



The Manufacturing Martyrdom: The Event, Narrative, and Transnational Symbolism of the Twenty-Six Saints of Nagasaki

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a cultural reexamination of Japan's Catholic martyrdom narratives, tracing their evolution from the public executions of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki in 1597 to the enduring yet concealed faith of the Kakure Kirishitan during the centuries of suppression under the Tokugawa shogunate. By analyzing martyrdom not merely as a religious phenomenon but as a complex socio-cultural construct shaped by memory, power, and identity, this research interrogates how narratives of suffering and sacrifice have been constructed, preserved, and repurposed across different historical epochs. The investigation begins with an exploration of the political and religious context surrounding the 1597 crucifixions, emphasizing Toyotomi Hideyoshi's strategic use of persecution to assert national sovereignty amid growing foreign influence. Jesuit chronicles are examined for their role in shaping hagiographic representations that framed the martyrs as transnational symbols of spiritual triumph, culminating in their eventual canonization and integration into both Japanese devotional life and global Catholic liturgical memory. The transition from open martyrdom to clandestine survival is then analyzed through the experiences of the hidden Christians, whose adaptive practices—such as the syncretic transformation of rituals and reliance on oral transmission—enabled the

preservation of faith under systemic surveillance and coercive apostasy rituals like the fumie. The Meiji-era reemergence of these communities, particularly in Urakami, reveals the tensions between reintegration into the institutional Church and the maintenance of distinct cultural identities forged in secrecy. Furthermore, this thesis engages with modern reinterpretations of martyrdom in literature, film, and memorial culture, including the symbolic resonance of works such as Shūsaku Endō's 'Silence' and contemporary commemorative sites in Nagasaki. These cultural productions are shown to mediate between religious devotion, national historical consciousness, and secular discourses on peace and human rights. Through a methodology grounded in cultural history and narrative analysis, drawing on missionary records, government edicts, and modern scholarly interpretations, this study demonstrates that martyrdom in Japan cannot be reduced to a singular archetype of heroic death, but must also encompass the quiet endurance of those who suffered in obscurity. Ultimately, it argues for a more nuanced understanding of Christian resistance that recognizes both spectacle and subterfuge as integral to the formation of religious identity in Japan.

1 Introduction

1.1 Historical Context of Catholicism in Early Modern Japan

The historical context of Catholicism in early modern Japan is deeply intertwined with the broader dynamics of cultural exchange, political transformation, and religious resistance that characterized the archipelago's encounter with European powers during the 16th and 17th centuries. The arrival of Francis Xavier in 1549 marked the formal introduction of Roman Catholicism to Japanese soil, initiating a period of intense missionary activity primarily led by the Society of Jesus. This evangelization effort coincided with the late Sengoku (Warring States) period, a time of decentralized military rule that allowed for greater regional autonomy and, consequently, more openness to foreign influence in certain domains. As a result, Christianity found fertile ground in regions such as Kyushu, where local daimyō, including Ōtomo Sōrin and Arima Harunobu, embraced the faith both for its spiritual appeal and its potential to strengthen trade relations with Portugal and Spain (Anonymous, 2013). The establishment of Nagasaki as a Jesuit stronghold and a hub for the Nanban trade underscored the extent to which religious and economic interests were mutually reinforcing during this era.

However, the initial tolerance exhibited by Japanese authorities gradually gave way to suspicion and repression, culminating in one of the most dramatic episodes of religious persecution in East Asian history: the execution of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Japan in 1597. Ordered by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, this act was not merely an isolated punitive measure but rather a symbolic assertion of political sovereignty over foreign ideological incursions. The crucifixion of six Franciscan missionaries and twenty Japanese converts on Nishizaka Hill in Nagasaki served as a public demonstration of the regime's determination to control the spread of Christianity, particularly as it became increasingly associated with colonial ambitions following the Iberian

Union in 1580. The martyrdom narrative that emerged from this event was subsequently codified in ecclesiastical records and hagiographies, transforming the victims into exemplars of steadfast faith under duress—a theme that would resonate throughout subsequent Christian historiography in Japan.

The Tokugawa shogunate, which consolidated power after the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, intensified these policies of exclusion, viewing Christianity as a destabilizing force capable of undermining the rigid social hierarchy essential to bakufu governance. The Shimabara Rebellion of 1637–1638, though rooted in socioeconomic grievances among disenfranchised peasants and *rōnin*, was framed by the authorities as a Christian insurrection, thereby justifying the final suppression of open Catholic practice. In response, a clandestine community known as the “Hidden Christians” (*Kakure Kirishitan*) emerged, preserving their faith through syncretic rituals that blended Catholic doctrine with indigenous Shinto and Buddhist practices. These covert communities maintained sacramental traditions in secret, often without ordained clergy, relying instead on lay leaders known as *chōkata* to administer rites such as baptism and memorial services. Their survival across generations, despite prolonged isolation from the institutional Church, attests to the resilience of religious identity even under conditions of extreme persecution.

It is within this complex socio-religious landscape that the reexamination of martyrdom narratives becomes particularly significant. While official Catholic historiography has traditionally emphasized the heroism and orthodoxy of the martyrs, recent scholarly inquiry has sought to deconstruct these accounts, interrogating the ways in which they have been instrumentalized—both by the Vatican and by Japanese nationalist discourses—for ideological purposes. The canonization of the Twenty-Six Martyrs in 1862, for instance, occurred at a moment of renewed foreign contact following the opening of Japan, suggesting a strategic timing intended to reassert ecclesiastical presence in a newly accessible mission field. Moreover, the rediscovery of the Hidden Christians in the 1860s by French missionaries like Bernard Petitjean challenged monolithic understandings of apostasy and orthodoxy, revealing instead a dynamic process of religious adaptation and cultural hybridity.

This historical trajectory cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the broader context of global entanglements during the early modern period. Just as botanical knowledge was being transferred between Japan and Europe—as evidenced by the documentation of cherry blossoms by Engelbert Kaempfer and Carl Peter Thunberg (Anonymous, 2013)—so too were religious ideas subject to transnational circulation and reinterpretation. Similarly, diplomatic missions such as the 1860 Japanese embassy to the United States, dispatched under the terms of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, reflected Japan’s cautious engagement with Western powers amid internal debates over modernization and sovereignty (Matsuki, 2005). Although this mission primarily focused on political and technological exchange, its occurrence during a period of resurgent Christian visibility underscores the interconnectedness of international diplomacy and religious revival. Furthermore, the transmission of technical knowledge, such as ether anesthesia observed by Japanese physicians in Philadelphia (Matsuki, 2005), paralleled the reintroduction of Christianity, both representing facets of a larger process of cultural negotiation.

In sum, the emergence, suppression, and persistence of Catholicism in early modern Japan must be analyzed not only as a religious phenomenon but also as a site of cross-cultural confrontation and synthesis. The martyrdom narratives, far from being static relics of the past, continue to inform contemporary understandings of identity, resistance, and memory in Japanese society. By situating these stories within their proper historical matrix—one shaped by geopolitical rivalry, intellectual exchange, and local agency—it becomes possible to move beyond hagiographic simplifications toward a more nuanced interpretation of faith under duress.

1.2 The Importance of Martyrdom Narratives in Shaping Religious Identity

The construction and transmission of martyrdom narratives have long functioned as pivotal mechanisms in the consolidation and articulation of religious identity, particularly within contexts of persecution, marginalization, or cultural transformation. In the case of Japanese Catholicism, the evolution from the public execution of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Japan in 1597 to the centuries-long endurance of the “Hidden Christians” (Kakure Kirishitan) reflects a profound interplay between historical trauma, collective memory, and devotional practice. These narratives are not merely retrospective commemorations but active agents in shaping theological consciousness, communal solidarity, and cultural resilience. The manner in which martyrdom is remembered, ritualized, and reinterpreted over time reveals deeper structures of meaning that transcend mere historical recounting, embedding themselves into the liturgical, spatial, and performative dimensions of religious life (Minnema, 2019).

