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Coluber korros Lesson, 1831 and *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 (Reptilia: Squamata: Colubridae): there is a *korros* too many in the family

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to solve an overlooked nomenclatural problem involving two taxa of Colubridae, both described as *Coluber korros*. The first one is *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837, now *Ptyas korros*, a well-known and widespread species in south-east Asia. Its senior homonym is *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831, a long forgotten taxon. Furthermore, these taxa are undoubtedly non-conspecific. We tentatively identify the holotype of this latter taxon as a large specimen of *Coelognathus radiatus* (F. Boie, 1827) and we specify its type locality as "Region of Kolkata, West Bengal State, eastern India" (the same specification of type-locality can hence be applied to the elapid *Naja kaouthia* Lesson, 1831). Nevertheless, following the strict principle of priority, *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 has priority over *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837. Based on the *Code*, we use Article 23.9 on reversal of precedence in order to preserve the use of the well-known taxon *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 (now *Ptyas korros*) against its senior primary homonym *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831. Finally, we consider *Coluber boncorage* Lesson, 1831 to be a *nomen dubium*.

Key words: Nomenclature, taxonomy, Serpentes, *Ptyas korros*, *Naja kaouthia*, South Asia, South-east Asia

Introduction

Ptyas korros (Schlegel, 1837), the Indochinese Rat Snake, is one of the most widespread colubrid snakes in South and South-east Asia. Its range extends from north-east India to southern and south-eastern China across Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar, and southward, up to Indonesia (Sumatra, Borneo [Kalimantan], Java and Bali), across the whole of the Indochinese Region, Thailand, West Malaysia, Singapore, East Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam (Wallach *et al*. 2014). It is also a common snake in much of its distribution range, although this species is not included in the most recent edition of the IUCN *Red List* as its status has not been evaluated.

The combination *Coluber korros* was first mentioned by Kuhl (1824: 81, footnote), credited to C. G. C. Reinwardt. However, Kuhl stated in his text (our translation of the French text) that among the genus *Coluber* Linnaeus, 1758, "I had found here [in Java] only four species, of which one is the *Coluber cancellatus* Oppel, already mentioned". Then, in the first footnote of the same page 81, Kuhl stated that (our translation) "The long list

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of colubrid snakes already comprises a *Col. cancellatus*. (See Merrem Syst. p. 115). The name *Col. Korros*, given to this species by M.[onsieur] Reinwardt, deserves preference." Obviously, Kuhl (1824) suggested the combination *Coluber korros* as a replacement name of *Coluber cancellatus*, a species *nomen* of a taxon from Java credited to Michael Oppel but, in his text, Kuhl (1824) indeed made reference to the species *Coluber cancellatus* Merrem, 1820. The description given by Merrem (1820: 115) obviously refers to a species different from *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837, although we have not identified it. *Coluber korros* Kuhl, 1824 is therefore a *nomen nudum*, as the species name was not accompanied by a description or an indication, and not a replacement name for *Coluber cancellatus* Merrem, 1820.

Several subsequent authors have mentioned *Coluber korros* Kuhl, 1824 but, to the best of our knowledge, none of these descriptions satisfies the requirements of the *Code* (see the historical list of synonyms of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 given below). F. Boie (1827) did not even mention this latter species but he used the combination "[*Coluber*] *cancellatus* Oppel. *korros* Reinw[ardt]", namely a new taxon named (but not described) by Michael Oppel and explicitly stated by F. Boie to be based on the description written by Friedrich Boie's late brother Heinrich Boie in his unpublished manuscript "*Erpétologie de Java*". However, this description of the manuscript was not repeated by F. Boie, who did not even mention any character, making *Coluber cancellatus* sensu F. Boie, 1827 also a *nomen nudum*. Therefore, as strange as it may be, we could not find a valid description of *Coluber korros* before Schlegel (1837b). Subsequently, *Coluber korros* and its various chresonyms such as *Coryphodon korros*, *Zamenis korros* and *Ptyas korros* have been cited hundreds of times in the literature since 1837; we provide below a very partial list of 25 references published since 1971; see also Wallach *et al*. (2014).

