

Waarom, Why, or in my native language Ndaou: Ngeyi

Not too long ago, 10 years ago to be exact,
I was sitting where some of you are sitting here today.
I was a student from Zimbabwe.
Far away from home,
Far from my family and friends,
But motivated to start studying law in this magnificent city,
With a unique name that I'm still learning to pronounce: Groningen.

Waarom, Why, Ngeyi

My goal was to learn from the best.
I especially wanted to be a champion for the voiceless.
I yearned for justice.

Little did I know that THIS path would lead me to advocating
for the wildlife and nature that I had the privilege of enjoying
as a young girl, growing up in Zimbabwe.
Where being chased by monkeys
Or trying to count how many lines were on a zebra
was a common past time for us during school holidays.

In the Netherlands, I pursued my studies with enthusiasm.
And explored various opportunities including:
an internship at the Wildlife Justice Commission.
It was here, that I learnt that wildlife crime
is a multi-billion-dollar organised crime
It was there that I realised how much was at risk,
It was then that I asked:

Waarom, Why, Ngeyi?

Funny that it took me leaving Africa, to learn just how big,
a problem wildlife crime really is.
That innate quest for justice kicked in.

I wanted to contribute.

I wanted to use the law to protect nature and the wildlife I grew up enjoying.

Not just for myself, but for my country and for the next generation to come long after I'm gone.

So, I finished my studies,
and returned home to Zimbabwe,
the first lawyer employed by a wildlife conservation non-profit.

As I'm sure you can tell it's not a typical path.

I've had days where my heart is broken,
by news of armed contact between rangers and poachers.
With an endangered animal wounded beyond recovery
For its horn or tusks or scales.

I've also had days where hope is restored
by news of community members
going out of their way to hand over pangolin
that they encounter while herding cattle,
instead of selling this precious animal into illegal trade.

Sometimes it's hard to see the progress,
As days become months
spent going through the legislative and judicial process.

This kind of work, just like any,
demands that we maintain a sense of wonder.
It requires us to dream.
To remain hopeful.

To ask why.

In asking why
we better understand the challenge.
Only then is it possible to find solutions.
Only then can we innovate.

We have a proverb in Shona that says:

'Rume rimwe harikombi churu'

It translates to one person cannot encircle an anthill.

This proverb is a testament to my journey.

Advancing wildlife laws and policy in my beautiful Zimbabwe

Would be impossible without the incredible people.

that have committed their careers and lives to protecting our shared biodiversity.

The people that help answer the many why's

The rangers, police, prosecutors, magistrates, researchers, government, and even our donors.

The list is endless.

But still the why, waarom and ngeyi remains.

As you embark on your studies

Your professions

Your lives,

I implore you to ask this question:

Waarom, Why, Ngeyi?

It is from the why that we transform our world.

To my husband, parents, sisters, brothers, friends, and peers.

Please don't get tired of me always asking why.

Dankjewel, Thank you, Ndinobonga