

# Meteorology and Myth: The Thunderstorm and Tornado Deities of Japan

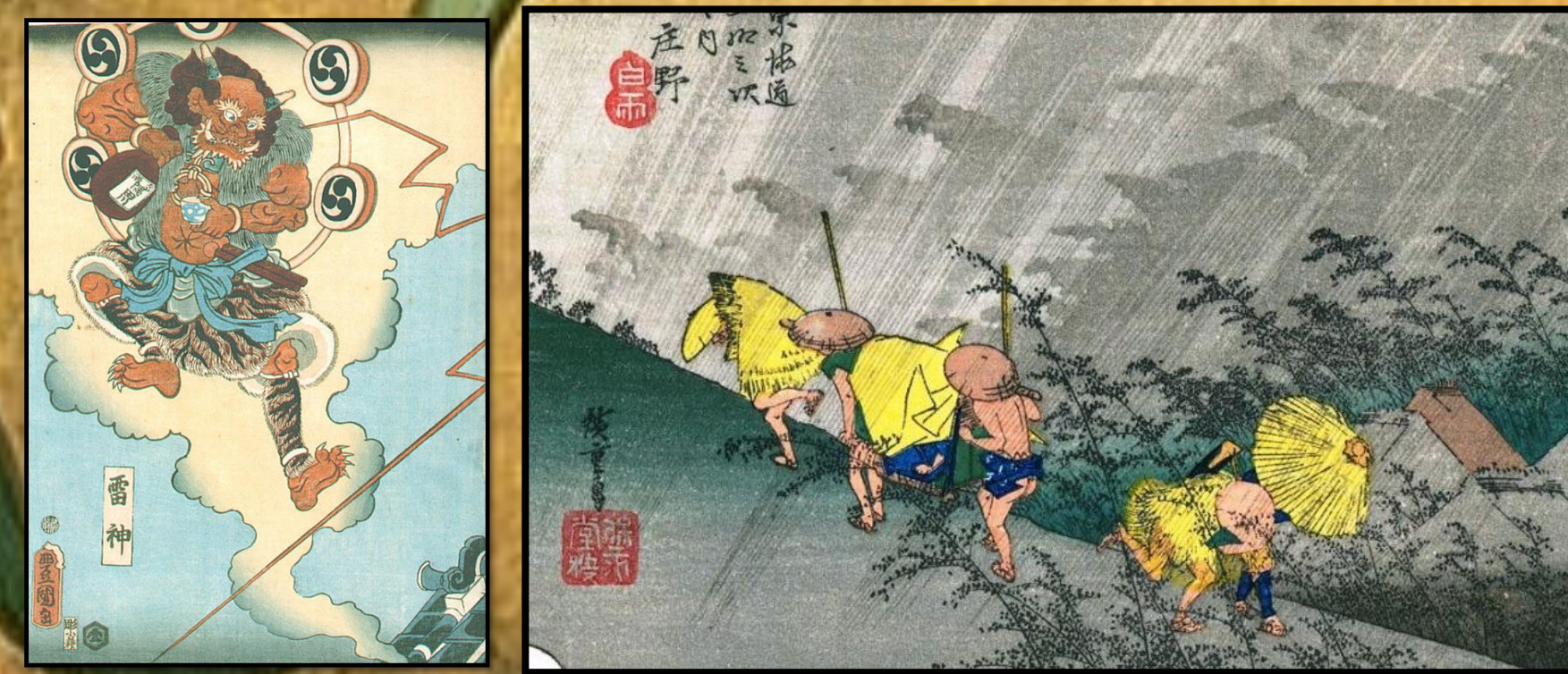
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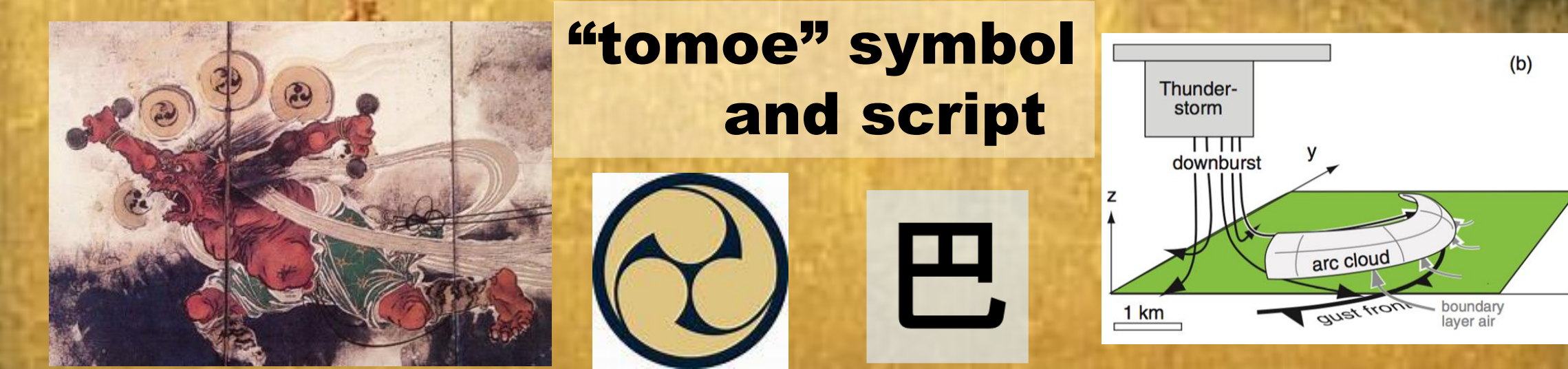
**Raijin 雷神** is a Shinto god of thunderstorms and lightning.

