

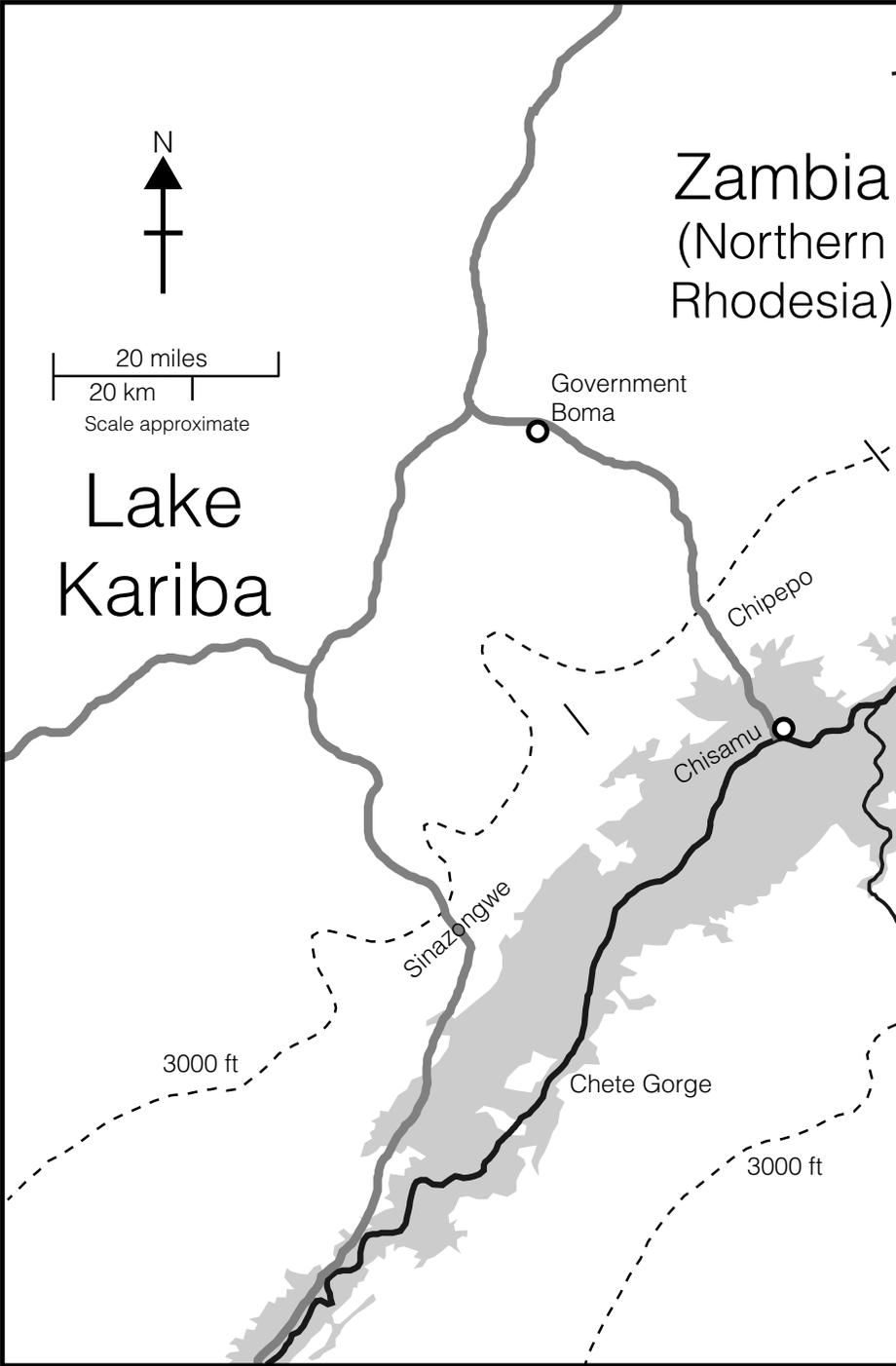
“Water is the best of all things.”

Pindar (c 522 – c 438 BC) Olympian Odes.

“Manzi ni moyo”

Water is life

– Chinyanja saying.



