

# Fear and Uncertainty: Local Perceptions of the Sorcerer and the State in an Indonesian Witch-hunt

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*In 1998, around one hundred alleged sorcerers were killed in Banyuwangi District, East Java. Most scholars treated the killings as a conspiracy. My evidence indicates that local residents have been killing 'sorcerers' for at least the past half century. Rather than a conspiracy, the increased numbers of killings in 1998 can be attributed to: 1. A perception that the reform movement ca 1998 incorporated violence against sorcerers, as much as social or political protest; 2. Attempts by officials to safely relocate 'sorcerers', by identifying those to be relocated. Officials thereby inadvertently confirmed the identities of 'sorcerers' and gave encouragement to potential killers; 3. A perception that officers of the police and army were afraid they would be accused of human rights violations if they prevented local residents killing 'sorcerers'.*

## Understandings of the Killings

Banyuwangi District (*Kabupaten Banyuwangi*) is the easternmost of more than 80 districts in Java. The district's capital, Banyuwangi City, is known as the "City of Gandrung" (*Kota Gandrung*) after the traditional Gandrung dance. However, Banyuwangi District itself has a rather less benign appellation, being renowned as 'The Warehouse of Sorcery' (*Gudang Santet*). The district lived up to its infamous reputation in 1998, when an outbreak of killings of 'sorcerers' occurred in East Java.<sup>2</sup> In that year, Banyuwangi District witnessed more killings than any other area, with around one hundred homicides, and many more injured or banished. Against the advice

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<sup>2</sup> For convenience, the word "outbreak" is used to describe the increased frequency of killings, but I wish to avoid the negative connotation with which this word is associated.

of Indonesian friends who feared a sorcerer might bewitch me, I undertook more than a year of fieldwork in 2000–2002 researching the killings in Banyuwangi.

At the time of the outbreak, rumours were widespread among the population that the violence was the result of a conspiracy. It was most commonly believed that groups of ninjas were killing Muslim clerics. Such ideas were publicised by the press, Islamic parties, and various ‘Fact-Finding Missions’. Soon, a wide array of often-conflicting conspiracy theories emerged to explain the killings. Later, scholars adopted and published conspiratorial explanations regarding the perpetrators of, victims of, and political motivations behind, the violence.

The received opinion among scholars is that the perpetrators of some or all of the killings were involved in a conspiracy. For example, Brown writes that “local military *oknum* [mysterious agents]” were behind the killings (1999:98). Hefner’s understanding is that “the executions were carried out by black-clad vigilantes, trucked in to remote locales to capture, murder, and dismember their victims” (2000:210). Campbell and Connor claim that the people of Banyuwangi experienced “large armed groups on the street coming in the dead of night dragging neighbours away” (2000:88). Other authors affirm this idea, elaborating that the perpetrators of the violence were said to be ‘ninjas’. Cribb reports that “the killings were attributed by all to shadowy gangs of black-clad masked men who quickly came to be called ‘ninja’” (2000:193). For Barker, the killings:

seemed to begin as “local” killings . . . but have since been imitated by highly organized squads of masked men using walky-talkies, hand-signals and maps. These squads reportedly select their victims from lists of *dukun santet* [sorcerers] prepared by local government officials. The killers themselves are known as *ninja* (1998:40–41).

And in a footnote to his monograph on religion in Banyuwangi, Beatty records that:

From August to October 1998 more than one hundred ‘witches and warlocks’ throughout the regency [Banyuwangi District] were targeted by squads of masked, sword-bearing ‘ninjas’. . . . Many see the hand of the army in the killings (1999:259 n).

Thufail (2005:153) also reports that “killings by masked ‘ninja’ figures” spread throughout East Java. These authors have not clearly stipulated what might have been meant by “*ninja*”. We might presume the term to refer to squads of special forces (*Kopassus*) who had undertaken covert missions in places such as Timor and Aceh (Aditjondro 2000:172, Kammen 2001:167–168, 172). It could also refer to people trained in martial arts.

In any case, the general idea is that the perpetrators of the killings were anonymous, trained assassins representing either military or non-local forces, with some form of central organisation.

This is what has been published about the perpetrators, but what about the victims of the killings? The common position is that the victims of the killings were not only alleged sorcerers. Some authors propose that the victims were affiliated with the traditionalist Muslim organisation, the NU. Barker (1998:40) writes that “the Muslim (especially Nahdlatul Ulama [NU]) population of Java has been terrorized”. O’Rourke (2002:172) notes that “members of the NU were provoked and whipped into frenzies”. Additionally, it is claimed that the victims were mostly those who held some position or status within this traditionalist Muslim community. According to Barker (1998:41), it is an “obvious fact that the population being terrorized consists mainly of religious preachers (*guru ngaji*)”. Hefner (2000:210) concurs; “[m]ore than a hundred NU preachers and alleged *abangan* [animist Muslim] ‘sorcerers’ were mysteriously killed”. Similarly, Beatty (1999: 259 n) notes that “[m]any of the victims were Muslim preachers and NU personnel”. For others, such as van Dijk (2001:161), it was not just preachers (*guru ngaji*), but Islamic leaders or clerics (*kiai*). O’Rourke (2002:168) adds that the killings incorporated the “mysterious victimization of NU members” and that “large numbers of those killed in September and October were mainstream Muslim clerics (*kiai*), Islamic boarding school teachers and ordinary citizens who happened to be devout Muslims”. Cribb (2000:193) also asserts that aside from ‘sorcerers’:

the victims came to include as well rural Islamic teachers called *kiai* with no particular reputation for black magic. Many of them suffered a horrible fate, stabbed, hanged, incinerated or hacked to pieces. Their bodies were sometimes displayed in trees, sometimes thrown into mosques, sometimes left in the middle of the street.

Thufail (2005:150, 153) concurs “most victims were rural Islamic preachers and teachers (*kyai*) who were closely affiliated with the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) . . . [b]odies of kyai, slain and tortured, were found in many places: hanging from a tree, left on the street, or dumped in the river”. Furthermore, “[n]ot only did the ninjas threaten important national figures such as [famous NU leader] Kyai [Yusuf] Hasyim, they also spread terror among villagers” (Thufail 2005:162). It seems the consensus is that, aside from putative sorcerers, the victims of the killings ranged from ordinary villagers to religious leaders within the traditionalist Muslim community.

Aside from the identity of the perpetrators and the victims, some scholars have also speculated on political motivations behind the killings. Thufail (2005:159) suggests that “[t]he cumulative effect of various incidents suggests that the ninja affair was indeed linked to national level politics”, but

does not define what this link is. Cribb (2000:195) speculates that “the ninja killings were intended simply to raise the level of public alarm in Indonesian society in order to pave the way for a return to authoritarian rule”. He also links the killings with an incipient political alliance between traditionalist Muslims and nationalists, which allegedly threatened authoritarian elements. For Cribb (2000:196) it is “most plausible” that the killings were intended to warn “grassroots supporters” of the NU organisation’s political party, the PKB, against backing the nationalist leader Megawati. Similarly, Hefner records that “in order to reduce the chances” of a potential alliance between NU leader Abdurrahman Wahid and nationalist leader Megawati, “[m]any observers suspected that the goal of the violence was . . . to worsen ties” between their respective constituencies — comparatively pious NU Muslims and Muslims with animist beliefs (*abangan*). The killings are hence formulated as a “clear attempt to pit NU Muslims” against Muslims with animist beliefs. Hefner compares the killings in Banyuwangi with an incident in another East Javanese district, Situbondo, in which, he alleges, provocateurs in black ninja uniforms had incited crowds to attack Christian churches and schools, and ethnic Chinese property. Hefner proposes that the 1998 killings in Banyuwangi were part of the same “pattern of mysterious killings of Muslims and nominal Muslims” (2000:190–193, 210). These opinions on the perpetrators, victims, and political motivations, all point to a conspiracy behind the killings.

