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Hidden Christians of Iyo : A Preliminary Report

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The authors (sometimes referred to hereafter by their initials, YF and DRB, respectively) discuss the need for research into Hidden Christians in Iyo. They point to the lack of detailed literature in this area in spite of the historical data confirming the pre-expulsion activities of missionaries in the region. The report also gives a brief account of the authors' visits to sites in Horie and Waké, which have been considered through local lore as having relics of Hidden Christians.

We would like to thank Shigeru Kawahara and Kimiko Kaneko for their kind help in showing us the sites in Hojo and for relating some of the folklore regarding them. In addition, our thanks go to Kimio Kubota, who took us to the site in Horie, and to the faculty members of Horie Elementary School who put DRB in contact with him.

Introduction

There are some puzzling objects which can be found in and around the Hojo area (see geographical reference below, if necessary), and from early times, local lore has identified these artifacts, carved in or of easily-worked sandstone, as being relics of the Hidden Christians of Iyo.

For some time now, researchers have been investigating the Crypto-, or "Hidden", Christians of Japan – paying careful heed to constraints laid upon such

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research by the sensitive nature of such material with regard to the preservation of cultural heritage and the protection of human rights – and this research has resulted in numerous academic books and papers in the field. However, research into Crypto-Christianity in the Iyo region, has, to date, been left somewhat out in the cold.

YF and DRB have recently taken upon themselves to begin some investigation in this region, examining relics which, according to local lore, have been attributed to Crypto-Christians. The research must be conducted very delicately in order to maintain respect for religious sensibilities and local culture. In this paper, we would like to provide an brief and objective preliminary report of our research activities into the relics of the Kakure (“Hidden” or “Crypto-”) Christians of Iyo in the Horie and Hojo areas, including local oral tradition.

Preliminaries

Geography

First of all, we should probably take a brief moment to go over some basic geography for those not familiar with Japan. Three regions mentioned above are Horie, Hojo, and Iyo. Let us begin with the last first. Iyo refers to what is now essentially Ehime Prefecture, occupying the northwest part of the island of Shikoku, and Horie and Hojo are communities located on the Seto Inland Sea just north of Matsuyama – the largest city and capital of the Prefecture. The latter two were independent municipalities until 2005, when they were incorporated into (merged with) the City of Matsuyama. The locations can be seen below on the map in Figure 1 (slightly adapted from Google Maps, 2015).

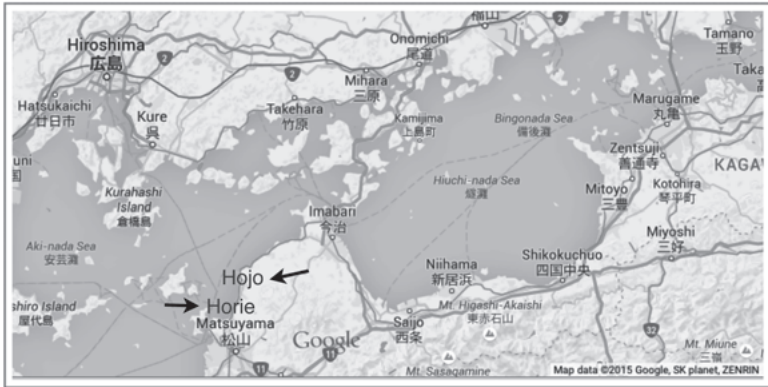


Fig 1 : Map showing Hojo

Historical references

The beginnings

Now let us examine some historical references to the earliest introduction of Christianity to the Iyo area. One source in particular, *Ehime-ken Shi* (History of Ehime Prefecture : 1983), provides some detailed information concerning the first contacts between Christianity and Iyo.

It is commonly known (CBCJ) that, in 1549, Francis Xavier, co-founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), arrived in Japan along with three other Jesuits together with a Japanese Christian convert named Anjiro—who at some point had adopted the name of “Paulo de Santa Fe”) – in Anjiro’s homeland of Kagoshima. This arrival is considered to be the very first introduction of Christianity to Japan. The Jesuits at first were warmly welcomed, and they proceeded, but not without subsequent resistance, to promulgate their belief system throughout many areas of Kyushu and extending to the Kyoto and Osaka areas, gaining many converts in the process. However, it would appear that the missionaries did not seem to consider

the Iyo region to be fertile grounds for their plans of proselytism.

In essence, the introduction of Christianity in the Iyo region can be attributed to a both chance and, in some sense, almost romantic happenstance.

