WITCH-HUNT AND CONSPIRACY

THE 'NINJA CASE' IN EAST JAVA

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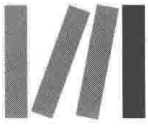

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas Herriman is Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at La Trobe University. His podcasts on iTunes U, including the Audible Anthropologist and Witch-hunts and Persecution, have tens of thousands of listeners. He also regularly contributes opinion pieces to the mainstream media. Based on more than one year's fieldwork, he has written a number of significant and award-winning publications on East Java, including his PhD dissertation—the Australian Anthropological Society's "Best Thesis" in 2008. This book represents the culmination of researching witch-hunts for more than a decade.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The killings of sorcerers and subsequent ninja killings in 1998 Indonesia far eclipsed the number of victims in the Salem witch trials. In the district of Banyuwangi alone, around 100 sorcerers were killed and many more suffered. Yet the Indonesian events have attracted not a fraction of the academic attention devoted to Salem. Moreover, such scholarship as can be found often misleads. I thus have spent a sizeable chunk of my working life trying to understand the violence that occurred. I conducted research at the desk (1999) and in the field (2000–2002), then wrote a PhD thesis (2003–2008) on the topic. Beginning in 2006 and continuing up to the present, I have also published some findings. Revised versions of several of these publications are represented here. Sections from my articles 'A din of whispers' (Herriman 2009), 'Governing the black arts' (Herriman 2013b), and 'Legislating against the supernatural' (Herriman 2013a) appear in different parts of this book. Also Chapter Two is based on 'The Great Rumor Mill' (Herriman 2010); Chapter Six on my article 'Fear and Uncertainty' (Herriman 2006a); and Chapter Seven on proceedings of the 2008 Asian Studies Association of Australia (Herriman 2008). I have drawn together this previously published material with new writings to compile this book. I thank the various publishers for allowing me to publish these revised versions here.

Convention demands that this kind of book be attributed to a single author's name. However, it is composed of the support, ideas and experiences I have absorbed from others, prominent among them my father, Michael Herriman. Recently retired, his field was philosophy of education, but his passion for music, film, science, sport, antiques—in brief, human culture—was a feature of my early years. I observed my father's interest and curiosity as well as respect and tolerance for other ways and cultures. I have tried to emulate this ever since. So, as a child, playing 'Cowboys and Indians', I always wanted to be an 'Indian'. In adolescence, he steered these naive

impulses by giving me anthropological books and encouraging travel. Just recently, he was so impressed by the anthropological classic *Tristes Tropiques*, that he sent me a copy. I had not read this and it amused me that I, now a professional anthropologist, was still following his lead! So I have dedicated this book to him.

My own fieldwork experience had to wait until 2000–2002. I suppose I should feel guilty that I have not had the opportunity to reciprocate the generosity of Dr Habib and Haji Hatip, who guided me throughout this period. I sometimes daydream about doing it all again; *rawon* lunches; prayer breaks, drawn out conversations and silences. From it I experienced another way of looking at life.

Post-fieldwork I was lucky enough to find myself under the supervision of David Bourchier and Greg Acciaioli. All things must pass I suppose, but they had good reason to doubt this, as it would be 2008 before I would graduate. But finally an anthropologist Monika Winarnita inspired me to complete. She was doing her PhD fieldwork in my home town; I followed her back to her university, ANU, after which we created our own anthropological family, complete with my mother-in-law, Yunita Winarto, Professor of Anthropology at Universitas Indonesia.

My career began when I was fortunate enough to work at Monash Asia Institute with Director Marika Vicziany and its Centre for Southeast Asian Studies under Penny Graham. This provided the pathway to my current position, in a team of wonderful anthropologists at La Trobe University, led by the phenomenal Helen Lee.

