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Sorcerers on Trial: Records of the 1827 Osaka Incident:
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<BOOK REVIEWS>Christian Sorcerers on Trial:
Records of the 1827 Osaka Incident Translated
and with an introduction by Fumiko Miyazaki,
Kate Wildman Nakai, and Mark Teeuwen

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BOOK REVIEW

*Christian Sorcerers on Trial:
Records of the 1827 Osaka Incident*

Translated and with an introduction by
Fumiko Miyazaki, Kate Wildman Nakai,
and Mark Teeuwen

Columbia University Press, 2020
408 pages

Reviewed by Martin NOGUEIRA RAMOS



At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Christian threat seemed to be distant, repelled way beyond the borders of Japan. There were no more practitioners of the forbidden cult, as the Buddhist temples of the country could guarantee. The last executions dated back more than one hundred and fifty years when the authorities had discovered large communities of hidden Christians in Kyushu (Ōmura and different domains in Bungo) and central Japan (Minō). During the Bunsei era (1818–1830), the arrest (1827) and execution (1830) of a small group of self-declared Kirishitan based in Kyoto and Osaka were blows not only to the shogunal officers involved in the investigation, but also to people across Japan. Japanese historians refer to this episode by different names, one of them being *Keihan Kirishitan ikken* (Kirishitan incident of the Kyoto-Osaka region).

Christian Sorcerers on a Trial offers the reader a translation of selected documents from two manuscripts related to the incident. These translations give a full picture of the testimonies of the people associated with the group's secret practices (first part), the investigation process, and the juridical decisions (second part). The third part comprises extracts, translated by the three editors, of documents that reveal society's reaction to the incident. Informative short essays precede each part and allow the reader to penetrate with ease nineteenth-century Japanese beliefs, juridical customs, and social organization. For students and scholars of late Edo Japan, the material is truly fascinating as it vividly exposes society's inner mechanisms and folk practices that other primary sources generally do not touch upon.

I have two minor criticisms concerning the apparatus of the translation. First, the reading and writing of the Japanese terms only appear in the comprehensive glossary, and so the reader continually needs to check ahead to pp. 293–297 to verify the original words. Second, as a book intended for an academic audience, the editors could have usefully included some of the essential documents in Japanese in the appendix. This omission is a pity, as there are few translations available of these kinds of early modern administrative texts. Advanced students in early modern Japanese history could have benefited greatly from access to the Japanese originals.

None of the six members of the group crucified at the Tobita execution ground in Osaka, nor past members who had died before the beginning of the investigation, had any

link with the remnant underground (*senpuku*) Christian communities scattered throughout Kyushu. The group was heterogeneous: it embraced Inari mediums, Yijing diviners, former monks, a physician, and a teahouse owner. Some of them acted as healers or soothsayers for people from all layers of society.

We do not know much about the founder of the group, Mizuno Gunki, as he died three years before the beginning of the investigation. He was a guru-like figure who had been a court retainer. Gunki taught to carefully selected people a way to gain incredible supernatural powers. As the depositions reveal, the primary motivation of his disciples was to improve their healing and clairvoyant skills. His was a two-step method: first, the initiand had to reach an unwavering mind (*fudōshin*) by regularly practicing water austerities and avoiding sexual intercourse; this applied especially to women. Second, sometimes after long years of practice, Gunki (or one of his advanced disciples) would introduce the initiand to the secret deity of the Kirishitan, Tentei Nyorai. The initiand would also learn about a sacred mantra (Zensu Maru Paraizo), swear an oath on a scroll which seemingly portrayed Mary and Jesus, and acquire new ways to cure people or to predict the future. The now full-fledged insider was supposedly able to share Gunki's extraordinary abilities and to make money out of them. Apparently, the Kirishitan facet was not a foil for practitioners. On the contrary, they genuinely believed that learning the tenets of the forbidden cult was a way to earn magic powers.

However, in 1827, someone reported to the Osaka Eastern Magistracy (*Ōsaka higashi machi bugyō*) the lucrative activities of a woman medium and healer who had been introduced to Gunki's method by one of his disciples. The investigation led to the disbanding of this group and to the shocking discovery of its Kirishitan features.

The religious beliefs of the group were an amalgam of magic, asceticism, folk practices, Christian elements drawn from Japanese anti-Christian tales and Chinese Jesuit books, and secrecy. I want to emphasize this latter aspect. Although the authorities and the established Buddhist clergy considered underground movements with suspicion, and could even take action against them, secret rites remained attractive among the populace. Gunki's disciples shared the same fondness for concealment: on their altars, they used deities from the Japanese pantheon as a front for their worship for God; they pledged to keep secrecy under all circumstances; several steps constituted their initiatory process, and secrecy shrouded the final rite. To read the different items of the investigation is to receive the impression that the group's concealment and asceticism were the reasons for its attractiveness. To a certain extent, hidden Christianity and covert Shin Buddhism (*kakure nenbutsu*) also shared these two characteristics. However, the focus of their practices differed, as the latter both emphasized the afterlife. The Kyoto-Osaka group only promised this-worldly benefits.

The documents related to the investigation and the deliberations that followed allow the reader to understand better how the juridical system worked in nineteenth-century Japan. The arrests of these so-called Kirishitan constituted no ordinary incident, as there was no legal precedent. The representatives of the bakufu in the Kansai could thus not rely on the experience of their predecessors to solve the case; they had to submit a dossier to the Council of Elders in Edo, who later consulted the Deliberative Council (Hyōjōsho). The documents bring to light the fact that collective responsibility was the pillar of society. The authorities not only punished the practitioners of the forbidden cult; dozens of others also received sanctions of one sort or another: the death penalty, imprisonment, banishment,

or fines. They included relatives of those arrested, Buddhist monks in charge of religious inspection, aldermen, village headmen, and the clients of the group. One wonders whether the workload caused by this kind of incident was not one of the reasons why the authorities generally preferred to turn a blind eye to “deviant” religious groups.

Christian Sorcerers on a Trial is thus highly recommended reading. Let us hope that soon new research by the three editors (or by other scholars) will further our understanding of this fascinating incident.