

(Self-)Transformation as Translation

The Birth of the Individual from German *Bildung* and Japanese *kata*

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Abstract: *Pedagogical processes are always connected to translation. This is very obvious in those practices of teaching where knowledge is transmitted through mediation. However, processes of self-formation or self-education, and especially the development of individuality, don't seem to be connected directly to processes of translation. The following paper suggests that processes of individuation, too, can be understood as translations. In contrasting two culturally very different positions — the German idea of Bildung and the Japanese practice of exercising kata — it should become clear that both cannot be understood without referring to a concept of translation.*

Introduction

Pedagogical processes are deeply connected to processes of translation. If we understand 'translating' as the process and a 'translation' as the result of transferring something into another medium, then there is no pedagogy without translating or translation — especially when taking into account the concept of translation elaborated by George Steiner who prominently called one of the chapters of his seminal work *After Babel* (1975) 'Understanding as Translation'. For Steiner, to understand or to achieve some sort of understanding (one might even say: to give an interpretation) is to translate a foreign idiom into one's own, or to present one's own idiom in a form that it might be understood by the recipient. Those structures are obvious if one was to consider pedagogical processes of education — especially those which are somehow goal-oriented or goal-driven and where education is a process of initiated or guided learning towards a certain goal. Here the educator has something in mind, which s/he has to translate into something external (as speech or action) and of which s/he hopes it will be translated again into something cognitive/internal by the student (hopefully resulting in something roughly identical to what the educator started with). Most teaching consists of translating a specific content

into a certain form that is thought to be conceivable by the student, and most teachers use educational environments which are informed by materialised invitations for learning: the goal of teaching is translated into a material form in order to find its way into the student's mind — the traditional form of entrances of school-buildings that separated girls from boys was as much an agenda translated into stone as is our modern refusal of such separating entrances. There was no age where educational content was not translated into materiality in order to, consciously or unconsciously, inform everyone living in this material world: placing the church/palace/parliament/agora/gathering house at the centre of the village or town is as much about educating the inhabitants about the structures of power as the repetitive presentation of the lore and legends that express the same structures, only translated into words.

However, not so easily recognisable are the structures of translation in pedagogical processes of self-formation and the emergence of individuality. By definition not about simply transferring something pre-existing from the educator to the student (a process that involves, as shown above, several stages of translation), it needs to be asked whether or not individuation or self-formation can and should be understood as translation. This paper endeavours to show that ultimately pedagogical processes of the (self-)formation of the individual can be understood as translation, even though different cultures might have different ideas as to what is translated into what in those processes. In order to show this, the paper will introduce and thereby contrast two seemingly opposing views of (self-)formation of the individual: the German idea of *Bildung* in its Classic 18th century form and the Classic Japanese concept of (self-)formation of the individual through the practising of *kata* (形 / 型).¹ Although both concepts of the emergence of individuality are quite different, they do agree in proposing that those processes are processes of translation. Contrasting both traditions in this way would help to find a common ground for relating both traditions and to point towards a shared frame of reference for comparing both traditions — hereby not only questioning the often repeated description of the uniqueness of both traditions but also offering a basis for comparison that is somewhat richer than the frameworks used in modern comparative studies focusing on student attainment.

¹ In traditional texts, two different characters are used to express *kata*: 形 and 型. Both mean “form”, and “model”. However, 型 refers more to something like a mould; whereas 形 usually means a shape or appearance. Both meanings are part of the understanding of *kata*. However, a difference can and should be made as will be shown below.

***Bildung* — Translating the Opaque**

A very brief and often overlooked passage in Humboldt's text about the *Theory of Bildung*² can serve as an entrance point not only for the presentation of this Classic concept of *Bildung*³ but also for the demarcation of the difference to pre-Classic concepts of *Bildung* — a difference that is intrinsically connected to the idea of the development of the individual as translation.

