LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION:
THE CASE OF MALAYSIA AND UGANDA
Confronting New Realities

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The purpose of the first part of this paper is to examine the role of language in the politics of cultural sub-nationalism in Uganda. The questions it seeks to answer are: (a) To what degree is language part of the problem of cultural sub-nationalism in Uganda? and (b) To what degree can language be part of the solution, if indeed there is any?

In addressing these questions, I will refer to two essays written by two different Africanists-Ali A Mazrui[1] and Nelson Kasfir.[2] I will also refer to the opening address delivered by Milton Obote, former President of Uganda, before a seminar on Mass Media and Linguistic Communications in East Africa which took place in Kampala in 1967.[3] These three essays form the basis of this part of the paper. However, it must be noted here that these three authors do not directly address the role of language in the politics of Ugandan cultural sub-nationalism. It will be my task to extrapolate such information. I will approach this issue by critically reviewing these three essays, integrating them with my personal insights and opinions.

In discussing this topic one feels that he is obliged to consider other subjects that are equally relevant, such as anthropology, history, sociology, and political science. Although the interdisciplinary

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1   Ali Mazrui, "The Racial Boundaries of The English Language," in *The Political Sociology of The English Language* (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1975), pp. 69-85. All page references are to this edition.

2   Nelson Kasfir, "Cultural Sub-Nationalism in Uganda," in *The Politics of Cultural Sub-Nationalism*, edited by Victor A Olorunsola (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 49-148. All page references are to this edition.

3   Milton Obote, "Language and National Identification," Appendix A in *The Political Sociology of The English Language*, edited by Ali Mazrui (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1975), pp. 210-215. All page references are to this edition.

approach is appropriate in this kind of study, I am compelled by practical necessity to deal with specifics as much as possible.

In his treatment of the politics of cultural sub-nationalism, Nelson Kasfir dealt with a number of issues. He discussed the various traditional political cultures in Uganda. He elaborated upon the colonial administration's treatment of the various cultures within the framework of the state. Efforts made by different traditional cultural groups to insure their survival within the framework of the independent state were also highlighted. Kasfir successfully attempted to outline the historical experiences in the post-independent era which point to the incompatibilities or intensification of the politics of sub-nationalism. He pointed out the methods used to keep cultural sub-nationalism from destroying the state, offering his own suggestions as to how sub-nationalism can be made compatible with a country's nationalistic drives.

Ali Mazrui made the distinction between communalist languages and ecumenical languages. According to him, Ugandan languages fall under the category of communalist languages, and thus play a major role in defining race or tribal groups. Milton Obote, former President of Uganda, enumerated the various obstacles preventing the country from adopting a Ugandan language as a national language. He discussed the importance of adopting an African language that would not isolate Uganda from its neighbors. In proposing Swahili as an African national language, he admitted that Swahili itself is not without its disadvantages. Although former president Obote acknowledged that the government and the people of Uganda recognize certain advantages in learning English, he seemed to agree with Ali Mazrui that as long as English is the official language of an African State, there will always be a conflict between dignity and linguistic nationality in that particular state.

In his discussion of the politics of cultural sub-nationalism, Kasfir did not distinguish between sub-nationalism and ethnicity. To him, there is no difference between the two. He seemed to agree with the criteria that have been advanced for defining African ethnic groups, which include language, territory, social structure and cultural patterns. Nevertheless, he was not certain as to whether or not this broad definition of ethnicity fits all Ugandan peoples.