

Names and Surnames among the Malays

Malays, both young and old, bear personal names of either Arabic or Malay origin, though the Arabic element predominates in the majority of cases. In the case of surnames however one notices that a good many such patronymics are of Malay or Sanskritic origin. It is said that in the olden days, the names given to Malay children at the naming ceremony on the fortieth day were kept a secret as they believed that they could be harmed by witch doctors. For instance, B.D.K.Saldin in his *Portrait of a Sri Lankan Malay* (2003) notes that he was named Tuan Singasiri at his naming ceremony but the name subsequently given as Baba Deen Kitchil Saldin. The Malays of former times are also said to have given names relating to events when a child was born. For instance, a person with the name Puasa meant that he was born during the fasting month. The name Selasa meant that the child was born on a Tuesday (Saldin 2003).

The names of Malay males generally begin with Tuan, an honorific meaning 'sir', 'master'¹, while that of the females begin with Gnei. In the olden days however, it was not uncommon for the proper names of males to be preceded with Babā² and one may come across individuals of the older generation who still bear this name. Malay women of the olden days commonly had Nona prefixed to their names, e.g.Nona Ahayan, Nona Balkis

¹ The practice is an old one and evidently originated from the Malay homeland for Barros (1553) compares the style 'Tuam' to the Portuguese Dom and states that it is put before a person's proper name, as for instance in Tuam Colascar.

² Such names for instance commonly occur in *A Directory of the Members of the All Ceylon Malay Association and other Malays of Ceylon in the Jubilee Book* (1924). For instance, Baba Brahanudeen Sadar, Baba Reebu Doole and Baba Amjadeen Drahim. Curiously, the term is an ethnic one traditionally applied to the ethnic Chinese males of areas like Malacca and Penang. The womenfolk of these Babas are known as nyonyas, a term which bears a curious resemblance to Nona borne by some local Malay women of about a generation or two ago. Whether this necessarily implies Chinese descent is however doubtful, since such an appellation could well have been adopted as an honorary prefix, the Chinese of yore being considered a respectable class of people in Malay lands. This would have been particularly so of the Peranakans or Straits-born Chinese whose males are generally known as Babas and females as Nyonyas. The origins of this community is traced back to the 15th century when the Ming Emperor offered the hand of his daughter, Princess Hang Li Po to Sultan Mansur Shah in 1459. The princess arrived in Malacca with a royal entourage who went on to form the core of the Peranakan community. The immigrants through intermarriage soon assimilated with the local culture giving rise to this unique community which preserves the traditions of both the Chinese and Malay races (See *Cultural Melaka*.Donna Jeremiah.2002).

and Nona Zam Zam ³ and a few elderly women are still known to bear this name.

The Malays of former times had personal names like Bagus, Bintan, Kicil and Kasūma which may still be borne by the older generation. Such names are not without meaning. For instance, Kicil means ‘small’, Bagus ‘fine’ and Bintan ‘star’. One also still comes across typical Malay female names like Kartini, Hartini and Melāti. Even nowadays there are said to be those Malay parents who give their children Malay names like Azehari and Prawira for boys and Melati and Suratni for girls ⁴, but this does not hold true for the vast majority who still prefer names of Arabic origin. These include names like Akīl, Salīm and Taslim in the case of males and Hafsa, Zīnat and Raihāna in the case of females.

In Malaysia and to some extent in Indonesia today, the system of surnaming is derived from the Arab tradition of naming individuals as the sons or daughters of their fathers. This practice however does not exist among Sri Lankan Malays who bear patronymics passed down from generation to generation. Among the prominent Malay patronymics may be cited Ālif, Anif, Ahlip, Asan, Amat, Amit, Amidon, Ajumain, Akbar, Azūr, Bahar, Bakman, Bongso, Būrah, Būso, Bangsajayah, Cunci, Cuncīr, Cunkīr, Dīn, Dēn, Dōl, Dūl, Drahman, Dulapandan, Gunavijāyā, Hamit, Hamidon, Jāyah, Jaldin, Jumat, Jaimon, Jūnus, Jungkīr, Jamalón, Jumadin, Jurangpati, Kambal, Kutilan, Kicilan, Lye, Lantra, Laksana, Mīdin, Miskin, Mantārā, Musafar, Mutalif, Nalawangsa, Raban, Rājon, Sāle, Sāmat, Saban, Saldin, Sampan, Samahon, Samidon, Sourjah, Suhūd, Sinhawangsa, Singalaksana, Tālif, Wīrabangsa and Yusuf ⁵. Those patronymics such as Wīrabangsa, Nalawangsa, Sinhawangsa and Bangsajayah are of Sanskrit origin, the constituent terms wangsa and bangsa occurring here having their origins in the Sanskrit *varṣa* ‘family’, ‘clan’, ‘lineage’. Thus Wīrabangsa would signify ‘heroic clan’ and Sinhawangsa ‘lion clan’.

