

## **Syncretism of Kakure Kirishitan as a Result of Tokugawa Government's Authoritarianism**

<sup>1</sup>Inge Windy Dorea, <sup>2</sup>Bayu Aryanto

Universitas Dian Nuswantoro

Semarang

([312201900835@mhs.dinus.ac.id](mailto:312201900835@mhs.dinus.ac.id))

**Abstract:** The Kakure Kirishitan flow of belief in Japan, which emerged due to the authoritarian Tokugawa government system at the time, is being studied in this study for its syncretism. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method that focuses on historical concerns. Research that is specifically concerned with the past is called historical research. This study attempts to reconstruct historical events precisely and, most of the time provides an explanation for why they occurred. To be able to describe, explain, and comprehend actions or events that happened in the past, we use systematic data searching. This research aims to analyze how a belief flow can be formed and influenced by local culture and political structures; specifically, we looked at the Kakure Kirishitan community. In order to survive the struggle and ensure their existence, a new flow of belief called Kakure Kirishitan was established on the foundation of the Christian believers' colonization of Japan. As a result, a new flow of belief emerged. Since the Japanese people were under government control at the time, Kakure Kirishitan is thought to have had a favorable outcome in the form of their security.

**Keywords:** Kakure Kirishitan, Syncretism, Authoritarianism, Tokugawa Government

### **RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

During the Tokugawa reign (1603-1867), also known as the Edo period, Japan had a feudal government. This government system places the Shogun as the supreme ruler. At the same time, the emperor only acted as a symbol of the leader of the state structure (Ishii, 1988, p. 47). The military had a significant role, and landlords (daimyo) assisted the Shoguns.

Around 29 million people in Japan during the Edo period (Mikiso, 1992, p. 34) were divided into social classes consisting of four categories. There are military class (bushi), farmers (noomin), workers (shokoo), and traders (shoonins). Authoritarian government occurs because of the existence of these social classes, which affect the society's social life. During the Tokugawa era, one of the policies that marked the authoritarianism of the shogunate was the existence of isolation politics (sakoku). Isolation politics (sakoku) is a way for a country to close itself and avoid attracting outside attention to protect its interests (Holsti, 1992, p. 86). This situation limits Japanese society in various aspects. One of them is the Japanese belief system.

Christianity in the Tokugawa period in Japan became one of the historical records of how a government system influenced the development of a belief or the formation of a new belief system. Christianity had been allowed to spread during the Muromachi shogunate until Azuchi Momoyama had to be stopped when Tokugawa's sakoku policy emerged, also with the incidents of the adherents and Christian priest execution. Tokugawa shared Hideyoshi's views regarding the prohibition of Christianity. They felt threatened that this would disrupt the country's unity and was suspicious of European domination. This concern was the background for forming sakoku politics, which influenced Christianity in Japan.

The strictness of the Tokugawa government, which prohibited Christianity, caused its adherents to be forced to change their beliefs and form a new flow of belief, Kakure Kirishitan. The culture of the local community also influences the form of the Kakure Kirishitan school. Buddhism and Shinto dominated Japan's belief system at that time. This shows that these two streams of belief have many adherents. Of course, this cannot be separated from Japan's view of secularism and historical factors. The thick culture of Buddhism and Shintoism also influenced the form of Kakure Kirishitan's beliefs. Syncretism occurs between Christianity and the two religious sects of the local community (Buddhism and Shinto). Malinowski (1884) defines culture as the settlement of humans against their environment and efforts to maintain their lives following the best traditions. Kakure Kirishitan is a form of syncretism's impact, surviving the government's conflict. Maharani (2010) explains trust is one party's belief in the reliability, durability, and integrity of the other party in a relationship and the belief that his actions are in the best interest and will produce positive results for the trusted party. At that time, the Japanese believed Kakure Kirishitan was a "safe house" from the government dictatorship.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a historical research approach emphasizing historical issues. Historical research is research that focuses explicitly on past events. Researchers try to reconstruct what happened in the past as accurately as possible and explain why it happened. The data in this study were obtained from the results of a literature study on historical books and journal articles related to Kakure Kurisutan in Japan during the Tokugawa era.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Arrival of Christianity in Japan**

