

REGARDING THE STORY OF “THE BLIND MAN WHO KILLED JESUS CHRIST” IN THE *TENCHI HAJIMARI NO KOTO*^{1 2}

*Miguel Carvalho Abrantes*³

Resumo: Este artigo começa por apresentar brevemente os *Kakure Kirishitan* e a sua composição única conhecida como *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*. Depois, apresenta as quatro camadas da composição dessa obra, seguindo-se a apresentação de uma história, única a esta fonte, a que podemos chamar “o Homem Cego Que Matou Jesus Cristo”. Para terminar, discute as suas potenciais fontes, para provar que esta história não é uma invenção puramente japonesa.

Palavras-Chave: *Kakure Kirishitan*, *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, Cristianismo no Japão, Longino, Estudos Japoneses.

Abstract: This paper starts by succinctly presenting the *Kakure Kirishitan* and their unique composition known as *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*. Then, it presents the four layers of composition of that work, followed by the presentation of a story, unique to this source, which can be called “Blind Man Who Killed Jesus Christ”. Finally, it discusses its potential sources, to prove that this story is not a purely Japanese invention.

Keywords: *Kakure Kirishitan*, *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, Christianity in Japan, Longinus, Japanese Studies.

1. BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE *KAKURE KIRISHITAN*⁴

The history of the *Kakure Kirishitan* is naturally interlinked with that of Christianity in Japan. When, in the early XVII century, western missionaries were forced to

1 Article received 22 July 2020 and accepted 7 December 2020.

2 A thank you to Professor Margarida Miranda, whose teachings eventually allowed me to write this article. The anonymous peer should also be thanked for his feedback on a preliminary version of this article.

3 PhD Candidate and Researcher at the Centro de Estudos Clássicos e Humanísticos, of the Faculty of Letters, Coimbra, Portugal; miguel.r.abrantes@gmail.com (ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2098-3318>).

4 Literally “Hidden Christians”, in the sense they had to hide their religious beliefs.

leave the country, those natives who had previously adhered to the christian religion were presented with an equally difficult decision, that of either retaining their current beliefs but going into hiding, or completely dropping everything they had grown to believe in. It is unknown how many people took each of those two options, but we do know that at least a significant number ended up going into hiding – HARRINGTON (1980: 318) states they were “about 35,000”, NOSCO (1993: 25) estimates their number as “tens (if not hundreds) of thousands”, while WHELAN (1994: 9) mentions “150,000”, with more precise numbers being currently unknown and certainly hard to calculate.

But such a decision to hide undoubtedly led them to an entirely new problem – since the Bible itself was, at the time, never actually translated into Japanese, believers were left with an incomplete vision of christian beliefs, which had been passed along to them through the oral teachings of missionaries and the written ones presented in catechisms. Eventually deprived of that first source, they were ultimately left with imperfect versions of what the missionaries had once told them, and had to complement that knowledge either with new stories or the limited ones they could access in the static catechisms of yore, effectively creating a religion which “evolved according to their own indigenous systems” (WHELAN 1992: 370). Although we can, based on its verifiable results, easily realize that such process did take place, precisely how it developed across time remains unknown.

2. BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE *TENCHI HAJIMARI NO KOTO*

As WHELAN (1996: vii) tells us, we know very little about the struggles that the *Kakure Kirishitan* faced, since secrecy was, by definition, a crucial component of their religion. However, we do know that, before being “rediscovered” in the 17th of March 1865 by Father Bernard Petitjean (WHELAN 1996: 13), they composed at least one work of their own, called in its original *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, which can be translated as *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth*. This name comes almost certainly since the work starts by narrating the main events of the christian creation of the world, before advancing further into the stories of Adam and Eve, followed by an adapted version of Noah’s Ark. It then jumps all the way into the New Testament and presents the early life of the Virgin Mary, along with the life – and death – of Jesus Christ himself. The plot finally ends with the events of the Apocalypse and an addendum, only present in some manuscripts, which contains the stories of two companion saints, *Santosu-sama*⁵ and an unknown figure⁶.

5 The original work seems to employ many words borrowed from Portuguese and Latin. Like Whelan and other authors, we too opted to use those same words in here, instead of translating them, because they allow us to realize that the *Kakure Kirishitan* were familiarized with some western words and concepts, even if in an imperfect way. To this day they seem to be unaware of the true meaning of some of these words (WHELAN 1992: 378-380), which may explain why, in this current example, the Portuguese word for “saints” became the proper name *Santosu*.

