

Can Multiculturalism Be Exported? Dilemmas of Diversity on Nigeria's *Sesame Square*

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While scholars argue that “multicultural education” initiatives are rooted in liberal Western ideals, such projects are increasingly being exported to non-Western countries with significantly different sociohistorical contexts. This article examines the adaptation of multicultural education on the Nigerian version of *Sesame Street*, called *Sesame Square*, which is coproduced by a Nigerian company and funded by USAID. Drawing on ethnographic observations, interviews, and episode analysis, I analyze *Sesame Square's* efforts to teach intergroup tolerance. While most nations struggle to balance diversity and unity, my research suggests that this endeavor is particularly delicate in Nigeria, where ongoing ethno-religious conflicts threaten to fracture the nation. The fate of multicultural education may depend less on its pedagogy than on the sociopolitical contexts in which it takes place. Paradoxically, multicultural education may be a luxury reserved for countries with some preexisting level of intergroup cohesion.

Introduction

During a pilot episode of Nigeria's *Sesame Square*, an orange Muppet named Kami tells Big Bird about her recent visit to the doctor. She explains how after the doctor examined her and gave her a vaccine, she said good-bye and the doctor gave her a big smile. Big Bird exclaims that he wants a check-up too, and asks, “Hey, do you think the doctor will give me a nice, big smile, too?” They both laugh and the scene ends.¹ When I spoke with one of *Sesame Square's* Nigerian creators, she explained the debates that took place while creating this segment.

The hugging incident—let me tell you how it got started. . . . A child goes to the clinic to visit the doctor, and gets a lollipop, right? And [Sesame Workshop] now say[s], “No, lollipops, sweets, it's not healthy, we can't do that.” So we said, okay, then the doctor should give the child a hug. . . . As soon as [a northern creator] saw it, she said, “You can't do this, this is not possible in Kano. . . . Why

¹ Pilot episode no. 2.

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would a grown man be hugging a small girl? Who's not his daughter?" . . . And so then, we said, how about a pat on the head? And the Yorubas now say "that's insulting!" . . . Those who are a bit fetish,² they say, "Ah, so that's how they'll be transferring demons!" So at the end of the day, the doctor gives the child a smile. (Nigerian creator, June 23, 2010)

This anecdote represents one of many challenges that creators³ faced in designing *Sesame Square*, the new Nigerian version of *Sesame Street*, which began airing in 2011. Creators were constantly pulled between different religious and ethnic groups' demands for representation on the program. Creators feared that if one group felt insulted or underrepresented, they would refuse to watch. During a 9-month ethnographic study, I investigated how these dynamics influenced the ways *Sesame Square* portrays diversity.

Sesame Square is coproduced by a Nigerian production company, Ileke Media, and Sesame Workshop in New York, and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Sesame Workshop currently produces over 25 coproductions around the world (nine of which are funded by USAID). Each international coproduction includes program segments that were created for the American *Sesame Street* interspersed with content that is produced in each specific country. In Nigeria, *Sesame Square* is in English⁴ and teaches children about literacy and numeracy, health and nutrition, the environment, and the diverse cultural groups in Nigeria.

Sesame Square offers an ideal opportunity to observe how Western norms about multiculturalism interact with local understandings of ethnic relations and national unity. The meanings and practices of "multicultural education" are widely debated in Western societies,⁵ but educators generally use the term to describe efforts to help all children succeed equally in schools regardless of their ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, or linguistic background (Banks 2009; Nieto 2010). Multicultural education often refers to reforming school curriculum to include diverse "heroes" in national historical narratives, as well as literature written by (or about) minority groups (Zimmerman 2002). These curricular revisions are made with the assumption that when minority groups "see themselves" represented in national narratives and institutions, they will learn better and feel included in the nation

² The term "fetish" is sometimes used to refer to people who follow traditional religion or believe in spirit possession.

³ I use the term "creators" to include everyone involved with creating *Sesame Square*: educational consultants, cultural advisors, scriptwriters, producers, directors, actors, and puppeteers.

⁴ While Nigeria is said to have more than 500 indigenous languages, English is the only official language. English is the language of government and schools and is considered the "pan-Nigerian" language.

⁵ Other terms are used interchangeably or in comparison with "multicultural education" and are sometimes more popular in different countries, such as: intercultural education, antiracist education, peace education, citizenship education, and so on (Lund 2006; Dietz and Mateos Cortes 2011; Solano-Campos 2013). These paradigms come with their own complex histories and contested meanings.

(Zimmerman 2002; Nieto 2010). Scholars also emphasize that multicultural education must attempt to reduce prejudices among all students, and help all citizens to appreciate diverse members of their nation (Lewis 2003; Banks 2009).

In this way, multicultural education has twin goals: to recognize diversity within a nation, and to build tolerance, respect, and unity among co-citizens. In theory, these twin goals can coexist, as they do in national mottos such as “unity in diversity.”⁶ In practice, however, goals of recognizing diversity and fostering national unity are sometimes in tension, as some citizens fear that emphasizing diversity threatens the unity of the nation-state, while others feel that nationalist movements threaten to “neutralize” ethnic identities (Baumann 1999; Callan 2008).

Some theorists emphasize that multicultural education reforms must have broader aims than merely revising the formal curriculum. James Banks (2009, 27) writes that multicultural education must target the “total school environment” and make changes to ensure that all aspects of schools promote equality among students: pedagogical strategies, language practices, assessment and discipline procedures, staff attitudes and actions, and so on. Other scholars also include issues of school segregation, zoning policies, and the politics of access under the umbrella of “multicultural education” (Zimmerman 2002; Clotfelter 2004). Many decry the fact that multicultural education often means superficial insertions of ethnic “heroes and holidays” into the curriculum, while structural inequalities remain intact (Lewis 2003; Pollock 2005; Nieto 2010).