Early Christianity in Iyo

A slightly peculiar, but serendipitous, chain of events led to the introduction of Christianity to the Iyo area. An account of this chance happenstance can be found in Father Fróis' History of Japan (cited in Konuma, 1998), according to which, a Portuguese missionary named Gaspar Vilela, along with two Japanese monks, Lorenzo and Damian, were on their way from Kyushu to Kyoto in 1559 when their ship happened to stop at Horie (now part of Matsuyama). This chance event turned out to be the first recorded encounter between Christianity and the Iyo region.

We should mention here that, although Horie has always been geographically close to and is now a part of Matsuyama, the regions have a very different history and background. Also, the Hojo region, which we will be discussing later in this paper, adjoins Horie, and those two regions have some close cultural ties.

As we mentioned above, the group was on its way to the Kyoto area, but the ship/boat they were on had to lay in at Horie due to inclement weather. As it happened, the other passengers attributed the weather to the priests or Christianity itself and prevailed upon the captain to leave the group there. This led to the missionaries spending a short time (marooned) in Horie.

The next encounter between Christianity and Iyo occurred in 1566, when a group of four missionaries, including Father Louis Fróis, were on their way back from Oita (in Kyushu) to the Kyoto area, when they also had to lay over unexpectedly in Horie, again due to bad weather. It was there that one of their number, Father Almeida, happened to come across some Christians, including one Emanuel Akimasa, who had been baptized in Kyoto. It was reported that during the eight-day stay in Horie, six people received baptism and converted to

Christianity. Slightly more detailed reference to the two events can be found in Konuma (in Japanese) and Bogdan & Fukuda (2014).

Although exactly what may have taken place in the interim between this occurrence and that of the previous landing in Horie has been lost with the passage of the centuries that have followed, it requires no great leap of faith to infer that the Horie area no doubt provided a launching point for the introduction of Christianity to the Iyo region.

While many details remain somewhat murky, it appears that quite a bit of Christian activity took place in the Dogo region of Matsuyama, near the Ishite Temple there. For example, on the map of Japan found in his 1646 (Cardim) book, the Jesuit Antonio Fancisco Cardim clearly indicates both a church and a rectory in Dongo (Dogo) in the “Kingdom” of Iyo, and his notes (#36) on the same map confirm this. Figures 2 and 3 provide cutouts from both the map and the pertinent notes.



Fig 2 : “Dongo” and “Iyo” on Cardim’s map of Japan

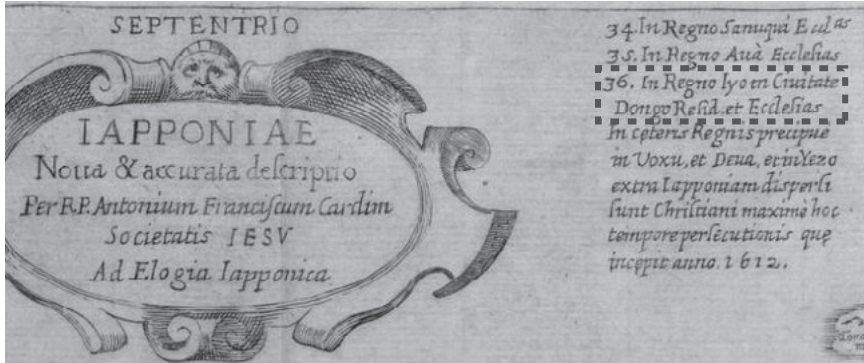


Fig 3 : Notes from Cardim's map of Japan

As further evidence of Christian activity in Iyo, we see reports by the Jesuits Valignano and Chardin (cited in Ehime Lifelong Learning Center). Valignano, in a report from 1583, writes of churches and rectories in such locations as Yamaguchi, Iyo, and Shimonoseki, while in 1653, Chardin notes a gathering in Masaki (slightly south of Hojo) during which a mass was served and other religious observances took place.

A turn for the worse

In 1587, Hideyoshi Toyotomi issued his Edict of Expulsion, *Bateren Tsuiho Rei* (*bateren* (from the Portuguese word *padre*, "father"), which placed a ban on the Portuguese missionaries. For the most part, the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians were able to continue in their activities for a certain time after this, but this did not last. A decade later, Hideyoshi ordered the crucifixion of a group of Christians in Nagasaki, who would become known as the 26 Martyrs of Japan

The Tokugawa Shogunate would also come to treat the Christians harshly. In 1614, Ieyasu signed the second Christian Expulsion Edict. This edict banned Christianity, expelled Christians and foreigners, and forbade Christians from practicing their religion. The enforcement was brutal. Eight years later, fifty-five

Christians were burned or beheaded publicly in Nagasaki, and then in the following year, the third Shogun, Iemitsu, had some fifty Christians be burned at the stake in Edo (present-day Tokyo).