Through this all, my mother Carole Herriman has supported me as collaborator, sounding board, and editor. Her only reward in this book's publication will be the knowledge that she will not have to revisit each of its sentences for the hundredth time, and perhaps to realise this book would not have eventuated without her. Many other among my family and friends have provided contentment in this journey, but I should especially mention those whom I forced to listen to or read parts of this manuscript: Alicia Herriman, Kiely O'Flaherty, Phillip Dobson, Ed Knox, and Tod Jones.

As for that which I cherish above all, my children Joey, Kiki, and Miya, I hope I can bring the excitement and curiosity to them that their 'Grandpa Mike' has brought to me.

Sorrento, July 2015

NOTES ON STYLE AND SPELLING

Pseudonyms have been used for places and names where the information might be incriminating. In my transcriptions of interviews words were lost, my informants or I used ungrammatical and awkward structures, the 'train of thought' changed halfway through a sentence, and so on. In order to minimise my role in interpreting or skewing data, I have translated interviews as faithfully to the error-ridden original as possible—although this often lacks rhetorical grace. I indent longer quotations, use double quotation marks for shorter quotations, and single quotation marks for quotations within quotations.

For modern Osing language, there are two spelling systems, following the Javanese. The more consistent, but less popular, renders the English terms 'hamlet head' and 'no' as '*kamituwa*' and '*using*', for example. The more popular, but less consistent, renders the terms '*kamituwo*', '*osing*'. The latter spelling system will be used here.

In spelling Indonesian personal names, I have attempted to accord with the most common usage, and so I have opted for 'Soekarno' and 'Mas'oed', for example, though when quoting others I follow the spelling they have used. For bibliographic purposes, the last appearing name of the author will be used in the alphabetic listing.

For convenience, the word 'outbreak' is used to describe the increased frequency of killings in 1998, though I do not wish to imply these events were in any way akin to a disease. To refer to those whom I interviewed or who helped me in my research I have used the word 'informant' instead of 'participant'. This is to avoid confusion with 'participant' in the sense of someone who took part in a killing. Notwithstanding, I also hope to avoid the negative connotation of 'informant'. By the word 'sorcerer', I refer to one who has learned black magic abilities. Accordingly, I use the verb 'ensorcell' to refer to the sorcerer's use of black magic. This contrasts with the word 'witch', by which I refer to one who has inherent black magic abilities, and the verb 'bewitch', which I use to refer to the witch's use of black magic.

GLOSSARY

ABRI	*Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia*, The Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia
Adat	customary practice (including ritual, art, and law)
Aksi Sepihak	unilateral action (refers to the Communist Party of Indonesia's program of redistributing agricultural land)
Aparat	state apparatus (often specifically used to refer to the state's repressive institutions such as the army and police)
Babinsa	village guidance army officer
Balai Desa	village hall, village office grounds
Bupati	district head
Camat	subdistrict head
Desa	village
DPR	*Dewan Permusyarawatan Rakyat,* People's Consultative Council
Dusun	hamlet
Dukun	practitioner of white magic; healer; seer
Gestapu	'*Gerakan September Tigapuluh*', 'The September Thirtieth Movement' (an alleged coup against President Soeharto in 1965)
Guru Ngaji	local Islamic religious instructor who typically teaches neighbourhood children for a couple of hours every day
Haji	pilgrim
Ilmu	esoteric knowledge that provides one with supernatural power; magical power
Kabupaten	district
Kecamatan	subdistrict
Kepala Desa	village head
Kepala Dusun	hamlet head

