

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)

Hi and welcome to this fourth lesson of the Zambia series!

Today, you will discover the legend of Nyami Nyami, the Zambezi river god. This sounds all strange and mysterious, right?

Understandably.

However, by the end of this lesson, not only will you know the ins and outs of the Nyami Nyami story, but you will also be able to define common terms relating to fairy tales, folktales, folklore, myths and legends.

Additionally, you will be able to describe these popular stories using Adjectives.

I hope I have piqued your curiosity!



Why don't we start?










Step 1 (Nyami Nyami): First Things First— Words for Describing Stories



I grew up listening to and reading many stories. For example, in Malawi, we have stories that are called '[nthano](#)' (folktales). In the village, people tell each other these stories at night, under the moonlight and sitting by the fire. Elderly people have many stories and children often look forward to these evenings when all is still outside except for the sound of hyenas now and again.

Do you like stories? What types of stories do you like reading or listening to? What are these stories called? Below are different types of words that you can use to talk about stories:

Identifying different types of stories:

-  **A story:** This is a simple or complex description of a sequence of events. Stories can be real (non-fiction) or imaginary (fiction). [Here](#) are some really interesting stories you can read.
-  **A short story:** This is an account of true or invented events. Short stories are shorter than novels and can be read in one sitting. On this website, we have many short stories such as '[The Astronaut from Bolero](#)'.

-  **A bedtime story:** This is a story that parents usually read aloud to their children to help them go to sleep. These stories can be relaxing, funny or full of adventure. Popular examples of bedtime stories are '[The Three Little Pigs](#)', '[Little Red Riding Hood](#)' and '[Goldilocks and the Three Bears](#)'.
-  **A fantasy story:** Fantasy stories often involve magic and supernatural events. Most of the times writers create an entirely new universe. A good example is the '[Harry Potter](#)' stories by J.K Rowling.
-  **A magical story:** A magical story is a story that is set in the real world but involves elements of the supernatural. '[Matilda](#)' by Roald Dahl is an excellent example of a magical story. [Here](#) are more interesting magical stories.
-  **A tale:** This is another word for 'story'. A tale is often simple with memorable characters. It can be in oral or written form. Additionally, it can be true or totally invented. '[Puss in Boots](#)' is a fine example of a tale.
-  **A fairy tale:** This is a children's story often involving magical beings. It usually starts with '*Once upon a time...*', '*Long, long ago*', '*A long time ago...*', '*In a land far, far away...*', '*In the days of...*' etc. Fairy tales often end with: '*...and they lived happily ever after*'. '[Cinderella](#)' is a perfect example of a fairy tale.
-  **A folktale:** This is an anonymous and traditional oral story that has been passed down through generations. It often has a moral message. '[The Black Bird](#)', a Zambian folktale, is an interesting example of this type of story.
-  **A tall tale:** This is a story that is told as if it were true. It is very exaggerated and difficult to believe. Most of the times, tall tales are humorous. The [Paul Bunyan](#) tall tales are classic examples of this genre.
-  **A fable:** This is a moral story that aims to teach a lesson or convey a message. It is often short and read to children. The story mostly involves animal characters. Here are some very good examples of [fables](#).
-  **A parable:** Parables are simple, traditional stories that convey a moral, religious or spiritual message. The bible abounds with parables as told by Jesus to his followers. Parables often have human characters. Some of these parables can be read [here](#).

-  **A myth:** You have probably heard of Greek Mythology! This is a traditional story that illustrates the history or origins of a certain people or a particular civilisation. It actually explains the world or natural phenomenon. Besides, Gods, heroes, monsters or other supernatural beings are often featured. Have a look at the [Myth of Pandora's Box](#) and its meaning in our modern days.
-  **A legend:** This is a traditional story that has been passed down through generations. It is presented as a historical account but its facts cannot be verified. The [Arthurian](#) legend and Excalibur is fitting example of a legendary tale.

Frequently asked questions:

Is folktale the same as folklore?

A folktale is a traditional story that has been passed through generations by word of mouth. Folklore refers to the set of stories and beliefs of a particular culture. A folktale is part of folklore.

Is fairytale the same as fairy tale?

