

# The Jesuit Mission in Hirado and the Vanished Christians of Takushima

- A Historical and Anthropological Research -

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## 平戸でのイエズス会と度島の消えたキリシタン

—歴史的、人類学的研究—

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### アブストラクト

フロイスなどの宣教師に書かれた日本聖イエズス会の記録によると、平戸藩の度島には350人のキリスト教信者がいた。16世紀末から豊臣秀吉がキリシタン征伐を始め、徳川幕府の時代にさらに厳しくなる。その結果、17世紀末、度島には1人の信者もいなくなり、彼らの運命は不明である。この論文は聖イエズス会の記録を通して、平戸藩でのイエズス会の活動を明らかにし、現在の度島で行われている盆行事「盆ごうれい」の伝統と島人の口伝のフィールドワーク調査で度島から消えた信者の運命に関して論ずる。

### Abstract

According to the records of the Jesuit Mission in Japan, there were at least 350 Christians living at Takushima Island in the Hirado domain. From the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Chancellor Toyotomi Hideyoshi started the prosecution of the Christian church, and this policy was continued and intensified by the Tokugawa shogunate. As a result of this prosecution there were no Christians left on the island at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The fate of those 350 remains uncertain. This paper will show the activities of the Jesuit mission in Hirado as recorded by

the Jesuits themselves and through participant observation research of the ‘Bongôrei’ Obon-festival and oral traditions of the island, discuss the fate of these vanished Christians.

*Keywords: Takushima, Hirado, Christian history, Bongôrei, hidden Christians*



Francis Xavier<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The Unknown Fate of the Christians of Takushima

Takushima is a small island of less than three and a half square kilometers off the coast of Hirado, Nagasaki prefecture and has a population of around 828 people (Planning and Promotion Department Hirado City). The island can only be reached by ferry and because of its isolated position is not particularly well known and only seldom visited by tourists. However, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the island regularly welcomed the fathers of the Jesuit mission and was one of the strongholds of Christianity in the Kyushu area, appearing in the records of the Jesuit fathers on many occasions.

The suppression of Christians in Japan and the situation concerning the Hidden Christians of Nagasaki have been described in several publications that focus mainly on parts of the Gotô islands, the island of Ikitsuki and the area of Shishi and Neshiko in Hirado.

Ikitsuki, Shishi and Neshiko belonged to the Hirado domain and were controlled by the Koteda family, vassals of the Lords of Hirado. The head of the family, Koteda Yasutsune, was one of the first known members of the higher ranks of the warrior class to be baptized and he strongly promoted the spread of the Christian faith in his domain. Koteda also controlled the island of Takushima.

There are no Japanese records that deal in much detail with the situation of the

Christians in Hirado and hardly any that mention Takushima in this time period at all. The records of the Matura family and the Hirado domain are no exception to this and also contain very little information concerning the introduction of the Christian faith to the area and the way in which Christian converts were oppressed in later days. The records themselves have been copied and categorized in the second half of the Edo period and are well preserved. However, it seems that any reference to that particular part of history was regarded as a liability to the future of the House of Matura and all traces of it have been erased from them with the exception of some parts that prove that the Matura were not devoted Christians themselves.

The only records that give more detailed information concerning the history of Christianity in Hirado are those of the Jesuit Mission in Japan, in particular 'The History of Japan' (*Historia de Iapam*) written by Luis Frois (1532-1597). The records discuss the situation in Hirado in some detail and it is through these records that we can get an idea of the activities of the mission at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the way in which the Matura dealt with those activities.

It should be kept in mind though, that the relevant records were sent to the headquarters of the Jesuit mission in Goa, present India, and that it is therefore very well possible that the Jesuit fathers somewhat exaggerated the number of converts in their reports to please their superiors with the results of their work, as can be seen from the differences in the number of converts that become clear when the accounts written by different fathers are compared. However, even with some reservation, it can be concluded that a considerable part of the inhabitants of Hirado, and possibly the entire population of about 350 people of Takushima, converted to Christianity.

Notwithstanding the important role Takushima played in the history of Christianity in Japan, at present the only Christians living at the island are people who have married an islander and moved there. Furthermore, contrary to the other areas that were controlled by Koteda, there is no proof of the existence of 'Hidden Christians' on Takushima. The 350 Christians that according to the Jesuits lived at the island vanished during the Christian persecution of the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and because of a lack of Japanese sources or other hard evidence, the situation is largely ignored in most publications concerning the history of Christianity in Japan. We know that Inomoto Gouemon was sent to the island in 1597 on orders of Lord Matura, but what occurred there remains uncertain.

While living at Takushima for four years, doing participant observation research of the island's traditions and dialect, it became clear that its celebration of Obon, known

as ‘Bongôrei’ (盆ごうれい) is strongly related to the fate of the Christians who lived at Takushima. The form that it takes, which is strongly related to the Shinto religion, as well as the oral traditions of the island are evidence of the fact that a large group, if not all, of the Christians at Takushima were executed by Inomoto Gouemon at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century on orders of Lord Matura. This will be shown in the following sections.

