AL-SHAJARAH

Contents

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.

As far as language was concerned Kasfir believed that four major language families spoken in Uganda–Bantu, Nilo-Hamitic, Niloic, and Sudanic, are of less importance in ethnic determination. Since English and Swahili can affect the role of Ugandan languages in this respect. However, he seems to have forgotten the fact, which he himself has mentioned, that the four major linguistic families mentioned above have been major factors in "the formation of ethnic coalitions in national politics."[4] Moreover one must not forget that neither Swahili nor English has reached the necessary degree of acceptance as national languages in terms of the number of speakers.

The debate continues as to what language Uganda must adopt as a national language; until this debate is settled, and even after it is settled, Ugandan languages will play a prominent role in national politics. It is not easy to distinguish between ethnicity and language in Uganda; even on the larger scale, the definitions of the family of related tribes of Bantu and Nilotes are extremely reliant on linguistic criteria.[5] On a smaller scale, Luganda and Luo, the two Ugandan communalist languages, "are race-bound or tribe-bound, and serve to define as communities those who speak them as mother-tongues."[6]

The problems posed by cultural sub-nationalism indeed jeopardize the achievement of nationalism and national integration in the country. The call for "one state-many nations" in Africa may lead either to the existence of multinational states or to the perpetual fragmentation of sovereign states. This will be caused by cultural groups that express, every now and then, the right to autonomy and self-determination, as we shall see in the example of Uganda.

The British colonial policy of indirect rule has, no doubt, contributed greatly to the increase in cultural sub-nationalism. To the British, it is cheaper to permit traditional authorities to carry out administrative tasks under British supervision than to have British officers do it themselves. Thus, local ethnic areas were separately

4. Otorussola, p.57.
5. Mazrui, p. 69.
6. Mazrui, p. 70.

administered on the assumption that indirect rule required a tribal unit governed by traditional authorities. In this respect, the colonial administrative techniques, in achieving law, order and development, often stimulated cultural sub-nationalism. Unequal educational and economic development aroused frustrations and, consequently, intensified feelings of cultural sub-nationalism. At the time when the British decided to leave Uganda, cultural sub-nationalism increased because minority ethnic groups feared their rights would be taken when the British departed. As Kasfir has put it:

The departure of the alien government tended to remove one force of unity within the national state. With the British present all Africans could unite against the common enemy. With the British absent they would have to allocate resources among themselves.[7]

The development of nationalist parties after independence as coalitions of district political notables rather than as centralized national organizations also contributed to cultural sub-nationalism. This was the case until Milton Obote took over in 1966. After that, according to Kasfir, things began to change for the better.[8]

In his attempt to settle the conflict between ethnicity and national integration, Kasfir never considered language as part of the solution. To him, the solution to this problem exists only in the political arena. It is true, according to Kasfir, that "loyalties based on ethnic and district groups resulted in political competition that weakened national political leaders and diverted resources."[9]

Still, Kasfir believed, it is "more appropriate to build a nation by developing political structures which take ethnic and district loyalties into account rather than disregarding them."[10] However, language, the most important ingredient in ethnicity, does not receive any attention from him.

7 Okorunsola p. 87.
8 Ibid, p. 85
9 Ibid, p. 134.
10 Ibid, p. 134.

Kasfir strongly agreed with the politicians who came after 1966 that the central government, as the most institutionalized political organization in the country, should be used in finding a political structure that would reduce and redirect local demands. The government is thus viewed as a vital core in the political solution. "Building a nation in Uganda, if successful, will be accomplished by working from the center outwards, not from the periphery inwards."[11]

I believe that this is part of the solution. Another part of the solution is language. Any attempt made to reduce the conflict between ethnicity and national integration must, in my view, try to disarm ethnicity of one of its most efficient weapons, LANGUAGE.

None of the Ugandan communalist languages can be adopted at the national level because this would lead to great trouble in the country, since no ethnic group would desire to be linguistically assimilated into another one.