Both spellings are used but for different purposes. We use 'fairytale' as an Adjective meaning idealised or magical. E.g. A fairytale romance or a fairytale ending. On the contrary, a fairy tale is a children's story such as 'Beauty and the Beast'.

What is the difference between a fantasy story and a magical story?

Both stories involve the supernatural. However, a magical story is set in the real world while a fantasy story often has an entirely invented universe.

What is the difference between a myth and a legend?

A myth is a story that explains the origin of a culture and involves gods and other supernatural beings. A legend is often presented as a historical account whose facts cannot be verified.

Are myths fictional stories?

Yes, myths are fictional stories that our ancestors invented in order to explain the world around them. Some myths can have historical origins.

Are legends based on facts?












Yes, legends are often based on facts though the facts often change over time. Legends are based on real historical events though the supernatural also comes into play.














Your Turn: What is your favourite type of story and why? Make at least **3** sentences.

Step 2 (Nyami Nyami): Different Types of Characters in a Story

These are some of the most common characters that you usually find in the above stories.

-  **A hero or**  **a heroine:** These are the main characters of the story. They are also called protagonists. A hero is a male character and a heroine is a female character. [Harry Potter](#) is an example of a hero and [Alice](#) is an example of a heroine.
-  **An ogre or an ogress:** This is a scary giant that is said to eat children. An ogress is the female version of this character. You can find a perfect example of an ogre in '[Jack and the Beanstalk](#)'.
-  **A king or**  **a queen:** What are fairy tales without a kingdom ruled by a king or a queen? [Here](#) is a beautiful story featuring these major characters.
-  **A prince or**  **a princess:** These are a king's and a queen's children. Princes and princesses are also very popular characters in children's stories. By the way, [Cinderella](#) is saved by a prince from her cruel stepmother.
-  **A god:** Greek mythology has a lot of gods and goddesses. These are supernatural entities or deities endowed with many attributes. They have authority over people and the latter worship them in return. [Zeus](#) is a wonderful example of a god. He is the god of the sky and thunder. A goddess is a female version of a god. [Rhea](#), Zeus's wife is a mother goddess.
-  **A wizard or**  **a witch:** A wizard is a man believed to possess magical powers. A witch is the female version of the wizard. There is actually a story called '[The Wonderful Wizard of Oz](#)'. In [Hansel and Gretel](#), the children meet a witch who almost eats them before they manage to escape!
-  **A magician:** A magician is like a wizard. In [The Smurfs](#), both Papa Smurf and Gargamel are magicians.

-  **A knight:** A knight was a valiant and skilled warrior in medieval times. He respected a code of honour while serving his king. [Sir Lancelot](#) is a famous example of a knight. Here is story called the '[Green Knight](#)'. It is the '[Cinderella](#)' story from Denmark.
-  **An elf:** In fairy stories, an elf is often a small supernatural and mischievous creature with pointed ears. In the plural form we use 'elves'. He is a modern [elf story](#). Enjoy!
-  **A giant or a  giantess:** In [Jack and the Beanstalk](#), a giant makes Jack's quest almost impossible. A giant is like an ogre. He is very tall and is often said to eat children. A giantess is the female version of a giant. Here is another beautiful story about a giant by the famous Irish author, Oscar Wilde: '[The Selfish Giant](#)'.
-  **A dragon:** When I was small, a I read a very moving story about a dragon. It was called '[The Neverending Story](#)'. I remember having cried when I finished reading the book. This was paradoxical because oftentimes dragons are feared because they are huge reptiles with a long tail and spit fire on everything they set their eyes on.
-  **A fairy:** This is an imaginary creature in fairy tales. It is often woman with wings. This creature has magical powers and helps the protagonists. The fairy godmother in '[Cinderella](#)' is a classical example of a fairy.
-  **A mermaid:** This is a supernatural and imaginary character in stories. Mermaids have the upper body of a woman and instead of having legs, they have the tail of a fish. Princess Ariel is the most famous mermaid in '[The Little Mermaid](#)'.
-  **A dwarf:** The story of '[Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs](#)' rings a bell, right? In children's stories, dwarfs are portrayed as small, stocky men with magical powers. They are also skilled in metal work and mining.
-  **Animals that can talk:** Stories also feature many animal characters that can talk like human beings. In the '[The Three Little Pigs](#)' all characters are animals and they talk!
-  **A monster:** Monsters are also famous characters in stories. A monster is typically huge, scary and ugly. On this page, you will find many examples of [monster stories](#) for children.
-  **A goblin:** Goblins are mixtures between elves, dwarfs and monsters. They are usually harmful to human beings. Female goblins are called hags. You can learn more about goblins [here](#).

