

SHORT COMMUNICATION

ADANSONIA IS A BAOBAB TREE, NOT A THERIDIID SPIDER

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ABSTRACT. The name *Adansonia* Saville-Kent was erroneously introduced into spider taxonomy by Bonnet in 1939 and still appears in the literature. Saville-Kent was referring to a tree, not describing a spider.

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Most biologists are familiar with the genus *Adansonia* Linnaeus 1753, which contains the magnificent Baobab trees. The Baobabs are particularly prolific in Madagascar but also widely distributed in continental Africa, and one species is native to northwestern Australia. These trees are also popular in botanical gardens and parks in other parts of the world. Less well known is the mollusk *Adansonia* Pallary 1902. Pallary validly proposed this name as a subgenus of *Donovania* Bucquoy Dautzenberg & Dollfus, which in turn is now considered a junior synonym of the buccinid snail *Chauvetia* Monterosato. Very few are aware of yet another use of the name *Adansonia*, but *Adansonia* Saville-Kent 1897 is currently listed as a generic name of the spider family Theridiidae (Platnick 1997). The latest use of the name is an error that can be traced back to a cataloging mistake by Bonnet (1939). This note is written to clarify the situation and prevent further inclusion of the name *Adansonia* Saville-Kent in spider taxonomy.

The acclaimed author of the name is William Saville-Kent (1845–1908), whose works include “The Great Barrier Reef of Australia” (Saville-Kent 1893) and “The Naturalist in Australia” (Saville-Kent 1897). In the latter he was discussing a theridiid spider:

“A remaining spider form included in Chromo-Plate IX. invites brief notice. It is represented by Figs. 12 to 15 [these show the details of the egg cocoon and the general habitus of the spider]. This type is apparently referable to the genus *Theridium*, and is remarkable more especially with relation to its habits and the singular environments of its egg cocoon. It

was observed by the writer in the neighbourhood of Derby, at the head of King’s Sound, Western Australia, taking up its abode in the fissures of the gnarled trunks of the older Baobab or Bottle-trees, *Adansonia rupestris*. The spider, a small brown one, presents no special features of interest, and neither does the web, which is of the irregularly meshed order. Suspended in the snare, however, there is generally present a little cupola-shaped mass, which, on near examination, is found to be composed superficially of the emptied skins and disjointed limbs of a small species of black ant upon which this spider habitually feeds. The interior of this ant aggregation is hollow, and is found to contain in its upper confines the spherical silken egg cocoon of its fabricator, which it has most effectively and ingeniously concealed from view” (Saville-Kent 1897:261).

It is clear from Saville-Kent’s text that he did not intend to describe a new species, and thus gives the spider no name, he is simply sharing some interesting observations with the reader. Bonnet (1939), however, mistakenly connected Saville-Kent’s description of the spider to the Latin name of the Baobab and listed *Adansonia* Saville-Kent, as a new genus and *Adansonia rupestris* Saville-Kent as a new species (which he designated as the type species, by monotypy), in the family Theridiidae (Bonnet 1939:158)! Bonnet’s error does not appear in Levi & Levi’s (1962) exhaustive work on theridiid genera, nor in the catalogs of Roewer (1942), Brignoli (1983) or Platnick (1988), but *Adansonia* is listed as a theridiid genus in the two most recent spider taxonomy catalogs under the heading of “No

Entries" (Platnick 1993:180; 1997:248). Thus no one has used this name since Bonnet's error.

The argument might be made that Bonnet's error can be considered as providing availability to *Adansonia rupestris* Saville-Kent. To be available, every new name published after 1930 must be accompanied by a bibliographic reference to a description that states in words, characters that are purported to differentiate the taxon (International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature, 1999: Art. 13.1.1 & 13.1.2). Thus Bonnet would make *Adansonia rupestris* available because he provides a reference to a description. However, Saville-Kent does not provide a description of the spider, "The spider . . . presents no special features of interest and neither does the web . . ." (Saville-Kent 1897:261) but rather of the egg cocoon. The egg cocoon is the work of an animal and is clearly excluded from zoological nomenclature (International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature, Art. 13.6.2). Therefore, it is clear that by the publication of *Adansonia* in Bonnet's (1939) catalog Bonnet was not making a new name available; he was merely cataloging what he thought was Saville-Kent's new name (*Adansonia rupestris*). But as there is no new Saville-Kent name, Bonnet does not accidentally validate a name. It is furthermore clear that *Adansonia* was in use for a mollusk genus (Pallary 1902) at the time of Bonnet's publication and is therefore unavailable regardless of other things due to the principle of homonymy (International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature, 1999: Art. 52.1, 52.2 & 52.3). *Adansonia* Saville-Kent is thus a *nomen nudum* and *Adansonia rupestris* is a tree.

After the removal of *Adansonia* there are currently 73 valid genera in the family Theridiidae (Platnick 1997; Tanikawa 1998).

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