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AN INCIDENT AT KILANG: A FURTHER NOTE ON THE DEATH OF LIEUTENANT G. F. PHILLIPS

Jörg Adelberger

"See that my grave is kept clean" (Old folksong)

In a recent article dealing with the Tangale Peak or Kilang, as it is called in the local Tangale language, Herrmann JUNGRAITHMAYR presents an account narrated by a Tangale elder about the attempted ascent of that characteristic mountain by a British colonial officer and his subsequent death.¹ Kilang mountain is a basaltic cone approximately 1300 m high, about 8 km southwest of Kaltungo, one of the principal settlements of the Tangale people, in southern Bauchi State, northeastern Nigeria.

During a research stay at the National Archives in Kaduna in November 1993 I was able to consult a file containing various documents relating to this incident in detail.² In the following note I present an outline of the events based on the evidence in the colonial records. By doing this I not only intend to shed more light on a tragic event from the very early years of the colonial era. The picture of the circumstances emerging from the investigations of the colonial authorities may serve as a background to the narrative by the Tangale elder presented in JUNGRAITHMAYR's publication.

On 12th April 1907, about 4 p.m., two men, namely Madi and Sarki Zungo, arrived from the Tangale area at Nafada, where the O.C. (officer commanding) of the region was stationed, presenting a khaki helmet and informed the officers present that the Assistant Resident Lieutenant G. F. Phillips had apparently fallen down a mountain and could not be found.³ The commanding offi-

¹ Herrmann JUNGRAITHMAYR "The Tangale Peak: A local account of its ascent by a European" in: H. Jungraithmayr, G. Miehe (Hrsg.): *Mitteilungen des Sonderforschungsbereichs 268 (Burkina Faso und Nordostnigeria)*, Westafrikanische Studien Bd. 1, Köln 1994:113-124

² The file has the number SNP 7 - 5242/1907 and carries the title "Phillips, Late Lieutenant G. F., Memorial Stone, Erection on the Grave of". My thanks are due to my colleagues Karsten Brunk who first drew my attention to that file, Ulrich Kleinewillighöfer for his always helpful comments and Roger Blench for various suggestions. The research was undertaken within the framework of the joint research project "Cultural Development and Language History in the Environment of the West African Savannah" (SFB 268) of the University of Frankfurt and the University of Maiduguri, financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

³ For the following cf. "Evidence of Dr. Alex. Bremner, M.O. Nafada, re death of Lieut. Phillips, Assistant Resident, Tangale. Sub-enclosure (a) to despatch N. Nigeria No. 290 of 18th June '07" (SNP 7 - 5242/1907).

cer Captain Utterson sent out a search party with Dr. Alexander Bremner, Medical Officer at Nafada, to investigate the case.

Although nowhere in the files is the idea positively articulated, one may assume that the authorities feared that the death of Phillips was the result of an act of local resistance to the partly violent subjugation of the region which had taken place only the year before.⁴ This fear may be inferred from the choice of words used in a telegraphic despatch concerning the incident: "... Nafada wires reported by natives Asst. Resident Phillips **accidentally** fell over cliff ..." (Telegraph from Resident Bauchi to H. C. Zungeru dated 13.04.07, my emphasis). Lt. Phillips had attracted the attention of his superiors by exercising unnecessary force in his actions. He had burned the compound of the Yerima of Gelengu (a title holder among the neighbouring Waja people) for not obeying his summons. The action was disapproved of by the Resident.⁵

Dr. Bremner started the following day and arrived at the mountain approximately 170 km south of Nafada five days later on 18th April. As a preliminary search yielded no result, Bremner waited for the principal witness Madi, who at that time was at the settlement of Panda. On 20th April Bremner conducted a systematic search, accompanied by the servants of Lt. Phillips, seven soldiers and Sarki Gainab of Ture Kwadu with his followers. They started to ascend the mountain and reached the base of the second part of the hill at 8 a.m. After an hour resting they continued and arrived at the base of the rocky peak around 11.30 a.m. From a small platform Madi pointed out the place where he had found the helmet and the cleft in the rock by which Phillips had tried to ascend the peak. With the help of his binoculars Bremner discovered an object lying under a rock at the base of the peak across a crevasse. After having crossed the crevasse, the object turned out to be the haversack of Lt. G. F. Phillips. Furthermore, a leather belt with a small key for the dispatch box attached was found in the crevasse. The haversack contained a briarwood pipe, a thermometer, a lead pencil, a silver head of walking stick, a tie-clip and a piece of paper signed by Phillips, giving the 9th April 1907 as the date of ascent. Because of an attack by large baboons throwing rocks, the party had to interrupt their search for about an hour. After having commenced again their search of the crevasse, marks of blood were found and several items: a white buckskin shoe, a pocket aneroid barometer, parts of a watch and some brown coloured hair. Finally, around 3.30 p.m., under a tree at the foot of the ravine a

⁴ See A. C. G. HASTINGS *Nigerian Days*, London 1925:67-89 for an account of the first military expedition to touch this area by a commanding officer; Obaro IKIME "The British in Bauchi, 1901-1908: An Episode in the British Occupation and Control of Northern Nigeria" in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 7/2, 1974:277; Karsten BRUNK "History of Settlement and Rule, Patterns of Infrastructure, and Demographic Development in Southeastern Bauchi State, NE-Nigeria", this volume p. 11-79

⁵ Cf. "Province of Bauchi, Report No. 31 for Quarter Ending March 1907 by Resident Hon. O. Howard", in SNP 6 - 140/1907.

skeleton was located. It was identified by his servants as Lt. Phillips by the remnants of the clothing it was still wearing.