The multicultural education that I analyze on *Sesame Square* is an educational television curriculum that recognizes Nigeria’s diversity by including children, languages, and symbols from various cultural groups. While these efforts could be critiqued for being a simplistic version of multicultural education, it is important to note the limitations of the medium of television. For example, students cannot have an interactive dialogue with a television set that investigates the structural inequalities of society (Gutmann [2004] and Pollock [2008] suggest this strategy for classrooms). While television may be limited in its capacity for “deeper” forms of multicultural education, many—including *Sesame Square*’s creators—see it as an important tool for teaching about diversity and reducing prejudices by exposing children to diverse “others” (Lemish 2007; Greenberg and Mastro 2008). *Sesame Square*’s creators hoped that portraying diverse characters would make the program appeal to all types of children (so all children could learn from *Sesame Square*) and help young children to appreciate the diversity of their fellow Nigerians.

⁶ Nigeria’s first prime minister, Tafawa Balewa, used this phrase in a 1957 speech after the date for Nigeria’s independence was set (Cartey and Kilson 1970). Other nations, including India, Indonesia, and South Africa, have also used “Unity in Diversity” as a national motto.

By examining multicultural education in a non-Western postcolony, this project reveals two important insights into multicultural education more broadly. First, the tensions that multicultural education faces in Western countries persist even in countries with significantly different contexts, such as Nigeria. Scholars argue that multicultural education arose from particular historical circumstances in Western countries (Zimmerman 2002; Banks 2009); some question whether it is appropriate to diffuse these multicultural education models into different contexts (Dietz and Mateos Cortes 2011; Shome 2012). Despite significant differences in context, however, the tensions inherent in multicultural education in Western societies persist in Nigeria: tensions between “authentic” and reductive representations of diversity, anxieties about which types of difference should be celebrated, and disagreements about whether highlighting diversity is salutary or divisive. One could say that multicultural education carries a backpack of contradictions wherever it travels. How these contradictions are unpacked, and what risks they contain, however, may differ across countries.

The second insight from this study is that while the central tensions of multicultural education persist, certain contextual factors may heighten these tensions in ways that ultimately compromise the goals of multicultural education. In the Nigerian case, the stakes of multicultural education may be higher, due to the ongoing conflicts between ethno-religious groups. Long-standing ethno-religious divisions may contribute to a more divisive type of multicultural education, as educators focus more on avoiding offense than on promoting unity. Moreover, the fact that religious diversity is particularly salient in Nigeria presents challenges for multicultural education, as religious differences are sometimes considered more difficult to reconcile than ethnic differences. Paradoxically, multicultural education may work best in countries that need it less; celebrating diversity may be a luxury reserved for countries with some level of national unity. Thus, we may need to temper our expectations of multicultural education’s potential in deeply conflicted societies. The Nigerian context may require new models of multicultural education that focus more on forging unity than on celebrating diversity.

This study allows us to explore the contours and limitations of multicultural education outside of Western contexts and to consider its potential impact in different societies—including societies in conflict where initiatives to build tolerance may be most needed. Additionally, examining multicultural education in non-Western contexts can help us better understand the central tensions of multicultural education in general. For example, the Nigerian case suggests that it may be impossible to “celebrate” diversity without reducing groups into somewhat superficial representations separated by reified boundaries—a risk of multicultural education worldwide. While scholars claim that we can improve potentially divisive versions

of multicultural education by employing better teaching strategies, the sociopolitical context may be at least as influential in determining multicultural education's potential. Multicultural educators must be deeply cognizant of how the logics of multicultural education are influenced by demographic characteristics, group relations, and political contexts.

Relevant Literature

The goals of “multiculturalism” are related to enlightenment ideals such as freedom, democracy, and equality that have spread around the world but are taken up differently in different contexts (Appadurai 1996). While the term suffers from theoretical vagueness, theories of multiculturalism generally stress the importance of treating diverse peoples equally and incorporating them justly into the nation. Most multicultural theorists qualify their discussions by saying that the goals of multiculturalism are predicated on the specific histories and contexts of Western liberal democracies (Taylor 1994; Kymlicka 1996). Yet despite this continuous acknowledgment, multicultural ideology is being diffused and taken up in many non-Western societies that have varying degrees of “liberalism” and “democracy.” Some scholars critique this globalization of multicultural models, arguing that such initiatives rely on West-centric assumptions about citizenship, justice, and democracy (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Shome 2012).

The literature on multicultural education echoes these same contradictions; while scholars explain its history as rooted in Western (predominantly Anglo-American) nations, they simultaneously advocate the diffusion of multicultural education around the world. James Banks (2009, 12), for example, explains how multicultural education in Western nations was born when ethnic minorities perceived a gap between their nations' egalitarian ideals and discriminatory societal realities. While acknowledging these Western roots, however, Banks simultaneously calls for all nations to develop multicultural education policies, asserting that children around the world must learn to work effectively with diverse groups of people (10).

Indeed, multicultural practices—including inclusive language policies, increased minority rights, and multicultural education—are being exported worldwide (Kymlicka 2007). International organizations (including aid agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and multilateral organizations) encourage nations to use education as a mechanism for managing diverse populations and building national unity. For example, scholars document how international organizations have supported efforts to revise Rwandan history curriculum to be more egalitarian (Freedman et al. 2008), initiatives to build ethnically integrated schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hromadzic 2008), and projects to teach conflict resolution strategies in Sierra Leone (Samura 2013). USAID, in addition to funding international *Sesame*

Street coproductions, also funds numerous other multicultural education initiatives to promote democratic and tolerant worldviews (Stevick and Levinson 2008).