The Tokugawa Shogunate had developed a practice of using *fumi-e* “likenesses of Jesus or Mary” to weed out Christians. Officials forced people to step on these *fumi-e* in a test known as *e-fumi* “stepping on a picture”, and those who refused or even showed a reluctance to performing this act were considered to be Christians and consigned to a dire fate.

Indubitably one of the most devastating blows to early Christianity in Japan took place in 1638, when a Tokugawa army (with some collusion from the Dutch) laid siege to and eventually sacked a rebel stronghold at Hara Castle, resulting the deaths of an estimated 37,000 (including men, women, and children).

Interestingly enough, there is a school of thought according to which Christianity in Iyo could have been in some sense strengthened as a result of the widespread persecution and oppression of Christians elsewhere. Christians from the more established and urbanized areas of Kyushu and Osaka would find the more rural and isolated nature of Shikoku to be more attractive as a place of refuge (Ehime Lifelong Learning Center). Remote communities such as Hojo and Horie would be inviting places to go underground, following the Japanese axiom *Ki no ha wo kakusunara, mori no naka*, which translates into something along the lines of “The best place to hide a leaf is in a forest”. Unfortunately, because they had hidden themselves so well and so much time has passed, it is extremely difficult to track their movements.

Relics of Christianity

Given the historical evidence that Hidden Christians were, in fact, in Iyo –

coming from either the original converts from the area or those who had sought sanctuary from other regions – it is reasonable to expect there would remain some physical artifacts or relics. Hidden Christians typically concealed their prohibited objects of worship in various ways: for example, disguising statues of Jesus and Mary as Buddhist statues (Filus). The Maria Kannon is a well-known example of this type of camouflaging. Hino (2000) provides some pictures of relics found throughout Ehime: in the southern Ehime (Nanyo) towns of Yawata, Ozu, and Uchiko; in Futami, Matsuyama, Nakajima, and Hojo in Central Ehime (Chuyo); and a number of places in Eastern Ehime (Toyo), including Kikuma, Onishi, and Imabari.

Relics from one region often have different characteristics from those from other regions and from other parts of Japan. It has been suggested that these differences may have resulted from that fact that missionaries from different orders had been active in and affected the various regions. However, one would still need to explain the difference between relics from Iyo and those from Kyushu where the missionaries were members of the same order.

In addition to physical artifacts, special attention should be paid to the folklore relating to the Hidden Christians. For example, there is a certain gravesite in Kikuma (the town adjoining Hojo to its north) nicknamed *Hitokuroden* (the *den* means rice paddy, but the *Hitokuro* is written in the phonetic Hiragana). Local legend has it that officials had beheaded 48 Christians there, and that the village headman had had the bodies gathered and a mound raised over them. Because no monument was allowed, he had bamboo planted on or around the mound to mark their mass grave. According to the local folklore, the *kuro* in the name *Hitokuroden* is a shortened form of *kurosu* “cross” (Ehime Lifelong Learning Center).

Again, we must stress that there is no physical monument or written records of

this incident ; local folklore and the place name provide the evidence in this case. In our investigation into the Hidden Christians, we need to examine both types of evidence, both physical and from folklore and tradition.

Research Considerations

This type of research calls for special considerations to be made when conducting it. Investigation relating to religion or faith is sensitive in nature, and, while research and study of this kind is, of course, important and necessary, when delving into people's religion, discretion, discipline, and common sense are of prime importance. In addition, human rights and cultural, ethnic, and national sensitivities must be taken into consideration.

However, the clock is ticking. Lore, customs, and knowledge (including that of the location of relics), which had been passed down through generations of Hidden Christians, are no longer being transmitted as recent generations have either lost interest or turned to other faiths, including Buddhism or mainstream Christianity. The relics themselves are being subject to the elements or development (Yamaguchi, 2002). We need to gather as much evidence/information as possible before it completely disappears, and we have taken some first steps in that direction.

