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Big Bird in South Africa

Rena Singer

"Sesame Street" star Big Bird has a new role: nation-builder.

Producers for the South African version of the popular children's television show hope that the gentle yellow giant will foster harmony in this nation recovering from apartheid.

"The overarching theme of the program is that of nation-building...." says Salie Abrahams, director of research for the South African production. "We have this nation that's arising. We can contribute to this."

The program, premiering in South Africa this week, has the nonracist, nonsexist, inclusive approach traditional in "Sesame Street" programming. It features mixed-race couples, disabled children, and skits about accepting people who look different - standard fare in the US, but new and important lessons in this newly dubbed "rainbow nation" still grappling with the aftermath of white rule.

"We are social educators trying to deconstruct the legacy of apartheid," says Abrahams, a South African-born, Harvard-trained psychologist. "It is social engineering."

Says Seipati Bulane-Hopa, the show's executive producer: "The Street represents some reality we want to see in this country, where all kids come together and see themselves as South African, a street where all people of South Africa can learn and play together."

And understand each other - not an easy feat in a country with 43 million people and 11 generally mutually unintelligible languages. "Takalani Sesame," as the South African version of the show is called, illustrates the challenge language poses as this diverse nation tries to find common ground.

The first hurdle for the producers trying to engineer mutual understanding on "Sesame Street" - and for government officials attempting the same on the streets of Johannesburg or Cape Town - is language. Which language should be the lingua franca in offices, schools, and on the streets?

The producers and government officials seem to have reached the same conclusion.

"We didn't want to choose one language and teach it," says Clarence Hamilton, head writer for the program. "We wanted to showcase the languages, to use them without shame."

And so Moshe, a brown adult-size muppet with a pear-shaped figure modeled after the African ferretlike meerkat, skips between Zulu and English. Zikwe, a blue furry monster with an attitude, liberally sprinkles words from all 11 languages into his English dialogue. The human character Nkgono entralls the muppets and children with stories in various African languages.

It is part of the ambitious national post-apartheid shift away from Afrikaans, a Dutch creole forced upon all students during white rule here, toward multilingual communication.

The post-apartheid government has dubbed all 11 languages "official." The country's new motto, unveiled earlier this year, has been translated into all 11 languages. And the government went so far as to air radio commercials designed to teach citizens how to say the maxim "Unity in Diversity" in each of the languages.

The Education Ministry is currently considering a policy that would require all children, no matter their background, to learn at least one African language in addition to the usual Afrikaans or English.

"We think it will promote reconciliation and nation-building," said Bkeki Khumalo, a spokesman for the department. "We can't understand each other if we can't communicate."

The multilingual muppets and actors fluidly move among 11 different languages. The sights along South Africa's "Sesame Street" are distinctive as well.

A live-action clip shows rural children collecting caterpillars from the bush, which their mother then boils, sundries, and serves up for breakfast.

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Round mud huts have replaced the brownstones familiar to US audiences, and groceries come from the loal spaza.

The South African production of "Sesame Street" is the 20th international spin-off of the show. This first sub-Saharan production is also the first to include a radio component to reach children who have no television.

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