Banks (2009), while celebrating the expansion of multicultural education around the world, does acknowledge that the implementation of multicultural education is contested and will vary in different contexts. Similarly, Amy Gutmann (2004, 72) writes, “If multicultural education is now a movement worldwide . . . [it] faces a tremendous variety of cultural, socioeconomic, and political conditions even within democracies.” Neither of these authors, however, empirically explores what happens to multicultural education when it encounters these varying conditions. This ethnographic study examines the creation of *Sesame Square* to provide empirical evidence of the challenges that multicultural education faces in non-Western states such as Nigeria. By investigating the details of this curricular adaptation, this study answers calls by comparative education scholars to examine the politics, processes, and agents involved in educational transfer (Steiner-Khamsi 2004; Pizmony-Levy 2011).

Before examining how the context in Nigeria influences efforts to teach about diversity, it is important to acknowledge that the purported benefits of multicultural education are also highly contested in the Western societies where such models originated. Nation-states such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia have citizenries that have (comparably) more faith in their state than Nigerians do; these nations enjoy some level of stable national identity and (relatively) low levels of political and ethnic violence. Despite this relative stability, scholars still question if multicultural education “works” in these Western nations. Tensions between racial and ethnic groups certainly persist, and some worry that a curricular emphasis on “celebrating diversity” can reify boundaries between groups and reinforce stereotypes (Pollock 2005; Nieto 2010). Some theorists criticize multicultural education for overfocusing on race and ethnicity, and debate whether other categories of difference—such as religion or sexual orientation—should be included (Gutmann 2004; Banks 2009). Others critique multicultural education for being a palliative measure to mollify diverse groups while ignoring more serious institutional injustices (McLaren 1997; Lewis 2003).

Scholars grapple with the purported benefits and potential risks of multicultural education. On the one hand, multicultural education may result in the improved self-image and achievement of minority students, and in increased tolerance among all children. On the other hand, it can reproduce stereotypes, exacerbate divisions between groups, and mask societal inequalities. The majority of scholarship on multicultural education is theoretical and normative, giving endless recommendations about how

to improve multicultural education. Most of these pedagogical recommendations, however, do not adequately acknowledge the sociohistorical contexts in which such efforts take place. By empirically examining a multicultural curriculum in Nigeria, this study reveals how the dilemmas of multicultural education inevitably appear, even in different contexts. Moreover, findings suggest that contextual factors in Nigeria raise the stakes for multicultural education, bringing particular risks in a deeply divided nation.

The Nigerian Context

Demographic Differences

The context in Nigeria necessitates a rethinking of the possibilities of multicultural education. The demographics of Nigeria—and many African postcolonies—differ greatly from Western countries. Nigerians widely consider themselves to be divided into three majority groups—the Hausa-Fulani (29 percent), Yoruba (21 percent), and Igbo (18 percent)⁷—and over 250 smaller ethnic groups. None of the three largest groups are dominant by numbers or by other means; historically, the Yoruba have dominated education, the Igbo have dominated commerce, and the Hausa have dominated the government and armed forces (Mustapha 2004, 266). The hundreds of other ethnic groups live in the shadow of these “big three” but still fight for recognition and resources (Mustapha 2004). The absence of a dominant majority in Nigeria also plays out along religious lines; Nigeria is the largest country in the world that has near-equal numbers of Christians and Muslims, and both groups fear domination by the other (Paden 2008; Campbell 2013). Religious differences overlap significantly with ethnic and regional differences; the northern region of the country is predominantly Hausa and Muslim, and the southeast region is predominantly Igbo and Christian. The southwest Yoruba region contains Christians and Muslims; while this complicates a strict north-south Muslim-Christian dichotomy, many Nigerians still think in terms of this binary (Paden 2008). The suspicion that another ethnic or religious group has “hegemonic tendencies” has reverberated throughout Nigerian history, leading to the Biafran War (1967–70) and numerous other conflicts (Mustapha 2004). Multicultural education may operate differently in a context where each group sees itself as a marginalized minority fighting for recognition and resources, and each group fears domination by others.

While there is no dominant ethnic or religious majority in Nigeria as a whole, majorities in particular regions cause high levels of geographic seg-

⁷ CIA World Factbook, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>.

regation. In many African states, minority groups are highly concentrated, which poses problems for nations because spatially distinct groups can be mobilized around ethnic loyalties that compete with the state (Herbst and Mills 2006, 10). Because ethnic, religious, and regional distinctions coincide in Nigeria, one could say that segregation is “triple-marked” by dividing lines (Baumann 1999).

National Unity and Governing Differences

While most nations struggle to build unity among diverse groups, many African countries, and perhaps Nigeria in particular, suffer severely from such “nation problems.” Nigeria’s boundaries were drawn for colonists’ purposes, and British policies exacerbated inequalities between ethnic groups (Falola and Heaton 2008). As a result, at independence in 1960, the south was significantly more “developed” and educated than the north (Mustapha 2004, 274). When divisions between ethno-religious groups correspond to massive gaps in economic and educational levels, differences are often politicized by elites to foster rivalries.

Since the restoration of democracy in 1999, there is evidence of deepening ethno-religious divisions, partly due to a progressively weak Nigerian state (Falola and Heaton 2008). The Nigerian government has little incentive to be accountable to its population, since 80 percent of its revenues come from foreign oil companies (Paden 2008, 12). The context of high oil revenues and low accountability has led to rampant corruption; while Nigeria is the seventh largest oil producer in the world, 70 percent of Nigerians live on less than one US dollar per day (Paden 2008, 13). Jeffrey Herbst and Greg Mills (2006, 1) classify Nigeria as a “dysfunctional state” because it fails to provide welfare to its citizens, and has had “sustained period(s) of civil unrest, economic decline, state atrophy and social corrosion.” When the state fails to improve citizens’ lives, some rely on ethnic or religious networks as alternatives to citizenship (Falola and Heaton 2008, 205). Therefore, ethno-religious divisions may be deeper in Nigeria than in Western nation-states partly because people have stronger ethno-religious identities as a response to the inadequacy of their government.

