile of bones and instantly the bones were changed back into the cow herder, but he was weak and unable to walk. When the six boys saw the cow herder alive again, their hearts were filled with joy. Each taking turns, the six boys supported the weak cow herder and walked towards the sea, fearing that the land people would discover them.

But just before they entered the sea, the sea people came out and chased them away crying, "We don't know you! You went to the land looking for work and left the sea for a long time. Because of that, you're now counted as land people."

With troubled hearts, the seven children returned to the land, but even there they were chased and people tried to kill them. Finally, the oldest said, "Because we cannot return to the sea and because on land we are always pursued, it's better that we should go to the sky." The six other boys agreed and so they went up into the sky where they were changed into seven stars that remained side by side forever, a cluster of stars that joined together to send rays to the earth. The rays from one of the seven stars, however, were pale and dim, for they came from the star that had been the cow herder who was still weak and weary when changed into a star.

3. The Monkey and the Turtle

(1)

One day a monkey met a turtle on the beach and said, "What are you doing here, my friend?"

"Oh, I'm taking a rest because I've been swimming all day and now I'm very tired."

"Do you want to be friends with me?" continued the monkey.

"Certainly," replied the turtle.

"If that's so, then it'd be wonderful if we could prove our friendship to each other."

"And how are we going to do that?" asked the turtle.

"Well, for example, we could look for fleas on each other."

"That's fine, but it's obvious that there aren't any fleas on my head because I don't have any hair," replied the turtle scratching his head.

"Even though you don't have hair, that doesn't mean that you don't have fleas. I can see a lot of fleas hiding underneath the skin of your head right now. If those fleas aren't killed, I'm sure they'll eat up the skin on your head. And after they've done that to your head, they'll get into your skull and, I'm afraid, maybe eat up your brain."

When he heard what the monkey had said, the turtle uncovered his head and let the monkey search for fleas. Several times the monkey bit the skin and caused the turtle to moan, "Why are you biting my head?"

Convulsed with laughter, the monkey replied, "I'm not trying to hurt you, my friend; you're feeling pain because the fleas have already penetrated a long way into the skin on your head. If you want to save your head, this skin has to be taken off!"

"Don't, don't," cried the turtle pulling his head away. "If you do that, later my brains will dry out and be baked solid by the sun."

"OK," said the monkey brushing off his friend's head. "If that's what you want, I won't skin you anymore, but I'll do my best to kill all of those damned fleas." Then the monkey bit the turtle's head several more times. The turtle complained, but the monkey said, "Don't cry, my friend; a little pain doesn't matter as long as you're freed from these fleas." The monkey then bit the turtle's head again and again until it was bleeding. When the turtle cried, the monkey cheered him up saying, "Patience, my friend. You've got to have pain before you can get rid of those fleas. Later on it'll be better."

The turtle brushed away his tears, and his friend continued scraping until several sections of the skin were loosened. As soon as the brains were visible, the monkey began eating and continued until he had finished them off.

When he was full, the monkey jumped on top of a rock and said, "Good-bye, my friend. Before this I was hungry, but now I'm full and can be on my way again." The turtle scratched his head and discovered to his horror that the monkey had eaten all his brains. With that, the turtle began to plot his revenge.

4. The Monkey and the Turtle

(2)

When the water had ebbed, the monkey went out into the sea to catch some fish. Turning several stones over and over and deep in thought, the monkey suddenly heard a voice behind him, "Good afternoon, my friend. How are you?" When he turned around, he saw a turtle with his head bound with a red cloth sunning himself on top of a rock.

"Good afternoon," replied the monkey.

"What are you doing here?" asked the turtle as he approached the monkey.

"I'm looking for fish brains."

When he heard the monkey's answer, the turtle grew very angry. He felt ridiculed and insulted, for he remembered that it was this very monkey which had eaten all his brains. With great effort, the turtle subdued his anger and said patiently, "Oh, I know where all the brains of the fish are hidden. Only recently have the fish realized that there are a lot of enemies trying to steal their brains, so they've gathered all their brains together and hidden them not far from here."

"Is that true?" asked the monkey licking his lips.

"Up until now, I've never lied to anyone, not even to one of my enemies. I don't want to hurt anyone even though they've hurt me."