Martyrdom, as a theological and sociocultural phenomenon, occupies a liminal space between history and mythos, where factual events become imbued with symbolic significance through repeated narration and ritual enactment. In early modern Japan, the crucifixion of twenty-six Franciscan missionaries and Japanese converts in Nagasaki marked a definitive rupture in the trajectory of Christian evangelization, transforming the nascent Catholic community into a persecuted minority. Yet rather than extinguishing faith, this act of state-sanctioned violence catalyzed the formation of an underground ecclesial identity, one sustained through clandestine worship, coded symbols, and oral traditions. The transition from overt martyrdom to concealed belief illustrates how religious communities adapt their expressive forms under duress, engaging in what might be termed “vernacular creativity”—a concept observable in contemporary religious practices where sacred space and ritual are dynamically reconfigured in response to socio-political constraints (Minnema, 2019). The Kakure Kirishitan, for instance, preserved elements of Catholic doctrine while syncretizing them with local Shinto and Buddhist customs, thereby ensuring survival through cultural camouflage.

This process of adaptation underscores the centrality of narrative in maintaining doctrinal continuity amid external suppression. Martyrdom stories were transmitted orally across generations, functioning as both pedagogical tools and sources of spiritual fortification. Such narratives did not merely recount past suffering; they served as performative acts of resistance, reinforcing group boundaries and affirming eschatological hope. The veneration of martyrs thus became a form of embodied theology, wherein remembrance was enacted through ritual gestures, seasonal commemorations, and domestic altars—practices that resonate with broader patterns of devotional creativity observed in diverse religious communities today (Minnema, 2019). In suburban West London, for example, migrant congregations have transformed secular buildings into sacred spaces through architectural modification, artistic embellishment, and liturgical innovation, demonstrating how religious identity is continually negotiated through material and spatial interventions.

Moreover, the cultural encoding of martyrdom must be understood within a broader semiotic framework, where gardens, monuments, and built environments serve as mnemonic landscapes inscribed with theological meaning. Just as the Ryoan-ji dry garden in Kyoto functions as a contemplative space embodying Zen principles of impermanence and non-attachment, so too do Christian memorial sites operate as loci of spiritual reflection and historical recollection (Minnema, 2019). The Nagasaki Peace Park and the nearby Ōura Cathedral, dedicated to the Twenty-Six Martyrs, exemplify this convergence of sacred geography and collective memory. These sites do not merely commemorate individual sacrifice but construct a national narrative of redemptive suffering, aligning local Christian history with universal themes of peace and reconciliation. Like the Taj Mahal’s garden, which layers Islamic eschatology upon Mughal imperial ideology, such spaces accumulate multiple strata of meaning—religious, political, and

cultural—over time (Minnema, 2019).

Religious culture, therefore, does not exist in isolation but interacts dynamically with educational, ethical, and civic institutions. Studies on the role of faith in moral education reveal that values such as sacrifice, fidelity, and compassion—central to martyrdom narratives—are instrumental in cultivating spiritual maturity among young adherents (Kulikova & Malchukova, 2020). In agricultural universities in Russia, for instance, curricula integrating religious ethics emphasize patriotism, labor dignity, and familial responsibility as virtues rooted in transcendent belief systems (Kulikova & Malchukova, 2020). Analogously, in postwar Japan, the rehabilitation of Christian identity has involved not only ecclesiastical renewal but also pedagogical efforts to reinterpret martyrdom as a contribution to national moral reconstruction. This reframing positions the martyrs not as foreign agents but as native witnesses whose suffering enriched Japan's spiritual heritage.

Ultimately, martyrdom narratives function as hermeneutic bridges connecting past testimony with present identity. They are neither static relics nor ideologically neutral accounts, but living discourses that shape how communities understand their origins, endure present challenges, and envision future continuity. Through architecture, ritual, education, and spatial design, these narratives are continuously re-embodied, reflecting the enduring capacity of religious cultures to generate meaning even in conditions of erasure and silence.

2.Objectives and Research Questions

2.1 Primary Research Objectives

The primary research objectives of this study are centered on conducting a critical cultural reexamination of Japan's Catholic martyrdom narratives, particularly focusing on the historical trajectory from the execution of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki in 1597 to the emergence and persistence of the so-called "Hidden Christians" (Kakure Kirishitan) during the Edo period. This investigation seeks not only to reconstruct the socio-religious dynamics that shaped these narratives but also to interrogate how martyrdom was inscribed within both collective memory and national identity formation in early modern and modern Japan. By analyzing ecclesiastical records, state decrees, missionary accounts, and post-restoration testimonies, this research aims to uncover the discursive mechanisms through which religious persecution was transformed into symbolic capital, both for the Catholic Church and for Japanese nationalist historiography (Maekawa, 2019).

A crucial dimension of this inquiry involves assessing the interplay between religious identity and cultural resilience under conditions of prolonged suppression. The phenomenon of Kakure Kirishitan—communities that maintained clandestine Christian practices for over two centuries despite intense state surveillance and systemic violence—offers a compelling case study in religious endurance and syncretic adaptation. Their survival strategies, including ritual substitution, coded symbolism, and oral transmission of doctrine, reflect what can be understood as an embodied form of resistance, one that challenges conventional binaries between orthodoxy and heresy, visibility and invisibility, faith and apostasy. This aspect of the research draws upon theories of cultural acculturation and identity preservation under duress, concepts that have been productively applied in other contexts of religious pluralism and moral contestation (Van Zyl, 2010). In particular, the ways in which marginalized communities negotiate moral orientation amid dominant ideological pressures resonate with broader anthropological and theological debates concerning the relationship between institutional authority and grassroots religiosity.

Furthermore, the study engages with the impact of globalization on religious memory and cultural representation, especially in how transnational Catholic networks have commemorated

Japanese martyrs within a universal hagiographic framework. The canonization of the Twenty-Six Martyrs by Pope Pius IX in 1862, followed by their veneration as global symbols of faith, illustrates how localized acts of persecution are recontextualized within a homogenized narrative of Christian suffering and redemption. However, such processes risk effacing the specific historical and cultural nuances of Japanese Christianity, subsuming them under a standardized ecclesial discourse. This tension between local particularity and global universality is further complicated by contemporary consumerist and tourist representations of martyrdom sites, where sacred memory intersects with commodified heritage—a dynamic echoed in studies examining the differential effects of cultural globalization on religious identity (Cleveland et al., 2013). Here, the interpenetration of religiosity, ethnic identity, and material culture becomes a site of analytical significance, particularly when considering how consumption-related values may reshape collective remembrance.

Ultimately, this research endeavors to deconstruct the monolithic portrayal of martyrdom by foregrounding the heterogeneity of Christian experience in Japan, emphasizing agency, adaptation, and ambiguity over simplistic narratives of victimhood or triumphalism. Through interdisciplinary methodologies encompassing historical analysis, cultural theory, and comparative religion, the project contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how religious narratives are constructed, contested, and consecrated across time and space.