Zambia  
(Northern  
Rhodesia)



20 miles  
20 km  
Scale approximate

Lake  
Kariba

Government  
Boma

Chipepo

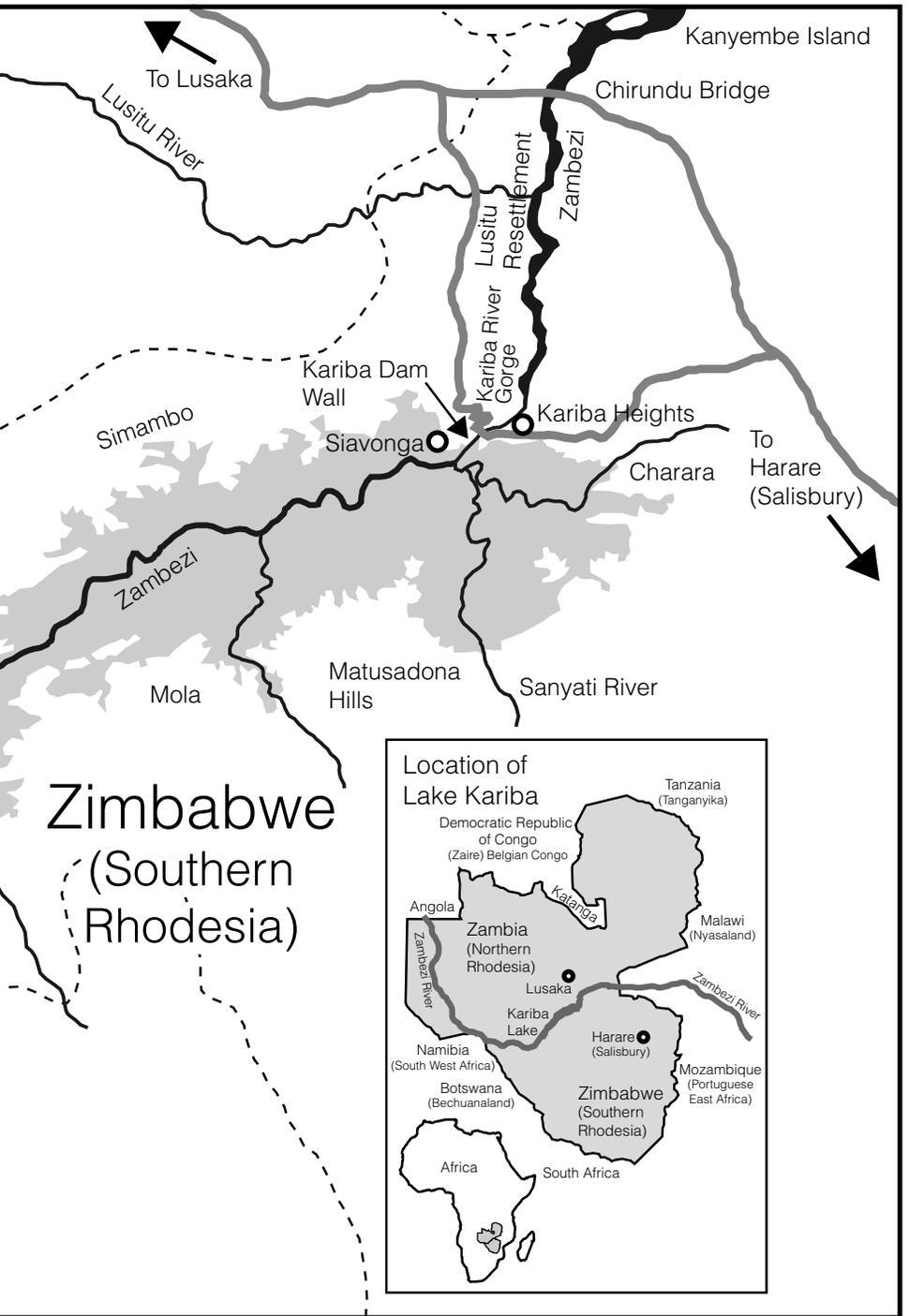
Chisamu

Sinazongwe

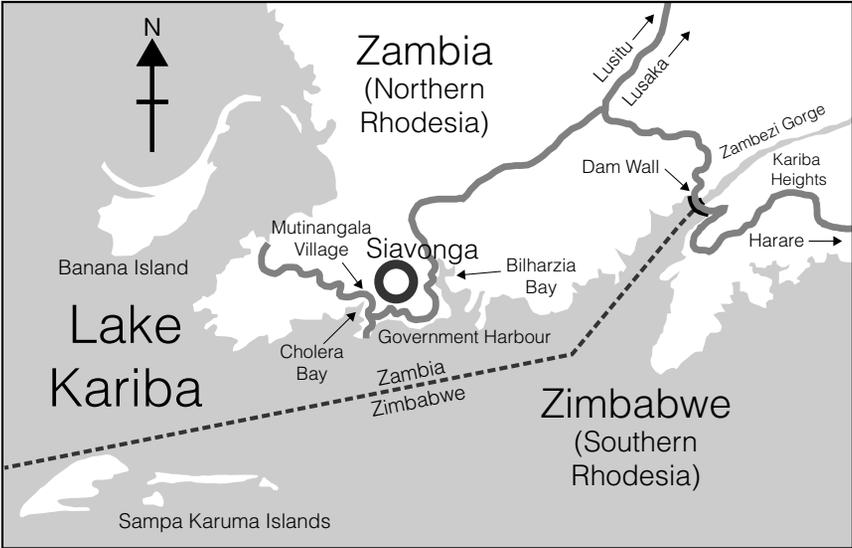
Chete Gorge

3000 ft

3000 ft



# Map of Siavonga



## **Suspended In Space**

1994

Marielise, strapped and trapped in her aeroplane seat, flew the little blue screen in front of her away from planet Earth into space.

Would flying as high as the angels grant her insight?

She zoomed back to see the close-up images of the actual curves and bumps of the mountain ridges on the earth beneath.

At this height, almost caressing the earth, was it easier to understand the world?

Pressing her face against the plane window, half-blinded, in spite of her sunglasses, by the clarity and brightness of the sky outside, Marielise stared and stared at Africa slowly moving southwards under her.

Mysterious and fantastic lives and deaths were being enacted on the extraordinary continent so far below.

What had she learnt while she lived down there?

What did she really know of those other lives?

She found her own life so mystifying that surely any rational knowledge of other people's lives was impossible?

Here she was, only a little older than the Apartheid regime whose end she had just celebrated, flying back to finish her doctorate at Cambridge. The struggle was over – or most probably only beginning. The world was changing again and so was she – again.

Marielise shifted uncomfortably. The plastic and metal bits of her bones did not like long flights and flying thrilled and

frightened her. Atheist that she was, there remained that little nigggle of fear, that flying would provoke the gods – or she grinned wryly – maybe just the Shades of Milimo Singani’s ancestors, who lie drowned in the waters of Kariba Lake. Marielise loved the lake and delighted in its surprises and its beauty, but reconciling herself to the destruction that brought it into existence was another matter.

