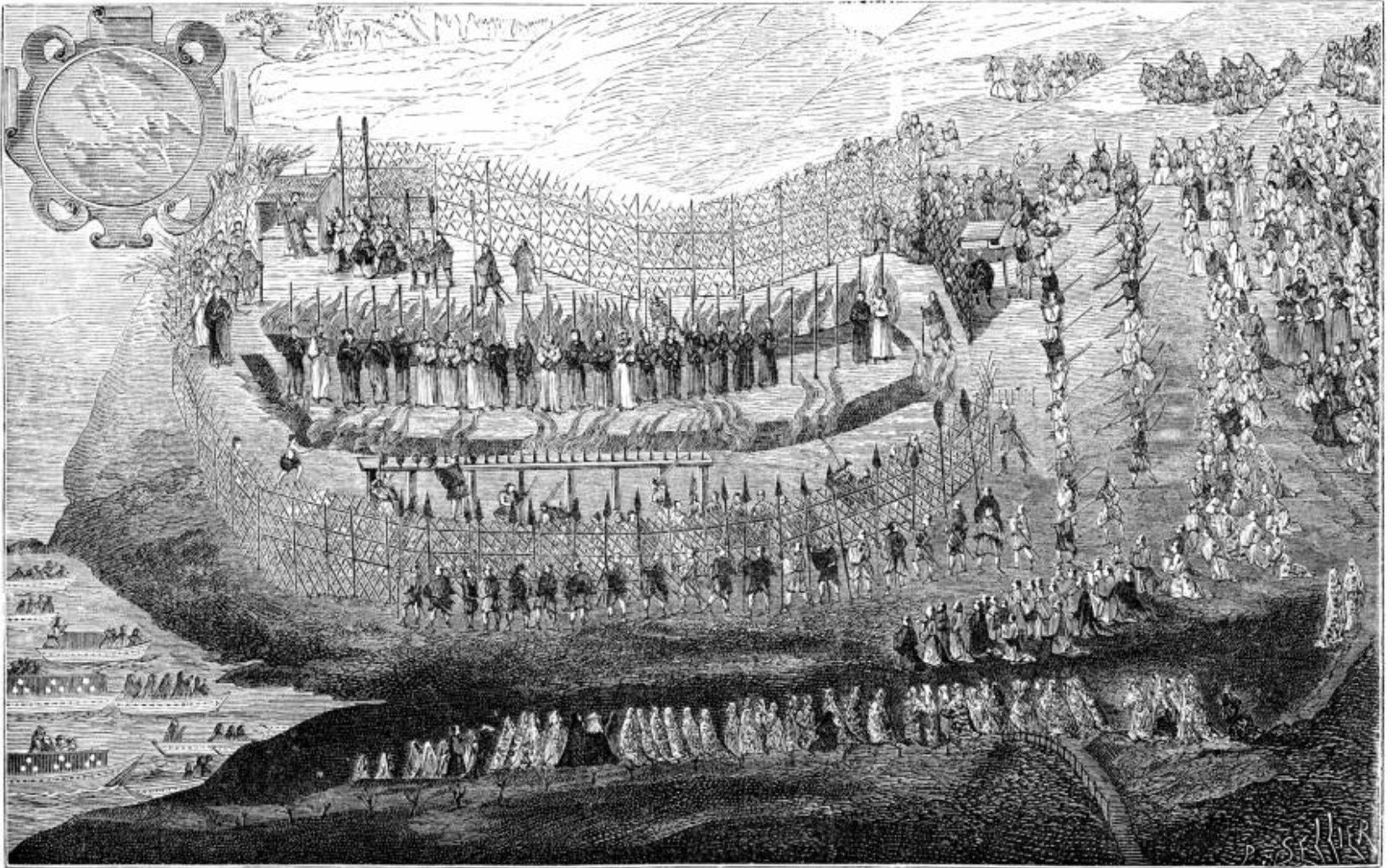


Japan's historical resistance to Christianity

[Michael Hoffman](#) Dec 16, 2017



Fifty-five Catholics were martyred in Nagasaki in the 17th century in what became known as the Great Genna Martyrdom. | GETTY IMAGES

Jesus and Japan go back a long way, longer than you'd think if you don't happen to know of a peculiar legend that has the Son of God sojourning — twice: once before, once after the crucifixion — in a remote mountain village in northern Aomori Prefecture.

It's a bizarre, fantastic tale, its origins misty beyond tracing. The 1,000-odd inhabitants of Shingo, the village in question, knew nothing of it until 1935, when a Shinto priest from Ibaraki Prefecture came bearing an ancient document he said had been in his family's possession for centuries. It purported to explain the existence of a simple grave outside the village marked by two wooden crosses. No one had paid it any attention before, but here was the document, describing Jesus coming to Japan during the

reign of Emperor Suijin (himself a legendary figure) to study mysticism with mountain priests before returning to his mission in the Holy Land. Escaping crucifixion (his brother was crucified in his stead), he returned, says the document, to northern Japan — where he married, fathered children and lived to the ripe old age of 106.

