

## **Kakure Kirishitan: People Who Chose to Continue the Practices of the Hidden Christians**

### **Hidden Christians and the Kakure Kirishitan**

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, most of Japan's Hidden Christians decided to return to Catholicism. However, some groups chose to persevere with the religious rituals and items of the period when Christianity was banned and they were in hiding. (Some of these believers are still living today.) In order to distinguish them from the Hidden Christians of the Tokugawa shogunate, they are referred to as "Kakure Kirishitan." There were also some Hidden Christians who elected to convert to Buddhism and Shinto, joining the local parish temples that had tolerated their faith during the period when it was forbidden.

### **Systems and Organizations**

The Christian organizations and rituals that were handed down came with their own regional character. They can be divided into two broad groupings: the Hirado and Ikitsuki variety and the Sotome, Gotō, and Nagasaki variety.

The organizations consisted of two types of brotherhoods, *jihi no kumi* (misericordia) and *shinshinkai* (*confraria*) both of which date back to the time of the early missionaries. They were presided over by three kinds of officials: the *chōkata*, or *oyajiyaku*, who kept the sacred effigies and performed religious ceremonies; the *mizukata*, or *ojiyaku*, who performed baptisms; and the *kikiyaku*, or *yakuchū*, who assisted at ceremonies and handled communications and accounts.

Recently, social changes and aging issues have seen the number of communities which keep up the practices of Kakure Kirishitan undergo a drastic decline. In the early Shōwa era (1926–1946), the population of Kakure Kirishitan was estimated to be in excess of 30,000. By 1999, however, that had plummeted to somewhere between 1,000 and 1,500 people. The area where the faith continues to exist has also shrunk; today it is found only in some parts of Ikitsuki Island, the Sotome region, and the Gotō Islands.

### **Prayer and Objects of Devotion**

During Kakure Kirishitan ceremonies, the congregation chants the prayers (*orashio* in Japanese) that were transmitted orally during the centuries of hiding. The objects of worship, known as *takaramono* (treasures) and *nandogami* (closet gods), include plaquettes, medals, and rosaries, which were either passed down from the Kirishitan period or else given to them

in the late nineteenth century after the return of the missionaries. In the regions of Sotome and Gotō, statuettes of Maria Kannon were passed down over generations, while in Ikitsuki Island the same is true for sacred hanging scrolls known as *o-kake-e*.

### **PICTURE 1**

Kakure Kirishitan Ceremony

Ca. 1904–1905

From *Shiryōshashinshū ikitsuki* by Watanabe Kurasuke

(Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture)

### **PICTURE 2**

Nakaenoshima, an island situated between Ikitsuki and Hirado islands, is a sacred place. It was the site of the execution of several martyrs with the baptismal name of Juan in 1622 and 1624. Regarded as powerful and replete with the Holy Spirit, water collected at Nakaenoshima is referred to as the revered water of San Juan (St. John).

Ca. 1904–1905

From *Shiryōshashinshū Ikitsuki* by Watanabe Kurasuke

From Watanabe's *Documentary Photograph Collection Ikitsuki*

(Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture)

### **PICTURE 3**

*Jiwan*, or St. John, was the mentor of the local martyred religious teacher Bastian, and is enshrined at the Karematsu Shrine in Sotome. There is a Christian graveyard nearby and a large rock called the “prayer rock,” where the Hidden Christians memorized their prayers when Christianity was banned.