Christianity entered Japan in the mid-1500s when the Sekigahara war happened. A well-known figure in the history of the spread of Christianity in Japan is Francis Xavier, a Jesuit who became a Christian missionary in Japan. Francis Xavier arrived with his companions in Japan on August 15, 1549, at Kagoshima, Kyushu port. Jorge Alvares, the captain of the Portuguese ship, is someone who provides information about Japan and is looking for information and trying to establish closer relations with other countries to Xavier. Xavier then wrote letters to his colleagues which contained his impressions of Japan. He mentioned that Japan is passionate about learning something, especially in matters related to the west, and also upholds dignity. In the end, the Jesuits agreed to choose Japan as one of the missionary fields, assuming Japan would be open to studying Christianity. In December 1547, Xavier met a Japanese nobleman from Kagoshima named Anjiro. Anjiro is a samurai who has an appointment with Xavier, who

will visit Japan. Afterward, Anjiro told a lot about Japanese culture and its customs. With his role as a samurai, a noble class in Japan, Anjiro helped Xavier a lot as a mediator and translator in Xavier's mission in Japan. Then Anjiro was christened with the baptismal name Paulo de Santa Fe, and together with Xavier, they devised a plan to spread Christianity in Japan.

### **Christian Christianity during the Tokugawa Period**

After the death of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1598, the Tokugawa government continued its anti-Christian policies. The Tokugawa government then made discriminatory policies and put humanity aside, such as the forced closing of churches, exile, persecution, death penalty, etc. Previously, Tokugawa Ieyasu only implemented a policy of banning Christianity without any strict, repressive punishment. The development of Christianity at that time seemed to have a gap between developing, thus making the Tokugawa government change its policy of prohibiting the development of Christianity from becoming more repressive.

These repressive policies included persecuting Christians who were found to hold on to their beliefs and refused to renounce them. In mid-1603-1609, a drastic decline in the Christian population occurred from 80,000 followers down to 20,000 followers in a region in Japan due to government authoritarianism. In addition, in 1609, the government carried out the death penalty against three Christians on the island of Ikitsuki, warning the people there to take their policy of banning Christianity seriously.

The government also closed churches. One example is the Franciscan Church in Kansai and Kanto. A decree was issued in 1614 and circulated in the significant cities of Kansai. The Kansai churches were destroyed, and missionaries were sent to Nagasaki to gather with the captured missionaries. Most Christians in the area chose to renounce their faith. The Jesuits were also asked to provide a list of all staff in Kansai. Some ended up giving fake lists, while others stayed to help Christian followers there secretly.

Churches must also produce a temple registration certificate to prove their conversion to Buddhism. In 1635, a temple office was established to require that their branch temples expose Christians to the whole village. Exile was also carried out among internal circles, such as aristocrats who were found still believing in Christianity. Some were exiled to northern Japan, while others chose to leave their faith.

Many Japanese Christians then chose to become martyrs rather than renounce their beliefs. Even when they were about to undergo execution, they were still forbidden to pray or sing there. One way of execution was decapitation. In 1618 the number of martyrs had increased to 240%, to 68 from 20 in the previous year, and almost 30% more. The following year, when it reached 88,636 since 1619, the government began offering reward informants. Informants work to provide information about Christian followers they find to the government. In 1625 the commission for informants was increased, resulting in more informants appearing. In addition, anti-Christian books were also published in Japan.

At the end of 1620, there was a ceremony called Efumi. Efumi is a ceremony in which Christians were forced to step on objects and Christian representations as proof that they were not Christians (Fumie). This ceremony tests them to determine whether they have left their beliefs. Efumi became widespread in Japan and was used as a population tester. In Kyushu, for example, Efumi became an activity that was held every year or two at that time. Still, in the exact location, government officials developed a methodology by relying on Buddhist priests

to help convert Christian followers to Buddhism. Torture and execution are the final options if they insist on defending their beliefs. Even Christians with a specific rank who choose to want to leave their beliefs can get various gifts prepared by the government, such as rice, money, and many more.