Two articles take a different approach. Siegel (2001) deconstructs the meanings of “masses” and “witchcraft” in order to understand the killings. Campbell and Connor’s (2000:62) overarching argument is that the killings should not be seen as an expression of traditional life, but are “intrinsic to the processes of modernity that are experienced so sharply and so ambivalently in East Java”. This builds on a fascinating body of research developed by Comaroff and Comaroff (1993) and Geschiere (1997, 1998), which sees witchcraft not so much as a remnant of traditional thinking, but rather as integral to the experience of modernity or post-modernity.

In undertaking fieldwork, my initial intention was to discover the origins of the conspiracy behind the killings. I also set out to test numerous hypotheses, including that the outbreak can be attributed to false accusations, hidden agendas, ethnic tension or some other latent social, economic, or political phenomenon. However, my research findings did not support these hypotheses, my initial expectations, nor the published findings referred to above.

Instead, as is argued in this article, the killing of ‘sorcerers’ has to be understood primarily as a local phenomenon, in which neighbours, family, and friends suspect one of their fellows to be a sorcerer and take it upon themselves to kill this person. Such killings have been occurring intermittently for at least the past half-century. In order to explain how this intermittent frequency of killings turned into a widespread outbreak, it is

necessary to understand local interpretations of supra-local factors such as the state's reactions to violence against sorcerers, a nation-wide protest movement and human rights. It will be demonstrated that the combination of these local and supra-local factors provides the necessary context for understanding the 1998 spate of killings in Banyuwangi.

## **Sorcery in Rural Banyuwangi**

Rural Banyuwangi could be loosely categorised as a peasant society. The main ethnic groups are the Osing as well as Madurese and Javanese. Although these groups tend to live separately — the Osing in rice growing areas, Madurese in fishing villages, and Javanese near plantations — I found no evidence of the tension or discrimination between ethnic groups that characterises some other parts of Indonesia. These groups believe in magic and sorcery. For them, the existence of magic and sorcery can be reconciled with Islam, the predominant religion, because it is felt that magic and sorcery occur only by God's leave.

Accusations of sorcery usually follow a coincidence of dispute and illness. That is to say, if following a dispute, I become ill, I am inclined to think that the person I argued with caused my illness. If that person argues with other people, and they subsequently become ill, then my suspicions are 'confirmed'. It is likely in this situation that a rumour will begin to spread that the person is a sorcerer. This is especially the case if the 'victims' suffer from a distended stomach (*perut besar*), which usually leads to death. Local doctors attribute this condition to ascites caused by cirrhosis or cancer of the liver, which is, in turn, ascribed to viral hepatitis. Even so, local people usually attribute the cause of a distended stomach to sorcery. Additionally, they may ascribe any kind of illness and misfortune to sorcery if these outcomes occur following a dispute with someone who has a reputation as a sorcerer. In my fieldwork location, roughly one in five hundred people carries this reputation.

Aside from the sincere belief that a person is a 'sorcerer', there is no other or ulterior motive behind accusations and killings. Provided there is a 'coincidence' of dispute and illness, almost anyone is liable to be thought of as a sorcerer. It is believed that men possess a greater aptitude for the power (*ilmu*) which can be used for sorcery. This power increases with age. Hence, the majority of 'sorcerers' are older males. However, older females and younger people of both genders are also sometimes suspected. Furthermore, although I have considered various economic, religious, ethnic, social, political and other variables, in relation to sorcery accusations, no pattern is significant. The only pattern I could discern for sorcery spells and retributions for these spells is an in-group manifestation. That is to say, the alleged sorcerer's neighbours, family, and friends perceive them-

selves to be the victims of the sorcerer. Accordingly, it is the ‘sorcerer’s’ neighbours, family, and friends who secretly spread the rumour that this person is a ‘sorcerer’.

As gossip spreads, other members of their community fear and revile this ‘sorcerer’, and there is a variety of actions these local residents might take against the ‘sorcerer’. ‘Sorcerers’ are sometimes banished from the community. Sometimes their roofs are stoned, or their houses are burned. Otherwise, they might be forced to undertake a shrouded oath (*sumpah pocong*). In this form of trial by ordeal, the alleged sorcerer is dressed as a corpse and in front of local people, usually at a mosque, undertakes not to commit sorcery on pain of divine retribution. However, none of these methods is believed to be particularly effective. The only foolproof method to properly handle the issue, in the minds of people in rural Banyuwangi, is to kill the sorcerer. ‘Sorcerers’ are usually killed by a group of local men. This group is often led by people related to the ‘victims’ of the ‘sorcerer’ — that is, the alleged sorcerer’s neighbours, family, and friends. Sometimes local hoodlums (*preman, wong wani*) are also among the leaders. Generally, there is widespread community support for, if not involvement in, the killing.

Prior to the 1998 spate of killings, at least three local ‘sorcerers’ had been killed in the village (*desa*) in which I conducted fieldwork, Tegalgaring. One of these was Tajeri. According to oral histories, this man had been suspected of being a sorcerer since the Dutch colonial period. During the 1950s, he and other suspected sorcerers had undergone a shrouded oath. About a year later, Tajeri was physically attacked. A crowd of local people set upon him as he returned from evening prayers. One of the attackers explained:

the people did it, the people were just doing their job. . . . There was excitement and the people came out because people were hitting him. So they just joined in hitting, all those people. . . . Many of the people, all the mob. . . . There were many excited people. While he was unconscious and lying in the gutter he had covered his private region so people couldn’t hit him there. . . . Everybody went home, they said he was dead. When he regained consciousness, he escaped.

Having survived this first attack, Tajeri lived on in Tegalgaring through the 1960s. It was reported that during this period he bewitched and killed a local Muslim preacher (*kiai*). My host-father recalled that the second attack on Tajeri occurred:

one day in the 1970s. [He] didn’t die straight away, but was sick for a month, then died. [The killer] was from here, his name was Sis. [He killed Tajeri] alone. [Tajeri] didn’t die, he was stomped on with shoes, but had

internal injuries. He was sick for a long time, at least one month, then he died because. . . . There was no report [to the authorities] from people here, because they agreed. Tajeri was a big fish, a heavyweight, when he died, all of Tegalgarang was happy. They just kept their mouths shut; no one reported it, his family was also afraid to report it.

The evidence I have collected indicates that Tegalgarang is not unique among the villages of Banyuwangi with respect to the killing of sorcerers. Among the more than 150 interviews I have conducted throughout the district, I have recorded oral histories from elderly informants throughout Banyuwangi who recall similar attacks dating back to the colonial period. On this basis, it could be posited that since at least the 1950s until the present, roof-stonings, banishments, shrouded oaths, and the occasional killing of sorcerers have been occurring in an intermittent and geographically dispersed fashion. This ‘usual’ state of affairs results from a balance of factors, some of which facilitate, and others of which impede, violence.

The factors which facilitate a killing are difficult for the researcher to enumerate. This is mainly because the need to kill sorcerers is so obvious to most informants, that it does not require explanation; rather it is tacitly taken for granted. Put one way, the ‘obvious’ point is that because the ‘sorcerer’ has used sorcery to kill people, this ‘sorcerer’ should be killed.

Some informants managed to convey this point in different ways. For instance, an informant related that the community:

does not like sorcery, because sorcery gives rise to effects which are not good for the community. Amongst other things, a sudden sickness occurs within people who have been affected by sorcery.

Another explained that a ‘sorcerer’ had been “hanged because [the community] was irritated”. In such a conception, ‘sorcerers’ are killed because of the disruption they cause in a community.

Another justification for the killing of a ‘sorcerer’ is along utilitarian lines. The idea is to take one life in order to save others:

What we have is the ‘bus system’, the ‘bus driver principle’. Rather than more of the victims being the passengers, it is better that just one person is finished off, killed.