The sculptor, for example, does not actually wish to present the image of a god, but to express and make fast the fullness of his plastic imagination in this figure.⁴

Why is this a significant passage in Humboldt's text? Because it reverses the pre-Classic (one might say: original) idea of *Bildung* as becoming (again) the true image (= *imago/ Bild* in German) of God, regaining Godlikeness. This original concept of *Bildung* that is very much informed by the German mystic Meister Eckhart, perceived *Bildung* as the process in which humankind as a whole and the individual human attempt to regain their prelapsarian state of being like God in whose image every human was created. This process was indeed a process of de-individualization, as Godlikeness was thought to be the result of intentional self-negation. With Humboldt now, it is not the human that has to become like God, but it's the god that has to be created according to the plastic imagination of the human. Not the human becomes godlike, but the god becomes humanlike. And one can easily see from here that it is the individual and its capacities that became of central interest to this type of philosophy and educational thinking. And indeed: *Bildung* in its 18th century guise soon became one of the two core concepts of German educational discourse which since then is represented by the two complementary notions of *Erziehung* and *Bildung* mapping out the horizon of possibility along the axes of heteronomous (*Erziehung*) and autonomous (*Bildung*) anthropopoiesis.

² Humboldt (2000).

³ For a general introduction to the concept of *Bildung* see: Horlacher (2016).

⁴ Humboldt (2000, 61).

Coming back to Humboldt's concept it needs to be asked what *Bildung* actually meant when its root is not the formation according to a pre-given image (of God). It is here that we encounter the concept of the development of the individual as translation.

Humboldt builds his musings about *Bildung* around an anthropological statement that provides the foundation for what is developed later. For him, the individual human "wishes only to strengthen and heighten the powers of his nature and secure value and permanence for his being".⁵ To achieve this goal, one has to relate oneself to the outside world, as Humboldt points out:

It is the ultimate task of our existence to achieve as much substance as possible for the concept of humanity in our person, both during the span of our life and beyond it, through the traces we leave by means of our vital activity. This can be fulfilled only by the linking of the self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay.⁶

As can be seen, the individuality of every single person plays an important role in this kind of concept: It is the concrete individuality of the single human that expands the very idea of humanity; the life of every single person is proof of the very potential of humanity — every life pushes the boundaries of what is thought to be 'human' further and thereby expands the idea of 'humanity'. This expansion of the idea of humanity is, according to Humboldt, set as the general obligation of all human beings; to give up on this is tantamount to renouncing your humanity. To better comprehend why this can be described as a translation, we have to look more closely at the process that is thought to be supporting this development of individuality.

Humboldt states that this is done through linking the self to the world. What exactly happens here? The individual is supposed to act upon the world, and it is those actions that bind and relate her/him to the world:

To this end, however, he must bring the mass of objects closer to himself, impress his mind upon this matter, and create more of a resemblance

⁵ Humboldt (2000, 58).

⁶ Humboldt (2000, 58).

between the two. Perfect unity and constant interplay are contained within him; thus he must apply both to Nature.⁷

Humboldt here relates to classic descriptions of human reason as being a unity of multitudes — a unity of diverse faculties which create the idea or image of an object as composition of different aspects. It now is the task to learn how to perceive nature, that is the outside world, in exactly the same way; to see and represent nature as unity of multitudes is to impress the human mind upon the inhuman realm which in being acted upon resembles more and more the human mind and spirit. It is not by chance that Humboldt was one of the advisors of the new and modern German university, as this is exactly what he has in mind here: The academic endeavour to represent the world as a multitude of aspects which are nevertheless connected by for example natural laws or laws of causality means nothing else than seeing the world as unity of complexity, and every academic discipline represents the world from a certain angle, but it always does this as a project of analyzing (taking apart) and synthesizing (bringing it together) again. With regard to the individual that means: Every person should aspire to perceive the world from a specific, individual angle in order not only to identify the multitude of objects before him/her, but also to set out to connect all those objects and relate them to each other in order to create unity within this diversity. As every human can and should achieve this from her/his own individual point of view, the world is seen anew in every single person, and in doing so, every person bears witness to the potential of the human race. This is what *Bildung* as a personal and at the same time social evolution is all about.

