

Hidden Christians in Contemporary Nagasaki

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Spanish Jesuit Francisco Xavier brought Christianity to the shores of Kagoshima in the year 1549. His arrival came near the end of a century-long period of national strife and an important turning point in Japanese history, and in the midst of this great social chaos, the Japanese people were ripe for his spiritual message. “The best people yet discovered,” said Xavier of the Japanese. “It seems to me that among pagan nations there will not be another to surpass the Japanese, . . . a people who prize honour above all else . . .” Christianity prospered in this country for about a half a century, just as Xavier predicted. But after the establishment of the Tokugawa Bakufu in 1603 and subsequent national unification, it suffered almost complete undoing.

The introduction of Christianity marked the first important meeting of Japan with the West, and the religious communication that followed signified much more than a mere brush with the exotic. Indeed, it was a head-on collision between Western culture—the core of which is Christianity—and Japanese culture with its ancient hodgepodge of Shintoism, Buddhism and folk religion. It signified, in other words, an encounter between the monotheistic world view inherent in Western culture and the polytheistic world view of Japan.

After wiping out all resistance from its political enemies—the retainers of Toyotomi Hideyoshi—and establishing unshakable control over all of Japan, the Tokugawa Shogunate seized the profits from Portuguese trade and embarked upon a policy of strict suppression of Christianity, which it viewed as a threat to the bakufu taisei (shogunate-domain system). In 1614, Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu issued a national ban on Christianity and ordered the exile of missionaries and prominent Japanese Christians to Macao and Manila. Many of the priests went into hiding after the ban, and a large number of their Japanese followers refused to renounce their faith. But in subsequent months and years they were captured one after another and forced either to recant or to die as martyrs. An estimated 40,000 people were executed during the long period between the martyrdom of the 26 Saints of Japan in Nagasaki in 1597 and the lifting of the ban on Christianity in 1873.

The bakufu succeeded in its policy of national isolation in 1639 when it expelled all Portuguese and Spanish from Japan in response to the Catholics’ insistence on the indivisibility of trade and Christian propagation. Two years later the Dutch Trading Post on Hirado Island (in the northern part of present-day Nagasaki Prefecture) was moved to the manmade island of “Dejima” in Nagasaki Harbor. Subsequently, Japanese foreign trade was confined to the one port of Nagasaki and to only two partners: the Chinese and the Protestant Dutch who came to Japan for the sole purpose of trade.

The decision to remove all traces of Christianity from Japan was based to a large extent on political and economic considerations, but from an ideological standpoint it also signified the failure of Christianity to strike a bargain with the polytheistic religious attitude and magnanimous world view embraced by the Japanese. The method of suppression was extremely systematic, including efumi (the forcing of all Nagasaki citizens to trample on metal images of Christ or Mary), sonin hosho seido (monetary awards to persons revealing the names of Christians) and terauke seido (the compulsory registration of all Japanese citizens as parishioners of Buddhist temples). But despite this thoroughgoing policy of suppression, groups of tenacious Japanese followers went into hiding and kept the flame of Christianity burning for more than two centuries. In order to survive, these people had no choice but to abandon all the outward manifestations of Christianity and to assume

the guise of Buddhists or Shintoists. But in their hearts they secretly observed the Christian faith generation after generation and were not discovered until 1865 when they disclosed their incredible secret to the French priest Bernard Petitjean in the Roman Catholic Church built that year by the French Catholic mission in the Oura foreign settlement.

The ban on Christianity was finally lifted in 1873. As a result, most of the underground Christians returned to the orthodox Roman Catholic Church under the guidance of the French missionaries. But there were others who were living in remote regions and did not have the opportunity to meet the French priests, and still many more who had given up all catechism and prayer books in fear of discovery by the authorities and who in the process of verbal transmission forgot the original meanings of the teachings and in effect no longer associated their faith with Christianity.

Consequently, although the majority of Japanese Christians returned to the Catholic Church, there were many who opted to maintain the style of faith cultivated during the centuries of hiding and to refuse orthodox Christianity. The term *kakure kirishitan*, or “hidden Christians,” refers to the Japanese people who continued to practice this distorted form of Christianity even when the need to hide their faith had been eliminated. It distinguishes them from *senpuku kirishitan*, or “underground Christians,” the term applied to all the Japanese Christians of the Edo period. Even today, there are hidden Christians in Nagasaki Prefecture who continue to observe the faith passed down by their ancestors.