Keterbukaan	openness. This term is sometimes used to describe the relaxing of media controls that occurred during *Reformasi*. Note that the same term is also used to represent a short-lived period of press openness instituted by the Soeharto regime in the late 1980s and early 1990s.
Kiai	an Islamic scholar or teacher whose pupils board with him
Komnas HAM	*Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia*, National Commission for Human Rights
Kontras	*Komisi untuk Orang Hilang dan Korban Tindak Kekerasan*, Commission for Missing People and Victims of Violence
Krismon	the 'monetary crisis' in Indonesia that accompanied the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis
MPR	*Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat*, People's Consultative Assembly. With around one thousand members, this has been the highest governing body in Indonesia and incorporates the *DPR*. The MPR is sometimes referred to as the 'Upper House'.
Musholla	a prayer room or small mosque
Nadhlatul Ulama	*Nadhatul Ulama*
Nadhatul Ulama	the largest traditionalist Muslim organisation in Indonesia
Ngaji	to attend or address a prayer meeting, to study the Koran and Hadith
NU	*Nadhatul Ulama*
Oknum	a mysterious agent
Petrus	*Penembakan Misterius*, the Mysterious Shootings (refers to extra-legal killings of *preman* around 1982–83)
PKI	*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, the Indonesian Communist Party
PPP	*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*, the United Development Party (a centrist Islamic party formed during the Soeharto era)
Preman	a local hoodlum or petty-criminal; a thug
Reformasi	Indonesia's Reform Movement, a political and social reform movement (c.1996–1999) which began with demonstrations, culminating in the resignation of President Soeharto in 1998.
Santri	a comparatively orthodox or pious Muslim
Tukang Santet	sorcerer

FOREWORD

In 1998 around 100 people were killed for being sorcerers in Banyuwangi, far-east Java, Indonesia. The killers were local residents who were proud of their actions and received strong support from other community members. This book explains why.

The killings—variously dubbed the 'Banyuwangi Incident' (*Peristiwa Banyuwangi*), the 'Banyuwangi Case' (*Kasus Banyuwangi*), or the 'Ninja Case' (*Kasus Ninja*)—assumed national significance. They were even covered in the international media, which is how I came to hear of them. In my first year of doctoral research I perused reports of the killings, including press coverage, findings from various institutions and organisations, and academic reports. These all led me to believe that the killings were part of a larger political conspiracy.

Several scenarios were proposed: organised squads of 'ninjas' were killing religious scholars and teachers, or the grandchildren of members of the Communist Party were wreaking vengeance on those people who had killed their grandparents, or the military was attempting to destabilise the regions. Absorbing all of this, I presented a paper at a postgraduate conference, finding that ex-president 'Soeharto and his allies encouraged and manipulated violence towards their own ends' (Herriman 1999). My suspicion of a conspiracy seemed to be confirmed when I arrived in Indonesia, as all the Indonesian academics, reporters and lay-people I met seemed to know (at a distance) someone who could 'prove' there was a plot lying behind the killings. So when I finally arrived in East Java I expected that most of my research would be consumed with getting to the origins of the conspiracy. At my first stop, in Malang city, for a few minutes I even thought I was being followed by a member of the state security organisation. I *was* being followed, but it turned out to be by a member of the local parliament who subsequently became a friend.

This did not relieve my wariness that the forces behind the conspiracy would find out when I was getting too close to 'the truth'.

I found something quite different after spending some time in Banyuwangi. Residing in a village where killings had occurred, given the pseudonym Tegalgaring here, I undertook ethnographic research on the origins of the violence. I observed and participated in the daily lives of the killers, the families of the victims, and other local people. I also had the opportunity to interview such people in villages all over Banyuwangi District. It soon became apparent that the entire framework I had brought was wrong. The killings were best understood as the product of local residents grouping together to kill one among them whom they believed to be a 'sorcerer', in a context of the state's being unable to stop this.

Although I expected to find a conspiracy, the local dynamics underpinning the violence I uncovered were in some ways more interesting. Local residents 'raided' the village offices in order to kill 'sorcerers' being protected inside, or to free killers of 'sorcerers'. Local officials supported killers of 'sorcerers' and local residents expropriated programs designed for state surveillance in order to torture 'sorcerers'.

Interviewing and interacting day-to-day with those closely and recently involved in this outbreak of killings enabled an understanding of actions against witches and 'sorcerers' quite apart from that which could be obtained on the basis of written records and other sources. For the participants at least, violence against 'sorcerers' in this context is a form of community justice. In 1998, this communal impulse escalated in response to district and national events.