6 The author openly admits that “because we do not know the name of the other friend we have omitted it” (*Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 15, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 67), betraying his incomplete knowledge

Concerning this work, WHELAN (1996: vii, 18) defines it as a “fascinating and bewildering amalgam of legends and tales (...) divided into fifteen chapters with an approximate length of 14,300 letters”⁷, to which NOSCO (1993: 18) adds that it “intersperses elements of Japanese folk religion with (...) fundamental elements of the Christian narrative”, and to this second opinion we should further append that those first set of (new) beliefs could only have risen in the absence of western missionaries, but while still taking advantage of their former oral teachings, as was already shown by KAWAI (1994: 52) and BERNABÉ (2018: 303-305).

3. THE FOUR LAYERS OF COMPOSITION OF THE *TENCHI HAJIMARI NO KOTO*

Naturally, the *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto* should not be confused as a biblical text. It is not one, but a unique production originated through four layers of composition. According to PACHECO (1969: 55-56), it is an amalgam of a) a biblical history and brief catechism; b) practical annotations by one or several catechists; c) interpolations from the apocryphal gospels and lives of the Saints; d) local legends and ones from the Shinto religion. To best explain each of these four layers, we now provide a few examples:

The episodes placed in the first group are easy to recognize, essentially because all across the text a reader is able to recognize multiple events which undoubtedly come from biblical sources, such as the story of *Adan* and *Ewa* eating the *masan* (or “apple”, in the original Portuguese). However, that basic layer is here almost always complemented with entirely new events – the original couple soon regrets their infamous action, and the reader is then unexpectedly added the information that the two “offered the [prayer of the] *Salve Regina*”⁸; this would be an impossible task since such prayer praises the Virgin Mary, who hadn’t been born yet, and the mistake certainly rose in a context where the words which compose it were no longer understood, but simply repeated without any knowledge of their real meaning.

The second group can contain references made to the origin of particular expressions and rituals. When Christ dies, soon afterwards he descends from heaven, and a short commentary quickly adds that “This is the origin of the five mysteries of the evening”⁹, directly tying a moment from the biblical story to actual elements from the practices of Christianity. This happens multiple times across the work, always in the exact same

of the whole story. As we will see later on, it is possible he may have heard the original story from missionaries, either directly or through his companions who knew one in the past, but can no longer recall all its specifics.

7 TURNBULL (1996: 63) gives a total number of 16000 letters instead.

8 *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 1, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 41.

9 *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 11, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 62.

format, i.e. presenting a story and then succinctly commenting that such event was behind the origin of a particular expression or ritual.

In the third group one could place moments which are not purely biblical in nature, but are part of the christian tradition via its many apocryphal stories, certainly taken to Japan by western missionaries. In that context, the wise men are here presented as “*Menteo* the King of Turkey, *Gasuparu* the King of Mexico, and *Bautazaru* the King of France”¹⁰. The story to which we call “The Blind Man Who Killed Jesus Christ” may also fall into this same group, but we will explore it further in the next section of this paper.

In the fourth group one can place several moments in which different religious beliefs cross their paths in a significant way, such as when *Ewa* becomes a dog in Middle Heaven¹¹ (an idea coming from Buddhism), or when, after having betrayed Christ, *Judatsu* seemingly turns into a horrible *tengu*¹² (a creature from Shinto beliefs).

Although some moments of the plot are easy to attribute to just one of these four categories, more often than not these layers intersect in a very indistinguishable way, making it hard for the reader to understand where the original christian ideas end and completely new innovations begin. For example, we are informed that the number of infanticides in the so-called “Massacre of the Innocents” was 44444¹³, a certainly symbolical number derived from the Japanese seeing “4” as an unlucky number, as already pointed out by WHEDON (1994, note 69). However, that famous biblical event takes an unexpected turn when Christ’s need for atonement is directly linked to it – he receives an oracle from the “Holy One”, *Deusu*, stating that “thousands of infants lost their lives on your account. I fear they may now forfeit the pleasure of *Paraíso*. For their sake in the next world, you must be tortured and trodden upon. Suffer and give up your body.”¹⁴ This idea deeply contrasts with Christianity’s own version, where Jesus’ sacrifice is seen as an atonement for, first and foremost, the original sin of Adam and Eve, a concept which, according to KAWAI (1994: 54-57, 62), did not seem to exist in Japanese Christianity, leading to this unusual explanation by the *Kakure Kirishitan*.

Such syncretism of beliefs is further complicated by the fact that the authors of the *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto* were clearly not familiarized with the biblical canon or the original languages in which Christianity developed. The original author, whoever he was, turns the roman governor Pontius Pilate into “*Ponsha* and *Piroto*”, the two chief retainers of King *Yorotetsu* of *Beren*¹⁵, best known as Herod, and makes

10 *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 5, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 51.

