

HIDDEN ALTARS

DIALOGUE AS LIVED INFRASTRUCTURE AMONG JAPAN'S KAKURE KIRISHITAN



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This article examines the ritual life of contemporary Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians) in Japan to reconsider how anthropology conceptualizes interreligious dialogue. Drawing on more than two decades of ethnographic engagement with Kakure Kirishitan communities, including focused research conducted between 2012 and 2025, it argues that religious plurality in this context is sustained less through discursive exchange or doctrinal negotiation than through embodied ritual coordination. Catholic-inflected prayers (orasho), Buddhist memorial practices, and local domestic and shrine-related spatial practices are brought together within a practical repertoire shaped by histories of persecution, concealment, and adaptation. Attending to ritual timing, bodily discipline, spatial arrangements, and material objects, the article shows how these practices are reproduced without requiring participants to reconcile their different religious histories or meanings. What may appear externally as hybridity or syncretism is approached ethnographically as a historically situated process of practical coordination. The article proposes “dialogue as lived infrastructure” to describe the repeated, embodied adjustments through which practitioners sustain relationships across religious difference, even when the meaning of those relationships remain partially articulated. Rather than replacing discursive approaches to dialogue, this concept draws attention to the practical and relational work through which plurality remains possible in everyday religious life.

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE is commonly understood as a discursive encounter between clearly bounded traditions, articulated through theological discussion, institutional representation, or reasoned exchange. Such approaches tend to privilege participants’ ability to articulate beliefs and negotiate difference through speech (Swidler 1983; Cornille 2008; Knitter 2002). Even approaches attentive to lived religion may emphasize recognition, mutual understanding, or

the transformation of religious perspectives. These approaches raise a question for ethnographic inquiry: how should dialogue be understood when religious plurality is sustained less through explicit discussion than through repeated practices, spatial arrangements, and bodily responsiveness?

Among Japan's Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians), religious differences have often been negotiated in practice without formal dialogue or doctrinal reconciliation. These communities emerged under the prohibition on Christianity imposed during the Tokugawa period. Under surveillance, compulsory registration at Buddhist temples, and periodic religious inspections, Christian practices were maintained through concealment, adaptation, and ritual transformation. In areas including Sotome, Shimo-Kurosaki, Kami-Kurosaki, Shitsu, and the Gotō archipelago, practitioners transmitted prayers known as *orasho*, which preserve and transform elements of early modern Catholic liturgy, while maintaining domestic altars and ancestral rites (Minagawa 1981, 2004). These practices also developed in relation to Buddhist memorial observances and local shrine traditions. A domestic altar, for example, may bring together objects with different religious histories within an established setting for prayer and remembrance. Religious plurality in such settings is not necessarily declared or resolved; it is enacted through practice.

My engagement with Kakure Kirishitan communities began with intensive fieldwork in 2004. Following the publication of my 2012 study of Murakami Shigeru (Munsi 2012), my research increasingly focused on how religious differences are sustained through ritual practice, embodied coordination, and material arrangements. The present article draws primarily on this later research conducted between 2012 and 2025, while building on ethnographic knowledge accumulated since 2004.

Drawing on this longitudinal engagement, I examine domestic altars, memorial practices, and ritual events such as *Ohatsuhoage* お初穂上げ (a ritualized communal meal in the Murakami community of Shimo-Kurosaki) to investigate how religious relationships are maintained through bodily practice, spatial arrangements, repetition, and material engagement without depending primarily on explicit theological articulation. Bringing theories of embodiment (Csordas 1990, 1994), performance (Turner 1969; Schechner 2002), and habitus (Bourdieu 1977) into conversation with ethnographic analysis, I propose dialogue as *lived infrastructure* as a way of understanding how historically differentiated practices are coordinated and reproduced through relations among people, objects, gestures, and shared spaces. The term does not imply that practitioners themselves describe their activities as dialogue, nor that their practices are necessarily symmetrical or consciously reconciled. Instead, it directs attention to the practical responsiveness through which religious differences remain livable under changing historical conditions.

The article proceeds in five analytical sections. Section 1 establishes the historical and ethnographic background, including the ways concealment shaped religious transmission. Section 2 develops an approach to dialogue beyond discourse through embodiment, performance, and habitus. Section 3 examines domestic altars and ancestral veneration as related material and intergenerational practices. Section 4 analyzes *Ohatsuhoage* and the coordination, affect, and continuity generated through ritual participation. Section 5 draws findings together to develop the argument of dialogue as lived infrastructure. The conclusion considers the article's contribution and limits of its claims. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of Japanese-language conversations and interviews are by the author.

Historical and Ethnographic Background

Contemporary Kakure Kirishitan ritual practices must be understood in relation to historical conditions under which Christian practices were transmitted without regular clerical oversight, secure institutional support, or consistent access to religious texts. Following the Tokugawa shogunate's prohibition of Christianity in the early seventeenth century, temple-registration systems (*terauke* 寺請制度) and religious inspections (*shūmon aratame* 宗門改め) subjected households to institutionalized surveillance. Families had to demonstrate Buddhist affiliation through registration and other practices that publicly established their non-Christian status.

With clergy absent and access to canonical texts restricted, communities developed ways of transmitting Christian knowledge while remaining outwardly compatible with the surrounding religious environment (Tagita 1978; Kataoka 1997; Turnbull 1998; Mullins 2003; Paramore 2009). Concealment did not entail complete separation from dominant religious institutions. Rather, continuity depended on forms of accommodation through which practices and objects were selectively adapted to prevailing social conditions (Filus 2003; Williams 1996; Rowe 2011).

