

Learning more about ‘protectors’ of sultans

While other children played on the beach and splashed about in the sea by their kampung in Pasir Panjang, four-year-old Faisal Nordin was learning how to “kill and incapacitate” people with his bare hands.

Over the next seven years, under the tutelage of his grandfather, he learnt how to use a slew of weapons such as knives (*badik* and *keris*), swords (*alamang*), spears (*tombak*) and axes for self-defence purposes.

Mr Faisal, 43, comes from a line of Bugis men who served as warriors of the region’s sultans. The Bugis are an ethnic group from South Sulawesi. His great-great-grandfather Daeng Abdullah purportedly served Sultan Ali of Johor and Singapore (who reigned from 1835 to 1855) as a “*sulewatang*”. His role was to serve, advise and protect the sultan.

Mr Faisal is the subject of a National Heritage Board (NHB) heritage research grant project which seeks to better understand Singapore from the perspective of Malay warriors, known as the *Orang-orang diraja* and the *Pendekar*.

Led by historian Mohamed Effendy Abdul Hamid, a lecturer at the National University of Singapore’s department of South-east Asian studies, the two-year-long project seeks to uncover the stories and ancient techniques of warriors.

To piece this story together, Dr Effendy is hoping to find more people like Mr Faisal. In the meantime, he has been interviewing gurus and their students from various Malay martial arts schools in Singapore.

Speaking to *The Straits Times*, Dr Effendy said: “The *Orang-orang Diraja* and *Pendekar* were central to the military and political activities of the region’s pre-colonial rulers.

“However, there has been very little research on them. Perhaps the only way to learn more about this unique thread of history is by interviewing descendants in the hope of collecting some clues from the past.”



A two-year-long project, led by historian Mohamed Effendy Abdul Hamid (above), seeks to uncover the stories and ancient techniques of Bugis warriors (left) – depicted here by Mr Faisal Nordin (standing) and his student Solihin Hamidon – whose role was to serve, advise and protect the Malay rulers.
ST PHOTOS:
KELVIN CHNG

This work is especially timely as Singapore commemorates its bicentennial year, he said. “We always focus on people at the top such as Sultan Hussein and Stamford Raffles, but what about the people on the ground who maintained the legitimacy of Malay rulers?”

He noted that the imposing stature and “killer moves” of the *Orang-orang Diraja* and *Pendekar* must have sparked fear among onlookers. Their imposing presence would have also helped in their other role as tax collectors for Malay rulers.

How did their story go untold for so long? Throughout the early 19th

century, the British worked to assert their political and economic dominance in Singapore and Malaya, which led to changes in the way traditional kingdoms operated. As a result, many of their warriors were dispersed and many of their skills and contributions have largely been forgotten.

Nonetheless, Dr Effendy believes some traces of the *Orang-orang Diraja* and the *Pendekar* can still be found in modern Singapore.

For instance, he noted that some warriors, in their search for new relevance for their skills after 1819, repurposed their expertise for cul-

tural performances at the kampung and community level for special occasions such as weddings.

The warriors were also likely to have passed on traditional routines and combative moves to their children and other students.

Mr Faisal, who now runs a Bugis silat school, said he hopes to pass on the warrior skills to other Singaporeans. “Growing up, my elders didn’t let me play with other children. Instead, my grandfather spent time teaching me royal etiquette and fighting techniques. He wanted me to pass on these skills and that’s what I’m doing today.”

The NHB project will also attempt to trace the descendants of warriors from Sulawesi, Sumatra, Java and Bawean islands who moved to Singapore in the first half of the 20th century. It involves setting up a website dedicated to the history of the *Orang-orang Diraja* and the *Pendekar*. It will also document their ancient techniques in video format.

NHB’s deputy chief executive of policy and community, Mr Alvin Tan, said the organisation supported the project because it focuses on both the traditional art form in practice as well as its practitioners. He added that NHB hopes

to incorporate the research findings on silat in its Intangible Cultural Heritage inventory.

Dr Effendy, who wrote the first book to document the history of silat in Singapore in 2017, said: “The project aims to unearth new historical perspectives to understand Singapore and the Malay community’s place in it. Behind the silat practised by our youth today is a rich history and culture and, more importantly, time-honoured values such as honour, respect and humility that we must share with the young.”

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