The essence and outward forms of this faith, however, have diverged widely from those introduced to Japan by Francisco Xavier and the other European missionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It would be more accurate to call it a folk religion altogether Japanese in spirit and content. In the following pages I would like to describe the present status of this religion and the lifestyle of its followers.

The Distribution and Organization of the Contemporary Hidden Christians

The modern *kakure kirishitan* live in three parts of Nagasaki Prefecture, that is, the Ikitsuki-Hirado district, Sotome district and Goto Islands district, and also to a very small extent in the city of Nagasaki. The names of executive positions and style of organization differ among the various districts. In Ikitsuki, for example, the executor of religious functions, executor of baptisms, and person in charge of communications and assisting in religious functions are called *oyajiyaku*, *ojiyaku* and *yakuchu*, respectively, while in Sotome the same persons are called *choyaku*, *kanbo* and *shukuro*.

Whatever the naming, the existence of the three persons responsible for 1) leading ceremonies, 2) conducting baptisms, and 3) assisting in ceremonies and maintaining contact among members is a fundamental common point of all the hidden Christian communities. In recent years, however, the lack of appropriate successors has led to difficulties in preserving the three executive positions, and there are many groups that have had to appoint one person to handle two or three positions and still other groups which have entirely dissolved.

As a result of the drastic decrease in the population of hidden Christians, there are no more than 300 or 400 families who continue to maintain the traditional customs, faith and organization. There may be another 2,000 or 3,000 individuals who are no longer members of active groups but continue to believe in the religion of their ancestors. It will be difficult to estimate the exact number of modern hidden Christians without a clear definition of their faith.

Doctrines and Prayers

The publication of Japanese books on Christian dogma—such as the 1591 *Sanctos no Gosagyo no Uchinukigaki* (Extracts from the Acts of the Saints)—exerted an enormous influence on the followers of that faith in Japan. After the enforcement of the ban, however, the text books disappeared and, by necessity, verbal transmission replaced the written word as the means of communication of Christian doctrines and prayers among the Japanese faithful.

The doctrines and prayers were of course riddled with Portuguese and Latin words that, after the elimination of text books, were rapidly corrupted by confusion of meaning, poor pronunciation, and substitution by Japanese words. For example, *batismo* (baptism) became *bautsurujima* (lit. “island that changes places”), *eucaristia* (eucharist) became *hachinichi-no-shichiya* (lit. “seventh night of the eighth day”), *passion* became *hassen* (lit. “eight thousand”) and *anjo* (angel) kept approximately the same pronunciation but was remembered by substitution with the characters meaning “hermitage place.”

It can be said, in short, that the orthodox doctrinal content of Christianity was almost completely forgotten and only mechanical rituals and corrupted prayers found their way down through the centuries. This means that although the faith followed by the underground Christians had the outward appearances of Christianity, the vital content and spirit of the religion evolved into something entirely different.

An investigation into the nature of the religion of the “hidden Christians” must therefore begin by addressing the question of what filled the vacuum left by the loss of orthodox Christian doctrines. What filled the vacuum, in fact, was the fundamental religious notions of the Japanese people that permeate Shintoism, Buddhism and all the other popular beliefs of this country. Thus, the “hidden Christianity” persisting to this day in Nagasaki Prefecture, although featuring a large number of customs and paraphernalia that at first glance seem unmistakably Roman Catholic, is inherently Japanese in content and character.

Religious Events and their Meaning

In Sotome and the Goto Islands, where the disintegration of hidden Christian communities is particularly evident, the number of annual events observed by the *kakure kirishitan* has dwindled drastically. But on Ikitsuki Island there are still many tight-knit groups, and as many as twenty or thirty events are still held every year with strict attention to tradition. The period straddling New Year’s, in particular, sees some 30 to 40% of all annual activities. The observances can be divided roughly into the following four categories: 1) gatherings to reinforce bonds among community members; 2) rituals to pray for rich harvests, large catches of fish and other worldly rewards; 3) ceremonies to comfort the souls of deceased ancestors; and 4) events with origins in Christian culture. Among the characteristically Christian observances are Christmas, Easter and baptisms. It can be said, however, that these have become little more than ancestral customs passed down verbally from generation to generation and that there is very little understanding of their original meaning.