Today, Kakure Kirishitan communities remain in several parts of Nagasaki Prefecture, including Hirado, Ikitsuki, Shimo-Kurosaki and Shitsu, and Wakamatsu in the Gotō Islands. Fieldwork and available information indicate a substantial decline in the number of practitioners, from approximately 1,500 around 2000 to fewer than 1,000 by 2025 (Munsi 2026, 164). These figures are indicative rather than census counts. The UNESCO-listed *Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region* also draw attention to the historical formation of these communities and the material and symbolic legacies through which their histories continue to be represented (UNESCO 2018).

Over generations, prayers were memorized rather than written down, religious images were concealed or interpreted, and domestic spaces became settings for hidden ritual observance. Maria Kannon figures, which resemble the bodhisattva

Kannon but may be venerated as representations of the Virgin Mary, exemplify this layered visibility. Their significance depended on familiarity with the practices surrounding them, rather than on public identification alone. Continuity thus rested partly on the repeated performance of prayers, gestures, and spatial arrangements. In the absence of regular priestly mediation, ritual competence was demonstrated through the cadence of *orasho* recitation and the timing of gestures, as well as through explanations of religious meaning (Turnbull 1998).

The lifting of the prohibition on Christianity in 1873 did not lead all communities to join or return to institutional Catholicism. Following the encounter between missionaries and hidden Christians in Nagasaki in 1865, some communities entered or returned to the Roman Catholic Church, while others continued to maintain inherited practices outside ecclesiastical oversight and came to be known as Kakure Kirishitan (Mullins 1998; Filus 1997; Miyazaki 1996; 2001; 2003; 2014; 2018; Nakazono 2018). Among those who maintained distinct Kakure Kirishitan traditions, religious life continued through a ritual repertoire centered on domestic altars, ancestral veneration, and ceremonies such as *Ohatsuhoage*. This persistence should not be understood simply as resistance to Catholic reintegration. Rather, it reflects the continuity of religious life through practices whose authority and significance had developed under specific historical conditions (Munsi 2019a).

These historical developments provide the context for the contemporary practices examined here. The important point is not that current ritual arrangements reproduce an unchanged past, but that historically transmitted practices continue to provide resources for responding to changing social and religious circumstances. To understand how this continuity is achieved, we must examine how religious knowledge is learned, embodied, and coordinated in practice.

Dialogue Beyond Discourse

In contemporary Kakure Kirishitan settings, religious knowledge is often transmitted through participation and demonstration rather than extended verbal explanation. During my fieldwork, questions about belief, orthodoxy, or religious affiliation sometimes elicited brief, practice-oriented responses. Rather than treating these replies as evidence of silence or resistance, it is more useful to consider how they locate religious knowledge in established ways of doing things. A Kakure Kirishitan leader (*chōkata*) in Wakamatsu explained, “This is how it has always been done” (personal communication, 2015). Such statements grounded ritual authority in inherited practice rather than explicit doctrinal justification. Instruction also occurred through gestures: a hand tracing the arc of a bow, fingers tapping the altar surface to indicate sequence, or a slight nod from an elder correcting a younger participant’s posture.

One evening after *Ohatsuhoage*, I asked a *chōkata* about a prayer containing elements of Latin, Portuguese, and Japanese. He smiled, shook his head, and replied, “Meaning comes when we do it together” (personal communication, 2018). As he spoke, participants rearranged cushions in a tatami room, and extinguishing candles in accordance to the household’s familiar sequence. No further explanation followed; the gathering gradually returned to ordinary domestic activity. The exchange suggested that understanding was sustained not only through interpretation but also through shared participation and attentiveness to the ritual sequence. His response did not necessarily imply that the prayer had no interpretable meaning; rather, it directed attention to the understanding that participants developed and expressed through doing the ritual together.

Goffman’s (2017) account of face-work and deference offers one way to understand the interpersonal restraint evident in this encounter. The leader’s response allowed the ritual to continue without turning a request for clarification into an obligation to articulate its meaning. Yet restraint should not be reduced to the management of social appearances; it must also be understood in relation to the religious histories and inherited practices through which discretion acquired religious and social significance.

This distinction matters for the study of interreligious dialogue. Barnes (2012) approaches dialogue as learning through encounter, emphasizing attentiveness to difference and the possibility of transformations. The Kakure Kirishitan case draws attention to another dimension of learning: ritual competence can develop through repeated participation even when meanings are not fully articulated. Asad’s (1993) account of religious traditions likewise directs attention to the role of discipline and practice in shaping religious life. Among Kakure Kirishitan communities, practices associated with Catholic, Buddhist, and Shinto may coexist within the same ritual environment without necessarily being formulated as competing doctrinal positions.

Tacit practice, however, should not be equated with a lack of awareness. Some interlocutors recognized that outsiders perceived their practices as “mixed” or “unclear,” yet this awareness did not necessarily lead them to reorganize ritual life around such classifications. When I introduced the term “Christian” in one conversation, a participant paused and responded, “That is your word. We follow the way of our righteous ancestors in faith” (personal communication, 2014). The remark did not deny the tradition’s Christian genealogy. Instead, it located religious authority in inherited practice rather than in a classification introduced from outside.

These encounters suggest that religious difference need not be explicitly debated for relationships across traditions to be sustained. In this case, such relationships are shaped by histories of concealment, accommodation, and continuity, and

maintained through ordinary ritual practices (Nakazono 2018; Miyazaki 2014; 2018). Dialogue therefore need not be limited to explicit exchange: it can also be examined through the embodied practices by which people learn to act in relation to others. Three related concepts—embodiment, performance, and habitus—help clarify how such practices are acquired and reproduced.

Embodiment directs attention to bodily knowledge; performance to the relationships renewed through ritual action; and habitus to the dispositions formed through repeated participation. Together, these concepts shift the analysis from belief as an abstract mental state toward religion as an enacted mode of being in the world. This perspective also challenges approaches to dialogue that privilege verbal articulation and assume that participants can step outside their practices to explain them discursively. Csordas (1990; 1994) treats embodiment as a methodological starting point for understanding religious experience through the lived body, while Bell (1992) shows how ritualization establishes practical distinctions and disciplined forms of action without requiring explicit conceptualization. Religious knowledge may be expressed through posture, timing, gesture, sensory attention, and the ability to respond appropriately within a ritual sequence, even when participants cannot or do not explain these actions verbally.