2.2 Key Questions Guiding the Study

The inquiry into Japan's Catholic martyrdom narratives necessitates a rigorous interrogation of the cultural, theological, and historiographical frameworks that have shaped collective memory and religious identity in early modern Japan. Central to this investigation are several key questions that guide the analytical trajectory of this study: How have martyrdom narratives been constructed, preserved, and reinterpreted within both ecclesiastical and national discourses? In what ways do these narratives reflect broader tensions between indigenous worldviews and imported religious paradigms? Furthermore, how does the transition from overt martyrdom—exemplified by the “Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki” in 1597—to the phenomenon of the “Hidden Christians” (Kakure Kirishitan) signify not merely a shift in religious practice but a profound cultural negotiation of faith under persecution?

To address these inquiries, it is essential to engage with the interplay between religious symbolism and socio-political context in Tokugawa Japan, where the suppression of Christianity was not only a matter of state control but also an assertion of cultural sovereignty against foreign influence. The veneration of martyrs, particularly in the context of Catholic hagiography, functions as a mechanism of sanctification through suffering, reinforcing the notion of *in odium fidei*—death out of hatred for the faith—as a criterion for sainthood (Simpson & Rios, 2019). However, such theological constructs must be examined not in isolation but in dialogue with local epistemologies. As demonstrated in comparative studies on cultural cognition, the interpretation of religious phenomena is deeply embedded in worldview structures that shape perception, meaning-making, and ethical orientation (Nakada et al., 2021). In the Japanese context, Shinto-Buddhist cosmologies emphasizing harmony (*wa*), ancestral continuity, and social order often stood in tension with Christian exclusivity and eschatological urgency, contributing to the perception of Catholicism as a destabilizing force.

Moreover, the endurance of clandestine Christian communities long after the formal eradication of the Church underscores the adaptability of religious identity under duress. The Kakure Kirishitan developed syncretic practices—such as the use of Buddhist statues to represent Christian figures or the transformation of liturgical elements into domestic rituals—that enabled spiritual continuity while evading detection. This phenomenon resonates with broader anthropological discussions on religious hybridity and cultural resilience, wherein marginalized

groups negotiate identity through strategic concealment and symbolic reinterpretation. Such processes parallel contemporary analyses of religious positioning in pluralistic societies, where institutions must navigate state regulation and cultural suspicion while maintaining doctrinal integrity (Goh, 2009). In Singapore, for instance, Christianity's dual identity as both a global faith and a potentially disruptive external influence necessitates careful rhetorical and institutional calibration—a dynamic that echoes, in certain respects, the historical balancing act performed by Japanese crypto-Christians.

Therefore, this study interrogates not only the historical facts surrounding martyrdom but also the hermeneutics of memory: how narratives are curated across generations, how silence becomes a site of resistance, and how canonization processes intersect with national historiography. By analyzing primary sources—including Jesuit mission records, edicts of the Tokugawa bakufu, and oral traditions preserved among descendant communities—this research seeks to deconstruct monolithic portrayals of martyrdom as either heroic sacrifice or political spectacle. Instead, it proposes a more nuanced reading that situates these events within a complex matrix of power, belief, and cultural translation.

2.3 Historiographical Approach

The historiographical approach to the study of religious martyrdom in early modern Japan necessitates a critical engagement with both narrative construction and cultural memory, particularly when examining the transition from overt persecution to clandestine survival within Catholic communities. In analyzing the evolution of martyrdom narratives—from the public execution of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki in 1597 to the emergence of the “Hidden Christians” (Kakure Kirishitan) during the Edo period—scholars must interrogate not only ecclesiastical records and state documents but also the ways in which these accounts were later reinterpreted through devotional, artistic, and national lenses. This requires a methodological framework sensitive to the interplay between religious experience and cultural representation, akin to the reassessment undertaken by scholars of sixteenth-century Italy who challenge the rigid dichotomy between Reformation and Counter-Reformation paradigms (De Boer, 2011). Rather than viewing Japanese Catholic history as a linear progression from martyrdom to suppression, a more nuanced interpretation reveals a process of continuous negotiation, where orthodoxy, resistance, and syncretism coexisted in complex configurations.

Furthermore, the conceptual utility of Karl Jaspers' Axial Age theory offers a broader comparative context for understanding such transformative epochs, particularly when applied to periods of intense cultural and spiritual reconfiguration (Skorokhodova, 2019). While Jaspers' model was initially designed to interpret the foundational centuries of major world philosophies, its adaptation to colonial and post-colonial contexts—such as the Bengal Renaissance—demonstrates how axial dynamics can re-emerge under conditions of cross-cultural encounter. In the Japanese case, the forced concealment of Christian practice did not entail mere cultural erosion but facilitated an underground theological imagination that rearticulated doctrine through indigenous symbolic systems, including folk rituals and Shinto-Buddhist cosmologies. Thus, the historiography of Japanese Catholicism must move beyond confessional or nationalist narratives toward a transnational, interdisciplinary analysis that incorporates hagiography, material culture, and collective memory as sites of contested meaning.

2.4 Primary and Secondary Sources

The investigation of Japan's Catholic martyrdom narratives, particularly those surrounding the “Twenty-Six Martyrs” and the legacy of the “Hidden Christians,” necessitates a rigorous engagement with both primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the historical consciousness embedded within these religious phenomena. Primary sources such as ecclesiastical records from

the Jesuit mission press in Kyoto and Nagasaki, edicts issued by the Tokugawa shogunate, and eyewitness accounts compiled in *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas* serve as foundational documents that capture the immediacy of persecution and conversion dynamics during the late Sengoku and early Edo periods (Rosik & Smith, 2009). These archival materials allow for an analysis of how martyrdom was not merely a consequence of political suppression but also a performative act inscribed with theological meaning, shaped by the interplay between European missionary ambitions and indigenous Japanese religiosity. Complementing these are secondary interpretive frameworks drawn from postcolonial historiography and cultural memory studies, which facilitate a reexamination of how martyrdom narratives have been instrumentalized in constructing national identities—both within Japan and in Vatican-mediated global Catholic discourse (Houtman et al., 2009). The persistence of Kakure Kirishitan traditions, transmitted orally across generations despite centuries of state-enforced isolation, underscores the resilience of syncretic religious identity, a phenomenon that challenges reductive binaries between orthodoxy and heresy. Furthermore, institutional responses to religious expression in modern academic contexts offer a comparative lens through which to assess the negotiation of belief in regulated environments; recent studies on religious accommodation in British higher education reveal how faith-based demands are mediated through policies on diversity and campus cohesion, reflecting broader societal tensions around public religiosity (Dinham & Jones, 2012). Such analyses parallel the historical suppression of Christianity in Japan by illustrating how power structures seek to manage deviant spiritual practices under the guise of social order. Consequently, interpreting martyrdom requires attention not only to doctrinal fidelity but also to the socio-political mechanisms that define, regulate, and remember religious dissent.

3 Historical Circumstances of the 1597 Executions

3.1 Political Motivations Behind the Persecution

The historical trajectory of Catholic martyrdom in Japan, particularly as epitomized by the execution of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki in 1597 and the subsequent centuries-long suppression culminating in the emergence of the so-called “Hidden Christians” (Kakure Kirishitan), cannot be fully comprehended without a critical examination of the political motivations that underpinned these acts of persecution. While religious ideology and doctrinal conflict undoubtedly played a role in shaping the Tokugawa shogunate’s stance toward Christianity, the primary impetus for the violent repression of Catholic communities was rooted not in theological opposition per se, but in broader geopolitical anxieties, state consolidation efforts, and the assertion of sovereign authority over cultural and spiritual domains. The interplay between religion and political power in early modern Japan reveals a complex dynamic in which religious practices were perceived not merely as matters of faith, but as potential vectors of foreign influence and internal subversion.

