

## Three etymologies and some "feel oh logical" notes

Rhys Gardner

First examined here are the origins and meanings of three well-known generic names. For two of them, *Trichomanes* and *Luzula*, my preferred etymologies are a little different from those in Marie Taylor's invaluable dictionary (Taylor 2002). I have had the advantage of ready access<sup>1</sup> to the early (Linnean and pre-Linnean) literature, at Websites like Botanicus.org and Biodiversity Heritage Library. Two compilations of Ancient Greek and Roman plant names (Carnoy 1959, André 1985) have also been very useful. These are not currently available on the Web but there are copies at the University of Auckland library. The subsequent five topics briefly examined include an "eyebrows raised" look at things I have formerly written on, or at least, misspelt.

**1. *Trichomanes*:** This was what the Ancient Greeks and Romans called the fern we know as *Asplenium trichomanes*. The word's two parts (*trichos* hair *manes* an extreme profusion) obviously refer to the plant's abundance of slender dark hairs. Linnaeus, in his "*Species Plantarum*" of 1753, used this name twice: firstly, as the epithet for this asplenium; and secondly, for a new group of eleven species of fern, at least some of which still remain in the this genus, *Trichomanes*. None of the eleven are noted by Linnaeus as being copiously hairy, though.

The puzzle is solved when we look more closely at the only one to have been listed in Linnaeus's earlier work, his "*Hortus Cliffortianus*" of 1738. There, and in "*Species Plantarum*" too, we get a reference to an even earlier French botanist in the West Indies. This author's figure, reproduced here (Fig. 1),

shows the typical trichomanoid description of *T. crispum*, by Charles Plumier (1646–1704), indusium and central hair-like receptacle. Examination of a specimen confirms the conspicuousness ("profusion") and persistence of the latter structure (Fig. 2).