Steps to date

Horie Gravesite

Last year, having been informed that there was a small poster about a Kakure Christian gravesite in Horie, DRB went to see it in order to locate the actual site. The poster was on display on the back wall of the recently opened *Umiterasu Umi*

no Eki (“Umiterasu” Station of the Sea) in the port area of Horie.

Here is a rough translation of the poster :

Name : Tomb of Hidden Christians (Tomb of Christians)

Location Fukuzumi Matsuo

1975 : Discovered.

1559 (Late Muromachi Period) : Christian missionaries landed for the first time in Horie on Shikoku.

1564 (Late Muromachi Period) : Birth of Christianity on Shikoku

Horie District Town Development Community Council : Regional Development and Maintenance Division

As directions to the site were essentially nonexistent and there was no one around to ask, DRB struck out on his own, and after a number of unsuccessful attempts over the next several days, was finally able to locate the gravesite. The set of four gravestones (or monuments) can be found on the southeast side of a small hill which turned out to be quite close to the main costal highway that enters Matsuyama from the north.

Figure 4 shows the sign found in front of the tomb, a rough English translation (by DRB) of which would be :

Tomb of Hidden Christians

In 1559 (late Muromachi period), Father Gaspar Vilela, arrived on a beach in Horie accompanied by monks.

It is said that this was the first time Christian missionaries landed on Shikoku.

Five years later, while Father Luis Frois' party was (staying) in Horie, six residents were baptized, marking the birth of Christianity on Shikoku.

Later, when the persecution of Christians became increasingly severe, the missionaries and their followers faced cruel punishment.

However, the devout believers, continued in their faith in secret, and came to



Fig 4 : Sign at Horie Gravesite

be called “Hidden Christians”.

This tomb was discovered in 1975.

The stone monuments are neatly arranged in a set of three, with the stone cross in the middle, a “church” stone on the left, and “five-ringed tower” (in Japanese, Gorinto) on the right.

Horie Community Center of Matsuyama

When DRB asked a local resident living in a house just below the site whether she was aware of any folklore relating to the tomb, she responded negatively, but then suggested that he check at the nearby elementary school. In fact, upon checking on the Internet, the Horie Elementary School did have a webpage mentioning the grave, so DRB dropped by the school a few weeks later, and the faculty/staff there were kind enough to put him in contact with Kimio Kubota, who

they suggested as being the most knowledgeable about the site.

Somewhat later, when YF happened to be back in the Ehime area for other research, both authors met with Mr. Kubota and went with him to the gravesite. In front of the sign seen above in Figure 4 is the row of markers themselves, shown in Figure 5.



Fig 5 : Stone markers at Horie Gravesite

In Figure 6, you can see a picture (taken from the poster mentioned above) of the condition they were in 40 years ago, just after they were discovered by accident when housing development was begun in that area. Obviously – especially considering the presence of the large and informative sign in front of them – effort is being made to care for them, no doubt out of acknowledgement and respect for their cultural and religious significance.



Fig 6 : Horie Gravesite when discovered (from poster in Umiterasu Building)

As mentioned above, the gravesite is located on the southeast side of a small hill. A typical, small Japanese cemetery can be found on the other side of the hill – the north side – which faces the sea and towards the town of Horie.

The next picture provides a closeup of the middle “Maria Kannon” stone. Much erosion and weathering has taken place, but the features are still apparent.

Enmyo-ji in Waké

Mr. Kubota also took the authors to nearby Waké, where Enmyo-ji, one of the 88 temples of the Shikoku Pilgrimage, is located. DRB had already been there previously on his own, but it was the first time for YF. If you inquire about Hidden Christians in Ehime, this is one of the first places you will be directed to because it has a “Hidden Christian” display on the temple grounds.

Upon entering the temple grounds, you will be immediately greeted by a slightly rusting sign in Japanese on the left informing you that a “Christian Stone



Fig 7 : “Maria Kannon” in Horie

Lantern” can be found behind it in the back.

A short narrow path leads you to another sign, which is also only in Japanese, that can be roughly translated as :

Christian Stone Lantern

“Cross-shaped Lantern”

40-cm tall stature, said by some to be carved to look like Maria with her hands clasped in prayer, and used in the practice of their faith.

A picture of the “Maria Kannon” can be seen in Figure 8, and other pictures from the Enmyoji Temple grounds can be found in Bogdan & Fukuda (2014).



Fig 8 : “Maria Kannon” at Enmyo-ji Temple

There the authors also comment on how the wording “said by some” and “look like” could suggest that this interpretation is itself open to debate or perhaps doubt. Remember that the *Kakure* in *Kakure Christian* means “hidden” and that the loyal practitioners of the faith were forced to render their “faith essentially invisible” in various ways in order to protect themselves from persecution (Filus).

