

Sakitsu Village in Amakusa



Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region



What is the World Cultural Heritage Candidate “Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region”?



Introduced to Japan by Francisco Xavier during the Age of Discovery, Christianity flourished before being forced underground by 250 years of severe suppression, only to finally experience a miraculous resurgence in the 19th century—an extraordinary story that is unmatched worldwide.

The Nagasaki and Amakusa regions of Japan are the center stage of this story, and as such, are resplendent with sites, ruins, churches, and villages that attest to the area’s unique Christian heritage.

During centuries of prohibition and oppression, propagation of Christian faith continued in secrecy and isolation among its believers, resulting in religious customs endemic to this region of Japan. The World Cultural Heritage Candidate “Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region” encompasses all such historical aspects of the area’s Christian culture.

Map of Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region



Did You Know: What is World Heritage?

World Heritage are treasures such as buildings, ruins, natural landscapes or scenery that are worthy of preserving for the future. These treasures are divided into three groups. Let’s look at these groups and some model examples.

Cultural Heritage

Buildings, ruins, and other things that were made by people.

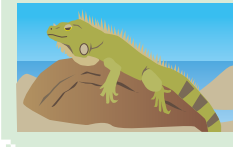
- The Sphinx (Egypt)



Natural Heritage

Living things and their natural habitat, or natural scenery.

- Galapagos Islands (Ecuador)



Mixed Heritage

A combination of Cultural and Natural Heritage in one place.

- Machu Picchu (Peru)



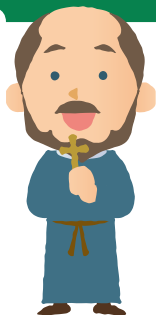
Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region aims to be registered as a Cultural Heritage, to stand along with other treasures as a part of our worldwide cultural legacy.

Why should Sakitsu village also become a World Heritage Site?

While the Sakitsu Church is the village’s main cultural jewel and symbol, the hamlet itself is also historically significant as a ‘Hidden Christian Village’. During times of Christian prohibition in Japan, this was a place where Christian faith secretly coexisted and was propagated alongside traditional religious customs, giving rise to a unique and historically significant ‘Hidden Christian’ culture. Let’s have a closer look at what kinds of history and culture are to be found here!



What kind of village is Sakitsu?



Sakitsu was established after the Sengoku Period (Age of the Warring States, 1467-1603) as a fishing village. The village soon became a focal point for the propagation of Christianity. The landscape has not changed much since the Edo period (1603-1868), and the village's main road, stone walls protecting its seashore, and sacred sites still remain today. Located on the main street, the Sakitsu Suwa Shrine and the Sakitsu Catholic Church attest to the coexistence of different religions within this village.

Did you know?

There are some ingenious adaptations in the village to deal with the lack of workspace, such as:



Kake
decks used by fishermen for cleaning fish, etc.



Tōya
narrow lanes that give access to the sea.

✠ The Propagation of Christianity ✠

Due to Luis de Almeida's proselytizing work, which began in the Kawachiura area (today's Kawaura town), Christianity penetrated into people's lives very quickly in Sakitsu. In those days, the village was called Saxinoccu (pronounced 'Sashinotsu'), and was regarded as an important port by both missionaries and merchants.

As Christianity began to spread, Japan's ruler Hideyoshi Toyotomi feared it may subvert the people, and issued a ban on Christianity, deporting many missionaries. In 1597, twenty-six Christians who defied the ban were executed at Nishizaka in Nagasaki. On the other hand, Hideyoshi wanted to continue trading with the Europeans, making it difficult to thoroughly carry out the prohibition. The missionaries who remained, clandestinely continued their activities. Nevertheless, the golden age of religious freedom had given way to a dark time of prohibition and suppression.



Luis de Almeida Monument



Medallion
(housed in the Amakusa Christian Museum)

✠ Suppression of Christianity ✠

Hideyoshi Toyotomi introduced policies against Christianity and the succeeding Edo Shogunate (Japanese feudal government) introduced further restrictive measures. Finally, in 1614, a total ban on Christianity was enacted. Missionaries were expelled from Japan and churches were destroyed. Strict suppression and persecution resulted in many Christians being martyred. In Nagasaki and Amakusa alone, 75 missionaries were executed between 1617 and 1644.

Even as the Shogunate's oppression became more and more draconian, numerous Christians continued to practice their faith in secret. A large number of believers who lived in the fiefs of Shimabara, Nagasaki and Amakusa suffered terribly from famine and heavy taxation. In 1637, they banded together and orchestrated an armed uprising, known as the 'Shimabara-Amakusa Rebellion', which culminated in the besieging of more than 20,000 rebels at Hara Castle. The blockade lasted 88 days, and in the end all the besieged, including women and children, lost their lives.