He is usually depicted as beating on a drum to create thunder. Persistent rumbling of thunder is common during thunderstorm advance. Gust fronts and roll clouds will create a series of thunder shockwaves. Raijin and his lightning are often red in color.



It is said that *“he will descend from the clouds and take children away”*. The malevolence of Raijin could be explained by Japan’s physical geography. Intense summer thunderstorms are common in the humid subtropical climate. Additionally, much of Japan’s topography is steeply sloped. Flash floods frequently occur during downpours, and floods are especially powerful through Japan’s valleys. These flash floods could easily sweep away any peasant children working the fields and forests during summer.

Notable is the connected arc of rounded red disks. This arc of drums “taiko” resembles a frontal line as viewed from above. The red disks coincidentally resemble a warm front or squall line advance.



A common Japanese folk tradition is for parents to tell their children to always *“hide your bellybuttons from Raijin”* during lightning storms. The warning is made that the storm god will eat the navels (or abdomens) of careless children. Perhaps a child who crouches low, in order to make themselves a smaller, covered, target during the lightning flashes, would stand a better chance of avoiding a strike, as lightning tends to hit the tallest object nearby. Many older Japanese say they instinctively cover their stomachs when they hear thunder!



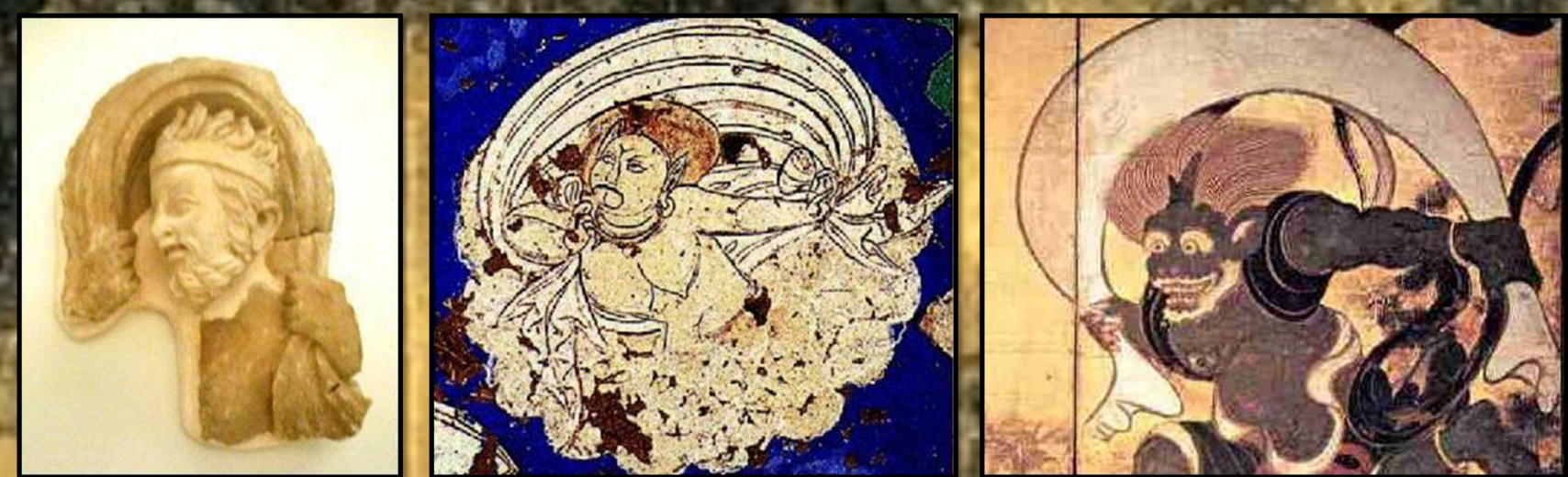
風神雷神図  
Artwork: “Wind God & Thunder God”  
17th Century  
Artist: Ogata Korin, 1658 – 1716  
Two-folded screen; color and gold on paper.  
(164.5 x 181.8 cm)  
Location: Tokyo National Museum

The East Asia Shinto/Buddhist/Taoist religions include syncretic blends of mythology. Fujin’s image is based on Greco-influenced Buddhist iconography. Raijin also takes other forms and names in other East Asian cultures. Ex. Chinese monkey thunder god Lei Gong