And as can now be seen, *Bildung* as self-formation is a translation. Like in the example of the sculptor, *Bildung* is the process wherein the initially unknown inner potential of every person and of the whole race is gradually expressed in the outside world. The single person and with it the whole of humanity has been given specific potential from the first moment of existence, and somehow this potential is inscribed in us. Even though Humboldt himself does not elaborate as to how this inscription actually is to be understood (even though he does assume it to be inscribed somehow), one could refer to contemporary comparisons of humans to plants, using the unfolding and growing of a plant out of a single seed as model for the development of the human as, under the right circumstances, unfolding of something that is already ingrained into the human germ cells. Whatever is ingrained, and in whatever way it is ingrained: to actually become recognizable as individually

⁷ Humboldt (2000, 59).

specific traits, it has to unfold into the outside world.⁸ And in doing this, it is translated into a ‘language’ of acts, of behavior, of life, that now is understood not only by the individual itself but also by other humans. Without translation, the potential never becomes real, perceivable and comprehensible; without this project of translation the individual would neither be understood nor understand itself; without translation there is no individuality. *Bildung* as the formation of individuality therefore can be understood as translation of an opaque potential into an understood reality.

Bildung in the sense described above is very much a product of the Classic German culture of the 18th century. It therefore is appropriate to compare this understanding with another Classic concept of individuation like the Japanese idea of *kata* 型 which is an integral part of the traditional culture of Japan, and, so can be argued, even of modern culture: Japan is a “culture of form”.⁹ And even though individuation through *kata*, too, can be understood as translation, as will be shown in the following paragraphs, the fundamental differences between both concepts will also become clear.

Practicing *kata* — Translating the Universal

Night after night, often in the backyard of the Azato house as the master looked on, I would practice a *kata* (“formal exercise”) time and again, week after week, sometimes month after month, until I had mastered it to my teacher’s satisfaction. This constant repetition of a single *kata* was gruelling, often exasperating and on occasion humiliating. More than once I had to lick the dust on the floor of the dojo or in the Azato backyard. But practice was strict, and I was never permitted to move on to another *kata* until Azato was convinced that I had satisfactorily understood the one I had been working on.¹⁰

Here Funakoshi Gichin 船越 義珍, the founder of modern karate, describes his martial arts training. The role of *kata* practice can easily be recognized in this quote:

⁸ It is only later, especially with Herbart, that this form of pre-determination implied by the idea of ingrained traits gave way to the more open concept of *Bildsamkeit* which refers to the general educability of a person.

⁹ Sasaki (2008, 47).

¹⁰ Funakoshi (1989, 6).

Not only is *kata* central to the whole way of teaching and learning — it also is extremely challenging as it demands a never-ending repetition until the *kata* is mastered. However — what exactly is *kata*?

It is as easy to explain as it is hard to understand. *Kata* is the heart of all traditional training, of traditional teaching and learning: *Kata* is the inheritance that every pupil is bestowed with by the tradition and by the old masters of the art. Matsunobu states:

Japanese arts have been preserved and transmitted through *kata*, literally “form” or “mold”, through which students learn structures of art, patterns of artistic and social behaviours, and moral and ethical values, all in accordance with prescribed formulae. *Kata* is a set of bodily movements that have been developed and preserved by precedent artists. The most efficient and authentic way to master the artistry, it is believed, is to follow the model defined as *kata*.¹¹

Kata therefore, on a more superficial level, is a set and combination of specific movements, whose order and way of presenting is fixed and prescribed — and which, as a form of pre-arranged training, usually hasn’t changed much for centuries; each *kata* includes different and similar movements, and the sum of all *kata* of an art represents the scope and horizon of the art itself. And this representation is not only a representation on the visible surface: the sum of all *kata* of an art represents the very heart of the art itself — its physical, mental and spiritual core. Mastering all *kata* is tantamount to mastering the art as a whole — and it would not be unusual if there is only one *kata* that makes up the whole art (as, for example, in tea ceremony). *Kata* are known not only in basically all martial arts, but also in all traditional arts and ways (*dō* 道) of Japan and in other formally acknowledged arts in Asia.¹²

However, it has to be asked what “mastering the *kata*” means. Two sets of contraries might help to better understand what this mastership entails.

