

A working life The environmental health inspector



Sins of the flesh

For Yunes Teinaz, tracking down illegal meat traders is more than just a job, he tells Steve Boggan, it's a crusade to prevent the spread of public disease. Portrait by Frank Baron

In any line of work, there is a certain satisfaction in knowing you've got the opposition rattled. Imagine, then, the strange sense of achievement felt by Dr Yunes Teinaz when someone put up £100,000 to have him killed.

"I had been investigating a gang for selling illegal meat and I think they felt I was being a nuisance," he chuckles. "So, they approached my boss and offered him £100,000 to kill me or £20,000 to fire me. Fortunately, he simply reported them to the police."

Teinaz is not an undercover cop or a customs officer. He is acting head of environmental health in Hackney, east London. For him, tracking down rotting, stolen carcasses from the UK or "bush meat" from Africa – including zebra, antelope, elephant and rat – is as commonplace as intercepting animal body parts for use in voodoo. Yes, voodoo.

"The illegal meat trade is a billion-pound industry, yet most people know nothing about it," says Teinaz, a softly spoken man in his late forties. "There are 'smokies', which are animals stolen from farms in England and Wales, then burned with a blowtorch until golden brown; they're a delicacy among the African community. There is condemned meat which is trimmed, treated and bleached, then put back into the food chain.

"There is illegal halal meat sold to muslims. And there is bush meat, mostly from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa. We see meat from antelopes, 'grass cutters', which are a kind of bush rat, bats, zebras, giraffes, elephants and, of course, gorillas and monkeys. The biggest fear from this kind of meat is that it will introduce a new strain of, say E coli, or even worse, Ebola, into Britain."

It was the threat of disease such as Ebola – which causes massive internal bleeding and organ failure – that led Teinaz into the profession in the first place. Born in Libya, he grew up in north Africa witnessing poverty, overcrowding and a lack of knowledge

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Curriculum vitae

Current position
Acting head of Environmental Health, London borough of Hackney

Qualifications
BSc degree in environmental science, Master's in public health, doctorate in public administration, certificate in tropical medicine and health

Career high
When his success in targeting meat criminals resulted in a price on his head

Career low
When he followed criminals for 24 hours ... but they escaped

about food hygiene (although he has seen this in the UK, too). This, he says, instilled in him a desire to make life better for ordinary people by improving their health.

He came to the UK to study in the late 1970s and went on to gain degrees in public health and public administration at Liverpool University and King's College London, and a Master's in public health at the University of Dundee.

Various environmental posts followed at several local authorities before he took on his present post in Hackney three years ago.

During that time his awareness of the trade in illegal meat grew until he realised it posed a huge threat to public health. In 2005 he made his colleagues in environmental health sit up and take notice when, during a speech to the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health, he claimed that illegal meat was now the third largest illegal trade in the UK after arms and narcotics.

The latest figures from HM Revenue and Customs show that there were 10,792 seizures of illegal meat in Britain to the end of 2005, amounting to 77,087kg. That was up from 69,927kg the previous year.

A practising muslim, one of Teinaz's first tasks on arriving in Hackney was to tackle the sale of haram meat – non-halal products illegally sold as halal. Then came the the bush meat. In each case, he says, it is often poorer, sometimes less-educated, members of ethnic communities who are preyed on.

"With the bush meat, for example, immigrants, and sometimes Africans born here, have a taste for this and they will pay good money for it – up to £30 a kilo," says Teinaz. "But it is often in a terrible condition when it arrives here, sometimes smuggled in luggage, sometimes smuggled with other goods, or even sent through the post.

"The gangs trim it and often bleach it to make it appear edible. But the worst part of it is that these animals are usually trapped with poison and that can be passed on to the consumer.

Health statistics often demonstrate high levels of kidney problems among ethnic Africans, and this could be why."

It isn't simply taste, however, that draws some in the African community to bush meat; it is also because certain animal parts are thought to hold magic properties in voodoo, or muti, belief systems. Muti is the Zulu word for medicine.

"Elephant meat, for example, is associated with luck," says Teinaz. "Some endangered species, like gorilla, are thought to be an aphrodisiac, and the horns of animals are used for detoxification of the liver.

"A bigger concern, however, is with what we suspect could be a trade in human parts. It became clear after the torso of a young boy was found in the Thames [in 2001] that he was killed as some kind of black magic ritual. We believe that other rituals, using human parts smuggled in from Africa could be taking place here.

"We regularly receive intelligence to suggest that potions using human body parts are being sold."

In muti, lotions and potions are sold for considerable sums. After taking advice from Teinaz while writing a story three years ago on witch doctors in London, I hired an actor to buy a potion for £500 that was supposed to cure leukaemia. Analysis showed it contained plant extracts, quartz and animal blood and tissue.

In certain parts of north and south London, cards for witch doctors are pushed through letterboxes as often as leaflets for pizza delivery services. Most use plant, mineral and herb extracts. Some, as I found, use animal derivatives. And the suspicion is that a few are using human parts.

Genitals might be used to increase fertility or virility; breasts taken for "mother's luck"; blood for life force; eyes for far-sightedness, and so on.

"I am pretty sure this is going on in the UK," says Teinaz. "When people migrate, their beliefs and superstitions

travel with them. We haven't found hard evidence yet. But, from what we are being told, the suspicion is strong."

Teinaz says he and fellow environmental health officers are slowly making a difference, tracking down gangs, confiscating meat and educating the public. In Hackney, bush meat used to be openly on sale in markets; now it is nowhere to be seen – although the suspicion is there is a thriving black market.

There is, then, a sense of achievement for Teinaz, but one also of frustration with the sentencing of criminals. "Meat smugglers face sentences of up to six months and fines of up to £20,000, or both," he says. "But a few years ago I did the biggest seizure of the year – 120 illegal carcasses – but the man responsible was fined only £250."

It isn't just meat, of course, that keeps Teinaz and his colleagues busy, but the smugglers and their routes are often associated with other crimes such as child-trafficking, drugs and prostitution, so one thing can lead to another. (He recently became aware of a fly spray being imported from Africa that contained DDT, the highly carcinogenic, and banned, insecticide.)

One of his biggest concerns at the moment is with Zam Zam, a holy water, supposedly from Mecca, that Muslims believe possesses healing powers. It is not supposed to be sold commercially, but unscrupulous gangs are marketing it in the UK – and Teinaz and his colleagues have found that it contains dangerous levels of arsenic.

"We have to be aware and concerned all the time, and we have to warn the public of such things that can harm them," he says. "Sometimes it can be hard – such as the time when I caught a gang with a vanload of rotting meat but had to let them go because I didn't have the police with me.

"But most of the time the job is interesting and exciting. We try to prevent the spread of disease before it can happen. And to prevent suffering is a very satisfying way to make a living."