Frequently asked questions:

Who is Anansi in African folklore?

Anansi or Ananse is a popular character in West African folklore. He is a very clever and resourceful spider. Oftentimes, he uses trickery to get what he wants. Sometimes, he also uses magic. He is said to originate from the Akan culture in Ghana.

Is hare a common character in African folklore?

Like Anansi, hare is a common character in African folktales. In Malawi, he is called Kalulu. Just like his counterpart Anansi, hare is a trickster who uses his cleverness to outsmart stronger animals.

Are there dragons in African folklore?

Yes, we dragon-like creatures are common in African folklore. One such example is the Ninki Nanka from Gambia. Nyami Nyami is also said to resemble a dragon. However, most of these creatures do not breathe fire like in western folktale.

Who is a witch doctor in African folklore?

A witch doctor is a person who possesses magical powers and can heal others. He is also a diviner and can communicate with the spirits. Thus, he is the medium between living human beings and their ancestors. Witch doctors are also believed to be able to chase evil spirits.

Are there any gods in African folklore?

Just like in Greek mythology, there are also many gods in African folklore. In southern Africa, one god is often identified as Chiuta. Nyami Nyami is also considered to be the god of the Zambezi river among the Tonga people.

Who are spirits in African folklore?

These are supernatural entities that can influence the land of the living. Examples of these spirits are those of ancestors and nature. Gods or deities are also considered as spirits. Many African communities make offerings to ancestral spirits in order to ask favours from them or appease them in the event of a drought.

- You can find the stories of Anansi [here](#).
- Learn more about African spirits [here](#).



Your Turn: Who is your favourite character and why? Make at least **3** sentences.

Step 3 (Nyami Nyami): Adjectives for Describing Stories



Grammatically speaking, an Adjective is a word that modifies or describes a noun. Adjectives are very useful when we want to describe someone or something.

When you read a story, you can also describe it in order to get the most out of it. Is the story interesting or boring? Or is it captivating or thrilling

Soon, you are going to read the story of the Nyami Nyami. Observe the Adjectives below and use some of them to talk about the Zambian story you are about to read.

How Emotional is the Story?

How does the story make you feel? Do you feel happy or does the story makes you cry? It happens often when I am watching a movie. Most of the times, I engage with the story. If it is funny I laugh out aloud. If it is heart-wrenching, I cry my eyes out. What about you? How do you respond to stories?

Below are more Adjectives that you can use to talk about how emotional the story makes you feel.

- 🤔 **Amusing:** This is when the story makes you laugh. E.g. *The story was so amusing, I couldn't help laughing out aloud. I even shared the story with my friends.* The story's name is '[Puss in Boots](#)'.
- 😴 **Boring:** This means that the story is dull or uninteresting. E.g. *I slept while reading a scientific textbook. It was so boring!*
- 😱 **Chilling:** This is when the story is scary. It horrifies or frightens you. E.g. *My younger sister doesn't like reading horror stories. She thinks that they are chilling and she doesn't like being awake at night!* I love '[Frankenstein](#)' though.
- 😂🤡 **Comical:** A comical story is funny or amusing. E.g. *He didn't even laugh once, even though the story was very comical. I always laugh when I read '[Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus](#)'!*
- 😂 **Funny:** This means the same as comical or amusing. E.g. *My grandfather always tells us funny stories when we visit him in the village.*
- 🌹 **Haunting:** A haunting story is beautiful but in a sad and unforgettable way. E.g. *He thought about the main character long after he had finished the book. He was struck by her haunting story and could not stop thinking about her. Since then, I have also read '[The Little Match Girl](#)' and I can't forget her.*
- 🌈💖🌟 **Heartwarming:** This means that the story makes you feel good and happy. E.g. *My mother used to read us heartwarming stories before we went to bed. I will never forget this.*
- 😂🤡😂😂 **Hilarious:** You can use 'hilarious' to describe an extremely funny story. E.g. *They laughed to stitches when they read this funny story called '[Gangsta Granny](#)'.*
- 🤡😂 **Humorous:** This means funny but in a clever way. E.g. *This stand-up comedian is very funny. He tells amusing stories with many humorous situations. No wonder he is very rich.*
- ❤️❤️ **Intense:** This means that the story evokes powerful emotions. E.g. *I couldn't put '[The Little Prince](#)' down as it was very intense. I was really tense because I thought that the main character was going to die.*
- 🤝 **Moving:** Using this word implies that the story has provoked strong emotions. E.g. *'[The Neverending Story](#)' was very moving, especially the end. I cried when I finished reading the book.*
- 🧘😓💔 **Poignant:** This story makes you feel very sad in a striking way. E.g. *The places in '[The Road](#)' are described in such a poignant way that they seem to be real.*