In a vicious cycle, strengthened ethno-religious identities coupled with a dysfunctional state lead to ethno-religious conflict, which further undermines national unity. At least 13,500 people have been killed in ethno-religious conflicts since 1999 (Campbell 2013). Attacks by the extremist Islamic group Boko Haram, whose name means “Western education is sinful,” have left over 5,600 people dead (Associated Press 2014). Boko Haram has increasingly attacked schools, killing over 170 teachers and students since 2012 (Amnesty International 2013). In April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped more than 250 schoolgirls in northeast Nigeria; despite an international outcry, the girls have not been found. President Goodluck Jonathan’s

government has employed brutal techniques to defeat Boko Haram and has been critiqued for human rights violations (Gordon 2013; Nossiter 2013). These increases in violence have led to massive refugee outflows and renewed calls for secession by some groups (Ross 2012; UN News Centre 2013).

The “national question” has plagued Nigeria since independence. A Nigerian creator of *Sesame Square* painted this picture:

As of now, every Nigerian person . . . is an individual. It is not a community. When a man builds a house, and builds a fence so high, and puts barbed wire on the fence, and employs a mean-looking security person, and has lots of kids, do you call it Nigeria? Of course he’s a state on his own. He’s got his own army. He’s got his own reservoir so he provides his own electricity, that’s a generator. He provides his own water; he could as well provide his own education for his children. And then he becomes the Federal Republic of [his last name], that’s my own country. . . . There is no part of us that says that we’re one. (Nigerian creator, April 23, 2012)

This comment captures how Nigeria’s problems of a dysfunctional state, weak national identity, and vast inequalities are deeply intertwined. These complex contextual factors may undermine the positive potential of multicultural education.

Indeed, while the Nigerian government has used education as a tool to help unite Nigeria’s diverse groups into one nation, many of these efforts have been ineffective. Textbook chapters about different ethnic groups often serve to reproduce stereotypes instead (Gambo et al. 2007). The government has established Federal Unity Colleges, university quotas, and a national youth service corps to encourage the integration of students from different ethnic groups, but many parents are reticent to send their children to other regions because of ongoing violence (Anyanwu 2011; Campbell 2013). *Sesame Square*, a hybrid American-Nigerian project, faces some of these same challenges to recognize diversity and foster unity.

Methodology

In order to examine how creators produced a multicultural curriculum in Nigeria, I focused on the production, rather than the reception, of *Sesame Square* (Dornfeld 1998). During 9 months of research in Nigeria, I interviewed 35 *Sesame Square* staff and 37 educators who use *Sesame Square* in their classrooms. In addition, I observed meetings and film shoots in the *Sesame Square* studios and classroom viewings in six cities around Nigeria. I also conducted textual analysis of all 78 episodes produced thus far to examine the representation of diversity on the program.

This article focuses on data from repeated, in-depth interviews with 21 *Sesame Square* creators: 15 Nigerians and six Americans. The Nigerian

creators are divided into two teams. The education and outreach team, which includes six regional cultural advisors, is responsible for writing the curriculum and scripts and for ensuring that episodes are culturally and educationally appropriate. The production team films and produces the actual television episodes. Sesame Workshop's Global Education department in New York manages both of these teams. The New York team trains many of the Nigerian creators (in Nigeria and via e-mail and Skype) and makes frequent revisions to scripts and episodes. While the American team provides oversight, Nigerian creators are responsible for the majority of the program's content.

To analyze interviews, I used a combination of deductive and inductive coding, beginning with codes describing themes in which I was interested, such as "representing diversity authentically," and adding new codes that emerged from my data, such as "fear of Christian domination." I combed through excerpts and arranged them to examine agreement and disagreement among interviewees. In my citations, I usually include only the nationality of the creator (e.g., "a Nigerian creator"), in order to protect creators' confidentiality. If a Nigerian creator's ethnicity or location is relevant to the discussion, I include it (e.g., "a northern Hausa creator").

This article also draws from my episode analysis and "covieing interviews," wherein I watched episode segments with creators and asked them about their intentions for the segment and their opinions about how it turned out (a technique inspired by Tobin et al. 2009). Together, my ethnographic, interview, and episode data coalesce to paint a detailed picture of the dilemmas of multicultural education in Nigeria.

Findings

Creators continually reiterated that while representing diversity on *Sesame Square* was a touchy endeavor, it was important to do, so that children would "see themselves" represented and therefore watch and learn more.⁸ They also agreed that the opposite was true: if an ethnic or religious group was not represented on the program, they would not watch it. Creators worked under a constant fear of someone boycotting the program—a fear that was not unfounded in a context where Boko Haram claims to be fighting against Western education. One Nigerian creator explained, "If someone doesn't like one episode, that's it for *Sesame* [*Square*], we've wasted five years . . . we have to be careful" (Nigerian creator, June 23, 2010). This fear was at the heart of four overlapping anxieties that *Sesame Square* creators had about representing diversity: (1) anxieties about representing

⁸ The program also addresses diversity in terms of class, gender, disability, and HIV status. This article focuses on ethnicity and religion.

all groups equally; (2) anxieties about authentic representations of diversity; (3) anxieties that celebrating diversity could be divisive; and (4) anxieties about discussing controversial subjects, such as religion and nation. These anxieties are similar to those that multicultural educators face in other countries, but the Nigerian context brought heightened risks.

