

## SORCERER KILLINGS IN 1998 EAST JAVA: AN ANALYSIS OF PRESS AND ACADEMIC REPORTS

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In 1998, large numbers of alleged sorcerers were killed in East Java, Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> With around 100 fatalities peaking in September, Banyuwangi regency seems to have experienced the most killings. Hundreds of articles were published about this ‘outbreak’ in East Java’s two main newspapers—*Surabaya Post* and *Jawa Pos*. Most articles maintained conspirators caused the killings or sourced commentators who claimed a conspiracy without attempting to verify these claims. Additionally, various organisations sent Fact-Finding Missions which published conspiracy theories and were quoted proposing conspiracy theories in the press. These included:

- ∞ NU, the largest traditionalist Muslim organisation in Indonesia;
- ∞ PPP, a centrist Islamic party formed during the Soeharto era; and,
- ∞ Partai Keadilan, an Islamist party.

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Presumably on the basis of the reportage, Western academics also put forward conspiracy theories to explain the killings of ‘sorcerers’. In this article, I analyse these conspiracy theories on the basis of over one year’s fieldwork I undertook in East Java 2000-2002, including interviews with killers, victims’ families, and community leaders. I first provide a case study of one killing against which to compare the conspiracy theories. Then I outline the specific reasons which have been put forward in the press to support a conspiracy. I conclude by suggesting that conspiratorial accounts overlook the involvement of local people in the killings.

### **Killing of Jaenuddin**

Local residents killed Jaenuddin in Kedayunan, Kabat Subdistrict on August 3. A community leader told me that Jaenuddin had killed members of his own family through sorcery. One family member had even asked for water from Jaenuddin—which is a way of requesting a cure from a ‘sorcerer’. It was not just family. Jaenuddin’s “neighbours once saw him praying in the corner of his house”. More ‘evidence’ of Jaenuddin’s sorcery was that during the extra-legal killings of suspected criminals around 1982-83, “he disappeared because he was scared” of being targeted by troops for being a sorcerer. Eventually, “all the community in this hamlet” accused him of sorcery. Similarly, Jaenuddin’s killers comprised “all layers of the community...if you didn’t join in, it would be a problem. At the very least you had to get out of the house [to publicly show your support].” Evidence of the extent of local participation can be seen in the following events.

At the beginning of October, police forces comprising provincial, area and district personnel arrested suspected killers throughout Banyuwangi. On October 2, they arrested a person suspected of killing Jaenuddin. Local residents reacted immediately, organising trucks to take them approximately 10 km to Banyuwangi’s central police headquarters.

A research participant, who is not from Kedayunan, was coincidentally at the Banyuwangi central mosque at the time. This mosque is directly opposite the police station, where the demonstration was occurring. He recalled that there was outrage at the mosque that a demonstration should occur before Friday prayers. These people, including my participant, thought that the demonstrators might disrupt the prayers, and in any case, all men who are capable should participate in Friday prayers. Furthermore, they were under the impression, based on press coverage, that the killings in other villages were of religious leaders not ‘sorcerers’, and were politically

motivated. Accordingly, the demonstrators were viewed as enemies, so the people at the mosque sided with the police. They were not aware of the local context of the killing and the reason for the ensuing demonstration. My participant had supported a killing in his own village; it could not be said he was opposed to ‘sorcerer’ killings. Local understandings, which stressed local involvement in the killings of local ‘sorcerers’, thus contrasted with understandings produced by the press and international scholarship, which portrayed the killings as a conspiracy.

### Conspiracy Theories

The putative organisation or coordination behind the outbreak is a crucial premise in conspiracy theories. Barton (2002:257) reports anecdotes about “small, well-organised bands of individuals who appeared to be trained militiamen, and of carefully co-ordinated attacks.” These anecdotes came to be accepted as fact. For Beatty (1999:259 n.), the killings were “Organized terror.” Barker (1998:40) points to “highly organized squads of men.” For Thufail (2005:156), the killings “were coordinated.” Cribb (2000a:194) concurs “similarity of the assassinations” and the “evident professionalism of the assassins” implied “a centrally coordinated campaign.”

