

Was Ancient Dignity of Shamanism Invaded?

We question the manner in which the subject of shamanism was treated during the recent trial of Alan Riley Walunga of St. Lawrence Island. Although undoubtedly this was a very complex trial, the fragmented and sensational manner in which shamanism was brought in, discussed by various witnesses, by the judge, and by both attorneys gave an incomplete picture of the way in which shamanism functioned in the life of an Eskimo community.

Shamanism played an important and profound role in the lifestyles of past generations of Alaska Native peoples. The shaman in the old days acted, in fact, as the psychiatrist for his people as well as being something of a psychologist for them. His powers were geared toward the wellbeing of those he ministered to. He was the man the people looked to for better and vital mental attitudes when periods of difficulties descended upon the village, such as prolonged unfavorable hunting conditions. The shaman was the man who instilled courage in times of deadly stress. He was looked upon as a necessary practitioner who thoroughly knew the mental faculties, traditions and customs of his people. He was constantly a steadying influence.

The shaman was also a colorful character who amazed and delighted his villagers by performing seemingly impossible tricks. He also commanded great respect among his people. No one doubted his abilities. He shielded his fellow villagers from fear of the unknown and the mysterious while wielding his own mysterious profession.

The highly regarded shaman lost his powers of influence as varying denominations of Christianity took hold in Alaska some 100 years ago. However, there are occasional indications that some still exist in various parts of Native Alaska.

Shamanism had its own brand of dignity much revered and looked upon with awe by Native people. It was not viewed as something evil as some people would make one think. It was a way of life that actually steadied the lifestyles of Alaska's villagers who have had to live under one of the world's most forbidding environments.

We are of the mind that involvement of shamanism in the recent Walunga trial should have been done under more dignified atmosphere. Perhaps there should have been some serious consultations with older and knowledgeable Native people on the once prestigious practice of shamanism before allowing it to become involved in the trial.