As Ali Mazrui observed, this is what previously happened in Uganda:

Communalist languages could be highly absorptive in the sense of allowing even newcomers to the language to be categorized racially or tribally as natives, provided they have, in fact, succeeded in being linguistically assimilated. This phenomenon has been striking in Baganda itself, where new groups coming during the last two or three generations, acquiring Luganda gradually as a first language, have in time become Baganda. They become Baganda once Luganda has become their first language.[12]

Thus, Luganda, which is spoken by the greatest number of people, cannot be adopted as the official language for administrative purposes because if this happens, as former president Obote has observed, "some of us will have to go out of the government"[13] "The

11 Ibid, p. 134.
12 Mazrui, p. 70.
13 Ibid, p. 211.

areas we now represent. "Obote continues, "would not like to have just any person who speaks Luganda to represent them. They would feel unrepresented."[14]

Once again, one must emphasize the fact that unless replaced by either English or Swahili, communalist languages would remain an important element in ethnic determination. The efforts that have been made to adopt one of these two languages should not be understood as reflecting a policy of abolishing Ugandan languages entirely. Nobody in his right mind would do such a thing. However, this does not negate the fact that as time passes, some of these languages will die gradually-if the government purposely encourages the adoption of either English or Swahili.

The need for Ugandans to communicate with one another in one common language must not be ignored. The fact that Radio Uganda broadcasts in fifteen languages clearly demonstrates the country's linguistic diversity. One must feel the psychological barriers that are created by these linguistic divisions between the people of the same country. It is hard for me to imagine living in a country where I cannot communicate with common folks who, like many, may not have had a formal education. Uganda must act as quickly as possible. The problems posed by cultural sub-nationalism will not disappear with time if neglected.

We have already ruled out the possibility of adopting a Ugandan language as a lingua franca in the country. Another major reason for not adopting a Ugandan language is the importance of communication between Uganda and its five neighboring states, where none of the Ugandan languages is spoken.[15] It appears that Uganda has to choose between Swahili and English. At the present time, English is the official language of the country; this has both advantages and disadvantages. Since English is not Uganda's lingua franca, it became the language of the government, spoken by only a few privileged elitist groups.[16] If Uganda seeks a language that will not isolate it from its Swahili-speaking neighbors, English is not

14. Ibid, p. 212.
15. Ibid, p. 213.
16. Advantages and disadvantages are fully discussed in Mazrui's, pp. 210-212.

suitable. Problems of dignity and linguistic nationality will always remain if English, the language of the Masters, is adopted as the common language of the state.

Former president Obote raises the question of whether Swahili can express the different Ugandan cultures.[17] This, I believe, is the task of linguists and experts. Before 1966, Swahili was taught in Uganda, but this was discontinued because it was believed that one cannot adopt a language without adopting its culture. Former president Obote later believed that "one can learn a language without taking the culture that that language expresses."[18] Unlike Hausa, which carries Islam, Islamic culture and customs with it, Swahili is now becoming less absorptive. It is on its way toward becoming an ecumenical language. There is "an increasing number of people in Tanzania and Kenya who are growing up bilingual in Swahili and their own tribal language."[19] As Ali Mazrui has observed:

The Waswahili, in the original sense "the people of the coast," were defined by reference to some degree of Arabization and Islamization. Because they are now politically unimportant, their language stands a chance of being acceptable to others.[20]

On the basis of the points made above, I believe that Swahili is the best choice for Ugandan national language. However, whether it is English or Swahili, Uganda must act as quickly as possible in promoting its national language not only in the public sector, but also as a medium of instruction and as a means of communication. As long as ethnicity remains an important consideration in Ugandan politics, language will, without doubt, be part of the problem.

The early stages of national reconstruction in Africa and Asia witnessed a decolonization movement in more than one aspect of life. This movement was championed by literateurs, thinkers, artists

17. Mazrui, P. 213.
18. Ibid, p. 213.
19. Ibid, p. 70.
20. Ibid, p. 71.

and statesmen who for the first time began to see the relevance of language to issues and concepts such as reality, culture, values, literature, and national integration. These were indeed relevant issues to newly emerging societies struggling to redefine their cultural and political identities.

