

Trans/Formations

Tentative Remarks on the Practice of Kata as Bodily Experience of Time

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At nihilominus sentimus, experimurque, nos aeternos esse.

—Spinoza, *Ética* V-23, scholio

In a number of Japanese artistic disciplines, the so-called ways of art or *geidō* (芸道), artistic practice is based on learning *kata*. According to Ryōen Minamoto 源了圓 (1920–2020), exercises in *kata* assume a fundamental role especially in Nō theater (能) and in *budō* (武道), the so-called “martial arts.”¹ *Kata* is a term usually translated into western languages as “form.” But what kind of form is intended here? And what kind of experience is realized in the artistic practice of *kata*?

KATA: TRANSMISSION AS TRANS/FORMATION

Kata is usually written in Japanese with the ideograms 型 or 形. If one looks these up in the *Kenkyūsha Japanese-English Dictionary*,² one finds, in both cases, that possible translations include “model,” “pattern,” “form,” or “shape.” The term *kata*, therefore, refers to the idea of “figure” or “form.” As Émile Benveniste pointed out so well in his celebrated paper “La notion de ‘rythme’ dans son expression linguis-

1. Cf. MINAMOTO 1989, 1992.

2. MASUDA 1992, 750.

tique” included in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*,³ “form” is one of the most complex and crucial terms in Greek culture and philosophy – and hence, in those of Europe and the West. Indeed, in ancient Greek, “form” could be expressed by *rhythmòs* (ῥυθμός), *skhēma* (σχῆμα), *morphé* (μορφή) or *eĩdos* (εἶδος), thus taking on, in turn, a radically different meaning, depending on whether one meant a dynamic form captured within its temporal becoming (such as, for example, the gesture of an actor on stage); a static form, foreign to becoming (such as a geometric shape); a form in the sense of an external surface of something (such as the skin of the human body);⁴ or a visual form, i.e. form as it appears to sight. Consequently, translating *kata* as “form” becomes a matter of trying to understand what is meant by the word, whether its meanings are similar to those found in Greek and Western contexts or completely different, proper to Japanese artistic culture.

Anyone who has practiced any kind of martial art will probably be aware of what *kata* refers to: it is first and foremost a gesture or movement codified according to precise rules. A *kendō* (剣道) or *iaidō* (居合道) *kata*, for example, consists of a rigorously codified series of movements that the practitioner has to repeat a number of times until it is mastered in the best possible way. It is performed as a series of movements which are executed with a Japanese sword, a real one or one made of wood, and which serve as an ideal model for certain types of combat situations against one or more adversaries. That is, the *kata* can be considered a “canonic model” of sorts for those who wish to practice swordsmanship. It represents the result of generations of empirical research done by masters of the art, which has been perfected, passed on to their pupils and used to monitor and guide the latter’s practice.

In order to better understand the meaning of “form” in terms of *kata*, one can resort to the ideogram’s etymology. The original image of

3. Cf. BENVENISTE 1966.

4. This seems to be also the etymology of the Japanese word for “body,” *karada* (体). Cf. SHIRAKAWA 2010, 218.

the ideogram used to express *kata*, 型, clarifies its meaning: the upper left part of 型 represents a casting mold; the ideogram in the lower part indicates that the mold is made of “earth” or “clay,” 土 (*tsuchi*), whereas the two lines on the upper right-hand side indicate a bladed tool to put the mold in good shape.⁵ The same mold can be seen on the left of the second ideogram used for writing *kata*, 形, whereas the three lines on the right suggest the “color” and visual “beauty” of the object created by the mold.⁶ *Kata* is therefore a “model,” a kind of “mold” used to “give a beautiful form” to something.

As already suggested, one might even try to compare it to a kind of *kanón* (κανών), even though, in this case, a canon unlike the one used in ancient Greek sculpture and architecture, since Pythagorean numbers and references to mathematical proportions are not involved. The *kata* of the Japanese ways of art is not, in fact, an ideal form based on mathematical relationships, but rather a gesture. We must not make the mistake of perceiving *kata* as a sort of platonic idea, eternal, transcendent, and expressible in mathematical terms. *Kata* is gesture and does not have a numerical rationality, but a functional one, that is, one based on practice and not on mathematical principles. And so, a perfect, eternal model of a gesture, disembodied and existing for itself alone in some kind of *hyperuranion* is not possible: *kata* does not exist as such unless it is incarnated in the individual bodies of those who practice it, coming into being at the very moment it is performed. Above all else, then, *kata* exists in so far as there are numerous *kata* performed by the bodies of the practitioners, a multitude of gestures which on close inspection differ from one another. But at the same time, these individual *kata* refer back to a *Kata*, which on the one hand is not captured by any one of the bodies incarnating it, yet on the other cannot exist without them. However, such a *Kata* must not be understood as a kind of atemporal idea which exists separately from its concrete mani-

5. SHIRAKAWA 2010, 238.

6. SHIRAKAWA 2010, 236f.

festations, but rather as something similar to a stoic incorporeal form, which subsists together with the practitioners’ bodies even if it does not coincide with them.

