

In search of Hauptmann Strümpell

A case study of one man's bibliographical legacy

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Abstract

Kurt Strümpell, a German colonial officer in Cameroon at the beginning of the 20th century, wrote at least three scholarly articles on the culture, history, and languages of the Adamawa region, as well as a number of factual accounts of military operations by the German *Schutztruppe*. However, citations of these articles in subsequent literature give at least ten different forms of his name. Some of the different forms are plainly due to errors, but it also appears that in his one scholarly article published after the First World War (byline "F. Strümpell") he used his second name, for reasons that are not clear. With the identity of "Kurt" and "F." established, it is relatively straightforward to reconstruct an outline biography and to identify the more serious errors in the literature. These errors are relevant to current efforts to trace the provenance of colonial artefacts in European museums.

Keywords: Kurt Strümpell, Cameroon, Kamerun, Adamawa

Résumé

Kurt Strümpell, officier colonial allemand au Cameroun au début du 20e siècle, a écrit au moins trois articles savants sur la culture, l'histoire et les langues de la région d'Adamawa, ainsi qu'un certain nombre de récits factuels sur les opérations militaires de la *Schutztruppe* allemande. Cependant, les citations de ces articles dans la littérature ultérieure donnent au moins dix formes différentes de son nom. Certaines de ces formes différentes sont manifestement dues à des erreurs, mais il semble également que dans son seul article scientifique publié après la Première Guerre mondiale (sous la signature "F. Strümpell"), il ait utilisé son second nom, pour des raisons qui ne sont pas claires. L'identité de "Kurt" et de "F." étant établie, il est relativement simple de reconstituer les grandes lignes de la biographie et d'identifier les erreurs les plus graves dans la littérature. Ces erreurs sont pertinentes pour les efforts actuels visant à retracer la provenance des artefacts coloniaux dans les musées européens.

Mots clefs: Kurt Strümpell, Cameroun, Kamerun, Adamawa

Zusammenfassung

Kurt Strümpell, ein deutscher Kolonialoffizier in Kamerun zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts, schrieb mindestens drei wissenschaftliche Artikel über die Kultur, Geschichte und Sprachen der Adamawa-Region sowie eine Reihe von Tatsachenberichten über militärische Operationen der deutschen *Schutztruppe*. In der späteren Literatur werden diese Artikel jedoch mit mindestens zehn verschiedenen Formen seines Namens zitiert. Einige der verschiedenen Formen sind offensichtlich auf Irrtümer zurückzuführen, aber es scheint auch, dass er in seinem einzigen

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wissenschaftlichen Artikel aus der Nachkriegszeit, der unter dem Namen “F. Strümpell” erschien, aus unklaren Gründen seinen zweiten Namen verwendete. Nachdem die Identität von “Kurt” und “F.” feststeht, ist es relative einfach, eine grobe Biographie zu rekonstruieren und die schwerwiegenden Fehler in der Literatur zu ermitteln. Diese Fehler sind für die aktuellen Bemühungen um die Rückverfolgung der Herkunft kolonialer Artefakte in europäischen Museen von Bedeutung.

Stichworte: Kurt Strümpell, Kamerun, Cameroon, Adamawa

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What was this man called?

	
Hauptmann Strümpell from König 2014. Also in Kadege 2020: 148.	Hauptmann Strümpell http://www.deutsche-kriegsgeschichte.de/kabild04.jpg

Between 2016 and 2019, as a result of a collegial conversation over a beer, I found myself involved in translating the first linguistic description of Mambila, a Bantoid language of the Cameroon-Nigeria borderland. The original description, by Emmi Kähler-Meyer, a mid-20th century German Africanist, was a substantial monograph published in three parts in the *Zeitschrift für Eingeborenen-Sprachen* (now *Afrika und Übersee*) (Meyer 1939-40). The translation, supplemented with substantial commentaries and appendices by my colleague Bruce Connell, a 21st century Canadian Africanist and an authority on Mambila, was published by Rüdiger Köppe in Cologne (Connell & Ladd 2020). As part of the overall project, we updated a number of features of the original, including the references to the literature, and this is where the story begins.

As was common at the time, in the original monograph such references consist of footnotes in the text and often contain minimal information about the work referred to. In particular, authors are often cited only by their surname, and for books we frequently learn the place of publication but not the identity of the publisher. Given modern web resources, we assumed it would be a simple matter to take a textual reference such as “Frobenius’s ‘Unknown Africa’” (with a footnote specifying only “Munich, 1923, p. 142-3”) and convert it into an in-text reference to “Frobenius (1923: 142f)” together with an entry giving the author’s full first name in a unified bibliography: “Frobenius, Leo (1923). *Das unbekannte Afrika*. Munich: Beck.” Many of these conversions actually required only a few mouse clicks and were completed in a minute or two.