Anxieties about Equal Representation

Sesame Square creators from all over Nigeria assured me that if the program highlights one group too much, other groups will not watch. These claims were sometimes made along religious lines; creators worried that if representation is unbalanced, Muslim parents might scream, “You are teaching my child Christianity!” (Nigerian creator, July 12, 2010), or “fanatical Christians might say, ‘Okay, this is about the Muslims!’” (Nigerian creator, June 23, 2010). Ethnic representation presents additional challenges. Interviewees explained that phenotypical “markers” of ethnicity are not reliable,⁹ so diversity needs to be represented by characters’ languages, names, clothing, and geographical location. Five episodes contain languages other than English; for example, one segment teaches viewers how to say “delicious” in Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. Another segment includes children explaining the ethnic meanings of their names, three segments contain children in ethnic clothing, and other episodes rotate location between Kano (in the north), Lagos (in the southwest), and Abuja (in central Nigeria).

Despite all the efforts to represent diversity, creators were concerned that some groups were excluded. For example, one creator worried that no episodes were filmed in the Igbo southeast; filming there in 2010 was considered too dangerous due to violence near the Niger Delta (Nigerian creator, April 27, 2012). In my episode analysis, I tracked characters’ ethnicities by their names, languages, and geographic regions, and representation seemed quite equal. Nevertheless, some creators expressed concerns that *Sesame Square* catered more to the northern Muslim audience’s presumed sensitivities—about immodest dressing, physical contact, and gender roles—thereby ignoring other groups. One Christian Nigerian creator described a film shoot wherein an Igbo girl in a tank top with thin straps was told to wear a jacket, because the clothing may be offensive to Muslims. This creator asked, “If it’s okay for another child to wear a hijab, then why can’t she wear [a tank top]?” (Nigerian creator, October 28, 2011). Even though a hijab is a religious (and ethnic) symbol and a tank top is not, the tank top came to symbolize non-Muslims, a group this creator believed

⁹ Some Nigerians claim that they can tell a person’s ethnicity by their appearance, saying, for example, “Hausas are tall and thin” or “Yorubas have wider faces than Hausas,” but obvious exceptions to these generalizations make such markers unreliable.

should be equally recognized. Paradoxically, while (predominantly southern) creators saw northern children as their priority target audience because of their greater educational needs, some also resented needing to cater to this population.

All multicultural education initiatives involve arguments about whether groups are represented equally. In the Nigerian context, however, demands for recognition may be more fervent. The lack of a dominant majority and the history of ethnic competition have led groups to be very “sensitive” to the potential domination of any cultural or political sphere—including a television show—by another group. Moreover, the risks of offending a group are much higher amid current conflicts waged along ethno-religious lines. Against the backdrop of Boko Haram burning schools and killing teachers and students, fears of protests against an educational program—particularly one with Western connections—were real. These factors raised the stakes of appeasing different groups.

Anxieties about Representing Diversity Authentically

Creators were also concerned that viewers may be offended if their group was portrayed stereotypically or inaccurately. A Hausa creator acknowledged her own frustration with a (non-Hausa) southerner speaking Hausa on *Sesame Square*, “[If] you’re doing an educational activity in my language and you’re doing it wrongly . . . I won’t even look at it! Especially with the Hausa people, we are like that” (Nigerian creator, April 13, 2012). The creator may have been referring to Uncle Ado, the shopkeeper on *Sesame Square*. Several creators told me that Uncle Ado is Hausa, a fact that is marked by his language; in one episode, he teaches Kami how to say “happy birthday” in Hausa to his mother on the telephone.¹⁰ When I interviewed the actor who played Uncle Ado, he explained that while he has spoken Hausa since he was young, he was not “core Hausa”; he was concerned that “a Hausa-speaking person might watch and say, ‘Hmm, this shopkeeper is kind of suspicious. I don’t think he’s a Hausa chap at all!’” (actor, Uncle Ado, January 24, 2012). This quote illustrates the fluidity of ethnic categories—this actor explained that he is ethnically Tiv, but identifies himself somewhat as Hausa but not “core Hausa.” When I asked a Hausa creator what Uncle Ado’s ethnicity was, she said she was not sure, but “definitely not Hausa” (Nigerian creator, April 13, 2012). Both creators, then, were policing boundaries of “authentic” Hausa-ness, assuming that inauthentic portrayals may lead “core” Hausas to be offended and stop watching. Fears of boycotts, then, may have inadvertently led creators to emphasize rigid group boundaries so that viewers would be appeased by “authentic” representations of their group.

¹⁰ Season 2, episode 26.

The production team also struggled to find “real” diverse children to be on the program. The predominantly Yoruba and Christian creators often used children they knew on the program, who were also Yoruba and Christian. When they struggled to find Hausa Muslim children, they had other children pretend to be Hausa by wearing Hausa clothing and speaking phrases in Hausa (Nigerian creator, January 24, 2012). There were also discussions about children pretending to be Muslim, but Christian parents were not comfortable with this option. The production team finally found two Muslim girls to be on the program, but they were not quite as expected: “Funny enough . . . [these Muslim girls] don’t normally wear hijabs, they just tie their hair, but because we wanted children with hijabs, we asked them to bring their hijabs, because they do wear their hijabs when they go for their lessons [i.e., their religious schooling]” (Nigerian creator, April 30, 2012). The Muslim girls that they found, then, were not quite “real” enough—they did not always wear hijabs. In this case, portraying diversity required Muslim girls to wear something that they did not usually wear, in order to seem authentic. The creators found themselves trapped—if they allowed these Muslim girls to wear what they normally wore (no head scarves), the program could be seen as excluding Muslims.

