



Research Article

Types of Architectural Compositions of *komainu* Guardian Lions of Sengen (Asama) Shrines

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Abstract

One of the attributes of Shinto shrines are the *komainu* guardian lions, which are paired sculptures, sometimes supplemented with additional attributes such as lion cubs and an orb (jewelled). The current diversity of *komainu* makes it difficult to systematise them. This article examines the *komainu* of the shrines of Sengen (Asama). It is shown that more than half of them simultaneously belong to the “edo”-kotori and “edo”-tamatori styles, and some of them include elements of the “izumo” and “okazaki” styles, which leads to the conclusion that the existing division into styles is not suitable for the *komainu* of these shrines. This may be due to the influence of the Fuji (Fujiko) faith, which is indirectly confirmed by the unique *komainu* located in the territory of Fujizukas. All the *komainu* studied were divided into three types of compositions, the benchmark being the *komainu* of shrines important to the Fuji faith. The first type of *komainu* is present in the Fujisan Hongu Sengen Taisha. The right sculpture is a seated lion with its mouth grinning. Its paw is placed on a lion cub that is biting it. The left sculpture is a sitting lion, without a grin, with its paw resting on a ball. Variations of this type include the position of the lion cub under the paw. In Yamanaka Sengen Jinja the paw is on the back, in Kawaguchi Asama jinja it is on the head, and in Tamagawa Sengen Jinja the lion cub additionally holds a ball. Inversion, where the lion cub is part of the left sculpture of the composition, is quite popular, and is found in shrines in Yamanashi, Shizuoka, Aichi, Kanagawa prefectures and in Tokyo. The second type of *komainu* is present in Higashiguchi Sengen Jinja. These are essentially *komainu* mounted on mounds shaped like fujizuka, illustrating the proverb *Shishi-no-ko-otoshi*. Variants of this type, including two lion cubs, are found at Sezaki sengen Jinja and at Tagoyama Fujizuka. The third type of *komainu* is present in Kitaguchi Hongu Sengen Jinja and is two *komainu*, one of which growls. This type is the simplest and most common. The article is supplemented with illustrations of *komainu* for all types and their variants.

Keywords

Komainu, Sengen, Fuji, Shinto

1. Introduction

Komainu (狛犬), a pair of sculpted animals visually resembling a mixture of a lion and a dog, but traditionally referred to as guardian lions, are thought to have been introduced to Japan in the Nara period and to have been finalized in the

Muromachi period [1, 2]. Today, the *komainu* is one of the sculptures often found in Shinto shrine grounds [3]. Most often these are set immediately behind the torii, but in some shrines they may be either in front of the torii or between them

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(*sando*), as well as in front of the heiden and, even, the honden [4]. Since the main task of the komainu is to ward off evil spirits, one of the sculptures (most often the right one) is made with an open mouth, but their shapes depend on the specific cultural traditions accepted in a given area.

It is accepted to distinguish three main architectural styles [5]. The “Izumo” style is characterized by two komainu poses - those sitting quietly (“*yaegaki*”) and those preparing to jump (with their backs arched). They are most commonly found from Aomori Prefecture to Yamaguchi Prefecture. The edo style is characterized by a large tuft on the tail in the shape of a tassel (old style) or a developing tail (new style). The sculptural composition may represent a lion with bushy eyebrows and a slender body, which is characteristic of Miyagi Prefecture, and may also include a lion cub (子取り *kotori*) or a jewel ball (玉取り *tamatori*), which is characteristic of the Kanto region. The naniwa style is highly diverse and is characterized by lions with ferocious muzzles, short legs and long bodies that may have a curly mane. They are found in the south of Kyoto Prefecture, in Nara Prefecture and along the entire coast of the inland sea. Other styles are also distinguished, including the modern strongly “*okazaki*” style, but it is important to realize both the presence of a mix of styles and the lack of study of this issue. For example, the style for shrines in Shizuoka and Yamanashi prefectures is uncertain [5]. The reason for this is probably the large number of Sengen or Asama shrines (浅間神社)¹, that is, shrines where the kami of Mount Fuji (Asama-sama) is honored, some of which belong to followers of the Fuji (Fujiko) faith [6-8]. And since these shrines are somewhat isolated from the rest, it must be assumed that they have developed their own styles for komainu, which will be found in the shrines of Sengen (Asama) located in other prefectures.

Thus, within the scope of this paper, we have examined the komainu sculptural compositions found in Sengen (Asama) shrines. In total the author personally examined 68 known Sengen (Asama) shrines located in the area from Aichi Prefecture to Yamagata Prefecture. This selection included only shrines that had a worship hall (heiden). In the Sengen (Asama) shrines studied, komainu were found in only 69.5%, 8.6% more than the total number of “other” shrines [5]. Of all the Sengen (Asama) shrines with komainu, more than half (55.8%) belong to the “edo”-*kotori* style, but 71.4% of them should also be attributed to the “edo”-*tamatori* style, and the figures of some should be attributed to the ‘izumo’ and “*okazuki*” styles. In this regard, it is impossible to talk about a clear division into styles. As we have already said, probably the reason for this is the isolation of these shrines from others, pro-

vided by the followers of the Fuji faith, which can be indirectly confirmed by the presence of unique komainu, established on the territory of fujizuka (富士塚) - mounds, imitating Fuji, for the ritual of the community (since on fujizuka are located shrines Sengen (Asama), they are also included in our study). Anyway, we propose to systematize the sanctuaries of Sengen (Asama) into types depending on the pose of the lion (sitting, standing, preparing to jump), the position of its jaws (grinning or growling), the presence and position of the lion cub.