Ikuta introduces the important difference between *kata* 型 and *katachi* 形 by stating that

¹¹ Matsunobu (2011, 47f.).

¹² This kind of pre-arranged training is, however, known in especially combat or martial arts all over the world; it is not exclusively Asian. But it might be considered a Japanese specialty to have widened out those pre-structuring of practice and training on basically all arts and crafts.

“Katachi” is an apparent physical form of action shown by the performer [sic] of a certain “Waza” [technique], which may be decomposed into parts and described as a sequence of procedures. [...] On the contrary, “Kata”, which has been regarded as the ultimate goal of the learner to attain in learning “Waza”, is not a simple collection of parts of action like “Katachi”, but an artistic and personal expression of “Katachi” bearing the meaning connected with a socio-historical factor of the world of a certain “Waza”, which is supposed to be mastered through the activity of imitating and repeating superficial “Katachi” with great pains.¹³

As can be seen here, *kata* is more than just the superficial repetition of a set of movements as it might appear to the ignorant eye; *kata* is about doing the right movements and at the same time understanding them in a way that goes far beyond a physical exercise: It is about ‘owning’ the *kata*, so to speak. It is this form of deeper understanding that the training of *kata* is aiming at — and it is exactly this form of understanding that is so difficult or maybe even impossible to explain for those without experience in such a kind of training. For Ikuta, it is this difficulty because of which trainers and educators using *kata* as method of teaching and learning always are drawn to use metaphorical language for explaining what the physical activity should look like or what it should or will achieve in the end. And it might be the reason why much of this practicing of *kata* is exercised in silence,¹⁴ without explanations or verbal comments. The account Herrigel gives of his experiences in being taught Japanese archery (*kyūdō* 弓道) shows in great detail not only the silence that often surrounds his exercising, but also the metaphorical language his teacher used to express his occasional comments on his pupil’s learning.¹⁵

Keeping in mind the difference between *kata* and *katachi*, it is easily to be understood why Egami Shigeru 江上 茂, a master of modern karate, distinguishes between two different types of practice and exercise: *keiko* 稽古 and *renshū* 練習.¹⁶ Whereas *renshū* refers to a practice of repetition, of training as drill, *keiko* for

¹³ Ikuta (1990, 138).

¹⁴ Hare (1998).

¹⁵ Herrigel (1948). The account Herrigel gives of his training has been criticised lately. However, those criticisms usually question whether or not his archery can justifiably be called a practice in Zen, as he thought — they do not question his descriptions of silence being a strong feature of his training.

¹⁶ Wittwer (2007, 117).

Egami means much more: *keiko* is *renshū* expanded by remembrance of the ancestors, or here: of the old masters. Far from being a mere physical activity, exercising and practising *kata* has a mental and spiritual dimension that connects the practitioner with the tradition: it is the mental and spiritual aspect of the physical activity that is the main aim of making *kata* the heart of practising; it is the heart-to-heart-communication between the masters of all ages and their followers which usually is referred to as *ishin-denshin* 以心伝心 that *kata* is aiming at. Yuasa has shown just how central the idea of the connectedness or even oneness of mind and body is in Asian cultures of practising, and that it is the physical activity that lays the ground for the formation of the mind and, subsequently, of the self.¹⁷