In this analogy, the community is like a bus driver reacting when, say, a motorcyclist crosses the bus’s path. One option is to swerve and save the motorcyclist, but in doing so crash the bus, and kill all the passengers. The other option is crash into and kill the motorcyclist, but save the lives of the passengers. The intention here is to kill one ‘sorcerer’, rather than incur many victims.

Another analogy is in terms of a disease. An informant explained that his local community had taken action against an alleged sorcerer previous to the 1998 killings:

because sorcerers are considered to be a blight on this village. Emotions were running high because it is considered to be eradicating a germ. If we let it go, all the more people would die.

However, most informants did not explore these philosophical avenues to justify or explain killings, and it would be misleading to get caught up in these idiomatic renderings of what remained an 'obvious' point — that sorcerers should be killed. This point is the primary motivation for killers.

The secondary incentive to kill is the social pressure to 'join in' (*'milu-milu'*). One killer likened the killing of a 'sorcerer' to a family outing to Surabaya. "If an entire family wants to go sightseeing in Surabaya, how would it feel if one of them didn't join in, how would that feel?" he asked rhetorically. In the same way that the whole family should join in the outing to Surabaya, there is strong social pressure for all the neighbours and family to join in the killing of a sorcerer. In another case, a local community leader insisted repeatedly that in the killing of a 'sorcerer', when "everyone hit him, you had to hit him. The main thing was you had to hit him. They were the rules of the agreement. The main thing was 'you have to hit him hard'".

This kind of solidarity does not seem to apply to defending the 'sorcerer'. Contrary to my expectation, people accused of being a 'sorcerer' are rarely supported by neighbours, family, or friends. Oftentimes, the reason for this is that these are the very people who suspect the 'sorcerer'. In all the cases I covered, at most, only a small minority of the local community was prepared to say that the accusation of sorcery was false. The community did not protect the 'sorcerer' and this was simply because they actively supported the killing.

In spite of these incentives for killing them, 'sorcerers' continue to survive. In Tegalgarang, for example, there are currently at least ten people who are identified by local residents as 'sorcerers.' In almost every village I visited in Banyuwangi, there were still 'sorcerers' living locally, even after the outbreak of killings. If this observation can be generalised then only a small minority of 'sorcerers' have been killed, while hundreds continue to live in Banyuwangi.

Given that killing 'sorcerers' is an accepted means of dealing with the 'threat' that they pose; it is surprising that killings do not occur more frequently. I could speculate on different factors which impede killings, but this would be conjectural. The only clear disincentive that arose from my data was a fear of a possible reaction from the *aparāt* to a killing. The term "*aparāt*" is used quite loosely but usually signifies a conception that

local people have of the state, and particularly, but not necessarily, its repressive elements.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the best translation of “*aparat*” is “the authorities”. Although it has been suggested that killers of sorcerers do not realise their actions could attract a response from the *aparat*,<sup>4</sup> the evidence I have collected contradicts this. Most informants seemed to feel that recriminations are possible, although not certain. To this extent, a fear of the *aparat* is probably the primary disincentive against killing in the ‘usual’ state of affairs. Hence, these incentives and this disincentive have probably remained in a balance over the years, the net result being random and sporadic killings and other anti-sorcerer actions throughout Banyuwangi.

By contrast, there have been three occasions in Banyuwangi when the usual trickle has cascaded into a spate of killings. In 1965–66, tens or hundreds of thousands of Communists throughout Java, Bali, and other islands were massacred following an alleged coup in Indonesia’s capital city. A large number of ‘sorcerers’ in Banyuwangi seems to have been killed, mostly by local people during this period. There was also an outbreak of killings during the ‘Mysterious Shootings’ (*Petrus*) campaign of 1982–1983, when troops ostensibly targeted hoodlums throughout Java (Bourchier 1990). In Banyuwangi, it seems that the troops also targeted ‘sorcerers’ during this period. The third occasion was the 1998 outbreak of killings. The following section briefly covers this most recent outbreak, and explains how it was linked to a sense of ‘opportunity’.

## The Usual State of Affairs versus the Outbreak

The most accurate record of the outbreak is a list of violence against ‘sorcerers’, which I obtained from the district government.<sup>5</sup> This shows a total of 99 killings in 1998: one killing in February; three in July; seven in August; peaking with 80 in September; before dropping back to eight in October. Using this record, I sampled at least one killing in every sub-district in which a killing occurred. From this sample, I conducted interviews with families of victims, killers, onlookers and local officials. One

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<sup>3</sup> It could thus be seen as an example of government or state “being constructed in the imagination and everyday practices of ordinary people” (Gupta 1995:390).

<sup>4</sup> See Anwar (March 10, 2003), for example.

<sup>5</sup> This document is entitled “Daftar: Nama Korban” and signed by the regent on December 2, 1998. A later document “Daftar: Jumlah Korban” signed by the regent on January 8, 1999 has the victim total at 103. However, this latter document gives no detail of the individual victims and so is impossible to verify.

It should be noted that data published by Islamic parties and newspapers regarding the outbreak of killings are inaccurate and often exaggerate the extent of the violence.

such killing I researched was the killing of Hasan (otherwise known as “Asan”) on September 16, 1998 in Karangrejo Hamlet (*dusun*) near my fieldwork site.

Hasan’s fellow residents had long suspected him of being a sorcerer. It was reported that he and his cousin argued. Following this, his cousin complained that his livestock had died (it is thought that sorcerers begin practising on livestock before moving on to humans). Moreover, Hasan was putatively involved in a dispute between a truck driver and his assistant (*kernet*). According to local residents, the truck driver thought his assistant had stolen his money, and so he had paid Hasan to bewitch his assistant. Subsequently, the assistant had fallen sick.

Hasan was not alone in Karangrejo Hamlet, where there were at least half a dozen people suspected of being sorcerers. For a small village the size of Karangrejo, this number of ‘sorcerers’ is typical. Nevertheless, “the entire village feared sorcerers”, as one informant, a neighbourhood head (*kepala RW*), explained. He related the background to the killing:

There was a community session at the village hall. The people who were suspected by the community [of sorcery] were Arifin, Bunali, Asari, Gojali, Mujaki . . . it was hoped that they would be put on the [government’s] transmigration scheme so that they would be safe.

It seems that the concern regarding their placement on the transmigration scheme was just a pretext, because later local residents undertook to kill one of these ‘sorcerers’, Arifin. According to one of the killers, who was jailed for the killing:

there was a meeting at the cemetery, but there wasn’t enough zeal. The meeting failed because our friends weren’t compact. The meeting failed, then there was another meeting at the house of Asnawi [a local resident]. . . . There were more or less three hundred people. Then Asnawi marshalled the community to Arifin’s house at seven o’clock. Arifin wasn’t there, so the community headed on to Hasan’s house. . . . Before the incident the community was ordered to turn off the lights [in their houses]. . . . It turned out that [Hasan was] hiding underneath a bed at Basuni’s house, without Basuni’s knowledge. So the community was angered. Hasan was dragged out of the house, thumped, struck, and knifed. . . . He was taken to the old sand mine. And there he was hanged. After that the community went home.

A month later, the police arrested four people, two of whom were eventually sentenced to terms of three years, and the other two to six years.

Aside from specificities of place, time and the number of people involved, the above account is typical. Killings both in the 1998 outbreak as well as in the ‘usual’ state of affairs are characterised by the same general pattern of local residents banding together, with widespread support

from other residents, and killing another local resident whom they believe to be a sorcerer. What, then, accounts for the change from the 'usual' dispersed and randomly infrequent killings, to a large 'outbreak' around September 1998? All of the above constraints and motivations to kill have been generally in balance in the 'usual' state of affairs. So for an outbreak of killings to have occurred, there must have been a change in this balance.