Beside the bodies, which actualize a multitude of fleeting *kata* during practice, therefore, there subsists a *Kata* which through practice is transmitted in temporal succession down through the generations, from masters to pupils, thus bringing about the fragile birth of a “tra/dition” which is at the same time a trans/fer and a trans/lation, known in Japanese as *ryūha* (流派). This term refers to the idea of “flowing” or “streaming,” *nagareru* (流れる), suggesting a temporal succession in historical becoming. The practice of *kata*, then, is the bodily experience of a “tra/dition” which actually is a “trans/ition,” an *Übergeben* or *utsuriwatari* (移り渡り), that at the same time involves an *utsurikawari* (移り変わり), a “trans/formation” of the incorporeal form known as *Kata* which goes *trans, über, to the other side*—for example, of a river, like in *wataru* (渡る)—and consists therefore of a movement, *utsuri* (移り), which implies at the same time change, *kawari* (変わり). Accordingly, one might dare to say with Marcus Aurelius (or his interpretation in Victor Goldschmidt⁷ or Gilles Deleuze⁸) that the practice of *kata* implies a “trans/formation” within the relation of *aión* (αἰών, i.e. the incorporeal *Kata*) and *chrónos* (χρόνος, i.e. the transmission from master to pupil). The practice of *kata* would thus seem to coincide with the bodily experience of time, as I will attempt to outline below.

THE BODILY EXPERIENCE OF TIME IN *KEIKO*

The experience of immersing oneself in a *Kata’s* flow of trans/formation allows one to gain a bodily experience of time, in which the sapiential and philosophical value of the aesthetic gesture of the *kata* is concentrated.

7. GOLDSCHMIDT 1953.

8. DELEUZE 1969.

The *kata* is practised in *keiko* (稽古), a term which immediately reveals an indissoluble link to time. Indeed, *keiko* consists principally in the bodily experience of the past, which is realized through the reception and assimilation of *kata* on the part of the pupil. *Keiko* is a term composed of two ideograms, *kei* (稽), which can also be read as *kangaeru* (稽える), “to think,”⁹ and *ko* (古), that is *inishie*, meaning something “ancient” that reaches us from a “distant past,” and hence refers to an “origin,” to a “beginning” for the gesture one is attempting to perform. Thus, *keiko* means above all else “to think” something that arrives from a distant “past.” One’s own situation in the present is linked to an unobjectifiable, original past, precisely to the extent that such an origin must be irredeemably lost, immemorial as are all origins (one could think here, for example, of the Indo-European root of words which, as Giorgio Agamben observes, is heuristic precisely because it refers to an “historically undocumented state of language, ... to an “unspoken” yet nonetheless real language”).¹⁰

Inishie is the virtual, inexhaustible origin as *Kata* which eludes all its actualizations, rendering them phantasmatic and transitory, just as in the “dream *Nō*” (夢幻能) of Zeami 世阿弥 (c. 1363–c. 1443), the ghosts returning to meet mortals reference an unobjectifiable Death. Similarly, the Death anticipated in the opponent-less combat of an *iaidō kata* seems to arrive from a future one must remain forever in wait of. In the taking part, in the being here and now of the practice, the phantasmatic co-presence of past and future is bodily experienced, and in the practice of *iaidō kata* the bond with this co-presence is produced by the element of sentiment, by the Buddhist sense of compassion (慈悲) which must permeate the practitioner’s every gesture, or by the intensity of the expression of *ki* (気) which needs to summon a “meeting” (*kiai*, 気合^ㇿ) with such phantasmatic otherness.

Not only are the past and the future experienced within the bodily

9. SHIRAKAWA 2010, 249.

10. AGAMBEN 2001, 48.

process of trans/formation of *kata*, in *keiko* there is a constant experience of the present as continuous flow of gesture, movement or mobility about which, for example, Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) speaks in *Art and Morality*,¹¹ taking up the theme from Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*.¹² As the famous Nō actor Kanze Hisao 観世寿夫 (1925–1978) writes, “Nō *kata* is constantly flowing”¹³ but such flowing is a flowing of singular gestures that reveal, at the same time, the discontinuity inherent in continuity, the *kire-tsuzuki* (切れ・つづき) about which Ōhashi Ryōsuke 大橋良介 writes.¹⁴ Such a discontinuous continuity is evident in every gesture of the practitioners, and occurs in terms of *seichūdō*, *dōchūsei* (静中動、動中静), often emphasized in *iaidō* as “movement in stillness, stillness in movement.” In learning *kata*, one of the fundamental problems is precisely that of bodily expressing the contradiction which is the continuity of discontinuity. In the *kata* gesture, stillness and movement, virtual and actual, continuity and discontinuity, breathing in and breathing out, temporality and spatiality mutually arise in their dynamic inseparability. The same is true for the term *ma* (間) in *kendō* (剣道), for example, which represents not simply the distance from one's opponent, but a variable spatiotemporal relationship within which an event takes place, that of striking in the right way, according to an exactness that is neither numerical nor measurable but should rather be understood as the “rightness” of the propitious moment, of *kairōs* (καιρός).