It is the last remark that takes us now into a new direction: *kata* is as much about mastering the art as it is about the development of the self. Practising and mastering *kata* is tantamount to developing the self. As has been shown by Dodd & Brown, mastering the *kata* has been regarded as a way to develop the self.¹⁸ Not only the self in its relation to the art, but the entire self changes in the process of practising *kata*. As Matsunobu has put it: “The goal is not to accumulate knowledge or seek a higher level of technical and artistic achievement but to deepen one’s experience for the artful fulfillment of mind, body, and spirit”.¹⁹ Here it is irrelevant to ask which *kata* of which specific art is practised: the structures of *kata*-practising in general serve as an instrument to form the self. Nothing was more obvious than this to the masters of Japanese arts. Even in those arts which were introduced to serve a specific practical purpose, the mental and spiritual side and the sense for the formation of the whole self was never absent, as can easily be seen in the art of sword-fighting of Miyamoto Musashi 宮本 武蔵.²⁰ Musashi, who indeed perceived his art of fighting as an art to ensure the very survival in battles and duels, was very much aware of the mental and spiritual dimension of the physical activity of wielding a sword, and his art of fighting is at first an art of the mental and spiritual discipline of the self; practising the art therefore is in its main parts a development of the whole self. For those arts which were somewhat disconnected from the physical necessities of survival, the mental and spiritual side of the practice and the formation of the whole self was even more obvious, as can be seen not only in Sen no Rikyū’s 千利休 account of tea ceremony²¹ but also in those martial arts

¹⁷ Yuasa (1987).

¹⁸ Dodd & Brown (2016).

¹⁹ Matsunobu (2017, 114).

²⁰ Musashi (2010).

²¹ Kenklies (2016).

who changed from being understood as *bujutsu* 武術 (technique of war/ fight) to being understood as *budō* 武道 (way/ path of war/ fight) — a development that started with the pacification of Japan during the Tokugawa shogunate 徳川幕府.²²

It now has to be considered what the practice of *kata* means for the development of the self. From here it then will become obvious why it would be justified to refer to this process of individuation as a process of translating.

The emphasis Egami puts on *keiko* as a practice that is transcended by a remembrance of the ancestors and old masters encapsulates what *kata* practising means: It aims at the introduction of the practitioner into the realm of tradition. Whoever practises *kata* aspires to become part of the tradition of which the *kata* represents the very heart. Mastering the *kata* means to inhabit the country of the ancestors; practising is the way of in-habiting, that is: of becoming an inhabitant of the Promised Land. It is a journey on the path (*dō* 道) that the masters walked before.

Nowhere can this be seen better than in the travels and journeys of Matsuo Bashō 松尾 芭蕉.²³ Bashō's travels can be understood as journeys into the land of his ancestors: the mytho-historical map of Japan in his head, Bashō travels to those places which have some meaning for the people of Japan in general and for his noble ancestor poets in particular to grasp and understand the lore of the ancients in a much deeper way as he could from a distance. And not only does he attempt to understand: in adding his own personal poem to the numerous poems and stories that already address those places and bestow them with meaning, Bashō writes himself into the mytho-historical narrative of the land and at the same time forms himself in accordance to this ancestral narrative — thereby creating a self-image that is expressed in his famous diaries. Practising *kata* forms the practitioner to become a part of the tradition. Imai calls this self-formation through *kata* an “aesthetic construction” of the self as it does shape itself after the image provided by *kata*.²⁴ Now — why is this process of self-formation and individuation a translation?

As has been stated above, *kata* is the traditional model that has been transmitted through the teacher of the art so that the student can form him/herself in accordance to this model. In showing the *kata*, the teacher provides the instrument for the student to become part of this tradition. *Kata* therefore represents the blueprint of the art, the universal model that is the measure against which every

²² Kanno (2009).

²³ Kenklies (2015).

²⁴ Imai (2004).

practitioner and every practice has to be judged. It stands beyond the individual students and masters of the art and could be called the universal law of the art. However, it needs to be noted that learning the *kata* and thereby immersing oneself into the tradition is only the first step — or only the second step, if we count with Ikuta: starting with a mere physical imitation, *katachi*, that is followed by a state of a spiritually and mentally enriched understanding of the practice, *kata*, this path leads to yet another state — a state where *kata* as universal form is expressed in an individualised way — a state, where the practitioner reaches beyond what is universal and transcends the form: mastership lies beyond the traditional and therefore universal *kata* — it is based upon creativity.²⁵ This step beyond can be seen in all arts: Sen no Rikyū mentions it with regard to his tea ceremony,²⁶ Matsuo Bashō's in-habitation of the ancestral country leads him far beyond what has been suggested to him,²⁷ and in the Martial Arts this often is the moment where the student creates his/ her own style (*ryū* 流). As can be seen in the numerous anecdotes of the masters of arts: they tend to represent quite unique personalities. Mastership (and, similarly, enlightenment) does not mean conformity but, on the contrary, individuality.²⁸ And it is this individuation that can now be seen to be a translation: Practising *kata* in the end leads to a translation of the universal into something individual; becoming a master through mastering the *kata* consists in finding and expressing a very unique translation of the universal idiom of the *kata*; mastering the *kata* means to understand the universal form and oneself in relation to it — what appears to be a practice of uniformity reveals itself to be an epitomization of individuation through translation.

