

Kakure Kirishitan

Patrick Downes

A faith, introduced to Japan by St. Francis Xavier, then hidden for 400 years, resurfaces on film before it disappears forever.



They say prayers in languages they don't understand whispered down the generations for more than 400 years. These are Catholic prayers composed in Latin and 16th century Portuguese and Japanese. Their mumbled sacred phrases are preserved only in memory, hidden from those who in decades past would have killed those found speaking them.

A documentary film recorded these prayers five years ago, recited separately by two elderly men, one who turns 100 this year, the other who will be 99. Both may be the very last remnant of the faith brought to Japan 450 years ago by the greatest of missionaries, St. Francis Xavier.

The 34-minute film, "Otaiya: Japan's Hidden Christians," was made by visual anthropologist Christal Whelan who, for the past decade, has been studying these living cultural relics.

She showed her documentary to an audience of about 50 on Jan. 22 in Sacred Hearts Academy auditorium in Honolulu.

The film is probably the first, and likely last, audio-visual record of one of the most amazing groups of believers in the religious world. They are Japan's Kakure Kirishitan or "Hidden Christians."

The Kakure Kirishitan were once an estimated 150,000 in number. They were those who, newly infused with the Catholic faith four centuries ago, took their religion underground to escape persecution, torture and death.

The Catholic faith was brought to Japan in 1549 by the great Jesuit missionary to Asia, St. Francis Xavier. Last year Japan celebrated the 450th anniversary of his arrival at

Kagoshima at the bottom end of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four major islands. Warmly welcomed by Japanese leaders, Xavier and his fellow missionaries baptized hundreds of people before he departed two years later.

Jesuits missionaries under the Portuguese flag continued Xavier's missionary efforts, mostly on Kyushu, reporting 300,000 converts before the century's end.

It wasn't long, however, before Japanese lords began to view the enthusiastic Christians as a threat to the stability of the nation. They began a systematic persecution that led to the torture and death of thousands of Japanese Catholics. The canonized Nagasaki martyrs were victims of the persecution of 1597.

Another great persecution took place in the mid-1600s. Catholics who did not renounce their faith were crucified, dismembered, lowered headfirst in excrement, or suffered other cruel means of torture and death.

Thousands took their faith underground. In order to practice their religion without detection, they eliminated most external symbols and books, disguising their rituals, and committing prayers and snatches of Scripture to memory.

Missionaries were banned from Japan for 200 years until the middle of the 19th century when the French reintroduced Catholicism to the country. At this time, some of the Hidden Christians came forth and rejoined the Catholic Church. Others did not recognize the French Catholicism as the faith of their ancestors. Centuries of concealment and isolation had changed their faith into something unique with secrecy an integral part of its doctrine.

The Hidden Christians worshiped and prayed together and offered each other mutual support. But because the initial introduction to Christianity lasted barely one generation, their education in the faith was somewhat rudimentary. Nevertheless, they turned their inadequate instruction into a practice that developed its own hereditary priesthood, observed holy days and administered the sacrament of Baptism.

These are the Kakure Kirishitan Whelan found and filmed.

Whelan's academic journey, which led to her discovery of the Hidden Christians, began more than 10 years ago.

While on a fellowship at the University of Portugal in Lisbon, she became interested in the Portuguese religious presence in Asia, "especially in Japan because it ended there so badly, with a horrible persecution."

Realizing that European documents did not offer a balanced view on the subject, she decided to "learn Japanese and go to Japan and find out what happened" from Japan's perspective.

She eventually found herself poking through the Jesuits' Sophia University library in Tokyo, "getting kind of frustrated, feeling like some kind of monk."

"I was going through all these old letters, not really finding the focus I wanted," she said. "I needed some living contact."

Then she found the photograph. It was of a Kakure Kirishitan baptism taken in the 1930s.

With evidence that recent, Whelan figured there was a chance the Hidden Christians could still be found. After a little detective work, she narrowed her search to the isolated Goto Islands off the southwestern tip of Kyushu.



She was unsure as how to find them because she was told they were reclusive and unapproachable. Nevertheless, she said she "felt a close affinity" to these people.

"I didn't feel like an impostor. I felt it was really what I should be doing," she said. "It felt like exactly the right thing for me."

Following historical maps, she made a "little reconnaissance mission" in the spring of 1991 to a small island that had been known to be 100 percent Hidden Christian.

Not knowing where to begin or how to meet people she decided to "be really low key" and take a swim in the harbor and wait to see what happened. A Caucasian woman floating alone in a harbor normally reserved for squid boats drew attention all right, especially from children screaming "gaijin, gaijin," or "foreigner, foreigner."

Eventually, the kids brought her into the town and after some time and a few introductions to adults she cautiously revealed her mission: "Do you know where they are, the Kakure Kirishitan?"

When everyone said no, she thought it was all over. "I thought, oh no, I've blown it. These could be the hidden Christians and they are just not telling me."

As it turned out, they were telling the truth. One man, however, knew what she was talking about—the mailman. It was he who "delivered her" to her first contact with a Hidden Christian.

When Whelan met the old man, a Kakure Kirishitan priest, he told her that she was 10 years too late, that nothing had happened there since another priest died a decade earlier.

He suggested she try another island—Narushima. There she met two priests.

"I told them that I really wanted to study what they did, and it all just fell into place as I think things do when you are doing what you are supposed to be doing," she said.

The anthropologist lived on the island for a year participating in all the ceremonies, taking notes for the book she planned to write and taking photos. "I got to know them pretty well," she said.

