



Correspondence

The Tenasserim Banyan

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Abstract

In his *Natural Productions of Burma* published in 1850, Francis Mason described a fig species that he referred to as the Tenasserim Banyan and legitimately published the name *Ficus benjaminoides* for it. This name has been very largely overlooked in the botanical literature. In the absence of type material, the name is here neotypified to make *F. benjaminoides* Mason a synonym of *Ficus benjamina*. Mason's name makes *Ficus benjaminoides* Corner an illegitimate later homonym.

Key words: Burma, *Ficus*, fig, Francis Mason, Moraceae, neotype, nomenclature, typification

Francis Mason (1799–1874) was a Baptist missionary who worked among the Karen people of Burma. As well as his missionary work, which included translation of the Bible into the Karen dialects, he had a strong interest in the natural history and geology of Burma. He published a number of articles on botanical subjects, including the description of *Pinus latteri* Mason (1849: 74), and wrote a lengthy work summarising the geology, flora and fauna of Burma (Mabberley 1985). This first appeared in 1850 under the title *The Natural Productions of Burmah, or notes on the Fauna, Flora and Minerals of the Tenasserim Provinces, and the Burman Empire*. In it, Mason refers to the Tenasserim Banyan, a large fig-tree with descending roots found at the back of the mangroves and along tidal rivers in Tenasserim. He notes that it is close to *Ficus benjamina* Linnaeus (1767: 129) of southern India but finds consistent differences between the Indian and Burman plants. He ends the section with a couplet, as from a dichotomous key, to distinguish *Ficus benjamina* from what he refers to as *Ficus benjaminoides*. This represents the valid and legitimate publication of *Ficus benjaminoides* Mason (1850: 88). This name has been very largely overlooked in the botanical literature.

What then is Mason's Tenasserim Banyan? There seem two clear candidates. That is the widespread (India to Australia and the South Pacific) and variable *F. benjamina* (Berg & Corner 2005) or the more poorly known *Ficus kurzii* King (1887: 47). Original specimens would help clarify this issue. Stafleu & Cowan (1981) indicate that Mason's specimens and types are present in the herbarium of the New York Botanical Garden, but this seems to refer only to the cryptogam specimens included in the Mitten herbarium purchased in 1906. I have failed to locate any relevant material in K or BM. I suspect that there are no extant specimens of *F. benjaminoides*, if any were ever made, as the name would otherwise not have remained overlooked. It seems expedient to neotypify *F. benjaminoides* to a specimen of *F. benjamina* to avoid unnecessary name changes. The chosen specimen has been referred to *F. benjamina* var. *nuda* (Miquel 1847: 584) Barrett (1951: 128), but the recent treatment by Berg & Corner (2005) does not recognise any infraspecific taxa for *F. benjamina*.

Ficus benjamina Linnaeus (1767: 129). Lectotype (designated by Smith 1981: 175):—INDIA. Illustration in Rheede tot Draakestein (1678: t. 26).

Ficus benjaminoides Mason (1850: 88), *syn. nov.* Neotype (designated here):—BURMA: Tenasserim, 1877, G. Gallatly 981 (K!, iso BM!).