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Kakure Kirishitan's Religion:

Why Did Some Hidden Christians of Japan Not Rejoin the Catholic Church

Introduction

[1] The Kakure Kirishitan's story is one of the most unique case in the history of the Catholic Church and Japan alike. It refers to group of original Japanese Christians, whose beginning dates to the activity of Portuguese Catholic missionaries between 1550s and 1630s. After proclaiming the Sakoku edicts, the Japanese Christians had to hide their faith to avoid persecution of the Tokugawa regime for more than two hundred and thirty years. This means that the Kakure Kirishitan were exposed to repression for a longer period than they were exposed to the evangelization that founded their Christian identity. However, even after 1873, a year that marked the end of the era of state oppression of Christianity, not all of the Kakure decided to rejoin the Catholic Church.¹ The part of the Kakure Kirishitan that refused to join the Catholic Church after mid-nineteenth century is now called the Hanare Kirishitan, or "separate Christians." This is surprising and paradoxical that while these Christians preserved their faith for so many years, initially with the hope to practice Catholicism in its full and unrestrained form once allowed again to do so, they finally did not return to the faith of their ancestors.

¹ John Breen, "Beyond the Prohibition: Christianity in Restoration Japan," in *Japan and Christianity: Impacts and Responses*, edited by John Breen and Mark Williams (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1996): 90; Kentarō Miyazaki "The Kakure Kirishitan Tradition," in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan (Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section 5, Volume 10)*, edited by Mark R. Mullins, Leiden, the Netherlands and Boston, MA: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2003: 31

[2] Answering the question as to what in the identity of the Kakure Kirishitan prevented some of them from rejoining the conventional Christian community is the subject matter of this paper. The primary reason for this group's separation from other Christians in modern Japan is that, isolated from the Catholic clergy for a long period of time, the Kakure Kirishitan developed a new, syncretic religion, which adopted the elements of Christianity as well as Shintōism, Buddhism, and folklore beliefs. There are a number of factors that jointly contributed to the eclecticism of the Kakure belief over the persecution period. Of them, three are especially important: a weak grounding of faith associated with language difficulties, a limited exposure to the Catholic doctrine, and a partial adoption of Buddhist and Shintō cults.

The Weak Grounding

[3] One factor that underlay the later process of the Kakure Kirishitan's receding from the pure Catholic faith is that a significant number of neophytes were not sufficiently acquainted with the teaching of the Catholic Church before the persecution started. According to Christal Whelan, an American anthropologist who investigated the Hanare Kirishitan community of the isolated Goto Island, it was because the missionaries "baptized as many people as possible with the minimal amount of indoctrination," and that they did not have a chance to evangelize the people more thoroughly later.² It does not mean that there were no religiously educated people among the Japanese Christians: the Jesuits established preparatory schools, and the religious awareness of those who later became martyrs attests to a thorough comprehension of faith in some believers.³ Nevertheless, the Kakure Kirishitan were, in general, illiterate, and a small number of clergy residing Japan in its Christian

² Christal Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth: The Sacred Book of Japans Hidden Christians* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996): 11

³ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 5

century did not allow the Catholic theology and liturgy to become deeply rooted in the culture. This fact left the Christian society prone to unorthodox influences over time.⁴

[4] The study of the lexicon of the Kakure religion, which employs Buddhist terms as well Latin and Portuguese words, unveils that language difficulties may have vastly contributed to misunderstanding of the missionaries' teaching, which later resulted in an erroneous and syncretic nature of the Kakure beliefs.⁵ When the Jesuits arrived in Japan in 1549, they did not know the Japanese language and had to rely on interpreters. The interpreters, however, were not always accurate in translating the truths of the newly introduced monotheistic religion. For example, at the beginning of their mission, the interpreters incorrectly used the word Dainichi (Buddha Mahavairocana) to refer to God.⁶ This unintentional reliance on the Buddhist terminological framework made the new believers misinterpret some fundamental Christian concepts. However, the missionaries also contributed to the confusion themselves by consciously adapting Buddhist or Shintō terms, such as *Tengu* ("devil" or "satan"), or *gekai* (literally "lower world" – "Earth").⁷ For example, the assimilation of the Buddhist theology of six heavens in the Kakure Kirishitan's writings can possibly be attributed to the previous adoption of Buddhist terms to describe the Christian cosmology.⁸ Coupled with the incorrect popular belief that Christianity had come from India, this fact made the Japanese society fail to appreciate the novelty and distinctiveness of the new religion.⁹

[5] On the other hand, the missionaries introduced to the Japanese language numerous new words from Latin and Portuguese in order to describe new theological ideas. Whelan

⁴ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 20; 11

⁵ Because the Kakure faith finally transformed into a new religion, one could criticize this orthodoxy judgement from the Catholic perspective. However, this paper assumes that the Kakure Kirishitan were Roman Catholics who only unintentionally developed a new system of beliefs, and thus it is reasonable to write about their errors and mistakes from the point of view of the Catholic doctrine.

