

## **“Koster’s Curse”: mistaken blame in the common name for the invasive melastome, *Clidemia hirta*?<sup>1</sup>**

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The invasive melastome *Clidemia hirta* (L.) D.Don was introduced into Hawai‘i (first observed on O‘ahu as early as 1941 but not collected until 1949; Wester & Wood, 1977), and quickly spread to all the islands where it has posed a problem for native plants by out-competing for resources and choking out native understory plants. It has been called “Koster’s Curse” for many years and apparently no one has bothered to find the source of the name or if the name is correctly applied.

*Clidemia hirta* is native to the Neotropics with a wide distribution from southern Mexico, the West Indies, throughout central America, and into the northern half of south America including Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil. Wester & Wood (1977) gave a detailed account of the history of its introductions throughout the Pacific and noted that Fiji was where the current common name originated. Simmonds (1937) stated that it was probably introduced accidentally into Fiji with coffee plants originating from mainland South America between 1880 and 1886 (probably Guyana). Apparently, a man named Koster was the culprit and the appellation “Koster’s Curse” was given and it stuck.

Delving into the literature a bit more, I have come up with some evidence that lends support to the possibility that the wrong man was blamed for the importation of the plant and that the common name may be wrongly attributed. The first published use of the common name seems to be in 1906 by Frederick Muir, an entomologist with the Hawaii Sugar Planters’ Association (at the time the only entomological research institution in Hawai‘i). Muir was sent out to the tropical areas of the South Pacific, Australia, and the Melanesian Archipelago to search for potential biological control agents for sugar cane pests. In his report of a trip to Fiji, he mentioned *Clidemia hirta* as an invasive pest on the island of Viti Levu and said it was called “Koester’s Curse” (Muir, 1906: 5). As there had been no published reports using that common name, he must have heard the common name from locals. However, researching subsequent literature from agricultural reports in Fiji indicates that the common name was incorrectly applied but unfortunately no reasons were given why.

“Considerable interest has been aroused by a reference in some correspondence with Mr. F. Muir, an Entomologist, who visited Fiji some time ago, to a fungus present on leaves of *Clidemia hirta* (sometimes, apparently erroneously, called Kōster’s Curse) a common weed in some parts of Fiji.” (Anonymous, 1914: 65).

In compiling the diaries and journals of Bishop Museum naturalist Edwin H. Bryan, Jr. during his 1924 trip in to Samoa and Fiji as part of the Whitney South Seas Expeditions (see Evenhuis, 2007 for a detailed account of his trip based on his journals and photography), I came across a June 1924 journal entry that gives the possible origin of the plant and the name.

Bryan spent from February through November of 1924 as part of the Whitney South Seas Expedition where he was tasked by Bishop Museum Director, Herbert Gregory to

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“collecting everything except birds”. The expedition stopped at many South Seas islands but spent most of its time in the Lau Group of Fiji. Upon arriving in Suva at the beginning of the Fiji portion of the trip, Bryan made short collecting trips around Suva, and visited a number of naturalists and agriculture folks on the island of Viti Levu to become acquainted with the fauna and flora before venturing out to the Lau Group to collect.

One of the persons he met was an artist by the name of A.E. Ward. Mr. Ward watched Bryan pressing plants and identified one of the plants he was pressing (Fig. 1) as “Köster’s Curse” and proceeded to tell Bryan the origin of the plant in Fiji and how it got its name.

“It was introduced as a garden plant by a Mr. Parr. It later escaped and became a great pest because of its ability to spread rapidly. Someone asked the son of Mr. Köster, a neighbor of Parr’s who it was that introduced the plant. Young Köster replied “Parr”. Thinking he had said “pa”, the misinformation became fixed that Köster had introduced it and despite Köster’s efforts to correct the mistake it has been known as Köster’s Curse.” (*Bryan journal entry, Monday 9 June 1924, Suva, Fiji*; see Evenhuis 2007: 135).

So there are two differing stories: 1) the plants were brought in accidentally by Köster for his coffee plantation between 1880 and 1886; and 2) the plants were brought in purposefully by Parr [unknown date of introduction] as an ornamental for his garden. In order to get to the bottom of this story, I conducted some research on just who Köster and Parr were. Possibly this would explain why there were two differing stories.

Parr is William Fillingham Parr (1844–1912), a English-born planter who was an advocate of slavery (Parr, 1895), but he essentially mistreated local Fijians and kept them indentured slaves on his plantations (Ali, 2008). He was a powerful and wealthy person in Fiji and, although a vocal opponent of the government at the time, held sway with a number of individuals in business, including the powerful Planters’ Association in Fiji. He owned a coffee plantation and was known to introduce ornamentals and other plants into Fiji (an introduced *Parkia* tree on his property was described as new and named after him [cf. Baker (1884)], and he exchanged seeds and plants with foreign herbaria and societies, including the Botanic Gardens in Sydney, Australia (Anonymous, 1882: 24). Some of the earlier Fiji Agriculture reports on *Clidemia hirta* indicate that the officials at that time believed that Parr’s estate was where the plant originated and not Köster’s:

“Acting upon information given by Mr. Corbett, visits were paid to his estate, and to those of Mr. Koster and Mr. Witherow adjoining to investigate a disease which was said to be killing the weed *Clidemia hirta*. A visit was also paid to the old coffee plantation of Mr. Parr, where the weed is said to have first appeared in this country.” (Simmonds & Knowles, 1920: 9).

