

Kariba ferry disaster: A Tonga son's grief and demand for answers

Nehanda Radio by Temba Munsaka, clinical psychologist

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A deeply personal reflection on the Kariba ferry disaster, the historic relationship between the Tonga people and the Zambezi, and why rural communities deserve answers, accountability and safe transport.

I am Tonga, and I was born into a people who know the Zambezi not from geography books, but from memory. We know her smell before the rain, the colour of her water when the wind begins to turn, the sound of a canoe cutting through the morning silence, and the particular fear that enters an old man's voice when he says the water is no longer safe.

We know that water can feed a family, carry a fisherman home, separate a mother from a hospital, and sometimes, without warning, take a life.

So when the news came that a ferry had overturned on Lake Kariba, I did not read it as another story coming across my phone. I felt it somewhere deep inside me, in that place where a people keep the memories that history books often forget.

Kariba is not simply a lake to the Tonga. It is history, pain, survival and memory. It is the place where an old world disappeared beneath water and where our people were forced to learn how to begin again.

Our elders remember the villages that were moved when the dam was built, the graves and sacred places disturbed, the homes left behind, and the profound rupture that came when a people were told that what was being taken from them was necessary for the development of a nation.

The Tonga sacrificed, and then we carried our memories with us. We learned to live beside the enormous body of water that had replaced parts of the world our ancestors knew.

We learned the lake, fished it, crossed it, feared it and respected it. That is why, when the water takes our people again, it touches an old wound.

I do not know all the names of those who died, but I know what a name means. A name is somebody's child, somebody's mother, somebody's husband, somebody's sister, somebody's grandfather, somebody's friend.

Behind every number announced on television is a family sitting somewhere tonight, staring at a doorway that will not open. That is why I cannot bring myself to speak simply of forty-six people, or whatever final number emerges from the search and investigation.

Forty-six is a number; they were human beings. They laughed, argued, worried about money, made plans for tomorrow and carried the ordinary hopes that make up a life.



Someone was probably carrying food home. Someone was returning from a market. Someone may have been thinking about work the following morning. Someone may have promised a child, "I will be back." Then the lake became the last place they were seen.

We are told that the ferry was carrying more people than its certified capacity, that the passenger numbers are disputed, and that survivors described frightening conditions aboard the vessel.

We have heard accounts of water entering the ferry, luggage shifting and passengers becoming increasingly afraid. We have heard that some passengers wanted the vessel to turn back.

These things must be investigated carefully and independently, because grief does not give us permission to turn allegations into facts. But even before the final report is written, one truth is already staring us in the face: poor people should never have to choose between danger and survival.

The people who use these boats are not tourists looking for an adventure. They are fishermen, traders, mothers, children, farmers, grandmothers and ordinary people travelling because they need medicine, food, school, work or simply a way to reach another community.

For someone sitting comfortably in Harare, a ferry may be just another form of transport. For someone in the Zambezi Valley, it can be a lifeline.

It can be the difference between reaching a clinic and remaining at home, between getting food to a family and going hungry, between reaching a market and losing the day's income. That is why the safety of these vessels cannot be treated as an administrative matter buried somewhere inside a ministry.

When people board a ferry on Lake Kariba, they are entrusting the state, the operator and the captain with something that cannot be replaced once lost: their lives.

A lifeline must never become a death sentence simply because the people using it are rural, poor or far away from the centres of power.

I am Tonga, and this is where Kariba becomes personal. Our history with this water is complicated beyond anything a tourist photograph can capture.

The dam transformed the Zambezi Valley, displaced communities and changed the relationship between our people and the river that had sustained them for generations.

Development brought electricity and national benefit, but it also demanded a price from people who had little power to negotiate that price. Our grandparents and parents carried their memories forward because a people can be displaced from land without being displaced from history.

We know what it means for the nation to benefit from something while the people living closest to it carry some of its greatest burdens.

So when people die on this lake because questions of safety may have been ignored, the grief is not isolated from that history. It sits directly inside it.

But I refuse to blame the water for everything. The Zambezi is not a criminal, and the lake did not decide how many people should board the ferry.

The lake did not issue a safety certificate, inspect an engine, count passengers, approve a departure or decide whether a vessel was fit for the weather.

Human beings make those decisions. Institutions make those decisions. Governments make those decisions. Therefore, if human decisions contributed to this tragedy, human beings must have the courage to answer for them.

We cannot simply point at the wind, blame the waves and call the matter closed. There is a difference between a tragedy that nobody could reasonably have prevented and a tragedy that exposes a system that was already failing.

So I want answers, not because I want someone to blame, but because the dead deserve the truth. How many people were actually aboard? Why were the numbers so uncertain? Was the vessel overloaded? When was it last inspected?

