

RIMA Brief

Discussing Orang Laut Advocacy in Singapore | January 2025

Speakers: Dr Vivienne Wee, Firdaus Sani

Key Takeaways

1. There is a **need for the recognition and preservation of Orang Laut heritage**, establishment of proper research ethics guidelines, and creation of dedicated community spaces for cultural practices and gatherings.
2. **Current Orang Laut advocacy** efforts include documentation of cultural practices, engagement with government bodies, educational initiatives through workshops and learning journeys, as well as creative advocacy through art forms like music, poetry weaving, and traditional fish trap crafting.
3. Some of the **bigger challenges** in advocacy lie in the documenting process. This include the locating of community members, as well as the reluctance from some of them to share their stories due to stigma, or because certain stories and beliefs are kept within the family and not meant to be documented publicly.
4. **Effective advocacy** in the Orang Laut space, as per other forms of advocacy, include cross-sector collaboration, building knowledge capacity with different stakeholders, engagement with government bodies, and consistent community involvement in development planning and decision-making processes.
5. The public can support the Orang Laut cause by **directly supporting** Orang Laut SG initiatives such as Hari Orang Pulau, and other public programmes; as well as through exploring academic research, looking into their own family genealogies, and engaging with recommended readings.

BACKGROUND

The Orang Laut community in Singapore continues to face negative impacts from relocation. In response, there has been a growing movement to advocate for this community, which holds rich traditional environmental knowledge and cultural heritage. This webinar, the second instalment of RIMA's advocacy series, explores the experiences and challenges of Orang Laut advocacy. We examine the advocates' intended outcomes and discuss what makes their advocacy efforts effective. This webinar ultimately aims to hold recognition for these pioneering advocacy initiatives.

In this webinar, we heard from an anthropologist, Dr Vivienne Wee, who talked about the past of Orang Laut in Singapore and the region. We also heard from an advocate, Firdaus Sani, who shared his experiences advocating for the Orang Laut community.

THE ORANG LAUT PAST

Dr Vivienne Wee noted that there has been documentation of sea people in the region that predates what is mentioned in Singaporean history textbooks, which usually takes the starting point of 1819. This starting point was when a treaty was signed between the English East India Company and Temenggong Abdul Rahman, which gave permission for a British trading post in the Temenggong's domain, encompassing Singapore, Batam and other smaller islands. It has been documented in the record of the meeting that when the 1819 treaty was signed, there were 500 Orang Kallang, 200 Orang Seletar, 150 Orang Gelam, and other Orang Laut — presumably Orang Selat.

This document regarded these people as the indigenous inhabitants of Singapore, of which not all were land-dwellers, but instead living on boats, dwelling on both sea and land. The British 1820 map also showed place names of Orang Laut origin, which include Jurong, Ulu Pandan, Rochor, Kallang, and many others, being well-documented and remaining unchanged.

However, even before these historically significant events in relation to national narratives, the existence of sea-dwelling people was ubiquitous in this region. The rising of sea levels 7,000 years ago, which saw Sundaland morphing into island Southeast Asia, submerging low-lying lands, doubling coastlines and creating islands from higher lands and mountain peaks. This gave rise to three clusters of sea people — the Moken, Sama Bajau, and Orang Laut. The Orang Laut were part of a state in Temasek/Singapore from the 7th century onwards.

The kingdom at Temasek/Singapore was part of a network of autonomous port cities seeking to profit from seaborne trade between China and countries to its west. These autonomous port cities could profit from the seaborne trade, because they obtained maritime products from the Orang Laut.

Ending her presentation, Dr Vivienne Wee discussed indigeneity and indigenisation. Being indigenous in Singapore means being indigenous to not just the land, but to the 7,000 years that preceded the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty. This was a treaty that demarcated the region into two spheres of influence, British Malaya (including Singapore), under the English East India

Company and the Dutch East Indies under the Dutch, with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia being their successors. Many Singaporean citizens, born and raised in Singapore, undergo indigenisation because they have no other home but here in Singapore.

ORANG LAUT IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

To contextualise the Orang Laut discourse in the contemporary context, Firdaus Sani, founder of Orang Laut SG and a descendant of the Southern Islands, shared with us about his experiences advocating in the Orang Laut space. Following Dr Vivienne Wee's historical recounts of the Orang Laut in Singapore post-1824, there have been many drastic changes in the livelihoods of the Orang Laut, who have had to move out of the islands to make space for Singapore's rapid national development efforts.