In the moment of practice, therefore, what takes form is firstly the temporal finitude of every existence in its self-contradictory or phantasmatic presence, where “phantom” is a “ghost” or “specter” in the sense intended by Jacques Derrida, for example, in *Specters of Marx*:

“Ghost” is something of which we must say it is and at the same time it

11. Cf. NISHIDA 2003, 19, 24 ff.

12. BERGSON 1959, 573.

13. 「能の型は流れていく。」KANZE 1969, 412, quoted in NISHIHIRA 2009, 97.

14. Cf. ŌHASHI 1986.

is not, “a non-object”..., a non-present present, ... a *Da-sein* of something that is missing.¹⁵

In the “now” of practice, a unique and individual body, *my* body, experiences its own temporal nature, *chrónos*, unceasingly becoming in continuous discontinuity. Nevertheless, at the very same time, in the moment of the gesture’s execution, the practitioner is also given the possibility of attaining a bodily experience of *aión*, the incorporeal, achronological background to *chrónos*. The realization of such a bodily experience, *taiken* (体験), is not to be found in an extemporaneous intuition, rather it emerges only through the continued accumulation of practice or depth of practice (修行の深さ), in a patient acquisition of *kata* attained through following the path outlined by Nishihira Tadashi 西平直 on the basis of Zeami’s theoretical works: the transition from *niseru* (似せる), to *nisenu* (似せぬ), and finally to *niuru* (似うる), that is to say, from “imitating” the *kata*, to “not imitating” the *kata*, to “being able to imitate” or not imitate the *kata*.¹⁶ At the end of this process of trans/formation of both the *kata* and the practitioner, a mastery is attained that allows the virtual and aionic nature of *kata* not only to be embodied, but also experienced and felt in an empty gesture in which “for a bit nothing is done,” that gesture to which Zeami seems to be alluding when, for example in *Kakyō* (『花鏡』), he speaks of *senuhima* (せぬ隙) as that which produces the interest (*omoshiroki* 面白き) in a Nō play.¹⁷

Senuhima, a term also used in *iaidō*, is not a mere lack of movement, but a gesture that expresses the power of non-doing, a suspended moment in time from which the charm (*myō* 妙) of the gesture in *iaidō* derives. All this occurs in an individual experience that is attained through using one’s body with care, learning to control breathing, submitting to “ascetic discipline” (*gyō* 行), following the

15. DERRIDA 1994, 13.

16. Cf. NISHIHIRA 2009, 170–6.

17. OMOTE and KATŌ 1974, 100.

guidance of masters and companions. Only under these conditions can it sometimes happen that a particular moment becomes *topos outopos* or *stanza*,¹⁸ allowing *Kata* to be trans/formed in the practitioner's gesture. The body and its ghosts are together, form becomes *rhythmòs*, gesture becomes dance.

TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the practice of *Kata* could be said to be about letting the “ghost” in, about offering it hospitality. In an old Renaissance text on the subject of dance, commented on by Giorgio Agamben in his work *Ninfe*, Domenico da Piacenza (1400–1470 ca) writes:

I say that whoever wants to learn this art, needs to dance through phantasmata; note that phantasmata are a kind of corporeal swiftness that is controlled by the understanding of the measure.... This necessitates that at each tempo you appear as if you had seen Medusa's head, as the poet says; after having performed the movement, you should appear entirely made of stone in that instant and in the next you should put on wings like a falcon moved by hunger, according to the above rule, that is to say, employing measure, memory, manner with measure of ground and air.¹⁹

Domenico's experience of dance shows surprising affinities to Zeami's. For Domenico, too, the beauty of the gesture derives from allowing the “ghosts” or “phantasmata” to manifest themselves in the moment of stasis, in the fullness of non-doing, of non-moving. It is here that the trans/formation of *Kata* occurs, can be experienced and felt, in the instant of a gesture which is the very locus of contradiction, neither in movement nor in stillness: *exaiφhnēs* (ἐξαιφνης) inasmuch as atopic,²⁰ constantly haunted by a past that is no more and a future that is yet to come. In that instant, the trans/formation of *Kata* into

18. AGAMBEN 2011, XVI.

19. AGAMBEN, 2007, 12. English translation: KHALIP and MITCHELL 2011, 62. See also DOMENICO 1995, 13.

20. Parm. 156d.

its unrepeatable and transitory bodily expression is accomplished. The *complicatio* of *aiōn* and *chrōnos* is realized in the exact and measured *kata* gesture, in the time/place of *senuhima*.

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