Laughing, the monkey asked, "Just where is this place you're talking about, my friend?"

"Over here," answered the turtle, taking his friend's hand and leading him to an oyster. The oyster shell was open and the white meat sparkled as the sun's rays struck it. When the monkey saw the meat, his mouth watered.

"Since when have the fish hidden their brains here?" asked the monkey.

"Since we turtles lost ours," answered the turtle.

"And who showed them such a safe place?" laughed the monkey.

"Me," replied the turtle, adjusting the bandage on his head, "so don't take any fish brains while I'm still here. Later I'll be accused of telling the secret. Be patient until I leave and then you can eat to your heart's content." With that, the turtle left the monkey watching over the oyster.

Seeing the turtle disappear behind a rock, the monkey could wait no longer and stuck both hands into the oyster shell. He tore at the meat, but it was in vain because in a second the shell closed tightly and caught both of his hands. The monkey almost cried out, but fortunately, he did not lose his senses. Instead, he said, "I'm really luckier than all the other animals because I've found this good place for my urinal." When the oyster shell heard the monkey, it quickly opened its shell up and the monkey jumped away saying, "Good-bye, my friend. Give my regards to the kind-hearted turtle. Tell him that I want to borrow his *destar*."¹

1. *Destar*—Javanese head covering. The monkey mockingly refers to the turtle's bandage as the head covering worn by Javanese men.

5. The Monkey and the Turtle

(3)

After the monkey had freed himself from the grip of the oyster, he began to plan his revenge. Every day he went to the beach and spied on the turtle. Nearly every morning he saw the turtle sunning himself on top of an *upih pinang*.² When the sun got higher and the weather hotter, the turtle would then go back into the sea.

One afternoon, after the turtle had returned to the sea, the monkey got a rope, tied it to the *upih pinang*, and hid one of its ends in some bushes. Early the next morning the monkey returned and hid in the same bushes. Not long after that, the turtle came and climbed on top of the *upih pinang* and at the same time stretched his body several times.

A cool sea wind blew and the sky grew cloudy causing the weather to cool down. As a result, the turtle fell asleep on top of the *upih pinang*. Seeing his opportunity, the monkey crept out of the bushes and carefully pulled the *upih pinang* into the forest. With the *upih pinang* rocking gently like a cradle, the turtle only slept more soundly.

Not long after that, the turtle was awakened by pains in his body as he was pulled over rocky and bumpy ground. When he saw himself in such a dangerous situation, he was desperate and almost cried out for help. But seeing how far away he was from the sea, he remained silent and looked for a way to escape.

Every time the monkey turned around, the turtle pretended to be sleeping. Frequently the monkey would check to see if the turtle was still living. He would put his ear to the turtle's nose or carefully touch his stomach. When he was sure the turtle was still alive, the monkey would start pulling again very carefully.

Not long afterwards, several other monkeys came up and asked, "What are you pulling?"

"I'm taking this sleeping turtle to my place and tonight my family and I are going to have a feast."

"That's fine, but how are you going to carry that turtle over the small bridge near your place?" asked a young monkey. "Isn't it impossible to pull him over that bridge? It would be good if we helped you and carried him on our shoulders--as long as you don't forget about us."

"Good," replied the monkey, and he began asking his friends to help pull.

When they reached the small bridge, one of the monkeys said, "Let's put the *upih pinang* on our shoulders. But be careful! Lift it slowly so the turtle doesn't wake up. If he moves even a little bit, we'll fall into the river for sure."

The turtle laughed silently to himself when he heard what the monkeys said. As soon as he saw the monkeys getting ready to put him on their shoulders, he shut his eyes and pretended to be sleeping soundly.

2. *Upih pinang*--a large piece of bark from the areca palm.

Carefully, the monkeys began to carry the turtle over the bridge. When he knew they were moving with great difficulty over the bridge, the turtle began to struggle and move about, causing several of the monkeys to fall into the river, together with him and the upih pinang. In the water, the turtle turned to his "friend" trying to swim and said, "Good afternoon, my friend. How are you today?" The monkey did not say a word and continued to swim towards the bank. When he received no answer, the turtle said, "Have a good swim, my friend. I thank you with all my heart because you so willingly brought me on this excursion. Now it's time for me to go back. Until we meet again." And with that, the turtle swam towards the sea.