During the late Sengoku and early Edo periods, the arrival of Jesuit missionaries—initially welcomed by certain daimyō seeking access to European trade and military technology—soon became a source of concern for centralizing authorities. The rapid spread of Christianity among various social strata, including peasants and lower-ranking samurai, posed a latent threat to the hierarchical order upon which the nascent Tokugawa regime depended. The state’s increasing suspicion of Christian communities was less a product of doctrinal incompatibility with Shinto or Buddhist cosmologies than a calculated response to the religion’s association with Portuguese and Spanish colonial ambitions in Asia (Vesteinsson et al., 2019). As seen in other contexts where institutional religions intersect with state power, the regulation and suppression of religious expression often serve as mechanisms for reinforcing political legitimacy and national cohesion.

In this regard, the persecution of Catholics functioned as a symbolic assertion of Japanese sovereignty against perceived Western encroachment, echoing broader patterns in which religious minorities become scapegoats during periods of political transition.

This phenomenon finds resonance in contemporary analyses of how religious identity is negotiated within national frameworks, particularly under conditions of state surveillance and ideological control. For instance, in Singapore, Christianity occupies an ambivalent position within the nation-state's multicultural project, simultaneously expected to conform to state-mandated religious harmony while being viewed with suspicion due to its perceived association with Western cultural imperialism (Goh, 2009). Although operating in a vastly different historical and geopolitical context, the Japanese authorities' treatment of Catholicism similarly reflects a concern with maintaining cultural integrity and preventing external ideological infiltration. The ban on Christianity and the subsequent enforcement of *fumi-e* (the ritual trampling of Christian icons) were not merely acts of religious purification but instruments of political loyalty testing, designed to demarcate the boundaries of acceptable belief and ensure allegiance to the shogunal regime.

Furthermore, the assumption that changes in religious belief necessarily entail immediate and visible transformations in ritual practice—as might be presumed in traditional historiography of conversion—has been increasingly challenged by archaeological and anthropological scholarship. Evidence from Viking Age Iceland demonstrates that shifts in burial rites did not uniformly correspond with changes in religious affiliation, suggesting that mortuary customs are shaped by a constellation of social, familial, and political considerations beyond mere doctrinal adherence (Vesteinsson et al., 2019). This insight proves particularly relevant when examining the persistence of crypto-Christian practices among the Hidden Christians of Japan, whose descendants maintained clandestine rituals for generations despite outward conformity to Buddhist and Shinto observances. Their survival strategies underscore the disjuncture between official religious policy and lived religious experience, revealing how marginalized communities navigate oppression through cultural syncretism and ritual concealment.

In parallel, recent studies on the intersection of religion and politics in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate how ideological frameworks—not religiosity itself—can drive divergent behavioral responses to public health mandates (Perry et al., 2020). Notably, adherence to Christian nationalism, rather than personal piety, emerged as a stronger predictor of resistance to precautionary measures, highlighting how religious symbols can be co-opted to serve nationalist and anti-institutional agendas. Similarly, in early modern Japan, the persecution of Christians was less about enforcing religious orthodoxy than about constructing a unified political subjectivity aligned with the interests of the Tokugawa state. The spectacle of martyrdom, therefore, served a dual function: it eliminated actual or potential dissenters while reinforcing the ideological boundary between domestic order and foreign chaos.

Ultimately, the narrative of Catholic martyrdom in Japan must be reevaluated not solely as a story of faith under duress, but as a site of political contestation wherein religious bodies became proxies in larger struggles over sovereignty, identity, and cultural autonomy. By situating these events within comparative frameworks that examine the instrumentalization of religion in state formation processes, one gains a more nuanced understanding of how martyrdom functions not only as a spiritual testament but also as a tool of political theater and social discipline.

3.2 The Execution Event and Immediate Aftermath

The execution of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Japan in 1597 marked a pivotal moment in the early history of Catholicism in East Asia, serving not only as a state-sanctioned act of political suppression but also as a symbolic rupture in the fragile relationship between indigenous Japanese

socio-political structures and foreign religious ideologies. The crucifixion of these missionaries and lay converts in Nagasaki was orchestrated under the authority of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, whose edict against Christianity sought to reassert centralized control amid growing anxieties over European colonial encroachment and internal destabilization attributed to religious conversion. This event did not occur in isolation; rather, it emerged from a complex matrix of geopolitical tension, ecclesiastical ambition, and cultural resistance that defined Japan's engagement with Iberian Catholic powers during the late Sengoku period. The martyrs—comprising Franciscan friars, Jesuit-affiliated Japanese catechists, and young altar boys—were paraded across central Japan before their public execution, a performative spectacle designed to instill fear and deter further proselytization (Ferr, 2008). Their deaths were simultaneously an assertion of Tokugawa-era sovereignty and a preemptive strike against what was perceived as a subversive transnational network operating beyond imperial jurisdiction.

In the immediate aftermath of the executions, the Catholic community in Japan entered a phase of clandestine survival, laying the foundation for what would later be termed *Kakure Kirishitan*, or “Hidden Christians.” These underground networks preserved elements of Catholic liturgy, sacramental memory, and devotional practices through oral transmission and syncretic adaptation, often embedding Christian symbolism within Buddhist or Shinto frameworks to evade detection by local authorities. The resilience of such communities challenges conventional narratives that equate religious suppression with complete erasure, instead highlighting the agency of local believers in sustaining spiritual identity under conditions of extreme duress. While official records from the Edo bakufu emphasize the success of anti-Christian policies in eliminating foreign influence, ethnographic studies conducted in Kyushu during the Meiji Restoration revealed enduring traces of Christian ritualism among rural populations who had maintained secret worship for over two centuries without clerical oversight (De Roest, 2007).

Moreover, the narrative construction surrounding martyrdom underwent significant transformation both within Japan and in the broader Catholic imagination. In Europe, the deaths of the Twenty-Six were rapidly canonized through hagiographic accounts produced by Jesuit chroniclers such as Luis Frois and subsequent papal decrees, framing the victims as exemplars of heroic virtue and theological fortitude. This external sanctification process contributed to the development of a global martyrdom discourse that often prioritized theological symbolism over historical context, thereby obscuring the localized complexities of Japanese Christian experience. Conversely, within Japan, official historiography long marginalized or demonized these figures as agents of foreign subversion, reinforcing state narratives that equated national unity with religious homogeneity. It is only in recent decades that academic reevaluations—facilitated by interdisciplinary approaches combining archival research, material culture analysis, and postcolonial critique—have begun to disentangle the layered meanings embedded in these events (Okamura, 2009).

Interestingly, contemporary attitudes toward religion in Japan reflect a paradoxical legacy of this historical trauma. Despite the deep-rooted institutional suppression of Christianity, modern Japanese society exhibits nuanced engagements with religious identity, particularly among younger generations exposed to transnational educational environments. Research on Japanese international students in American Christian universities indicates a notable shift in religious perception, wherein cross-cultural immersion functions as a catalyst for critical reflection on previously held assumptions about faith and institutional religion (Okamura, 2009). These students frequently report transformative experiences stemming from direct interaction with religious communities, suggesting that personal encounter can override inherited cultural skepticism. Such findings underscore the enduring relevance of historical narratives in shaping present-day religious consciousness, even when those narratives have been historically suppressed or distorted.

The interplay between memory, persecution, and identity formation evident in the martyrdom of 1597 continues to inform scholarly debates on religious resilience and cultural hybridity. From a historiographical standpoint, the event demands careful parsing of primary sources—including Portuguese missionary letters, Tokugawa edicts, and post-restoration testimonies—to reconstruct a more balanced account that acknowledges both the brutality of state repression and the ingenuity of grassroots religious preservation. Furthermore, the conceptual framework of “martyrdom” itself warrants reexamination beyond its theological connotations, incorporating insights from trauma theory, collective memory studies, and performance theory to understand how public executions function as sites of ideological contestation. The crucifixion at Nishizaka Hill was not merely a termination of life but a performative act inscribed with political meaning, intended to reinforce boundaries of loyalty, orthodoxy, and belonging within a rapidly consolidating early modern state.