*Well – the dam can’t be undone – neither can I undo anything I have done.*

It had taken her plane almost an hour to fly across the rainfall area that feeds Lake Kariba with water. If she could have diverted the flight downstream from the dam to fly over the huge flood plains and the great length of Zambezi River that the dam controlled, even more time would have been needed. Instead the Jumbo’s flight path was well west of the African Rift Valley; that continent-long, ridged fault in the earth, an earthquake zone, with the Kariba Dam at the furthest flick of its curled tail.

Marielise’s thoughts went from Kariba, to Milimo Singani and his mother Natombi. They had both been born in the Zambezi Valley and uprooted and impoverished by the dam’s construction. She found herself smiling at their remembered faces. Was Natombi still the guardian of one of the Rain Shrines of the Basilwizi? What had happened to Milimo since he had left the cottage? The cottage where he had been the guardian of her happiest days. *Here I am, Marielise said to herself, between a lover who is alive and a lover who is dead; suspended above the country I lived in, and above the people of the valley whom I knew, while all that I have left of my life, work and friendships is stored on my computer.*

Marielise’s mind slipstreamed away from the straight path of her plane.

*Oh yes! The opposing forces of Good and Evil and the God I don’t believe in, is only on one side.*

Her old friend, Father Patrick Brogan, had had no answers for her on that question, and perhaps, come to think of it, not that many certain answers for himself.

‘Faith is the answer,’ he might have said, shaking his head doubtfully.