Among Kakure Kirishitan communities, religious learning often takes place through bodily participation: bowing before the altar, adopting appropriate postures during ritual, chanting *orasho* in an established rhythm, handling ritual objects, and observing elders' comportment. In the absence of formal catechesis, children learn through imitation, correction, and participation. They learn when to bow, how to hold the ritual cup, and when silence is expected, often before they can fully articulate the significance of these actions. During one memorial observance, a young boy began reciting the opening syllables of an *orasho* too quickly. An elder corrected him not through verbal instruction but by slowing her own cadence until his breathing synchronized with hers. Her adjustment conveyed the appropriate rhythm through bodily attunement, making the practical force of embodied knowledge visible in the interaction. This example illustrates how religious learning can occur through participation and correction without requiring every aspect of practice to be verbally explained. It also resonates with lived-religion approaches that examine religion as enacted in everyday life rather than measured against institutionally defined systems of belief (McGuire 2008).

Performance theory further clarifies how ritual does more than represent an inherited past: it brings relationships and memories into the present. Following Turner (1969), ceremonies such as *Ohatsuhoage* can be understood as occasions when ordinary social relations are temporarily reconfigured and intensified. As Section 4 examines in greater detail, the arrangement of the room, the positioning of participants, and the coordination of voices and gestures contribute to this

process. Schechner's (2002) concept of "restored behavior" highlights how repeated actions carry earlier forms into new circumstances. Repetition, however, does not entail exact reproduction. Adjustments in sequence, emphasis, or bodily coordination allow practices to respond to changing conditions while retaining recognizable continuity.

Bourdieu's (1977; 1990) concept of *habitus* helps explain how such practices acquire durability. Through repeated ritual participation, ways of responding to people, objects, and ritual expectations become incorporated as practical dispositions rather than necessarily explicit propositions about religious plurality. Catholic prayer forms, Buddhist memorial sensibilities, and local domestic and shrine-related practices may become elements of an established ritual repertoire without being consciously synthesized. What appears to an observer as spontaneous coordination may depend on dispositions acquired through observation, repetition, and correction.

Together, these concepts direct attention to the three connected processes: bodily participation transmits knowledge, performance renews relationships in the present, and repetition develops a durable capacity for practical adjustment. The following sections examine how these processes operate through domestic altars, ancestral remembrance, and collective ritual performance. Taken together, they help explain how religious relationships and inherited practices can be sustained without depending exclusively on explicit verbal exchange or doctrinal agreement. The following sections examine how these processes operate through domestic altars, ancestral remembrance, and collective ritual performance. They also consider the historical conditions under which discretion and the management of visibility became integral to the transmission of religious practice.

Hidden Altars, Ancestral Veneration, and Embodied Transmission

Concealment and the practice of continuity

Oral histories collected in Shimo-Kurosaki, Shitsu, Hirado, Ikitsuki, and the Gotō archipelago emphasize secrecy, adaptation, and continuity through practice rather than doctrine. In interviews conducted between 2012 and 2019, older practitioners recalled childhoods shaped by participation in ritual routines whose meanings were rarely explained. One woman in her late seventies described learning prayers from her grandmother by repeating them each night before sleep, without ever seeing them written or asking what the words meant. "You don't ask," she explained quietly, tapping her chest. "The body remembers" (personal communication, 2012). Similar patterns of transmission appeared in contemporary gatherings, where elders corrected deviations in chanting, posture, and timing through gesture rather

than extended instruction. Concealment thus shaped not only what practitioners could express openly but also the circumstances under which religious knowledge was acquired and transmitted.

Under conditions of surveillance and uncertain visibility, continuity depended on knowing not only what to do but when, where, and how to do it. Religious learning therefore involved spatial awareness, temporal discipline, bodily comportment, and sensitivity to the presence of others. Maintaining a ritual required managing its visibility as well as performing its actions correctly. A Foucauldian perspective on discipline and surveillance (Foucault 1977) helps illuminate how prohibition reorganized the conditions under which Christian practice could continue. These unequal conditions of visibility encouraged forms of discretion and bodily discipline, although contemporary practices should not automatically be interpreted as direct survivals of persecution-era strategies.

Historical accounts and oral testimonies illustrate how these disciplines took material form. Ritual objects were disguised as ordinary household items: rosaries embedded within cords, crosses concealed within statues resembling Buddhist figures, and altars hidden behind sliding panels or inside cabinets. In several homes on Ikitsuki, small wooden cabinets resembling Buddhist household altars contained objects recognizable to practitioners as Christian in their inner compartments. Their outward appearance was compatible with Buddhist ancestor veneration, while access to the concealed objects required a familiar sequence of movements. Opening the cabinet, arranging its contents, and closing it again were not simply practical tasks: they were learned actions through which knowledge of concealment was transmitted across generations.

Over time, such practices contributed to a disposition toward calibrated visibility: the capacity to manage what could be seen, by whom, and under what circumstances. Rather than treating these arrangements simply as syncretism or religious dilution, they can understand as practical accommodations through which distinct religious forms remained viable without requiring their conceptual reconciliation. As Stewart and Shaw (1994) argue more broadly, religious synthesis must be considered in relation to historical asymmetries and the politics of religious classification. The question is therefore not merely whether traditions were mixed, but how practices with different histories became workable within the same social and ritual settings.

Concealment also shaped religious authority. In the absence of regular priestly supervision and formal ecclesiastical hierarchies, ritual leadership often rested with elders whose legitimacy derived from practical competence. They knew when to begin a chant, how to arrange an altar, when to speak or remain silent, and how to recognize deviations in a ritual sequence. Errors were often corrected gently and without explanation. Authority was exercised through demonstrating and

maintaining appropriate practice, with experience providing the basis for guiding others.