## **2. The Koteda family and the Jesuit Mission in Hirado**

In 1549, Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier (1506-1552) arrived in Japan as the first Christian missionary to reach the land. He started preaching the Christian faith in the Satsuma domain with permission of its Lord Shimazu Takahisa (1514-1571) but after initial success met with strong opposition from the Buddhist clergy. In July 1550, he heard of the arrival of a Portuguese ship in the port of Hirado, or Firando as the Portuguese called it, and left for that domain, accompanied by fellow missionaries father Juan Fernández (1526-1567) and father Cosme de Torres (1510-1570).<sup>2</sup>

Frois’ History of Japan mentions a number of 150 converted Christians in the 10 months the Jesuits stayed in Kagoshima, from which it can be concluded that the mission in Kagoshima was far from successful, explaining Xavier’s eagerness to leave for Hirado.<sup>3</sup>

Xavier was met with great respect by the captain of the ship who saluted him with cannon fire, duly impressing the people of Hirado and affirming Xavier’s status. Two months after his arrival in Hirado, Lord Takanobu (Dôka) (1529-1599), 25<sup>th</sup> head of the Matura family, gave Xavier permission to start a mission in his domain and according to the records of the Jesuit Mission they converted 1000 people in less than two months.<sup>4</sup> This number, however, seems to be an exaggeration. According to the entry of Balthasar Gago (1515-1583) in his letter of September 20, 1555, the number of converts in Hirado was only 500 when he moved there from Yamaguchi, making it very unlikely that there were 1000 converts only five years earlier.<sup>5</sup> Either way, Xavier seems to have been satisfied with the results of his work and decided to leave for Kyoto to arrange an audience with the emperor, whom he then still assumed to be the central political force in Japan. He took Fernández with him as his translator, leaving Cosme de Torres in charge of the mission.

In the following years there are no entries concerning the number of Christians in the Hirado area and we may therefore assume that there were no major developments. The first record that again gives a more detailed report of the mission is the above-

mentioned entry by Balthasar Gago in 1555. Next to the number of Christians, he also mentions that a daily mass was held that was attended by so many of the Christians in the area that they did not fit in the building that was used as a church. Around this time, Takanobu also granted the missionaries the use of a graveyard as well as giving them permission to erect a crucifix.

In a letter directed to the head of the Jesuit Mission in India on October 16, 1555, Takanobu expresses his pleasure over the large number of converts in his domain.<sup>6</sup> He continues saying that some of the members of his house have converted to Christianity and implies that he himself is willing to convert as well.

The members of Takanobu's family that converted to Christianity are the aforementioned Koteda Yasutsune and his brother Ichibu, who were both descendants of Koteda Hisashi, brother of the 23<sup>rd</sup> head of the Matura family, Hirosada. Koteda Yasutsune was a man of great stature in Hirado. He had proven to be a brave and skilled warrior during Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea and more importantly, had protected the young Takanobu as his guardian when the latter succeeded his father as Lord of Hirado at the young age of 23. The Matura clan only managed to consolidate its power as lords of Hirado under the rule of Takanobu himself and Yasutsune was, according to the records of both the Matura clan and the Jesuits, the most powerful lord in Hirado next to Takanobu.<sup>7</sup>

Yasutsune, known by the Jesuits as 'Don Antonio' (Anthony), controlled the major part of the islands of Ikitsuki, Takushima and the areas of Shishi, Iira, Shiraishi and Kasuga on Hirado island, while his younger brother Ichibu, known as 'Don João' (John), controlled the remaining part of Ikitsuki and Neshiko.

All the above areas were home to what are known as 'Hidden Christians', groups of Christians that continued practicing their faith in secret all through the Edo-period. There are many differences between these groups and there is also some discussion about what these groups should be called in Japanese. I will leave that discussion for another paper but would like to focus on the fact that Takushima is the only part of the old fiefs of Koteda that does not show any trace of this kind of hidden Christian tradition at all.

### **3. Lord Takanobu and the Jesuits**

The first mention of Takushima in the records of the Jesuit mission appears in a letter by Gaspar Vilela (1525-1572) to the Jesuit Headquarters in Goa and Europe on October 28, 1557<sup>8</sup>. He describes the island as consisting of several villages and

having about 200 houses which would indicate, considering the family structure of that time period, that the whole island had close to 1000 inhabitants. Vilela is probably mistaken here, as later records state that the whole population of the island is around 350 people.