Regardless of content, the religious events of the hidden Christians follow the same basic pattern. The persons in executive positions gather at the home of the *oyajiyaku* or *choyaku*. The purpose of the gathering is stated while conducting an offering of *o-miki* (sacred sake used in Shinto rituals) and *sashimi* (sliced raw fish) or some other freshly harvested food, a custom simulating the bread

and wine offered in the Catholic mass. Then the prescribed prayers are recited by all the participants on the basis of the assumption that God will be pleased with the offering and grant the wishes made. When this is finished, the participants join in a meal and consume the sake and food offered. A symbolic union of God and humankind by communal eating and feasting, this is similar to the custom of naorai in the Shinto religion. The gathering is brought to a conclusion with the recitation of a prayer.

The Structure and Characteristics of the Hidden Christian Faith

The religious climate of Japan features a magnanimity so remarkable that it might be said to border on polytheism or pantheism. One fundamental condition in the world of Japanese religion, however, is that all religions exist in harmony without destruction of established beliefs. The modern religions of Japan can be said to share the following four characteristics: 1) polytheism; 2) present gain; 3) ancestor worship; and 4) ritualism. These are none other than the characteristics of hidden Christianity as we see it today. Paradoxically speaking, therefore, the faith of the kakure kirishitan is not an old religion at all; it is an altogether up-to-date system of belief that lacks none of the features common to other modern Japanese religions. To make this point more clearly, I would like to dwell on the nature of the above four characteristics.

a) Polytheism

In order to survive the severe conditions of persecution, the underground Christians of the Edo Period had no choice but to conceal their faith under the mantle of Buddhism and Shintoism. But various features of those 'pagan' religions have now been amalgamated into the religion of the kakure kirishitan. At the same time, the hidden Christians have skillfully recast and adopted as their own the whole spectrum of customs, manners, legends, superstitions and taboos common to Japanese folk religions.

b) Present gain

Christianity is by nature a religion oriented not as much to profit in the present world as to fulfillment in the next. The prayers of the hidden Christians, by contrast, are pleas for safety of family and home, for freedom from illness and natural disasters, for abundant harvests and catches of fish, and for success in business. This feature makes hidden Christianity consistent with the various new religions of modern-day Japan. Very seldom is there a striving for salvation in the afterlife.

c) Ancestor worship

This is the most fundamental and illustrative characteristic of hidden Christianity and the principal reason for the refusal of the kakure kirishitan to return to the orthodox Catholic church even twelve decades after the sanctioning of complete religious freedom by the Japanese government. The God of the hidden Christians is no longer Jesus Christ or the Holy Trinity; it is now the souls of ancestors, particularly those who chose gruesome deaths over renunciation of Christianity. The kakure kirishitan therefore consider it their foremost duty—and the highest expression of their faith—to loyally maintain the religious system for which their ancestors gave up their lives.

d) Ritualism

The hidden Christian communities in Sotome and the Goto Islands, which have undergone disintegration in recent years, now find it all but impossible to faithfully observe the calendar of annual

events. On Ikitsuki Island, however, the hidden Christians continue to observe an astounding number of traditional events. Still, in the communities that have ceased to have a permanent official executor of religious ceremonies, the meaning of traditional doctrines has been completely forgotten, and the faithful cling exclusively to the hollow rituals that have been made holy by virtue of the martyrdom of ancestors.

The faith of the kakure kirishitan, therefore, while exhibiting various features that are apparently Christian, is essentially a religion of Japanese nature that has been reabsorbed into the background of Japanese folk beliefs and now has little in common with the world-view of modern Christianity. This may be called the tragic result of the persecution of Japanese Christians by a heathen government, but from another point of view, it is the inevitable outcome of the attempt by a foreign religion to sink roots in Japan. It is clear that for a new culture, ideology, philosophy or religion to prosper in the hearts of the common people, it must harmonize and amalgamate with the existing cultural system, not destroy or ignore it. Buddhism, which has become the religious mainstay of Japan, is a excellent case in point. Although a “foreign religion” originating in India, Buddhism lost no time in blending with Shintoism—the basic faith of the Japanese people—after its introduction to this country in the sixth century. In other words, by accepting ancestor worship it was able to sink roots and prosper in the hearts of the Japanese people. Needless to say, however, Japanese Buddhism now differs widely from the original form of the religion.

The history and customs of the hidden Christians of Nagasaki remain as another rare and invaluable example of the amalgamation of a foreign religion into the native culture of Japan and, in a larger sense, of the ever-difficult encounter between East and West.

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