

The Communities and Sacred Places of Hirado Kasuga Village and Christianity

This little mountain is Mt. Maruoyama.

Here crosses once stood, marking the spots
where the Kakure Kirishitan dead were buried.

Now there stands a small stone *hokora* shrine
to keep a discreet, protective eye on people's lives.

Kasuga is a village on the west coast of Hirado in Nagasaki,
where the faith of the Kakure Kirishitan was handed down.

The history of Christianity in Kasuga started around 460 years ago.

Kasuga was one of the first places in Japan where Christianity
was propagated, and the villagers converted en masse.

But Christianity was later banned.

The villagers secretly continued practicing their Christian faith,
while outwardly accepting Buddhism and Shinto.

Even after the ban on Christianity was lifted,
the villagers stuck with the old practices.

As Kakure Kirishitan, they passed their faith
on to the next generation.

Even today, there are houses in Kasuga where
articles of devotion remain enshrined.

They can be found in closets and household altars.

Kasuga is a place of beautiful, expansive landscapes.

From ancient times, people here have always revered
natural objects like mountains and streams.

Mt. Yasumandake, the highest peak in Hirado, is an example.

Walk through the dense foliage along the paved path
and you can see the stone *hokora* shrine.

This shrine is mentioned in the local Kakure Kirishitan prayers.
It is called the "holy of holies of Mt. Yasumandake."

Roughly 2 kilometers off the coast,
the island of Nakaenoshima is another one of Kasuga's sacred places.

When Christianity was outlawed, many believers were executed here.
The Kakure Kirishitan collected holy water on the island.

There is no Christian church in Kasuga today.

While Christianity was banned, the villagers worshipped with rituals
directed at Nakaenoshima and Christian devotional articles.

They also worshipped the gods of the mountains and streams,
and performed rites at shrines and temples.

The organized faith of the Kakure Kirishitan has died out in Kasuga.

But their “closet gods” and sacred places
are carefully preserved.

The landscape which they also worshipped,
Mt. Yasumandake, with its shrines and monuments, remains.

This whole landscape was once alive with prayer.

What remains is a kind of miracle, created by the hearts
of the people who lived here for centuries.