

# Christian Prayer Songs Chanted by Kakure Kirishitan, or Hidden Christians, on Ikitsuki Island, Nagasaki Prefecture:

— A Case Study of the Yamada Area —

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The term *kakure Kirishitan*, or “hidden Christians,” brings to Japanese people’s minds words such as *fumie* (paper depictions of Christian symbols that people were ordered to step on to prove that they were not Christians), oppression and martyrdom. It carries a negative connotation because the circumstances surrounding hidden Christians in the Edo period were extremely severe, and many of them died horrible deaths. As discussed in the first section of this paper, it is widely known in and out of Japan that the government back then exercised strict control over Christianity. The negative image can also be attributed to the country’s historical education that focuses only on tragedies of hidden Christians.

Even in such a dire situation, those believers pursued their religion as underground Christians. However, for fear of being discovered, they handed down their doctrines and liturgies from generation to generation orally rather than in writing. Moreover, they did not have a formal leader due to the government’s ban on the religion. Hidden Christians passed down their faith in a unique way, and it was mixed with the rituals of more common religions in Japan. Thus, present-day hidden Christianity is quite different from the original Catholicism.

Descendants of hidden Christians face a decrease in the number of believers and the danger of dissolution of their religious body. How do they perceive their religion and try to preserve their heritage while maintaining a balance between their lives and religion? Because hidden Christianity is dying out, little time is left to examine it. The objective of this paper is to reveal the religious practices of hidden Christians in Nagasaki Prefecture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and their perspective on the religion. The author has studied hidden Christians in the Ichibu area on Ikitsuki Island, Nagasaki Prefecture. In this paper, Christian prayer songs called *uta orasho* in the Yamada area on same Island will be examined.

In particular, this paper will discuss changes in the form of hidden Christianity, the causes of these changes and the rituals of current hidden Christianity based on information obtained from fieldwork. In addition, the results of a comparative study on hidden Christians in coastal areas outside Nagasaki Prefecture will be introduced.