The press also reported coordination or organisation. The outbreak was:

- a. apparently “engineered”, a member of the National Human Rights Commission stated (*Jawa Pos* October 13 1998 "*Jangan Tutup*");
- b. “undertaken by trained groups under a command,” an ex-government minister maintained (*Surabaya Post* October 12 1998 "*Itu Kelompok*");
- c. most probably “controlled by people outside Banyuwangi,” the PPP Fact-Finding Mission head stated (*Surabaya Post* October 15 1998 "*Sutarmas*");
- d. the work of an “intellectual actor” who was behind the killings, according to the head of the East Java NU (*Surabaya Post* November 12 1998 "*Sidang 'Kasus...'*");
- e. the work of a puppet master. Prominent politician, Amien Rais, demanded, “the Armed Forces must immediately catch the puppet master” (*Jawa Pos* October 13 1998 "*Jangan Tutup*"). NU leader Gus Dur maintained to *Jawa Pos* (October 18 1998 "*Gus Dur: Dalang*") reporters that he could identify who the puppet masters were, although he became vague when asked to do so. Furthermore, the *Surabaya Post* (November 21 1998 "*Pangdam V...*") records that the East Java military head stated that he would “continue to search for who is the real brains behind the incident (*otak kejadian*)...to reveal who the puppet master is in this case is extremely difficult”; and
- f. the result of an elite struggle. The *Surabaya Post* (November 30 1998 "*Tim NU*") recorded that the NU’s report on the killings “confirmed the

involvement of the political elite in Jakarta in the tragedy.” In an interview with the *Surabaya Post* (December 3 1998 "Ketua PW"), the head of the East Java NU agreed that the killings were part of a national elite struggle.

The following sections will evaluate the evidence of such organisation and cooperation.

### **Stages**

The coordination is putatively evidenced by the stages of phases of the killings. The *Jawa Pos* (October 1 1998 "Pangdam Minta") recorded that the perpetrators of the initial killings were “pure masses” (*massa murni*), but following this, paid killers undertook the killings. A source from the Banyuwangi NU asserted in a *Surabaya Post* (October 14 1998 "Di Ponpes") article and later in a *Jawa Pos* (October 15 1998 "NU Satukan") article that the killings incorporated three stages. The later stages involved criminals from outside and secret agents. Several academics also proposed that the killings went through stages, including Retsikas (2006:56) and Barker (1998:40). My data show no trend of outsiders or secret killers replacing local people, let alone distinct phases or stages in the outbreak.

### **Blackouts**

The idea that blackouts preceded killings of ‘sorcerers’ was also linked to a conspiracy. The Justice Party’s Fact-Finding Mission concluded that the “attacks and terror” were “always preceded with a blackout in the entire village.” The *Jawa Pos* (October 2 1998 "Laki Perempuan") found that when a victim was attacked the “electricity stopped”. Cribb (2000a:194) also reports that the assassins frequently “cut electricity to their victims’ houses before attacking.”

My participants reported blackouts, but only in some of the killings. Local people, not external agents were responsible for those that occurred. In these cases, I found no evidence of complete electrical failure or shut down. Rather, certain lights were turned off or broken, while other electrical appliances still worked. This is because local residents turned off the lights in front rooms and verandas (*teras*). In some cases lights were switched off:

- ∞ or broken by the local killers themselves. One participant, Muklis, related that “the killers were the ones who turned them [the lights] off.”
- ∞ by local residents, after local killers ordered them to. A participant related that, “the lights were broken, it wasn’t from the centre.” I asked him “Why were there lights turned off here?” He responded, “Because there was an order, which means that they were part of the same group as the killers.”

- ∞ as a spontaneous gesture of sympathy and support for the local killers. In fact, participants often mentioned the fact that lights were turned off as evidence of the solidarity among the local residents. For instance, a research assistant asked an ex-village head about the killing in his village “was it united here?” The village-head responded, “Yes, it was united, there were many people, the entire village, the lights were turned off.”

Far from indicating outside orders or conspirators, the turning off of lights demonstrates the extent of communal, local involvement in the killing.

