

Zambia (Lesson 4)—The Story of Nyami Nyami and Kariba Lake, Home to One of the Largest Dams in the World! Unbelievable! (Level A2-B1-B2)

You must already be familiar with the myth of the [Loch Ness](#) monster. Legend says that there is a large aquatic creature residing in the depths of this Scottish lake. Nessie is its name and the myth actually dates back to the Middle Ages.

The creature is said to look like a serpent with a long neck and some humps. Some people believe it to be a [plesiosaurus](#), which normally became extinct with other dinosaurs.

That's crazy, right?

Yet, the myth persists and from time to time, [photos](#) come up to testify a sighting and try to prove that Nessie does exist. However, most of these claims are mere hoaxes and the mystery remains. Does the monster of the Loch really exist?

In Zambia, a similar myth is perpetuated by the Tonga tribe which has lived along the Zambezi river for centuries. The Tonga firmly believe that there is a god that lives in this great river.

His name is Nyami Nyami and he has a wife who is called Kitapo. Nyami Nyami is said to have the head of a fish or a dragon. His body is thought to be that of a snake. Supposedly, his wife is a mermaid. This means that she has a head of a human being and a fishtail instead of legs.

For as far back as anyone can remember, the couple used to provide food and protection to the local tribes and would receive offerings in exchange.

Nyami Nyami's name is in fact derived from the Tonga word: 'Nyama' meaning meat. If there was a lack of food, people could simply cut pieces from his large body and they would not die from hunger.

The Tonga myth says the couple used to live peacefully in the upper and lower parts of the Zambezi river until the construction of the [Kariba Dam](#) wreaked havoc on their once blissful life.

I guess the name Kariba Dam rings a bell as well. It is approximately 128 metres high and 579 metres long and is situated on the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe. Its architect was André Coyne, a French engineer, a specialist in arch dams.

The dam's construction was commissioned by the colonial federal government of Northern Rhodesia (present-day Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) and Nyasaland (present-day Malawi).

Construction was done by Italian engineers and ended in 1959. Consequently, the artificial Lake Kariba was created. Hence, It became the largest man-made lake by volume in the world!

Both Zambia and Zimbabwe began to produce cheap electricity which later boosted their economies.

Yet, this came with a dear price.

The Tonga bid farewell to the land they had once cherished. What awaited them in the highlands broke their hearts. They left fertile lands that had carried the bones of their ancestors and traded this treasure for arid and barren lands.

Animals of the savannah scattered in all directions to flee the rising waters. 6, 000 animals were rescued in biblical style and this poor mimicry was called '[*Operation Noah*](#)'.

Most of all, the local people lamented the loss of their god Nyami Nyami. Kitapo was nowhere to be seen either. It is said that the couple was separated upon the construction of the dam, Nyami Nyami remaining in the upper part of the river and his wife forced to stay in the lower part.

However, legend says that Nyami Nyami did try to put a stop the creation of the dam by flooding the Zambezi , first in late 1956 and then in 1958. These deluges unleashed as warnings would later be called the Hundred Years' flood and the Thousand Years' flood respectively.

The Tonga people saw the floods as an expression of Nyami Nyami's discontent. Elders advised the construction company to make offerings to their river god.

Eventually, the engineers found a way to make the dam wall more resistant by building it in the form of an arch. Construction work ended in 1959.

However, this was not the end of their ordeal. Today, there is a growing fear that the dam might collapse due to wear and tear and seismic activity. The consequences of such an event would bring about untold suffering and destruction upon the land!

For the Tongas, this would mean that Nyami Nyami had had the final word. The dam would be a mere memory relegated to the land of nightmares. Nyami Nyami would finally reunite with Kitapo, heralding a new and hopeful beginning for his people.



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