One American creator lamented the fact that showing diversity often relies on monolithic representations, even when creators try to avoid stereotypes. When I asked her why, she said “it’s easier!” (American creator, February 3, 2010). She was not suggesting that creators are lazy, but that there are constraints that are difficult to navigate. The benefit of showing diversity by ethnic or religious clothing is that it can be an instantaneous cue. Creators’ suggestions for more authentic depictions of diversity involved longer interactions between “real” children, but such segments would be unlikely due to time and money constraints (Nigerian creator, October 28, 2011). More broadly, it seems the objective of representing diversity *itself* is constrained by the realities of representation to depict groups in reified ways. This illustrates an unavoidable gap between the goals and the execution of multicultural education. In order to be seen, diverse groups have to be reduced to something visible and easily recognizable. The medium of television may further constrain the representation of “authentic” diversity; television cannot engage children in more dialogic forms of multiculturalism in the way classroom teachers can (Gutmann 2004). Even if it may be inevitable, a multicultural education that perpetuates stereotypes can become a more divisive type, particularly in a volatile country such as Nigeria.

Anxieties That Emphasizing Diversity Could Be Divisive

Some of *Sesame Square*’s creators were concerned that the program focuses too much on diversity. One creator worried that highlighting diver-

sity “is just going to stamp the fact that . . . kids are different from other kids, when the whole purpose of the project is to teach respect, and tolerance, and unity” (Nigerian creator, October 28, 2011). She bemoaned the fact that the program had become “politicized” because it was “obsessed” with meeting each group’s demands for recognition. Her concerns echo Gutmann’s (2004, 80) claims that showing diversity to satisfy market pressures can pervert the politics of recognition and lead to a multicultural education that is more concerned with placating groups than with promoting equal respect.

A related concern was that representing diversity would teach about difference when young children did not see difference in the first place. Nigerian creators claimed that, “Kids don’t see Muslim/Christian; they don’t see color” (Nigerian creator, April 30, 2012). Scholars in American settings have studied similar claims and demonstrated that even very young children do recognize difference (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001; Lewis 2003). However, the belief that they do not see difference persists. A creator explained, “Kids don’t say, ‘oh, you’re Igbo, or you’re Yoruba,’ they’re just interested in having a good time with themselves . . . it’s the adults that have the problem, and we’re trying to teach [children] the prejudices we have already” (Nigerian creator, October 27, 2011).

One of the ways creators attempted to counterbalance the potentially divisive focus on diversity was to portray ethnic neutrality on *Sesame Square*. One Nigerian creator explained that *Sesame Square* is in English because Nigeria is “too multiethnic” and using local languages would cause controversy (Nigerian creator, June 23, 2010). Zobi and Kami, the two main characters, are portrayed as ethnically neutral—their names, language, and appearances cannot be tied to any one group (Nigerian creator, July 26, 2010).

Representing ethnic neutrality, in addition to countering the potential divisiveness of highlighting diversity, is also a tool for promoting national unity. Scholars recognize this strategy; Gerd Baumann (1999, 31) argues that nation-states turn the nation into a “superethnos” in order to neutralize ethnic loyalties. Will Kymlicka (2004, 64) cautions that while such pan-ethnic nation-building may be less threatening to minorities because it does not privilege the dominant majority, it may be seen as a threat to all ethnic groups. In the case of *Sesame Square*, even if creators saw ethnic neutrality as a way to avoid arguments over equal representation, it seems possible that viewers could see an ethnically neutral television program as excluding identities that are important to them.

Anxieties about balancing portrayals of differences and similarities are not unique to Nigeria. In all multicultural education efforts, overemphasizing diversity risks divisiveness, while emphasizing sameness may cause groups to feel underrepresented or “neutralized.” These risks are height-

ened in Nigeria, however, where ethno-religious divisions are contributing to violent conflict. One may hypothesize that in such a volatile context, multicultural educators would focus more on promoting unity than on highlighting diversity. This research shows, however, that most *Sesame Square* creators were more concerned about celebrating diversity, perhaps because demands for equal representation were louder than calls for unity in Nigeria.

Anxieties about Controversial Topics

Finally, *Sesame Square* creators had anxieties about whether some topics of multicultural education, such as religion and nation, were too risky to present on the program. The American *Sesame Street* is decidedly secular, and American creators were wary of including religion on *Sesame Square*. While a few Nigerians agreed that this was a risky topic, most thought representing religion was an integral part of showing Nigerian diversity. One Nigerian creator portrayed the former opinion by describing a controversial segment: “[The scriptwriters] did a segment that I told them they had to change because it was too Christian-y. . . . It was about clapping and singing songs in church. So I said, you’ve got to find out if the Muslims clap and sing songs in the mosque . . . [otherwise] if [Muslims] watch it, they’re going to say ‘OK, you’re trying to convert my children to Christianity.’ Even if it’s just a simple song. So I said they have to steer clear of religious things” (Nigerian creator, June 27, 2010). They did change that script; there were no episode segments that showed churches or mosques.