Amakusa Shiro's battle flag
(housed in the Amakusa Christian Museum)

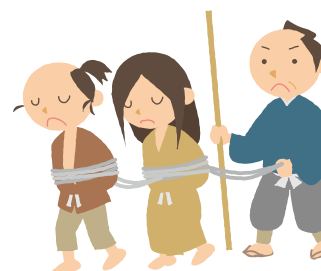
What measures were taken to crack down on Christians?

Every year, citizens had to tread upon a Christian image to prove they had denounced their faith. This practice was known as efumi. If they refused, they were identified as Christians and made to convert to Buddhism.

In Sakitsu, efumi was carried out in the yard of the village headman's house. Today, the Sakitsu Church stands on the very same ground where the denunciations took place.

The difference between efumi and fumie

Efumi is the test of allegiance and fumie is the plate with the Christian image on which one has to tread.



Efumi



Fumie



The Dormant Period of Hidden Faith



Sakitsu during the Oppression

Hidden Christians used religious artifacts such as medals, rosaries, Japanese-style mirrors, and abalone and mussel shells with mother-of-pearl patterns thought to resemble the Virgin Mary. There were even rare medals made entirely from mother-of-pearl.



Devotional items

Hidden in the pillar a medal

Continued Crackdown and Amakusa Kuzure

Hidden Christians continued to be discovered. In 1805, the fact that beef and fish were offered on the altar at Christmas time at home, became the trigger for an investigation by the magistrate's officers into suspicious religious practices. A box was placed within the Sakitsu Suwa Shrine grounds for the villagers to voluntarily discard any suspect religious objects. Christians who did so were judged to have unintentionally gone astray

and were absolved of any wrongdoing. During the investigation, it was noted that believers would incant anmenriyusu (Amen Deus) regardless of where they came to worship. Altogether, 5,205 people living in the villages of Oe, Sakitsu, Imatomi and Takahama were found out to be Christians. In Sakitsu alone, 1,709 residents, or approximately 70% the village's population, were discovered.



Sakitsu Suwa Shrine



Resurgence of Christianity



As the Shogunate era came to a turbulent close, Japan finally yielded to American pressure and the country was once more opened to foreign trade. A settlement for foreigners was established in Nagasaki, and the Oura Cathedral was built in 1864 to serve its religious needs. Shortly after, the church became the unexpected stage of a 'Discovery of Hidden Christians' as several dozen Hidden Christians from Nagasaki's Uragami village came to the church and confessed their faith to Father Petitjean. As the Europeans believed that no native Christians could have withstood more than two centuries of severe persecution, the discovery surprised and astounded them. However, native Japanese Christians were still subject to the prohibition. They were coerced to convert and their hardships continued. In response, various Western countries successively lodged strong protests with the Japanese Meiji Government against the persecution of native Christians. The government finally gave in and withdrew the Prohibition Edict in 1873. Freed from oppression, Japanese Christians took baptism and were reinstated as Catholics. One after another, new churches began to appear on local worshipping grounds.



Oura Cathedral

The Building of Sakitsu Church

The first Sakitsu church was built on the present site of the old convent. The present church was built in 1934. According to the strong wishes of Father Halbout the church was situated on the site of the village headman's residence where the efumi ritual, the symbol of Christian oppression, was carried out, and the church's altar was placed upon the very spot where the fumie plate used to be. From the beginning, the floor was covered with tatami mats, which is unusual for a church anywhere in Japan, and symbolizes the blending of Western and Japanese cultures. The layout of the church was the work of Yosuke Tetsukawa, a carpenter originally from Nagasaki's Gotō Islands who also participated in the design of many other churches in the area.





Sacred Places and Local Customs We Can Still See Today



A festival dating from the Edo Period taking place on the village main street

In Sakitsu, a Catholic church built in the midst of a fishing village created a unique townscape. Today, we can still find sacred places and vestiges of Hidden Christian times within the village as well as in the surrounding hills. Seasonal festivals at the Sakitsu Suwa Shrine, as well as church parades, continue to be held on the village's main street.

Please be considerate!

Like any other village, Sakitsu is a place used by the residents as they go about their daily lives. When visiting, please to not make undue noise or obstruct the narrow streets while walking in a group. Your consideration will be much appreciated.



Christian Vestiges in Imatomi Village



Like its close neighbor Sakitsu, Imatomi village had also been receptive to Christianity and is rich in Hidden Christian heritage from the Prohibition period. A unique form of worshipping developed here as Christian rituals combined with those of Buddhism and Shugendō asceticism. The village precincts contain a source of 'holy water', a Christian cemetery, other sacred grounds that were demolished during the 'Amakusa Kuzure' crackdown, and religious relics such as Japanese-style mirrors. Thanks in part to these vestiges, Hidden Christian customs have persisted and are still a part of the inhabitants' daily lives. When Prohibition was lifted during the Meiji Period, even though Christianity was legitimized, Imatomi residents did not become Catholics. They have kept their Buddhist and Hidden Christian customs, choosing to become 'Kakure Kirishitan' instead.



