

***Witch-Hunt and Conspiracy: The “Ninja Case” in East Java.* By Nicholas Herriman. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2016. Softcover: 208pp.**

Extraordinary violence has often accompanied momentous political change in Indonesia. The democratic transition in 1998 was no exception. Following President Soeharto’s resignation in May 1998, racial riots broke out in major urban centres and communal violence paralysed daily life in parts of the country. Within the context of this widespread insecurity, observers also noted an alarming rise in mob attacks across Indonesia. Perhaps due to the salience of political contention at the time, early accounts describe these attacks as the consequence of inter-elite competition produced by rapid institutional reform. In *Witch-Hunt and Conspiracy*, Nicholas Herriman challenges the primacy of these national-level factors. Based on a painstaking examination of witch-hunts in East Java, Herriman argues that while broader economic and political forces may have created an opportunity for mob attacks, the motivations behind these killings emerged from local belief systems and communities’ quotidian interactions with alleged scorers.

The empirical scope of the book centres on the killing of a hundred alleged sorcerers in Banyuwangi district. While such incidents were prevalent even under the New Order, Herriman argues that the events of 1998 were unusual for two reasons. First, they can be described as an “outbreak” due to the high frequency of killings during a relatively short period of time (p. xxi). Second, unlike past attacks on sorcerers that were local affairs, these killings came to be viewed as part of a national conspiracy. Subsequent reprisals against the perpetrators of these witch-hunts, collectively known as the “Ninja” phenomenon, are duly noted in the book but are not its main focus. Instead, the author seeks to explain the motivations behind denunciation of particular sorcerers by their communities and the timing of mob attacks against them (p. xxiv).

Herriman brings to bear an impressive range of qualitative data in order to advance his argument. This includes participant observation and over 150 interviews with the perpetrators, victims’ families and local elites. Drawing on these extensive sources, the book presents detailed chronologies of individual incidents along with informants’ personal impressions about the practice of magic. While the killings took place under different circumstances, several similarities are identified that problematize the enduring view that

the witch-hunts were part of a national conspiracy targeted at the religious leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).

First, the book convincingly shows that everyday community interactions and prevalent beliefs about sorcery drove the identification of alleged culprits. Many of the accused sorcerers had religious credentials that fit the general profile of a traditional NU leader (*kiai*) but they had a long-standing reputation within their communities for practising black magic (p. 30). Attacks against them were triggered by specific allegations of harm by other community members. The sudden onset of certain illnesses and/or unexpected economic misfortune following disagreement about an unrelated dispute with a suspected sorcerer, typically led to accusations of mischief. Because there is no definitive method to establish the guilt of an accused witch, formal deliberation about the veracity of the allegations was rare. Instead, complaints spread through word of mouth. Guilt became implicit if a social motive for malice could be established and the nature of the reported injury coincided with local beliefs about black magic. The same beliefs mandated killing of witches as the only effective way to protect communities from their terror.

Second, contrary to alternative explanations that point to the role of external actors in the killings, Herriman finds that virtually all the attacks were organized by local residents (p. 17). Usually, a small number of people led the raid against an accused sorcerer, but broader complicity was sought from village residents in other ways. Some were asked to collaborate by turning off their lights at the time of the attack. Others were persuaded to offer monetary contributions to the perpetrators in exchange for their efforts to protect the village.

It is important to note the tension between these two aspects of Herriman's argument. The author repeatedly claims that individuals involved in the attacks sincerely believed in harmful effects of sorcery and the guilt of the accused (p. 86). Yet, he cites claims by ordinary community members that they were under immense social pressure to cooperate with the attackers (p. 99). This discrepancy suggests two possibilities. One is that informants could have retrospectively adjusted their beliefs about the victim's guilt to justify their complicity in the attacks. Another is that a critical mass of believers may have instigated the violence but the silent acquiescence from the rest of the residents — which the author describes as social sanction — could be the function of social pressure. Neither possibility is closely examined in the book, but could be important for future studies of mob violence in Indonesia and elsewhere.

Finally, the book argues that while the motives behind the attacks were local, their clustering may have been influenced by national-level factors. Specifically, the perceived weakness of the state due to prevailing political turmoil at the time and new restraints on the security forces' use of repressive tactics enabled communities to act with relative impunity against the sorcerers that had long been deemed a threat (p. 120). Indeed, the evidence suggests that local police and military officials rarely intervened in the first round of killings. Decisive action against the perpetrators was taken only when the attacks reached an endemic level and rumours of a conspiracy resulted in violent public reprisals against suspected killers (p. 117). Following the strict response by security forces, the killings subsided as rapidly as they had arisen.

Overall, the book provides an important corrective to our understanding of this mysterious chapter in Indonesia's tumultuous transition. While the East Java witch-hunts have long been linked to a political conspiracy, Herriman presents compelling evidence to show that, at least in Banyuwangi, local beliefs about magic and mundane disputes between community members provided the primary impetus for the killing of alleged scorers. Equally important is the finding about the intimate nature of the killings that often involved neighbours and even family members of the victims. As such, this argument resonates well with advances in the study of political violence from other parts of the world that call for analytical separation between factors that drive political contention among national elites and local incentives for violence.

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