Köster was a lesser-known Mr. Carl H. Köster, who owned land in Waimanu in the Rewa District, near where *Clidemia hirta* is purported to have been introduced. It is unclear if he farmed coffee or tried to, but he had a sugar plantation in the Ra District (Angus, 2013) and apparently also had some cows as he won awards for his buttermilk and cheese (Anonymous, 1915). Upon hearing of his name applied to the pest *Clidemia*, he tried to correct the mistake, but was unsuccessful. He died in 1920 and most of the agricultural reports coming out of Fiji using the “Köster’s Curse” common name were published in the 1930s, after his death. With no one to defend his presumed innocence, the name Köster Curse has persisted and strengthened and, at some point in time, it lost the umlaut over the “ö” to have the orthography currently used.

If Simmonds is correct in his estimation that *Clidemia* was introduced sometime between 1880 and 1886, this would fit the scenario of the times when Parr was running his

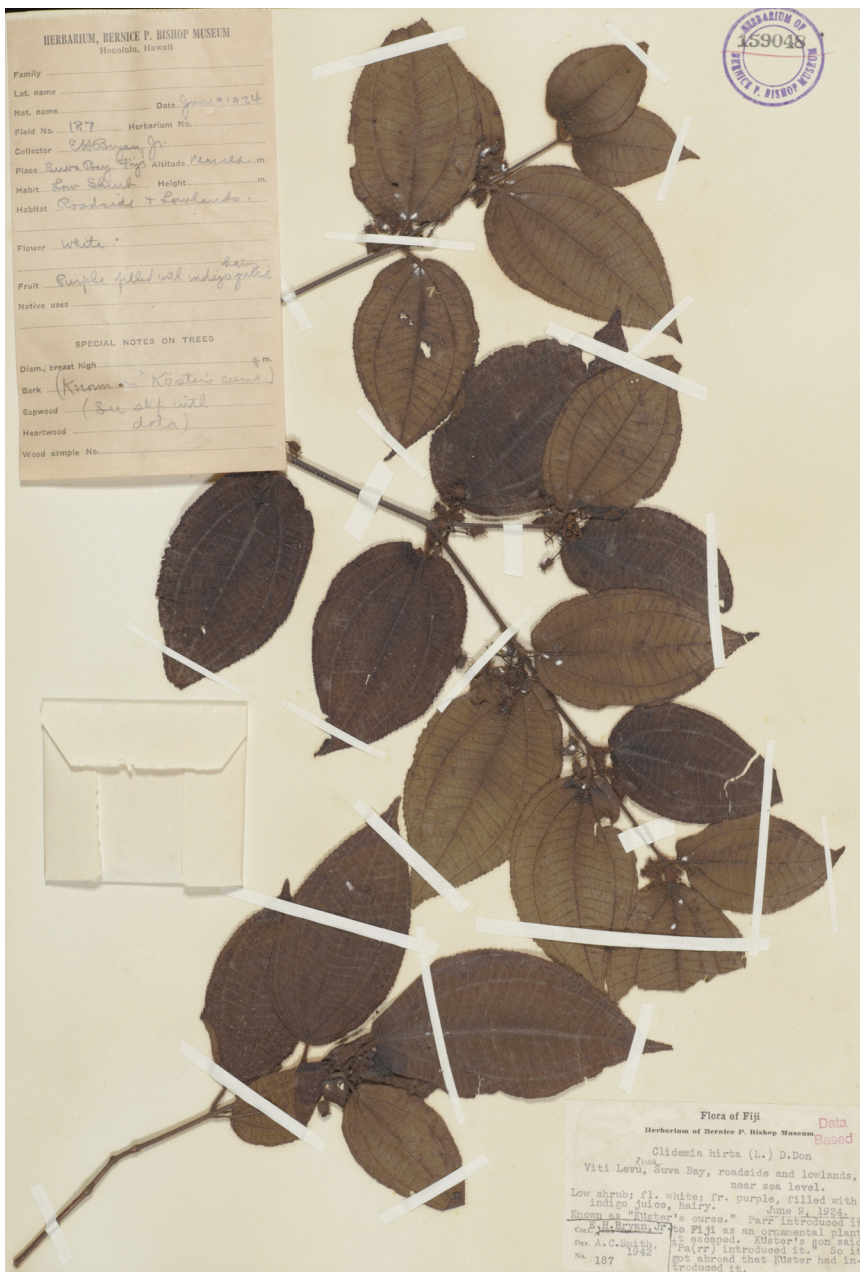


Figure 1. Herbarium sheet in Herbarium Pacificum of the *Clidemia hirta* plant from Fiji that Bryan was pressing when Mr. Ward explained the mistaken origin of the name. See Bryan’s note at bottom right.

coffee plantation. Given that the Fiji Agriculture officials were attempting to determine origin and timing of the introduction not until many years later (1900s–1910s) and the fact the plant spreads so quickly, it would be too late to accurately determine exactly where the plants had originally been introduced. With regard to being introduced with coffee plants, they could have also easily been introduced into a garden of the owner of a coffee farm and birds eating the fruits could have helped quickly spread seeds to nearby areas. Given the known facts and personalities, it seems much more probable that Parr purposefully introduced the plant from Brazil for his garden (along with other plants he introduced), rather than Köster accidentally introducing the plant with coffee plants from Guyana.

So, if Mr. Ward's story is true, the plant should more accurately be called "Parr's Curse"; but nevertheless, the current spelling is incorrect since it should really be "Köster" and not "Koster" if it is to be blamed on that poor boy's father.

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