However, all subsequent authors except Wallach *et al.* (2014) overlooked the existence of a homonym taxon validly described before *Coluber korros* Schlegel (1837b), namely *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831. At this stage, we refer to Lescure (2015) for an extensive description of the life, travels and publications of René-Primevère Lesson (1794–1849). A pharmacist of the French Navy, this traveller who took part to the sixth French discovery trip around the world on the ship *La Coquille* (1822–1825). He was also a naturalist and herpetologist of significance in the first half of the nineteenth century. Lesson discovered new reptiles and amphibians during his travel to the Pacific Ocean and, more relevant here, R.-P. Lesson also described the reptiles and amphibians collected in India by several travellers, such as Lamare-Piquot, Raynaud and Bélanger. Lescure (2015) provided the lists of all the reptiles and amphibians species described or mentioned by Lesson in his publications, the complete list of which was given with their current names. We also refer to Lescure (2015) for the dates of publication of Lesson's works, often controversial in the literature, for example those of Lesson (1831a–b), often erroneously stated as being 1829 in the literature.

In a publication on the reptiles collected by C.-A. Lamare-Piquot (see below) in India, Lesson (1831a: 122) described *Coluber korros* (type locality: none specified but obviously from "l'Inde continentale", namely 'Mainland India', by inference). Its description was brief, but it was expanded in Lesson (1831b: 316). By all evidence as shown below, the described specimen clearly differs from *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837, although Wallach *et al*. (2014: 605) included *Coluber korros* Lesson in the synonymy of *C. korros* Schlegel (as a *nomen preoccupatum*).

Unfortunately, the description of *Coluber korros* published by Lesson (1831a) is valid, although it is obviously a *nomen oblitum*. This raises a nomenclatural problem as *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 would have priority over *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837, of which it is currently a junior primary homonym, but definitely not a senior synonym, of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837, and also a *nomen oblitum*. This nomenclatural problem was pointed out by Lescure (2015: 39 & 44) but left open in his publication. We here analyse the case based on a chronological history of relevant taxa and propose a solution based on articles of the *Code* (I. C. Z. N. 1999) to delete the primary homonymy between these two species names and conserve the long and continuing usage of combination *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837.

Analysis of the cases

The case of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837

A chronological list of synonyms of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 is established as follows, based on our analysis of the literature and the synonymy provided by Wallach *et al*. (2014) for publications subsequent to Schlegel (1837). It should be noted that Wallach *et al*. (2014) added *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 and *Coluber boncorage* Lesson, 1831 in the synonymy of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837. We show here that these two taxa, both described by

Lesson (1831a), are definitely not synonyms of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837, therefore they are not included in the following synonymy.

"*Coluber cancellatus*" Kuhl, 1824: 80 & 81; species nomen credited to Michael Oppel (nec *Coluber cancellatus* Merrem, 1820: 115, a species not identified here).—Type locality. "Java" by inference.—**Status**. *Nomen nudum*, no description and no indication.

"*Coluber korros*" Kuhl, 1824: 80 & 81 (footnote); species nomen credited to C. G. C. Reinwardt.—Type locality. "Java" by inference.—**Status**. Suggested by H. Kuhl to be a replacement name for *Coluber cancellatus* sensu M. Oppel (nec *Coluber cancellatus* Merrem, 1820: 115). *Nomen nudum*, no description and no indication.

"*Coluber korros*" Schlegel, 1826a: 237.—Type locality. "Java" by inference.—**Status**. *Nomen nudum*, no description and no indication.

"*Coluber korros*" Schlegel, 1826b: col. 292.—Type locality. "Java" by inference.—**Status**. *Nomen nudum*, no description and no indication.

"[*Coluber*] *cancellatus*" F. Boie, 1827: col. 537; species nomen credited to M. Oppel (nec *Coluber cancellatus* Merrem, 1820: 115) with reference to the manuscript "*Erpétologie de Java*" of H. Boie.—Type locality. "Java" by inference.—**Status**. *Nomen nudum*, no description and no indication; no type specimen mentioned, either primary or secondary; cited by Schlegel (1837b: 139) as a synonym of his *Coluber korros*.

"*Coluber korros*" Wagler, 1830: 180.—Type locality. None.—**Status**. *Nomen nudum*, no description.

***Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837a: 145; Schlegel, 1837b: 139**.—**Type locality**. "Des îles de Java et de Sumatra", i.e., the islands of Java and Sumatra, Indonesia.—**Syntypes** (7 specimens according to Wallach *et al.* 2014). (1–5) RMNH.RENA.410a–410d, RMNH.RENA.411, adult specimens from Java; all deposited by Heinrich Boie & Heinrich Christian Macklot, 1825–1827.—(6–7) RMNH.RENA.414a–414b (from Padang, Sumatra); deposited by L. Horner, 1835. All syntypes deposited in the Nationaal Natuurhistorisch Museum (Naturalis)), Leyden, The Netherlands).—**Status**. A *nomen protectum* based on the present work, see below.