⁶ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 4-5

⁷ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 80-81

⁸ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 101-102

⁹ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 4

posits that many of the Hidden Christians misunderstood the European terms, especially after 1630s, when no Catholic missionaries were left in the country.¹⁰ Her translation of the only written text of the Kakure Kirishitan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*, can be used as a primary source of the group's beliefs (at least at some point of their history) as well as the language they used in rituals and catechesis.¹¹ In the book, which is a collection of syncretic religious stories based on the Bible, it is not difficult to find loanwords from Latin and Portuguese such as *bauchisumo* (Port. *bautismo*—"baptism"), *Deusu* (Lat. *Deus*—"God"), or *Paraíso* (Port. *paraíso*—"heaven"). One example of the misunderstanding of foreign terms can be found in the usage of the word *sagaramento*, which no longer meant a sacrament, but rather a heavenly teacher who gave spiritual guidance to Jesus.¹² Finally, waning command of the foreign vocabulary resulted in that the Kakure Kirishitan stopped to understand even the prayers they recited.¹³ Inevitably, their later belief strayed from the original doctrine, as it developed partially out of semantic ignorance.

The Separation

[6] Nonetheless, the above-mentioned problems are not a complete explanation of the discrepancy between the late Kakure beliefs and the Catholic doctrine; the divergence was also a consequence of the separation from the free Christian world. The lack of priests or scholars educated in seminaries resulted in the accumulation of theological errors, as there was nobody to correct the inaccuracy of oral tradition.¹⁴ Rather than priests, the Hidden Christians had their secular counterparts (*choukata*, *mizukata*, *jiiyaku*, *oshiekata*) whose role was to celebrate baptism, follow the liturgical calendar, and teach the Catholic doctrine to the

¹⁰ Patrick Downes, "Kakure Kirishitan," (*The Hawaii Catholic Herald*, 2000);

Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 21-22

¹¹ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*.

¹² Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 53-54

¹³ Downes, "Kakure Kirishitan"

¹⁴ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 22

community.¹⁵ However, because these communities did not have Bibles, catechisms, or any other original written sources, it was ineluctable that their religious teaching would alter over time.¹⁶

[7] Doctrinal issues aside, the Hidden Christians' ritual life was limited to a narrow scope of activities that the laity could celebrate in the absence of actual priests, which weakened the Kakure's sense of belonging to the Church. In the Catholic Church, sacraments and their ministers (priests) play the central role in ceremonies and services. A disappearance of important elements of Catholic spirituality such as confession or the eucharist left the Kakure disconnected from the core of their faith. While their communities tried to establish new ceremonies as a remembrance of the real sacraments, the Kakure ritual was limited to mainly reciting the *Orashio* (basic prayers from the Catechism) and the rosary.¹⁷ This is true that these practices helped them preserve some fundamental elements of their religion. However, the Hidden Christians, deprived of priesthood for over two centuries, started to perceive the new form of communal prayer as a norm. Thus, while the first Kakure were "waiting for someone from Rome," their descendants found the reestablished ecclesiastical structures in the nineteenth century something unfamiliar, or even alien.¹⁸ Some of them thus failed to recognize that the Catholic Church was the community they originally belonged to.

The Syncretism

[8] While the above-described internal factors contributed to the departure from the Catholic faith, the emergence of a new and unique Kakure Kirishitan belief was also a result

¹⁵ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 12, 15

¹⁶ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 14-15

¹⁷ Stephen Turnbull, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan: A Study of Their Development, Beliefs and Rituals to the Present Day* (Richmond, England: Japan Library, 1998): Chapter 7: "The Structure of Kakure Worship and the Significance of the Communal Meal";

Turnbull, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan*: 104;