Nevertheless, the finding that a conspiracy did not lie behind the killings has been the most widely criticised aspect of my research. In seminars, conversations, and in reviews of my work, some friends and colleagues have criticised me ('But did you really understand what was going on?'); others have made unflattering *ad hominem* comparisons ('I hope you realise how much you sound like [the Soeharto general] Wiranto'); and yet others have reached for humour ('Wow, you'll get a medal from the Armed Forces for this'). Mostly these criticisms have been in good faith and reflect not only the majority opinion that a conspiracy lies behind the killings but also an assumption that in Indonesia conspiracies generally lie beneath 'unusual' social, economic, political and, especially, violent phenomena.

Yet the challenges of sleepy afternoon seminars, informal chats in university corridors, email correspondence with colleagues, or teasing friends, were pleasantly distracting after conducting the field research. As I had become aware of the domestic and mundane nature of 'sorcery' and its recriminations, fieldwork became emotionally and morally challenging. The

people I lived with suspected their neighbours, friends, and even family members of theft and, in extreme cases, of sorcery. I became conscious of, unwittingly involved and almost carried away in, this world of fear and suspicions when, for example, my own belongings went missing, or on the occasions when I was perceived to have slighted a 'sorcerer'. I lived among people who were involved in the killing of a local 'sorcerer' and met many such people in my almost daily trips to other villages. My early fieldwork was disturbed by nightmares based on the troubling stories they had told me. Leisurely interviewing a killer at night, sipping coffee his wife had politely offered me, seeing his face illuminated by the tiny light bulb in the roof and the glow of the clove cigarette he dragged on, my horrified imagination fancied the faces of men and women illuminated by the burning faggots of Europe's witch-hunts.

Becoming used to these stories and feelings, and more intimate with the people who accused and killed 'sorcerers', I found it harder to insulate myself against the encroaching moral problems. The people I spoke to were neither especially good nor bad, but were, as far as I could tell, normal. Yet they were also people who had thrust a sword "up a 'sorcerer's vagina", dragged a 'sorcerer' behind a truck, or set a 'sorcerer' on fire. Moreover, they were proud of what they had done, and had received widespread village support for their actions.

In this book I dispute the prevailing scholarly opinion that the outbreak of 'sorcerer' killings resulted from either a conspiracy or larger political or economic forces. I argue that larger political and economic forces were relevant only in as much as they shaped local interactions between friends, neighbours and family, and I emphasise the importance of domestic factors and local belief systems which have largely been overlooked.

PROLOGUE

It was ten people who killed him, but it was one village that supported them.

Everybody told this story differently, but they agreed on almost all of what follows. The story is set in Tegalgaring village in far-east Java. It begins when Saman took a frond from a coconut tree on a plot belonging to his grandmother, Hadipa. Coconut fronds have some value. They can be used as decorations, for example, at a wedding. This is how the story went …

Hadipa's son, Kustari, was not happy. Saman, Kustari's nephew, had stolen the frond from Hadipa, Kustari's own mother! Kustari made a veiled threat, "Whoever took this frond will soon suffer for what he did."

Saman went to his grandmother, Hadipa. He explained he had a right to take the coconut frond. He told her he was not afraid of Kustari. But he was. Kustari was a sorcerer.

Following this, Saman became sick. Then he died.

Everyone thought that Kustari had gone too far. It is normal for things to go missing. Aside from that, no one likes having a sorcerer around. If you offend one, even without meaning to, you might end up dead.

So it was not difficult for Bunali, a poor farm labourer, to muster support when he decided to avenge the death of his son, Saman. Initially, Bunali turned to Salimi for help. Salimi used to be a local tough. Bunali apparently offered Salimi a large sum to help him with the killing. (Salimi claimed he was never paid leading to disagreements for years afterwards.)

They enlisted the help of some others. And, as with all secrets in the village, everyone soon knew about it … Bunali was planning to kill Kustari, his wife's brother.