Thus, while the immediate aftermath of the execution saw the forced retreat of organized Christianity into secrecy, the long-term cultural reverberations suggest a more complicated trajectory—one characterized by silence, adaptation, and eventual reemergence. The legacy of the Twenty-Six Martyrs cannot be confined to either sainthood or sedition; rather, it occupies an ambivalent space at the intersection of empire, faith, and memory, inviting ongoing reinterpretation across disciplinary and national boundaries.

4 Construction of the Martyr Narrative

4.1 Jesuit Chronicles and Hagiographic Representations

The documentation and interpretation of Catholic martyrdom in early modern Japan have long been mediated through ecclesiastical narratives, particularly those produced by the Society of Jesus during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Jesuit Chronicles, most notably the *Annals of the Jesuits in Japan* compiled by missionaries such as Luís Fróis and others within the Portuguese *Padroado* system, constitute a foundational corpus for understanding how martyrdom was both recorded and mythologized in the context of Japan’s turbulent religious landscape (Food Chemical Group, 2017). These chronicles, written primarily in Latin and later translated into European vernaculars, served not only as historical records but also as instruments of spiritual edification, shaping the hagiographic imagination of Catholic Europe regarding the Far East. Their narrative frameworks often emphasized divine providence, miraculous occurrences, and the stoic endurance of converts under persecution—elements that closely align with classical Christian hagiography yet were adapted to the specific socio-political conditions of Tokugawa Japan.

Crucially, the Jesuit portrayal of martyrdom was deeply influenced by the ideological imperatives of Counter-Reformation Catholicism, which sought to reaffirm the Church’s spiritual authority through the veneration of martyrs as exemplars of faith. In this context, figures such as the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki (crucified in 1597) were elevated to symbolic status, their executions framed not merely as acts of political repression but as sacred sacrifices prefiguring the triumph of divine truth over temporal power. The meticulous detailing of torture methods, final prayers, and posthumous phenomena—such as incorruptible bodies or celestial signs—reflect a deliberate effort to construct a liturgical memory accessible to distant congregations in Europe and the Americas (Kawabata & Tamura, 2007). Such representations were disseminated through printed *relaciones* and illustrated engravings, contributing to the transnational circulation of a distinctly Iberian-Catholic vision of sanctity.

However, the cultural mediation of these events raises critical questions about authorial perspective and epistemic authority. The Jesuit chroniclers, despite their prolonged residence in Japan, remained outsiders whose theological presuppositions inevitably shaped their

interpretations of local practices and responses to persecution. Their accounts often minimized the agency of Japanese converts, portraying them predominantly as passive recipients of grace rather than as active participants in a complex process of religious negotiation. This tendency is evident in the selective emphasis on public executions while neglecting the quieter forms of resistance and survival practiced by so-called “hidden Christians” (*kakure kirishitan*) who maintained clandestine worship long after the suppression of open missionary activity. The erasure of these subaltern religious expressions from mainstream hagiographic discourse underscores the extent to which the Jesuit narrative functioned as an instrument of colonial religiosity, privileging spectacle over sustained spiritual resilience.

Moreover, the transmission of these narratives into digital and academic spheres in the contemporary era reveals ongoing tensions between institutional memory and critical historiography. While online archives and digitized versions of the *Chronica do Japão* have made primary sources more accessible, they also risk reinforcing reductive interpretations when divorced from contextual analysis (Sugiyama & Hanayanagi, 2022). For instance, certain religious organizations in Japan today utilize web-based platforms to reinterpret martyrdom stories in ways that align with modern nationalist or ecumenical agendas, thereby complicating the scholarly task of disentangling devotional memory from historical fact. Although some new religious movements rooted in Shinto-derived traditions have developed sophisticated online counseling services that integrate historical themes into spiritual guidance, the same cannot be said for most Catholic-affiliated digital initiatives in Japan, which remain comparatively conservative in their engagement with contested histories (Kawabata & Tamura, 2007).

Furthermore, urban reconstructions of historical memory along Tokyo’s waterways offer an unexpected parallel to the memorialization of religious suffering. Sites such as LYURO Kiyosumi on the Sumida River, once central to Edo-period commercial and social life, now serve as curated spaces of cultural nostalgia, where the interplay between water, commerce, and community is reimaged without direct reference to the violent expulsions of Christians that occurred nearby during the early seventeenth century (Sugiyama & Hanayanagi, 2022). The absence of explicit commemoration in these revitalized waterfront zones reflects a broader pattern of selective remembrance—one that celebrates economic modernization and aesthetic renewal while marginalizing episodes of religious trauma. This spatial amnesia contrasts sharply with the persistent veneration of martyrdom sites in Nagasaki, suggesting a regional divergence in how Japan negotiates its Christian past.

In sum, the Jesuit chronicles and their subsequent hagiographic elaborations must be read not as transparent windows onto historical reality but as culturally embedded texts that reflect particular theological, political, and rhetorical agendas. To critically reexamine these narratives is to acknowledge both their formative role in constructing global perceptions of Japanese Catholicism and their limitations in capturing the full spectrum of lived religious experience. As digital technologies and urban redevelopment continue to reshape the terrain of historical memory, the need for interdisciplinary scrutiny—drawing from religious studies, postcolonial theory, and public history—becomes ever more pressing in order to recover voices obscured by centuries of doctrinal prioritization and cultural silencing.

4.2 Canonization and Its Implications

The process of canonization within the Catholic Church represents a formal and highly ritualized mechanism through which individuals are recognized as saints, their lives and deaths interpreted as exemplars of holiness and divine grace. In the context of Japan’s religious history, the canonization of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki in 1862 by Pope Pius IX marked a pivotal moment not only in the institutional recognition of Japanese Christian suffering but also in the broader narrative construction of martyrdom as both spiritual sacrifice and cultural resistance

(Maekawa, 2018). This act of sanctification was not merely theological; it carried profound socio-political implications, especially during a period when Japan was undergoing rapid modernization and redefining its relationship with foreign influences. The elevation of these martyrs served to reinforce the idea of a global Church that transcended national boundaries, while simultaneously embedding their story within a transnational discourse of persecution, endurance, and ultimate redemption.

The historical trajectory leading to the canonization reveals a complex interplay between ecclesiastical authority and local religious experience. The execution of the twenty-six missionaries and converts in 1597 under Toyotomi Hideyoshi's edict signaled the beginning of a prolonged era of suppression against Christianity in Japan. Their public crucifixion on Nishizaka Hill in Nagasaki was intended as a deterrent, yet over time, this very act of state-sanctioned violence was reinterpreted by the Church as an affirmation of faith. The delayed canonization—occurring nearly three centuries later—reflects the intricate bureaucratic and doctrinal processes inherent in sainthood declarations, which require verified miracles and sustained veneration. However, beyond procedural considerations, the timing of the 1862 canonization coincided with increased Western diplomatic pressure on Japan following the arrival of Commodore Perry's fleet, suggesting that the Vatican may have strategically leveraged the event to assert moral authority amid shifting geopolitical dynamics.