The critical factor, as expressed in the informants' idiom is *kesempatan*. "*Kesempatan*" roughly equates to "having the opportunity" or, more passively, "being provided with the opportunity". At the time of the outbreak, there was a strong, but vaguely defined, notion that the *aparatus* was either unable and/or unwilling to stop, or was possibly even supporting, the killings of sorcerers. It is this notion of lawlessness that gave rise to the sense of 'opportunity'.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, what changed was not so much the motivating factors of the need to kill sorcerers or the pressure to join in, but rather a reduction of the inhibiting factor, that is, a reduction of the perceived likelihood of recrimination by the *aparatus*.

Doubts regarding the capacity or inclination of the *aparatus* to stop the killings probably arose from three perceptions in particular. First was that *Reformasi* might incorporate violent actions against 'sorcerers'. Second was that by recording lists of names of 'sorcerers', the government had legitimised the identification of 'sorcerers', and thereby given tacit approval to killings. And, third was a sense of lawlessness tied to perceptions of the police as being overwhelmed by "Human Rights" and demonstrations. These three perceptions are the background to the killings, and are the focus of this article.

## ***Reformasi*, Radiograms and HAM**

*Reformasi* was a nation-wide protest movement demanding political reform, which culminated in the 1998 downfall of Indonesia's second and longest serving president, Soeharto, and his New Order regime. One might question how the killings of 'sorcerers' could be connected with a political reform movement. The answer lies in the local interpretation of this movement, which had three important facets.

First, *Reformasi* was equated with a lack of state control or law. When I asked an informant, "why was that sorcerer killed then? why not before?", he responded: "*Reformasi*, before *Reformasi* we were waiting for the oppor-

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<sup>6</sup> This was constantly repeated by informants, although sometimes with slight variation, for example, "at that time there wasn't any law" ("*waktu itu sudah ndak ada hukum*") or "at that time they said there wasn't any law" ("*waktu itu katanya orang ndak hukuman*"). "*Hukum*" in this context refers to the "law" as it is dispensed by police, army and courts.

tunity. It was like there was no law [during *Reformasi*].” It was also explained to me that “if there is turbulence in the state, there is an opportunity for the concerns of the many, they look for an opportunity; this was, after all, the opportunity of *Reformasi*.” In a similar vein, an informant described how a ‘sorcerer’ named Jakarya survived prior to *Reformasi*:

J: Jakarya was often traumatised; some people came to him in the rice field wanting to kill him.

NH: Why wasn’t he killed?

J: It was before *Reformasi*, it was still secure.

As a final example, one of the killers in my fieldwork village recalled:

At the time I did it to [the ‘sorcerer’] Dillah it was like there were no rules from the rulers. He [indicating in the direction of a neighbouring ‘sorcerer’] is my number two [i.e. next victim]. If there weren’t rules to search for the killers [of ‘sorcerers’], I would have brought him to justice.

All these quotations imply a perception that during *Reformasi*, there was a diminution of the control the *aparatus* had previously enjoyed. Hence, in the first sense of *Reformasi*, killings of ‘sorcerers’ could occur because of lawlessness or a lack of state control. (And it seems that this lawlessness was keenly anticipated.)

In the second sense, *Reformasi* seemed to imply a time for mass action. In Banyuwangi, gatherings of local residents with the aim of exiling ‘sorcerers’, or destroying their homes, sometimes culminating in the killing of a ‘sorcerer’ are frequently described as *demo*.<sup>7</sup> The term “*demo*” is also used to describe local residents’ massing outside a police station in order to demand that their comrades arrested for the killing of ‘sorcerers’ be released.<sup>8</sup> Other actions which were considered to be *demo* included incidents televised

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, in a hamlet in my fieldwork location, the hamlet head related that four suspected sorcerers “were all demonstrated against (*didemo*), were stoned with bricks. It occurred prior to the killings, in ’97 and ’95”. While I was doing fieldwork there was one such ‘demo’ in a nearby village, against a ‘sorcerer’ who had recently taken up residence there:

Just like that there was a “demo”. There was contact between *preman* [hoodlums] drinking liquor. After that they organised a mass of people under one of the leaders. . . . The house [of the ‘sorcerer’] was completely ruined.

As a final example, in a village in Genteng Subdistrict in 2002, “there was a demonstration by the people [against a ‘sorcerer’], with many people, with the people”.

<sup>8</sup> For example, an informant related that:

A person had been taken [by the police for the killing of a ‘sorcerer’], so there was solidarity, there was a demonstration. . . . They had a tough image so that the police would be scared.

from the larger cities in 1998 during *Reformasi*; both student marches advocating political reform and also the actions of other groups, who looted, destroyed and razed prominent malls and shops, and committed violence against ethnic-Chinese. Local residents seem to have felt that those involved in these *Reformasi* demonstrations had 'got away with it', so those involved in demonstrations against sorcerers could 'get away with it' too. Two informants discussing the killings as a form of demonstration, reflected:

HA: there was a mass opportunity

HH: they said that there was no law

HA: it was almost the same as a demo, the activities of the mob.

As another put it, more succinctly, "[the killers of 'sorcerers' were] copying what was on TV". The important connection here is that the killing of 'sorcerers' was understood as similar to, or perhaps not even differentiated from, demonstrations in the major cities. Attendant to this was a sense of impunity. One informant attributed the outbreak to the:

political change from the New Order, *Reformasi*. People became unstable. The villagers joined in with those who were swept away by the situation; they used the opportunity to take the law into their own hands.

For local residents then, *Reformasi* implied a time for demonstrating with impunity, and such demonstrations incorporated actions against sorcerers.

In a third sense, the connection with *Reformasi* can be understood as a popular reaction against injustice. Perhaps the greatest injustice the people in rural Banyuwangi perceived was not the politics of the Soeharto regime, but rather the injustice of their neighbour who had, for many years, been practicing sorcery.

In a way, what the *Reformasi* demonstrations in Jakarta really were about is hardly relevant. What is important is that local residents perceived them to signify a lack of state control, a time for demonstration, and a time to right past wrongs. And this was interpreted as an opportunity to attack or kill a 'sorcerer' in the neighbourhood.

The more immediate catalyst for the killings was the radiograms. For analytical purposes, the phenomenon of the radiograms can be divided into the text of the radiograms, their official implementation, and the interpretation by local residents.

As regards the text, everyday the regent (*bupati*), the executive head of Banyuwangi District, sends around a dozen instructions to the subdistrict heads (*camat*) via radiogram. This means that instructions are read out

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In another case in the 1980s, several people were arrested following the killing of a sorcerer; in response, the community "demonstrated at the police station".

at the regent's office and broadcast over a two-way radio to the various subdistrict offices, where the information is simultaneously transcribed by hand. On February 6, 1998, the regent, Purnomo Sidik, sent one such radiogram, which would eventually lead to him being ousted from his position. One account of the body text of radiogram 300/070/439.013/1998 was:

... bearing in mind the incidents of houses being destroyed because of sorcery rumours, it is instructed that:

1. There be co-ordination amongst the executive, police and military sub-district heads to avoid, as early as possible, the occurrence of incidents.
2. If it is possible appeal to the village and neighbourhood heads, if a citizen has been accused by the community as a sorcerer, that he relocate himself to a safer place...<sup>9</sup>

Another reproduction of this radiogram depicts it as containing two instructions.<sup>10</sup> The first instruction was that "people presumed to be sorcerers by the community" be "protected". The second was that these people be encouraged to move or perhaps transmigrate.<sup>11</sup>

Although the district office has acknowledged that a radiogram was sent,<sup>12</sup> and permitted me to read the radiogram, I was not allowed to copy it.<sup>13</sup> In any case, from my recollection, the impression of the two reproductions

<sup>9</sup> This is a translation of a reproduction in the appendix of Manan et al. (2001):  
... *Memperhatikan kasus terjadinya perusakan dengan isu santet dengan ini diinstruksikan agar:*

1. *Adakan koordinasi dengan Muspika untuk mencegah sedini mungkin terjadinya peristiwa.*
2. *Apabila mungkin Sdr menghimbau melalui Kades, RW, RT, apabila ada warga pernah dituduh masyarakat sebagai tukang santet, supaya mengamankan diri pindah ke tempat lain...*

<sup>10</sup> This version was recorded in an unpublished document entitled "*Laporan Sementara Kasus Santet Banyuwangi*" by the NU. The untranslated instructions were:

1. *koordinasikan perlindungan kepada orang-2 yang oleh masyarakat diduga sebagai DUKUN SANTET*
2. *Jika memungkinkan dipersilahkan pindah, atau disarankan untuk Transmigrasi dan akan dibantu kepada mereka yang sedia Transmigrasi.*

<sup>11</sup> Transmigration is the internal migration program in which residents are sent from densely populated areas and are given some government assistance in establishing a livelihood in less densely populated areas.

