

A.I.

When ghosts walked among men¹

On Russell Morton's *Saudade*

by Elizabeth Gabrielle Lee

Saudade is a torn up love letter, its heart spilt at the seams. It revels in dualities, through the known and unknown, the feared and the adored. It is, anyway, the untranslatable yet ubiquitous Portuguese term for a deep yearning for something that is absent—and will probably never be in reach again.

But at the hand of Russell Morton, the film finds release in surrender, a tenderness in heartbreak. With the exultant costumes and arresting cinematography, the film transforms into a sonic shield, sheathing the endangered Kristang language, Malayan chimeras and the *jinkli nona* (a song sung by the Portugese Eurasians). *Saudade* is the act of narration revisited, accompanied by a scintillating *orang minyak* and a droning soundtrack. Thawing frozen myths and the vanishing Kristang tongue, storytelling is activated as an affordable luxury, indiscriminately disseminated to the hoi polloi. As if casting a spell, the piece weaves in oral histories of the Portugese Eurasians, entangled with the onscreen exchange between a Malaccan shrimper and his wife.

Using magic as a form of self-defence, *Saudade* casts a protection shield in detection of the Anglophone, constructing a world where blithe legends and fables take precedence over opaque facts and hard history. In [Manna For The Ghost](#), a performance lecture given to accompany the film, Morton resurrected rituals of the Singaporean Eurasians. One of those was communal eating of *bluder*, a decadent cake that requires up to 80 egg yolks, 2 days of bake time and a bed for a fermentation site. Historically, it was made with toddy, a liquor drawn from the sap of the coconut flower back in the heyday of Malaya's rubber plantations. Toddy has since been banned, and the *bluder* is a ghost of its own past—a rare and near-extinct cake.

Malaya's gradual westernisation led to the waning of this dependence on rituals and oracles, along with the dwindling of manna for both spirits and Portugese Eurasians alike. Sounding to their aid, *Saudade* chimes in ode to non-western speak and inherited superstitions. Disarmingly transgressive, these acts of revival defy western modernity, delighting in newborn oral histories cradled by a mother tongue. Though the term *saudade* refers to something no longer present, the faintest echo of Kristang or an unearthed *bluder* recipe might be just the right fire starter. Perhaps, it is in this rekindlement that a flicker of reconnection may surface once more.

¹ Russell Morton, line from the script of *Saudade*, 2020.

"BLOEDER"

- I 4-oz FLOUR
 $\frac{1}{2}$ -oz FRESH YEAST.
 $3\frac{1}{2}$ -oz WARM WATER.
1- Tsp SUGAR.

Cream the yeast, warm water, sugar and flour & leave for one hour to rise. Then knead in

- II 4-oz flour, $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp salt, & 1 oz. castor sugar and leave for another hour.

- III 10- yolks; 2 whites
1- oz castor sugar.
2- oz flour
 $\frac{1}{2}$ - lb. Butter
Vanilla Essence.

Cream egg & sugar till creamy add vanilla essence.

- IV. Do NO: II add 2 oz flour, then add egg mixture very gradually beating in between, knead and beat well, then beat in the butter, 2 oz at a time. Put into well buttered pan and leave to rise.

Bluder recipe written on the back of a scrap document by Russell Morton's grandmother, a former telephone operator working in Singapore's City Hall.

Credits

Russell Morton

Saudade, 2020

21mins 20secs

HD video with audio

Written and Directed by Russell Morton

Jinkli Nona Dancers: Tervor Nonis, Megan Barker, Estioco Ignacio Jr., Andrea Wong and Chloe Calderon
Chotrani

Fisherman: Bunny Rodrigues

Maiden: Sara Federica Santa Maria

Oily Man: Ryan Chen

Eurasian Man 1: Rocky Rodrigues

Eurasian Man 2: Wesley Angel Fernandez

Eurasian Man 3: Russell Morton

Eurasian Man 4: Jason Dehamel

Cinematography: Russell Morton

Sound Recordist: Johnathan Teo

Focus Puller: Calvin Phua

Camera Grip: Istavino Manuel

Make-up: Mavis Ng

Costume: Daniela Monasterios Tan, Shaf Amisaabudin

Music: Syafii

Producer: Amanda Zhang

Translated by Myra Morrison and Sara Federica Santa Maria

Orator: Russell Morton

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Curated by Cheong Kah Kit, Selene Yap and Tan Guo-Liang