Was it mechanically and structurally sound? Were there enough life jackets, and could passengers reach them quickly? What weather information was available before departure?

Who made the decision to sail? Were concerns raised before the vessel left? How quickly did the rescue response begin?

Why should communities living beside one of Africa's great lakes have to wonder whether adequate rescue capacity is available when disaster strikes? These are not political questions.

They are human questions, and they deserve answers that can withstand the grief of the families who are now waiting.

Please do not reduce this tragedy to another press conference. We have seen the pattern before: disaster happens, cameras arrive, officials express sadness, condolences are issued, promises are made, and then the country moves on. But the families do not move on.

They go home with empty chairs, clothes that belonged to somebody, photographs that suddenly become painful to look at and children who keep asking when their mother or father is coming home.

They live with a silence that does not end when the news cycle ends. The families of those who died on Kariba do not need Zimbabwe to remember them for a week. They need us to remember them long enough to change the system that carried them onto that water.

And this is why I believe every person aboard that ferry must be counted. A child does not become less human because the ticketing system did not record the child. An infant does not become a statistical ghost because there was no fare to collect.

A grandmother carrying maize is not cargo, and a fisherman trying to make a living is not an expendable unit in a transport schedule.

If somebody stepped onto that vessel, somebody had a responsibility to know that person was there and to make every reasonable effort to bring them home. The manifest should not merely be a document for officials; it should be a promise that every person aboard matters.

The government must therefore do more than mourn. Every passenger vessel operating on Lake Kariba should face a rigorous, independent safety assessment, and government-owned vessels should be subjected to the same standards expected of private operators.

Passenger capacity must mean exactly what it says. Every person aboard must be recorded, regardless of age. Life-saving equipment must be available and properly maintained. Weather warnings must have consequences.

Captains must have the authority to refuse departure or turn back when conditions become unsafe. And the communities who have lived beside this water for generations must be part of the conversation. The fishermen know the lake.

The boat operators know its moods. The elders understand seasons and winds. Indigenous knowledge should not replace modern science, but neither should modern institutions be so arrogant that they refuse to listen to people who have spent their entire lives reading the water.

I speak now not only for myself but from the place where my own identity meets this tragedy. I am a son of the Zambezi Valley, and I know that the Tonga people understand something about being forgotten.

We know what it means to have our history submerged beneath something the rest of the country calls development. We know what it means to be told that sacrifice is necessary and then expected to carry on quietly.

We know what it means for the centre to remember us only when something goes wrong. But the people who died on Lake Kariba cannot be allowed to disappear twice: first beneath the water, and then beneath the weight of another news cycle.

Tonight, when I think of Kariba, I do not see the beautiful photographs that tourists take at sunset. I see mothers waiting on the shore, children asking questions that no parent should have to answer, fishermen staring into the darkness and families listening for footsteps that will never come.

I think about the people whose final journey was supposed to take them home. I think about the old Tonga relationship with water, and I think about the generations who have lived with the consequences of Kariba.

Our ancestors are not here for us to blame, and the lake is not an enemy to be cursed. They are memory, and memory carries an obligation: to learn, to protect, to speak and to refuse to allow suffering to become normal.

So I speak to Kariba tonight as a Tonga son, not with hatred but with grief, anger and love. You have carried our people, fed our families, witnessed our history and held beneath your surface memories that no map can recover.

Now you have taken more of our own, and we cannot pretend that the pain belongs only to the families directly affected. It belongs to all of us who call the Zambezi Valley home. Let every missing person be searched for with dignity. Let every family receive the truth.

Let every death be properly investigated. Let those responsible be held accountable where the evidence demands it.

And let the safety of the people who live around this lake finally become as important to the nation as the electricity, tourism and economic value that Kariba provides.

I am from the Zambezi Valley, and I know that water is both giver and taker. I know that we cannot command it, only respect it. But respecting the water also means respecting the people who must cross it.

Kariba should never again become a choice between hunger and danger, between reaching a hospital and risking death, between feeding a family and leaving them without a parent.

Rural lives are not cheaper lives. Tonga lives are not lesser lives. A child from Binga or Kariba is not worth less because they were born far from the capital.

Kariba, my mother, my river, my memory, you have carried us for generations. You have witnessed what was taken from us and what we have endured. You have known our songs, our fishing grounds, our grief and our resilience.

This time, you have cried, and we have cried with you. But we will not let those who disappeared into your waters disappear from our national memory. We will remember their names. We will remember their families.

We will remember what happened on that terrible August day. And we will ask, again and again, until somebody finally answers: How many more of our people must the water take before Zimbabwe learns to protect those who live beside it?

I am Tonga. I am a son of the Zambezi. And tonight, I mourn.

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