They fell into the river

6. How a Boy Turned into a Monkey

Once upon a time a grandmother lived on the edge of a forest with her grandchild. The old woman was a weaver, and every day she went to someone's field and helped to pick cotton. In the afternoon she went home with the cotton the owner of the field had given her for her work. At night she ginned the cotton, spun it, and then wove it into cloth which she sold to buy food for her grandchild and herself.

One afternoon when the old lady was deep in thought spinning thread, her grandchild came up whining and begging for something to eat. Quickly the old woman got up and went to the kitchen. Not long afterwards she came back carrying some rice in a coconut shell. She gave the rice to her grandchild, but he flung it to the floor furiously. Patiently, the grandmother picked the coconut shell up and went back to the kitchen to get some sugar. But even the sugar did not satisfy the child, and he threw it too onto the floor. As his crying got louder and louder, he grumbled and rolled around on the floor.

"What do you want?" asked the old woman.

"I want some fried corn."

"The corn is all gone," said the woman, continuing her work. But this did not stop the child; and his cries kept up and became even harder to stop.

When she no longer had any patience left to listen to the unending crying, the grandmother took the spinning wheel into the kitchen and spun her thread there. When he saw what the old woman had done, the grandchild got more and



He jumped on the roof

more angry and finally went into the kitchen where he whined and rolled on the floor.

Losing her patience again, the woman reached for a ladle and struck her grandchild on the head. Instantly, the child turned into a monkey and jumped on the roof of the hut calling out, "I don't like sugar and corn anymore. Now I only want fruit from the forest and water from the rock pools."

The old woman regretted what she had done and she tried to call her grandchild back with words of flattery, "Come here, my beloved grandchild. Here's some corn and sugar. Eat to your heart's content."

But the monkey quickly leaped into the forest and disappeared. And it is because of this story that the old people of Roti are forbidden to hit their children on the head with a ladle.

7. How Boys Turned into Mice

Once upon a time there was an old woman who lived with her two grandchildren on the outskirts of a village. The woman was a weaver and she exchanged her woven goods for rice or corn to use as food. One day the old woman said to her two grandchildren, "I'm going to the sea to catch some fish today. You must stay at home and fix our meal. Take one grain of rice and boil it in one coconut shell of water." After telling her grandchildren what to do, the old woman left.

The two children began to light the fire to boil the rice, and while washing the cooking pot, the older brother said, "Grandma told us to boil one grain of rice to fill one cooking pot full of rice. That seems to me impossible to do with only a single grain of rice."

"Take as much as will fill up this coconut shell," replied his brother. "The cooking pot will be filled for sure and then we'll have a lot to eat."

"That's true," continued the older brother. "Maybe Grandma will catch a big fish today, so we'd better boil as much rice as possible."

The two of them took a coconut shell of rice and began to boil it. The longer it cooked, the more rice overflowed out of the cooking pot. Finally, it flowed through a ditch beside the hut into the river. Then the rice flowed into the sea, and in the wink of an eye one part of the sea was filled with piles of rice. When the old woman saw all of that rice, she knew what had happened at home. Immediately, she left; and when she got home, the old woman whipped the two grandchildren. Then she asked the eldest, "How many grains of rice did you boil?"

"A lot, Grandma, a coconut shell full."

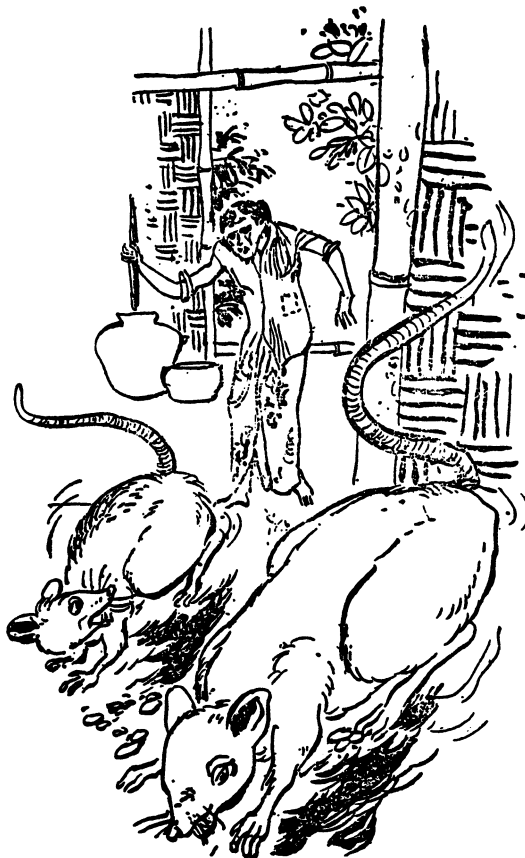
"Didn't I tell you to boil only one grain?"