Liopeltis libertatis Barbour, 1910: 169.—Type locality. "Buitenzorg, Java", now Bogor, Java, Indonesia.—**Status**. A junior subjective synonym of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837.

Ptyas korros chinensis Mell, 1930: 320.—Type locality. "Kwangsi", i.e., Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China, by inference.—**Status**. A junior subjective synonym of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837.

Ptyas korros indicus Mell, 1931: 208.—Type locality. "Southwestern Yunnan", Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China.—**Status**. A junior subjective synonym of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837.

We list the type specimens of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 according to Wallach *et al*. (2014: 605); there are probably many more syntypes, as Schlegel (1837) mentioned a large number of specimens of *C. korros* present in the collection of the Leyden Museum, but we did not try to identify them. This problem will be addressed elsewhere. Smith (1943: 262) restricted the type locality to Java but this restriction is invalid as it was not accompanied by the designation of a lectotype. Lastly, the division at subspecies level was accepted by Bourret (1936) and Deuve (1970) but, in contrast, Pope (1935), Taylor (1965) and subsequent authors did not recognize any subspecies. *Ptyas korros* is currently monotypic.

The case of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831

Coluber Korros Lesson, 1831a: 122.—Type locality. None given, India by inference; here specified as being in the region of Kolkata and the mouth of the Ganges or Ganga River, state of West Bengal, eastern India; see below.—Holotype. Untraced.—**Status**. A primary senior homonym of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837, and also a *nomen oblitum*; defined here as a junior subjective synonym of *Coluber radiatus* F. Boie, 1827.

As briefly stated above, the description of Lesson (1831a) of the "Couleuvre Korros, *Coluber Korros*", was brief as only the number of ventral and subcaudal scales (246 and 90, respectively) of the single described specimen were provided; no type locality was mentioned. Nevertheless, the description of this taxon is valid. Subsequently,

Lesson (1831b: 316) provided an expanded description of *Coluber korros*. We follow Lescure (2015: 40) who demonstrated that Lesson (1831a) was published in April 1831 while the main text on Reptiles of the "*Voyage aux Indes-Orientales*" (Lesson 1831b) was published in September or October 1831. Furthermore, Lescure (2015) also showed that the seven plates dealing with Reptiles (Lesson 1831c) were also published in September 1831, and not in 1834 as it is generally accepted in the literature.

Discussion

The identity of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831

Lesson (1831b: 316) expanded enough the description of *Coluber korros* to allow the determination of its holotype. The number of ventral plates and subcaudal scales, and the dorsal pattern are unambiguously different from those of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 and from another large species present in India, *Ptyas mucosa* (Linnaeus, 1758). We here identify Lesson's holotype as a large individual of *Coelognathus radiatus* (F. Boie, 1827). The scalation data and pattern fit well, as shown in Table 1. Only the colour of the stripe differs between *C. korros* and *C. radiatus* but, obviously, Lesson saw the specimen held in preservative at least two years later. The sole main difference in scalation between *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 and *Coelognathus radiatus* is that the cloacal plate is entire in this latter species, while Lesson described it as divided in *C. korros*. This difference may result from an anomaly. We therefore consider, with confidence, that *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 is a junior subjective synonym of *Coluber radiatus* F. Boie, 1827, now *Coelognathus radiatus.*

The type locality of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831

At this point, we feel necessary to discuss the possible type locality of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831. Lesson (1831a) did not mention any type locality but, in his paper, he described a collection of reptiles brought back to France from "Africa" and "continental India" by Christophe-Augustin Lamare-Picquot (1785–1873), a pharmacist, naturalist and explorer. According to Chaigneau (1982), he established a dispensary on Mauritius in 1815. From this island, Lamare-Picquot undertook frequent trips to neighbouring islands. He visited Madagascar and the region of the Cape of Good-Hope, and then he sailed to India in 1828, a country in which he stayed for an unspecified time. Nevertheless, he visited the mouth of the Ganges/Ganga River, Chandernagor (now Chandannagar) and Calcutta (now Kolkota), all in West Bengal State. It is interesting to note that all Indian specimens brought back by M. Lamare-Picquot and described in Lesson (1831a) originated from either the "Ganges" or "Bengale". Chaigneau (1982) provided an interesting clue contained in an unpublished report of Lamare-Picquot read in 1832 during a session of the French "*Académie des Sciences*" entitled "*Sur les serpents venimeux du Bengale*", namely 'On the venomous snakes of Bengal'. The traveller reported that the colubrid snake *Coluber korros*, locally called "Demnha", is known for sucking the milk of cows. Based on Das (1998), the noun "Dhemna", of which the "Demnha" of Lesson is either an ancient spelling or a mistyping, is given to another large colubrid species, *Ptyas mucosa*, in Lodha language. According to Das (1998), this language is now spoken in the western part of West Bengal. This is an additional evidence for specifying the type locality of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 as the region of Kolkata and the mouth of the Ganges, in south-western West Bengal.