<sup>12</sup> Documents obtainable from the office confirm this. For example, the document "*Materi Pertemuan Tentang Pembunuhan Terhadap Orang-Orang Yang Diduga Dukun Santet Di Kabupaten Dati II Banyuwangi*" records that the regent "sent out a radiogram on February 6, 1998, number 300/070/439.013/1998, to subdistrict heads to raise the level of security".

<sup>13</sup> The official reticence was perhaps due to a feeling that the radiogram might be incriminating in view of the events described here.

given above corresponds closely to the original, which stressed the protection and relocation of sorcerers. Following the first radiogram of February, the regent issued a second radiogram (450/1126/439.023/1998) on September 16, the text of which was similar to the first, but the context was markedly different.<sup>14</sup> By this time, Banyuwangi was in the grip of killings that the first radiogram had probably inadvertently contributed to. Although the text of the two radiograms stressed that alleged sorcerers be protected and encouraged to relocate, the radiograms in fact led to more killings. An explanation for how this might have occurred lies in the implementation and interpretation of the radiograms.

In relation to the official implementation of the radiograms, the radiograms' instructions to subdistrict heads were forwarded on to village heads. They responded by compiling data about 'sorcerers', and this information was passed on to the police. In Tegalaring, it was actually the hamlet heads (*kepala dusun*), who made lists of 'sorcerers'. The Tegalaring village head noted:

the policemen from Rogojampi came, "who are the people suspected of sorcery?" I feel that is common knowledge, so I would have just listed them. I know who they are, young and old, only too well. . . . It was just noted by the hamlet heads. This information was noted by the police.

In fact in Tegalaring, only one hamlet head formally recorded the information. This is how he explained it:

R: There was a request that anyone who was suspected, caught in the community spotlight, to possess it . . . it did not imply that A possessed sorcery, just that he was spotlighted by the community. [I reported it] verbally, at the [village] office. As I remember it was the police. People who were suspected of possessing sorcery, the police requested information about sorcerers . . . Kaderi, Mursid, Abdul, Urip. I recalled four people. There was a letter from the police that those who were suspected of sorcery were requested to come to the police office to be photographed. The term for it was "being called up".

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<sup>14</sup> The regent's official version of events records the second radiogram (450/1126/439.023/1998 *perihal Perkembangan . . . oleh Isu Tukang Sihir*) as containing the following information:

*berdasarkan Radiogram tanggal 16 September 1998 nomor 450/1126/439.023/1998, Bupati Kdh memerintahkan kepada para Camat untuk mendata mereka yang diduga sebagai tukang santet dengan tujuan:*

- a) *Upaya penyelamatan*
- b) *Tindakan Pengamanan*
- c) *Mengadakan upaya persuasif kepada mereka yang merasa dirinya dicurigai agar pindah ke luar Banyuwangi.*

NH: That was after they were listed, right?

R: Yes. There was a police letter calling them up, and I delivered it to those who were involved. He was emotional, he was mad at me, he said that I had listed him there, listed his name, Urip. . . . He said whatever happened he did not want to agree to being called up, so I said "it's up to you, I have come and delivered this only because it's my job".

Listing also apparently took place in many other villages. In general, where the lists were constructed, those 'sorcerers' who were listed received letters which required their presence at subdistrict police stations. This was apparently to be the first bureaucratic step in assisting the 'sorcerers' in relocating. Aside from this, another official response was to convene meetings. For example, in Watukebo:

There was a meeting at the village hall about a month before the killing [of a local sorcerer]. From the police, the problem of sorcery, the listing of sorcerers. All the village officials, the neighbourhood heads, and also from the police. The [police gave a lecture, advice].

Hence, the two general responses to the radiograms were collecting data about the identity of 'sorcerers' and convening meetings.

The text of the radiograms seems benign enough. Furthermore, as far as I can ascertain, those officials who recorded information and convened meetings did so within the parameters of the instructions. So, it is particularly the villagers' interpretation of the text of the radiograms and their implementation that provides the historical significance. The interpretation incorporated different things.

In specific cases where a 'sorcerer' was processed, local people perceived the letters, visits to the police station, and other official interventions as recognition of the 'sorcerers' guilt. For instance, many interviewees stressed the 'fact' that the 'sorcerers' had been taken to the subdistrict army base (*koramil*) or the village hall as corroborating the 'fact' that the person was a sorcerer.<sup>15</sup> In addition, informants often stated that the sorcerers admitted to their sorcery and were photographed at these locations. When talking about an alleged sorcerer, I asked an informant, "was there ever any acknowledgment from the person that he possessed sorcery?" The informant explained:

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<sup>15</sup> An example of the incriminating interpretation of the official dealings with 'sorcerers' was related by a man who confessed to 'joining in' in the killing of the 'sorcerer' Basuri. This man recalled:

The village head listed [sorcerers]. They were given an official document allowing them to leave so that they could be banished. [Basuri] was moved to another village, [but] was not welcomed [there]. The sorcerer came back to the village, but he wasn't welcome in his original village.

I don't know about any confession. That man had been photographed by the army and the police. All the people who possessed [sorcery] were photographed.

I asked two of the killers from a neighbouring village why the victim had only been killed then, in 1998, and not earlier. They replied:

S: Yeah there was the opportunity. There was the listing by the regent.

J: Before the killing occurred there was the listing, they were photographed by the regent.

Hence, there was a perception that the 'sorcerers' had been photographed, and, furthermore, that "those who had been photographed there, they were the ones who really should be killed."<sup>16</sup> I could locate no police records of photographs of suspected sorcerers, even though the police gave me access to all other records that I had requested pertaining to the killings. Moreover, no informants witnessed the putative photographs and confessions, so their stories were hearsay. Whether or not a 'sorcerer' was actually photographed, being listed and processed by the *aparāt* reinforced local residents' belief that the 'sorcerer' was guilty.

However, some of the alleged sorcerers who were killed in 1998 were not thought to have been listed and processed by the *aparāt*. In spite of this, the radiograms may have contributed to their deaths by creating a general perception that the *aparāt* condoned actions against 'sorcerers'. As one of the killers summed it up: "The main thing was the regent gave the order to eliminate sorcerers". Hence, the radiograms were perceived as a 'green light' to attack sorcerers generally.

In summary, the radiograms were interpreted as officially permitting attacks on 'sorcerers' generally. And in specific cases where 'sorcerers' received letters or were officially processed in some manner, this was taken as further evidence of their guilt. Hence, in spite of the fact that the text called for the protection of 'sorcerers', the radiograms led to the killings of the 'sorcerers'.<sup>17</sup> Assessing that the regent was intending to save the 'sorcerers', but that the radiograms could have the opposite effect, some local officials prudently chose to ignore the instructions. For instance, although one hamlet head in Tegalgarang was, as mentioned earlier, compliant, the

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<sup>16</sup> The incriminating interpretation of being putatively photographed was stressed by a local Army Guidance Officer or *Babinsa*:

before the killing, all the people who were thought to possess sorcery were called to the subdistrict police station, the letter stated they were invited. Those people were photographed, [they] felt shocked, the community knew. . . .