- 🦾 **Powerful:** This means 'strong'. E.g. *The story has a powerful message and memorable characters.*
 - 🧐 ⏳ **Profound:** You can use this word when the story is deep, serious or very intense. E.g. *All the chapters in 'The [Bible](#)' have at least a profound message that can be passed down to the next generation.*
 - 😞 **Sad:** This is when the story makes you unhappy or have feelings of sorrow. E.g. *Some bedtime stories like '[The Little Match Girl](#)' have sad endings.*
 - 🧟 **Scary:** This means that the story causes fear. E.g. *My children love scary stories. They are simply not afraid. When I read, '[The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde](#)' I couldn't sleep with the lights off.*
 - 🧑 **Tedious:** The word 'tedious' is somehow the same as 'boring'. This means that the story is dull because it is either too long or repetitive. E.g. *I couldn't read each and every entry of the '[Encyclopaedia](#)' anymore. It was so tedious!*
 - 😬 **Tense:** When you feel tense, it means you are nervous and cannot calm down. E.g. *She was tense with worry because the atmosphere in the book was scary. The book I'm talking about is '[Carrie](#)'.*
 - 🧛 **Terrifying:** 'Terrifying' means very scary. E.g. *'[Dracula](#)'s' storyline is very terrifying. I don't think I will recommend this book to anyone.*
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🧩 Is the Story Out of the Ordinary?

- 🧟 **Bizarre:** This is the equivalent of 'strange'. E.g. *'[The Metamorphosis](#)' was really bizarre. I have never read such a book before.*
- ✨ 🧚 ✨ **Enchanting:** This means that the story is very appealing or delightful. E.g. *The atmosphere of '[Charlie and the Chocolate Factory](#)' was enchanting. I felt as if I had been transported to a fairy land.*
- 📖 ⭐ **Magical:** 'Magical' means that the book is wonderful and really pleasant in an unusual way. E.g. *As soon as I started reading the book, I was transported to a magical, enchanting world.*

- 🧐 **Strange:** This is when the story is unusual and surprising. E.g. *The beginning of '[The Neverending Story](#)' was strange. I could hardly understand it.*
 - 🚀 **Surreal:** This is when the story feels strange, as if in a dream. E.g. *The story was about a rabbit who talked. Everything felt surreal. I think you know the story: '[Alice's Adventures in Wonderland](#)'*
 - 🤖 **Unconventional:** This is when the story is different from what is usually done. E.g. *The writer of '[Matilda](#)' used an unconventional plot device to make the plot more interesting.*
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★ What's the pace of the story?

- 📖 **Action-packed:** This is when the story is full of activity and excitement. E.g. *'[The Adventures of Tom Sawyer](#)' is very interesting. It's action-packed and I love the adventurous stories.*
 - 🏎️ **Fast-paced:** A fast-paced story develops very quickly. E.g. *I understand why '[And Then There Were None](#)' is fast-paced. It uses short sentences and the active voice.*
 - 🤖 **Gripping:** This is when the story keeps your attention because it is very interesting. E.g. *'[The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#)' was gripping and I could barely put it down.*
 - ★ **Intense:** An intense story provokes very strong feelings. E.g. *The mood of the story in '[Twilight](#)' was very intense in . There was a lot of action and violence.*
 - 😄 **Thrilling:** This means that the story is exhilarating. It actually causes great excitement and pleasure. E.g. *My friend says that '[Peter Pan](#)' is thrilling and I agree with her. I loved both the characters and the plot.*
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🕒 Does the story remind you of the past?

