

# Music to My Ears: The Terms ‘nona’ and ‘nyonya’ as Ethnonyms and Beyond

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## Introduction

According to dictionaries of Standard Malay, *nyonya* means the married woman of a Chinese or a European, whereas *nona* stands for an un-married, young woman of European or Chinese descent. Hence, a dichotomous relation is reflected in the meanings for these two terms. Nowadays, *nyonya* almost refers exclusively to a Chinese Peranakan lady. This is the connotation of the term in Baba Malay and it is clearly visible in the ethnonym *baba-nyonya* or in designations of cultural areas connected to the Chinese Peranakan such as ‘*baba-nyonya* language’, ‘*nyonya* food’, ‘*nyonya* kuih’, or ‘*nyonya* clothing’. These labels coexist with other labels like ‘peranakan cuisine’ and ‘peranakan fashion’. As for *nona*, the word also has a different significance in the Portuguese creole varieties of Melaka (Malaysia) and Tugu (Indonesia). Parents in Portuguese Eurasians families address their daughters by the term *nona*, but, unlike *nyonya* for the Chinese Peranakans, *nona* is not an ethnonym for the female members of the Portuguese Eurasian communities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Sarkissian (1995) and Jackson (2007) analyzed the song *Jinkli Nona* and demonstrated that the beautiful and exotic “Portuguese” damsel - in fact, a Eurasian-African-Sinhalese “nona” - had “become synonymous over time with South and Southeast Asian women in areas influenced by Indo-Portuguese maritime contacts, both etymologically and aesthetically” (Jackson 2007: 213). In the context of Malaysia, the song is now considered a national song that is known by all ethnic groups, young and old. Expanding from there, the objective of this paper is to observe how music has influenced the meaning of the terms *nyonya* and *nona*, and to understand how the terms *nyonya* and *nona* shifted semantically between languages and nations, if that is the case. Further analysis could take into perspective *pantuns* and poems.

As the interactions between the Portuguese Eurasians and Chinese Peranakans are still underexplored, a review of pertinent literature will focus tacitly on listing folk and popular songs, where one of the two terms (or its variations) are present in the lyrics. The research questions of this paper are: what are the cultural connections established by the terms *nyonya* and *nona* in the folk songs and popular music of Malaysia, Singapore and Malaysia? Following Tan’s (2017) exposition on how a music genre crossed ethnic and cultural boundaries, the intention of locating the two terms in areas outside of Melaka could help understand the second set of research questions: In what ways the presence of these terms in folk songs helped (or still help) to re-interpret the semantic scope of the terms in Standard Malay, Baba Malay, and Melaka Creole Portuguese? How does the presence of *nyonya* and *nona* in folk songs helps to expand the semantic scope of the terms? Conceptualizing the Creole communities of the Malay Archipelago as *Peranakan*, this paper proposes that the terms and concepts of *nona* and *nyonya* were not anchored to a specific ethnic community in Nusantara, but were shared by the people of the region as a supra-national cultural asset.

## Methodology

Qualitative data in this paper is gathered from via short-term fieldwork in Melaka and Jakarta, as well as secondary sources which include dictionaries and a survey of folk and popular song-texts within the geographical space of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, to determine the interactions between languages and local varieties in what concerns the usage of *nyonya* and *nona*. Initial results indicate a higher presence of *nona* compared to *nyonya* in the song-texts, which can be understood by the moral norm of not singing in a passionate manner to a married woman. Nevertheless, in order to test to what extent these two loanwords have become nativized, a literature review on the etymology of *nyonya* and *nona* is conducted. An annotation of exemplary songs containing *nyonya* or *nona* in its lyrics can aid in the understanding of the reach of the terms, and realize how their presence in local varieties of a language secure its belonging to that given language.

## Results

Table 1 – List of exemplary songs containing the words *nyonya* or *nona*.

<i>Jingli Nona</i>
Yusof B. – <i>Nona Zaman Sekarang</i> (1940s)
R. Azmi- <i>Nona Malaya</i> (1955)
Anneke Grönloh – <i>Nina bobo</i> (1962)
Nona Asiah & Ismail Mukasim - <i>Nona Manis</i> (1953)
George de Fretes – <i>Rasa Sajang É</i> (1969)
Rifa Hadijah & Mus Mulyadi - <i>Bila Suami Kerja</i> (1975)
Rudi van Dalm and his Raindrops – <i>Waarom huil je toch, nona manis</i> (1981)
<i>Nyonya pakay bunga</i>
Willy and his Giants – <i>Ajoen Ajoen a.k.a. De klapperboom marsch</i> (1965)
R. Azmi - <i>Nona Singapura</i> (1940s)
Baba Nyonya Mari Go Round! – <i>Jinking Nona, Nyonya pakay bunga</i> (2006)
Nyong Franco – <i>Gemu fa mi re</i> (2015)

## Discussion

The presence of *nona* and *nyonya* in Standard Malay (both Malaysian and Indonesian varieties) are quite consistent but, in Baba Malay, there is some vagueness about the presence of *nona* in its lexical inventory. In addition to that, the native speakers of Baba Malay inquired during the fieldwork in Melaka reject the idea of *nona* belonging to Baba Malay. As for the Melaka Portuguese creole language, native speakers and literary references acknowledge both words, but restricts the semantic scope of *nyonya* to a Chinese Peranakan lady. Identifying the discrepancies of meaning and its diatopic variation is of relevance to the theory of linguistic contact, because *nyonya* and *nona* do not fall into the different categories of borrowing, be it

importation, partial substitution or even substitution discussed in Betz (1949, 1959), Haugen (1950, 1953, 1956), and Weinreich (1953).

The presence of *nyonya* and *nona* in *keroncong* songs is also remarkable. *Keroncong* (also written as *krontjong* or *kroncong*) is associated with the Portuguese Eurasian community of Tugu, Jakarta, while being a musical genre characteristic of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (see Ganap 1999, 2011). This style of music is also connected with the Chinese Peranakan community, especially through *dondang sayang* (see Thomas 1986, Ding 2004, Tan 2009). Through music, *nyonya* and *nona* have a higher exposure to the resident populations and go beyond the realm of Baba Malay and Melaka Creole Portuguese. At the same time, this exposure can contribute to a re-interpretation of the terms within the scope of the Malay language.

Reinforcing a conclusion from Mutsaers (2014), Matusky & Tan (2017), and Tan (2017) about the potentiality of music in overcoming ethnic and linguistic boundaries, music could have contributed to the presence and consequent semantic shift of the terms *nyonya* and *nona* in distant areas of Indonesia and even Europe. Other factors such as socio-historical or economical events may have played a role in the diffusion of the music and the terms.

## Conclusion

In this preliminary study, it is found that there is a correlation between the presence (and absence) of a certain word and its (frequent or sporadic) usage within a specific area of cultural activity. The fairly constant usage of *nona* in comparison to *nyonya* could also have contributed to a broader, ethnically unbound meaning of the term. *Mutatis mutandis*, the sporadic presence of *nyonya* in folk and popular songs could have fostered further ethnic specification of the term.

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