The use of such camouflaging means that it can very difficult to determine whether an artifact is a disguised *Kakure* object or perhaps has nothing to do with Christianity. Such cases call for corroboration in the form of records or, if they are not available, oral tradition, geographical names, and the like. In the case of the

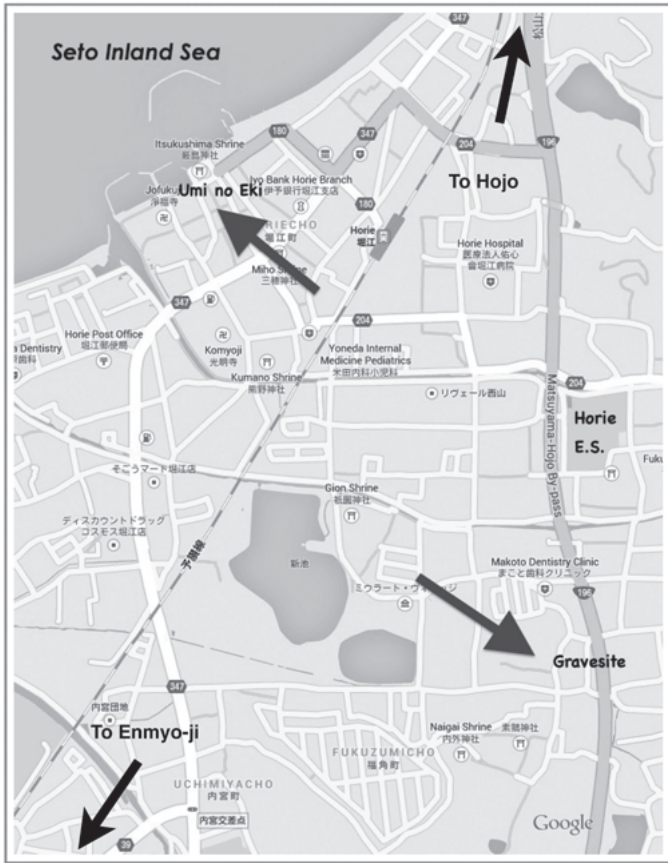


Fig 9 : Salient locations in and around Horie

Enmyo-ji Kannon, local legend has it that when a lantern was placed on the flat surface at the top of the statue, the whole thing would then form a cross, allowing the faithful to worship before it.

Figure 9 provides a map of the Horie area showing the locations of the poster, the gravesite, and in what directions the Enmyo-ji Temple and Hojo site can be found.

Hojo

In March of this year, when DRB was cycling to the top of Mt. Takanawa (one of the highest mountains in the Matsuyama area), he stopped at the Buddhist temple just below the top, where a ceremony marking the advent of spring was taking place. One of the participants/organizers, a Mr. Shigeru Kawahara, approached him and struck up a conversation. He was from Hojo, at the foot of Mt. Takanawa on the coastal side, and was going into detail about the history of the temple and the items found on the grounds. It was during this conversation that DRB casually mentioned his interest in Hidden Christians, and his interlocutor informed him of his own interest in the subject and that there were relics near his home that he would be glad to show him.

At the beginning of May, YF was again scheduled to be in Matsuyama, so the authors made arrangements to meet with Mr. Kawahara in Hojo, where he would take them to the site(s). When they arrived at the station, they were met by Mr. Kawahara and a friend of his, Ms. Kimiko Kaneko, who was also interested in the local history of the Kakure Christians. Mr. Kawahara drove the group to the first site, which was just to the east of Kono Elementary School in Hojo. He explained that there was the possibility of the site of being associated with Christianity, but the stone monuments there were quite weathered and gave no obvious clue to any Christian origins.

Following this, the group went to a second site, close by, this time to the west of the elementary school. As can be seen in Figure 10, the stones are found in a sturdy stone structure that protects them to a certain extent from the elements. No doubt because of this, the images of “Maria Kannon” on two stones – pointed out in Figure 11 and shown separately in Figures 12 and 13, respectively – are more distinguishable than the one at the unprotected site in Horie.

The authors were also informed of more relics near a village in a more remote



Fig10 : Hojo Site

area on the way as you ascend the side of Mt. Takanawa. Weather and time did not permit a visit to that area on that day ; this is left for a future date.

