

## Short note

# Permanently and retroactively eradicating certain offensive epithets from the scientific names of algae, fungi, and plants: ‘*afr-*’ is in

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**Abstract.** Following publication in 2021 of a proposal to permanently and retroactively eradicate a set of offensive epithets from the scientific nomenclature in use for algae, fungi, and plants, this proposal eventually formed part of the ballot sheet placed before people eligible to cast a preliminary guiding vote (the so-called “mail vote”) to amend the *International Code of Nomenclature for algae, fungi, and plants* in 2024. In this mail vote the proposal received 74 ‘no’ votes (47%) out of 156 votes cast. This meant that the proposal was not automatically rejected and that it would be put to a vote, following discussion, at the Nomenclature Section of the XX<sup>th</sup> International Botanical Congress that was held in Madrid, Spain, from 15 to 19 July 2024. We document the process and results of the voting on this proposal during the preliminary guiding vote, as well as during the Nomenclature Section.

**Keywords.** Botanical nomenclature, ICN, offensive epithets.

**Resumen.** Tras la publicación en 2021 de una propuesta para erradicar de forma permanente y retroactiva un conjunto de epítetos ofensivos de la nomenclatura científica que se utiliza para algas, hongos y plantas, esta propuesta finalmente formó parte de la papeleta presentada ante las personas elegibles para emitir un voto guía preliminar (el llamado “voto por correo”) para enmendar el *International Code of Nomenclature for algae, fungi, and plants* en 2024. En este voto por correo la propuesta recibió 74 votos ‘no’ (47%) de 156 votos emitidos. Esto significó que la propuesta no fue rechazada automáticamente y que se sometería a votación, después de la discusión en la Sección de Nomenclatura del XX Congreso Botánico Internacional que se celebró en Madrid, España, del 15 al 19 de julio de 2024. Documentamos el proceso y los resultados de la votación de esta propuesta tanto durante la votación guía preliminar, como durante la Sección de Nomenclatura.

**Palabras clave.** CIN, epítetos ofensivos, nomenclatura botánica.

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Title in Spanish: Erradicar de forma permanente y retroactiva ciertos epítetos ofensivos de los nombres científicos de algas, hongos y plantas: ‘*afr-*’ ha entrado

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Smith & Figueiredo (2021: 1395–1396) published a proposal to amend the *International Code of Nomenclature for algae, fungi, and plants* (hereafter the [botanical] *Code*) to permanently and retroactively eliminate from the scientific nomenclature in use for algae, fungi, and plants a set of some epithets with the root “*caff[e]r-*” or “*caff[e]r-*” that are considered to be an offensive racial slur, by

replacing them with epithets with the root ‘*afr-*’. To effect this amendment, it was essentially proposed that the ‘*c*’ should be dropped from such epithets. In practical terms, what Smith & Figueiredo (2021) proposed was the addition of an Article, Art. 61.6, to the *Code*’s Chapter VIII, Orthography and gender of names. For ease of reference, the proposal of Smith & Figueiredo (2021) was given the

number “126” and was recorded as “*Prop. G* [Art. 61.6]” in Turland & Wiersema (2024: 391).

The Rapporteur-général and Vice-rapporteur commented on this proposal as part of their synoptic review of proposals on nomenclature submitted to the XX<sup>th</sup> International Botanical Congress (hereafter IBC or XXth IBC, Madrid 2024) to amend the *Code* (Turland & Wiersema 2024). They, inter alia, stated on page 391: “*Prop. G* [Art. 61.6] seeks to eliminate the racial offence inherent in epithets such as *cafra*, *caffra* and *cafrorum*, which refer to a region of southern Africa and its inhabitants and derive from a noun that is a racial slur in languages such as Afrikaans, English, Portuguese and Spanish. The proposers [Smith & Figueiredo (2021)] have devised a way of neutralizing these epithets by retroactively treating, e.g., *cafra* as an orthographical variant of *afra*, among which only *afra* may be retained (which means African, or of or pertaining to Africa). [...] Alternatives to *Prop. G* seem less desirable: the epithets could remain in current use and continue to offend; [...]”

The voting on the proposal of Smith & Figueiredo (2021) took place in two stages: (1) a preliminary guiding vote—the so-called “mail vote”—prior to the Nomenclature Section (hereafter NS) meeting; and (2) an in-person vote, including personal and institutional votes, at the NS of the XXth IBC in Madrid.