2. Basic Compositions

2.1. First Type Composition and Its Variants

The head shrine of the Sengen (Asama) is 富士山本宮浅間大社 *Fujisan Hongu Sengen Taisha*, located in Fujinomiya City (Shizuoka Prefecture) [9]. The komainu of this sanctuary are installed in front of the torii. The right sculpture represents a seated lion with a grinning mouth. Its left paw is placed on a lion cub that bites it. The left sculpture is a seated lion, without a grin, with its paw resting on a ball (Figure 1). Interestingly, this composition is not found anywhere else, but similar compositions may differ in the position of the lion cub. Thus, in 山中浅間神社 *Yamanaka Sengen Jinja* and 河口浅間神社 *Kawaguchi Asama Jinja* located in Yamanashi Prefecture, the lion cub is pinned down with a paw near the back and head, respectively, and in 多摩川浅間神社 *Tamagawa Sengen Jinja*, located in Ota, Tokyo, the lion cub is holding a balloon (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Komainu in 富士山本宮浅間大社 *Fujisan Hongu Sengen Taisha*.

¹ The variant reading of the kanji depends solely on the tradition adopted in a particular shrine.



Figure 2. The position of lion cubs in komainu sculptures in 山中浅間神社 Yamanaka Sengen Jinja (left), 河口浅間神社 Kawaguchi Asama Jinja (center), and 多摩川浅間神社 Tamagawa Sengen Jinja (bottom right).

A variation of this composition is the komainu at the 森浅間神社 *Mori Sengen Jinja* in Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture. The right sculpture represents a seated lion, without a grin, whose paw is nudging a lion cub. Another lion cub is

reaching for the lion's muzzle, and another is climbing up its back. The left sculpture represents a seated lion, without a grin, whose paw rests on a ball. A lion cub peeks out from under the paw. Such a large number of lion cubs is not found anywhere else (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Komainu in 森浅間神社 *Mori Sengen Jinja*.

Inversion is quite popular, when the lion cub is part of the left sculpture of the composition. The lion with a wide-open mouth (growling), less often grinning, presses it with a paw in the back area, while the lion of the right sculpture holds a paw on the balloon. This type of composition is notably found in 須山浅間神社 *Suyama Sengen Jinja*, located in Susonoo (Shizuoka Prefecture), from where the southern trail to Mt. Fuji begins. In Shizuoka Prefecture, this species is also found in 駒門浅間神社 *Komakado Sengen Jinja*; in 浅間神社 *Asama Jinja* and 一幣司浅間神社 *Ippeishi Sengen Jinja* in Gotemba, and in 富知六所浅間神社 *Fuji Rokusho Sengen Jinja* in Fuji. In Yamanashi Prefecture, this species is found in 浅間神社 *Sengen Jinja* in Oshino; in 新倉富士浅間神社

Arakura Fuji Sengen Jinja and 小室浅間神社 *Omuro Sengen Jinja* in Fujiyoshida; and in 浅間日月神社 *Sengen Nichigetsu Jinja* and 富士御室浅間神社 *Fuji Omuro Sengen Jinja* in Fujikawaguchiko. This composition is also found in other places, such as 浅間神社 *Sengen Jinja* in Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture) and in Yamato (Kanagawa Prefecture), in 亀戸浅間神社 *Kameido Sengen jinja* in Koto (Tokyo), and in 大森浅間神社 *Ōmori Sengen Jinja* in Ota (Tokyo), with the lion cub also growling in the latter case.

The sculptural compositions in 新橋浅間神社 *Niihashi Sengen Jinja* in Gotemba (Shizuoka Prefecture) are of definite interest. The “inversion” composition already described by us, where the left sculpture includes a lion cub, and the right one

is set in front of the heiden, while both sculptures set in front of the torii (at the entrance to the sanctuary) include a lion cub: in the right sculpture it bites a paw, and in the left one it is pressed by a paw in the back area (Figure 4). This variant is

not found anywhere else and is essentially a mixture of the basic composition from Fujisan Hongu Sengen Taisha and its inversion.



Figure 4. komainu in 新橋浅間神社 Niihashi Sengen Jinja.

Another variant of the spatial arrangement of the lion cub is its support by the paw of the “main” lion, which can be seen in the komainu composition installed in front of the heiden in

小山浅間神社 Koyama Sengen Jinja in Matsudo (Chiba Prefecture), where the lions of the right and left sculptures support the lion cubs (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Komainu in 小山浅間神社 Koyama Sengen Jinja.