*At any rate, Marielise told herself ironically, hoping a stronger affirmation would make it more likely to be true, I know which side is wrong and it is not my side. I know that my heart is fleshy and loving and so vulnerable, and I trust its rhythm – like the beat of the pop music in my earphones – the music that sweet Manda sent me with her warmest love while I was in hospital – my heart is good – good – good! The beat of my heart tells me that I am alive and good, but the syncopated beat of doubt, the counterpoint of uncertainty is there too, all the time.*

*I am compromised and not just by my damaged body.*

*But this is now and that was then. There is no comfort in history, even my own short history. I meant well. I acted for the best. I tried to be good. I wasn’t bad – well – maybe just a little under-informed.*

*Really – Marielise considered – have I made any better moral judgements than my conventional Aunt Margaret and well-intentioned Uncle Charles?*

*I am good aren’t I?* Marielise asked herself again without much certainty and then dozed over her wine and painkillers at lunch without concluding anything at all. After all she had no choice but to hang suspended in the atmosphere at 35,000 feet for another five hours and listen once more to k.d. lang singing with hope about waiting for and trusting in love.

## Natombi

1947

I am Natombi.

I am ready now.

The elder mothers have let me leave the place where they have kept me secluded, my face hidden under a bead veil, while they taught me about the duties of marriage.

Tomorrow they will send for my husband to come and pay the bride-price and take me to his homestead.

All night on the journey to his homestead there will be drumming and singing. There will be beer and there will be dancing. By the first light of day I will enter his hut and be recognised as his wife. On the following night only, I will enter his hut to stay. Then I will be wrapped in garments that he must unwind before he can know me as a husband must know his wife.

My husband's name is Singani. He is the *sikatongo* who has the care of the Rain Shrine that brings us rain and good fortune. He is the inheritor of the shades of his ancestors who have taken care of the Rain Shrine before him. Singani already has a first wife. She is his ritual wife and I will be the junior ritual wife. At first I must work for this elder wife and do her bidding without complaining. When I have a child I may be allowed to have my own hut and garden and look after my own household.

Singani has worked many months in the fields of my mother

as payment of the bride-price for me. Tonight he will bring the goats and the gifts that were agreed for my family. Now I stand here wearing the beaded *insete* skirt that my mother has made for me by chewing the roots of *musante* tree and rolling it into many, many strings. My goat-skin beaded cloak and necklaces are presents from my husband. There are many beads of bright colours that are threaded into linked necklaces of differing lengths. I wear them across each shoulder and they rest between my breasts, which are still small and firm like unripe *mujenje* fruit.

I have been promised to my husband since I was six years of age. Now I have reached puberty and the time for my marriage has come. There have been twelve seasons of rain since I was born.

I am a child of the Basilwizi people who have always lived secretly in the Zambezi Valley where there are only paths for those who go by foot. The Basilwizi are those people who cannot be found when raiders come to rob and kill. We are the people of the river. Now there are changes that we cannot hide from any more. The white government comes more and more often to interfere with our people and our customs and our way of life.

I will be very sad to leave my mother and my sisters and go as a stranger to the house of another woman with whom I must share a husband. She has only one child and Singani is already a man of more than thirty years. I am afraid to go but I must not say so. I hope that they will be kind and that the elder wife will not be angry and treat me as her slave. I hope that they will share their food with me as is right and fair.



PART ONE  
MARGARET



ONE

## **Impossible Dreams**

*1960*

The steep hillside on which the cottage was built was covered by scrubby undergrowth without many big trees. The contractor simply cleared away the bush and any wood that the labourers could not find a use for was piled into heaps and burnt. He knew what his probable client would expect and he had terraced the hillside into giant steps using the rough rock left over from the road building on the site of the new township. The hillside was so steep that it was not possible to see the bottom terrace from the new veranda of the cottage, or to see more than the edge of the corrugated asbestos roof of the cottage from the place where there might one day be water. The future level of the water was guessed at by the contractor. Surveyors had been around the whole site taking measurements but, even so, mistakes about gradients and water levels were made by both the town planners and the architects.

The contractor did reasonably well with his estimates for his own design. It was a steep drive to the cottage and the plot was narrow. He chose to put the cottage up high on the plot and put 130 steps down to the lake – or where he hoped the lake would be.

