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Villages on Kuroshima

Communities preserved their religion by migrating to the abandoned horse farms of the Hirado domain.

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The Confession: “There are 600 Hidden Christians on Kuroshima.”

The dangerous confession was made just two months after the “Discovery of the Hidden Christians.”

BODY TEXT

Migrating to the Abandoned Horse Farm in the Hirado Domain

Kuroshima is a small island located to the west of Sasebo, with a circumference of 12 kilometers. The island’s name first appears in the documentary record around the thirteenth century, and we know that the village of Honmura existed in the north of the island by the fourteenth century.

From the seventeenth century, Kuroshima was home to farms where the Hirado domain raised horses. But by the early nineteenth century, as demand for horses fell and demand for agricultural land grew, they ceased operating. The Hirado domain decided to develop the site of the abandoned horse farms and began recruiting people to move there. Settlers from Sotome and elsewhere began migrating to Kuroshima, building seven new villages on the island by the mid-nineteenth century. The settlers included large numbers of Hidden Christians; in fact, six communities—Hikazu, Neya, Nakiri, Tashiro, Warabe, and Todobira—were Hidden Christian communities.

The Hidden Christians are believed to have selected Kuroshima because it looked like a place where they could coexist with the other inhabitants. And, indeed, they succeeded in transplanting and sustaining their religious structures on the island.

Symbiosis with Non-Christian Society and Religions

In public, the Hidden Christians who settled on Kuroshima behaved as Buddhists, and became parishioners of Kozenji Temple in Honmura.

Every year, the island’s Hidden Christians were forced to disavow Christianity by trampling on images of Jesus and Mary—an act called *efumi*—at the Honmura village headman’s house. But they were able to secretly enshrine Maria Kannon in the main hall of Kozenji by treating an innocuous figure of Kannon with a child as a statue of Mary. While pretending to worship at the Buddhist temple, they were actually praying to Maria Kannon, whom they regarded as Mary the mother of God.

The island’s graveyards are a visible testimony to the way Kuroshima’s Hidden Christians kept up a Buddhist façade while maintaining their own faith. The graveyards feature an unusual layout, with the gravestones oriented to the east rather than the west like most Buddhist graves, and include modes of burial not found in Buddhism.