<sup>17</sup> It has been proposed that the lists, once collated, were unintentionally or purposefully distributed amongst the public (Brown 1999:41). However, none of the killers I knew or interviewed reported first-hand knowledge of this occurring.

other four hamlet heads overlooked it. However, their actions seemed to escape notice and did little to discourage their fellow local residents. To my knowledge, it was only in Banyuwangi that such radiograms were sent. Hence, the official attempt to protect ‘sorcerers’ seems to have been a unique and particularly important factor in this district. This might help explain why there were more killings in Banyuwangi than in other East Javanese districts in 1998,<sup>18</sup> and why the outbreak of killings in East Java began, as seems to be the case, in Banyuwangi.<sup>19</sup>

The concept of HAM was another factor contributing to the sense of ‘lawlessness’. In educated circles outside the villages of Banyuwangi, the acronym “HAM” (standing for “Hak Asasi Manusia”) is a translation of “Human Rights” and has the positive moral force that this term connotes in the West. For example, suspecting that there were human rights abuses in Banyuwangi, the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) undertook a fact-finding mission in Banyuwangi and, not surprisingly, found that there had been HAM infractions (October 6, 1998). One member of the fact-finding mission asserted that “the National Human Rights Commission absolutely deplores the case of mass butchery in Banyuwangi and surrounding areas, because, in this case, HAM violations have been uncovered” (October 13, 1998).

However, rather than perceiving them as a violation of HAM, for my informants, the killings were enabled by higher levels of HAM. In addition to meaning “Human Rights”, “HAM” also has another rather different

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<sup>18</sup> The frequency of killings in Banyuwangi might also be explained in the opinion of some local residents that there are simply more sorcerers to be killed in Banyuwangi, the ‘Warehouse of Sorcery’. However, although it is difficult to quantify the sincerity and spread of sorcery beliefs, it does not seem that such beliefs are more prevalent in Banyuwangi.

<sup>19</sup> Given that the interpretation of the radiograms by local people helped incite the killings, one might be forgiven for wondering what the regent intended by issuing the radiograms. Critics of the regent claimed that he was seeking to blacklist and persecute innocent people. Local informants, by contrast, perceived it to be a long-overdue attempt by the *aparats* to get tough on sorcerers. My impression is that neither is the case. In a press interview (October 15, 1998) and in an interview with me, he insisted that his intention was to save the alleged sorcerers. However, he made no mention of the first radiogram of February, which preceded the outbreak. Perhaps he felt that, given that the first radiogram preceded the outbreak of killings, this would be an indictment against him. He only talked about the second radiogram in response to increasing killings, which, he maintained was intended to curtail the killings once they had begun. Although the regent’s intent became a fixation of the press and NGOs after the killings, in a sense, the regent’s actual intention is irrelevant to understanding the killings. This is because local residents’ interpretation is far more significant — they interpreted the radiograms as a sign the *aparats* would condone actions against ‘sorcerers’.

meaning for the people in Banyuwangi, whereby it also roughly means “political and social pressures which, correctly or incorrectly, inhibit the *aparatus*”. In this understanding, during *Reformasi* the *aparatus* was afraid that stopping local residents carrying out their actions would be conceived as a HAM violation. For example, one night I listened while two local people discussed the killings in Banyuwangi. One stated that the *aparatus* could not do its job properly, because “after there was HAM, the *aparatus* was confounded.” Another example relates to a ‘sorcerer’ named Ashari, who was killed after the *aparatus* had avoided confrontation with ‘demonstrators’ and allowed them to proceed. A local community leader related that fellow residents:

demo-ed the family [of Ashari], “he has to be killed, I don’t care if I’m put in jail” that [was the opinion of] the community, men and women from two neighbourhoods. It was spontaneous. The Dalmas [District Police Response Team] anticipated it. The Dalmas gave a direction not to be anarchic, not to demonstrate . . . the community attacked the Dalmas, the Dalmas was chased . . . in the end the Dalmas ran off, the Dalmas disappeared, rather than oppose [the community] in vain, because [the Dalmas] was afraid of HAM.

In this interpretation, not only the retreat of the *aparatus* but also the subsequent killing of the sorcerer thus seemed to be attributable to HAM.<sup>20</sup> Hence, local residents understood that the *aparatus* was constrained by HAM, providing them with the ‘opportunity’ to kill.

## State Response, Imitation, and Competition

In addition to interpretations of the regent’s radiograms, *Reformasi*, and the increasing levels of HAM, another factor contributing to a sense of lawlessness was the perception that, in its response to demonstrations and killings, the *aparatus* had been overcome by supporters of the killers. This perception appears to have developed after the killings had begun. It can be traced to the events following the killing of Jairo, in Aliyan Village on August 18. Three weeks later, on September 8, the police arrested four suspects. In response, the residents of Aliyan protested and the four suspects were released. The territorial police head is recorded as stating that he allowed the suspects to be released because they were not directly involved in the killing (September 12, 1998). However, local residents in

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<sup>20</sup> In direct contrast to this interpretation, following this killing, the Head of the National Human Rights Commission actually visited Ashari’s daughter, indicating that he considered there was a HAM infraction.

Aliyan, and other villages in the area, perceived that those responsible for the killings were released as a result of pressure from the protesters: “As they were released, the killings spread. [The killings] were copied because the killers were released. That was the mistake.” Additionally, there were several other cases in which the *aparatus* was perceived to have succumbed to local pressures. Another factor contributing to the perception that the *aparatus* had been overcome was the slow reaction of the state. It appeared that ‘sorcerers’ were being killed but no one was getting arrested.<sup>21</sup> The perceived absence of official reaction was taken to be further evidence that the *aparatus* might condone the killings or might be powerless to stop them.

The preceding discussion has briefly covered the important factors which contributed to the sense of lawlessness, and hence, ‘opportunity’. Local understandings of the regent’s radiograms, *Reformasi*, HAM, and the *aparatus* response to the killings contributed to a perception that the *aparatus* was unwilling or unable to act against the killers. This lawlessness existed only in respect to the killing of sorcerers and demonstrations against the arrests of their suspected murderers.<sup>22</sup>

There are other contributing factors which are not related to this sense of lawlessness, but which nevertheless may have spurred on the killings. One of these is imitation. In the ‘usual’ state of affairs, killings are isolated and intermittent. There is no evidence that a killing in one village influences neighbouring villages to take similar steps. However, once the outbreak began, it could be said that the killings started to ‘spread’; one act of killing helped to spur another killing in another village.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the sense

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<sup>21</sup> This was often referred to as the “sluggishness of the [state] security [response]” (“*Kelambanan dari keamanan*”).

<sup>22</sup> Brown suggests that:

throughout Indonesia the reformation process quickly produced a dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in the political sphere. . . . This ‘good-bad’ dichotomy also entered the collective consciousness at the village level. Dukun santet [sorcerers] . . . became the ‘bad’ which needed to be purged from the social landscape (2000:15).

In as much as sorcerers were ‘bad or evil’ this is acceptable, however it is simplistic in that the hatred of ‘sorcerers’ predates the *Reformasi* movement, and other ‘bad’ elements (the Chinese, prostitutes, gamblers, petty criminals) were not targeted for purging during *Reformasi*. There were demonstrations against ethnic Chinese shop-owners and their prices in the neighbouring district of Jember in January 1998. These spilled over only as far as the extreme west of Banyuwangi (Kalibaru Subdistrict). However, there is no evidence of anti-Chinese violence in Banyuwangi throughout the entire period of the outbreak.