These conditions continued to matter after the prohibition of Christianity was lifted in 1873. Some practitioners entered or returned to institutional Catholicism, while others maintained distinct Kakure Kirishitan traditions. Several interlocutors expressed ambivalence toward Catholic missionaries whose emphasis on doctrine and sacramental conformity could be experienced as disruptive rather than restorative. One elder in Shitsu remarked that the missionaries “wanted words,” whereas what had been preserved were “ways.” This contrast should not be taken to mean that institutional Catholicism was uniformly doctrinal or that Kakure Kirishitan practitioners rejected explanation as such. Rather, it highlights a difference in the grounds of religious authority: explicit doctrinal instruction on the one hand, and historically transmitted ritual competence on the other.

Concealment was therefore neither a period of interruption nor an unchanging cultural preference. It was a historically imposed condition that shaped how religious knowledge was learned, objects were arranged, and practices were carried forward. The significance of silence and discretion must be understood in relation to this history, while recognizing that contemporary practitioners adapt inherited practices to circumstances different from those in which they first developed.

Domestic altars as the organization of ritual space

Hidden table-set altars occupy a central place in Kakure Kirishitan ritual life, yet their significance is not exhausted by what their objects represent. During fieldwork, access to these altars was often carefully staged. In many households, an altar remained concealed during ordinary visits and was revealed only on particular ritual occasions. Casual conversation might continue until a pause, after which sliding doors were closed, voices lowered, and an elder retrieved a cloth-wrapped bundle from a cabinet. The altar then emerged within the domestic setting. Disclosure was itself part of the ritual: a familiar sequence of actions transformed the room into a setting for prayer and remembrance without requiring a formal announcement.

The material arrangement of the altar supports a sequence of opening, arranging, approaching, attending, praying, and eventually returning the objects to concealment. Scholarship on material religion emphasizes that religious meaning emerges through engagement with objects and spaces rather than through abstract interpretation alone (Meyer et al. 2010; Morgan 2010). Kakure Kirishitan altars illustrate this process. Their arrangements may juxtapose elements that appear religiously heterogeneous from an external perspective: a figure resembling Kannon but associated with the Virgin Mary, Buddhist mortuary tablets, candles, bowls of rice, *sake*, and water. Practitioners do not necessarily articulate the religious distinctions

associated with each object. Instead, the objects are incorporated into ritual sequences involving prayer, offerings, and silence. Their significance emerges not solely from their symbolic meanings or religious classifications, but also from the relationships and actions organized around them.

During one household visit in Shimo-Kurosaki, I encountered this arrangement in particularly clear form. A small table-set altar concealed behind sliding doors contained a Marian statue resembling Kannon, a Buddhist mortuary tablet, and a ritual cup used exclusively during *Ohatsuhoage*. The altar was opened only on specific memorial days; otherwise, it remained indistinguishable from ordinary domestic furniture. When the doors were opened, participants lowered their voices, slowed their gestures, and concentrated their attention. No formal announcement was made, yet everyone appeared to recognize that the room had entered a different mode of activity. When I asked whether the objects represented different religions, an elderly practitioner gently corrected my question: “They are not different. This is simply how we pray.” The response does not establish that the objects lack distinct histories or meanings. Rather, it suggests that distinguishing them by religious category was unnecessary for the ritual to proceed. What might appear externally as a juxtaposition of Catholic, Buddhist, and local religious forms was, within this household, an established arrangement of practice.

Participants’ familiarity with this arrangement was evident in their practical knowledge: they knew where objects belonged, when they should be uncovered, how they should be approached, and what bodily comportment was appropriate. The same practical orientation appeared in smaller acts of adjustment. During another gathering in Shimo-Kurosaki, I observed a practitioner pause midway through a chant to adjust a candle that had burned unevenly. The chanting resumed without comment. When I later asked whether the adjustment had symbolic significance, my host replied, “It must feel right.” A Kakure Kirishitan leader in Shimo-Kurosaki conveyed a similar emphasis on practice when he explained the table-set altar by demonstrating its use rather than describing what it represented. He unfolded a cloth, lit a candle, adjusted the objects, and began a chant. Asked about the meaning of a particular figure, he replied, “It is for praying.” These responses direct attention from symbolic representation to practical engagement. The altar functions not simply as a collection of religious symbols but as a material configuration through which practices with different histories are brought into relation. This emphasis resonates with Csordas’s (1990) account of somatic modes of attention: the altar helped orient participants’ attention, bodily positions, and coordinated actions. Its significance lay partly in how it organizes participation, not simply in what its individual objects symbolized.

The altar also transforms domestic space. Sliding doors close, lighting changes, and family members reposition themselves, temporarily reconfiguring a *tatami*

room as a ritual environment. Turner's (1969) concept of liminality offers one point of comparison, although the transition takes place within an ordinary domestic setting rather than across a clearly separated ceremonial threshold. Lefebvre's (1991) account of the production of space is also instructive: the altar does not necessarily occupy a permanently designated sacred zone. Instead, the room becomes a setting for prayer and remembrance through the actions that reorganize it and the relationships enacted within it.

The sequence of concealment, revelation, arrangement, prayer, and closure brings together the historical management of visibility discussed earlier in this Section and the practical competence through which ritual is sustained. What is transmitted is not simply knowledge about particular objects, but the capacity to manage their use and visibility: knowing when to reveal the altar, how to arrange it, where to position the body, and when an adjustment is needed. The domestic altar is therefore both a material focus of remembrance and a setting in which inherited practices are made practicable.

