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# MANY QUESTIONS, FEW ANSWERS

BY ALIOUNE KANE



My grandfather in Senegal had such a high spiritual respect for food that at every meal we shared, he made me pick up each piece of bread, vegetable and meat, as well as every grain of rice or couscous, and eat it all. He would tell me that I had to respect the sacred gift that is food because food preceded our first ancestor on earth, and has been keeping us alive since the beginning of time.

To understand his approach to food, one needs to understand that in our language, Wolof, the word for food is *duunde*, which means *to live* or *life*. To feed someone, therefore, means to give him or her life.

Somehow I never got sick on the traditional food of my ancestors, and I grew up to be healthy and strong.

Recently, while sitting in front of my store in Santa Barbara, sipping on some coffee and reading the newspaper, a headline suddenly made me choke. The gist of it was that the Food and Drug Administration has approved the sale of cloned milk and meat in 2008. The *Los Angeles Times* article went on to say that grocery stores may not be required to label these artificially made foods and they will all be mixed together with other meats and dairy products on the shelf. This news was alarming because it could take decades to determine the effects of these products that are the result of cloning. Will new diseases or mutations occur and will they surface only as the result of some future class action lawsuit?

I am not anti-progress or technology, and believe in a free market economy where everybody is allowed to maximize the profitability of his or her enterprise. But I feel strongly that when it comes to food, the consumer should be highly informed about what they are putting on their dining tables and in their bodies.

One obvious solution presented by the *Times* article was to pursue the organic way. I thought about how my vegetarian friends, especially the vegans, won't have to confront this issue of cloned meat, but I think everybody should consider these matters. We should all be very careful about where our food comes from, although that's not as easy as it sounds.

For instance, my favorite nut is the cashew. One of my favorite things about living in the United States of America

is that I can have cashews all year round. In my native African land of Senegal there are cashew trees everywhere but you can only find cashew nuts or the fruit that come with them about 3 to 4 months a year. In the 21 years that I have lived in seven different states and traveled through most of the others, I have not seen a cashew tree or its fruit but cashew nuts are everywhere, to my most grateful delight. I have to admit that I do not know where the very tasty cashews I have been enjoying in this country come from. I could not even tell if they are fabricated in a laboratory. I try my best to eat organic but have a weakness for cashews, and know that the ones I eat are not always organic. I also worry about GMOs—foods that are genetically engineered. My emotions run to extreme angst and a sense of vulnerability around these questions.

If I were to become a vegetarian again my dear mother would say I have taken to Western or “crazy white people’s” ways a bit too much. She does not know that most of my vegetarian friends are black Rastafarians. Still, I am left wondering if the imperialist ways of technology are going to push me into an extreme dietary zone just to be safe.

Following my afternoon reading the distressing news article about cloning, I had an occasion to visit the Deer Lodge restaurant for the first time. As I sat at the bar, I could not help but notice the unusual decoration of dead animals. I wondered how I could eat a relative of one of those animals while it stared at me from the wall, but it occurred to me that eating wild game is also a safe alternative to cloned meat. Of course this would cause my vegetarian buddies and fellow animal rights comrades to complain.

We live in such an extreme and complex world. If we mutate ourselves by eating cloned meat and dairy products, what would it mean—what would that look like? I wonder if my grandfather would have the same spiritual respect for food that is the result of cloning. How would he respond to all of these questions?