<sup>23</sup> Press reports regarding the outbreak implied that the spread of the killings was evidence of a conspiracy. Perhaps a more appropriate model is the protest and violence associated with the Luddite movement described by Rude. One village’s

that there was an outbreak, in itself, provided an impetus to kill. In one informant's words "in the end, there arose a feeling of flaring up like in other villages, that's what you call community." The grandchild of a victim explained:

at the time of the sorcery rumours in Banyuwangi, Ramelan's [one of the perpetrators] family and his friends used this opportunity. It was the time Banyuwangi was seething (*ramai-ramai*).

During the outbreak, imitation was limited to the killing of 'sorcerers' with whom local residents were familiar. Generally, informants copied killings of 'sorcerers' perpetrated by fellow villagers and those carried out in neighbouring villages.<sup>24</sup> However, on the basis of incorrect press reportage and rumour, most felt that innocent victims had been killed elsewhere. For instance, as mentioned at the outset, many believed that in other areas ninjas were killing Muslim clerics. (A belief that probably influenced later scholarly accounts espousing conspiracy theories.) Hence, imitation probably only operated within familiar locales.

Another causal factor of marginal importance was a sense of competition both within and between villages. Within villages, some informants sought to bolster their status within the community by their involvement in a killing. For example, I came across a case in which a man, who by all other accounts had not been involved in a killing, boasted of his involvement and was subsequently arrested and jailed. Between villages, there is some evidence that a form of rivalry might have developed as the killings spread. Some informants maintained they would have been thought to be 'chicken' (*wedhi*) or 'transvestites' (*banci*) had they not killed a sorcerer. For instance, one related that "initially there were killings everywhere, then this village was teased by citizens of [other] villages, they said that the people here were chickens (*wandu*)". However, such a rivalry is probably exaggerated and was limited, mainly to some of the more aggressive males such as hoodlums (*preman*).

Having looked at what caused and further incited the outbreak, consideration will now be given to what brought it to a stop. This was, quite

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actions appears to have influenced another, as this spread from village to village across the midlands of England (1981:81–83).

<sup>24</sup> In some cases, informants were not even aware of what was occurring in neighbouring villages. No soldiers were involved in the killing in my fieldwork location, Tegalgaring. Nevertheless, the head of a neighbouring village (Bumo) related that local residents in 'his' village "thought that the military were involved in Tegalgaring". Although this was not, in fact the case, the killers in Bumo thought they were following the soldiers' lead. This misconception may have provided further incentive to perpetrate the killing in Bumo.

simply, a police crackdown incorporating local and provincial police forces, with ostensible army support, and accompanied by press coverage.<sup>25</sup> The crackdown began on October 1, and the killings subsided within 4 days. This show of force, thus, seems to have halted the outbreak. And this provides further evidence that it was a perception that the *aparat* was unwilling or unable to respond that spurred the outbreak of killings in the first place.

Supporters of the killers had hoped that local sorcerers could be 'dealt with' without recrimination from the *aparat*. With *Reformasi*, the radiograms, HAM, and the late police response, it seemed their wish had been granted. However, arrests did eventually occur, and state law was reasserted. Local residents maintained that had they known that arrests would follow, they would not have supported or undertaken the killing.<sup>26</sup> Some even felt they had been misled. "The *aparat* didn't do anything [initially, in response to other, earlier killings]" one of those jailed insisted. Then, referring to himself, he added, "like an idiot [I went along with it], the community said that if it was a mass killing there wasn't any law, [so I] joined in the killing." Another informant in the northernmost subdistrict of Banyuwangi complained, "if only there had been arrests in the south," there would not have been a problem. Hence, although most informants generally agreed with the killing of the 'sorcerer' in their own village, they bemoaned the sense of lawlessness which provided impetus to the outbreak.

There is another reason why the apparent lawlessness was considered with regret. This was, as indicated above, a misconception rumoured in the press and by word of mouth that in other areas it was not sorcerers who were killed during the outbreak. As sorcery is primarily a local phenomenon, it is rare for sorcerers to be known outside the immediate environs of the village. Informants 'knew' the people killed in their village, and maybe neighbouring villages, were sorcerers. But as far as what was happening outside familiar locales, there was a perception that, among other things, ninjas were killing Muslim clerics. Because of all the 'innocent' victims in other areas, informants thought the outbreak was, in general, a bad thing. So for this reason, the sense of lawlessness was also lamented.

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<sup>25</sup> The Surabaya Post quotes the East Java Regional Police Chief (*kapolda*), Dayat, as saying:

"the Banyuwangi cases are too much, so the police must undertake actions that are even tougher. If we were just giving directions before, then this time it will be a different story" stated Dayat. To overcome this problem the regional police have sent a Mobile Brigade to Banyuwangi. It was not mentioned how large the force is, but it is considered capable of dealing with this problem (October 1, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, for most informants the killings of 1998 were a '*tragedi*' because of the arrest and jailing of fathers and husbands for perpetrating the killings, and not because suspected 'sorcerers' were killed.

Nevertheless, the lawlessness was perceived as an opportunity as far as it pertained to the killing of a local 'sorcerer' whom villagers knew.

## Reconsidering Conspiracies

In contrast to the various conspiracy theories regarding the outbreak, my findings emphasise that local people killed local 'sorcerers' without outside instigation. In light of this, the conspiracy theories presented in academic analyses should be reconsidered. I will confine my remarks here to a few short comments concerning the 'factual evidence' that underlies most of the conspiracy theories; the involvement of soldiers, or ninjas, and the victimisation of *kiai* or NU members in Banyuwangi.<sup>27</sup>

In relation to the involvement of soldiers, I could ascertain this in only one killing. Although I did not have the opportunity to crosscheck the facts of this case, it appears that a soldier and a policeman were merely local residents involved in a killing. They happened to be at home at the time and sympathised with the plight of the majority of local residents.

As regards ninjas, in some of the killings during the outbreak, some of the killers wore sarongs or T-shirts around their heads, in a fashion reminiscent of ninjas. Probably as a result of this, it was rumoured that 'actual' ninjas were roaming throughout East Java, and that these ninjas were assassinating innocent people. This rumour appears to have reached its zenith around mid- to late-October; several weeks after the killings of 'sorcerers' had subsided. In addition to the widespread stories that these ninjas were members of the Special Forces or trained in martial arts, according to local rumour, which was disseminated in the media; they also possessed supernatural capabilities. Many ninjas were 'sighted' disappearing behind banana tress, reappearing as cats, transforming themselves into madmen, and so forth. Believing in the existence of such ninjas, local residents throughout Banyuwangi mounted guards against ninjas. Even those who had originally worn the 'ninja' apparel took part in these guards, apparently unaware that they might have been the source of the rumour about ninjas. And, unless apprehending mentally ill drifters, cats, and other things count, no ninjas were ever caught, nor has any further evidence of their existence been forthcoming.

In relation to the theory that victims were *kiai*, all the data I have gathered indicate that the victims of the killings in 1998 were alleged sorcerers, but none was a *kiai*. In various meetings I had with local and provincial NU leaders, no one could provide me with any specific or verifiable evidence of *kiai* being targeted in Banyuwangi. One victim of the

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<sup>27</sup> More data is available in my forthcoming doctoral thesis.

1998 killings in Watukebo village, M Said, was said to be a *kiai*, in a Surabaya Post article. However, local people I interviewed disagreed with M Said being called a *kiai*. Aside from this putative *kiai*, who turned out not to be a *kiai*, I could find no evidence of *kiai* having been targeted. I discovered another victim from Watukebo village, Jamuri, who was said to be a *guru ngaji*. However, I do not think this is evidence that supports the theory that the NU was targeted, as aside from being a *guru ngaji*, he was thought to be a sorcerer. Aside from *kiai* and *guru ngaji*, the NU reports made much of the fact that Dillah, one of the victims in Tegalgarang village, was a *takmir masjid* (mosque official). However, there are three large mosques in Tegalgarang, each with over a dozen *takmir masjid*. More importantly, people in Tegalgarang do not place much or any stock in the fact that Dillah was, or anybody else is, a *takmir masjid*, because they do not associate this position with particular prominence or piety. If we counted no *kiai*, one *guru ngaji*, and one *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 vast majority of the victims in 1998 Banyuwangi were not thought by locals to be *kiai*, *guru ngaji* or pious figures.