### **Killers Dressed in Black**

Evidence the killings were organised or coordinated was based on the killers putatively wearing black apparel. Cribb (2000a:193) records that “the killings were attributed by all to shadowy gangs of black-clad masked men who quickly came to be called “ninja.”” For example, one reporter wrote, “the killers are usually dressed in black and are well-organised with dozens of them often turning up in trucks” (Retnowati October 4 1998). Hefner (2000:210) concurs that in Banyuwangi, “the executions were carried out by black-clad vigilantes, trucked in to remote locales.” And Thufail (2005:153) notes “killings by masked “ninja” figures”.

I found little information to corroborate the use of black clothes or uniforms. SiaR (December 12 1998 “*Ada Laporan*”), an internet news list devoted to Indonesia, reported that a Reuters journalist had met someone on a bus whose relative had received an order for black clothes. Subsequently, the Reuters journalist was allegedly “terrorised” by unknown persons. This long chain of evidence is only hearsay. Nevertheless, I did investigate this possibility, and it led to a single piece of ‘evidence’ of a conspiracy. A participant, a tailor in a nearby village, reported that just after a killing in his village:

there was a person who ordered black clothes to be tailored. It was a person from here. The District Army Base Commander. He ordered black clothes, two outfits. It was after the killing [here]. He was from the apparatus. [He ordered] trousers and a shirt. If I’m not mistaken [it was a week after the killing].

I could not corroborate this evidence. Furthermore, the killers’ alleged use of black clothes is contradicted by my data. While some of killers I spoke to recalled covering their faces with cloth in a ninja-like fashion during the killings, none recounted wearing black apparel. Furthermore, in all the data I have collected from local residents, there is no reference to killers wearing dark or black clothes.

### **List of Victims**

It was commonly believed that a list of targets had been intentionally created and distributed. The *Jawa Pos* (September 28 1998 "*Mantan Takmir*") reported that seven people, including an ex-NU village office-holder had been listed as targets for the killings. Barker (1998:40-41) also writes that squads of killers "reportedly select their victims from lists of *dukun santet* prepared by local government officials." Two phenomena may explain this rumour.

First, local residents tended to speak about 'sorcerers' as if there was a list. For example, a research assistant always put it to people we met that "in Tegalgaring there were class A, B, and C sorcerers" as if the 'sorcerers' had been listed or characterised in such a way (which is reminiscent of the categorisation of the Communist Party during the 1965-66 massacre). When I questioned him about this, he explained that some sorcerers were thought to be more powerful (*ampuh*) than others. This was simply a manner of speaking that is common in Banyuwangi, but does not indicate the existence of a list.

Secondly, in February of 1998, the regent of Banyuwangi issued a directive that alleged sorcerers be provided with the opportunity to move, in order to escape harm. This involved local officials identifying local residents in danger. These events may be the origin of the idea of 'lists'.

I found no evidence that this or other written lists were distributed or even unintentionally leaked. Nor is there any evidence that the killers selected victims on the basis of written lists. All the evidence I gathered indicates that the killers were local people who selected their victims on the basis of the victims' alleged sorcery.

### **Fundraising**

Fundraising was also taken as evidence of a conspiracy. In a *Surabaya Post* (October 31 1998 "*Danrem 083*") article, the area military chief is quoted as saying that there were five fundraisers (*penyandang dana*) and ten organisers out of more than two hundred arrested for the killings. Those I knew accused of being fundraisers and organisers, were merely local residents who collected money to provide the killers with alcohol, cigarettes or cash as an expression of local support and gratitude. Such fund-raising and organisation was undertaken at a local level, and not coordinated outside the villages by conspirators.

### **Other operational characteristics**

Reports of the killings implied other operational characteristics aside from blackouts, black apparel, lists, and fundraisers. Barker (1998:40) maintains the killers used “walky-talkies, hand-signals and maps.” Cribb (2000a:194) records that assassins were “equipped with maps indicating escape routes,” or were “carrying communications equipment”, or talked “with accents that were not local.

In the *Surabaya Post* (October 15 1998 "*Sutarmas*"), the head of the PPP Fact-Finding Mission stated “provocateurs...use walky-talkies...and their speech is in Indonesian rather than Madurese which is the everyday language in Banyuwangi society.”<sup>2</sup>

However, I found no evidence of the use of maps, communications equipment, or non-local accents or languages.