Ancestral veneration and intergenerational transmission

The veneration of righteous ancestors in faith—including local martyrs and patron figures such as San Jiwan—occupies a central place in Kakure Kirishitan religious life. Rather than constituting a separate ritual domain, it provides an enduring orientation toward the past, sustained through everyday conduct and embodied practice. San Jiwan, remembered in local accounts as a steadfast Catholic missionary priest during the period of prohibition, is invoked as a relational presence even when detailed narratives of his life are absent. Righteous ancestors in faith are made present through repeated acts: names uttered in prayer, offerings placed before the altar, gestures performed with care, and silences collectively observed. Remembering thus involves not only recalling the past but also renewing the practices through which relationships with it are maintained.

During fieldwork in the Shimo-Kurosaki and Gotō archipelago, practitioners frequently resisted requests to explain who ancestral figures were or what precisely they had done. When asked about San Jiwan, a Kakure Kirishitan leader replied, “He is someone we pray to,” before demonstrating the correct order of offerings (personal communication, 2013). Rather than elaborating a biography, he redirected attention to the relationship enacted through the ritual. A similar emphasis on practice was evident during a memorial observance, when the ancestral names were invoked in a low, steady cadence. Each name was followed by a slight bow and a synchronized inhalation. At certain invocations, the room grew perceptibly still, and pauses extended just beyond the rhythm of the chant. No explanation marked these moments, yet their affective intensity was apparent. The past became

perceptible through changes in breathing, tempo, and bodily attention, even when participants did not articulate what particular names or pauses meant to them.

This mode of remembering aligns with Connerton's (1989) distinction between inscribed memory and incorporated forms of memory. People may preserve knowledge of the past through the capacity to perform learned movements, even when they cannot or do not recount the historical origins of those actions. Among Kakure Kirishitan communities, *orasho* are memorized through recitation, gestures through imitation, and ritual timing through attentive observation. Memory is thus sustained not only through what practitioners can recount but also through their ability to perform and renew learned forms.

The importance of such embodied learning became particularly clear in an inter-generational encounter. In one household, a grandmother guided her granddaughter through the motions of a memorial prayer. She gently corrected the child's posture, adjusted the placement of her hands, and nodded approvingly when the rhythm of chanting aligned with the group. She did not explain the historical significance of the prayer or the identity of the ancestors invoked. As she later remarked, "She will understand later. First, she must learn how to do it" (personal communication, 2014). Through imitation and correction, the child learned not only how to perform the ritual but also how to coordinate her actions with those of others. What passed between generations was therefore not simply information about ancestors, but the practical capacity to sustain the rituals through which ancestral relationships were acknowledged.

Conversations with families in Shimo-Kurosaki, Shitsu, and Wakamatsu similarly indicated that some practitioners continue to transmit religious memories, values, and practices to younger generations through oral accounts and everyday participation. Such transmission does not depend on storytelling alone. It also occurs through what might be called *silent transmission*: knowledge conveyed through older practitioners' presence, conduct, and ritual activities. As Climo and Cattell (2002, 163) suggest, history is conveyed not only through "stories that are told but also through what is silenced or forgotten." Silence need not interrupt transmission; it may itself form part of how inherited commitments are carried forward.

This mode of transmission also gives ancestral veneration a relational dimension. Participants often describe feeling "accompanied" or "watched over" during rituals, particularly memorial observances. These descriptions should be understood as accounts of practitioners' experiences, not as claims independently verified by the researcher. The dead remain not merely objects of contemplation but figures within an ongoing relational field of obligation, remembrance, and care. This orientation resonates with Orsi's (2016) account of lived religion as a relational field involving humans, nonhumans, and the dead. Within this field, ancestors may act as moral

interlocutors whose remembered presence informs endurance, responsibility, and communal ties without requiring their role to be formulated as doctrine.

Ancestral veneration also provides a setting for the convergence of religious practices with different historical genealogies. Care for the dead draws on Buddhist memorial sensibilities, while remaining embedded in a Christian-inflected ritual repertoire. Practitioners do not necessarily describe this arrangement in terms of religious synthesis; it is often part of the ordinary organization of ritual life. A similar practical orientation appeared when a younger member questioned the continued recitation of certain *Orasho* phrases. The elder responded by resuming the accompanying gestures and continuing the sequence. A slight change in tempo, a firmer bow helped restore the familiar cadence, allowing the ritual to proceed without turning the question into a prolonged discussion. The episode does not establish that the question or any underlying disagreement was resolved; it shows how participants continued the ritual despite uncertainty. Such practices sustain inherited relationships within a broader Japanese religious world without requiring participants to reconcile their different histories explicitly.

As Bloch (2005) helps us understand, transmission involves more than preserving explicit accounts of the past. In Kakure Kirishitan practice, it involves both remembering particular righteous ancestors in faith and passing on ways of inhabiting a religiously plural environment. Faith is transmitted not simply as a set of propositions but also as a capacity to participate in a ritual world shaped by multiple religious histories. The altar and ancestral practices considered together thus reveal how material arrangements, bodily memory, and intergenerational responsibility help sustain religious relationships without requiring a fully articulated account of their shared meaning.

Ritual Performance: *Ohatsuhoage*

I turn now to *Ohatsuhoage*, the term used by the Murakami community in Shimo-Kurosaki for a ritualized communal meal that occupies a central place in its religious life. Comparable practices involving prayer, offerings, and the sharing of food and drink are also documented among other Kakure Kirishitan communities, although their ritual arrangements and terminology vary by region (Turnbull 1998; Miyazaki 1995, Whelan 1992; Munsu 2019a).