2.2. Second Type Composition and Its Variants

Another type of composition is found in 東口本宮富士浅間神社 Higashiguchi Fujisan Sengen Jinja, located in Oyama (Shizuoka Prefecture), from where the Subashiri route, the eastern trail to Mt. Fuji, begins [10, 11]. This composition

combines komainu and fujiizuka, as both sculptures are located on mounds that visually resemble fujiizuka. The right sculpture is a roaring lion standing at the top, with its gaze turned toward a lion cub climbing the slope. This sculpture is believed to illustrate the proverb 獅子の子落とし shishi no ko otoshi [12]. The left sculpture of the composition is a standing lion without a grin (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Komainu in 東口本宮富士浅間神社 Higashiguchi Fujisan Sengen Jinja.

This composition is quite rare and is not found anywhere else. However, the sculptural compositions located in Saitama Prefecture, 瀬崎浅間神社 *Sezaki Sengen Jinja* in Soka and 田子山富士塚 *Tagoyama Fujizuka* in Shiki, should be attributed to the same style. In the former, the lions are also perched on two hills, only they are preparing to jump, and the

lion cub, which is part of the left sculpture, seems to be running away (Figure 7). In the second shrine, lions are standing and lion cubs are present on the right and left sculptures (Figure 8). Both shrines have fujizuki on the grounds, and the fence of the 浅間下社 *Sengen Shimoshiya* shrine [13], located on the fujizuki grounds in Shiki, has unique rudimentary komainu (Figure 9).



Figure 7. Komainu in 瀬崎浅間神社 *Sezaki Sengen Jinja*.



Figure 8. Komainu in 田子山富士浅間神社 Tagoyama Fujisan Sengen Jinja.



Figure 9. Komainu on the fence in 浅間下社 Sengen Shimosha.

2.3. Third Type Composition and Its Variants

Another species is found in 北口本宮富士浅間神社 *Kitaguchi Hongu Fujisan Sengen Jinja*, located in Fujiyoshida (Yamanashi Prefecture), where the Yoshida Trail, the northern trail to Mt. Fuji, originates [14]. Both lions in the sculptural composition are sitting and differ from each other only by the fact that the right one roars (Figure 10). This type is found in almost half of the sanctuaries of Sengen (Asama), on the territory of which komainu are installed. Two of them deserve special attention. In 日限富士浅間神社 *Higiri Fuji Sengen Jinja*, located in Togichi (Togichi Prefecture), a small additional left sculpture including a lion pressing a lion cub near its back (i.e., an inversion of the first type) is installed

alongside a komainu of this style. Located in 鳩森八幡神社 *Hatonomori Hachiman Jinja* (Shibuya, Tokyo), the fujizuka has a komainu with a depression on the top where water accumulates. The reason for creating these depressions is unknown. According to one version, the sculpture is a union of the komainu with kappa (河童), the spirit of water, in gratitude for his help in a fire (18th century), hence the sculptures are also called カッパ狛犬 (*kappa komainu*). According to another version, water was used for baptism by secret Christians [15]. The second version, in our opinion, is more plausible because, firstly, the kappa cult is not widespread in this area. Secondly, the kappa sculptures with a depression for water on the head or combined with other sculptures are unknown to us. Finally, thirdly, the kappa and komainu installed on the territory of the

previously mentioned Tagoyama Fujizuka, which are separate sculptures, do not have any depressions for water. In addition, in favor of the second theory is the physical possibility of using small amounts of water for baptism of secret Christians, as well as some obvious identity of the common Sintoist ideas about kami as energies with the divine energies in Christianity. The above is particularly interesting because it is common to

speak of Christian-Buddhist syncretism. In addition, Fujiizuka is installed on the grounds of a shrine whose chief kami is the patron saint of war, Hachiman (八幡神), then the followers of the Fuji faith, like the Christians, practiced the path of resistance to war.



Figure 10. Komainu in 北口本宮富士浅間神社 Kitaguchi Hongu Fuji Sengen Jinja.

3. Conclusions

Thus, komainu sanctuaries Sengen (Asama) form a separate layer of compositions. There are three main compositions, which for convenience we “compaund” to the main shrines, from which the ascent to Fuji begins. The first composition is found exclusively in Fujisan Hongu Sengen Taisya, but it has several variants, including the most frequently encountered inversion variant. The second composition is also found exclusively in Higashiguchi Fujisan Sengen Jinja, although a comaine from at least two other shrines from Saitama Prefecture can be included in this type of composition. To be fair, while this composition is rare, it is also found at 大山阿夫利神社 *Ōyama Afuri Jinja*, located atop Mount Oyama (Kanagawa Prefecture), which has an auxiliary Sengen shrine, but it is impossible to assert a connection between this shrine and the type of sculptural composition. Finally, the third composition, the simplest in our opinion and the most widespread, is found in almost half of all shrines Sengen (Asama).

Author Contributions

Vladimir Gorshkov Cantacuzene: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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