Meanwhile the building of the actual township was on hold. Roads had been marked out and sites chosen for government

offices. Until the road across the dam made easy access possible it had been difficult to get in building machinery and materials to do very much work. The cement for the dam wall was produced near Lusaka and previously it had to be transported across the Zambezi at Chirundu where there was a bridge, taken down through Makuti in Southern Rhodesia, and then back again to the southern side of the dam construction site. It was 150 kilometres from Lusaka to Siavonga but the cement lorries had to go almost three times as far. There were many escarpments that made precipitous barriers for road builders and then there was the Zambezi River itself. It could spread shining sheets of water across miles of flood plain or rise up in a savage flood, racing through perpendicular gorges. At the time of the building of Kariba Dam there were only two bridges across its entire length: one at Livingstone, the other at Chirundu, both between Northern and Southern Rhodesia, one the gift of the financier, Alfred Beit, the other part of the colonising strategy of Cecil John Rhodes.

The roads over the escarpment follow for the main part the old migratory routes taken year after year for millennia by elephants. Elephants, who for all those thousands of years would roam, not just around Zimbabwe, or just around Kenya, but all the way up sub-Saharan Africa from south to north and back again. Now human governments have decreed that elephants must obey human laws and stay within the bounds of national boundaries drawn by straight-edged rulers on maps. In the time before colonisation, a mere 150 or so years ago, elephants travelled where they always travelled, and they walked across mountains with consummate skill and ease, always finding the most direct routes through the least difficult of the passes. The people of Africa also wandered freely across the continent. They had always followed the paths made by animals and the elephant paths over the mountains always were the best way, as the European explorers were yet to discover. In the time before the elephants and the people were confined to national boundaries that cut their tribes and their herds into pieces,

all the roads to Kariba and to Siavonga were elephant roads long before they became human roads.

The cottage was on the lake shore of the new township that would be known as Siavonga.

Siavonga was the name of the local chief and as was common with names of chiefs among the Tonga people, the meaning of the name had been lost. The reason that the first chief Siavonga had been given that name was forgotten. Whatever attributes, good or bad, that had earned him the name had vanished with the first chief. Whoever became the next chief took on the name of Chief Siavonga in a village ceremony and his own name disappeared. It was the same for Chief Chipepo in Gwembe and Chieftainess Chiawa beyond Chirundu. The only difference was that though local people said that this was the place of Chief Siavonga's village, there was no longer a village there. Villages along the Zambezi had the habit of moving as the river moved, each year the Zambezi would shift its banks as it settled itself into a slightly different place once the seasonal floods were over. Chief Siavonga's place was there but it could no longer be seen.

From the selected site for the north bank township that was to be called Siavonga, it was not possible to see or even hear the construction work of the great dam wall. The dam site was south-east of Siavonga and a short way down the gorge in a place known to the Tonga as Kariva: 'the trap'. It was called that by the Tonga because it was a giant reminder of the small rock traps they set in little gullies to catch tiny creatures. Little rocks carefully balanced across a gap on a thin stick to fall and crush an even smaller, scavenging mammal looking for grain. But this was to be the huge trap that was to catch the great Zambezi River.

Except that the Tonga knew that it would be impossible to trap the Zambezi.

At the place known as Kariva, the high ridges of mountainous hills rise up, almost blocking the path of the mighty river. It is able to continue its journey only through the narrowest and steepest of

gorges. This huge and steep escarpment, one of the steepest in Africa, lies at the end of the Great Rift Valley, a continent-long seismic fault that stretches from the Red Sea through to Lake Malawi and Lake Kariba. It is a seismic fault that will, one day, split Africa into two.

Here near Kariva, 'the trap', in the middle of a wilderness, is a place called Siavonga, which is a name without meaning. It is a place that will be a town but a place that is not yet built. It is a place that is presently isolated by poor and inadequate roads and it is difficult to reach. It is in a country that is becoming another country, with another name. It is here that there is a plot where a contractor builds a cottage above a lake not yet filled with water. All this takes place in the newly created Central African Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland that will be no more in a few short years. Two of these countries will change into independent states with different names when that happens.

It is an exercise in madness and dreams; in magic and megalomania, and the Tonga people know it to be impossible.

