



*The Story of the Eel*

Ink on paper, 1992, 40 cm x 27 cm

## *The Story of the Eel*

*Told by Elder Mark of Emil Potun*

There was once an old man and an old woman. They had a child. One evening they set out to look for eel fish in a river. The old woman walked along the dry riverbank while the old man waded through the river. He held a bundle of lighted coconut leaves firmly in his left hand, lighting his way as he went, and a spear in his right hand. Soon he saw a large eel swimming toward him. The man tried to catch the eel but the eel escaped from him and swam away very fast. The man ran after the eel, chasing it as it was trying to swim away from him. The chase went on for a while, but the man was catching up fast on the eel with every step he took. Just as he was about to spear the eel, the eel ran into a hole to hide. It was a deep hole at the side of the river. The poor man was so exhausted after the long chase that he didn't know what he should do next to try to catch the eel. He thought to himself for a while, then an idea struck him. He decided that he would block up the mouth of the hole with stones in order to prevent the eel from coming out. So he picked up all the stones he could find in the river nearby and brought them over and placed them firmly against the mouth of the hole. Having done this to his satisfaction, the old man decided to return to the old woman to tell her the story of what had happened. "Oh, I chased a very large eel over there but I could not catch it. It ran into its hole. But it doesn't matter. Let's go home." So the old man and the old woman turned around and went home.

Soon after they had arrived home they both went to bed and slept until the next morning. Early in the morning, the old man got up out of his bed and quickly ran over to the river where the hole was. He wanted to check to see if the stones he had placed there had been removed. He saw that the stones had not been disturbed but remained as he had placed them at the

mouth of the hole the night before. "The eel has not tried to move them," he thought. The old man then murmured to himself excitedly, "Oh good, the eel is still inside the hole." He made up his mind then that he must try to catch the eel this time. To do this he had to first open up the hole by removing all the stones he had placed at its mouth in order that the eel might have an opening to try to escape through. He then set to work removing all the stones one by one from the mouth of the hole. Then he took one of the stones and with it he began to hammer at the hole. He did this repeatedly, cracking the hole and progressively getting closer to the eel at the same time.

The eel was getting very anxious in the hole. It decided to trick the man so that he would stop trying to catch it. So the eel released one of its ten children through the hole for the man to catch and take home. It hoped that if the man caught that eel he would be satisfied and he would leave the mother and the other nine children behind in their hole. As the eel ran out of the hole, the old man chased after it. Soon he caught up with the eel, killed it, and threw it over onto the riverbank. He looked carefully at it and said to himself, "No, this is not the eel I saw yesterday. The one that ran into the hole yesterday is a lot bigger than this one." He then returned to the hole determined to catch the eel, which he believed was still inside the hole. He picked up the stone again and continued to hammer at the hole. For the second time, the mother eel tried to trick him by releasing its ninth child through the hole. When it came out, the old man caught it, killed it, and threw it onto the riverbank. But when he looked closely at it, he said, "No, this is not the eel I am after; the one that went into the hole yesterday is much bigger than this." So again he returned to the river and began to hammer at the hole with the stone, and again the eel had to release one of its children. The old man, however, was not prepared to leave until he caught the eel he had seen the first time. He kept coming back to the hole, hammering it with his stone, until the eel had released all its remaining children, one by one.

When the eel released its last child, the old man chased this eel and killed it too. He threw this last eel over to the riverbank, saying as he looked at it, "No, this is not it. It is still too small." This made him all the more determined to find the eel. He went back to the hole at the side of the river and continued to hammer at it. Meanwhile the mother eel had no more eels left to try to play its trick on the old man. What would it do now? It had lost all its children. Since it had no other eel to release for the old man, it took the pieces of wood from the fire with which it had been warming itself and

released these through the mouth of the hole. The old man saw them floating out of the hole. However, instead of thinking that this might mean that there was now no eel left inside the hole and that he should give up, the old man kept on cracking at the hole. The eel didn't know what to do. It then grabbed all the ashes and the charcoal from the fireplace and released these through the mouth of the hole. The old man saw these floating out through the hole. But they did not convince him that there might not be any more eels left in the hole. He kept on hammering away at the hole with the stone. The eel then released all its beddings. These came through the hole and floated away, watched by the old man. Instead of the old man thinking, "This is something different—there may not be any more eels left; I'll stop hammering at the hole," he remained persistent.

The eel had gotten rid of all that it had; it now didn't know what to do. The only thing left in the hole was the eel itself. It therefore jumped out of the hole into the open. The old man saw it and said, "This is the eel! It is the same eel I saw yesterday!" He then chased after it as fast as he could. He caught it, killed it, and then carried it home on a stick over his shoulder. At home the old man hung the eel up in a tree in front of their house. He said to his wife and their child, "That is the eel that I tried to catch yesterday but it went into hiding in its hole. Now it is dead and here it is." He said to the boy, "You stay here and keep an eye on it—keep the flies off it. Your mother and I will go to the garden to get some yam and some leaves, firewood, coconut, and other stuff to make a laplap [a pudding made of grated yam and baked with hot stones in the ground]. We shall make a laplap with the eel for our dinner tonight." So the child remained at home while the old man and woman went to the garden to get the ingredients for the laplap.