An example of the latter opinion—that while addressing religion may be risky, it seemed unwise to leave it out of portrayals of peaceful co-existence in Nigeria—comes from a segment in season 2 that includes a careful allusion to religion. While Kami and Zobi are playing in *Sesame Square*, they hear school bells, a Muslim call to prayer, and church bells, and then discuss how schools, mosques, and churches are places in their community.¹¹ I asked an American creator if it was a difficult decision to include this segment. She responded, “No, we knew we had to cross that road . . . we did it through sound. It doesn’t have to be in your space visually” (American creator, November 14, 2012). While she seemed uncomfortable with addressing religion, she acknowledged that religion was a part of the curriculum decided by the Nigerian creators. When I asked a Nigerian creator about this segment, she described the surrounding argument: “Oh yeah [laughs loudly, claps]! It was a big debate! We Nigerians thought it was okay, the Americans said, ‘No, Sesame does not . . .’—they don’t do religion. And we said, ‘You’re talking about a community, and these are the things you hear every day!’ And so let’s put what we hear,

¹¹ Season 2, episode 5.

we will not show pictures [of mosques and churches]. . . . It was a big fight. I fought a lot in season two. I think [the segment] is nice! Because now it's real" (Nigerian creator, April 30, 2012). She seemed pleased that a compromise allowed them to allude to religion in a way that the Americans did not think was too blatant, while still depicting a community that the Nigerians found realistic.

Decisions about representing religion raise complex questions about multicultural education in Western and non-Western contexts. Sesame Workshop's hesitance to allow "blatant" representations of religion could be seen as imposing Western secular beliefs. On the other hand, however, Americans had plenty of valid reasons to be nervous about including religion on *Sesame Square*. Religious differences are interwoven with ethnic differences in Nigeria and are extremely factious. Recent violence in central and northeastern Nigeria is understood as Christians and Muslims killing each other (Campbell 2013). In this volatile context, steering clear of religion may be the only safe route for *Sesame Square*.

Including religion on *Sesame Square* is dangerous not only because of the current conflicts, but also because religious diversity may be more difficult to reconcile. Jonathan Zimmerman (2002, 215) explains how religion presents different challenges to multicultural education, because while the heroes of racial and ethnic groups can be "folded in" to the curriculum, "different moral frameworks simply cannot be mixed into the curriculum like so many spices . . . these frameworks are fundamentally 'incommensurable'—that is, each one supposes the invalidity of the other." While ethnic differences may be seen as *different*, religious differences may seem *wrong*, because they diametrically contradict one's "deepest ethical commitments" (Gutmann 2004, 82).

In the United States, scholars cite the irreconcilability of religious differences as one of the reasons to leave religion out of multicultural education (Gutmann 2004). But in Nigeria, where religion is more present in the public sphere, and where religious and ethnic identities overlap, any depiction of Nigerian diversity that does not include religion may seem incomplete. The fact that religious difference is used to justify violence in Nigeria simultaneously makes it a topic that is more dangerous, and more necessary, to include in multicultural education. Additionally, however, in societies where religious diversity is factious, multicultural education may need to focus more on fostering peaceful coexistence and national unity.

Sesame Square creators also disagreed about how to represent the Nigerian nation. American creators expressed the same hesitance about representing the nation as they did about representing religion. The American *Sesame Street* rarely refers to the nation; it has always portrayed a neighborhood that was not tied to a specific region. An American creator explained that she felt uncomfortable alluding to the nation: "Even for a puppet to

say ‘Nigeria’ . . . it was odd for me . . . you’re in Sesame Square!” This creator is the same woman quoted above who advocated for subtle inclusions of religion; similarly, she wanted to find a child-friendly way to represent the nation that was not too “extreme” (American creator, August 25, 2010). Once again, Nigerians advocated for more direct representations of the nation, in order to encourage national unity and present a positive national image (American creator, November 20, 2012).

In a segment in season 1, Kami and Zobi celebrate Independence Day, “Nigeria’s birthday,” with green and white balloons. Kami says that “It’s really, really important for us to be proud of our country, Zobi!” They look at the map of Nigeria, and Zobi says, “Can you believe that there are lots and lots and lots of different kinds of people living in Nigeria?” Kami shows a flag and explains that the green stands for greenery and the white represents peace, “so we can all get along!”¹² Season 3 includes another episode about Independence Day wherein children dressed in ethnic costumes sing: “I know a lot about my country, I know a lot because I care. Nigeria, my beloved country, our future is you and me.”¹³ The fact that they sang a new song instead of the national anthem, and colored a construction paper flag instead of flying a real flag, suggests a possible hesitance with connecting the program with the embattled Nigerian nation. Perhaps creators wanted *Sesame Square* to represent a better version of Nigeria, where lots and lots of people really could get along.

Sesame Square creators, like multicultural educators everywhere, struggled to carefully address “hot-button issues”—in their case, religion and nation—as part of their efforts to promote tolerance and unity. Once again, this endeavor was made even more risky by contextual factors in Nigeria, where conflicts are waged along religious lines, and many Nigerians have conflicted relationships with their nation (Bach 2006; Falola and Heaton 2008).

Discussion and Conclusion

If multicultural education is indeed becoming a global phenomenon (Banks 2009), it is imperative that we consider the challenges it faces in different contexts. Certain characteristics that gave birth to multicultural education in Western liberal democracies—such as minority groups fighting for equal recognition by the state—differ in Nigeria. Demographic, historical, and political factors have deepened divisions between Nigerian ethno-religious groups. The weakness of the Nigerian state has led people

¹² Season 1, episode 16.

¹³ Season 3, episode 16.

to identify more deeply with ethnic and religious identities, and schisms between groups have contributed to ongoing conflict.

Despite these differences in context, however, Nigerian educators faced similar dilemmas as those their Western counterparts face when creating a multicultural education initiative. They grappled with the “backpack of contradictions” that accompanies multicultural education wherever it goes—struggling with how to represent diverse groups equally and authentically, how to celebrate diversity without exacerbating divisions, and how best to approach controversial topics. As they “unpacked” these dilemmas in the Nigerian context, there were differences in the details of how diversity was marked and which topics were controversial—but ultimately, educators faced very similar challenges.