### **Outsiders**

Press articles frequently reported claims of outsiders’ involvement, yet only a few of participants recalled outsiders being involved. The daughter of one victim related in a *Jawa Pos* (October 12 1998 "*Ketika Banyuwangi (5)*") interview that her father had been taken by “people in plain-clothes with whom no one was familiar.” Thus, one might think that mysterious people or outsiders were behind the killing. However, after establishing trust with this woman, she revealed to me that local residents, including neighbours, were the people who killed her father. Although she identified the killers to me, she was also anxious not to publicly identify those neighbours. Similarly some other participants attribute blamed ‘outsiders’ to avoid the repercussions of identifying the actual killers.

In some other cases, participants identified ‘outsiders’, who were ‘external’ perpetrators with close ties to the village. Regarding the killing of Hasan in Karangrejo, a local neighbourhood head (*kepala RW*) noted that that people from other villages had assisted local residents as “a united group, from all over the place”. Clearly, a ‘team effort’ of local residents and outsiders is not the conspiratorial idea alluded to in the press. But this example is exceptional.

In the majority of cases, participants willingly identified the main perpetrators by name. They could do this because the perpetrators were not ‘outsiders’ involved in a conspiracy, but rather other local people.

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<sup>2</sup> Three languages have wide currency in rural Banyuwangi—Osing, which is ‘indigenous’ to Banyuwangi; Javanese; and Madurese.

## Provocateurs

Press reports regarding the killings ostensibly also made repeated reference to the involvement of provocateurs. The *Surabaya Post* (October 15 1998 "Kiai Madura") reported the existence of "agitators representing a professional force which activates the masses with sensitive issues." The *Surabaya Post* (December 7 1998 "Soal Investigasi") also maintained that the Armed Forces "trained *provokator*".

Educated Indonesians and some journalists use the term "*provokator*," with a meaning similar to the English. However my participants use the term with a meaning roughly similar to "leader." For example:

- ∞ Ansori explained that he led the killing of a sorcerer named Abas in 1987. Referring to his role in the killing he explained "I was a *provocateur*" (*saya jadi provokator*);
- ∞ one of my main participants explained the meaning of the term "*provokator*" as "*tukang ngajak*" which could be translated as something like "people whose job it was to invite people along"; and,
- ∞ several local men were arrested for killing Yasin in Watukebo. One participant explained *provokator* were involved, but that they were among those who had been arrested.

No evidence of the existence of shadowy, mysterious agents who provoked local people to undertake killings has been forthcoming, and the data I collected directly contradict such involvement.

## Oknum and Gantung

The term "*oknum*" means something like "instigator" or "secret agent." The Partai Keadilan (1999) Fact-Finding Mission reported that "at one place ...*oknum* were apprehended by villagers." An Australian student's report (Brown 1999:98, 112) recorded that "political *oknum*" but these were "were only local *oknum*." However, I could find no evidence of the involvement of *oknum*.

Supposedly, a conspiratorial organisation called "*Gantung*" was also behind the killings. The *Surabaya Post* (October 5 1998 "Aksi Pembantaian" ) reported:

The terrorist action is usually undertaken by ninja-like troops... This terror takes the form of leaflets from a group which calls [itself] "*Gantung*" ("the anti-sorcery movement"), which threatens religious scholars who protect sorcerers.

No evidence of this alleged leaflet has emerged. None of the many killers I spoke to identified themselves as belonging to *Gantung*; and none was involved in printing, distributing, or even mentioned seeing such leaflets. The same could be said for a putative organisation called *Ganti*.

### **Army Conspiracy**

The idea that an army conspiracy was behind the killings was widely held (Beatty 1999:259 n). One idea is that Special Forces (KOPASSUS) deserters were responsible. Although I could find no evidence to corroborate this report, a *SiaR* article (November 4 1998 "*Awas, Pasukan*") reported that two ninjas caught by "Banyuwangi citizens" were deserters from the elite corps. They stated that Special Forces were operating in and around Banyuwangi. "Drop outs" from Akabri (The ABRI Academy) were also involved. I only have evidence of several cases in which local soldiers have taken actions against 'sorcerers', yet this was on their own initiative, in sympathy with other local residents.