Miyazaki, "The Kakure Kirishitan Tradition," 25-26

¹⁸ Grzegorz Kucharczyk, "Martyrdom in the Land of the Cherry Blossom." (*Love One Another* 15/2010)

of the external influence: Japan's traditional religions. That is, these Christians did not hide in a secular society, but rather in a one whose members actively participated in Buddhist and Shintō religion. The Kirishitan were "required to belong to a Buddhist temple, and periodic reports on them were expected from the temple priests."¹⁹ Therefore, in order to follow the law and avoid suspicion, the Hidden Christians attended shrines, temples, pilgrimages, and festivals.²⁰ According to Stephen Turnbull, a British historian of Japanese religious history, this compliance with the dominant Japanese religions led later to a "positive acceptance" of pagan rituals, and, consequently, religious pluralism.²¹ This polytheistic approach was the major reason of a clash between some Kakure Kirishitans and the French missionaries who came to Japan in the Meiji period.²² For the new missionaries, polytheism among Christians was unacceptable.²³ Similarly, the first Hidden Christians risked and laid their lives for Christianity, and not a syncretic practice. Therefore, it can be concluded that these Kakure Kirishitans who chose to stick to own ritual rather than rejoin the Catholic Church did so, because, in fact, the ritual was no longer a continuation of the Catholic faith, but a new religion.

[9] The Kakure Kirishitan faith deviated towards the traditional forms of cult not only because they were forced to attend nearby shrines or temples, but also due to the presence of Buddhist and Shintō cult objects at their homes. During the Obon holiday, Buddhist priests would visit the Japanese people at their places and "examine the family altars for any signs of heretical worship."²⁴ Therefore, the Hidden Christians applied the camouflage of worshipping "objects and images either repurposed or resembling those from Buddhist and Shintō

¹⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Kirishitan."

²⁰ Turnbull, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan*: 215

²¹ Turnbull, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan*: 215

²² Turnbull, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan*: 215-216

²³ Turnbull, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan*: 215-216

²⁴ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 69

tradition.”²⁵ While many Japanese Christians had idolatrous tendencies since the beginning, the presence of such objects posed an additional challenge to preserving orthodoxy when the traditional understanding of Catholicism was declining in the community.²⁶

[10] A large number of non-Christian influences are visible in *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*, where the introduction of Buddhist and folklore concepts resulted in reinterpretation of some biblical motives and stories. For instance, according to the text, “Deusu has two hundred ranks and forty-two forms,” even though ranks and forms are Buddhist concepts.²⁷ In a similar way, Holy Mary also receives a “rank” instead of a crown during her coronation.²⁸ A more explicit example of the Buddhist influence is that, according to the book, baptized souls “will all become buddhas” in heaven.²⁹ Further, the twelve-year-old Jesus masters Buddhist scriptures and learns the evocation of the Amida Buddha, chanting of which is the main practice of the True Pure Land sect of Buddhism.³⁰ The text’s numerology also includes a folk element: the number of infants killed by Herod is 44,444, which relates to the perceived unluckiness of the number four in the Japanese culture.³¹ Adaptations of this kind strongly attest to the eclectic nature of the Kakure Kirishitan beliefs.

Conclusion

[11] The story of the Hidden Christians of Japan is an interesting phenomenon to analyze in various aspects. This paper addressed the reason why some Kakure Kirishitan did not rejoin the Catholic Church after over two centuries of persecution of Christianity. However, the problem is more complicated because of the differences in beliefs among

²⁵ Rachel Whitley Smith, “A Chameleonic Icon: Questioning the Underground Christian Identity of an Edo-Period Amida Sculpture in the Nyoirin Kannon-Dō, Kawaguchi City,” (Eugene, OR: University of Oregon Library, June 2016): 15

²⁶ Rachel Whitley Smith, “A Chameleonic Icon.”

²⁷ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 39

²⁸ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 91

²⁹ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 66

³⁰ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 54

³¹ Whelan, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*: 102

different communities and even among individuals within them. Not all of the Kakure Kirishitan communities eventually became the Hanare Kirishitan. Many of them, in fact rejoined the Catholic Church, and some of them converted to Shintōism or Buddhism (often induced by the gradual decline in the Kakure tradition).³²

[12] The central paradox important to point out is that it was not the danger associated with practicing their faith that directly caused some Kakure Kirishitans to finally leave Catholicism. Rather, the cause was threefold. First, it was the weak grounding laid during the short period of evangelization. Second, enduring separation from the rest of the Catholic Church gradually led to the emergence of significant modifications in the Kakure Kirishitan belief. Finally, the influence of the traditional Japanese cults contributed to the creation of a new syncretic religion, which had a merely superficial connection to Catholicism. Therefore, while the Hanare Kirishitan claim that they adhere to the faith of their ancestors, they have, in fact, rejected the core of the religion their precursors once practiced.³³

³² Turnbull, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan*: 59;
Miyazaki, "The Kakure Kirishitan Tradition," 32

³³ Miyazaki, "The Kakure Kirishitan Tradition," 31

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