### **Kakure Kirishitan's Syncretism**

During the Tokugawa era, the influence of Confucianism and Buddhism obtained from Chinese influence became the basis of Japanese state philosophy. They were then experiencing syncretism with beliefs believed to have originated from Japan, namely Shinto teachings. These teachings later became the Japanese people's way of life or philosophy of life. The Japanese way of socializing is heavily influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintoism, which have been syncretized in several aspects. The results of the syncretism of several aspects of these schools form the character or identity of Japan as a country. Confucianism and Shintoism have borrowed and combined metaphysics and psychology from Buddhism. In contrast, Buddhism and Shinto have borrowed and combined the ethical teachings of Confucianism (Yulifar, 2010, p. 8). This syncretism caused Japan to become a country that has successfully borrowed culture (cultural borrowing) from foreign nations, and then they adapted to the local culture.

This syncretism also applies to the Kakure Kirishitan flow. This hidden Christian flow of beliefs was formed due to a government dictatorship that forced its adherents to disguise their beliefs by carrying out a process of syncretism against Christianity to several other Japanese flows of beliefs.

### **Kakure Kirishitan**

During the Tokugawa reign, Christians experienced pressure from the ruling government. The policies implemented to overcome the threat of western imperialism impacted limiting the freedom of the Japanese people to adhere to a belief. Authoritarian government policies at that time forced Christians to disguise their beliefs with syncretism. They form a community called Kakure Kirishitan, or called hidden Christians.

The Kakure Kirishitan Community is the only Christian tradition in Japan that developed separately from western forms of Christianity. Kakure Kirishitan developed during the Edo period in 1603-1867. Religious practices were carried out in disguise and hide. Most of them practice oral religion because most practitioners are illiterate, and if anyone caught possessing writings that prove Christian practice will be punished. In isolation and all the threats from the government's policies, Kakure Kirishitan was formed to hide their true identity to minimize the chance of being caught by the government. Kakure Kirishitan innovated the practice by combining it with new beliefs compatible with the government's ideology. Even so, they have not been able to engage openly in religious practices. Kakure Kirishitan is reshaping Christianity by interpreting it into a new form adapted and integrated with local teachings, namely, Buddhism, Shinto, and other Japanese cultural teachings. Kakure Kirishitan is not a community in the form of a monolithic group. They spread to various areas. The Kakure Kirishitan community, although in small numbers, performs religious rituals and prayers that vary from one region to another region. They develop practices that make sense for their respective groups. They were not hesitated to innovate in their beliefs by adjusting to their respective regional situations.

In the study of Kakure Kirishitan, it is said that there is a significant commonality among all Kakure Kirishitan groups. It focuses on one central aspect of practice, the Virgin Mary, in the guise of a Buddha figure. Within this broader approach, there are three main aspects of their beliefs and practices.

First, material culture and visual imagery. Second, liturgical rituals and prayers. Third, the sacred text. Regarding material culture and visual imagery, Kakure Kirishitan recognizes the term Maria Kannon, which is the result of syncretism of Christian and Buddhist beliefs by making representations of Mary as the Buddhist Bodhisattva Kannon. Kannon is the Japanese name and form of Bodhisattva. Apart from that, the figure of Jesus in their religious objects is also disguised with elements of Buddhism. This is done to avoid suspicion and authoritarianism of the government so that they can worship in peace without any threats. So, sacred religious objects are forced to be disguised to avoid the possibility of being caught by the local government.

For the figure of Maria Kannon, porcelain figures were made for religious occasions. Statues depicting Jizo as a monk can be found on the streets and cemeteries in Japan. In the Kirishitan sacred text known as Tenchi Hajimari no Koto (The Beginning of Heaven and Earth), the character Mary is referred to in the text as Maruya. In Kakure Kirishitan, Mary, described as Maria Kannon, has an equal position with Jesus and God the Father in worship. Reis Habito concluded that this might have happened because most of the Kakure Kirishitan were already familiar with Kannon, and they also found a resemblance to a Buddhist bodhisattva figure in Maria.

