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Address to the UNESCO Executive Board, Paris, on 24 April 1996

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Abstract

I wish to pay a brief tribute to a man, a noble and distinguished African, whose work was of utmost relevance to many of UNESCO's concerns as expressed in the Director-General's Report - concerns such as the freedom of artistic expression, or the freedom from political persecution, or the rights of minorities, or the right to be protected from activities, on the part of governments or private companies, which lay waste to the environment.

DAVID DABYDEEN, GUYANA

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The man of whom I speak was a fine poet and novelist. I knew him as a writer and as a friend. I use the past-tense because he was killed last year: his name was Ken Saro-Wiwa.

I first met Ken Saro-Wiwa at a Writers Festival in 1990 and I was quickly impressed by his character. He had a ready spirit of friendship about him. He was of gentle manner, and the modesty and quietness of his speech indicated not only a man who was lacking in vanity, but also a man who possessed an advanced sense of his own mortality. He knew that by challenging a multinational oil company and a military regime, he was liable to be assassinated.

Tyrants and writers are natural enemies. The tyrant cannot endow words with beauty and truth and spirit, and so the tyrant is eternally envious and fearful of the writer's power. What the tyrant cannot control, he seeks to exterminate.

Ken Saro-Wiwa had a special and dangerous gift as a writer, which was his sense of humour, the quickness of his wit. He had a talent for ridiculing and parodying the strut and pomp of the elite. A very effective way of deflating the ego of tyrants is to laugh at them. And in his writings Ken Saro-Wiwa laughed at their grandiose ambitions, their overweening egos. He laughed at the shiny medals they pinned on their chests, and the pompous titles they gave themselves. He showed them to be foolish, and all the more dangerous because of their foolishness.

It grieved me to learn of his imprisonment, and when he was killed I felt stained, almost blighted. I believe that the killing of a noble human soul can have this inward effect on all of us, irrespective of our race or gender or nationality. We feel that our own individual humanity is diminished by a loss such as that of Ken Saro-Wiwa's life.

I believe that the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa is as significant as that of

Lorca at the hands of Spanish fascists or the death of Mandelstam at the hands of Stalin. Ken Saro-Wiwa's death was only different in that he met his fate partly because of his environmental concerns.

It is clear to me that environmental concerns, which are relatively new, will find expression in relatively new modes of violence. In Britain where I spend part of my life, I have already witnessed the ransacking or burning down of shops which deal in environmentally unfriendly products. The spectacle of veal crates and cruelly caged animals arouses a passion among many British people, a passion so intense that sometimes I wonder whether we are all suffering from mad cow's disease! A new phenomenon in Britain today is that of the frail and elderly pensioner confronting bulldozers or burly bailiffs and policemen, all in defence of some beautiful parkland threatened by road-building. The spectacle of the lone, unarmed student confronting a tank in Tiananmen Square is refashioned, with typical British eccentricity, in the image of pensioner confronting bulldozer. People in Britain who are not normally activists have become highly charged and politicized because of the environmental factor.

In Britain, such activism expresses itself in low-level violence and it rarely leads to loss of life. In South America, where I originate, we tend to do things with less decorum. In a very short period of time we have killed thousands of Amerindian indigenous peoples whose only crime was that they stood in the way of bulldozers, in defence of their land and their forest environment. As a writer I can understand why the literary form of 'magical realism' originated in my region. 'Magical Realism' has to do with a certain grossness or exaggeration of proportions. The idea of the grotesque lies at the heart of the literary form of 'magical realism'. And the practice of the grotesque lies at the heart of our behaviour towards our indigenous peoples. No Indigenous Peoples Fund, however welcome, can ever recompense these peoples for the robbery of their culture, their lands and their lives.