TWO

## The Priest

1957

*It is the Garden of Eden*, Father Patrick Brogan thought, then added to himself, *On a cool day at least.*

Today especially, it was so hot that sweat had soaked right through his shirt. Wearing sodden clothes made the priest feel foolish in front of the villagers, who were naked but with the unselfconscious grace and natural beauty that are integral to unobserved innocence. It was midday and the women and children rested flat on the packed earth under the grass shelters. It was still strange for him to see women who had no shame about the closeness of the skin of their bodies to the dirt of the ground. Sometimes their bodies seemed to him, too real, too physical, and too close to his own pale white boniness. He had to hold his own chest in, sucking air in secretly through his nostrils in case he inhaled some of their reality and had to submit to it. He however, liked the touch of the children. The feel of their hard heads and dry skin when they came up to him to grab at his strange outfit, provided him with an antidote of sorts to the immense desire in him to take his clothes off and lie down on the earth in the shade with the women. Nothing the women ever did had been suggestive or an invitation for him to join them. They simply ignored him, perhaps did not see him as a man, or even as human.

The heat crushed him too, but he waited. One of the men would perhaps arrive soon. Nothing did move however, except a dog shifting because a fly had bitten it. The dog whined as it was forced to cross a patch of burning sunlight. A woman gestured at the dog with a stick without raising her recumbent body from the ground and it took its bites and flies deeper into the shade of a winterthorn. Even the goats were absolutely motionless in the small shade offered by the overhanging roof of a hut.

The river was close by. He could hear the water's rapid movement against its banks, but the bush was dense and lush after the rainy season and there was no obvious path or direction to take in search of the men. In all probability the men would be on the river shore with their fishing nets, basket traps and their *bwato* – the dugout canoes they use to cross the river.

The rainy season was over otherwise his Land Rover would not have made the journey. The road was not so much a road as a gully for flood water, and until the water had dried up no one could judge the depth of its pot-holes. On the way down to the village Father Patrick had seen youths tending a few cattle, and some still green but mature crops of millet. There was no shortage of food for the Basilwizi in the Zambezi River Valley. River, gardens and the bush fruits provided for them all year round. They did not suffer the seasonal famine of those who lived on the dry plains above the escarpment, who were forced each year to hunt, or steal, to survive. While other rivers would run dry or sink down under the sand long before the rains came, the Zambezi itself would continue to rise throughout the cool, dry season as the waters from the Congo watershed made their gradual way towards the sea.

Father Patrick knew however, that in reality, this village in the valley was not the Eden of Christianity. There was child marriage, witchcraft, illness, superstition, unexpected and unexplained deaths from poison, snakes, crocodiles and wild beasts. Children would run away screaming when he appeared and some of the women too, were afraid. White people did not go into the valley very often.

To the people of the river valley, the strange skin colouration of white people meant they were ghosts – the lost shades of the dead who had not been appeased – the *muzungu*.

The priest waited a long hour. The sweat on his face could not evaporate and cool him but he did not try and wipe it away. There was no relief to be had that way. The tremendous heat made him wonder why he had agreed to come to add his words of explanation about the new dam to those of the young district officer in charge of the area. Father Patrick was only a teacher in a mud-hut school working in the valley as part of the outreach of Canisius School and the Chikuni Jesuit Mission in Monze. The district officer, Tom Holmes, had however, expressed concern about the increasing resistance by the Tonga to the plans for their resettlement.

“The governor blames the African nationalists,” Tom had said, “but that’s a small part of it. The Tonga don’t trust us anymore. Why should they believe that we can stop the Zambezi flowing?”

He suggested that perhaps Father Patrick might be more convincing on the difficult spiritual questions of the shrines and the ancestors’ graves. Father Patrick agreed to try. He was always curious to see more of the traditional life from which his students came. He did not admit to himself that he was also curious to see the women of the village.

Eventually one of the elder women called to a young boy – her voice sounded both harsh and casual, but authoritative. He heard laughter in it and his chest made a little thud of fear that she must find him amusing. She sent the child to tell the men of the village that the priest had come. He heard the men’s strong voices talking and laughing before he saw them. They brought with them plump fish tied with fibres onto sticks.

The Headman greeted him and Father Patrick replied in ChiTonga in the traditional way.

Then the priest said, “I have come to try to answer your questions about the new dam the Federal Government is building down at the Kariva Gorge.”