It seems highly likely that the area was where Yamaguchi (2002) was shown the relics discussed in her senior thesis. In the course of her data-gathering for the thesis, she visited the area around the foot of Mt. Takanawa in Hojo, and, when she asked around about Hidden Christians, she was taken to some stone monuments that a friendly local resident told her were those of Kakure Christians. She had been taken there under the condition that she reveal the location to no one. Unfortunately, when YF & DRB asked her last year about the location or who to she had talked to, too much time had passed, and she could not recall exactly where



Fig11 : Hojo Site Closeup

the stones were or who she had gotten the information from. However, from her vague recollections of the location, it does seem entirely possible that it was the same area the authors were told about here.

One thing we need to point out here is that we are not giving the exact location of the sites we visited in Hojo. The reason Ms. Yamaguchi was asked not to reveal the location of the stones she saw was that there were those who might disturb them or even perhaps take them as souvenirs. Therefore, we also are attempting to be careful about divulging information about locations. The site in Hojo and the monument at Enmyo-ji, on the other hand, are well-known and well-marked, so we feel comfortable in providing the locations on the map in Figure 9.



Fig12 : Hojo "Maria Kannon"



Fig13 : Hojo "Maria Kannon"

Observations

As discussed above, historical records give evidence of continuing Christian activity in Iyo beginning in 1569. That leaves a period of 80 years until 1639 – when the 3rd Tokugawa Shogun closed off the country – for Christianity to establish a firm foothold in the area. Religious tradition would have been, by that time, already passed down through generations, which would have made it less likely for believers to quickly abandon their faith. However, not only the isolation of Japan from the Christian world, but also the isolation from the rest of Japan for which Shikoku has become famous, would have necessarily contributed to changes or peculiarities in the way the religion was practiced, much in the same way that isolation breeds dialects in language. To say that the practices and relics of the

groups of Hidden Christians from the more well-known regions constitute the “true” faith, is similar to saying that one particular dialect of a language is more proper, or legitimate, than another.

Concerning the sites that the authors visited, local tradition suggests a Christian origin for the relics. There are also similarities among the relics. Researchers into Christian relics in other parts of Japan have argued against the legitimacy of a Christian origin for the Iyo artifacts because they differ from the “mainstream” ones. Although the images shown above do resemble Maria, corroborating evidence is needed to confirm that they are indeed representations of “Maria Kannon” and not, for example, Buddhist images peculiar to this area. Also, the lack of clear, iconic “cross” images or artifacts has been a sticking point.

Future research needs to provide more supporting evidence, and the authors feel the need to answer the following questions :

1. How do we explain the peculiar characteristics of the objects found all around the Iyo region ?
2. How do we explain in a reasonable manner the fact that the peculiarities are common to artifacts in various places in the area ?
3. Is it pure coincidence that these objects happen to be found in areas where Christian missionaries were known to be active in the 15th and 16th centuries ?
4. Has the local lore been adequately recorded and researched ?

Until these, and other, questions have been adequately answered, there is much room for future study. And time is of the essence. The migration of the younger generation(s) to urban areas has left aging and disappearing communities in rural areas, the exact areas where Christians escaping persecution and oppression would have tried to hide. The local folklore, typically passed down orally, will be lost completely if not recorded post haste.

Also, the relics in question are themselves in danger of extinction. In Figure 14, we can see a stone monument at the first site the authors were taken to in Hojo. Even if there were rumors of a Christian connection with the site, the stone itself cannot provide corroboration due to the intense weathering it has undergone.

Figure 15 shows a nearly destroyed arrangement of stones just past the Christian gravestone site in Horie. The picture does not show it, but to the left,



Fig14 : Extremely weathered stone in Hojo



Fig15 : Damaged site in Horie

and downhill, from the path, are a number of obviously human-worked stones nearly completely buried in the dirt and leaves. Their proximity to the gravesite leads one to wonder if they might have some connection, but without further and more detailed examination, there is no way to determine this. However, the question is : who does one get permission from for such an investigation ? You cannot just fiddle around with what was most likely a gravesite and which formed a part of someone's religious observance.

Pictures in Yamaguchi's thesis also show relics which have been knocked over or nearly buried in the dirt. So it is not only the oral traditions (including information about where artifacts can be found) surrounding such sites which is being threatened by time and a disappearing community, but also the relics themselves through a lack of caretakers. Again, time is of essence, and the authors feel the urgent need to begin to take steps to record and protect this cultural heritage.

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