The slow response of the authorities, usually identified as the police, to the killings of 'sorcerers' is another idea that supposedly evidences a conspiracy. In the *Surabaya Post* (October 13 1998 "*Dari Diksusi*") a criminologist felt that the police "are letting it go and they are continually late." In specific killings, perhaps this impression arose because local police operate out of subdistrict towns, while most killings occurred in remote villages up to thirty minutes drive away. As regard the general outbreak, several killings of 'sorcerers' occurred in Banyuwangi prior to September 1998. Such a frequency of killings is common, and commonly, the police do not respond. By September, the total number of killings for the year reached almost one hundred. In early October, there was a police crackdown incorporating Mobile Brigade and army forces. This resulted in widespread arrests of suspects for the killings of 'sorcerers'. Even if the police and army's response could be defined as "slow", this is not proof that the army was behind the killings. The putative slowness might reflect difficulties in anticipating or stopping killings of 'sorcerers', for example.

### **Communist Party (PKI)**

Another conspiracy theory held that descendants of members of the Indonesian Communist Party were targeting traditionalist Muslims who were culpable for the 1965-66 massacre of alleged communists. Such opinions were ascribed to Islamic groups loyal to President B.J. Habibie and the NU leader in East Java (Retnowati October 4 1998). I only came across one person who espoused the Communist conspiracy theory—a district military commander—who arrived at the idea after "he had fasted and meditated". Salimi, one of the ringleaders in the killings of a 'sorcerer' named Kustari in Gintangan village, was a member of a PKI-aligned dance group (SRIMUDA). However, his victim was not associated with the perpetrators of those

earlier killings of communists, nor had Salimi or his family been persecuted during the massacre of communists. Other evidence contradicted a PKI conspiracy: Hasan, a ‘sorcerer’ who was killed in Karangrejo village was not a Communist killer, he was actually a member of the Communist Party youth group. In the absence of any credible evidence, it appears that the PKI conspiracy is merely an unsubstantiated allegation.

### **Anti-Alliance Conspiracy**

Another conspiracy theory was that the killings were an attempt to stop an alliance between East Java’s most prominent parties at the time; the PKB (the NU organisation’s political party, with its traditionalist-Muslim/NU constituency) and the PDI-P (with its animist-Muslim/nationalist constituency and popular leader Megawati). There was little such speculation in the East Javanese press, but it was popular in scholarship.

One version of the theory is that it was to frighten traditionalist Muslims against voting for PDI-P. Cribb (2000a:196) explains, “The targets of the attacks were the rural Islamic teachers who were key supporters” of the PKB. He finds, it is “most plausible” that the killings were intended to warn “grassroots supporters” of the NU against backing the PDI-P leader Megawati.

Another version is that it was to pit traditionalist against animist Muslim. Hefner records that “in order to reduce the chances” of a potential alliance between NU leader Gus Dur and Megawati, “Many observers suspected that the goal of the violence was ...to worsen ties” between their respective constituencies in East Java. Hefner compares the killings in Banyuwangi with an incident in another East Javanese district, Situbondo. In this incident, he alleges, provocateurs in black ninja uniforms had incited crowds to attack Christian churches and schools, and ethnic Chinese property. He proposes that the 1998 killings in Banyuwangi were part of the same “pattern of mysterious killings of Muslims and nominal [or animist] Muslims” (2000:190-193, 210). Both versions rely on the idea that traditionalist Muslims were targeted, which is discussed in the following section.

### **Traditionalist Muslims, Guru Ngaji, and Kiai Targeted**

The most common conspiratorial idea was that the victims of the killings were identified on religious grounds: that they were traditionalist Muslims generally. Barker (1998:40) writes, “the Muslim (especially Nahdlatul Ulama) population of Java has been terrorized by a mysterious killing campaign directed against so-called

*dukun santet* (sorcerers).” One can find read this in numerous press reports, for example:

- ∞ an NU figure stating “there are many victims from the NU” (*Jawa Pos* October 13 1998 "*Jangan Tutup*").
- ∞ a prominent NU official mentioned that “seventy percent of them [the victims] were NU people” (*Surabaya Post*, December 7 1998 "*Soal Investigasi NU*").