Umantera-sama



Source of Holy Water



New Year's Decorations
(Sawagi)

World Heritage Questions & Answers



Q How are World Heritage Sites Chosen?

A

In order for a place to become a World Heritage Site, it must undergo an inspection by UNESCO. The inspections are held only once a year—a very small window of opportunity.

Q What kind of World Heritage Sites do we have in Japan?

A

In July 2017, the World Heritage Committee has designated 21 sites. (Four are natural sites and 17 are cultural sites.)

◆ World Heritage Sites in Japan

- 1 Buddhist Monuments in the Horyu-ji area.
- 2 Himeji-jo
- 3 Yakushima
- 4 Shirakami-Sanchi
- 5 Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto
- 6 Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama
- 7 Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome)
- 8 Itsukushima Shrine
- 9 Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara
- 10 Shrines and Temples of Nikko
- 11 Gusoku Sites and Related Properties of the Kingdom of Ryukyu
- 12 Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range
- 13 Shiretoko
- 14 Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine and its Cultural Landscape
- 15 Ogasawara Islands
- 16 Hiraizumi-Temples, gardens and Archaeological Sites Representing the Buddhist Pure Land
- 17 Fujisan—sacred place and source of artistic inspiration
- 18 Tomioka Silk Mill and Related Sites
- 19 Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution: Iron and Steel, Shipbuilding and Coal Mining
- 20 The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement
- 21 Sacred Island of Okinoshima and Associated Sites in the Munakata Region



※Natural Heritage (in red) ... 4 places
Cultural Heritage (in blue) ... 17 places

Christian Chronology

Propagation

The arrival of Francis Xavier led to the dissemination of Christianity throughout Japan, thanks in part to Christian feudal lords. The propagation of Christianity was concurrent with trade with the West, through which many fascinating goods came to Japan. This exchange led to a flourishing of Western culture in Japan.



Oppression

The flourishing of Christianity came to an abrupt end when Toyotomi Hideyoshi ordered a ban on Christianity and 26 Christians were martyred. The Prohibition was reinforced by the Edo Shogunate. The Shimabara-Amakusa Rebellion was triggered by the oppression.



Concealment

The Shogunate deported foreign missionaries, leaving no leaders for the local Christians. Nevertheless, they secretly continued their religious practices for 250 years while outwardly pretending to be Buddhists.



Resurgence

As Japan opened to the world, the Oura Cathedral was built within the foreign concession. It was at this very church where the "Discovery of the Hidden Christians" took place. As the news spread to Europe, leading to surprise and astonishment. It can be considered one of the miracles of world religious history. When the Prohibition was lifted in Japan, many churches were built by local believers who came out of hiding.

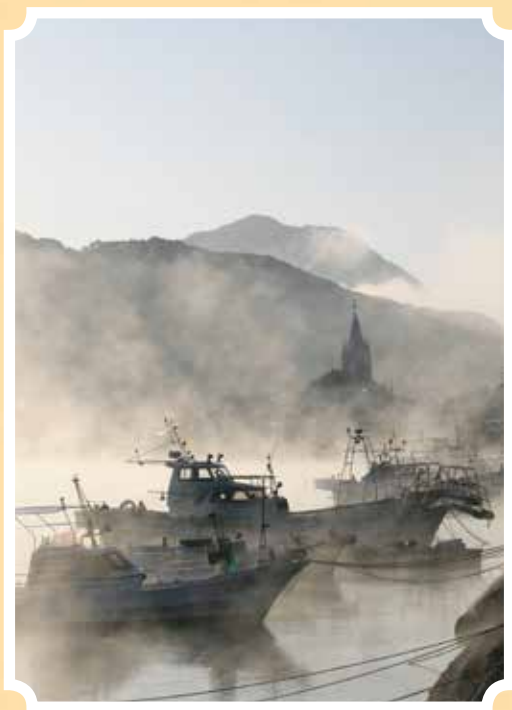


year	historic events
1549	Christianity comes to Japan
1566	The monk Luis De Almeida begins work as a missionary
1569	Almeida begins work in Kawauchiura
1591	The Colegio is established in Amakusa
1614	A Ban on Christianity is ordered by the Edo Shogunate
1637	The Shimabara-Amakusa Rebellion breaks out
1638	Hara Castle is destroyed; the Rebellion is quelled
1641	Amakusa comes under Shogunate control
1654	A signboard banning Christianity is displayed
1804	Hidden Christians are found in Oe, Sakitsu, and Imatomi
1805	In the Amakusa Debacle, a total of 5205 Christians are detected in four local villages.
1857	Order abolishing "efumi" is issued
1860	"Efumi" is abolished
1865	Hidden Christians come out of hiding
1873	the Ban on Christianity is lifted
1883	Father Ferrier oversees the construction of the Oe Church
1888	Father Ferrier oversees the construction of the Sakitsu Church
1933	The present Oe Church is constructed
1934	The present Sakitsu Church is constructed



How amazing it is that people could hide their belief for 250 years!





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