The letter also mentions Lord Takanobu's approach of the Jesuit fathers. Although Takanobu acted friendly toward the missionaries and pretended to have the intention to convert to Christianity, the Jesuits seem to have been very well aware of the fact that his intentions could not be trusted. Gaspar Vilela states in the above-mentioned letter that, 'the Lord of the port is our friend on the surface', meaning that Takanobu, described as 'Lord of the port' in this writing, is just pretending to be a friend of the mission but in fact is actually not.

Obviously, trade with the Portuguese opened possibilities for the lords engaged to improve their financial situation. It was also a way for them to get access to the firearms the Portuguese had introduced to the country. Takanobu understood that the fact that he himself had not converted to Christianity did not do much to improve his credibility. Instead, as mentioned above, he had his uncles of the Koteda family convert to solve that problem. Proof of this can be found in the 'Kôyôryoku' one of the records of the Matsura family. The Kôyôryoku mentions that it was Takanobu's objective to have the Koteda brothers be baptized in order to win the trust and favor of the Jesuits and that Takanobu's main motive for this was to obtain the knowledge necessary for the production of large cannons.<sup>9</sup> It also states that he intended to have them leave the church again as soon as he had achieved this goal. Although there is a possibility that this entry was added at a later time to support the fact that neither the Matsura nor their branch families were themselves professing Christians, it does seem to be a likely strategy concerning the circumstances of the time. Living in the era of 'Sengoku' or the 'Warring States' and 'Gekokujô' (vassals trying to overthrow their lords) Takanobu tried anything possible to consolidate the power of his family as lords of Hirado. The access to canons was an important means for him to be able to do so.

Contrary to what is written in the Kôyôryoku, the Koteda brothers remained in the church and became strong protectors of the Jesuit mission. This could indicate that the records of the Matsura were adjusted in a later period and that the Kotedas were baptized of their own free will. Neither the Jesuit Records nor those of the Matsura give any details concerning when and by whom they were baptized, however, judging from Takanobu's own letter to the head of the mission in Goa in 1555, it is most likely that they converted in that year.

Takanobu had to maintain a fragile balance of power trying to keep the Portuguese in Hirado, while at the same time also keeping peace with the Buddhist and Shinto clergy of his domain.

#### **4. Growing Tension in Hirado, the Exile of Father Vilela**

In 1557, Gaspar Vilela (1525-1572) took over the mission in Hirado, but only one year after his arrival he was banished from the domain. In his records of September 1, 1559, he gives his own version of the matter, explaining to the ‘collegio’ or council of the Jesuit mission in Goa and Europe that he had stayed in Hirado for a year and that in only two months 1300 people had been converted.<sup>10</sup> He also mentions that under his supervision three temples were turned into churches which greatly grieved the ‘devils’ as he calls the Buddhist priests of Hirado. He continues saying that these priests falsely accused him and asked for him to be banned from the domain. He further mentions that they demolished the crucifix and caused other harm which he does not discuss in great detail.

Luis Frois also describes the circumstances that lead to Vilela’s banishment from Hirado in Chapter 18 of *History of Japan*, calling the lord of Hirado the most important enemy of their mission.<sup>11</sup> He also states that he only unwillingly accepts the Jesuit mission because of the profits he can make from trade with the Portuguese and because of the power Koteda had in the domain. According to Frois almost all of Koteda’s vassals have by that time been converted to Christianity, totaling a number of 1500 people. The records of Frois and Vilela show a difference of two hundred people and this is again evidence that the records of the mission are not fully reliable when it comes to the number of converts.

Frois explains that the Buddhist clergy showed great resistance to the mission and Koteda himself went to Takushima to forbid his vassals from joining the Jodoshu sect of Buddhism. In *History of Japan*, it is noted that Koteda could not stand the fact that some of his vassals were not yet converted, and he tried whatever he could to have them become Christians.<sup>12</sup> According to the Jesuit records, Vilela then decided to attack a number of temples, after consulting Koteda. The above records mention that the priests of Mount Yasumandake and Mount Shijiki joined forces and demanded that Takanobu punish Vilela while warning him that his own rule over Hirado could be challenged.

Although the Christians protected by Koteda formed a strong political force within the domain, they were far outnumbered by the followers of Buddhism and Shintoism,

and Takanobu decided to banish Vilela from Hirado. The latter left for Hakata and from there traveled to Bungo, the domain of Christian Lord Otomo Sourin, the most powerful feudal lord of Kyushu at that time.

The record of Frois gives a clear picture of the problems Takanobu was faced with and the zealous way in which some of the missionaries attacked the Buddhist temples in the area. The example of Vilela does not stand on its own as will be shown later. The same records also show the fragile power balance Takanobu had to maintain. The Buddhist priests threatened to kill Koteda but Takanobu stopped them from doing so, afraid that the killing of Koteda would lead to an uprising.<sup>13</sup>

For some time Portuguese ships avoided the port of Hirado but they continued their trade relationships when Takanobu allowed the missionaries to return to his domain.