The name *Ohatsuhoage* evokes the Japanese practice of *hatsuho* 初穂, or the offering of the first fruits, traditionally associated with expressions of gratitude to the *kami* for the produce of the land. The element *age* is related to the Japanese verb *ageru* 上げる, meaning “to offer” or “to give,” while the prefix *O-* is an honorific marker that can convey respect or reverence. These linguistic elements foreground the act of offering, although their precise significance within Kakure Kirishitan

usage requires attention to practitioners' own understandings of the term. This linguistic resonance can be understood in the broader historical context in which Kakure Kirishitan communities incorporated and adapted elements of Buddhist, Shinto, and local practices to conceal and sustain their religious traditions. Such adaptations were not simply temporary disguises; they also became part of the ritual forms transmitted across generations. The precise historical relationship between *Ohatsuhoage* and Shinto offering practices, however, cannot be established from the name alone.

In the Kakure Kirishitan setting, offering takes shape within a religious tradition marked by a Christian inheritance and Japanese cultural forms. Its significance lies not simply in the act of offering but in how offerings are prepared, presented, and shared through an established sequence of practices. Conducted in domestic or semi-private communal settings, the ritual brings participants together through the preparation and presentation of offerings, followed by the shared consumption of rice, *sake*, *nishime*, and sashimi. Without ordained clergy or institutional liturgical supervision, participants sustain the ceremony through an established sequence of actions and close attention to one another.

During fieldwork, I observed how the ceremony unfolded through preparation of the space, collective chanting, moments of silence, and ritual offerings. Minor misalignments—a cushion slightly askew or a hand raised too early—are corrected silently through subtle nudges or repositioning. Participants monitored one another's movements, making small adjustments that preserve the sequence without interrupting it for verbal instruction. This coordination was also evident in prescribed seating positions, often arranged by age, gender, and ritual role, and in the careful timing of gestures. Chanting in unison produced a rhythm that helped organize breathing, posture, and attention. The *Orasho*, often archaic and partially opaque, were sustained through cadence, sequence, and repetition. As one participant observed, "Even if you don't understand the words, your body knows when to breathe" (personal communication, 2015). Through this shared rhythm, participants anticipate when to breathe, move, and join their voices with others, even when the words remained only partially understood. Although the ceremonies I observed followed a recognizable sequence, their performance varied according to the occasion and the participants involved.

The ritual's recognizable sequence did not require mechanical repetition. Variations in pacing, tone, and affect accompanied differences in occasion and atmosphere. Drawing on Schechner's (2002) concept of "restored behavior," *Ohatsuhoage* can be understood as a rehearsed sequence through which inherited forms are enacted anew. Participants neither reproduce every action mechanically nor improvise without constraint. They maintain a recognizable order while adjusting their performance to one another and to the circumstances of the occasion. Sound,

silence, posture, and shared attention contribute to an atmosphere that participants describe in terms of calm, intimacy, and connection. Pink's (2009) work on sensory ethnography helps illuminate how such embodied and sensory experiences contribute to religious meaning. Belonging is expressed not only through what is said or offered but also through the shared rhythm and atmosphere of ritual action.

The communal meal also connects participants with those remembered as the community's righteous ancestors in faith. Through preparing and sharing food, praying, and observing inherited practices, participants bring the past into the present without requiring a uniform theological explanation. Buddhist-or Shinto associate elements incorporated into the ritual are not necessarily treated as requiring explicit mediation. Instead, participants coordinate their actions within a familiar sequence, guided by inherited expectations and responsiveness to others. The ritual thus brings different religious histories into relation through shared practice, without requiring participants to formulate an explicit account of how those histories fit together.

The performance can also be examined through four interconnected dimensions of ritual space identified in my earlier analysis (Munsi 2019a). The *imaginative* dimension takes shape as participants prepare for the ceremony and orient themselves toward its inherited meanings. The *physical* dimension is established through the arrangement of the ritual setting, food, and objects. The *gestural* dimension emerges through coordinated movements, posture, chanting, and silence. For practitioners, these visible and embodied activities also open onto a *spiritual* or *communion* dimension in which prayer and offering establish a relationship with God and the community's righteous ancestors in faith. These dimensions are interdependent, rather than separate stages in a fixed sequence. Together, they offer complementary perspectives on the same performance: its anticipated meaning, material organization, embodied enactment, and spiritual significance as understood by practitioners.

The overall structure of *Ohatsuhoage* closely parallels aspects of Catholic Eucharistic liturgy, particularly in the place of prayer, the preparation and offering of food, and the sharing of a communal meal. As discussed in my earlier study (Munsi 2019a), the ritual is understood in relation to the historical absence of Catholic priests and the Eucharistic celebration among Kakure Kirishitan communities. The preface preceding the ritual's principal actions provides a further point of comparison with Catholic Eucharistic prayers. These parallels are significant not only for understanding the ritual's form but also for considering its historical formation and religious meaning. Accounts discussed in my earlier work, including Miura's (1980, 96–97) interpretation and oral traditions preserved in the Murakami community, associate *Ohatsuhoage* with the absence of priests and describe it as a ritual substitute for the Eucharist (Munsi 2019a). These accounts are important

for understanding how the ritual's origins and relationship to Catholicism have been interpreted and remembered, although they do not establish every detail of its historical development.

Nor should these parallels imply that the ritual's elements necessarily carry meanings identical to those of the Catholic Eucharist. Rice and *sake*, for example, occupy positions within a sacralized sequence that can be compared with bread and wine, but this resemblance does not establish doctrinal equivalence. Rather than treating *Ohatsuhoage* simply as a substitute for the Eucharist, I approach it as a historically situated ritual through which inherited religious forms are sustained and reworked in practice. Through prayer, offerings, and the communal meal, practitioners renew their relationship with God, remember their righteous ancestors in faith, and reaffirm their bonds with one another. Its significance lies not only in its relationship to Catholic liturgical forms but also in how these practices are enacted collectively. In this sense, *Ohatsuhoage* illustrates dialogue as lived infrastructure: continuity is sustained through shared arrangements, bodily responsiveness, remembrance, and repeated acts of participation, without requiring participants to articulate a uniform theological explanation or explicitly reconcile different religious histories.