The practice distinguishing the Kakure Kirishitan community also lies in the recitation of Orashio (a borrowed word from the Latin word meaning prayer). A special prayer passed down through oral tradition and reading. Orashio sounds similar to a Shinto or Buddhist ritual when reading aloud, so anyone who hears it does not suspect anything. Like Maria Kannon's image, Orashio combines Christian teachings and Japanese religious rituals that allow them to disguise themselves. Prayers can be in Japanese, Latin, or mixed. One of the applications of this Orashio prayer is at funerals. To avoid suspicion, Kakure Kirishitan performed a traditional Buddhist funeral. Kakure Kirishitan sees their new culture as something that does not contradict Christian teachings. For them, mixing their Christian faith with Shinto or Buddhist ritual traditions is fine.

Kakure Kirishitan is also familiar with the term Tenchi Hajimari no Koto, which is the designation for a collection of stories based on Biblical narratives such as the story of Adam and Eve, the birth of Jesus, the Crucifixion, and many more. The text in Tenchi itself consists of 15 chapters, which are relatively short and contains brief sketches. They have little-written text. Outside the Kakure Kirishitan context, the concept of Tenchi contradicts Christianity itself. Even its acceptance among Kakure Kirishitan itself at the time was still debatable. From a western perspective, Tenchi might be considered an eccentric mix that is not following the Christian teachings they believe in. They consider the practice significantly deviated and no longer part of Christianity.

Contemporary scholars have also questioned whether Kakure Kirishitan can be accurately described as part of Christianity. Kentaro (1996: 30) argues that Kirishitan Kakure cannot be considered a form of Christianity because it does not follow Christian dogma. Therefore, Kakure Kirishitan is classified as an "original religion" which arose due to the syncretism of Buddhism, Shinto, and Christianity in Tokugawa-era Japanese society. Harrington (1993: 159),



in his monograph *Japan's Hidden Christianity*, also concludes that *Kakure Kirishitan* is a new Japanese religion born from a mixture of Christianity and traditional Japanese religion. In the process, they adapted other teachings to suit their needs in several aspects. Many missionaries and scholars have concluded that *Kakure Kirishitan* should be categorized as a Japanese religion rather than Christianity.

## CONCLUSION

The study of *Kakure Kirishitan* concluded that *Kakure Kirishitan* is classified as a Japanese religion formed from the syncretism of Christianity and traditional Japanese religions such as Buddhism and Shinto. The classification of *Kakure Kirishitan* as a Japanese religion is based on many syncretistic aspects of this religion that are inconsistent with Christian beliefs. This religion is classified as a Japanese religion by religious leaders and experts. This syncretism in *Kakure Kirishitan*'s belief occurred not because the people deliberately wanted to mix based on innovation but because of external factors that pressured them. This forced syncretism, which is not in accordance with Christian dogma. Meanwhile, external factors originating from the government's authoritarianism became a significant factor in how this syncretism could occur at that time, especially during the Tokugawa leadership era. At that time, Christians in Japan experienced tremendous pressure from the government, which implemented a policy of banning Christianity in Japan. The result of the government seeing Christianity as a threat which they saw as divisive the unity of Japan. This sense of threat drives the government to implement an authoritarian regime to pressure Christian followers to abandon their beliefs and return to their beliefs and culture, which are teachings based on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintoism. This ideology was expected to strengthen Japan against the threat of western

imperialization that the government was worried about at that time. Firm policies were made, from forcing Christians to abandon their beliefs to the cruelest punishment from the government, the death penalty. Because of this, some Christians die as martyrs, many decide to renounce their beliefs, and some choose to stick to their beliefs even though they must do it secretly. Ultimately, this group of hidden Christians formed a hidden Christian community, Kakure Kirishitan.

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