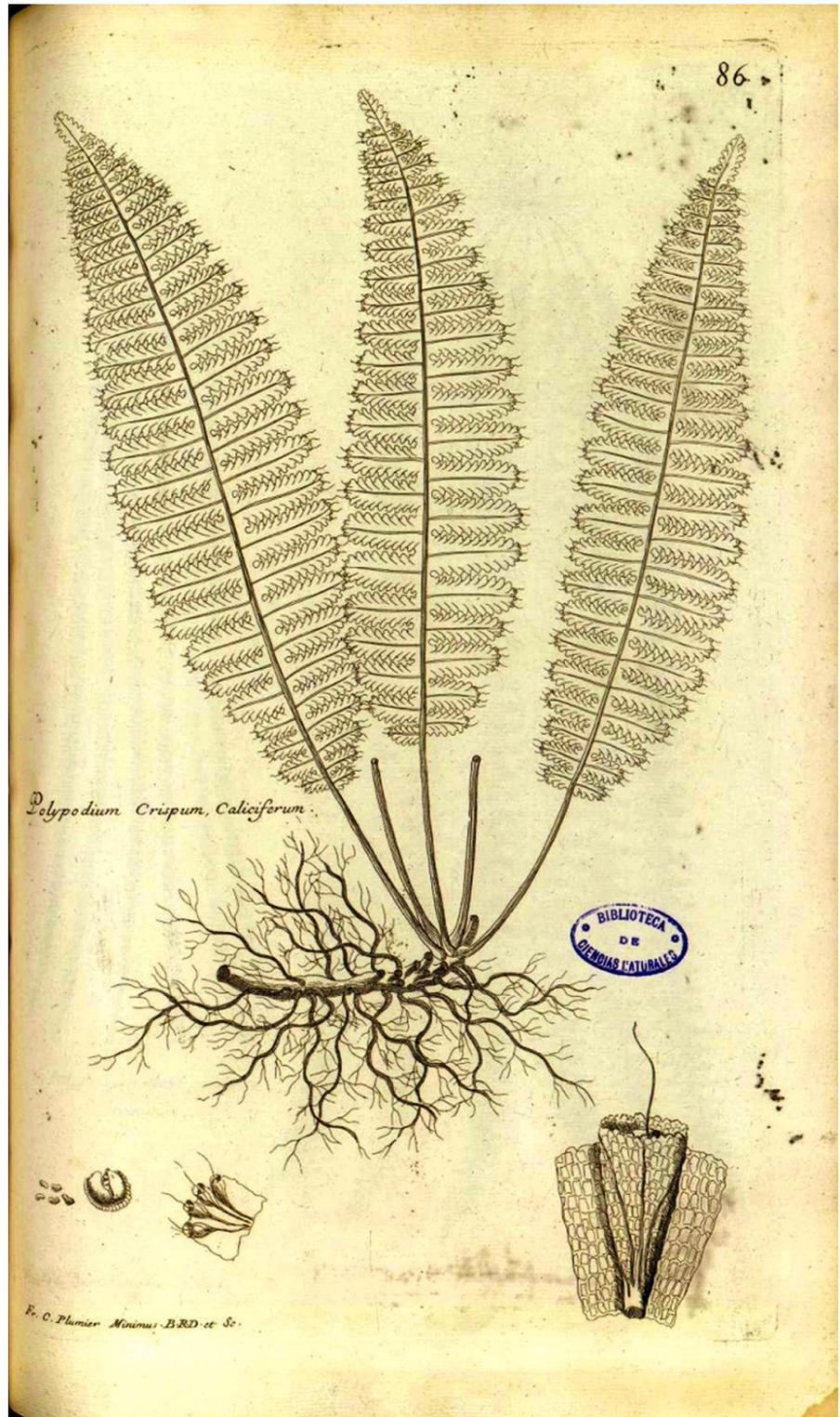


Fig. 1. Pl. 86, "*Polypodium crispum, caliciferum*". Charles Plumier, *Traité des fougères de l'Amérique*, 1705.



**Fig. 2. Fertile pinnules of *Trichomanes crispum* (AK 111500), Brazil. Scalebar = 5 mm.**

Linnaeus is said to have been lax in his Greek studies as a schoolboy, so we might think it just a coincidence that the second part of the generic can also be interpreted using the rather obscure Greek word "*manes* a kind of cup or beaker". Whether deliberate or not, the generic is apt and memorable.

**2. *Eragrostis*:** Alternatives have been offered, but most Flora-writers have focussed on the first part of this name as representing "*eros* love". I tend to agree: it can hardly be coincidence that Linnaeus published *Poa eragrostis* next to his *Poa amabilis*. Both these species are now placed in the post-Linnaean genus *Eragrostis*, commonly known as the love-grasses. The former is the European species *Eragrostis pilosa*. It seems as if this common name first appeared in France, as "*amourette*" (see writings of 16th/17th C. botanists Clusius and Bauhin), without explanation. Perhaps then, just a pretty grass.

But those responsible for the Flora of Australia treatment (Palmer et al. 2005: 346) have another story. They say that the name "probably alludes to the characteristic, earthy (human) female aroma of the inflorescences". We all know that features like smell and taste are seldom well-described in Floras — the love-grasses are generally just said to have an odour, or at best, an "unpleasant" one. But I think the specific claim made here would have been well-referenced in the European ethnobotanical / folk botany literature, and it is not.

**3. *Luzula*:** Everyone who has tried to explain this name brings in the old Italian name *luzziola*, literally little shining thing, name for a firefly. Why the plant should be thought to shine is not clear; for example, C. B. Bauhin in his "*Theatrici botanici*" of 1658 just says that this name (probably for *L. campestris*) is because it shines at night — one has to think, as a British author later did, this is because of the flower-heads, wet with dew and sparkling in the moonlight.

Some writers have thought that the plant "shines" because it was formerly used to make wicks for oil lamps, that is, for rush-lights. But stemless rushes such as *Juncus effusus* were invariably used for this purpose — *Luzula* has the wrong morphology. The former group has always been distinguished from the hairy "wood-rush" luzulas, nor has *luzziola* ever been an old Italian name for *J. effusus* etc.

**4. *Rama-rama*:** Two etymologies for this New Zealand Maori plant-name can be suggested. As for *Trichomanes*, one does not entirely exclude the other.