If we take the concept of "national language" in the Malaysian context, we find that it evolved during the period of independence in an emerging nation culturally and racially pluralistic. To Malaysia then, building a technologically advanced society was no less important than building a national identity. Thus, adopting an indigenous tongue as the national or common language was and still is thought of as an important characteristic in the issue of national identity:

A common indigenous language in the modern nation-states is a powerful factor for unity. Cutting across tribal and ethnic lines, it promotes a feeling of single community. Additionally it makes possible the expression and development of social ideals, economic targets and cultural identity easily perceived by citizens. It is, in a word, a powerful factor for mobilization of people and resources for nationhood.[21]

While the cultural and racial diversity in Malaysia can enrich and flavor the general atmosphere of life in the country, the fact that a strong relationship is maintained between ethnicity, language and religion may hamper society's movement towards sociocultural integration. The solution to Malaysia thus lies in maintaining a balance between unity and diversity, between proximity and distance. Malaysia's National Language Policy does provide this balance in the sense that it caters for both diversity and distance through the language policy which is all-embracing with regard to all other languages including Tamil and Mandarin, the two major languages after Malay.

21 Cited in Joshua A. Fishman, *Language in Sociocultural Change* (California: Stanford University Press, 1972) pp. 198-199.

With respect to unity and proximity the choice of Malay as national language seems to be the right thing, the reasons being that it is the language of the soil, of an eminent culture and religion, of administration, and-most of all, a language that has had a written tradition that dates back to more than a thousand years.[22] As Professor Asmah Haji Omar commented on the choice of Malay as the national language:

Superficially it would have been fair to choose a language which is not identifiable with any community-fair and square. However, traditions die hard. The Malays, as a race, would rather die than lose their language to a foreign one. The motto Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa ("Language is the soul of the nation") is deeply ingrained in them. This is not to say that they are against learning a foreign language. In fact they are quite open-minded in this matter, having accepted Arabic and English. But making English the national or the sole official language would have made them lose face, especially in the eyes of Indonesia which had taken precedence in elevating the language as her national language of integration (bahasa persatuan). So why unseat Malay from its natural soil? Why not give it back the status it enjoyed in the period before the coming of the Westerners?

Besides, not only has the national language a utility role but it also has a symbolic function. It exudes emotion-one that gives the feeling of pride in and attachment to one's country. This is true with the Malays and perhaps with the other bumiputera groups. It may not be so with others, but at least there is a community that is emotionally attached to it, and this community happens to be a major one.[23]

22 Asmah Haji Omar, *Malay in Sociocultural Context* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1987), p65.

23 *Ibid*, pp. 66-67.

Thus Malaysia's language planning policy has adopted Malay as a language of education, of commerce, of public service, and of the media because it is the language of wider communication and of a core culture. The fact that the policy gives every ethnic group the right to use its own language underscores its equality element. However, more importantly, the choice of Malay as the official language of the country puts society as a whole on the road towards indigenousness and sociocultural integration, a process that distinctly characterizes post-independence Asia and Africa in general.

But more than the perceptible link between language and national integration, there is language interrelationship with culture, values, and world-view. The notion that language is an index to culture is an old one. If we define culture as a way of life pertaining to a particular people, we can assume that the values of these people will be carried in their language. According to Asmah Haji Omar:

It cannot be denied that values are better understood from the speaker's own language than via another. As such, Chinese values inherent in their own language should be comprehended via the Chinese language, not through the national language. Hence, the other races; and in particular the Malays, should learn to speak the Chinese language. But that is another milestone in the process of bridging the gap between the various races of Malaysia.[24]

Perhaps another example from Africa will better explain this intricate relationship between language and culture. Ngugi Wa Thiongo, a leading Kenyan writer, believes that for the African writer, who is supposed to be the conscience of his people, the choice of a European language is especially embarrassing since he deals with language both as a means of communication and as a carrier of culture. He draws the example of English which is spoken in Britain, Sweden, and Denmark. While for the Swedish and Danish, English is only a means of communication with non-Scandinavians, for the

24. Ibid, p. 65.

English it is a carrier of their culture and history.[25]

For the African writer the question of language as culture is very valid. Africa's very history speaks to this effect. An entire continent with very few cultural similarities with the West has been experiencing perhaps the fastest pace of Westernization in the globe.[26] The cultural captivity of Africa to the West has definitely been a handy tool for colonial exploitation.

Culture itself has many functions.[27] If we consider the communicative function of culture, we see that it includes aspects that range from the use of language in the literal sense to physical gestures, image-forming processes, even modes of dressing. Thus, the roles of language and culture are so integrated that it becomes difficult to separate the two Ngugi Wa Thiongo intelligently highlights this unique relationship:

Language as communication and as culture is then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.[28]

25. Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (London: James Currey, 1986), p. 13.