³ Such names not uncommonly occur in Saldin (2003). The Malay term *nōnā* also used in Sinhala in the sense of ‘lady, ‘wife’ seems to have originally denoted a woman of European or Chinese descent or a woman married to an European or Chinaman as attested in Malay dialects such as Achenese, Javanese and Sundanese. It was evidently in later times that it came to be adopted by Malay women as a titular prefix having the sense of ‘lady’ or ‘madam’. The term seems to have arisen from the Portuguese *dona* ‘lady’ and the contact of *dona* and *senhora* ‘madam’ and their mutual influence (Influencia do Vocabulario Portugues em Linguas Asiaticas. Rudolfo Dalgado.1913. Trans.with notes, additions and comments by Anthony Soares.1936).

⁴ Saldin (2003)

⁵ Many such Malay patronymics could be gathered from the Directory of Malays found in the Jubilee Book (1924). A substantial list of Malay patronymics is also provided in Saldin (2003).

It is not uncommon for those bearing Sanskritic or semi-Sanskritic family names to claim royal or noble ancestry ⁶ and among the patronymics said to signify royal or aristocratic descent are Putra (Lit.Son), Raden (Prince) and Jurangpati (Chieftain). Those bearing the surname Jāyah (Victory) are also said to be of royal or noble stock, while it is not unlikely that the well-known family name Dūl derives from dūli, a term used in addressing royalty and evidently derived from the Sanskritic dhuli ‘dust’, it originally being a humble reference to oneself in the presence of royalty. Some families also have the term Mās (Noble) prefixed to their family names (E.g.Mās Ārun) or personal names as they believe themselves to be of nobler stock than others

Malay patronymics such as Alif, Sherif and Yusuf are evidently of Arab origin, though this may not necessarily imply Arab ancestry, Arabic names being popular with most non-Arab Muslim peoples. The adoption of such names in preference to their native Malay or Sanskritic names would indicate a strong Islamic consciousness among the forbears of this folk. De-aspiration has taken place in some Malay patronymics of Arabic origin such as Asan (Ar.Hasan) and Anif (Ar.Hanif) in keeping with the peculiarities of local Malay which does away with aspirates. The absence of final *d* in the Malay language may perhaps account for such names like Amit and Amat which have probably originated from the Arabic Hamīd and Ahmad. Yet other names have undergone corruption with the passage of time such as for instance Saldin which little doubt derives from the Arabic Salah-ud-dīn.

⁶ Sanskritic names among Malays evidently pre-date Islamic influence beginning from about the 13th century and go back to a time when Hindu influences were strong. The first recorded instance of such a name is perhaps found in the Sanskrit inscription from Pagaroyang, the capital of the ancient Malay state of Menangkabau in the heart of Sumatra dated to 656 AC which refers to one King Adityadharma (Lit.Sun of the faith) of the first Java. The use of Sanskrit names among Malays may suggest royalty or nobility, for as noted by William Maxwell (A Manual of the Malay Language.1882) the titles of royalty and nobility are Sanskrit. He further observes: “The centre of Hindu influence in Malay states would seem to have been the court. From the governing classes the use of Sanskritic expressions would gradually spread among the people. To this day there are certain Sanskrit words which are applied to royalty alone, there being native equivalents when the non-privileged classes are intended. The words *putra* and *putri* afford an instance in point. Meaning simply “son” and “daughter” in Sanskrit, they have from the fact of Sanskrit nomenclature having been affected at Malay courts, come to mean “Prince” and “princess” and are applied only to the sons and daughters of rajas”.