The child had a little bow and arrows. With his bow and arrows he playfully shot at the flies that tried to sit on the eel to keep them off it. One of the flies then landed on one of the eel's eyes. As soon as it landed on the eel's eye, the child pulled the string of his bow and aimed an arrow at the fly. As he was about to let go of the string to shoot an arrow at the fly, the eel spoke. "Watch out!" it said. "You might shoot my eye by mistake." On hearing this, the boy dropped his bow and arrows; he didn't shoot but instead stood there wondering what was going on. Then the eel spoke to him again, saying, "When your father and mother return from the garden and you cook me in the laplap, you and your parents should not eat the laplap, nor should you eat me. Let other people eat me and the laplap, but you and your parents must not eat with them." The boy took note

of everything the eel had said to him and waited for his parents to return from the garden.

As soon as they returned, the boy ran over to meet them. He told them, "Mum and dad, the eel said that when we make the laplap with it, the three of us should not eat the laplap or its meat. Only other people should eat it." When his father heard what the boy had said, he was cross. He scolded his son saying, "Do you want us to believe that a dead fish such as this can talk?" After being told off by his father, the boy did not want to say anything else about the eel's warning.

They then started making the laplap as planned. When they had finished preparing the yam, they placed the eel on it, covered it all up with leaves and placed it in the hot laplap hole to cook. However, the mother of the boy believed what the boy had told them. So she decided to also prepare a separate laplap for herself and the boy so that they would not have to eat the laplap with the eel in it.

In the evening when it was time for dinner, they took the laplap out of its hole. Meanwhile the old man had invited nine of his friends to eat the laplap with him. The ten men (the old man and his nine friends) ate the laplap with the eel in it, while the boy and his mother ate the other laplap that his mother had cooked separately for them.

The old man and his friends thoroughly enjoyed their laplap with the meat of the eel. They ate until they were so full that they decided to take a break from eating and lie down around the laplap. After the break, they ate some more until again they were so full that they had to take another break, lying around the laplap as before. All of a sudden, the house they were eating in turned into a cave. It no longer was a house; it had changed into a cave. And then the mouth of the cave closed up. The men suddenly found themselves lying inside a closed cave. They didn't know what to do. What could they do? They felt their way around in the dark trying to find where the opening was, but there wasn't one anywhere to be found. The whole house had turned into a closed-in cave. The men could not find an escape route anywhere.

The boy and his mother could hear all sorts of noises coming from where the house was, but no intelligent sound or talking that they could understand. So the woman said to her son, "Go and check on your father and his friends. See if they are alright in the house. They don't appear to be talking anymore. Earlier on we could hear what they were saying. Go over and check." So the boy quickly ran over in the direction of the house. He looked for the house, but there was no house where their house had

been before. He saw instead a large boulder standing where their house had been. When he saw this, the boy called out, "Dad!" His father replied, "Oh!" The boy then said to him, "I told you that the eel had said that we should not eat it, but you didn't want to believe what I said. Now look what has happened to you. What I predicted has happened." His father thought about this and regretted having ignored his son's message. But what could he do now? Trapped inside the cave, he felt terrible about the whole thing. The house had turned into a cave over them. The boy quickly ran back to his mother and told her what had happened.

There was nothing more that the boy and his mother could do. They waited until the following morning and again the boy ran over and stood at what used to be the door to their house and called to his father inside saying, "Dad! How is it?" His father replied from inside, "Oh, one of us died last night. Only nine of us are still alive." After hearing this, the boy ran back to his mother to tell her about it. They slept until early the next morning and the boy returned to the cave as he had done before. Again he stood at the entrance and called out to his father saying, "Dad, how is it?" His father replied, "Oh, only eight of us are still alive. One of us died last night." Again the boy ran back to tell his mother what his father had said. The boy kept going back and forth like this between his mother and the cave where his father and his friends were, until his father told him that all his nine friends had died and he was the only one still alive. By now his father was extremely weak and at the point of death, having had nothing to eat or drink for the whole time. The boy and his mother were now very worried. They realized that the next night the father too would probably die. They could do nothing but wait until the next morning to find out. But they could not imagine that he would survive after all his nine friends with whom he had eaten the laplap and the eel had already died. It was a foregone conclusion for them that the father would be dead by the next morning.

The boy's father was very, very weak from having eaten nothing for many days. He was unable to walk upright and had to crawl using his hands and his legs. He moved himself slowly—crawling inch by inch, until he managed to arrive at where the house entrance used to be, and there he collapsed from exhaustion and weakness. He collapsed and lay flat as if he were dead. He lay there in such a way that the cave thought he must have died. But the man could see through the lashes of his half-opened eyes. He did not move but remained very still until about midnight when he noticed the door of the cave begin to open slightly. Through his eyelashes

he watched the door slowly opening up, and moved himself forward as slowly as possible at the same time, so that his movement would not be noticed by the cave. Every so often he stopped, pretending to be dead. Then he would open his eyes again and look through his eyelashes. He noted that the entrance was opening wider and wider until it was fully open and remained open. Quickly, the old man got himself up and jumped out of the entrance to the cave. As soon as the cave realized what had happened, it quickly dropped its door. But it was too late. The old man had jumped out from inside and was now lying outside the cave. He had escaped from the cave.

Early the next morning, the boy returned to the entrance of the cave as he had done previously to call out for his father. As he walked toward the entrance, he saw his father lying outside the cave. He ran over to him and pulled him away from the cave and then returned to get his mother to help him take his father back to their house. All three of them were together again, safe and alive.

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Detail from *The Story of the Eel*, by Ralph Regenvanu. 1992.