26. Ali A Mazrui, The African Condition, p. 47.

27. Ali A Mazrui relates the process of Westernization in Africa to seven functions of culture. He discusses these functions in chapter three of his book, The African Condition, pp. 46-69.

28. Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Decolonizing the Mind, pp. 15-16.

To Ngugi, language is a memory-bank of a people; it reflects their historical consciousness. Consequently, the literature of a people draws upon their collective experience, upon their history which is embodied in their language. According to him, an African writer who uses a European language is actually reflecting the historical consciousness of the foreigners and promoting the bourgeois culture carried by that language, all the while he is undermining his own language and culture. This is why Ngugi believes that his previous works in English speak only to the intelligentsia and do not communicate with the vast majority of his people. As he himself once said, "I knew whom I was writing about but whom was I writing for?"[29] This situation ultimately led Ngugi to give up writing in English and to write in Kikuyu. And since his books in Kikuyu are inevitably translated into European languages, they still reach a large audience.

The interrelationship between language on the one hand and reality and world-view on the other is responsible for a continuous debate among social linguists. Perhaps one can sum up this debate by saying that man's perception and conception of realities around him as well as his world-view are both recorded in his language. But language does not create reality, rather it reflects it:

The view that language reflects reality stems from the premise that language is the product of man's perception of his environment and of his understanding of reality. From perception comes conceptualization, in which Man is able to make use of verbal symbols to record his thoughts and experiences. It is these two processes, perception and conceptualization, that have been responsible for the emergence of a language of one community that is different from that of another. That is to say, a certain people perceive differently from another, and a group of people in a particular environment have their own type of perception, based

29 Ibid, p. 72.

on the environment around them and their experiences in life. Hence, as mentioned earlier, a language with a rich treasury of rice-farming terms is certainly to be one that is spoken by people who are in the pursuit of this type of occupation. This shows that the speakers concerned, being involved as they are in rice-farming, are able to differentiate the realities in their rice-farming environment and type of life better than those people whose daily pursuits are more in the line of fishing.[30]

Thus, the process of perception is also related to world-view which is, according to Asmah Omar:

World-view is defined as the way a certain people perceive life and this perception may be reflected in or influenced by various media: language, culture, religion, and so on. As such, examining people's perception through any of the media mentioned means examining the relationship between this medium and their thought processes.[31]

Perhaps at least in the context of the Muslim world one can say that the religion of Islam has been the most important factor in shaping the world-view of its followers throughout history, the only exception being the last two centuries in which the Muslim world was subjugated to Western domination. If we view culture as an all-inclusive category within which we can absorb the political, economic, moral, religious, and scientific categories of life, we find that popular culture in the Muslim world has been immensely saturated with the values of Islam. This in turn has been reflected through Arabic, the language of the Qur'an.

The link between the Arabic language and the Islamic world-view can, perhaps, be better explained in a separate study. Suffice it to say here, however, that while it is true that language does not

30 Asmah H Omar, Malay in Sociocultural Context, p. 113.
31 Ibid, p. 112.

create reality and perception, it does, nevertheless, influence people's world-view by the mere fact that it reflects a certain world-view in a certain sociocultural context.

We have tried in this undertaking to discuss the relevance of language to different sociocultural and political issues. We deliberated on the role of language as a means of communication and as a carrier of culture. We argued that while in some cases language can foster the spirit of cultural sub-nationalism, it can, in other cases, function as an essential medium for sociocultural integration. We tried to highlight the role of language in the movement towards indigenousness and cultural authenticity. All of this, however, has to be viewed in its proper context for this is not at all a call for a narrow-minded nationalistic culture. The Holy Qur'an teaches us that all mankind was created from a single pair of male and female and made into nations and tribes that they may know each other and not despise each other and that the most honored of them in the eyes of God is the one who is most righteous.[32] The process of knowing the other cannot be separated from knowing ourselves first. The teachings of Islam encourage us to know about others, and learning foreign languages as part of this process is something that was highly stressed by the prophet of Islam himself. Indeed, the variations in our languages and colors are among the signs of God.[33] It would, no doubt, be a dull world if all people were created from the same race, had the same complexion, and spoke one language. These variations are not responsible for the cultural misunderstanding which is unfortunately rampant in our world of today. It is only the ignorance within some of us.

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32 The Holy Qur'an, Al-Hujurāt (49)13.

33 Al-Rūm (30):22