Simultaneously with publication of the synoptic review of Turland & Wiersema (2024) in February, a ballot sheet was distributed by the office of the International Association for Plant Taxonomy (IAPT) in Bratislava, Slovakia, to people eligible to participate in the preliminary guiding vote on proposals to amend the *Code*. These were: (1) individual members of the IAPT; (2) authors of any of the proposals; and (3) members of the nine Permanent Nomenclature Committees (see Turland & al. 2018: Div. III, Prov. 2.5 and 7.1). However, no institutional votes are allowed during the preliminary guiding vote (Turland & al. 2018: Div. III, Prov. 3).

The results of the preliminary guiding vote (the “mail vote”) record that the proposal of Smith & Figueiredo (2021) was voted on by 156 individuals. In the sequence tabulated by Turland & al. (2024), the proposal received 67 ‘yes’ votes (43%), 74 ‘no’ votes (47%), while eight votes (‘edc’) suggested that the proposal should be referred to the Editorial Committee for the *Code*, and seven votes suggested that a Special-purpose Committee should be set up to deal with the proposal. If referral of the proposal to the Editorial Committee is assumed to reflect an automatic acceptance for implementation, the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ votes were virtually the same.

Since the proposal received only 74 ‘no’ votes (47%), it was not automatically rejected—75% or more ‘no’ votes in the preliminary guiding vote are required for such an auto-rejection to be implemented (Turland & al. 2018: Div. III, Prov. 5.5)—and it thus became one of the proposals to amend the *Code* placed before the NS of the Madrid IBC. Incidentally, an automatically rejected proposal can be revived for discussion, amendment, and voting at the NS if a proposal to discuss it is moved by a member of the Section and supported, i.e., seconded, by five other members (Turland & al. 2018: Div. III, Prov. 5.5).

Against this background, the proposal to add Art. 61.6 to the *Code*, in order to eliminate this set of offensive epithets from botanical nomenclature, was discussed and voted on during the post-lunch, afternoon session on 18 July 2024. After discussion from the floor, the matter was brought to a vote at 15:19 h. A card vote (secret ballot) was requested, which allowed for institutional votes to also be cast by those delegates authorised to carry such votes. Although this is normally achieved using two boxes, one for ‘no’ votes and the other for ‘yes’ votes, in this particular case voters had to write ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on the ballot card/s. This meant that voters could place their card/s in either the ‘Yes’ ballot box, or in the ‘No’ ballot box, to maintain the secrecy of the ballot and allow for a free vote without fear of discrimination against Section members based on the direction of their vote.

At 16:05 h, the result of the card vote was announced, as follows: ‘Yes’ [i.e., in favour of accepting the proposal]: 351 votes (63.13%); ‘No’ [i.e., in favour of rejecting the proposal]: 205 votes (36.87%); and spoiled votes [i.e., using the wrong card number and / or not clearly indicating ‘Yes’ or ‘No’]: 17. The number of spoiled votes did not affect the result of the voting.

For any proposal to amend the botanical *Code* to succeed, a supermajority, i.e., at least 60% of votes cast must be achieved (Turland & al. 2018: Div. III Prov. 5.1(a)). As this proposal received over 63% support, the outcome of the vote at the NS means a new Article, Art. 61.6, will be introduced into the *Code* that retroactively eradicates the designated set of epithets from botanical nomenclature. The mechanism through which this is done will form part of Art. 61 of the botanical *Code* (Turland & al., 2018), where orthographical variants are regulated.

Fifteen years after 18 July was instituted by the United Nations, in 2009, as International Nelson Mandela Day, to honour Mandela’s global contributions and legacy, a repulsive racial slur used across demographics was voted out of botanical nomenclature by the users of the botanical *Code*, as represented by the members of a NS (Turland &

al. 2018: Div. III, Prov. 1.1). Under Div. III, Prov. 4.4, this decision became binding on Saturday, 27 July 2024, when a resolution moved by the NS was accepted by the plenary session of the XXth IBC, in Madrid.

Over the past three years, since the proposal was published and until the final voting took place, doomsday scenarios for the future of nomenclature were spread in the literature, in parallel to abhorrent messages of intimidation being placed on social media platforms. This hostile climate has resulted in many botanists refraining from getting involved in this issue. It is evident that removing offensive names from biological nomenclature can be undertaken within the framework of the codes of biological nomenclature, in a cordial way. The world is now aware of the way in which the discussions were conducted at the Madrid NS, and of the progressive decision taken by the botanical community. It is anticipated that what botany has achieved in this regard will be taken into account when those bodies that regulate the naming of other biological organisms deliberate on how to deal with racial slurs in use in their spheres of decision-making. Other similar names, such as the scientific name of the Cape buffalo, inevitably come to mind.

## AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Gideon F. SMITH: Conceptualization, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing. Estrela FIGUEIREDO: Conceptualization, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing.

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