

# The Etymology of *Nyonya* and *Nona* and their Language Contacts: Unilateral and Reciprocal Influence

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## Introduction

Among the ethnonyms recorded for the Chinese Peranakans of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, *nyonya* (or *nonya*) stands out, because it is perceived as a loanword and its origin is strongly disputed. The *Pusat Rujukan Persuratan Melayu* (the main reference of the Malay language in Malaysia, containing the dictionaries *Kamus Dewan* and *Kamus Pelajar*) and the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (the main reference in Indonesia; KBBI) register *nyonya*. However, scholars and dilettantes in the study of the Chinese Peranakan point out to different etymologies. One of these involves the word *nona*, which is found in Malay, in the Melaka Creole Portuguese, and in one dictionary of Baba Malay.

Nonetheless, *nyonya* stands for one of three meanings in the *Kamus Dewan*: 1) the term of a married Chinese woman; 2) a Chinese woman belonging to the Chinese Peranakan community; and 3) the term of address for married women. As for *nyonya* in the KBBI, two entries are registered: 1) the term for married women; and 2) wife. One can observe that there is no ethnic connotation in the Indonesian sense of the word. In Baba Malay, *nyonya* has only one meaning, i.e. a Chinese Peranakan woman, regardless of her social status (married or single). The same definition of *nyonya* is also present in the Melaka Creole Portuguese.

As for *nona*, the Malaysian dictionaries exhibit some uncertainty: *Kamus Dewan* registers two entries for the term: 1) term of address for unmarried young women, especially for foreign women; 2) name of the tree or its fruit. The reference for Indonesian Malay lists *nona* as a term of address for daughters and unmarried women without any mention about ethnicity. Some Baba informants inquired during fieldwork in Melaka do not consider *nona* as part of the lexical inventory of Baba Malay. Daughters and unmarried women are addressed as *nyonya*; this contradicts the meaning of the term in Gwee's (2006:144) dictionary of Baba Malay. In Melaka Creole Portuguese, *nona* is a term of address to daughters. This has also been observed during fieldwork in the Portuguese Settlement (Melaka) and in the Tugu Village (Jakarta). Although Tugu Creole Portuguese is currently extinct, the locals still make use of this term of address (and its variants) in their variety of Malay.

The current semantic nuances between varieties of Malay, Baba Malay and Melaka Creole Portuguese compose part of the core of this contribution. The other facet of this paper reviews the etymological proposals for *nyonya* and *nona*.

## Methodology

The qualitative data in this paper is gathered via short-term fieldwork in Melaka and Jakarta, as well as secondary sources composed of current dictionaries, and dictionaries produced in

the 19th to early 20th centuries. From what was observed in Malay, Baba Malay, and Melaka Creole Portuguese, the first research question is evident: Why is there a dichotomy between *nyonya* and *nona* in Malay and not in Baba Malay and in Melaka Creole Portuguese? What created this nuance in the Malaysian and Indonesian varieties of Malay? Was the present situation also current in earlier literature? To answer this question, it is imperative to understand the origins and the scope of *nyonya* and *nona*.

## Results

Table 1: List of literature containing information about the meaning and etymology of *nyonya*.

Literature	Meaning of <i>nyonya</i>	Etymology of <i>nyonya</i>
Favre (1875:904)	Married woman of European or Chinese origin	Portuguese <i>dona</i> /Spanish <i>dueña</i>
Favre (1880:495)	Woman of quality	–
Veth (1889:366-367)	Married woman of European or Eurasian ethnicity	Portuguese <i>dona</i>
Heyligers (1889:42)	Mistress, madam	Portuguese <i>senhora</i> /Spanish <i>dueña</i>
Schuchardt (1890:250)	<i>Nyonya</i> – Mistress, madam (title for European, Chinese and other foreign women); <i>Nonya</i> – unmarried (Tugu creole Portuguese)	Portuguese <i>senhora</i>
Schlegel (1891:400)	Married lady of European or Chinese descent	Chinese (Xiamen Hokkien) 娘子 ‘niô-á’ [Chinese (Mandarin) 娘子 ‘niáng zǎi’]
Vianna (1896:341)	Mistress, madam	Portuguese <i>senhora</i>
Wilkinson (1901:700)	Title given to married European or Chinese ladies of some position (Java); Title given to Straits-born Chinese and Eurasian ladies (in the Straits)	–
Fokker (1902:1735)	Married woman of a European or Chinese	Portuguese <i>senhora</i>