Takushima again appears in the records of the mission when Luis de Almeida (1525- 1583) visited Hirado in 1561 and describes it in some detail.<sup>14</sup> According to De Almeida, there were 500 Christians living at the island. He continues explaining that he baptized the last eight people living there who had not yet converted and now the whole population of the island had become Christians.

He also mentions that the island had a beautiful church that was looked after by a former Buddhist priest and calls the island an island of angels. He describes the islanders as being poor.

De Almeida decided to visit Ikitsuki, another island under the control of Koteda. He explains in the above letter that the island had a population of 2500 people of whom 800 were Christians. This makes clear that only a small fraction of people in Koteda's fief converted to Christianity.

The tension between the Christians of Hirado and the Buddhist clergy did not cease, and in 1561 a group of Christians fled Hirado to the domain of Christian lord Otomo in Bungo, leaving all their possessions behind.<sup>15</sup>

## **5. The Miyanomae Incident and the Attack on Yokosenoura**

In 1561, the 'Miyanomae incident' occurred. Portuguese merchants got into a quarrel with merchants from Hirado and when a vassal of the Mutsu named Itou got involved, the quarrel developed into bloodshed in which according to the Portuguese records thirteen Portuguese sailors were killed, including the ship's captain.<sup>16</sup> Directly related to this incident, the Portuguese started to avoid the harbor of Hirado again and travel to the port of Lord Sumitada of Omura at Yokosenoura. Sumitada was baptized by Cosme de Torres in 1563, further strengthening his relationship with the Jesuits.<sup>17</sup>



In August of 1563, a rebellion was caused by vassals of Omura and Yokosenoura was burned to the ground in November of the same year. Although the rebels' main motive was to have an illegitimate son of the old Lord of Omura replace Sumitada, their anger was in large part also caused by Sumitada's suppression of the Buddhist sects in his domain. As mentioned before, some of the Jesuit fathers attacked Buddhist temples and Omura himself destroyed his family temple and its graves. The rebellion was therefore not only directed towards Sumitada himself but also at the Jesuit missionaries. Koteda Yasutsune of Hirado sent a ship to rescue the missionaries and both Luis Frois and Juan Fernandez escaped to Takushima. At the island Frois started learning Japanese and worked with Fernandez on his first grammar and dictionary of the Japanese language.

After this we find various entries concerning the island and its inhabitants. The islanders seem to have been extremely poor as described by De Almeida but all of them, totaling about 350, were Christians.<sup>18</sup> Again we find a considerable difference concerning the number of converts as given by various fathers. Frois himself lived at the island for some time and his number is considerably lower than that of 500 given by De Almeida. It is therefore not likely to be an exaggeration, and probably gives the best indication of the actual number of converts at the island.

A new church was built but this burned down on the 1st of December, after which the missionaries bought a straw-thatched house to use as a church. They had lost most of their possessions but the islanders tried to help them in any way possible and they began rebuilding the church, one bringing wood, the other bringing straw, and so on. Frois also explains that there were many people on the island that followed him from Yokosenoura or came from Hakata.

Takanobu, wishing to resume trade relationships with the Portuguese, invited the missionaries back to Hirado and gave them a house to use as a church. Frois describes in the same letter of October 3, 1564 to the Headquarters of the mission in Goa that so many wished to take part in the celebration of Christmas that there was not enough space in the church for all to enter.

In December of 1564, Takanobu allowed Frois and the other fathers to remain in Hirado and gave them permission to build a church. The Church was finished in the same year and named Tenmon-temple, Church of the Virgin Maria.

In 1568, Takanobu retired and was replaced by his son, Shigenobu (Houin) (1549-1614). Shigenobu was a strong believer of the Buddhist Shingon sect and had very little compassion for the Christians in his domain. On various occasion the Jesuits

describe him as ‘an enemy of God’ and the biggest threat to their mission, as compared to Yasutsune whom they regarded as their most loyal protector. Even though Shigenobu did not favor the mission, the number of Christian converts kept growing and according to Vilela, by 1571, there were no fewer than 14 churches and 3000 Christians in Hirado (of an estimated total of 30,000 Christians in the whole of Japan).<sup>19</sup> By 1576, this number had increased to 4000 people.<sup>20</sup>

## **6. Hideyoshi’s Decree and the Persecution of Christians in Hirado and Takushima**

In 1582, Koteda Yasutsune, the great protector of the Christians in Hirado passed away. Yasutsune was succeeded by his son Yasukazu (Jeronimo).

In 1587, Chancellor Toyotomi Hideyoshi filed his Decree for the Expulsion of the Catholic Fathers, in which he declared that Japan is the land of the gods and ordered the departure of all foreign missionaries. The only remaining original piece of this declaration is now in possession of the Matura Historical Museum in Hirado.