"The skeleton was lying on its right side, with the back pointing up the crevasse. There was a huge hole in the vault of the skull, and the left leg was doubled up against a rock and against the face of the skeleton."

The remains of Lt. Phillips were carried back to the camp at the base of the mountain. The next morning it was brought to the residency at Ture where a post-mortem examination was carried out. The body had suffered various severe fractures and according to the opinion of Dr. Bremner death was caused by the breaking of the skull hitting a more or less sharp rock. The almost complete skeletal state of the body he ascribed to the action of vultures and other animals.

On Sunday, 21st of April 1907, at 2 p.m., the remains of Lt. G. F. Phillips were buried near Ture residency in the presence of all his servants, soldiers, Sarki Gainab and his followers with three volleys being fired.

On the same day Dr. Bremner put four servants of Lt. Phillips under oath, interviewed them and wrote down his report.⁶ These were Madi, messenger to Phillips and son of Buba, the interpreter at Ture station; John Asaba, the cook; and Mallam and Musa, two "boys". From the evidence presented by these four servants the course of events can be reconstructed as follows.⁷

On 9th April at 6 a.m., Lt. Phillips - or "Judge", as he was also called by his servants - left Ture barracks together with Madi, cook John, Mallam, Maidoki Mohamadu (being responsible for the horse) and Sarki Gainab in order to try an ascent of Tangale Peak.⁸ The party reached the foot of the mountain around 9 a.m. During a small rest Phillips drank a whiskey soda and smoked a cigarette but did not eat anything. The provisions that the cook had taken along for him only consisted of whiskey, gin and soda water. Phillips seems to have severely underestimated the duration of the excursion for he expected only to take food when coming back to Ture. Then he and Madi continued, leaving the others behind. They followed a route along the eastern and southern slopes up to the base of the rocky cone. Madi was exhausted by the climb and therefore sat down

"... under a projecting part of the peak at the head of a long steep fissure running to the foot of the second part of the mountain. The Baturi [white man] went up a fissure in the rock a little further down from where Madi sat down (about 8-10 yards). This should be about 11 a.m. About an hour afterwards he [Madi] heard a noise of falling stones and came out from his

⁶ Bremner had also photographed the corpse, but I could not locate the photos among the other documents in the file.

⁷ For the following cf. "Evidence re death of Lieutenant G. F. Phillips, A.R., Tangale District, killed 9.4.07. Sub-enclosure (b) to despatch N. Nigeria No. 290 of 18th June '07" (SNP 7 - 5242/1907).

⁸ At that time it was called Ture Peak, obviously because the principal settlement (from the perspective of the British) was Ture.

shelter and looked up the rock and down the fissure but could see nothing. He then sat down again for a short time, but as the Baturi did not appear he climbed up the same cleft as the "Judge" did and on getting up about 25-30 feet he found the helmet of his master lying on a small tuft of dry grass."

Becoming afraid, Madi returned to the foot of the mountain where he met the other members of the party around 4 p.m. He informed them about what had happened and that Phillips obviously had fallen down the rock. They all went back to Ture. The interpreter Buba organised and led a search party the same night, consisting of Sarki Gainab and his men and Sarki Zungo, but with no result. Thus the next day, 10th April, Madi and Sarki Zungo set out to Nafada to report the incident. Another search party went out on 15th April, consisting of soldiers from the escort stationed at Gwani, Corporal Madu from Nafada and also accompanied by Buba, the interpreter, but again with no result.

What actually had caused the fall of Phillips will remain unknown. Was it exhaustion, imprudence or something else - a baboon attack for instance - that made him slip and lose his balance?

Major Tremearne, a fellow officer with whom Phillips had spent some time at Amar - in what was then Muri Province - in 1906, is of the opinion that Phillips was killed by a baboon attack:

"... one of the Assistant Residents [Lt. Phillips] then with me at Amar was killed and thrown down by these animals [baboons] from a somewhat similar mountain in Bauchi country the following year, the reputation of the locality being, naturally, greatly enhanced since even a white man was powerless against the Guardian Spirits."⁹

Lieutenant Phillips had been serving in the Northern Nigeria Regiment since October 1902, when he was transferred to the Political Department in September 1904. After three years on probation his appointment as an Assistant Resident was approved in January 1907, just three months before his death at the age of 27.

In May 1908 Mrs. T. H. Phillips in Malvern, England, was informed that the memorial stone that she had sent for the grave of her son, late Lt. Phillips, had reached Lokoja and was being transferred to Ture via Bauchi. However, it seems to have taken over a year before it was finally erected, for the confirming letter dates from June 1909. The authorities promised to keep the grave with the stone in good order.¹⁰ Thirteen years after the incident, Mr. Pembleton, then Divisional Officer Gombe, would write:

⁹ A.J.N. TREAMEARNE, *The Tailed Head-Hunters of Nigeria*, London 1912, 50

¹⁰ Letter from Acting Secretary at Zungeru to Mrs. T. H. Phillips, 09.05.1908, and letter from Acting Secretary at Zungeru to Mrs. T. H. Phillips, 23.06.1909, both in SNP 7 - 5242/1907.

"When I visited Ture last month (April) I found that the grave of the late Lieutenant G. F. Phillips was very well kept by the local natives and that the tombstone is still standing and in good order."¹¹

Although the colonial regime and its promise are now long gone, and of the residency at Ture no trace is visible any longer, the grave of that man who, despite all his powers became a victim of their mountain, is meticulously preserved by the local people up to the present day.

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¹¹ Letter from Resident Bauchi to Secretary Northern Provinces at Kaduna, 22.05.1920 (SNP 7 - 5242/1907). For a photograph of the memorial stone see JUNGRAITHMAYR "The Tangale Peak".