



あ - ん, *Komainu and Niô...*

Komainu (狛犬 literally “Korean dogs”) are figures resembling lions. The origin of this term is obscure since the guardian animals are lions rather than canines. They are placed in pairs in the inner sanctuary of a Shintô shrine. They appear at its portal, or on both sides of the entrance. When inside the Shintô sanctuary, they are called *jinnai komainu* 陣内狛犬 and are mostly made of wood or metal; The outside pair of stone lions, called *sandô komainu* 参道狛犬 (approach way *komainu*) are an extension of the former and are from a later tradition that broadly developed during the Edo period. They are believed to be the protectors of the sanctuary. Some of the guardian lions have a single horn, and this feature is also found on lions in China guarding the entrances of tombs. The common belief that all Shintô shrines have *komainu* is as false, as is the idea that Buddhist temples never have them: Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto contains a beautiful pair of *komainu*, as do many other Buddhist precincts.



Pair of shishi or komainu, part of the architecture of a temple's gate. 17th century, attributed to Hidari Jingorô, famous carver of the nemuri neko (« Sleeping cat”) at Nikkô Tôshô-gû shrine

Ni-ô (仁王) are the 2 muscular guardians posted at the entrance of Buddhist temples in Japan, Korea and China, in a separate structure, called *niomon* in Japan (the *nio*-gate). They are naked except for a piece of cloth or scarf around their waist often looped around their shoulder and whirling above their heads. They are also called *kongôrikishi* (金剛力士) in Japanese. According to tradition, they both emanate from a single entity, Vajrapani, one of the earliest bodhisattva, guiding the Buddha armed with a thunderbolt to keep all evil spirits at safe distance. Yet in Indian Buddhism, Vajrapani is not as frightening as his dual representation in China and Japan, with knotted muscle and a terrific face showing fury ready to burst. The *Komainu* at the entrance of Shintô shrines (mostly) and the *Ni-ô* at the doorway of Buddhist temples share a common bond: they are saying the same thing. One is starting the word “a-um” or “om” by opening its mouth, and the other is finishing the word by closing it. The first is called Agyo (阿形, “A” shape) in Japanese, and the second is Ungyô (吽形 “UN” shape). In case of the *Ni-ô*, Agyo often wields a thunderbolt and is on the right side when facing the temple, and Ungyô is either barehanded, often with one closed fist, or carrying a sword or another weapon, and is on the left. In the case of *Komainu* however, the orientation of Agyo and Ungyô varies. For somewhere with a Chinese influence, both lions are Agyoⁱ, and in some regions such as Fukui, Ungyô is placed on the rightⁱⁱ. Independent of their orientation, however, an interesting thing is the late adoption of a pair of stone guardians in the shape of lion at Shintô shrines, just like the *ni-ô* guarding the Buddhist temples, and even

more remarkable is the adoption of the exact features of their faces, pronouncing the same word, “Aum”, with a clear Buddhist origin. That is one more example of the complex syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism into one faith, as can be seen by the fact that many Buddhist temples host one or more Shinto shrines (like Sensô-ji in Asakusa, Tokyo), and that some Shinto *kami* are also personified as Buddhist *bosatsu* (bodhisattva), such as Hachimanⁱⁱⁱ.



Pair of Ni-ô, enameled ceramic from Enshû kiln, central Japan, dated 1655

The sound “om” is a sacred word in Indian religions (including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism), and is written with two letters of the Devanāgarī Sanskrit alphabet: ओम often reduced to ॐ in India. The vowel “O” (ओ) can be further divided into the two consecutive vowels “A” (अ) and “U” (उ), so that it thus becomes spelled अ उ म : “aum”.

“A” (अ) and “M” म are considered to be the alpha and omega of the Sanskrit alphabet. They also happen to be the first あ and last ん sounds of the Japanese syllabary. It is also said that this sound contains all other sounds, all words, all languages, so “aum” is a representation of the All. In Indian religions, “aum” is the primordial vibration that existed at the creation of the universe, just like in the Christian statement, “in the beginning was the word”^{iv}.

“Aum” is also the symbol of several important triads, like earth, atmosphere, heaven and the union of the three major Hindu gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. According to Hindu philosophy, the letter “A” represents creation from Brahma's golden nucleus; the letter “U” refers to Vishnu the God of the middle who preserves this world, and the letter M symbolizes the final part of the cycle of existence. In other words, the beginning and the end are separated by time. Agyo pronounce the first “A” and Ungyo the last “M” of the sound “a-u-m”. The middle “U”, representing duration, or time is left unsaid, at least symbolically since there are only two *niô* or two *komainu*. By crossing the Buddhist temple gate, by entering the shintô shrine, the visitor is actually cutting into Agyo and Ungyo’s speech, and, while moving through, may become the third invisible entity, time. Furthermore, keeping in mind that Ni-ô at the Buddhist temple entrance are a duplication of the single bodhisattva Vajrapani, one can either consider these representations as the passage from dualism to unity or three (counting the space between them) subsumed to one.

Thus, the next time you cross between two *komainu* or two *niô*, reading the deities’ lips and completing their phrase by your movement, you will indubitably feel yourself part of the cosmos...

ⁱ The original model which stands at the Qianling Mausoleum in China was sculpted around 706, and is also the model for the lions at the entrance of Chinese restaurants all over the world.

ⁱⁱ See Kotera Yoshiaki *The Birth and Habitat Distribution of Shrine Guardian Lions*, Japanese Religions, Vol. 34 (1): 7-23

ⁱⁱⁱ Some further syncretism may be seen in the shintô *kami* Koyasu-sama, supplanted by the female *bosatsu* Kishimo-jin nursing a baby and being a secret representation of the Christian Virgin Mary during the persecution against Japanese Christians.

^{iv} “... and the word was with God and the word was God”, first line of St. John’s Gospel.