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We must speak the ugly truths about Queen Elizabeth and Britain's empire

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Columnist

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The death of Queen Elizabeth II, Britain's longest-serving monarch, is causing a global battle royale over a central question: How do we speak honestly about the loyal servants to Britain's powerful and historically brutal empire?

My answer? You speak the truth loudly, firmly and without hesitation. Use a microphone if you need to say it louder for those in the back.

In the wake of the queen's death, propaganda, fantasy and ignorance are being pitted against Britain's historical record and the lived experience of Africans, Asians, Middle Easterners, the Irish and others.

In the global north's imagination, the queen is a symbol of decorum and stability in the post-World War II world. But to people of places that Britain invaded, carved up and colonized over centuries, the 96-year-old grandmother — and the rest of the royal family — evoke complex feelings, to say the least.

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There are those who have a reverence for the royal family, as well as for Britain in general. Trust me, there are plenty of Black women across the African diaspora who loved Princess Diana. And I'll never forget cringing as my father's Ghanaian schoolmate, during a visit we made to her home in Accra, showed us pictures of her tourist trip to Buckingham Palace. "They ruled us," she said. "So, we are British!"

But for many, the British — by extension the queen — remain guilty for the nation's historical crimes.

Uju Anya, a Carnegie Mellon professor who is Nigerian, came under [intense attack](#) after tweeting Thursday, "I heard the chief monarch of a thieving raping genocidal empire is dying. May her pain be excruciating." Those are harsh and hateful words toward the queen, but they shouldn't be surprising — not to anyone who has truly grappled with the generational agony of families, such as Anya's, that have suffered massacre and displacement at the hands of the British.

Defenders of the queen, of course, have their answer to that. They suggest she was something of a "liberator," since decolonization occurred during her reign, and that the people thus "liberated" should be grateful. Again, the historical record is the crucial thing: When Elizabeth ascended to the throne in 1952, she inherited a Britain with a weakened grip on global power. Rebellions were gathering strength in its colonies. The economic drain from the conflicts, coupled with the growing independence movements in Africa and India, all but forced Britain to pull back.

Yet, even then, Britain under Elizabeth did not just let its prized colonies go. From 1952 to 1963, British forces crushed the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, forcing between [160,000 and 320,000](#) Kenyans into [concentration camps](#). Kenyan tribes are [suing the British government](#) at the European Court of Human Rights for land theft and torture.

Royalists will argue, too, that as a constitutional, symbolic monarch, Queen Elizabeth bore little responsibility for the ills that occurred during her long reign. But symbols *matter*. Elizabeth willingly took on the role of representing British power and wealth. She willingly adorned herself with jewels plundered from former colonies. Her image is on the currencies of many former colonies; by stewarding the British Commonwealth, she willingly took on the symbolic, patronizing role of “white mother” to the darker peoples of the former empire. All while reportedly banning “coloured immigrants or foreigners” from [serving in royal clerical roles until the 1960s](#).

And still others say we shouldn’t talk ill of Britain at this moment. That the past is long gone. That we should forget about it. The ugly reality is, Britain deliberately wanted to hide its crimes from newly independent countries; in 1961, it destroyed thousands of [colonial-era documents](#) so as not to “embarrass Her Majesty’s government.”

I’m also living proof that the past is present.

My mother, born in pre-independence Nigeria, recalls having to celebrate “Empire Day,” marching in stadiums and singing “God Save the Queen.” Several years after Nigeria’s independence in 1960, Britain [sided with the Nigerian forces to crush](#) the Biafran secession efforts. Some 1 million people of the Ibo ethnic tribe were killed or starved to death. My grandfather, who was one of the chief financial officers of Biafra, was forced to flee the country with my mother and siblings.

It shouldn’t take the death of a monarch to bring this colonial history to light, but this is where we are. The public relations imagery of a dedicated, elderly grandmother devoted to her corgis, and the Hollywood-ification of the royal family, serves all too well to blunt questions about empire. When the opportunity comes to surface truth, it must be seized.

Because there’s one more way the royalists have it wrong — this conversation is about the future, too. Hagiography of Queen Elizabeth and the fading British Empire obscures the truth not only about Britain but also about our current world order, which is built on that history. We can speak the truth about that history even as we pause to wish her spirit and her family well during this transition. And then we must get back to work — to dismantle the present-day vestiges of the racist, colonial empire she so dutifully represented.