Fokker (1903-1905:3)	A woman married to a European or Chinese	Portuguese <i>senhora</i> /Chinese (Xiamen Hokkien) 娘仔 ‘niô-á’ [Chinese (Mandarin) 娘子 ‘niáng zǎi’]
Vianna (1903-1905:15)	Mistress, madam	Portuguese <i>senhora</i>
Dalgado (1936:136-139, 325)	A woman of European or Chinese descent; A woman married to a European or Chinese	Portuguese <i>senhora</i>
Rêgo (1942:133)	Woman of certain age and (social) position; Term of address for rich Chinese women	Chinese (Mandarin) <i>neong</i> /Chinese (Cantonese) <i>leong</i>
Pakir (1986:25-26)	Chinese Peranakan woman; Lady	(Indonesian) Malay <i>nona</i> /Dutch –/Portuguese –
Tan (1988:13-14)	Chinese Peranakan woman; Term of address for married non-Malay women, especially Chinese women (in Malay); Term of address for married women of some status (Indonesia)	–
Khoo (1996:24)	Non-Malay married woman of some standing	(Traditional) Malay <i>nyonya</i>
Thurgood (2001:44)	Mistress	Javanese
Endon (2002:19)	Non-Malay married woman of some standing	Indonesian (Malay) –
Ong (2005:4)	Lady	Portuguese <i>dona</i>
Lee (2008:162)	Chinese Peranakan woman	Java island
Wee (2009:12)	Foreign married madam	Javanese <i>nyonya</i> /Dutch <i>nona</i> (sic) /Portuguese <i>dona</i>
Chew (2013:113)	Chinese Peranakan woman; form of address for non-Malay woman of high social status	(Traditional) Malay <i>nyonya</i> /Portuguese terms for grandmother (sic)

Lee (2014:91-92)	Chinese Peranakan woman; Wife of a non-indigenous person of some standing	Portuguese creole –/Portuguese <i>dona</i>
Clark & Pietsch (2014:145)	Words of address for non- Malay older married women	(Traditional) Malay <i>nyonya</i>
Ng & Shahrim (2016:94)	Madam married to a foreigner	Javanese <i>nyonya</i> /Dutch <i>nona</i> (grandma)/Portuguese <i>nona</i> or <i>nonha</i> (sic)
Kuake & Kuake (2017:190)	Young lady	Java island

Table 2: List of literature containing information about the meaning and etymology of *nona*.

Literature	Meaning of <i>nona</i>	Etymology of <i>nona</i>
Favre (1875:904)	Un-married woman, daughter of quality	–
Favre (1880:544-545)	Daughter of honest family	–
Veth (1889:366-367)	Young girl	Portuguese <i>dona</i>
Heyligers (1889:49)	Young European girls	Portuguese <i>menina</i>
Schuchardt (1890:250)	Miss	Portuguese <i>senhora</i>
Vianna (1896:341)	Miss	
Wilkinson (1901:675)	Unmarried daughter of a European or a Chinese (Java); Name given to the recognized mistress of a European (Singapore)	
Fokker (1902:1734)	Young lady	Portuguese <i>donha</i> (sic)
Vianna (1903-1905:15)	Mistress, madam	Portuguese <i>senhora</i>
Dalgado (1936:136-139, 325)	A woman of European or Chinese descent; A woman married to a European or Chinese	Portuguese <i>dona</i>
Rêgo (1942:133)	Young woman/girl	Portuguese <i>dona</i> /(Lower) Latin <i>nonna</i>
Pakir (1986:25-26)	Chinese Peranakan woman; Lady	(Indonesian) Malay <i>nona</i> /Dutch –/Portuguese –
Tan (1988)	–	–

