Learning more about ‘protectors’ of sultans

While other children played on the beach and splashed about in the sea by their kampong 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 (kedut and kera), swords (dalang), 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-grandfather Dang Sri Abdullah purportedly served Sultan Ali of Johor and Singapore (who reigned from 1835 to 1855) as a “safeswati”. 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 Effendi 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 Effendi 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 Effendi said: “The Orang-orang Diraja and Pendekar were central to the military and political activation of the region’s pre-colonial 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. At a result, many of their warriors were dispersed and many of their skills and contributions have largely been forgotten.

Nonetheless, Dr Effendi 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 1899, repurposed their expertise for cultural performances at the kampong 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 descendents 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 Effendi, 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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