Furthermore, the distribution range of *Coelognathus radiatus* also agrees with the type locality of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831. *C. radiatus* is widespread in north, north-east and east India, a country from which it has been recorded from the states of Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Sikkim, Uttarakhand,, Uttar Pradesh, and in West Bengal (see Schulz 1996, 2013a–b; Wallach *et al*. 2014).

The nomenclatural status of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831

The nomenclatural consequences of the analysis given above are important. The nomen *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 is a junior primary homonym of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831. As such, the first taxon should be considered permanently invalid, according to Articles 52.2 and 57.2 of the *Code*, even if the senior one has never been actually combined as valid with the nomen of the genus to which both species *nomina* are currently referred. It should be noted that our identification of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 as a junior subjective synonym of *Coluber radiatus* F. Boie, 1827 precludes considering it a *nomen dubium*.

TABLE 1. Comparison between *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 and five other large colubrid species.

Taxon	Ventrals	**Subcaudals**	**Cloacal plate**	**Dorsal pattern**
Coluber korros Lesson, 1831	246	90	Divided	Dorsal colour blackish-blue; a white, median stripe along the whole of the body, edged with two discontinuous black stripes; white crossbars widely spaced on the sides, their middle, blackish-blue, separated by brownish areas.
Coelognathus radiatus Boie, 1827	207–257	77–108	Entire	Dorsal colour brown, tan, greyish-brown, ochre or dark brown; on each side of the anterior half to two thirds of the body length, one broad, continuous black stripes and one narrow, discontinuous black stripe; on the lower part of the sides, another series of small, black spots.
Ptyas korros (Schlegel, 1837)	155–187	109–154	Divided	Dorsal colour olive brown, greenish-brown or pale bronze brown; scales of the posterior part of the body conspicuously edged or tipped with blackish-brown.
Ptyas mucosa (Linnaeus, 1758)	187–213	95–146	Divided	Dorsal colour olive green, olive brown, yellowish-brown, greenish-brown, dark brown or blackish-brown; irregular pale crossbands anteriorly and irregular black crossbands on the posterior half of the body, sometimes absent.
Coluber boncorage Lesson, 1831	262	92	Divided	Dorsal colour pale yellow, ringed with reddish-brown and coloured with black.
Elaphe taeniura yunnanensis (Anderson, 1879)	236–260	89–120	Divided	Dorsal colour greenish-yellow, greyish-yellow or yellowish-brown; dorsal marks made either of two rows of large, black or blackish-brown, pale-centred oval blotches, or of butterfly-shaped blotches; a vertebral stripe on the posterior third of the body length; a lateral stripe on the posterior third of the body dark but not black.

Therefore, strictly following the *Code*, *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 should be known by its first available synonym, *Liopeltis libertatis* Barbour, 1910, under the combination *Ptyas libertatis*. This conclusion, correct in a nomenclatural basis, would be problematic in terms of nomenclatural stability as the nomen *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 has been used as valid in dozens, if not hundreds of publications since 1837, while the nomen *Coluber libertatis* has been used as valid only a few times after 1910 (e.g., Barbour 1912; De Rooij 1917; Dunn 1927). In contrast, to our best knowledge, *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 has never been used after 1831.

The *Code of Zoological Nomenclature* allows two possibilities to fix the status of an available taxon with the status of overlooked senior homonym of a valid taxon. The first one, following Recommendation 23, is to make an application to the International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature asking for the suppression of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831. The second possibility is to make use of Article 23.9 of the *Code* on the "reversal of precedence" (see Dubois & David 2020) to validate the nomen *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 against its senior primary homonym *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831. In order to apply this Article, two conditions must be fulfilled:

- According to Art. 23.9.1.1, the senior homonym must not have been used as a valid nomen after 1899.
- According to Art. 23.9.1.2, the junior homonym must have been used for a particular taxon as its presumed valid nomen, "in at least 25 works, published by at least 10 authors in the immediately preceding 50 years and encompassing a span of not less than 10 years".