**Fūjin 風神** is a wind god of ancient Shinto legend, although his image likely of Buddhist origin. He is the cause of violent wind storms. Cyclones, whirlwind storms, monsoon winds and tornadoes and waterspouts are all weather hazards characteristic of Japan’s climate.

Fūjin is depicted as a demon with green skin. Tornadoes are demonic in their destruction and should be feared, but *why is he green?* Japan is a verdant green country. A tornado or strong dust devil (whirlwind) would pick up the local vegetation. Tree leaves, rice plants, etc. could be drawn into the ascending, rotating debris field of its cyclonic system (in contrast to the dirt-brown tornadoes of America’s dusty plains). Perhaps his color is observed because of the “green sky” effect (produced by complex atmospheric scattering), which often precedes tornadoes.



Fūjin carries a bag of wind. The bag may represent the funnel shaped cloud. Some tornadoes and waterspouts tilt horizontally, similar to how Fūjin carries his wind bag. The winds from Fūjin’s bag *“allowed the sun to shine”*. This may derive from the strong and persistent Asian summer monsoon. These winds come from the east, along with the rising eastern sun. Also – the *east* winds of cyclones are usually the most destructive.



YouTube video: Strong dust devil in Japan picking up green debris.



Green sky and elongated funnel cloud “bag”.

It may sound fitting, but Fūjin is NOT the origin of the famous Tornado “F-Scale.” (now EF scale) The Fujita scale is named after the late Theodore Fujita, preeminent expert on tornadoes and thunderstorms.



This research is one part of a larger investigation into “Meteorology and Myth.” This poster is based on a paper presented at the Southeastern Association of American Geographers conference 12/20/2018.

References available upon request. See the full presentation PDF linked on my academic blog site with this QR code.



Images and references to Raijin and Fūjin are ubiquitous in both the traditional and popular culture from Japan.