11 *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 1, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 41.

12 *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 7, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 58.

13 *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 7, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 56.

14 *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 7, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 57.

15 *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 5, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 52.

Santosu a holy man, instead of an honorary title given to all the saints¹⁶, just to give two noteworthy examples.

4. THE STORY OF “THE BLIND MAN WHO KILLED JESUS CHRIST”

One could attempt to explain away the modifications made to the original story in several different ways, but generally they can be attributed to the development of beliefs in a cultural setting where the original biblical texts were now completely unavailable. This entire problem is particularly noticeable in the episode of Christ’s Passion – if the kernel of the Christian message is the fact that Jesus died and was later raised from the dead for our sins, one would expect those moments of the Passion to be deeply ingrained in the plot and in the belief of all the *Kirishitan*, and SHIN (2013) even proves the Japanese were perfectly aware of the complete story as “derived from the four Gospels”, and perhaps even eager to copy the Savior’s own suffering in their personal lives (e.g. SHIN 2013: 10-12, 14-17). But, instead of presenting the Passion as we know it in western tradition, this text features Jesus Christ being tortured for multiple days before a seemingly original story takes place. Given its importance for our argument, we quote it in full here:

‘Impatient, *Yorotetsu* said repeatedly, “Soldiers, hurry up and snuff out his spirit at its very source.” Making obeisances, they took up their swords, but no matter how hard they tried, their bodies lost their strength; their arms and legs would not even move, so that they were unable to pierce the Holy One.

Then a blind man came along, and they said to him, “See here, blind man. In this place someone is nailed to a cross. If you deal him the death blow we’ll give you some money. How about it, eh?” The blind man listened and said, “If you will just show me where, I’ll jab him.” So the samurai guard said, “Over here, this is it,” and guided him carefully. “Oh, I see,” said the blind man and with an “ummph,” he jabbed his spear into the Holy One.

Blood spurted out and poured down over the blind man. When it ran into his eyes, in an instant both eyes were miraculously opened. “How extraordinary indeed,” he marveled, saying, “This world has become bright. If only I had stabbed that wicked person sooner, these eyes too would have been opened earlier.”

This time the Holy One said, “Blind man, you shall not be saved in the world to come.” After the blind man had given the Holy One the death blow without any qualms and received his money reward, his vision was suddenly extinguished, and he returned to his former state of blindness.

This is the origin of our saying, “Eyes darkened by money.”¹⁷

16 *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, addendum, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 66.

17 *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 10, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 61.

Even taking into account the multiple layers of composition for this one story, its interpretation is not an easy one, as already pointed out by KAWAI (1994: 58-59). If, at a lowest level, we could choose to see this whole sequence of the *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto* as a simple addition to the original story, made essentially to explain the usage of a particular Japanese proverb, it still has to raise multiple questions – first, if Jesus was supposed to die, why were the soldiers miraculously unable to strike him with their swords? Then, why is a blind man able to do so, by using his spear? Besides, why provide such a blind man to the whole story, miraculously heal him, and then present an entire second miracle to again darken his vision?

Although WHELAN (1994, note 84) notes that this whole episode “appears [to be] original”¹⁸, it ultimately derives from the biblical episode in which, facing Jesus Christ’s death, a centurion uttered the words “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39), a man to which apocryphal sources later gave the name of Longinus. This potential relationship was previously recognized by PACHECO (1969: 73, note 50), but our current argument can now add some more elements to support this theory.

First, if swords were common weapons in Japan at the time, an unknown missionary may have once felt the need to explain why Jesus was not killed with one, potentially saying that the soldiers were simply not fated to kill him, or that their swords could not reach him up in the cross, and such information may have become misunderstood across time. Although the author of the current work does not provide any reasons for the strange miracle, which does not seem to occur elsewhere, he did not really have to, since – as we can see just a few lines later – he was well familiarized with the fact that the death blow was not performed with a sword, but with a spear.

In fact, in medieval legends a famous spear was associated with the death of Christ and the figure of Longinus. In the *Golden Legend* he is portrayed as blind, but the blood from Christ’s wound eventually falls down the weapon he used to strike the Savior and it touches the centurion’s eyes, miraculously restoring his vision. Later in that same apocryphal account, a governor loses his sight and Longinus tells him that it will only be restored if he kills the one who is currently in front of him, which he does, resulting in this future saint’s very own death.