Individuation and (Self-)Formation — Education as Translation

As can be seen now, *Bildung* and the practice of *kata* can be understood as processes of individuation through translation. Both concepts need the crossover from one idiom to another; in both concepts the expression and hereby understanding of individuality rests upon the transformation of something else. However, it should have also become obvious that there are fundamental differences in the conceptualization of the individuation processes. As Imai has phrased it, the

²⁵ Matsunobu (2011).

²⁶ Kenklies (2016).

²⁷ Kenklies (2015).

²⁸ Matsunobu (2016).

Japanese individual does not seem to be connected to some sort of inner self: the practising and mastering of *kata* seems to produce a superficial self as it aspires to represent the mere surface of the visible *kata*.²⁹ And even if we agree with Ikuta that *kata* represents a somewhat deeper understanding, then it has to be remembered that especially because this understanding is produced and transmitted through the usage of metaphors it needs a connection and a shared social life in order to understand those metaphors. The absolute individual seems to have no place here. In contrast to this, the German idea of *Bildung* is directly founded upon the presupposition of such a strong core of the individual which is given somehow but not yet given to the person him/herself, and not yet to anyone else. Not yet aware and conscious of what it truly is, the individual needs to undergo the process of *Bildung* in order to express and understand him/herself. And it is only through this expression that one gets to understand the individual, i.e. the individuality of the person. However, it needs to be asked in what way Japanese thinking conceptualizes the possibility of transcending the form. That it includes the idea of transcending, of going beyond the mere form seems to be obvious, but it is not so clear how this achievement can be explained with regard to the existence of the absolute individuality that seems to be necessary as foundation of such a transgression (further research needs to be done here). And on the other hand, it needs to be asked in exactly what way the individuality of a person is already ingrained in its very beginning so that it just needs to be supported to express itself: the German concept of *Bildung* as expression of an initially opaque individuality remains itself somewhat opaque.

And another important difference has to be acknowledged: whereas the German individuation through *Bildung* seems to be almost exclusively focussed upon intellectuality, it is the Japanese idea of individuation through *kata* that combines in a much deeper (and one might even say: more modern) way body and mind inasmuch all those practices of *kata* include intellectual/ spiritual as well as bodily performances as they attempt to initiate a development in both realms — trying to achieve what is usually called a unity of mind and body.³⁰ It needs another paper to explore the intricate and maybe even paradoxical relationship between self and cosmos (or nothingness) that lies at the heart of a traditional Japanese concept of the self.

From a pedagogical point of view, there seems to be a fundamental difference in the conceptual framing of both processes of translation: whereas the

²⁹ Imai (2004).

³⁰ Yuasa (1987), Yamaguchi (1997).

German concept sets the unveiling of the individual as direct goal of the development, the Japanese idea of practicing *kata* does not directly aim at individuality as its goal — it simply emerges. It might be recognized as such in the end, but individuality is not part of the pedagogical framework that is used to infer the right practice of development. Individuality so could be said, is a direct aspiration of *Bildung* and an indirect result of *kata*-practice. This has consequences for the practices that surround those concepts of individuation. However, this is beyond my present scope.

Translations lie at the core of pedagogical processes. Not only are those practices of education that involve mediation founded upon concepts of translation. Also those educational practices that are involved in the formation of the self with regard to its individuation can justifiably be referred to as translations. Although there might be cultural differences when it comes to describing the very nature of those translations, it remains nevertheless true that education always entails an act of translating.

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