

**BOOK REVIEW – *Can Big Bird Fight Terrorism? Children’s Television and***

***Globalized Multicultural Education*, by Naomi A. Moland**

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It is unsurprising that Sesame Street holds the title for longest running and most watched children’s television program in the world. Since the 1960s, the show has educated children across the globe, teaching practical skills like counting to moral lessons on how to share. However, offering superlatives makes it easy to marvel at Sesame Street’s global fame while overlooking the implications of its reach. With over 30 co-productions of Sesame Street in more than 150 countries, what happens when the intentions of the program differ? Or if the moral lessons being taught are not universal? In her book *Can Big Bird Fight Terrorism? Children’s Television and Globalized Multicultural Education*, Naomi A. Moland addresses these concerns and ultimately tackles the complicated question posed in her title.

Moland centers her book on the Nigerian co-production of Sesame Street, which is called Sesame Square. She explains that the program was funded, in part, by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to combat the recruitment of Nigerian youth into the extremist group Boko Haram. Rather than use military force in the conflict-ridden region, USAID utilized childhood education to teach ethnic and religious tolerance. Though Moland highlights the benefits that this style of informal education offers, the book outlines her two main findings: (1) Sesame Square’s focus on diversity and representation reproduced stereotypes and promoted “othering,” and (2) the intolerant “public curriculum” – that is, “the politics and occurrences in the surrounding society” weakened the impact of Sesame Square’s messages of tolerance on Nigerian children (Moland, 2019, p. 4). These conclusions seemingly answer the big question; in Nigeria, Sesame Square could not effectively fight terrorism through teaching tolerance. However, this answer may not be as clear cut as it seems. Throughout the course of the book, other questions arise that warrant unpacking. In this review, I focus on two: Who is Sesame Square actually for, and is it fair to call for “Nigerian unity”?

As Moland deconstructs the production process of Sesame Square, a recurring question was: Who is the audience? Being the predominantly Muslim region, northern Nigeria experienced most of Boko Haram's violence and recruitment. As such, USAID hoped to deter mainly northern children from extremism. The problematic nature of Sesame Square arises in the demographics of the show's Nigerian creators. Most of them were from the more developed south, and many saw northerners as uneducated, backwards, and uncivilized. Moland contextualizes this, explaining that the north is predominantly Muslim, underdeveloped, and less educated, while the south is predominantly Christian and modernized. Moland offers the concept of "nesting orientalisms" (p. 57) to better frame the stereotypes of northerners. Stereotypes of backwardness are often perpetuated by the West toward "other" peoples from the global south. As Moland explains, this orientalist view of the "other" is then shifted from the global scale to "others" within the society. In this case, the Western view of Africa as uncivilized is then perpetuated by southerners against northerners within Nigeria. This reframes the purpose of Sesame Square: it becomes an inherently "civilizing mission" (Moland, 2019, p. 58) to "liberate" northern children from their "repressive" religion and culture.

This view of Sesame Square as a civilizing mission funded by USAID evokes an underlying tone of imperialism. When the creators of the show, although they are Nigerian, harbor deeply prejudiced views of the intended audience, the goal of teaching tolerance is defeated. Previous scholarship highlights the importance of not conflating contemporary development projects and colonialism (Moland, 2019, p. 89), but it is hard to not notice imperialist parallels when stereotypes are being perpetuated and the USAID logo and motto are used (Moland, 2019, p. 43). This imperialist lens highlights an oppressed/oppressor dynamic that I find particularly interesting. For instance, Moland refers to a study conducted with children from Palestine and Israel who watched their local productions of Sesame Street. The study found that "while there was an increase in positive perceptions of the other among [children] living in Israel, this was not the case for Palestinian children" (Moland, 2019, p. 40). The study raises the important question of who multicultural education is for. One would reasonably not expect Palestinian children to have positive perceptions of their oppressor. Likewise, although Muslim northerners are not necessarily the minority in Nigeria, is it not fair to ask them to see Sesame Square as anything other than patronizing?

When thinking about the ineffectiveness of Sesame Square in reducing terrorism, the goals of the show must be considered, one of which was to build national unity. Though Moland does touch on the colonial history of Nigeria, she fails to discuss in-depth how the imperialist nature of Nigeria's founding makes this call for unity unrealistic. The arbitrary border-drawing of African states by European

powers meant that multiple ethnic and religious groups, who were once autonomous, were suddenly being grouped together and labeled as one. Moland's introduction highlights Nigeria's ethnic diversity, stating that Nigeria is "divided into more than 250 ethnic groups" (p. 12). Attempting to instill national unity in people who never asked to be united under one nation in the first place is problematic. This is especially true when looking at the consequences of a weak and corrupt Nigerian government. As the security and community needs of Nigerians are not met by their national government, it is understandable that they would find that safety with those who share their identity. Daniel Agbiboa (2013) discusses this in his article "Why Boko Haram Exists," arguing that "religious conflicts need not be about religion...religion serves as the unifying and mobilizing identity" (p. 150). When combatting terrorist groups like Boko Haram, I understand the interest in making national unity a more salient identity to reduce extremism. However, this call for Nigerian children to identify with their "Nigerian-ness," over their own community, must be preceded by government reform. It is unreasonable to call for national unity when ethno-religious communities are protecting Nigerians more than the government.

Overall, reading Naomi Moland's book was incredibly fascinating. Her main observations highlighted the major impediments to the success of Sesame Square in fighting Boko Haram. The complexities of each topic touched on in this book, from childhood education to terrorism, make this an inherently layered story, giving rise to many new questions. Ultimately, the question was not just whether Big Bird can fight terrorism, but also whether it is appropriate and reasonable to use Big Bird to fight terrorism. While these questions are not easily answered, I would recommend reading *Can Big Bird Fight Terrorism?* to come to your own conclusion.

## References

- Agbiboa, D. (2013). Why Boko Haram Exists: The Relative Deprivation Perspective. *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, 3(1), 144-57.
- Moland, N. (2019). *Can Big Bird Fight Terrorism? Children's Television and Globalized Multicultural Education*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

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