Ritual coordination, affect, and continuity

Ritual participation has social and affective consequences within Kakure Kirishitan communities. Following ceremonies such as *Ohatsuhoage*, participants describe an atmosphere of intimacy, shared attention, and emotional composure. This intimacy is expressed less through overt emotional display than through synchronized movement, collective silence, careful pacing, and subtle mutual adjustment. Several interlocutors described feeling “settled” or “light” after rituals, using bodily metaphors to convey emotional states. These accounts suggest that the effects of ritual are experienced both individually and through the atmosphere created by collective participation (Munsi 2019b).

This affective dimension is significant given the histories of persecution, concealment, and social vulnerability that continue to inform Kakure Kirishitan identity. Ritual does not resolve these historical conditions, but it provides recurrent occasions for relationships to be renewed and inherited practices to continue. A familiar sequence offers temporary stability by making expectations recognizable and participation possible. Such stability should not be confused with the absence of tension or difference; it describes the restoration of a workable relational order through shared activity.

The consequences of ritual participation also extend beyond the ceremony itself. Shared observances bring elders, younger members, and other participants into a common social setting, where relationships are maintained through repeated

encounters. What is sustained is not merely knowledge of ritual procedures but participation in a community whose relationships depend, in part, on the continued practice of those procedures. Older practitioners remain important to this process, while younger participants acquire familiarity through involvement rather than formal instruction alone.

Continuity should not, however, be romanticized as evidence of an unbroken or self-sustaining tradition. Kakure Kirishitan communities face demographic decline, the pressures of heritage representation, and uncertainty about intergenerational transmission. Continuity remains contingent on the willingness and capacity of successive generations to participate and on the availability of settings in which participation can continue. Ritual coordination may help sustain the social relationships and the visibility of the tradition, but it cannot guarantee its future or reverse demographic and institutional pressures. Nor does ritual necessarily eliminate difference, conflict, or uncertainty, or produce agreement about religious identity. Its contribution is more modest but consequential: it provides recurring occasions for people to renew relationships and inhabit a shared social world through familiar practices. Resilience, if the term is used here, should therefore be understood as contingent rather than triumphant—as the continuing work of participation, repetition, and adjustment, not as evidence that the tradition is secure.

Discussion: Dialogue as Lived Infrastructure

This article has proposed a reconceptualization of dialogue as more than communicative exchange: it is a form of relational infrastructure through which differences are coordinated and relationships sustained over time. The Kakure Kirishitan case suggests that speech, doctrinal clarification, and mutual recognition constitute only one configuration of relational practice. Catholic-inflected *Orasho* sequences unfold alongside Buddhist mortuary rites, while local domestic and shrine-related practices coexist with concealed Christian devotions. Participants do not necessarily reconcile theological implications or seek conceptual synthesis. Instead, coordination takes place through timing, posture, spatial arrangement, and ritual sequence. Dialogue is thus enacted not only between people but also through their bodily engagement with ritual spaces, objects, and inherited practices.

This reframing challenges the assumption that dialogue presupposes subjects who articulate their beliefs and negotiate differences through discourse. Such models privilege speech, transparency, and recognition as primary forms of relational engagement. Barnes (2012), however, approaches interreligious dialogue as a process of learning through encounter, emphasizing attentiveness to difference and the transformation of religious understanding. The Kakure Kirishitan case extends

this perspective by showing that learning through relation may also be incorporated into bodily and ritual competencies rather than expressed through verbal exchange. Relational knowledge can be acquired through observing, repeating, and adjusting actions alongside others, even when participants do not explicitly articulate the meanings of their practices.

This opacity is historically situated. Under regimes of persecution, surveillance, and marginalization, overt expressions of religious difference could carry risk, shaping the circumstances in which religious practices were maintained and transmitted (Turnbull 1998). Yet the development of Kakure Kirishitan practice cannot be reduced to concealment alone. Research by Nakazono (2018) and Miyazaki (2014) points to the complexity of the tradition's formation, continuity, and relationship to the wider Japanese religious environment. The coordination visible today should therefore not be treated as a direct survival of persecution-era strategies, but as a historically conditioned mode of religious life shaped by inherited practices, later adaptations, and changing social circumstances.

The reinvention of religious material culture provides a particularly clear example of how continuity may be sustained through change. During fieldwork in Shimo-Kurosaki in November 2014, Murakami Shigenori showed me three newly made *Maria Kannon* figures, each with a Japanese woman's face and a distinct color. According to Murakami, the figures had distinct ritual functions: the gray figure was used during *Ohatsuhoage*, the blue figure served to protect households, and the white figure was used for funerals (Munsi 2015). These images did not simply reproduce an inherited religious object; they introduced new material forms and differentiated ritual uses into the community's religious life. Continuity need not depend on the unchanged preservation of sacred objects. It may also be sustained through the creation of new objects whose significance emerges through use in established ritual settings. As Riis and Woodhead (2012, 8) observe, sacred objects may become "the focus of collective sentiments" through their consecration by a group. Here, the figures' significance lies not only in their appearance but also in the differentiated occasions and relationships through which they acquire meaning.

Retaining the term "dialogue" is deliberate, but it requires a distinction between dialogical relation and mere coexistence. Traditions may reproduce themselves independently while occupying the same social space, without becoming responsive to one another. The dialogical dimension of lived infrastructure lies not in proximity alone, but in patterned adjustment: ritual timing may be modified, spatial arrangements calibrated, and bodily restraint exercised so that shared practices can continue despite unresolved differences. Material objects participate in this process by organizing repeated actions and providing a focus for relationships without requiring participants to articulate a shared interpretation.