The idea that traditionalist Muslims were killed is accurate, but of questionable significance. This is because most of the killers were also NU members or supporters. This is not surprising, as most people in typical villages of rural Banyuwangi consider themselves aligned with the NU. As one participant explained, “NU people killed NU people, so they [the killers and the victims] all were NU people.”

Another version of this conspiracy theory is that traditionalist Muslim leaders, including *guru ngaji* (Islamic instructors) and *kiai* (Islamic scholars), were targeted. The *Jawa Pos* (October 13 1998 "*Jangan Tutup*") states, “many *kiai* and *guru ngaji*” were “cruelly butchered.” Beatty (1999:259 n) notes that “Many of the victims were Muslim preachers and NU personnel.” Retsikas (2006:56) states that “many of the alleged sorcerers and victims were *kyai*”.

As for the idea that *guru ngaji* were targeted, Mahfud from Segobang village was described by the *Jawa Pos* (September 28 1998 "*Mantan Takmir*") as a *guru ngaji*. One participant promoted his innocence by portraying him as a *guru ngaji*, alleging that he “had a small mosque (*musholla*) and about 50 students.” Other participants in Segobang dismissed claims of his innocence, and none mentioned that Mahfud was a *guru ngaji*. I discovered another victim, Jamuri from Watukebo, was said to be a *guru ngaji*. However, I do not think this evidence supports the theory that the NU was targeted, as in addition to being a *guru ngaji* he was also thought to be a sorcerer.

Considering the idea that *kiai* were targeted, all the data I have gathered indicate that the victims of the killings in 1998 Banyuwangi were thought by their attackers to be sorcerers, and none was a *kiai*. In meetings I had with local or provincial NU leaders, none could provide me with specific or verifiable evidence of *kiai* being targeted in Banyuwangi. One victim of the 1998 killings in Watukebo village, M Said, was said to be a *kiai*. However, local people I interviewed disagreed with him being called a *kiai*. Aside from this putative *kiai*, I could find no evidence of *kiai* having been targeted.

Aside from traditionalist Muslims generally, *guru ngaji*, and *kiai*, the *Jawa Pos* (September 28 1998 "Mantan Takmir") also mentions a *takmir masjid* having been killed in Pakel village. However, local people place little stock in the fact that someone is a *takmir masjid*, because they do not associate this position with particular religious prominence or piety. There are four mosques in my fieldwork location, each with over a dozen *takmir masjid*.

If we counted no *kiai*, one *guru ngaji*, and a couple of *takmir masjid*, and even if we allowed for a few more victims in these categories, this supporting evidence would be outweighed by the fact that the majority of the hundred or so victims in 1998 Banyuwangi were not thought by local villagers to be *kiai*, or *guru ngaji*, or pious figures. The notion that traditionalist Muslims were targeted is true but irrelevant, while the notion that *guru ngaji* and *kiai* were victimised is unfounded.

The idea that victims in Banyuwangi were, in fact, members of the NU, *kiai*, or *guru ngaji* was vigorously promoted by NU leaders in press reports and in their reports on the killings. Some of the killers of ‘sorcerers’ took issue with this. A participant explained:

In those villages [the victims were killed] because [the victims] were considered sorcerers. By bringing out the political aspect they [the NU leadership] were just trying to get a response.

Another participant laughingly complained:

In the mass media it was explained that he [a local victim of the killings] was a *guru ngaji*, but he wasn’t, he took care of ducks...all [the killers and the victim] were NU supporters. The NU [leaders] got it wrong, it was exaggerated and in the end its own supporters [*anak*] were adversely affected. If Gus Dur had not said anything like that, it would have been over.

These participants felt the NU had thus put pressure on the ‘apparatus’ to respond to the killings and arrest the local perpetrators, whereas the police and army might otherwise have been inclined to overlook the killing, as often happens.

### **Conclusion**

It is this disjuncture between local participants’ understandings of killings that occurred in their own villages and the press and scholarly reports that I have sought to emphasise here. The idea that a conspiracy lies behind the 1998 outbreak killings of alleged ‘sorcerers’ in Banyuwangi was popular in the press and among academics. Explaining the killings in Banyuwangi as the result of a conspiracy overlooks the involvement—without ‘external’ or ‘coordinated’ forces—of local residents in killing local ‘sorcerers’ whom they feared.

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