While the dilemmas are similar, the risks of creating a divisive type of multicultural education may be heightened in Nigeria. As described above, scholars who write about the potentially divisive types of multicultural education often recommend revisions to make it more salutary. For example, Mica Pollock (2005) critiques the “one race each month”-type curriculum for reifying boundaries between groups, and suggests that, instead, contributions of different groups should be woven throughout the curriculum. Promising recommendations such as these suggest that it is the *pedagogical strategies* of multicultural education that determine its effect. In addition to the strategies, my research suggests that the context where multicultural education takes place may influence its outcomes. In a self-perpetuating cycle, deeply divided societies may be more likely to develop divisive types of multicultural education.

Ongoing ethno-religious rivalries in Nigeria have contributed to significant “sensitivity” about equal recognition, which led *Sesame Square* creators to be meticulous in their portrayal of diversity. While it is difficult to quantify whether *Sesame Square* portrayed more diversity or more unity, episode analysis indicates that program segments highlighting diversity were more common than segments explicitly addressing national unity, and creators spoke more about the importance of representing diversity. The American *Sesame Street* also emphasizes diversity more than unity. Like Nigeria, the United States contains multiple groups that vie for recognition—groups that will protest if they do not see themselves represented. However, contextual differences in the US, such as the relative strength of the American state, make emphasizing diversity a decidedly less risky endeavor. While the American state is certainly critiqued for unequal resource distribution, Americans typically still have some measure of faith that the government is providing for them—certainly more than most Nigerians do. Moreover, certain (imperfect) uniting ideologies such as egalitarianism and a “nation of immigrants” make the United States strong enough

to stay together even when diversity is emphasized. This suggests that multicultural education may require some base level of shared national identity in order to be successful, a suggestion that seems paradoxical because it claims that unity between groups may be a prerequisite for salutary types of multicultural education, rather than a result of such initiatives.

A related prerequisite for successful multicultural education may be the absence of ongoing conflict. American multicultural education may have the luxury of celebrating diversity because American citizens are not being mobilized en masse to attack ethnic and religious others. This again seems paradoxical, suggesting that some level of peace is necessary before peace-building initiatives can be successful. While a divisive type of multicultural education may not directly cause conflict, it seems questionable that it would help to alleviate it.

Nigeria also grapples with the fact that a particular type of diversity—religious difference—is extremely factious. Several factors make religious diversity in Nigeria different from that in most Western nations: the population is evenly split between Christians and Muslims; religious and ethnic identities are inextricable; religion is ubiquitous in the public sphere; and religious differences are currently being utilized to instigate violence. These factors, coupled with the fact that religious differences may be less reconcilable, make the inclusion of religion in multicultural education an extremely delicate project. These same factors, however, may mean that the option of leaving religion out of multicultural education, as is often advocated in Western countries, is untenable.

What does this mean for multicultural education in deeply divided societies? Emphasizing diversity—without the risk of furthering divisions—may be a luxury reserved for nations that have some semblance of a cohesive national identity, some faith in their government, and some level of peace and stability. The contextual realities of postcolonial nations such as Nigeria may require that educators recalibrate the balance between diversity and unity, and increase the emphasis on the latter. If *Sesame Square* aspires to inculcate tolerance among groups, it may need to further emphasize commonalities, as several creators themselves suggested. For example, one Nigerian creator recommended that instead of showing children in ethnic costumes, *Sesame Square* could include a Muslim and a Christian girl, conversing about how they both pray and celebrate religious holidays—just in different ways (Nigerian creator, October 28, 2011). Another Nigerian creator explained that it was essential to show children from different ethnic groups playing as friends on the program, so viewers could picture the possibilities of integration (Nigerian creator, April 13, 2012).

Neither of these creators recommended that *Sesame Square* include more references to the Nigerian nation; they seemed to want to teach a

type of unity that did not necessarily refer to the Nigerian state. This is understandable in a context where many citizens doubt the government's ability or willingness to provide for them. In fact, in recent years, the few times that diverse Nigerians have united have been during protests against the Nigerian government.¹⁴

Conflict resolution programs in other African countries have emphasized the need for (especially) youth to interact and build alliances based on cross-group commonalities. For example, a Mercy Corps report about postelection violence in Kenya found that youth who identified first as Kenyans (before their tribal identification) were two times less likely to engage in political violence (Kurtz 2011). This report recommends that future initiatives help to foster relationships across boundaries. On a program such as *Sesame Square*, more segments could emphasize the commonalities between ethnic and religious groups and showcase diverse children building relationships.

On a less optimistic note, the fact that multicultural education in a fractured society may exacerbate divisions suggests that the potential benefits may be limited, making such projects aspirational at best. As one Nigeria creator explained, depictions of ethnic and religious integration on *Sesame Square* may seem unrealistic or even offensive to viewers, given the current conflict and levels of distrust between groups (Nigerian creator, April 12, 2012). At the very least, this creator believed, *Sesame Square* could show a more peaceful version of Nigeria that children could hope for. If the Nigerian government is able to establish greater stability and adequate services for its citizens, this will likely help Nigerians to feel more Nigerian—but this is a tall order, and a long-term objective. In the meantime, perhaps initiatives such as *Sesame Square* can portray the peaceful integration that may be possible one day.

Finally, this study brings important insights to dilemmas of multicultural education itself. Even in a significantly different context such as Nigeria, the documented dilemmas of multicultural education in Western societies persist. Examining how these tensions play out in new surroundings helps us to better understand the tensions themselves. Dilemmas about equal and authentic representation, and about balancing diversity and unity, will persist wherever educators attempt multicultural education. The ability to manage these tensions more effectively may improve if scholars and educators better understand them.

¹⁴ Diverse ethnic groups united in antigovernment protests in January 2012, when President Jonathan reduced fuel subsidies, and again in May 2014, when the government failed to act swiftly to bring back the kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls.

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