- 🧑 **Archetypal:** This means that the story is typical of a culture , narrative or a certain period in time. E.g. *'[Cinderella](#)' is the archetypal 'rags to riches' story. Both children and adults love it.*
- 📖 **Historical:** When the story is historical, it means that it has something to do with the past. E.g. *I enjoyed reading '[Gone With the Wind](#)' because it is both a love and historical novel. By the way, who can resist [Rhett Butler](#)?*

- 🐉 **Legendary:** In our case, 'legendary' refers to a story that is based on a legend. E.g. *There is no proof that the legendary [Robin Hood](#) actually existed.*
 - 😇 **Sacred:** This is when the story has something to do with the religious. E.g. *We find many sacred stories in the Old and New Testaments of the [Bible](#).*
 - ⌚ **Timeless:** 'Timeless' means that the story is still relevant even after a long period of time. E.g. *'[The Great Gatsby](#)' is a classical, timeless story that has stood the test of time.*
 - 🏠 **Traditional:** This means that the story follow a long-established pattern as part of a certain culture. E.g. *Fairy tales are traditional stories that have been passed down through generations. Most children in the western world know these stories.*
 - 🌐 **Universal:** When a story is universal, it means that many people around the world can relate to it. E.g. *Shakespeare's '[Romeo and Juliet](#)' appeals to many readers because it is a universal story.*
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🎨 Is the story special?

- 💎🍪❤️ **Addictive:** This means that you cannot stop reading the story once you have started. E.g. *'[Charlie and the Chocolate Factory](#)' by Roald Dahl is very addictive. The movie version is particularly addictive!*
- 🔍 **Absorbing:** This means that the story captures your whole interest. E.g. *I think that 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' is very absorbing. I remember the whole story and what the characters said to each other.*
- 🌸💫🎀 **Beautiful:** A beautiful story is one that is emotionally, visually and aesthetically pleasing. E.g. *I love the story of 'Beauty and the Beast' because I think that it has a beautiful message.*
- ☀️ **Captivating:** A captivating story is a story that keeps you hooked. E.g. *This book looks like it is captivating given its title: [Incredible Stories for Inquisitive Kids: 'Captivating Tales for Young Readers from History, Science & the Crazy World We Live In'](#)*
- 🎨🖍️ **Creative:** This means that the book has been created with very original ideas. *'Alice in Wonderland' is a very creative book. I remember being fascinated by it when I was small.*

- **100 Engaging:** 'Engaging' means the story is pleasant and attractive. E.g. *Hans Christian Andersen's stories are often engaging. For example 'The Little Mermaid' is very popular with children of all ages.*
- **🎯 Engrossing:** This means that the story captures your attention completely. E.g. *I didn't sleep yesterday because I was reading 'The Hunger Games' trilogy. This story is very engrossing.*
- **🎭 🎁 Entertaining:** An entertaining story makes you want to read it again and again because it is enjoyable to read it. E.g. *'The Diary of a Wimpy Kid' is very entertaining. It is funny and unpredictable. Its illustrations are to die for!*
- **🧐 Interesting:** An interesting book stirs your curiosity. E.g. *My parents used to read interesting books such as 'The Adventures of Pinocchio' so that we could develop our own interest in books.*
- **☀️ 🔮 Mesmerising:** This means hypnotising and appealing in a mysterious way. E.g. *'The Great Gatsby' is a mesmerising book because Gatsby is rich, handsome and mysterious.*
- **100 ❤️ Remarkable:** 'Remarkable' means that the story is striking. E.g. *'Life of Pi' is a striking book with an incredible storyline.*
- **📌 Rivetting:** This means that the story is extremely interesting. E.g. *I only read books that are rivetting such as the 'Kite Runner'.*
- **😮 🎭 Spellbinding:** When you read a spellbinding story, it means that the story captures your whole attention as if by magic. E.g. *The "Harry Potter" series are simply spellbinding.*
- **😮 Surprising:** This means that the story is unexpected. E.g. *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp is really surprising.*
- **💡 Thought-provoking:** *This is a story with a string message that makes you think seriously or ponder over the message. 'The Road' by a thought-provoking book that will leave you haunted for life. I still have its landscape in my head.*