"He told me to boil a coconut shell full," replied the older brother accusing his younger brother.

"No, Grandma. It wasn't me who told him to do that. He just took it!" contradicted the younger brother.

The old woman got madder and madder listening to the brothers accuse each other. Finally, she took a spindle and struck them on the head; and in an instant they turned into mice.

When the two grandchildren saw what had happened, they ran off and hid in a hole. The old woman cried and begged the two of them to come out of the hole; but the two children replied, "It's impossible. We're mice and we can't live with you anymore. Go home! Don't be sorry, but remember this: if your children and grandchildren make a mistake, don't hit them on the head with a spindle."



The two turned into mice

8. How the Cow Got Skin That Sags

The day was very hot and all the trees standing in the middle of the field were withered from the drought. Several cows and water buffaloes which had been contentedly eating grass ran into the shade at the edge of the forest, leaving only two or three horses still eating greedily.

"Wow, it's really hot today!" said a thin cow to an old water buffalo that was chewing its cud at the edge of the forest.

"You said it," replied the water buffalo. "This heat really tires me out, and what's more, my skin really gets scorched if I stand in the field too long."

"Let's take a bath so we don't get scorched," continued the cow starting to walk away.

"Taking a bath is really a lot of fun, but it's hard to find a good spot."

"I know a good place," replied the cow. "There's a river with fresh water over there behind the forest. I usually take a bath there after I've plowed the fields with my master."

"I'd rather go to a buffalo's watering hole," said the water buffalo. "The water's colder there because there's a lot of mud."

"I know you feel that way," replied the cow, "but since there isn't a watering hole near here, it's better if we go to the river. We can drink as much water as we want to."

"OK," answered the water buffalo lazily.

When they reached the river, the two of them took off their skins and jumped into the water. The water was cool, and the weather was no longer quite as hot because the sky had begun to cloud up. The two of them relaxed and played in the water, chewing their cud and talking without stopping. Then the clouds upstream turned black. Suddenly, while the two were deep in conversation, the river rose up and they had to scramble for their skins. In their haste the water buffalo accidentally took the cow's skin and the cow the water buffalo's. Looking for a safe place, the two friends got separated so that the cow no longer knew where his friend was.



Around the neck it felt very loose

When he reached a safe place, the cow realized that he had taken his friend's skin by mistake. The skin was so large that when it hung on his thin body it looked as though it were empty. Around the neck it felt very loose. Feeling his neck, the cow knew there was extra skin hanging because the skin from around the neck of his friend was too big for him.

It was the same for the water buffalo. When he reached a safe place, he felt how tight his skin was; and then he, too, realized that he had taken his friend's skin.

And it is because of this mistake that we see cows' skin sag.

9. Why Crows Have Black Feathers

Once upon a time before crows had become fugitives, their feathers were as white as snow. Unfortunately, of all the birds it was the crow that was regarded as the most harmful. It was almost always the sparrows and the magpies that cried because their children had been kidnapped by the crows. And children of pigeons and thrushes were as often eaten by the crows. Even though the mother birds tried to fight them off, the crows still weren't discouraged from kidnapping the newly hatched baby birds.

Fighting well with their large strong beaks, the crows easily defeated their enemies. Many mother pigeons sacrificed themselves, many were seriously wounded, and the others could only surrender. So the crows remained the rulers of the wilderness.

One day in a discussion, the pigeons, the thrushes, the magpies, and the sparrows all agreed that this matter had to be brought before the king of the birds. An old eagle, acting as king at that time, ordered several other eagles to catch all crows big and small. All the captured crows were then killed, so that soon almost all of the crows in the land were destroyed.

