

Fumie setting stone left in Kutami-nagano

Fumie refers to likenesses of Jesus Christ or Virgin Mary, which were used to test if a person was Christian. There is a large setting stone used to hold *fumie* in Kutamikyo Nagano, Naoiri Town. How did Kutami Christians feel as they stepped onto the *fumie* placed on this stone back in those days? What had been drawn on the *fumie*?

Fumie had been one of the methods used to test if a person was Christian during the Edo period. The person being tested was forced to step on a likeness of Jesus Christ or Virgin Mary. It is generally believed that the practice of using *fumie* started in 1629 (6th year of Kanei) by the Tokugawa shogunate, but was only used later in the Oka clan in 1660 (3rd year of Manji). As there were not enough pieces of *fumie* when the method was first introduced, *fumie* drawn on Japanese paper (Photo 2) were used for the test. Examples of this type of *fumie* can be found in chapter 9 of this series. However, sometime after that, *fumie* began to be produced by the office of the Nagasaki magistrate, and each clan went to Nagasaki to borrow these in order to conduct the test in their own clans. These *fumie* were placed on the setting stone that was left behind in Naoiri town, and the size of the setting stone is quite big. It measures 170cm in length and 125cm in width (Photo 2). Normally, *fumie* is set on a straw mat at the garden of the village master's house when the weather is fine, so it would have been unusual to conduct the *fumie* test using a setting stone.

How effective had the *fumie* test been? Initially, it would certainly have been painful for a Christian to step on a sacred icon. However, after a few years, they were able to undergo the *fumie* test with an attitude of indifference, and then return home to pray and beg for forgiveness from God. Hence, the effectiveness of the test began to decline. It is said that about 300 Christians lived continuously in Kutami, but only five Christians were captured from the years 1661 to 1738. It is possible that the other Christians had converted to Buddhism, or perhaps they had undergone the *fumie* test in public and kept their beliefs deep inside their hearts.

The third generation feudal lord, Hisakiyo, started to use the *fumie* method in the Oka clan, and I have heard an interesting hypothesis about him from a researcher. "We can believe that that he had been tolerant of Christians as he had hidden the bell of Santiago in the Nishi-no-maru Tower of the castle. Thus, I believe that he had felt some resistance in making Christians step on actual *fumie* pictures. Records state that *fumie* tests were conducted, but it is doubtful if the sacred likenesses had been real. The Oka clan had been late in implementing *fumie* tests as compared to the Tokugawa shogunate or other domains because he had not wanted to implement it. This could have been why he had created a unique replica of the *fumie* for the Oka clan to use in the tests."

As this hypothesis explains, the Oka clan had been the only domain that made unique *fumie* replica from inside the domain during the fourth generation of the feudal lord Hisatsune. However, this was discovered by a feudal lord from Nagasaki, and led to a painful episode that concerned the actual survival of the clan itself.

The *fumie* that the Oka clan had been using before it borrowed the *fumie* from Nagasaki had been one of the "Christian Goddess (Virgin Mary)." However, both this "Christian Goddess" and the replica were destroyed in the above incident, so the design of the *fumie* remains a mystery. It is regrettable that they were lost, because they would have been the only Christian relics left in Japan. Had the *fumie* placed on the setting stone been that of a fake Christian goddess? Nobody has ever seen it, and everything remains a mystery.

I looked up at the sky and asked Mt. Taisen, where lord Hisakiyo rests, for the truth but the lord bided his silence, watching the setting stone from the top of the mountain.

(NANBAN Culture Promotion Division GOTO Atsumi)

References

- A Short History of Christians in the Oka Clan* / Author: Inoue Takashi
(Written by the Oka-no-sato Project Organizing Committee, 2012)
Banning of Christianity and Popular Religion / Author: Murai Sanae
(Yamakawa Shuppansha Ltd., 2002)
Christian Culture / Author: Gono Takashi
(Yoshikawakobunkan, 2012)
Nakagawa Family History
(Published by the Taketa City Board of Education, 2007)
Historical Records of Oita Christians / Author: Kitamura Seiji
(1961)



↑ (Photo 1) *Fumie* made from Japanese paper during the period of the Oka clan



↑ The *fumie* plate that is generally used.



↑ The family emblem of the house where the setting stone for *fumie* is placed.



↑ Semi-circular stones placed at the front of the gate.



↑ (Photo 2) A huge setting stone for *fumie* in Nagano, Naoiri town (length 170cm x width 125cm)