So, simply put, the medieval legend of (Saint) Longinus presents two different cases of people having their vision restored by miracles. It is possible that, when a missionary told this apocryphal tale to some listeners in Japan, as WHELAN (1994: 22) admits that tended to happen back in the days of their first presence in the country, and as one can also naturally infer from the non-biblical christian knowledge of the native Fabian Fukan¹⁹, the two independent figures may have become conflated into a single one. This one character evidently could not have his vision restored twice, but instead

18 Although Turnbull (1996) talks about the apocryphal sources for many other episodes present in this work, he completely ignores the one at hand here. Perhaps he was unaware of its original source?

19 Cf. ABRANTES 2018: 16-19.

had it restored once, in a manner similar to Longinus' own, and then lost it in a manner purely exclusive to this Japanese story, which was perhaps invented and added to the story exclusively to justify the native saying of "Eyes darkened by money."

At the same time, it should be noted that this nameless blind man, who is clearly not a soldier in this account, only lost his sight after accepting some money, potentially linking this innovation with the figure of Judas, who the author of this work was perfectly familiar with²⁰, and whose punishment was also linked to having accepted money for betraying Christ. And so, although unusual, the episode of the blind man who killed Jesus Christ is not an entirely Japanese innovation, but a conflation of some independent western reports and ideas, which were likely associated together when a believer from Japan heard several different tales from a missionary. Then, as time went on, the specifics of those tales were fused together into a single story, originating this unusual story as it is presented in the *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*.

5. CONCLUSION

As we just argued, the story of "The Blind Man Who Killed Jesus Christ" resulted from a conflation of four developmental elements identified across the work – it contains a kernel of biblical history in its depiction of Christ's torture and crucifixion; it presents a small annotation and a potential reference to local legends in the context of the expression "Eyes darkened by money"; and it seemingly adapts elements from the medieval life of Saint Longinus. Although we currently know very little about the way in which the beliefs of the *Kakure Kirishitan* evolved, the theory presented here assumes the existence of a kernel of christian belief that only a western missionary would have, and subsequently modifies it through a set of ideas, also presented all across the *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, which were derived by the evolution of Christianity in Japan in the absence of those who had originally introduced it to such country. As such, this story is not a purely Japanese one, since it was built upon several independent bricks from Western Christianity, making it a noteworthy production of the fusion of beliefs that characterize the *Kakure Kirishitan*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- ABRANTES, Miguel Carvalho. Argumentos de oposição ao cristianismo no Japão do século XVII – Os casos de Fabian Fukan e Cristóvão Ferreira. *Estudos Japoneses*, São Paulo, No. 39, pp. 11-21, 2018.
- BERNABÉ, Renata Cabral. **Fé e prática entre os Kirishitan**: Jesuítas, Franciscanos e as Reações Japonesas ao Cristianismo. São Paulo: USP [Tese de Doutorado], 2018.

20 Cf. *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, chapter 7, *apud* WHELAN 1994: 57-58, where the whole story of Judas' betrayal and punishment is retold in a way very similar to our Bible, with the addition of having him turning into an ugly *tengu* before his suicide.

- HARRINGTON, Ann M. The Kakure Kirishitan and Their Place in Japan's Religious Tradition. **Japanese Journal of Religious Studies**, Nagoya, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 318-336, December 1980.
- KAWAI, Hayao. The Transformation of Biblical Myths in Japan. **Diogenes**, Paris, Vol. 42 (165), pp. 49-66, March 1994.
- NOSCO, Peter. Secrecy and the Transmission of Tradition: Issues in the Study of the "Underground" Christians. **Japanese Journal of Religious Studies**, Nagoya, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 3-29, March 1993.
- PACHECO, Diego. El libro sagrado de los cristianos ocultos en Nagasaki. **Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas**, Madrid, V, pp. 51-76, 1969.
- RYAN, William Granger. **Jacobus de Voragine's The Golden Legend**. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- SHIN, Junhyoung Michael. The Passion and Flagellation in Sixteenth-Century Japan. **Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme**, Toronto, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 5-43, Spring/Printemps 2013.
- TURNBULL, Stephen. Acculturation among the *Kakure Kirishitan*: Some Conclusions from the *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*. In: BREEN, John. **Japan and Christianity: Impacts and Responses**. New York: Macmillan Press, 1996. Chapter 4, pp. 63-74.
- WHELAN, Christal. Religion Concealed, The Kakure Kirishitan of Narushima. **Monumenta Nipponica**, Tokyo, Vol. 47, No. 3, pp. 369-387, Autumn 1992.
- WHELAN, Christal. **The Beginning of Heaven and Earth: the Sacred Book of Japan's Hidden Christians**. First Edition. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996.