Khoo (1996:24)	Non-Malay married women of some standing	(Traditional) Malay
Thurgood (2001)	–	–
Endon (2002:19)	Non-Malay married woman of some standing	Indonesian (Malay)
Ong (2005)	–	–
Lee (2008)	–	–
Wee (2009:12)	Eurasian; Young native girl married to a European.	Portuguese <i>dona</i>
Chew (2013:113)	Chinese Peranakan woman; form of address for non-Malay woman of high social status	(Traditional) Malay <i>nona</i> /Portuguese terms for grandmother (sic)
Lee (2014:91-92)	–	–
Clark & Pietsch (2014:145)	Words of address for non-Malay older married women	(Traditional) Malay <i>nona</i>
Ng & Shahrin (2016:94)	Native girl married to a European	Portuguese <i>nona</i> or <i>nonha</i> (sic), <i>dona</i>
Kuake & Kuake (2017)	–	–

## Discussion

The proposed etymologies differ substantially, but it is possible to recognize certain tendencies. While most of the etymologies of *nona* favor the term as Portuguese, the origins of *nyonya* are still very much uncertain. Bastos (1912:840) reports the term *nhonha* as an adjective derived from Portuguese *senhora* and calls the Portuguese creole spoken in Mozambique *língua nhonha* ‘*nyonya* language’. This same denomination is applied to the Portuguese creole of Macau (China), whereby *nhonha* means ‘girl’ or ‘single or married woman’ (see Fernandes & Baxter 2001:148-149, 2004:116-117). As for *nona*, the term is found in Sinhalese, probably due to the “popularity and persistence of ‘Singelle Nona’” (Jackson 2007:304). Variations of this folk song were registered in India (namely Vypeen Island, Cochin), Sri Lanka, and Malaysia (see Sarkissian 2000:101). The extension of *nona* goes beyond its musical scope, because Dalgado (1900:166) registers *nona* and *nonha* (pronounced *nonya*) in the Portuguese creole of Sri Lanka. Here, *nona* stands for ‘mistress’, ‘respectable lady’, and ‘grandmother’. *Nonha*, on the other hand, can mean ‘virgin’ or ‘single’, to which is added that *nonha* is a diminutive of Macau creole Portuguese *nhonha* or of Sri Lanka creole Portuguese *nona*. Notwithstanding, Dalgado (1900:166) mentions the presence of *nona* in the Portuguese creoles of Cochin, Mahé, and Diu, together with Singaporean Tamil and Malay.

From what could be observed, the dichotomy *nyonya* vs. *nona* was noticed by some scholars, especially those dealing with Malay in the 19th century. Moreover, an absence of exclusivity in relation to the Chinese Peranakan is also noticed, which means that the dichotomy seems to be applied to all non-Malay ethnicities. As Lee (2014:90) points out, *baba* and *nyonya* have experienced a semantic shift, with a more exclusive meaning towards Chinese

Peranakan. The social history of Malaysia and Indonesia may also have played a role in the semantic nuances or semantic shifts of *nyonya* and *nona*.

## Conclusion

This paper problematizes the anterior etymologies of *nyonya* and *nona*, suggesting a new possibility of etymology involving the Portuguese creole languages of South Asia and Southeast Asia. The dichotomy between *nyonya* and *nona* appears to be ending in Malaysia due to a further specification of *nyonya* to define exclusively Chinese Peranakan women. However, the Baba Malay Dictionary by Gwee (2006) shows otherwise. Considering informants who used the popular song ‘Nona Zaman Sekarang’ to argue (in favor or against) the presence of *nona* in the Baba Malay language, this opens the subject to further analysis.

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