Only a single pair of young crows remained, and with heavy hearts they took shelter in a hole in a banyan tree. With fear and loneliness, the two of them discussed ways to save themselves from the dreadful eagles. One night the male said, "Next to a village not far from here, I saw a man boiling some indigo in two cooking pots. Don't you think it would be a good idea if we went over there and made our feathers black?"

"Yes! Is it really possible for us to disguise ourselves?" replied the female.

"Of course it is, and I intend to do just that. If we're disguised, it won't be easy to recognize us."

"Good, good," cried the female. "Tomorrow we'll go."

The next morning the two crows went to where the man was making indigo. They jumped into the pot and dyed their feathers. When their feathers had turned black, the two of them got out and dried themselves off on a turi tree. Several eagles passed the tree, but not one of them knew that the black birds perched on the branch were the fugitive crows. Smiling, the female said, "Your idea was really good!"

The male flapped his wings arrogantly and said, "Without ideas, you'll become the enemy's corpse for sure."

"Yes, that's true, but I'm sorry that my white feathers have turned black," replied the female.

"Never mind the black color as long as you're safe," returned the male.

And from that time until now, the crow and its grandchildren have had black feathers.

10. The Magic Fishhook

Once there was a fisherman who went to the point of a cape every day; but from morning until afternoon not even one fish nibbled at his hook. Exhausted, he got up lazily and grumbled, "Unlucky hook, you're only suitable for firewood. I sweat all day, but I can't catch even one fish!"

"Oh, my master," cried the fishhook. "Don't be so quick to blame me. Examine yourself, lest you have any shortcomings."

"You dare to accuse me, fishhook? I don't have any shortcomings. I'm perfect. It's only you --- you're too lazy to catch any fish for me. You wait; I'll put you into my stove."

"Forgive me, my master. I've already asked lots of fish to stop for a second, but they always refuse."

"Why do they refuse?" asked the fisherman in a rage.

"They say that the bait you use doesn't give them any pleasure."

"What'll make them happy?"

"Baby wasps, my master."

"If that's so, I'll go look for some for them later."

"Forgive me, my master, but don't tire yourself looking for the wasps because as soon as I mentioned them, the fish swam away; and I don't know where they went."

"If that's the case, then it's certain you've lied to me. I'm going to burn you up."

Then the fishhook cried out, "Forgive me! Don't burn me! Take me home, and every day I'll give you as many fish as you need."

"Good," replied the fisherman. I'll make you keep your promise all the time. And in case you don't, I'll use you as firewood." Then he went home happily and put the hook by his bed.

In the morning the fisherman took a basket, went to the hook and said, "Let's go, fishhook. Give me enough fish to fill up this basket."

"First, my master, try to answer this question. Who on earth is able to command and then get everything he has asked for? No one except God can do that. Everyone has to sweat in order to get a mouthful of rice; and for that reason, it's impossible for me to give you a basketful of fish this morning."

When the fisherman heard the answer, he became furious. Taking the fishhook into the kitchen, he said, "You liar! Today you're finished. This is the second time you've lied to me. Now you're going to get your punishment. I'm going to burn you in my stove until you're nothing but ashes!"

"Don't tire yourself, my master. Don't you know that it's impossible for me to be harmed by the flames? Don't you know that I'm a magic fishhook?"

"Then I'll cut you to pieces with my adz."

"It'll be in vain, my master. I'm invulnerable."

"Then I'll shoot you!"

"Don't you realize what I've told you? I'm magic! Bullets can't hurt me."

"I'll take you to the river and drown you!"

Hearing those words, the fishhook cried out, "Please don't do that, my master. I'll die if you throw me into the water."

"No, there's no more time for you. Soon you'll be washed away in the river." Then the fisherman took the hook and threw it into the river.

Laughing, the fishhook called out, "Oh, stupid man! Why have you thrown me away? I could give you as much as you wanted if you'd only work without grumbling and complaining. Today I tested you by not giving you any fish, but all you could do was grumble and threaten to destroy me. If you had worked patiently and trusted in God, then I would have given you as many fish as you needed every day." With those words the fishhook disappeared at the bottom of the river and the fisherman went home empty-handed.