William J. Farge, S.J.

A Christian Samurai: The Trials of Baba Bunkō. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016. Pp. xxv + 300. Pb, \$34.95.

Baba Bunkō was a *kōdanshi* (professional storyteller and lecturer) active in the Japanese capital during the 1750s who became famous not only for the popularity of his talks and writings, but also for the scandal of his arrest and execution in 1759. Although little has been written about the *kōdanshi*, recent scholarship on manuscript culture and the lending library system of the Edo period (1603–1868) has demonstrated the influence these figures and their written works had on book culture in that period. This book therefore addresses a much-needed but hitherto overlooked topic in English-language scholarship. In a wide-ranging monograph that could benefit from some consolidation and reorganization, Farge deals with a number of topics related to Bunkō, tracing his transition from samurai to *kōdanshi*. Farge also offers translations and summaries of some of Bunkō's more seminal works. Although the biographical information on Bunkō frustratingly lacks citation, the translations and the spotlight they place on the role of the *kōdanshi* are welcome contributions to scholarship on the topic. As the title clearly states, however, Farge's primary objective is an evaluation of his hypothesis that Baba Bunkō was in fact a Christian, and that his existence as such proves that the Christianity brought to Japan by the Jesuits actually endured into the eighteenth century and played a greater role in Tokugawa cultural history than has hitherto been acknowledged by historians. Unfortunately, the historical evidence provided seems too thin to support these claims, or Farge's assertion that the mention of Christianity in two of Bunkō's works allows us to interpret all of his other writings through the prism of Christianity.

The strength of this work lies in its translation of popular texts from the Edo period that were widely read, but have received scant scholarly attention because they did not conform to literary scholars' traditional views of "literature." We now know, however, that *kōdanshi* spoke and wrote on current events and topics of great interest to their audiences, and that the manuscripts of their talks (which could not be printed due to censorship) were hugely popular items in the lending libraries. Bunkō appears to have been particularly daring in his choice of topics, especially in his open criticism of the Tokugawa shogunate and other Edo officials, which no doubt inspired much of his popularity.

Although the translations and summaries of Bunkō's texts are valuable contributions to our understanding of the *kōdanshi*, Farge's main argument is that Bunkō was a Christian, or at the very least a Christian sympathizer, and that he

was likely executed for that very sympathy rather than for the content of his talks and publications. In making this claim, Farge seeks to explain why Bunkō was the only person executed for his writing in the Edo period. He argues that the Tokugawa shogunate was still battling the influence of Christianity, but that hidden Christians were dealt with in secret so that the authorities would not have to acknowledge that they still existed and that more than a century of enforcement had failed. Thus, he argues, despite the absence of Christian references in the official record of Bunkō's arrest and prosecution, the fact that he mentioned Christianity in two of his works, as well as the unusually severe penalty he received, point to the likelihood that he was executed for his Christian sympathies.

To support his claim, Farge focuses specifically on the fact that the *kōdanshi* originated from a place in Iyo province (present-day Ehime Prefecture) that harbored a hidden Christian community (though he acknowledges that there is no concrete proof that Bunkō was a member of this community). He further cites three passages mentioning Christianity in two of Bunkō's works, *Tōji chinsetsu yōhiroku* (1756) and *Guchishūi monogatari* (1758). In *Tōji chinsetsu yōhiroku*, Bunkō claims that the act of confession in Pure Land Buddhism was not, in fact, Buddhist, but copied from Christianity. Later, in *Guchishūi monogatari*, Bunkō praises Christian prayer as better than that of Buddhism and Shinto.

The passages mentioned above would certainly have been controversial, but Farge makes clear in other parts of the book that Bunkō was well known for this provocative style in both his oral and written works. For Farge, the strongest proof of Bunkō's Christian devotion comes from the third passage, which is found in *Guchishūi monogatari*. Because Farge's interpretation of this passage is fundamental to his argument that Bunkō was Christian, it is important to examine his evidence in detail. In this passage, Bunkō states that the crests of the Imperial family and the Tokugawa are inferior and that "the most important symbol of all" was one that "was simple and proper [and] showed the body of a person" (32). Bunkō then goes on to reference the Shimabara Rebellion and its "Christian champion" (Amakusa Shirō), whose crest was "the principal image of the Christian Lord of Heaven (*kirishitan tentei no honson*)" (32). Farge concludes that the "crest" of Amakusa Shirō, to which Bunkō refers, must have been the battle flag of the Shimabara Rebellion, one example of which is currently held at the Amakusa Christian Museum in Kumamoto prefecture. Farge then argues that because Bunkō seems to say that the crest is the "body of a person" (32), when in fact the picture on the flag is of a chalice and the host, he must have been familiar with the significance of the Eucharist as the body of Christ, for this only would have been possible for someone with knowledge of church doctrine.

Although he includes the original Japanese text for a number of phrases in these quotes, Farge does not say which word he is translating as “crest,” making it hard to determine why he assumes Bunkō is speaking of the flag. This assumption is key to his argument but it is also problematic. The single surviving flag of the Shimabara Rebellion is an artifact attributed to that time period by modern historians, but there is no evidence that it was well known in the Edo period, nor was its design common knowledge or part of Tokugawa discourse on Christianity. Furthermore, though we know little about the hidden Christians of the eighteenth century, among those discovered in the nineteenth century, there was no evidence to suggest that they were aware of the battle flag or that they would have understood the significance of the chalice and the host. In Baba Bunkō’s time, the most common source of information on the Shimabara Rebellion was the *Shimabaraki*, a text that went through at least five published editions and was widely disseminated in the eighteenth century. The first illustration in that text shows Amakusa Shirō and his followers worshipping at an altar behind which hangs a picture of *Deus*, which some might describe as “a body of a person.” It is far more likely that Bunkō was referring to that picture as the “crest” of Amakusa Shirō, than that he or his audience would have known about the existence of a flag that was first widely displayed in a museum in the late twentieth century.

It is entirely possible that Farge is correct in suggesting that Baba Bunkō was executed for the references to Christianity in his works, but it is also possible he was arrested and punished for his public criticism of Edo officials and of the Shogun Tokugawa Ieshige (1712–61). As Farge makes clear, many of Bunkō’s oral presentations and written texts were provocative and violated edicts on censorship, including references to Christianity. However, these references do not provide strong enough evidence to claim that Bunkō was Christian, or that his work is evidence of the strength of Christianity in Tokugawa Japan, and the focus throughout the book on this argument unfortunately detracts from the strengths of the study, which include valuable scholarship on an important *kōdanshi* of the Edo period and the influence of his works on popular discourse of the time.

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