The name is well known for *Lophomyrtus bullata* (Myrtaceae) and has also been recorded (Beever 1987; Riley 1994) for *Pseudowintera colorata* (usually, horopito, Winteraceae). In Polynesia (Tonga, Cook Is., and the Society and Tuamotu Is.; Rensch & Whistler 2009) the name *rama* is used for an unrelated plant, *Ximania americana* (Olacaceae). This is a coastal shrub, crooked-branched and thorny, with shiny opposite leaves, white fragrant flowers, and yellow-orange, marble-sized fruit. Unless its distribution has changed greatly in the last thousand years it would have been quite familiar to Polynesian voyagers. In the minds of the earliest of these to reach New Zealand a memory of it might have been triggered by the sight of the lophomyrtus, and that might be what the reduplication indicates: a tenuous connection rather than a positive identification.

Riley (1994) approached the problem from the New Zealand end, as it were, and suggests that since *rama* in the Maori language has the meaning of "a flash of light" we can understand the name as referring to the broken glossiness of the bullate leaf of the lophomyrtus, and he gives a nice picture illustrating this. It seems appropriate too for the pseudowintera, not so much for the leaf's reflective power as for its strikingly mottled surface.

**5. *Coix lacryma-jobi*:** This is the correct spelling of the scientific name for the grass commonly known as "Job's tears" Quite a few authors, including myself, those of Flora of New Zealand Vol. 5, and some even more eminent, have put in an "h", making the epithet conform with the usual Medieval Latin spelling and the modern "lachrymose", etc. But the older Latin spelling, from a Greek word, did not

have the "h", and that is the form Linnaeus used when he published the name.

#### 6. *Hedygium gardnerianum*, kahili ginger:

The common name of this ginger is sometimes begun with a capital K, as if referring to a region of the Himalayas where the plant might be native. In fact, "kahili" is a Polynesian word, from the Hawaiian Islands, for a kind of royal ceremonial feather-plume, often red and yellow (for ornithological details see Amante-Helweg & Conant 2009: 62) and therefore, very appropriate for the *H. gardnerianum* inflorescence. Perhaps the name first appeared in the Hawaiian gardening literature.

7. *Excoecaria agallocha*: Innocent visitors to Norfolk Island are regularly cautioned about this sinister coastal tree, its milky sap so poisonous as to be able to blind. The spelling of the genus-name should then be *Excaecaria*, from Latin *excaecare* to blind; as presently spelt (the original spelling of Linnaeus) it makes no sense. There is no provision in the current Botanical Code of Nomenclature though that would allow a correction to be made.

8. *Tmesipteris horomaka*: The nuisance of unlatinized Maori place-names as epithets continues, no attention being paid to the Recommendation of

the current Botanical Code that geographical epithets should take the usual endings (*-ensis*, etc), nor to its Principle V, that "Scientific names of taxonomic groups are treated as Latin regardless of their derivation", nor to Preamble 13, that "in the absence of a relevant rule established custom is [to be] followed". See the twelve thousand correctly formed geographical epithets in Kunkel (1990).

A band of critics pointed out that I was wrong (Gardner 1998) in saying that the malformed geographical species-names I listed (*Cotula maniototo*, etc) were in need of orthographic correction, since there is no provision in the Code for doing so. If there had been a relevant Rule I would have cited it, and changed the names myself. It may be useless pointing this out to those who cannot begin from the beginning, that is, in the spirit of the law.

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<sup>1</sup> A grasp of Latin basics is needed, though; machine-translation of Latin can make more problems than it solves. For example, if 16th C. Italian botanist Castore Durante were to be resurrected, he would be puzzled at finding himself now addressed as "Beavers During".

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## *Coprosma* (Rubiaceae) in the Cook Islands

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### *Coprosma laevigata*

The only true *Coprosma* in this tropical Polynesian archipelago is *Coprosma laevigata* of Rarotonga (Fig. 1), one of the discoveries made by Thomas Cheeseman on his 1899 visit there (Cheeseman 1903). Its rather thin and glossy leaves, whose finer venation reaches more or less to the midrib, and its "small bushy tree" habit, give it a fair resemblance to *C. acutifolia* of the Kermadecs and *C. macrocarpa* of New Zealand.

*Coprosma laevigata* does not seem to have anything that might indicate a close relationship with *C. robusta* (e.g., it does not have this species' minutely serrate leaf margins). Nor is there anything unusual about its domatia, which are simply small dome-roofed pits. Its stipules are like those of *C. repens*: relatively broad and thick, they carry numerous large glandular denticles along their margin, and they erode in place. This contrasts