The fathers assembled at Hirado and most of them decided to stay in Kyushu and continue their work disregarding the decree. It is not clear where the fathers assembled but this must have been either at the Christian strongholds of Ikitsuki or Takushima. Oral tradition at Takushima has it that they did so at Dosanando in the north of Takushima but there is no actual proof of this.

Hideyoshi took the land that the Jesuits controlled and that they had received from Omura Sumitada from them and placed those areas under direct control of the central government. This policy was continued by the following Tokugawa shogunate.

In 1587 Takanobu passed away and in 1592 Shigenobu, no longer restrained by his father, expelled all the catholic priests from Hirado, even though his own son and heir Hisanobu was married to Lady Mensia (1575-1657), daughter of Omura Sumitada and a Christian herself. The activities of the Jesuit mission consequently end here.

In 1597, Inomoto Gonuemon was appointed by Shigenobu and started the persecution of Christians at Takushima. There are no written records of what happened at the island but no trace of the 350 or more Christians that lived at the island remains. In 1616, the Jôdô-shu Ryûganji-temple, a branch of the Seiganji-temple in Hirado, was established. According to the oral tradition of the island, the Matura supported the establishment of this temple as a memorial to the massacred Christians. Inomoto Gonuemon stayed in Takushima and was buried there, his grave remaining until the present day. The Inomoto family, from generation to generation, held important positions as officials of the Matura family at the island, among others

being in charge of religious affairs.

In 1599, Koteda Yasukazu (Jeronimo), son of the late Yasutsune Antonio and 600 of his vassals left Hirado and took refuge in Nagasaki. This shows how severe the suppression of Christians in the Hirado domain had become and gives an indication that what had happened at Takushima, a part of the fief of the Koteda family, was enough reason for the family itself to leave Hirado altogether.

From then on there are various records that show that the suppression of Christians in Hirado intensified, involving the killings of many of them, all of this supported or at least encouraged by the decrees banning Christianity of 1614 by Tokugawa Ieyasu and 1616 by Tokugawa Hidetada.

In 1613, Inoue Hachirôheiei executed Nishi Genka (Gaspere) of Ikitsuki and his family on orders of Lord Matura. Nishi was the representative of the Koteda family on Ikitsuki and his killing put an end to the last hopes the Christians in Hirado might still have had. It was not the last massacre of Christians or priests in the domain but it was the end of an era of almost 65 years since the first visit of Francis Xavier, in which Christians could practice their religion in relative freedom.

The 'Ukihashi-Mondo Incident' of 1639, in which a vengeful former vassal of the Matura falsely accused them of secretly being Christians, was further incentive for the lords of Hirado to maintain their policy of suppression. The Matura successfully defended themselves and the 26<sup>th</sup> generation head of the family, Shigenobu (Chinshin) (1622-1703), was even appointed Commissioner of Temples and Shrines. However, it is clear from the way in which almost all references to the history of Christianity have been erased from the records of the Matura family, that they regarded it as a liability to the future of their house. I will discuss the details of the Ukihashi-Mondo Incident and the records of the Matura family in a forthcoming publication.

As a result of the Tokugawa shogunate's policy, halfway through the 17<sup>th</sup> century, most remaining Christians had converted to Buddhism, some of them practicing their religion secretly until religious freedom was again allowed in 1873. Roughly one hundred years after the arrival of Francis Xavier, the Christian Age of Japan came to an end.

## **7. The Bongôrei Festival at Takushima**

In the above I have discussed the history of Christianity and the Jesuit mission in Hirado, the domain of the Matura family. It has been made clear that a large group of Christians lived at the island of Takushima and that there are no written records of

what became of them after the persecution of Christians in this area started. In the following I will try to explain what happened to them through the result of my research of the Bongôrei festival at the island.



Raising of the banners at Ryûganji<sup>21</sup>



Stick-fighting at Ryûganji



Raising of the banners at the medical center

While living at Takushima for four years, doing participant observation research of the island's culture and its particular dialect, I had the chance to take part in many of the island's traditional seasonal celebrations, one of them being the Obon festival. The festival is known as 'Bongôrei' (盆ごうらい) at the island itself and was declared an intangible cultural heritage of Nagasaki prefecture. Bongôrei takes the form of a so-called 'daimyô gyôretsu' (大名行列), a feudal lord's procession. It is an imitation of the processions in which feudal lords from the various domains in Japan traveled to the old capital of Edo to pay respect to the Tokugawa shogun. The performance of 'daimyô gyôretsu' can be witnessed at various festivals throughout Japan but is not commonly a part of the Obon festival anywhere else in the country.

The procession used to be held on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of July, the days of Obon following the traditional calendar or 'Kyu-bon'. However, because of the declining population of the island the festival is now held for only one day on August 15, which since the Meiji period is the common date for the celebration of Obon around Nagasaki prefecture, enabling more people to attend due to the summer holidays.