RECOGNISING PIONEERING EFFORTS AND INTENDED OUTCOMES OF ADVOCACY

Advocacy efforts of Orang Laut SG targets five identified impacts of relocation:

Loss of land, culture, traditions, livelihoods and traditional values

Negative socio-economic impacts through generations

Adjustment of social identity and difficulty in adapting to living on mainland

Lack of conservation heritage spaces

Lack of recognition for indigenous communities in Singapore

As a result, the main goal of Orang Laut SG is to overcome these impacts through reclaiming and sharing lost narratives and recognising the sea as a living space for the continuation of the traditional practices of the Southern Islands. Orang Laut SG does these in two ways:

Addressing lack of recognition of indigenous communities in Singapore

Reclaiming and sharing lost narratives increases recognition of indigenous communities in Singapore. These efforts started off as an Instagram page in 2020, utilising food as a medium to share traditions and livelihoods. Even as Orang Laut SG expanded over the years, food remains central to sharing their stories, with cultural events showcasing the community's cuisine.

Sharing narratives also includes the documentation of life on the Southern Islands. For example, due to Firdaus' ease of access to the Pulau Semakau Orang Laut community, he has documented the memories of his mother, aunt, and uncle who used to live on the island. These memories include community knowledge not typically shared with outsiders, due to the stigma within the community about certain practices being considered un-Islamic.

In terms of the recognition of indigenous voices in urban development, Orang Laut SG has interacted with the Ministry of National Development to ensure that the community's challenges, needs, and desires are considered in national development plans. Community representation and voices are ultimately hoped to be included in policy making.

This includes building thriving community spaces, as well as addressing multigenerational socio-economic challenges while ensuring that indigenous knowledge — that can only be shared by years and years of being at sea — are also included in land and sea development.

Addressing the lack of a community space

Orang Laut SG aims to address the lack of community spaces by bringing together all islanders in Singapore at their landmark event called Hari Orang Pulau, where narratives of the history of the seven Southern Islands in Singapore will be shared through workshops, panel discussions, and performances. Hari Orang Pulau is said to be the start of having a community event together, in the hopes of pushing for more representation to establish a heritage center at West Coast Park.

There is currently one remaining community space at West Coast Park where former islanders still dock their sampans, gather, and practice their maritime crafts. Orang Laut SG is currently working with the Ministry of National Development to ensure that the space remains accessible, safe, and conducive for the Orang Laut and Orang Pulau community.

On top of that, Orang Laut SG has established a heritage garden at West Coast Park itself, called Tanah dan Air (Land and Water), which is a versatile space for workshops, talks, and community gatherings — fostering knowledge sharing and cultural connection. Tanah dan Air has hosted programmes and learning journeys in partnership with schools, such as the Singapore University of Social

Sciences (SUSS), art institutions like the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), and cultural partners like the National Heritage Board (NHB). These learning journeys aim to educate the public on the traditions of the Southern Islands, focusing on three main themes: food, culture, and medicine, including the use of plants.

WHAT MAKES EFFECTIVE ORANG LAUT ADVOCACY

From the extensive work and collaborations of Orang Laut SG that extends beyond the islander community, it is noted that effective advocacy work cannot exist in silo.

Building knowledge capacity with different stakeholders

On top of helping community members build confidence in reclaiming and accepting their narratives, Firdaus Sani notes that he has been fortunate enough to be invited on personal learning journeys to learn more about different Orang Laut communities in the region. This is in part to understand their cultures and their various similarities and differences. He still keeps in contact with them as a support system in a space where they share challenges, hopes, and inspirations with each other.

Orang Laut SG was recently invited to Sulawesi by Indonesia's Ministry of Culture, where different Orang Sama-Bajau groups gathered to sign a declaration pushing for the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage status. In the three-day dialogue, there was discussion about identity, naming conventions, and the role of food in preserving traditions.

When asked about inspiring advocates in the same space, Firdaus mentioned researchers like Dr Vivienne Wee who has been pioneering the work of advancing indigenous narratives, as well as advocates like Asnida Daud (a descendent from Pulau Sudong) who uses art and music to share indigenous narratives while advocating for Malay language integration in education.

Orang Laut SG has also worked with talented community members, such as a descendant from Pulau Sudong, who is a veteran artist who helped weave mantra knowledge into poetry. Orang Laut SG has also collaborated on various projects that involved other community members, Cik Hamzah and his son, that include bringing traditional fish trap weaving techniques to the Esplanade stage.

Collaborations with other organisations to increase visibility and acknowledgement

Orang Laut SG has worked with external content partners like Kontinentalist on data and research, requiring extensive collaboration across wider community networks.

Working with the government in the education system, and policy-level decisions

The community has managed to raise two parliamentary questions through MP Sharael Taha about the Orang Kallang and Orang Selat regarding the Kallang Alive project and Greater Southern Waterfront project. Considerations of how Orang Laut narratives can be included in these developments.