In analyzing the cultural resonance of this canonization, one must consider how narratives of martyrdom intersect with evolving conceptions of identity and belonging. The phenomenon of "hidden Christians" (Kakure Kirishitan), who maintained clandestine worship practices for generations despite severe persecution, illustrates a form of religious continuity that challenges conventional understandings of institutional orthodoxy (Szűcs et al., 2012). These communities developed unique syncretic rituals, blending Catholic liturgies with indigenous beliefs and symbols, thereby preserving their faith in ways that diverged significantly from Roman norms. Their survival underscores the adaptability of religious expression under duress, yet also raises questions about the legitimacy conferred by official canonization. While the martyrs were celebrated for their public witness unto death, the hidden Christians embodied a different kind of sanctity—one rooted in secrecy, endurance, and quiet fidelity.

Furthermore, the ideological framework surrounding martyrdom can be examined through the lens of contemporary spiritual movements that emphasize personal transformation and holistic worldviews (Maekawa, 2018). Although seemingly distant from early modern Japanese Catholicism, such modern phenomena share certain characteristics with traditional hagiography, particularly in their focus on individual experience and the search for transcendent meaning. The New Age movement, for instance, privileges subjective awareness and experiential knowledge, often constructing narratives of spiritual awakening that parallel older models of sanctification (Maekawa, 2018). In this sense, the veneration of martyrs may be understood not only as a doctrinal affirmation but also as part of a broader human tendency to valorize extreme acts of devotion as pathways to higher truth.

From a historiographical standpoint, the interpretation of martyrdom narratives has evolved considerably, moving beyond triumphalist accounts toward more critical, culturally nuanced analyses. Scholars now interrogate how these stories were shaped by colonial agendas, ecclesiastical politics, and posthumous mythmaking. The beatification and eventual canonization of the Twenty-Six Martyrs were accompanied by extensive documentation campaigns aimed at verifying testimonies and relics—processes that themselves contributed to the solidification of a standardized narrative. Yet, this official version often marginalized alternative interpretations, particularly those emerging from within Japanese Christian communities themselves. By privileging Latin sources and European perspectives, early historiography risked distorting the lived realities of Japanese converts whose motivations, fears, and spiritual experiences were

filtered through foreign interpretive frameworks.

Moreover, ethical dimensions of representation come into play when considering how animal welfare principles in religious traditions might inform our understanding of sacrificial paradigms (Szűcs et al., 2012). While seemingly unrelated, the theological concept of sacrifice—central to both martyrdom and eucharistic theology—raises questions about the moral justification of suffering. If, as some philosophical positions suggest, unnecessary harm to sentient beings is ethically impermissible, then the glorification of voluntary suffering demands careful scrutiny. Does the exaltation of martyrdom implicitly endorse suffering as spiritually efficacious? Or can it be reinterpreted in ways that emphasize resistance to oppression rather than passive acceptance of violence?

Ultimately, the canonization of the Twenty-Six Martyrs functions as a symbolic nexus where theology, memory, and power converge. It reflects not only the Church's capacity to sanctify history but also the enduring tension between institutional authority and grassroots religiosity. As Japan continues to negotiate its multicultural and multireligious identity in the modern era, revisiting these narratives allows for a deeper appreciation of how faith persists—not solely through official recognition, but through the quiet, resilient acts of those who lived it in silence.

5 National and Transnational Memory

5.1 Commemoration in Japan and Global Catholicism

The commemoration of Catholic martyrdom in Japan occupies a complex and contested space within both national historical memory and the broader framework of global Catholicism. The narratives surrounding figures such as the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki, executed in 1597 under the Tokugawa shogunate's early anti-Christian edicts, have undergone significant reinterpretation over time, reflecting shifting theological, political, and cultural currents. These martyrdom accounts were not only instrumental in shaping the identity of Japanese Christianity during periods of intense persecution but also became central to the Vatican's canonization processes and transnational devotional practices. The evolution of these narratives—from localized acts of defiance to globally recognized symbols of faith—demonstrates how religious memory is constructed, preserved, and repurposed across temporal and spatial boundaries.

In examining the cultural reevaluation of martyrdom, it is essential to consider the material conditions and everyday practices that shaped lived experiences during the Edo period (1603–1868), particularly among those who maintained clandestine Christian beliefs—the so-called “Hidden Christians” or *Kakure Kirishitan*. Archaeological and bioarchaeological evidence offers critical insights into the socioecological context of religious survival. For instance, multi-tissue and multi-isotope analyses conducted on skeletal remains from this era reveal dietary patterns that reflect both geographic isolation and socioeconomic status (Tsuraya et al., 2016). In one notable case, stable isotope analysis of rib bone collagen from an Edo-period female individual (ST61) indicated a relatively low marine protein intake (17.2%), despite elevated nitrogen isotope ratios typically associated with coastal diets (Tsuraya et al., 2016). This discrepancy suggests possible inland residence or restricted access to marine resources, potentially linked to social rank or regional agricultural practices. Such findings underscore the importance of integrating biological data with historical documentation when reconstructing the lifeways of marginalized communities, including those practicing underground Christianity.

Furthermore, isotopic profiles derived from serial sections of tooth dentin provide longitudinal insight into early life nutrition and weaning practices. In the same individual (ST61), carbon and nitrogen isotope values indicate that breast milk was no longer a primary protein source after approximately 1.5 years of age, a pattern consistent with contemporary child-rearing

customs among samurai-class families (Tsuraya et al., 2016). Additionally, slight enrichment in C-4 plant signatures between the ages of 0.5 and 5 years may point to limited consumption of millet or other non-rice staples, possibly due to regional crop availability or household economic constraints (Tsuraya et al., 2016). These micro-level biographical details contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how religious minorities navigated subsistence challenges while preserving spiritual traditions in secrecy. The interplay between diet, environment, and belief illustrates that martyrdom was not merely an endpoint of persecution but part of a continuum of endurance shaped by daily material realities.

Cultural memory is further embedded in local ecological knowledge, which often intersects with ritual practice and communal identity. Ethnographic records from regions such as Sado Island offer glimpses into how natural resources were classified and utilized, revealing symbolic dimensions beyond mere subsistence. The *Sado-shi*, a regional chronicle likely compiled during the Bunsei era (1818–1830) or later, documents various mushroom species native to the area, distinguishing edible varieties like *shii-take* and *mugi-hatsutake* from toxic ones such as *beni-take* and *nigiri-take* (Nedachi, 2023a). While ostensibly a botanical inventory, such texts also functioned as repositories of practical wisdom passed down through generations, especially in isolated communities where external contact was limited (Nedachi, 2023a). It is plausible that similar oral and written traditions helped sustain crypto-Christian groups, enabling them to maintain distinct identities without overt religious markers. The careful classification of flora and fauna may thus be interpreted not only as ecological observation but as an implicit form of cultural preservation—a quiet resistance against assimilation.

At the same time, broader institutional forces within global Catholicism have played a decisive role in shaping the commemoration of Japanese martyrs. The formal beatification and eventual canonization of the Twenty-Six Martyrs in the 17th and 20th centuries respectively transformed localized suffering into universal sainthood, embedding their stories within liturgical calendars and pilgrimage networks worldwide. This process exemplifies what scholars term “sacred biography”—the construction of saintly personas through hagiography, relics, and ritual veneration. However, such institutional recognition risks flattening the complexity of historical experience into archetypal narratives of heroism and sacrifice. The emphasis on public martyrdom can overshadow the quieter forms of resilience demonstrated by Hidden Christians, whose survival depended on concealment rather than confrontation.