The procession goes around the island and visits various places of importance to the islanders. At present, Takushima is divided into three wards: Ura in the south, once the political center of the island; Chûbu, the geographical center of the island; and Sanmen in the north. The heads of the wards play the part of the old feudal lords, wearing a simple kimono, a black haori coat with their family crests and a straw hat. Next to these feudal lords there are six groups of participants in the procession: the Suko-dance performers (須古通り); the Footman-dance performers (奴通り); the Girls- or Children's-dance performers (娘踊り/子踊り); the stick- or staff-fighters (棒組);

the banner carriers (幟組); and the musicians that accompany all these performances and who play at the temple and the shrines that are visited.

Every ward has its own representatives that usually start walking from the Shinto shrine central to their part of Takushima and then meet up around the main shrine situated at the border of Ura and Chûbu. At every stop the different groups perform their own dances and while some of these are common to all wards, some of them are particular to one part of the island. For example, the stick-fighting forms that are performed at present are a part of the old traditions of Chubu-ward and although the elder people that I interviewed clearly remembered that the other wards used to perform their own forms as well, these have been forgotten and there are no sources to bring them back.

The performance of all these dances, the stick-fighting forms and the raising of banners are specific features of the Bongôrei celebration at Takushima and especially the raising of the banners in connection to the Obon festival does not seem to be common anywhere else in Japan. The most striking of all these performances is the raising of the banners. Until last year, every ward carried two banners, bamboo sticks with a length of eleven meters, with a long, thin bamboo stick of another 3.66 meters attached to its top. The raising of these banners is performed by the young men of the island and is seen as a considerable proof of their masculinity. It is particularly seen as a great feat of strength when this is performed on the narrow steps in front of the Ryûganji temple in Ura ward.

The banner is attached to the eleven meter long bamboo stick and is divided into a black and white colored horizontal line. The white in the banner stands for the gods of the sky and the black for the gods of the land. The form of the banners itself resembles that of the banners on the 'tenmasen' boats that were used for trade by the merchants of Hakata. To the 3.66 meter bamboo stick the so-called 'mando' is attached. The mando is a small box on which the name of the main shrine of Takushima is written and it is seen as representing the presence of the Shinto gods of the island. As the banner is seen as a sacred object, great care is taken not to have it touch the ground, hence the great importance that is giving to the raising of it by the young men. Until recently, every ward had two banners but in the summer of 2014 this number was decreased to just one because of a lack of young men to carry them. Women are not allowed to touch the banners.

## 8. The History of the Bongôrei Celebration

There are no written sources from the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century that discuss Bongôrei or its origin and therefore, the only sources that can be used for a discussion of its origin and its religious context are the oral tradition of the islanders and the present form of the celebration itself.

The oral tradition of Takushima has it that Bongôrei started around 1670 to ask the Shinto gods to maintain peace at the island and to pray for a good harvest on the land as well as a good catch for the many fishermen living there.

When looking at the performance of Bongôrei at present, the Suko-dance and the fact that it takes the form of a daimyô gyôretsu, give an idea of the earliest possible date that the celebration could have been held. The Suko-dances are performed under the same name in other parts of Kyushu as well, and according to tradition are related to the siege of Suko castle in 1584. After that castle was lost, its defenders escaped to various places around the West Kyushu area and these dances are thought to have derived from the dances that were a part of the cultural tradition of these warriors. This would date the beginning of this celebration to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century or later.

The fact that Bongôrei takes the form of a daimyô gyôretsu on the other hand, makes it likely that it started halfway through the 17<sup>th</sup> century as the ‘sankin-kôtai’ system that forced the feudal lords to travel to Edo and pay their respect to the shogun dates from 1635. It is therefore quite possible that the oral tradition of the island is correct and that the Bongôrei tradition that remains today dates from the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, combining different dances that were known at the time.

## 9. Bongôrei and its Relation to Shintoism

Bongôrei shows various features that are directly related to Shinto. As mentioned before, the banners are regarded as sacred objects and on the morning of Bongôrei, they are taken to the sea to catch wind and be purified. After that they are also purified with sake and branches of the Sakaki tree, regarded as a sacred tree in Shintoism. The banners are then brought to the main shrine of the ward where they are again purified and blessed by the Shinto priest in residence. After being purified, the banners are carried around the island and at every place the procession halts, the banner carriers have the top part of the banner, to which the mando is attached, touch the roof of the temple and shrines that are visited but also the houses of people who request them to do so, in this way purifying and blessing the building and the people that use it.

Purifying rituals are a very important feature of Shinto religion that are not found to

that extent in Japanese Buddhism. Another example of this in Bongôrei is the way in which the men, not the women, who take part in the celebration prepare themselves. Traditionally, the males who took part in the celebration would stay together in the same house for a two or three of days making the necessary preparations for the festival and avoiding, as much as possible, any contact with the women of the island. Nowadays, that tradition is fading, as is the idea of performing Bongôrei as a part of Shinto tradition. At present only the boys that perform the stick-fighting forms stay overnight at one house, which to most of them is just a fun and exciting part of the summer holidays, and the adults return to their homes and stay with their families.