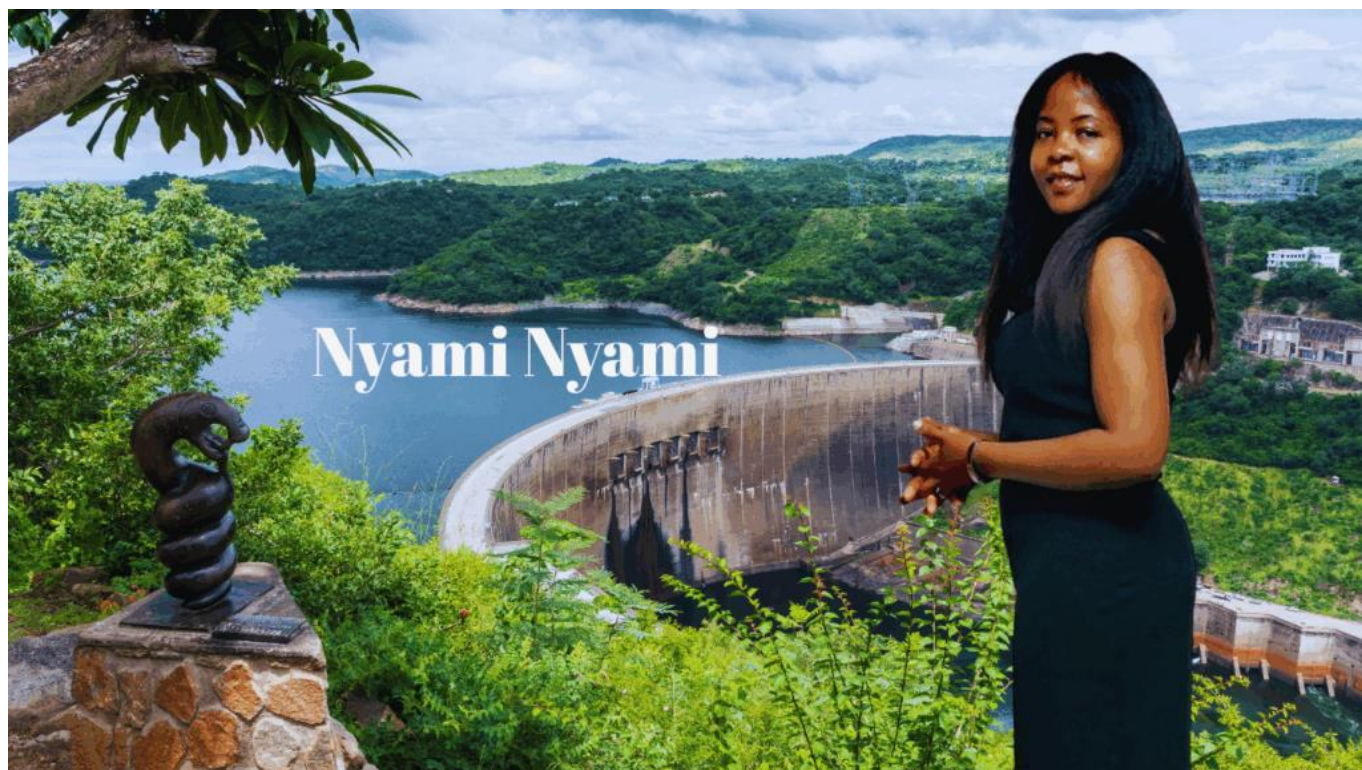
Your Turn: Pick 5 Adjectives that you like and use them to describe a story that you like or don't like.

Good luck!



Step 4 (Nyami Nyami): Now Let's Discover the Myth of Nyami Nyami

Comparing it to the Myth of Nessie



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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