Even Kustari was aware that he had become a target. He carried a knife around with him for protection. He was advised to leave the village. But Kustari didn't want to leave. If he left, other people would take that as a sign that he had killed Saman.

It was organised more or less spontaneously. Ten men met on a Monday night in September, 1998. They gathered in the middle of the village at the intersection of the two roads which lead out of the village. They searched for Kustari, but could not find him, so they decided to delay until the next night.

The next night, a couple of men could not be present. But that was all right because another couple could. This time they would get him.

They were a mixed group. A few were farm labourers. Another was a teenager. One was there because Bunali and Salimi had offered him money. The rest were hoodlums. One was a thief who had returned from Bali. Two brothers who had reputations as tough drinkers were also there. And there was a motorcycle thief who was visiting home and decided to lend a hand. They all hated sorcerers. They all hated Kustari. They had a drink to stiffen their resolve, so that they could "forget themselves". One folded his sarong around his head so that only his eyes were showing, "like a ninja".

First, they went to a watch house at the corner of the village. Here they enlisted two boys from a neighbouring house to find Kustari. The two boys returned with the information that Kustari was sitting at the front of Sairi's house watching TV with his wife.

The killers headed off into the darkness and the drizzle. One threw a stone at each house on the way. It was a sign that they should turn off their lights. One by one the lights went off. The group crept through the cemetery and around the side of the house. For the last few metres of their approach they crawled along the ground.

One of the attackers grabbed Kustari and dragged him several metres towards the road. Others helped throw him to the ground. Another smashed at his eyes with a wooden pole. The masked one beat Kustari until his mask and clothes were spattered with blood. They left him for dead, and went their separate ways.

Word quickly spread that Kustari was dead. Some local men began voluntarily collecting money for the killers. The police arrived from the nearest police station about an hour later, around 9:30. It turned out Kustari was not, in fact, dead, but was seriously wounded. Twice on the way to hospital the car

broke down. Finally, Kustari died after he reached the hospital. And that night the wind blew like it had never blown before.

Why was Kustari killed? And why, in the period around September 1998, when Kustari was killed, were many more 'sorcerers' killed than usual? And how can we make sense of the killings of 'ninjas' that followed?

INTRODUCTION

Nestled between an outcrop of volcanic mountains and the Bali Straits lies Banyuwangi, the easternmost district of Java. Rural Banyuwangi supports what could be loosely called a peasant society. The main ethnic groups are the Osing (indigenous to the area), Madurese and Javanese (who have migrated). These groups tend to live separately: the Osing in rice growing areas, Madurese in fishing villages, and Javanese near plantations. However, little tension or acrimony exists between ethnicities. All share a belief in magic and sorcery. Local residents reconcile Islam, the predominant religion, with the existence of magic by reasoning that magic and sorcery occur only by God's leave. In every village I researched, the inhabitants I spoke to reported that several other local residents were sorcerers.

In 1998 after the killing of around a hundred such 'sorcerers' in Banyuwangi, with a number of killings in nearby East Javanese districts as well, people identified as 'ninjas' were targeted throughout East Java as the perpetrators of these killings. This book presents new information based on more than a year's research (2001–2002) and interviews, conducted while living amongst killers and families of victims of the outbreak.

By the time I conducted research, gone were the tufts of smoke from the warm embers of a 'sorcerer's' scorched house, the blood dribbling from a disfigured cranium, or the panting breath and beads of sweat from the accused man escaping his home village. But most of the actors or their relatives and witnesses were still *in situ*, and their memories and accounts were still fresh. As I write more than a decade later, it remains crucial to learn from this outbreak because it provides a rare glimpse into how those involved understood such an event, and because victimisation of sorcerers still occurs. Insights from this event also help us to understand Indonesia's Reform Movement, *Reformasi*, and give a local perspective on and context to the violence that accompanied it. Most importantly, this story rectifies misunderstandings of the 1998 outbreak itself—including the idea that the outbreak resulted from an elite conspiracy.