On the morning of Bongôrei most of the men, in particular the stick-fighters and banner carriers take a bath in the sea to purify themselves. This is another feature of the festival that was followed less and less in recent years, however, a large group of men joined this purifying ritual again when the NHK came to make recordings of it, possibly reviving an old tradition. Like elsewhere around Japan, the younger generation seems to have less knowledge of, and less interest in, the traditions of their parents and grandparents than the previous generation.

#### **10. Bongôrei and Obon, a Misunderstood Religious Context**

As Bongôrei is performed at the time of Obon and obviously because of its name, one would assume that Bongôrei is an Obon ceremony and as Obon is strongly connected to Buddhist religious practices, one would again assume Bongôrei is too. However, from the above it can be concluded that it is, on the contrary, a Shinto ceremony and actually shows no features of Buddhist religious practices at all. In fact, there are only two things that seem to connect Bongôrei to Buddhism and those are the fact that it is held at the same day as the traditional Obon celebrations, and the fact that one of the places the daimyô gyôretsu visits is the Ryûganji-temple, the only temple of the island, according to tradition founded in 1616 as a memorial to the massacred Christians of Takushima.

Obon is celebrated everywhere around Japan by people who wish to honor their ancestral spirits. This practice, however, is not a part of the Bongôrei tradition. At Takushima, the services for the ancestral spirits are held in the three days preceding Bongôrei and although Bongôrei is held directly after the last day of Obon and the two festivals succeed each other, they are in fact two separate festivals. This can also be seen from the fact that whereas in the Obon festival, people who commemorate a family member they have lost in that particular year, also known as ‘hatsubon’ (初盆),

are at the center of the festival, until two years ago, they were not allowed to take part in Bongôrei. The rules concerning their participation have been loosened as the declining population of the island has forced changes to the tradition by the organization responsible for the preservation of this intangible cultural heritage. Fortunately, my research began several years ago, otherwise I might not have learned about this practice and that Bongôrei is not a part of the Obon festival but a separate festival honoring the ancestral spirits through a purifying ritual based on Shintoism.

In other areas of Hirado the ‘Jangara’ (ジャンガラ) festival is held in the same period as Obon. Jangara, like Bongôrei, is performed as a Shinto ritual asking the gods for peace and prosperity and much like Bongôrei the participants walk in a procession visiting several important places in their area, albeit not in the form of a daimyô gyôretsu. They also perform dances, but unlike Bongôrei they only have one form of dance, and they do not carry a sacred banner. Jangara is performed on the exact same days as Obon, not on the following day like at Takushima. Moreover, people who celebrate ‘hatsubon’ are allowed to take part in the festival and the houses of people who are celebrating ‘hatsubon’ are also visited.

It is clear from the above that Bongôrei and Obon are two separate festivals and that Bongôrei does not honor the recently deceased as its tradition (until two years ago) did not allow celebrants of hatsubon to take part in it. The fact that Bongôrei is held on the same day as Obon is traditionally held in other areas of Japan, yet has no connection to the honoring of the recently deceased, is significant proof of the fact that it actually honors something other than the direct ancestors of the families living on the island. These ancestors are, as mentioned before, honored in the three days of Obon that precede Bongôrei. The only other group of ancestors that are connected to the island but who might not have a direct relationship to the families living there now, are the Christians that lived there over 400 years ago and who had no descendants as they and their children were killed.

The fact that the procession visits Ryûganji-temple and in this way a Buddhist temple is purified through a Shinto ritual, is an interesting though not solely unique feature of Bongôrei. Until the separation of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples by the Meiji government in 1868, the distinction between shrines and temples was not strictly observed. The performance of Jangara at Obon is also an example of this. It is this feature, however, that is usually misunderstood and leads outsiders to believe that Bongôrei is a part of Obon. It is also a feature that, because of the very nature of the temple’s existence, connects Bongôrei to the commemoration of the Christians of



Takushima. Furthermore, according to the oral tradition of the island, Ryûganji was the site of one of the churches that were built by the Jesuit fathers, giving this visit further significance.

There is one more tradition of Bongôrei that is not very widely known which connects it directly to the persecution of Christians at Takushima. That is the fact that the heads of the wards and the other officials involved visit the grave of Inomoto Gonouemon on the morning of the festival, clearly linking it not to the Inomoto family as such, but directly to Gonouemon himself. This visit is not written in the notes of the organization for the preservation of Bongôrei, nor does it appear in the NHK documentary or in any research publication, but it is direct proof of the connection between Bongôrei, Gonouemon and the Christians of Takushima.

