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The Rotten Milk Of Our Politics - Simiyu Barasa

"Mao," I remember asking my mom two years ago, and though I was hitting twenty five, I couldn't actually stop calling her the child's equivalent of Mommy in KiTaita, her tribe. "Mao, when we used to live in Zimmerman, there was a day you came and took me and Rozi (my sis) out of our double decker bed and stacked it with UHT milk and packets of Unga maize flour as if it was a shelf. And for three weeks we never got out of the house. Which never hurt as much as you denying me the pleasure of fighting for who would sleep on the top deck!"

Mum stopped cooking the chicken. Dad was already out, trying to assert his presence in the area where he had bought land and built his retirement home. He was somewhere out there using my name as a punching glove with which to give headblows to his new neighbours. "My son...he has come for christmas holidays from Nairobi. He is er...er... writer". That part he hated, he thought writing is my excuse for being lazy. "He was in parliament," he would say, puffing himself up, "but went to writing for TV."

Mom, She told me that was 1982. There had been an attempted coup. They had to turn our bedroom into a store since no one could go out unless they were "waving their National Identity Cards both hands raised in the air, feet dancing around the corpses littering the tarmac, eyes fixed on the soldiers pointing guns at everyone ready to shoot." I paused, looked into her teary eyes as she recounted the terror; shocked that for twenty three years all I had visualized were yellow, green striped, brick like packets of Ultra Heat Treated Milk (whose slogan said The Long Lasting Milk) denying me the pleasure of sleeping and wetting on the lower bunk of the double

deck since my younger sister, the toughest since childhood, always wrestled me from the top bunker every time I tried to remove her.

In that moment, I remembered 1992. Multiparty politics was truly being watered with human blood in Kenya. I was then a pimple-infested teenager living in Kiambu, where my mother was a teacher and my father managing a Dairy Cooperative Society. One morning my friend knocked on my door and on reaching Kirigiti Stadium, saw a scene straight out of Somalia: People camped on the grounds with little igloos made of black polythene bags as their homes. They had been brought in the night, victims of tribal clashes in the Rift Valley. "They followed us to the Molo church where we had sought refuge, forced us into government lorries, and told us 'Go back to Gikuyu land'. The lorries dropped us here last night and zoomed off," the victims told us. They were paying for the sins of being Gikuyu. They were lucky. Hundreds of them were being slaughtered in the Rift Valley as if some one somewhere was intent on opening a canned factory of human flesh.

We were apprehensive. Would the Gikuyu revenge by kicking out all non Gikuyu's from Central province? For the first time, I realized that my Mom was a Taita from the Coast, and my Dad a Luhya from Western. Living in Gikuyu land. Where would we run? That day, we bought lots of yellow, green stripped, tetra-packed UHT milk, Dad brought some Long lasting milk from the Cooperative he was managing, and joined the long queues of sympathizers donating foodstuffs to the poor refugees. Two

days later, some one in the government thought the refugees wereliving too lavishly. In the dead of the night, we heard screams and gunshots from the stadium. The next morning, they refugees had vanished just as they had arrived. On top of government lorries.

So this is now. It is 2007 January. I am in a queue at Uchumi supermarket. Nairobi. It will take me at least two hours before I get into the supermarket-every Kenyan is shopping. Everyone is buying UHT milk. Those yellow, green striped brick-like packets sheltering Ultraheat Treated Milk that lasts forever without getting spoilt. Our once stable nation has again erupted: the Gikuyus are being slaughtered in the Rift Valley for sharing the same tongue and phonetic sounds as President Kibaki, who they say has 'stolen' the election and declared himself president. At the coast, it doesn't matter if you are Gikuyu or not, if you are not a member of the local tribe you are dead. In Eldoret, they followed those not of the Kalenjin tribe who had sought refuge in a church and burnt them alive-thanks to Hotel Rwanda and 100 Days and all those films that Kenyanswatched and said how silly of the Rwandese , to kill people due to the colour of their vocal chords. Little did we know some Kenyans were being educated on terror tactics.

Out here at Uchumi, everyone is pushing trolleys laden with UHT milk and flour to their cars-who knows how long this madness will last. I remember, again, that my mother, a Taita, is now living in Bungoma, Luhya Land, with my Luhya dad. In Kisumu, news has come that the Luos are going house to house-killing Gikuyus. If your wife is Gikuyu, it doesn't matter she is married to a Luo you. They are raping and killing, tax free, Gikuyu wives married to Luos. What about my Mao? Will the terror spread to her too?

I take out my cell phone and hit her numbers. Of course, I know that I can't make a call, my last airtime units ended three days ago, and for the past three days there has been no top up airtime for cellphones. Still I hope against hope that a miracle will happen and my call goes through.

A young boy squeezes out of the heavily guarded supermarket door with his Dad. He is carrying packets of UHT milk. His dad is pushing a trolley full of milk and flour. "Dad, the TV says that we need to recount the presidential votes," he says. "Yes , that is the cause for all this chaos.," the Father replies, loading the boot of his car next to me. "Is it not just adding?" says the son. "Yes, it is adding." "You mean adults cant count? Teacher John should teach them how to do do simple additions!"

I look at the Kid, and see myself in him. For him, it doesn't make sense why a whole country has to go shopping for UHT milk simply because adults can't add presidential votes correctly. Maybe when he grows to be a little wiser, like I am now, he will even wonder how a whole country can go to war, a whole 180 people dead (and mark you, official government statistics are always deceptively low when itcomes to such deaths) a whole 250,000 Gikuyus made homeless, many Luos dead, and a once peaceful Kenya now beating Benazir Bhutto's assassination, and the War in Iraq, to become the number one news item on all International News Channels including but not limited to CNN, Al Jazeera, BBC, Sky, etc. Just because two grown up men , each certified by the doctors and the Elections board, as being of sound mind to contest and God willing, become Presidents, cant agree on a simple arithmetic sign called + and =.

I look at the UHT packets and wait my turn to buy mine.