

Trigger Warning: Sexualized Violence

“Watashi wa Anju Himeko de aru” - わたしはあんじゅひめ子である - “I am Princess Anju” - Literary dance performance, November 11, 2023

EXC 2020: Research Area 2 “Travelling Matters”: Workshop and Performance

“Transforming a Medieval Saga into a Contemporary Ballad and Dance Performance”

The ballad text, written by Hiromi Ito in 1993, is based on the medieval legend of Sansho Dayu and a version by a shamaness from north-eastern Japan, which Ito identified and adapted. Ito’s radical reinterpretation of the legend places the child Anju at the centre and tells the story from her perspective. Sometimes the perspective changes and the mother speaks in Anju’s or the narrator’s voice. The strongly surreal ballad has four parts.

1) “The laughing body”

Three-year-old Anju tells us what has happened to her since she was born: Her father wants to take her life, does not want to recognise her as his child: “I will bury her in the sand, and if she survives three years, she may be my child”. The mother suffers pangs of guilt. Her breasts are swollen and painful. She cries until she goes blind and is cast out like Anju, she buries herself in the sand by the river where all the children’s bodies lie and searches for her. She had stuck a reed in Anju’s ear to mark the spot. At the same time, she hopes that her husband might come and take her back. In vain. A voice says: “Get up from the sand, yes, you, who can do nothing, so go hunt sparrows in the millet fields”. She wanders around blindly until she is hired as a living scarecrow. She calls for her children, the village children play tricks on her. – Three years pass, and Anju’s father says he wants to dig her up and see if she is dead or still alive. She is alive: “I am not dead (...) I grew, a laughing, living body, I grew, a laughing, living body, that is me, that is me”.

2) “Rebirth”

The father sets three-year-old Anju out on a raft and lets her drift across the sea. A favourable wind drives her back ashore and the raft crashes into their home. Anju manages to hide from her angry father and for many days and nights flees aimlessly through the thicket into the deep forest. The man who takes her in pampers her for a few days, then says: “Anju, come, pound millet, pound rice.” “Here I am, three years old, how can I hold a pestle with my little body? He hangs me upside down over a pile of burning bulrushes, I’m completely helpless, and he starts roasting me, I’m being roasted, do men always do such unreasonable things?” Anju has to perform impossible tasks: breaking stones with her bare hands, shovelling soil and scooping water into a bamboo basket full of holes. Crying, she stands by the river and beseeches the water spirit. Anju is sexually abused, her body bursts open, she is delighted by the beautiful colours of her intestines bulging out. – She flees naked and barefoot through the night, saves herself with a man who puts her in a sack and hangs her from the rafters. Her pursuer arrives, discovers the sack and the man

shows the intruder his reflection in the water: "So you really are a demon! Confess, confess!" Finally, the pursuer disappears.

3) "The wandering child"

Anju is now seven years old, it is springtime, she wanders through the countryside in search of her mother and finally crosses a river to a cottage on the other bank, where a blind woman gives her food and tells her story. Thus, mother and daughter are happily reunited, spending days and nights in tears and laughter. But after 10 days, Anju declares that she wants to set off to look for her father. Her mother is horrified. "Don't be, mother, I'm here in this world because I have a father, if I didn't have a father, I would never have been buried in the sand, but I would never have come out again either, (...) I want to see him". And: "Being roasted, being beaten, being killed, being impaled through the genitals", he did all that "because he loved me". She leaves and encounters many men, fathers.

4) "I am Princess Anju"

Anju, seven years old, is told that there is something that can save her, she doesn't know what it is, it's called Tennoji, the child is supposed to help her, she wants to find it. Then a mountain witch appears: "This is my last wish, please carry me that way on your back, into the mountains, this is my last wish, I want sexual intercourse", says the witch. "What is this?" Anju wants to resist, but the witch sneers: "I wanted to bring you back to life, that's why I always eat you". And so Anju carries her on her back into the mountains, a tiny old woman. Deep in the mountains, the witch rediscovers a huge phallus, and she humps it orgasmically. She says to Anju: "Look at me! Your task is to bear witness". And: "This is a gift from heaven! (...) take it, (...) you shall call it Hiruko, the 'leech child'". Anju shoulders the leech child and it shows her the way to Tennoji, asking what Anju wants to do there. Anju realises that the leech child has no language: "The leech child's desire to know is transferred to me, and I answer (...) all I have is language, I answer with language, I answer, answer, answer, and as I answer, I feel the leech child's desire on my back gradually being satisfied."

The ballad ends with these sentences. In this last part, many allusions to other myths and legends are brought together, from the Japanese creation myth to the legend of the healing Tennoji. Life from the beginning of history, a celebration of healing and new beginnings. Anju has anchored her existence in language through her performative act. I am Princess Anju!

© Short summary with quotations and translation of the ballad from Japanese by Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner (unpublished).