As explained above, the first condition is met with, as, to the best of our knowledge, the nomen *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 has never been used as valid after 1831 for the species described by Lesson (1831a). In order to fulfill the second condition, the nomen *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 should have been used as valid, in anyone of the genera *Coluber* Linnaeus, *Coryphodon* Duméril, Bibron & Duméril, *Zaocys* Cope or *Ptyas* Fitzinger, by at least 25 authors since 1972. We provide in the Appendix a list of 25 post-1971 works where the combination *Ptyas korros* (Schlegel, 1837) has been used as valid. This list of 25 references is only a partial overview of the literature in which *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837 was mentioned.

In conclusion, *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837, based on these articles of the *Code*, is here made a valid combination as a *nomen protectum*, and *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831 becomes a permanently invalid nomen, as a *nomen oblitum*, which cannot be used in the synonymy of *Coluber radiatus* F. Boie, 1827.

Conclusion

The paper of Lesson (1831a) is not totally forgotten as it contains the description of *Naja kaouthia* (Lesson 1831a: 122; type locality: not given but specified as "Bengale" by Lesson 1831b: 312–313; holotype depicted on Plate 2). Obviously, based on the discussion given above about the type locality of *Coluber korros* Lesson, 1831, we here provide a more accurate type locality of *Naja kaouthia* in specifying it as the "Region of Kolkata and the mouth of the Ganges/Ganga River, West Bengal State, India".

Furthermore, Lesson (1831a: 122) described another colubrid snake, *Coluber boncorage*, introduced in the text as "Couleuvre boncorage, *Coluber boncorage*". As for *Coluber korros*, the description was brief and limited to the numbers of ventral plates (262) and subcaudals (92 pairs), as well as the biotope "Les forêts montagneuses", namely "the montane forest". Lesson (1831b: 315) provided an expanded description as follows (our translation from the French text):

'The Boncorage Snake'
Coluber boncorage, Less.
(Ventral plates, 262, cloacal plate 2/2; subcaudals, 92 pairs)

'This colubrid snake is 7.5 feet long; its frontal plate is pointing backward, with two triangle-shaped occipital plates behind. Maxillary jaws support sharp teeth, densely arranged and curved; two straight rows of pterygoid teeth, elongate and sharp; the dorsal scales are ovoid, those of the sides more rounded; the ventral plates are narrow and not wide.

This snake is pale yellow, ringed with reddish-brown and ornate with black; the ventral plates are white, edged with black.

It occurs in montane forest of Bengale'.

This snake is obviously a large colubrid or colubroid species, as the holotype is about 2.30 meters long. Based on the pattern, our first impression was *Ptyas mucosa*(Linnaeus, 1758), however the number of ventral plates does not agree, 262 vs. 187–213 in *P. mucosa*. The pattern also suggests *Boiga siamensis* Nootpand but this species differs by its size, much smaller, and its number of subcaudal scales. Furthermore, Lesson (1831b) would have surely noticed the typical dentition of a member of the genus *Boiga*. In the same way, Lesson would have recognized at once a python. Another possibility might be *Elaphe taeniura yunnanensis* (Anderson), or *Orthriophis taeniurus yunnanensis* depending on authors. The numbers of ventral plates and subcaudals agree well but not the size, much smaller in *E. taeniura yunnanensis*, and the dorsal and ventral patterns. In fact, the best candidate would be a subadult of *Ophiophagus hannah* Cantor, the King cobra. The numbers of ventrals and subcaudals of this species (215–270 and 74–125, respectively) fit well, as do the backward pointing frontal scale followed by two occipital scales. In scalation, the sole available difference is the cloacal plate, divided in *Coluber boncorage* vs. entire in *O. hannah*. Lastly, the pattern agrees with that met in subadult individuals of *O. hannah* from the Himalayan population (see Shankar *et al*., 2021), namely conspicuous narrow, white, yellow or buff dorsal crossbars on a black background colour; here Lesson might have inverted the background colour and the colour of the crossbars. The pattern of the venter, ventral plates white edged with black, also agrees with that of *Ophiophagus hannah*. Nevertheless, we can imagine only with difficulty that Lesson would not have recognized a species of Elapidae.

We will not try to further identify *Coluber boncorage*. However, the description of the holotype makes clear that, in contrast to the synonymy of *Ptyas korros* given by Wallach *et al*. (2014: 605), *Coluber boncorage* cannot be considered a synonym of *Coluber korros* Schlegel, 1837. We here consider *Coluber boncorage* Lesson, 1831 to be a *nomen dubium*.

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APPENDIX

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