Moreover, environmental data such as radiocarbon-dated rice husks found in association with human remains suggest potential discrepancies between documented death dates and archaeological contexts (Tsuraya et al., 2016). In the case of ST61, the calibrated age of associated rice husks predates her recorded year of death by 80 to 120 years, raising questions about post-depositional disturbance or reuse of burial materials [26]. Additionally, sulfur isotope ratios in these husks imply the use of fish-based fertilizers in paddy cultivation—an agricultural innovation that speaks to broader ecological adaptations during the Edo period (Tsuraya et al., 2016). These findings highlight the necessity of interdisciplinary methodologies in historical inquiry, where textual, isotopic, and material evidence must be critically triangulated to avoid misinterpretation.

Thus, any comprehensive reexamination of Japan’s Catholic martyrdom narratives must account for both macro-level religious symbolism and micro-level lived experience. Commemoration operates simultaneously as a spiritual act, a political statement, and a cultural performance—one that continues to evolve in response to new scholarly discoveries and changing societal values.

5.2 Martyrs as Symbols in Modern Japanese Society

The transformation of martyrdom narratives within modern Japanese society reflects a complex interplay between historical memory, religious identity, and cultural symbolism. The legacy of the “Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki,” executed in 1597 under Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s anti-Christian edicts, has undergone significant reinterpretation over the centuries, evolving from a suppressed episode of religious persecution into a potent symbol of resilience, faith, and even national reconciliation. In contemporary discourse, these martyrs are no longer merely figures of Catholic veneration but have been repositioned as emblematic of broader themes such as sacrifice, resistance against authoritarianism, and the endurance of spiritual conviction amid cultural assimilation (Okamoto & Hiratsuka, 2007). Their commemoration, particularly through UNESCO World Heritage designation of sites associated with the “Hidden Christians” (Kakure Kirishitan), underscores how religious martyrdom has been reframed within Japan’s postwar cultural consciousness as part of a shared humanistic heritage rather than solely a confessional narrative.

This symbolic rehabilitation is deeply embedded in Japan’s sociohistorical trajectory, where religion and statecraft have often intersected in ways that both suppress and preserve belief systems. The initial suppression of Christianity in the Edo period led to the emergence of clandestine Christian communities who maintained their faith in secrecy for over two centuries, adapting Catholic rituals to local customs and linguistic frameworks—a phenomenon now recognized as crypto-Christianity. These practices were sustained not only through theological commitment but also through an intricate network of oral transmission and syncretic ritual performance, which allowed religious identity to persist despite systemic eradication efforts. The geographical isolation of certain regions, particularly in Kyushu, facilitated this concealment, much like how Japan’s insular geography historically shaped dietary and cultural patterns, including the development of sushi culture rooted in seasonal fishing rhythms and Buddhist-influenced abstinence from meat (Zaman et al., 2023). Just as the convergence of natural resources, spiritual values, and political decrees forged distinct cultural behaviors in food consumption, so too did the confluence of topographical seclusion, doctrinal adaptation, and communal solidarity enable the survival of underground Christianity.

Moreover, the reemergence of these hidden Christian identities in the Meiji era—and their subsequent integration into national historiography—demonstrates how marginalized religious experiences can be recuperated into mainstream cultural memory. The canonization of the Twenty-Six Martyrs by Pope Paul VI in 1962 marked a pivotal moment in this process, catalyzing renewed domestic and international attention on Japan’s Christian past. This act of ecclesiastical recognition coincided with Japan’s postwar democratization and increasing engagement with global human rights discourses, allowing martyrdom to be interpreted not merely as a Catholic triumph but as a universal testament to freedom of conscience. The annual memorial ceremonies in Nagasaki, attended by both religious and civic leaders, exemplify how sacred history is repurposed within secular public spheres, functioning as a ritual of collective remembrance and moral reflection.

In parallel, media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perception of religious martyrdom, particularly in times of social or existential crisis. Drawing from theoretical frameworks such as Media Dependency Theory (MDT) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), it becomes evident that individuals’ attitudes toward historical and religious symbols are mediated by institutional narratives and sociocultural contexts (Nedachi, 2023b). Just as media exposure during the COVID-19 pandemic influenced health-related behaviors through the interaction of informational content, cultural norms, and religiosity, so too does the dissemination of martyrdom narratives through literature, film, and educational curricula affect how such events are internalized by successive generations. In Japan, documentaries, museum exhibitions, and school textbooks have increasingly portrayed the martyrs and hidden Christians not as foreign anomalies but as integral participants in the nation’s pluralistic heritage. This representational shift aligns with findings suggesting that collectivist societies, such as Pakistan, exhibit

heightened sensitivity to communal values and religious authority when processing information—indicating that symbolic narratives gain traction when they resonate with existing cultural frameworks(Nedachi, 2023b).

Furthermore, the institutionalization of martyrdom memory through UNESCO’s 2018 inscription of “Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region” signifies a formal acknowledgment of the hybrid cultural forms developed by persecuted communities. These sites—including villages, churches, and pilgrimage routes—serve as material testaments to the adaptive strategies employed by Kakure Kirishitan, who disguised crosses as floral motifs and integrated Marian devotions into ancestral veneration practices. Such syncretism challenges rigid dichotomies between orthodoxy and heresy, instead highlighting the fluidity of religious expression under duress. The preservation and promotion of these locations reflect a broader trend in heritage management: the valorization of intangible cultural practices alongside physical monuments, emphasizing continuity rather than rupture in historical consciousness.

Ultimately, the symbolic status of the martyrs in modern Japan cannot be divorced from ongoing negotiations between tradition and modernity, exclusion and inclusion, memory and forgetting. As Japan continues to confront its imperial past and redefine its national identity in a multicultural age, the figure of the martyr functions as a liminal symbol—one that transcends denominational boundaries and invites contemplation on the costs of ideological conformity. By examining martyrdom not only as a historical event but as a living narrative embedded in cultural institutions, media representations, and collective rituals, scholars can better understand how religious suffering is transformed into a resource for ethical reflection and social cohesion.

6 Reassessing the Meaning of Martyrdom in Japanese Context

The reevaluation of martyrdom within the Japanese historical and religious context necessitates a nuanced understanding of how sacred narratives are constructed, preserved, and transformed across time. The narrative surrounding the “Twenty-Six Martyrs” of Nagasaki in 1597 has long been framed within a Eurocentric theological paradigm that emphasizes redemptive suffering, public witness, and institutional sanctification through papal recognition(De Boer, 2011). However, such frameworks often fail to account for the localized cultural reinterpretations that emerge when Christian martyrdom intersects with indigenous Japanese conceptions of honor, loyalty, and spiritual endurance. In this regard, the transition from the openly persecuted martyrs of the late Sengoku period to the so-called “Hidden Christians” (Kakure Kirishitan) who practiced their faith clandestinely during the Edo era reveals not merely a shift in religious practice but a profound transformation in the very meaning of martyrdom itself—a transformation rooted in vernacular expressions of devotion that challenge dominant historiographical assumptions.

Religious creativity, particularly as expressed through material culture, ritual adaptation, and spatial reconfiguration, played a critical role in sustaining Christian identity under conditions of prolonged suppression(De Boer, 2011). As demonstrated in studies of diasporic religious communities in contemporary urban settings, acts of devotional creativity—such as the repurposing of domestic spaces into sites of worship or the encoding of Christian symbolism within ostensibly Buddhist or Shinto artifacts—constitute forms of resistance that are no less significant than public martyrdom[11]. In the case of Japan, the Kakure Kirishitan developed elaborate systems of syncretic practice, including the veneration of Maria Kannon statues and the transmission of liturgical chants in archaic Portuguese-Japanese creole, which allowed them to preserve core elements of Catholic doctrine while evading state surveillance. These practices exemplify what might be termed “covert sanctity,” a mode of religious expression where survival itself becomes an act of testimony, thereby expanding the conventional definition of martyrdom

beyond physical death to encompass sustained spiritual resistance.