She herself became a mini-celebrity. Some claimed she was the first foreigner to visit their island. Some wanted to believe, despite her protests to the contrary, that she was a Portuguese and related to the original missionaries, come back to rediscover her own roots. She even ended up on regional television.

In 1995 she returned with her own camera crew to record the ceremonies and make the film.

The centerpiece of the documentary is Otaiya, literally "big evening," the Kakure Kirishitan celebration of Christmas Eve. It consists of a communion ceremony, which when correctly performed, consists of three priests blessing and consuming three cups of sake (a rice wine) and three bowls of rice.

In the film, one of the priests, being the sole surviving priest in his village, celebrates Otaiya alone. However, true to his tradition, he retains the three cups and three bowls as if the others were present.

The other priest, in a break with tradition made necessary by the absence of Hidden Christians where he lives, leaves his village to celebrate Otaiya in another village. There he observes the ritual with a trio of recently recruited middle-aged men.

These additional participants are another adjustment to tradition because they had not properly inherited the priesthood as children from their fathers. This is obvious as they mumble and fumble their way through the ceremony.

"There is no way that one of them is going to step up to a leading role" when the elderly priest dies, Whelan said.

In Otaiya the sake is consumed and the rice is placed in the palm of the cupped left hand very similar to way the Communion host is received in the hand in Catholic churches today. The rice is then eaten directly from the palm without use of the fingers.

The priest who celebrates alone does not consume the communion of his missing con-celebrants.

Whelan said that the use of rice and sake probably replaced the Eucharistic bread and wine because they were unavailable or as a way to conceal the ritual from persecutors.

Otaiya is most significant of Kakure Kirishitan ceremonies. They have no Sunday liturgies. They celebrate the Crucifixion but Easter has lost its significance and is merely a "time when mourning ceases." They have a feast of Italian origin called Our Lady of the Snows which is celebrated in August. They also have a couple of minor feast days and recognize a few standard Buddhist and Shinto celebrations.

Following Buddhist tradition, their priesthood is hereditary, passed down from father to son. A celibate priesthood would be too conspicuous in Japanese culture. Prayers were therefore passed down in the isolation of families and villages, resulting in little or no standardization. This was a religion truly hidden—devoid of documentation, a public hierarchy, and external structures.



Their prayers are taken from printed 16th century Portuguese, Latin and Japanese texts which Whelan was able to trace, but of which the present-day priests have no knowledge. They include the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Salve Regina, and other standards.

According to Whelan, the priests do not understand what they are reciting, and neither do they seem very interested in their meaning. "It is not very relevant to them," she said. Their significance is more spiritual than historical or theological, she said.

In fact, there is no way that Kakure Kirishitan can still be considered Christian in any theological sense, although one could possibly argue that, if their baptismal formula has remained intact, Hidden Christians could possibly be validly baptized.

Whelan did discover a Kakure Kirishitan bible, called "The Beginnings of Heaven and Earth" or "Tenchi Hajimari no Koto," which she described as a "fascinating and bewildering amalgam of legends and tales ... difficult to interpret." However, neither priest she met knew of this work.

With their Scripture forgotten, no real creed, and no catalogue of doctrines, the practice of this religion has evolved into a narrow fidelity to ancestral rituals.

"This is the only thing they have—the ceremony," Whelan said. "That becomes their dogma. You have to do it right, you have to say the prayers right, or it won't have power. In the absence of other things that most other traditions have, this becomes the thing you've got to be true to."

"I do think that they are religious men in their own way," she said, that their prayers are directed toward God.

A tiny Catholic Church on Narushima attracts a small congregation, but the Kakure Kirishitan priests are not interested in joining it. Although they probably understand intellectually the relationship between Kakure Kirishitan and the Catholic Church, Catholicism to them remains foreign and removed.

Whelan, herself a former Catholic turned Buddhist, saw reflected in the last two priests the universal religious struggle between the conservative and the liberal. One priest, in being correct to the past, is blind to the realities around him. The other, attempting to make the ritual relevant to those who don't truly understand the tradition, makes compromises that dilute the best of what had been preserved.

Whelan considers the two old men on Narushima as among the only living authentic practitioners of the Kakure Kirishitan. On Ikitsuki, an island off Kyushu's northwest coast, an active group displays Kakure Kirishitan rituals as pieces of Japanese folklore with paid performances, but she does not regard that to be the pure practice of the religion.

There may also be a little bit of activity on Sotome, north of Nagasaki.

On film Whelan also captured a unique Kakure Kirishitan funeral practice in which a small piece is cut from a centuries-old kimono which had belonged to a particularly holy Hidden Christian martyr. The two square inches of cloth is wrapped in paper and placed in the hands of the dead.

Today all that remains of the kimono belonging to one of the priests is a small piece of cloth kept folded in a box.

That kimono is a fitting metaphor for the Kakure Kirishitan—a religion born of persecution, enfolded in the heavy mantle of Japanese culture, concealed over the ages in a dark lacquer box of secrecy, destined to disappear bit by bit as each member passes into eternity.

Mr. Patrick Downes is the Editor of [The Hawaii Catholic Herald](#) (ISSN-10453636), published every other week by the Diocese of Honolulu. This article first appeared in the Feb. 4, 2000, edition of *The Hawaii Catholic Herald*. It recently won the 2001 first place newspaper feature writing award for newspapers under 17,000 circulation by the the Catholic Press Association. The Otaiya documentary video by Christal Whelan is available at: <http://www.der.org/films/otaiya.html> (sale \$195, rental \$50, color, 34 minutes, rd 1997).

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