The final conspiracy theory considered here is that the victims of the killings were members of the NU. This is indeed the case — most of the victims were members or supporters of the NU. However, most of the killers were also members or supporters of the NU. As one informant put it, in his village “those who accused and those who were accused [of sorcery] were the same,” that is, they were followers of the NU. This is not surprising as Banyuwangi could be considered an NU stronghold. Most people in typical villages of rural Banyuwangi consider themselves aligned with the NU, even if they are not card-carrying members or do not vote for the NU political party. In summary, it is true that the majority of victims were NU members or supporters, but, as it pertains to a conspiracy against the NU, this is not significant.<sup>28</sup> Hence, the ‘factual’ evidence considered above is either unacceptable or of insufficient grounds for the case that there was a conspiracy behind the killings.

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<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the NU organisation portrayed the killings as the victimisation of NU members. One informant ascribed this to political opportunism:

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.

The feeling among some of the killers was that, by ‘trying to get a response’, the NU leadership had put pressure on the *aparatus*. The Police and Army thus responded to the killings and arrested the local perpetrators, where they might otherwise have been inclined to overlook the killings. An informant laughingly complained:

## Fear and Uncertainty

Infrequent violence against ‘sorcerers’ is part of normal life in Banyuwangi. The increase in the frequency of such violence in 1998 resulted from a perception of increased lawlessness and, hence, opportunity among local residents.<sup>29</sup> Local residents were emboldened by their understandings of several supra-local factors, particularly *Reformasi*, the radiograms, and HAM. There were probably two general notions that potential killers drew upon in their understanding of these events. One was that the *aparatus* was unwilling to prosecute killers, because the *aparatus* might support actions against sorcerers. This notion might be linked to the historical ‘awareness’ that there was no reaction from the *aparatus* to the killings of ‘sorcerers’ during

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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 their victims] were NU supporters. The NU [leaders] got it wrong, it was exaggerated and in the end its own supporters [lit. children] were adversely affected. If [NU leader] Gus Dur had not said anything like that, it would have been over.

For these informants, the conspiracy theory was a deception (since NU supporters were not only the victims, but also the perpetrators of the killings) and a betrayal by the NU leaders (since eventually the police arrested NU supporters). Nevertheless, as loyal NU supporters, these informants were not particularly embittered.

<sup>29</sup> Brown (2000:15), Connor and Campbell (2000) stress the economic situation as an important causal factor behind the killings. They assert that the downturn (*krismon*) that was occurring in Indonesia had devastated Banyuwangi. However, the currency devaluation, rising unemployment and other effects of the downturn did not affect all parts of Indonesia, or even Java similarly. Moreover, both anecdotal and statistical evidence does not support the idea of an economic crisis in Banyuwangi. Banyuwangi’s resilience was perhaps due, in part, to the insulation that Bali affords to Banyuwangi’s economy.

We might accept the premise that there was a significant economic downturn in Banyuwangi for the sake of the argument. However, the reasoning that this can explain the killings is questionable. Although impoverishment can lead to widespread violence in some situations (Bread Riots in pre-Revolutionary France, 1990s Los Angeles, for example), in others it does not (the 1930s Depression in Australia). So, even if it could be established that there was an economic downturn in Banyuwangi, that this downturn could cause the 1998 killings cannot be assumed, and would require more evidence. Otherwise, the argument could be seen to be based on a kind of “understanding of social action” that Sidel labels “simplistic and reductionist” (2001:49), or a simple *post hoc* fallacy.

Indonesia’s *krismon* may have indirectly been a causal factor in as much as it contributed to *Reformasi* and local interpretations of *Reformasi* were, as has been demonstrated, a causal factor behind the killings. However, it is doubtful that *krismon* stands in direct causal relation to the outbreak in Banyuwangi.

1965–66, that soldiers had targeted ‘sorcerers’ in 1982–83, and that, in the ‘usual’ state of affairs, the *aparat* has not always responded to killings of ‘sorcerers’.<sup>30</sup> The other was that the *aparat* was unable to prosecute killers of sorcerers, because the *aparat* was emasculated.<sup>31</sup>

A salient point regarding all of the contributing factors discussed above — *Reformasi*, the radiograms, “Human Rights”, as well as the release of the suspects after the ‘demo’, and the sluggish response of the *aparat* — is that their importance lies in the interpretation that local people ‘put’ on them. For students in Jakarta, *Reformasi* might have been a political reform movement, while, for local residents in Banyuwangi, *Reformasi* meant a lack of state control, a time for mass action, and a time to right the wrongs that the sorcerers had committed. For the state, the radiograms were an attempt to protect alleged sorcerers, while for local residents they indicated that the *aparat* was finally getting tough on sorcerers. If, officially at least, the police had released some suspected of the killings of the ‘sorcerers’ because they were not directly involved; for local residents the release signified that the *aparat* had been overwhelmed by the demonstrators and had capitulated. Furthermore, the police’s ‘sluggishness’ in response to the killings, which was probably due to apathy or a sense of inability to respond immediately, implied for local residents that the *aparat* would not or could not respond to the killings at all. Finally, for the National Human Rights

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<sup>30</sup> As in 1998, a sense of opportunity seems to have operated during the Communist massacre of 1965–66. For instance, two alleged sorcerers in Tegalgarung were killed by local residents. This occurred because, in the words of an informant, who was a local hoodlum (*preman*), “the opportunity of the Communist Massacre was seized . . . you have to understand that was an opportunity, it was the massacre of the Communist movement.” Hence, as in 1998, informants recalled a sense of ‘opportunity’ in 1965–66. This resonates with Beatty’s observation that in Banyuwangi: during the independence struggle [1945–49] and the period of lawlessness of the early years of the republic [1949–early 1950s] and again during the upheavals of the 1960s, ‘anti-social elements’ — whether political agitators, criminals, or alleged sorcerers — were disposed of in a general ‘cleansing’ (Beatty 1999:77).

My research did not uncover sufficient data to corroborate or contradict the idea of an outbreak around the time of independence, however it clearly supports the notion of a ‘clean-up’ of sorcerers in the 1960s (specifically 1965–66).

<sup>31</sup> There is a superficial inconsistency between the two notions, in that, if the *aparat* was unable, then it would be irrelevant if it was willing or unwilling to stop the killings. Similarly, if the *aparat* was unwilling, then it would be irrelevant if it was able or unable to stop the killings. However, firstly, inconsistencies are common in human thought. Secondly, there was, in any case, an uncertainty regarding the *extent* of the *aparat*’s inability or unwillingness. Thirdly, both scenarios (unwillingness or inability) lead to the same conclusion — a sense of opportunity. For these reasons, the superficial inconsistency diminishes in significance.

Commission, the killings of 'sorcerers' represented a violation of human rights, while, for local residents, stopping the killings of sorcerers would be a HAM violation.

Local residents fear sorcerers but are uncertain about the state's response to violence against a 'sorcerer'. One gets the sense that during the outbreak in 1998 Banyuwangi, potential killers were cautiously optimistic that they might kill 'sorcerers' without recrimination from the *aparatus*. However, their uncertainty regarding the inclination or capacity of the *aparatus* to stop the outbreak ceased, when, finally, there was some concurrence in understanding between the supra-local state forces and local residents. The crack-down at the beginning of October signified for all those involved that the state or *aparatus* would no longer tolerate killings of 'sorcerers'. The sense of 'opportunity' was lost, and the outbreak came to a halt. Subsequently, violence against sorcerers returned to its 'usual' sporadic incidence.

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