Working groups have been formed with engagements with ministers to ensure that the voices of the community are heard.

In terms of raising awareness through education, Orang Laut SG conducts tours, talks, and discussions, working extensively with schools through learning journeys. One of their main goals is to integrate Orang Laut narratives into National Education.

That said, how then do we measure if the advocacy work done is effective? Firdaus responds with his observations on a shift in community perceptions — people are starting to ask questions to engage more critically with the issue of indigenous rights. There is also growing recognition, through acknowledgements on mainstream and social media, as well as a strong research interest, particularly from university students.

CHALLENGES FACED IN THE ADVOCACY PROCESS

However, research ethics become a concern when dealing with vulnerable communities. There have not been established guidelines for engaging with indigenous communities, which allows these communities to be susceptible to their time, resources and knowledge being taken advantage of without fair compensation.

To combat this, Orang Laut SG has strived to work with a researcher from the University of Hawaii on a framework that establishes some ground rules when it comes to research on these indigenous communities. Additionally, community members are also encouraged to

understand the intrinsic value of their narratives and to be selective about research requests.

Other major challenges include locating community members, which require extensive groundwork. A challenge is interviewing elderly members many have passed away or have developed dementia. Of those who are still around, a few are reluctant to share their stories, in an effort to distance themselves from their identity. This is due, at least in part, to the stigma of being different in language and belief systems, which cause them to be looked down upon, causing them to reject their identity as Orang Laut.

FURTHER ACTION

The general public can get involved in events organised and hosted by various Orang Laut advocacy groups. In particular, Firdaus urges all to support Hari Orang Pulau (Islanders' Day) in June 2025, either through supporting the fundraiser or through direct participation.

Hari Orang Pulau aims to celebrate livelihoods and traditions, as well as introduce opportunities for research — be it through cultural mapping to track descendents, assess whether descendents are still living in poverty, or measuring impacts of displacement. It is hoped that the benefit would extend beyond Hari Orang Pulau.

Dr Vivienne Wee added that there is a need for more substantial research, particularly in tracing family genealogies, instead of just grouping people under the umbrella "Malay" label. She urged all to start research within

one's own family, examining both paternal and maternal ancestors to discover indigenous roots.

Firdaus suggested that one can start to learn more about the Orang Laut community through acquainting themselves with research done by Dr Vivienne Wee, Dr Cynthia Chou as well as Chew Soo Beng's book "Fishermen in Flats".

CONCLUSION

The advocacy work for the Orang Laut community in Singapore represents a crucial effort to preserve and recognise indigenous heritage while addressing the ongoing impacts of relocation. Orang Laut SG has taken significant strides in documenting cultural practices, establishing community spaces, and engaging with various stakeholders, including government bodies and educational institutions.

The success of these advocacy efforts relies heavily on collaboration across different sectors, from community members to researchers and policymakers. While challenges persist — particularly in locating and engaging community members, and establishing proper research ethics — there are encouraging signs of growing public awareness and recognition of Orang Laut heritage.

Moving forward, continued support from the public, increased research initiatives, and sustained engagement with government bodies will be essential in ensuring the preservation and recognition of Orang Laut culture and heritage in Singapore.

ABOUT OUR SPEAKERS



DR VIVIENNE WEE,
ANTHROPOLOGIST

Dr Vivienne Wee is an **anthropologist** who has done extensive field research in Singapore and Indonesia. She has particular expertise on the **ethnohistories of communities self-identified as Melayu in the Riau Archipelago**.

She obtained her PhD in Anthropology from the Australian National University, MSocSc from the University of Singapore and Bachelor's degrees in Music and Anthropology from the University of Minnesota. She has taught at the University of Singapore, the National University of Singapore, the Australian National University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and City University of Hong Kong.



FIRDAUS SANI,
Founder of
Orang Laut SG

Firdaus Sani, a fourth-generation Orang Laut/Pulau descendant, **founded Orang Laut SG** in 2020 to preserve the heritage of Pulau Semakau. He advocates for **indigenous voices, representation in education, and public discourse**. Firdaus delivered a TedxYouth talk on sustainability, participated in the Singapore Writers Festival, and performed his work at Esplanade Theatre.

Recognised by Honeycombers as one of Singapore's Local Legends and featured in Prestige magazine's 40 under 40, he has experience in the non-profit sector such as WWF-Singapore. He also founded The Black Sampan, a **social enterprise that supports local non-profits** in their fundraising and social impact goals.

FOLLOW US ON:



rima_singapore



@rima_singapore



singaporeRIMA