Considering the above, it is most likely that Shinto was used as a pacification ritual for the spirits of those killed Christians, a common practice of which there are numerous examples in Japanese history, the most famous being the deification of Sugawara-no-Michizane in the Heian-period. Hence the development of the performance of a purification ritual on the day of the commemoration of the death, while the actual commemoration of the ancestors of the islanders is performed on the three days preceding it.

## **11. In Conclusion: the Fate of the Vanished Christians of Takushima**

The many interviews I had, especially with the elderly residents of Takushima, give an image of an oral tradition at the island that is still very much aware of its Christian history. This tradition remembers the harbors that were used by the Jesuit fathers (most of them now hidden from the eye under a wall of concrete), the places where they supposedly built their churches, like the sites of the Ryûganji temple and the main shrine of Takushima, and also a place called the ‘senninzuka’ (千人塚) where according to the same oral tradition more than one hundred Christians were killed.

Archaeological excavations have not found any proof of the existence of such buildings but if it were not for the Jesuits records, the existence of at least 350 Christians at Takushima could not have been proven. And, although we know exactly how many Dutchmen and Englishmen died in Hirado at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, their graves have been destroyed as a possible sign of Christianity and hardly any physical trace of them remains either. The oral traditions of the island are by no means hard evidence but it is striking that more than 400 years after these Christians vanished and the Matsura family erased almost all traces of their history from its

records, the Christians and Jesuit fathers are still remembered in the stories told from generation to generation until the present day.

Bongôrei is celebrated on the same day as in most places in Japan Obon is held. It is, however, not a Buddhist ceremony to honor the participants' ancestors, rather it shows strong evidence of being a Shinto purification ritual. It does not commemorate the recently deceased but actually regards them as a taboo, which is a strong indication that the festival is connected to the Christians that were killed at the island and who have no direct connection to the people who are at present living there.

The touching of the banners to the Buddhist Ryûganji temple could be seen as part of the old religious tradition in which Shinto and Buddhism were not strictly separated. However, that ritual gets a whole different meaning when one recalls the oral tradition about the underlying church and the fact that it was built to commemorate the massacred Christians. In this light, the ritual may be viewed as a pacification rite for the spirits of the victims.

The visit of the Bongôrei leaders to the grave of Inotomo Gouemon implies his central role in the event, also pointing at a connection of the festival to the persecution of the Christians at the island.

Inomoto Gouemon was sent to Takushima for the persecution of Christians in 1597, two years before the Koteda fled from Hirado. He stayed at Takushima until he died and it is therefore not very likely that there were many Christians left at Takushima when the Koteda family escaped to Nagasaki. We know from Jesuit records that there must have been at least 350 Christians at Takushima and all together, around 4000 Christians in Hirado, including those in the Koteda domain. 600 of those Christians followed Koteda to Nagasaki and there are no sources that are evidence of the killing of thousands of Christians on Hirado itself, a fact that certainly would have been noticed by the Jesuits despite their ban from the domain in 1592.

As only a minority of the Christians remaining in Hirado seem to have continued to practice Christianity in secret, it is likely that the majority of them converted to Buddhism under pressure from the Matsura, in the same way many had probably converted to Christianity because of their prior relationship to lord Koteda.

As there are no records of what happened at Takushima, it cannot be said with certainty just what occurred in 1597. It seems likely that under pressure from Gouemon, some of the islanders converted to Buddhism, especially as some of them were probably forced converts to Christianity under Koteda. However, considering the oral traditions of the island, the fact that the Matsura went so far as to build a temple

to commemorate or pacify them, and the way in which Bongôrei has been performed until this very day, it is likely that hundreds of Christians on Takushima were massacred, becoming martyrs for their faith.

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**Note:**

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- 8 Inoue, *Iesuzu Kaishi NihonTsûshin*, Letter by Vilela, October 28, 1557, 1557年10月28日「ヴェレラ書簡」
- 9 *Kôyôryoku* (壺陽録) p.17,
- 10 Matsuda, *Jûroku/Jûnanaseiki Iesuzukai Nihonhokokushu*, Part III, Book 1, p.307
- 11 Yanagiya, *Ruisu Furoisu, Nihonshi* , Book 6, p.190
- 12 Ibid. p.195
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- 15 Yanagiya, *Ruisu Furoisu, Nihonshi* , Book 2, p. 70-77; Book 6, p.192-193
- 16 Ibid. Book 6, p.299
- 17 Idem. p.312
- 18 Matsuda, *Jûroku/Jûnanaseiki Iesuzukai Nihonhokokushu*, Part II, Book 3, p.205-219
- 19 Ibid. Part III, Book 4, p. 125-154
- 20 Yanagiya, *Ruisu Furoisu, Nihonshi*, book 5, p. 181-185
- 21 These pictures of Bongôrei were used with the kind permission of Takushima Newspaper 度島新聞

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