

Shamanism, Murder

Walunga Testifies in Own Defense

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Alaska Superior Court Judge Gerald Van Hoomissen will hand down his decision June 25 in the first degree murder trial of Allen Riley Walunga.

Walunga, 22, of Gambell, St. Lawrence Island, has been charged with the rape-slaying of fellow University of Alaska student Jody Stambaugh last December 10 in her dormitory room.

Final arguments in the case were concluded June 14, with the defense holding to its plea of innocence by reason of insanity and the prosecution asking for a verdict of guilty, on grounds Walunga is simply an anti-social personality responsible for his crimes.

As Judge Hoomissen and witnesses in the case noted several times in court, the case is an extraordinary one; one which weaves into the record along

with the views of several psychiatrists, testimony concerning shamanism and its effects on the life of Riley Walunga.

The grandson of a shaman on St. Lawrence Island, Walunga testified in his own defense in the final week of the trial that he had inherited the powers of a shaman from his grandparent.

To be a shaman, "one has to be selected . . . I was selected to become one," Walunga said.

In his lifetime, he has heard seven spirits' voices, including four good spirits and three bad, Walunga said.

"The good ones entertain me, give me inspiration, comfort me, tell me I'm all right; the bad ones tempt me," he said.

"If you do a good thing, you are obligated to do a bad thing . . . to appease them (the bad spirits)," he said.

Walunga believes one of the bad spirits confronted him in

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Jody Stambaugh's room early on the morning of December 10 and ordered him, in Yupik Eskimo, to "take her".

Walunga said he tried to refuse, but the verbal battle with the spirit was to no avail. He said he recalled the sexual attack on her, but not the point at which she was strangled in her own bed.

Walunga's attorney, David Backstrum, told the court to take this testimony, along with other statements from Walunga, his family and other witnesses into account when considering the plea of innocent by reason of insanity.

While Walunga testified that the voices he hears are real and that he does not hallucinate, the defense argues in his behalf that he is a paranoid schizophrenic, whose mental health was so poor that he is unaccountable for that crime.

A psychiatrist for the defense, Dr. Francis Whelan Jr., testified, however, that some of the mental pressures of schizophrenia might have been relieved by the slaying of the Stambaugh girl, so that he might indeed be accountable for the attack and attempted slaying of her roommate, Deborah Dimond.

The prosecution takes an entirely different viewpoint. District Attorney Monroe Clayton argued time and time again that "shamanism is a mere smoke screen."

Clayton told the court in his closing arguments, "even if he (Walunga) has an intense interest in shamanism, it doesn't make him any different from anyone else."

Clayton was also vehement about the state law which, in this case, puts the burden of proof on the state to prove

Walunga is sane.

If the Court accepts a plea of insanity now, it is opening the door for any maladjusted person to go take drugs and liquor, commit a crime and then say they heard voices, Clayton said.

"If you have to do this, though you think it bad—God help us," Clayton said.

Walunga testified that he had taken the drugs LSD and marijuana, in addition to liquor within hours before the attack. At the same time, he did not mention their possible effect on his actions; these actions he attributed to the command from the voice of the spirit.

Walunga spoke quietly from the witness stand, for a total of less than one hour's time, but in that period he acknowledged his acceptance of shamanism and a number of incidents in his life which he says were affected by it.

For most of the trial, Walunga sat at a table, next to his attorney, sketching and writing in a notebook as psychiatrists and others discussed and gave their interpretation of the intimate details of his life, from the voices to his sexual experiences.

In the final round of testimony, the trial came down to an argument between the defense and the prosecution which was an attack at psychiatric interpretation of the psychiatrist for the opposition.

Whatever the decision of the court, Walunga will not go free. The question now is whether he will be confined to prison for first degree murder and attempted murder, or ordered to undergo psychiatric treatment for schizophrenia in confinement.