

23 Polynesians Convicted in Religious Witch-Hunt Murders

CHRISTOPHE MARQUAND April 6, 1990

PAPEETE, French Polynesia (AP) _ A jury convicted 23 residents of a South Pacific atoll who claimed they were swept up by demons or religious frenzy when they tortured to death six people during a witch hunt.

The seven-man, two-woman jury at the Tribunal of Papeete handed down penalties late Thursday that ranged from three to 14 years imprisonment for those who participated in the 1987 slayings.

"I find these penalties very heavy," said Roman Catholic Archbishop Michel Coppenrath, the highest-ranking church official in French Polynesia. "The repentance of the accused is sincere."

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The defendants, mostly fishermen and farmers from the atoll of Faaite, showed no reaction when the sentences were read. Another suspect, a minor, will be judged in a separate proceeding.

The 14-year sentence went to farmer Francois Mauti, 25, on convictions of murder, complicity in murder and inflicting mortal blows. He led a band of disciples that organized the violence in Sept. 2-4, 1987.

"I had a spirit under the spell of the devil," Mauti told Judge Marcel Bihl. "I lost my head, but I believed I was on the holy path, shunning the evil fighting within me."

During the nine-day trial, the court heard defendants speak of being swept away by evil spirits or religious enthusiasm as they hunted down and killed neighbors they thought were possessed.

The terror had roots in August 1987 visit by three women who arrived from Tahiti, 300 miles to the west. The women claimed to represent the Roman Catholic-affiliated movement Christian Renewal, a group founded in the United States. Church authorities deny they had any official role in the movement.

The group already had a strong following on Faaite, a sandy atoll where about 180 people live. The women, regarded as "priestesses" by the islanders, took over the community's whitewashed church and replaced the lay preacher as the religious authority.

The trio's leader, Alexandra Silvia, conducted services in a trance and told frightened islanders of her visions that God would abandon Faaite, the defendants said.

Miss Silvia suggested demons were in their midst, defendants said, and the population began viewing with suspicion fellow islanders who failed to attend her daily services.

"My words were misinterpreted," testified Silvia, a 55-year-old dental secretary who was not charged. "I only gave prayers that cured those who were sick."

But the defendants said the mood of the once-placid atoll swung between ecstasy and dread inspired by Silvia and her assistants. The trio left Faaite in late August and anointed seven disciples to continue their work.

A few days later, a 14-year-old boy reported a vision that the devil had possessed his aunt. The islanders gathered in nightlong prayer and finally pronounced the demon exorcised.

They repeated the ritual with two other people. But Ioane Harris, the assistant mayor, publicly denounced the women on Sept. 2. Maddened villagers twisted a cord around his neck, beat and drowned him, and threw his body on a bonfire built before the church.

"It was necessary to purify him," one defendant said. "It was necessary to purify the village."

Five more people were killed over the next two days.

Most islanders took no part in the carnage, but it was Sept. 4 before anyone established contact with Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia, and reported trouble on the atoll.

The mayor, who had been on vacation, and a Roman Catholic priest arrived the next day with police.

Psychiatric experts testified the emotional charismatic Christianity, mixed with ancient Polynesian beliefs in the supernatural, produced a dangerous mass hysteria on an isolated island lacking institutional authority. The three visitors were not put on trial because they left Faaite before the murders.