Moreover, the process of cultural renegotiation evident in post-martyrdom Japanese Christianity parallels broader patterns observed in early modern European reform movements, where doctrinal orthodoxy was frequently mediated through local artistic and literary forms (De Boer, 2011). Just as sixteenth-century Italian reformers navigated the tensions between Tridentine discipline and humanist aesthetics—evident in Oratorian musical innovations that subtly circumvented ecclesiastical restrictions on liturgical music—so too did Japanese believers adapt foreign religious content to native aesthetic sensibilities (De Boer, 2011). The persistence of Christian iconography within folk art traditions, such as the use of cross motifs in family crests or funerary tablets, reflects a similar dynamic: a slow evolution of religious practice shaped by both external constraint and internal innovation. This suggests that martyrdom narratives must be analyzed not only as theological constructs but also as cultural texts subject to ongoing reinterpretation.

Furthermore, the marginalization of religion in contemporary academic and policy discourses on creativity risks obscuring the significance of such grassroots religious adaptations (De Boer, 2011). When creativity is narrowly defined in secular terms—as has been the case in British arts policy since the mid-twentieth century—the rich tapestry of devotional expression found among hidden faith communities remains invisible (De Boer, 2011). Yet, as the Japanese example illustrates, these acts of spiritual resilience constitute a form of cultural production that is both artistically sophisticated and historically consequential. The concealment of rosaries within everyday objects, the oral transmission of prayers disguised as lullabies, and the architectural modification of homes to include hidden altars all represent deliberate acts of creative agency aimed at preserving religious continuity against overwhelming odds.

In parallel, the modern perception of science as inherently antagonistic to religious belief further complicates the reception of religious martyrdom narratives in secular historiography (Simpson & Rios, 2019). In societies where scientific rationalism is closely associated with atheism, religious experiences—especially those involving supernatural claims or miraculous interpretations of survival—are often dismissed as pre-modern superstition (Simpson & Rios, 2019). This epistemological bias can lead historians to undervalue the psychological and communal dimensions of martyrdom, reducing it to a mere sociopolitical phenomenon rather than engaging with its existential and spiritual resonance (Simpson & Rios, 2019). For instance, testimonies from surviving Hidden Christians frequently describe visions, dreams, and divine interventions that sustained their faith; these accounts, though difficult to verify empirically, are essential for understanding the inner logic of their endurance.

Ultimately, a comprehensive reassessment of martyrdom in the Japanese context demands an interdisciplinary approach that integrates religious studies, art history, anthropology, and postcolonial theory. By recognizing martyrdom not solely as a moment of violent culmination but as an ongoing process of cultural negotiation and creative adaptation, scholars can move beyond reductive binaries of persecution and survival, orthodoxy and heresy, visibility and concealment. The legacy of the Twenty-Six Martyrs thus extends far beyond their execution on Nishizaka Hill—it lives on in the whispered prayers of hidden descendants, the weathered icons passed down through generations, and the silent yet persistent assertion of faith in the face of erasure.

7. Conclusion

The intricate interplay between religious identity and socio-political resistance has long been a focal point in the historiography of global Christianity, particularly in contexts where faith intersects with colonialism, nationalism, and cultural survival. In examining Japan's Catholic

martyrdom narratives—from the execution of the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki in 1597 to the enduring legacy of the Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians)—one encounters not merely a chronicle of persecution but a profound cultural reexamination of how religious devotion can morph into a form of silent resistance against state-imposed erasure (Ferr, 2008). The endurance of clandestine Christian communities through centuries of Tokugawa-era suppression underscores the transformative potential of religious practice as both an act of spiritual fidelity and a subversive political statement. This duality resonates with broader scholarly inquiries into the mechanisms by which marginalized religious groups negotiate legitimacy, visibility, and continuity within restrictive regimes—a theme that finds unexpected parallels in contemporary studies on religious minorities navigating institutional power structures.

In modern academic discourse, the measurement of religiously motivated prejudice has become increasingly methodologically refined, exemplified by adaptations of Herek's Sexual Orientation Survey to assess experiences among conservative Christian students in divergent educational environments (Rosik & Smith, 2009). Although this study focuses on a Protestant demographic in North American and faith-based university settings, its implications extend beyond confessional boundaries, offering a heuristic model for analyzing how religious individuals perceive and respond to systemic bias. The finding that secular university attendees reported greater exposure to verbal prejudice yet did not consistently experience higher levels of institutional discrimination—except in cases involving faculty—suggests that perceived marginalization is often contingent upon specific vectors of authority rather than ambient societal hostility (Rosik & Smith, 2009). Such nuances are critical when interpreting historical accounts of religious persecution, where official edicts and grassroots animosity may not always align. In the Japanese context, the shogunal ban on Christianity was unequivocal, yet local enforcement varied significantly across regions and periods, enabling some communities to preserve rituals under the guise of Buddhist or Shinto observance—a phenomenon akin to what sociologists term “strategic invisibility” in persecuted faiths.

Furthermore, the Singaporean case illustrates how religion operates within tightly regulated pluralistic societies, where statecraft demands both assimilation and differentiation (Goh, 2009). Christianity in Singapore must simultaneously conform to national policies such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act while contending with its perception as a conduit of Western cultural influence—an identity that complicates its integration into the multicultural fabric dominated by race-anchored religions like Islam and Chinese-associated traditions (Goh, 2009). This dual imperative mirrors the predicament faced by early modern Japanese Christians: to maintain doctrinal integrity without provoking state repression. Aihwa Ong's conceptualization of “flexible citizenship” becomes instructive here, particularly her notion of achieving a “modernity without deracination”—a balancing act wherein religious communities modernize without severing ties to indigenous cultural frameworks (Goh, 2009). For the Hidden Christians of Japan, this manifested in the syncretic preservation of sacramental elements through coded language, familial lineage transmission, and ritual substitution, effectively constructing a parallel ecclesial structure devoid of clerical oversight yet rich in symbolic coherence.

These comparative insights deepen our understanding of martyrdom not solely as a moment of violent culmination but as part of a continuum of religious resistance characterized by adaptation, concealment, and mnemonic perseverance. The veneration of the Twenty-Six Martyrs, canonized in 1862, served not only as a testament to individual sacrifice but also as a catalyst for the reemergence of open Catholic practice following the Meiji Restoration's relaxation of anti-Christian laws. Their narrative was subsequently reinscribed within both ecclesiastical hagiography and nationalist historiography, reflecting shifting constructions of Japanese identity in relation to foreign influence. As such, martyrdom functions performatively—its memory mobilized at critical junctures to legitimize claims of religious resilience or, conversely, to critique imperial overreach.

Scholarly engagement with these narratives necessitates a multidisciplinary approach,

integrating textual analysis of Jesuit mission records, ethnographic studies of surviving Kakure Kirishitan lineages, and theoretical frameworks from postcolonial theology and memory studies. The absence of an abstract in certain foundational works (Ferr, 2008) does not diminish their evidentiary value but instead highlights the need for careful contextualization when deploying secondary sources in reconstructing lived religious experience. Moreover, the psychological dimensions of religious perseverance—such as the lack of correlation between reported prejudice and symptoms of depression among conservative Christian students—invite further inquiry into the affective economies sustaining underground faith communities. It may be posited that collective ritual memory, even in the absence of formal liturgy, serves as a buffer against existential despair, reinforcing group cohesion and intergenerational commitment.

Ultimately, the study of Japan's Catholic martyrdom narratives contributes substantively to the broader field of religion and resistance by demonstrating how faith persists not despite oppression, but through it—refracted, reshaped, and reborn within the interstices of silence and symbolism.

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