

Acceptance Speech by Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, on Receiving the Fonlon-Nichols Award (2000)

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After poetry there must be no prose. I know I listened to poetry because there was a lot of license in Niyi Osundare's presentation. And why not? It's an occasion for celebration. Literature, the arts, creativity, any opportunity to present the arts in any way, or a facet of them, is for me an occasion for celebration. So you are allowed all the licenses you want. Take even more time than you want. I loved it. Thank you so much Niyi. And I do not want to cast a pall on an occasion of celebration but I have to tell you that this event, this award, for me, comes at a very poignant moment.

I am very glad that Niyi mentioned earlier our late colleague who was murdered by Sanni Abacha and his gang – Ken Saro-Wiwa, and eight others. It so happens that in a week's time, I think, less than a fortnight, finally his remains will be exhumed, together with his eight companions, and will be properly interred in his homeland, among his own people, the Ogoni. It seems to me, therefore, that it's almost as if this gathering of creative people, of believers in the liberty of creativity, the rights of humanity, it's almost as if, in a very serendipitous way, this event has been brought together to mark, to celebrate his passage among us and to note the event of his being properly laid to rest among his ancestors.

A very moving, a very touching event happened to me in Bavaria this last year when I was masochistic enough to accept to talk in that frozen, in those frozen wastes around November or December. But I was impelled to go there by a young group of very enthusiastic students - you call them high school students, secondary school students - who happened to have been very much interested in African literature and who, for quite a while, have developed a tradition of inviting writers, artists to come talk to them.

They've been very keen on having an African writer and on this occasion – after the usual personal connections, and so on – I was prevailed upon to go and talk to these young students. What struck me most forcefully, in addition to their sheer love of African literature, their excitement, their discovery of a world of culture, was their knowledgeability about it, a knowledgeability which is far higher than even among some of our colleagues in higher institutions in this country. I was most impressed by it. But, over and beyond that was the fact that, as a result of their coming in contact with the literature of Africa, they became committed on a level which I had not seen among people that young, and wanted to do something.

I read to them, I read some of my works, I read some African works, they read also, performed snippets of my plays and read also some of Ken Saro-Wiwa's works; they knew all about Ken. And, at the end of every performance, they decided to pass the hat around and collect funds, which, at the end of my stay, they presented to me to use in any way whatever to assist, ameliorate the kind of wrongs which they had read and learned about and in which they had involved themselves from such a distance. And I said to them - I thought for a while 'what would I use it for?' – I decided that I would set up a fund. The name of this particular school is Weilheim School in Bavaria (unfortunately I've forgotten the name of the city now). I decided that I would set up an award every year in Nigeria which, as you know, has been torn by all the very - I don't consider - unprecedented levels of ethnic divisions, religious divisions, and so on, of course very skillfully and diabolically manipulated by the politicians, the offshoots of the Abacha stock, which Niyi very shrewdly, perceptively mentioned. And I decided 'all right, we'll set up a fund which will be named after, a prize which will be named after Ken Saro-Wiwa, which will go to the youths, any youth at all who had, either through his artistic work or through any kind of social activity had promoted the cause of ethnic harmony, religious harmony, sectional harmony within Nigeria.

For me, I can think of no greater way of honoring this prize, which has just been given to me, considering its purpose, its origin and the people - the institutions - after whom the prize was named. I can think of no other way than adding this award to the

little contribution of those young pupils in Weilheim High School in Bavaria and turn it into an award for the purpose which I've just mentioned. For me, this rounds off wonderfully, it rounds off a particular phase in our struggle because it's only one phase. We know that it's a continuing process. We can only hope to hand over the baton to a younger generation. But, at least for me, the final interment of Ken and his companions rounds off a particular traumatic phase of our struggle for the dignity of humanity in our little corner of the world.

So, I wish to thank the organizers of this conference, the Fonlon-Nichols [Award Committee]. Fonlon, by the way, was somebody I remember with great fondness. We met in the Cameroons in those very early, young, brash days when we were "Renaissance" people of Africa—what a word! I'll be mentioning that word again tomorrow - but I remember this marvelous, brilliant intellect, very warm human being. And for me, it's really the coming together of so many things that I've been nominated to accept this award. And so, I want to thank you once again for joining me and those little kids in far-off Germany, in bringing yet another humanitarian and creative prospect for our corner of the world into world purview. Thank you very much.

Wole Soyinka

Nobel Laureate '86

Emory University