There are other tantalizing scraps — words in the Aomori dialect that sound vaguely Semitic, for example. Whatever all this may mean, the first European Christian missionaries landing in Japan 16 centuries later found their hosts utterly unprepared for the message of salvation they brought. Not indifferent, however. On the contrary, their preaching, garbled through incompetent interpreters though it was and radically at odds with native beliefs, was warmly received — by the lowly especially but not exclusively. Some feudal lords converted, imposing conversion on their retainers and peasants. Baptismal waters flowed. Japan might have gone Christian.

It was not to be. The nation newly and fragilely unified, a wary regime saw in the sect a vanguard of foreign imperialism. The last straw was the Shimabara Rebellion of 1638, an uprising of starving, tax-squeezed Kyushu peasants marching under a Christian banner. It was a glorious, hideous martyrdom — a blood-soaked end to the “Christian century.” A bare remnant of the butchered faith went underground, and stayed underground until after the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

The Restoration bred a new Japan. Its forward march into Westernization, modernization and “civilization” could hardly exclude Christianity. Hesitantly at first, with growing confidence over time, “secret Christians” came into the open. Missionary work resumed. Among idealistic young converts of the time was a woman named Mina Ishizaka. Her recollections of her baptism in 1886, written in English years later, convey feelings shared by many:

“According to the custom of heathenism I was taught to worship idols as guardians or gods. My family had ever so many gods in home (sic), to worship as many as possible. ... I was in a normal school, where I was

compelled to worship the Emperor. ...It did not satisfy my mind, although I did it as an obedient student. ... At last I came to the feet of Christ, where he received me as one of his and gave me peace, joy, true happiness, true rest and hope.”

Ferment and agitation seethed. Ishizaka met her husband-to-be, poet Tokoku Kitamura, at a gathering of young activists campaigning for democracy. He wrote: “I desired ... to become a real statesman and recoup the failing fortunes of the Orient. I conceived the ardent desire to sacrifice myself entirely for the benefit of the people. Like another Christ, I would consecrate all my energies to politics.” Despair overcame him. He hanged himself in 1894.

The old and the new were struggling for the soul of Japan. Samurai values, eclipsed but smoldering, flared as hatred for Yaso (Christians). “Yaso, Yaso, born in a stable! Ya! Ya! Ya!” children would shout, drowning out street preachers. Nobuo Nagano, the main character of Ayako Miura’s 1968 historical novel “Shiokari Toge (Shiokari Pass)”, hates the Yaso-worshippers as much as anyone. His story unfolds over 20 years, opening in 1886 when, age 10, he learns for the first time that his mother is not dead but something far worse in the eyes of Grandmother Tose, who was raising him — a Christian. From Tose, Nobuo learned that Yaso “sucked human blood and ate people’s flesh ... deceiving people by magical powers in order to destroy Japan.”

Tose, samurai to the bone, could perhaps have killed Nobuo’s mother with an easy mind as a service to her country. Instead she banished the young woman from the family home, forcing her to give up the child. Tose would see to it that the boy grew up right. Love your enemies? Turn the other cheek? Christian meekness had no place in a samurai’s heart. “If someone hits you once, you hit him twice,” was the gospel according to Tose.

The novel traces Nobuo’s gradual evolution from samurai to Christian. It might have been Japan’s evolution, but, again, wasn’t. Asia’s most Westernized nation remains to this day its most resistant to Christianity.

Tose dies. His mother Kiku's return, to Nobuo, is almost a resurrection. He loves her but hates her Christianity. On its account she had left him, evidently preferring Jesus. "Mother," he asks her one day, "how did you become a Christian believer?"

She replies by recalling a scene she'd witnessed as a child. A village mob was hurling abuse at a young Christian priest. The priest was unruffled. Then someone seized a dipper from a cesspit and doused him with muck. Still calm, the priest washed himself in a nearby river, and then began to sing. His voice was loud, his face radiant. There was no anger in him, only joy. "It made a deep impression on my child's heart," Kiku said.

It would, of course. Nobuo himself is stirred. But what, he wonders, about the ancestors, and the Buddhist homage due them? Kiku acknowledges the conflict but, forced to choose between the Buddhist mob and its Christian victim, between the mob's violence and the victim's turning of the other cheek, she chose the latter.

A samurai would have sliced off the offender's head — *then* gone to the river to wash.

Michael Hoffman is the author of "In the Land of the Kami: A Journey into the Hearts of Japan" and "Other Worlds."