This argument extends anthropological critiques of dialogical idealism (Asad 1993; Beyer 2013) by shifting attention from recognition to practical coordination. Drawing on theories of habitus and ritualization (Bourdieu 1977; Bell 1992), I do not equate habitus with dialogue. Rather, I examine how embodied dispositions acquire a relational dimension when practices are repeatedly adjusted in response to others. The infrastructure at stake is neither purely internalized nor simply external; it is reproduced through interactions among bodies, objects, spaces, and inherited expectations. Practitioners move across partially overlapping religious grammars without necessarily naming, ranking, or reconciling them. Their relations acquire durability because familiar practices can be repeated and adjusted without requiring their meanings to be continually renegotiated at the level of explicit belief.

The four dimensions of ritual space identified through *Ohatsuhoage* further clarify this argument. The imaginative dimension orients participants toward the ritual and its inherited meanings; the physical and gestural dimensions organize the setting and coordinate embodied action; and the spiritual dimension concerns the relationship with God and the righteous ancestors in faith as understood by practitioners. These dimensions are interdependent rather than discrete stages. The first three can be examined through participants' preparation, arrangements, movements, and interactions, while the fourth concerns the spiritual relationships that these actions express and sustain for practitioners. The ritual therefore extends beyond dialogue among those physically present: prayer, offering, and remembrance enact an embodied relationship with the dead, as understood by participants. This does not imply that all participants experience ancestral presence identically, or that the relationship takes the form of a literal verbal exchange. Rather, *Ohatsuhoage* provides a shared ritual framework through which relationships across generations can be acknowledged and renewed.

The same dynamics of embodied coordination and religious coexistence are visible in the annual shrine festivals documented in Nagasaki Prefecture. The Karematsu Shrine festival, held on 3 November in Shimo-Kurosaki, has brought together Kakure Kirishitan practitioners, Catholics, and Buddhists in a shared commemorative setting. At Kuwahime Shrine, located within the grounds of Fuchi Shinto Shrine in Nagasaki City, the 7 August festival commemorates Otomo Maxência, remembered as the Mulberry Princess. At the Yamanokami Shrine festival in Wakamatsu on 23 September, a Shinto priest is sometimes invited by Kakure Kirishitan participants to perform a ritual before they continue with their own ceremony. These occasions bring religious traditions into practical relation without necessarily requiring participants to reconcile their differences through formal theological dialogue (Munsi 2015; 2021). Although these festivals take place within historically situated religious settings, they bring participants into shared

ritual spaces without requiring a common theological position. Hardacre's (2017) account of shrine festivals and their changing place in public life provides broader historical context for considering such settings. Together, these examples extend the argument developed through *Ohatsuhoage* by showing how religious coexistence is enacted through participation in shared settings and the coordination of particular actions, rather than secured by shared theological commitments. The specific character of these relations nevertheless depends on each festival's history and local organization.

Foregrounding embodiment also reorients the ethics of pluralism. Ethics does not appear primarily as articulated tolerance or principled deliberation, but as disciplined disposition (Lambek 2010). It may be expressed through affective restraint, spatial discipline, and temporal patience—the cultivated capacity to sustain proximity without demanding resolution. Such restraint is neither simply passive nor reducible to strategic calculation; it reflects dispositions shaped by vulnerability and marginalization. Ethical life and dialogical infrastructure therefore intersect without being identical: the former concerns practical judgment and conduct more broadly, while the latter identifies the patterned coordination through which particular relations are maintained.

These perspectives may also illuminate settings beyond interreligious encounter, including multiethnic neighborhoods, postcolonial formations, and institutions marked by asymmetrical power. Such comparisons remain propositions for further inquiry rather than conclusions established by this case. Discursive models of dialogue remain indispensable where recognition, negotiation, and public deliberation are central. The infrastructural model is most useful where relationships are sustained through repeated practical adjustment under conditions of risk, marginality, or historically constrained visibility.

The concept of “lived infrastructure” is not intended to replace dialogical or lived-religion approaches, but to bring their concerns into closer ethnographic relation. Barnes's (2012) emphasis on learning through interreligious encounter highlights the transformative potential of relations across difference, while McGuire's (2008) account of lived religion directs attention to the everyday practices through which religious life exceeds institutional boundaries. Lived infrastructure adds a focus on how such relations become durable through repeated, embodied coordination. It identifies practical work through which relationships are learned, repeated, and adjusted in particular settings, even when their meanings remain only partially articulated.

Conclusion

This article has examined contemporary Kakure Kirishitan ritual life to reconsider how anthropology conceptualizes religious plurality. Across household altars, memorial observances, and *Ohatsuhoage*, religious differences are sustained not primarily through theological clarification or doctrinal reconciliation, but through timing, spatial organization, bodily discipline, and repetition. Catholic-inflected *Orasho*, Buddhist memorial practices, and local domestic and shrine-related practices remain operative within shared arrangements without requiring formal synthesis. Religious continuity is thus sustained through practical coordination even when participants do not explicitly reconcile the different histories and meanings involved.

This capacity is historically situated. It bears the imprint of persecution, surveillance, concealment, and later encounters with institutional Catholicism. The coordination visible in contemporary practice should neither be romanticized as harmonious coexistence nor treated as a universal model of interreligious relations. It is a historically formed way of maintaining religious relationships under conditions in which explicit articulation was not always possible, desirable, or safe. Its persistence, moreover, does not mean that the tradition is free from demographic decline or uncertainty about intergenerational transmission.

For anthropology, the broader implication is methodological: statements of belief need to be considered alongside the embodied, material, and temporal practices through which religious worlds are reproduced. “Dialogue as lived infrastructure” names the relational work performed through repeated adjustments of bodies, objects, spaces, and rhythms through which relationships are sustained across religious difference. The concept does not displace discursive models of dialogue; it extends their analytic reach to forms of relationality that may remain only partially articulated. Its contribution is to show how religious plurality is lived and reproduced not only through what people say about difference, but also through how they learn to act with others, engage material objects, and sustain shared practices in the presence of difference.

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