One name, however, kept throwing up perplexing contradictions. Kähler-Meyer cites two articles on languages of the Adamawa region in the north of Cameroon, one from 1910 and one from 1922-23, by someone she refers to as “F. Strümpell”. Google Scholar showed the 1910 article as the work of “H. Strümpell” and also listed another work – a short monograph on the history of the Adamawa region, from 1912 – by “K. Strümpell” or “Kurt Strümpell”. I quickly found a German Wikipedia article on “Kurt Strümpell”, which made clear that there was a German colonial officer by the name of Strümpell in Cameroon in the early years of the 20th century, and that he had written about the languages and cultures that he encountered there. But tracking down specific articles left me no wiser about his first name. By the time I had spent a few hours on this, I had found him cited in at least ten different forms: Kurt Strümpell, Karl Strumpell [without umlaut], K. Strümpell, F. Strümpell, K. F. Strümpell, F. K. Strümpell, H. K. Strümpell, H. Strümpell, R. Strümpell, and R. Kürt [with umlaut] Strümpell.

At least one of these forms was easy to explain: the 1910 article (which is available on JSTOR) gives the author's name simply as "Hauptmann [Captain] Strümpell", and his 1912 monograph on Adamawa was published under the name "Hauptmann Kurt Strümpell". This seems to have led Google (and a few authors) to infer a first name "Hauptmann". But the most obvious explanation for some of the others ("Karl" for "Kurt", for example) seemed to be nothing more than sloppy scholarship. I was particularly puzzled by "F. Strümpell", which seemed to show up primarily in work by linguists since about 1980. Perhaps the reference in Kähler-Meyer was a typographical error that had then propagated itself from reference list to reference list, in the manner of errors in mediaeval manuscripts that trickled down through generations of copyists? But no, I eventually consulted a physical copy of the 1922-23 article in the SOAS library in London, and it does indeed bear the byline "F. Strümpell". I also briefly considered the possibility that F. Strümpell and Kurt Strümpell were two different people, but Strümpell is a fairly unusual surname, and the autobiographical notes at the beginning of the 1922-23 article make it clear that the author's experiences in Cameroon coincide with what Wikipedia says about Kurt Strümpell.

At this point the sensible thing would have been to leave the reference in our translation in the form "F. Strümpell", but by now I had invested enough in my mini-research project that I wanted to know more. Who *was* Strümpell? His name turns up in quite a number of accounts of the German colonial presence in Cameroon (e.g. Chilver 1967; Nkwi 1989) as well as in numerous historical and anthropological works on Adamawa (e.g. Westermann & Mittwoch 1914; Burnham 1995). Basic biographical facts about him, at least up until the early 1920s, are fairly easy to

establish. He was born in Schöningen, near Braunschweig, in 1872 and became a lieutenant in the German army in 1892. In 1900 he was transferred to the imperial *Schutztruppe* in Cameroon and for at least a few years was involved in military efforts to subdue the indigenous peoples in the southern part of Cameroon.

Between 1906 and 1910 (apparently in two separate terms of office) he was the colonial Resident (Governor or District Officer) in Garoua, in the Adamawa region in the north, and was promoted to captain in 1909. During this time he became very interested in the local cultures, learned to speak Fulfulde (Fulani), and published a handful of scholarly works on linguistic and ethnographic topics as well as factual reports about military operations. (In fact, his 1912 monograph, which is based on his interviews with local chiefs, remains an important primary source for historians and ethnographers, and in 2020 was republished in an electronic facsimile edition by De Gruyter.) For several years after his arrival in Africa he also shipped a remarkable quantity of native artifacts of various kinds to both the Municipal Museum in Braunschweig and the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin.

After his service as Resident he returned to Berlin. What he did after that is more difficult to determine from web searches. According to the most authoritative published source (Hoffman 2007, based on military records and correspondence with Strümpell's son), he served during the First World War alternately as a reserve officer and as an official in the Imperial Colonial Office (*Reichskolonialamt*). He was promoted to major in 1915, and after the war, as (acting?) lieutenant colonel, he was in charge of winding down the *Schutztruppe*; later, he worked for the *Reichswehrministerium* (the Weimar Republic's Ministry of Defence). The *Reichswehrministerium* ceased to exist under that name not long after the Nazis took power (webpage: Wikipedia, Reichswehrministerium), and after the mid-1920s

Strümpell's online trail goes cold until early 1945. At that point he and his wife left Berlin and went to live in Hornberg Castle in Württemberg in southern Germany with his former comrade-in-arms Baron Kurt von Crailsheim (Ziegen 2015). He died there in 1947, and is buried in Hornberg cemetery. In 2013 the local municipal council resolved that his grave should be maintained indefinitely (webpage: Kirchberg an der Jagst 2013).

Crucially for the bibliographical question we started with, Hoffman (2007) gives Strümpell's full name: Kurt Friedrich Theodor Strümpell. The second name Friedrich seems to offer some sort of explanation for "F. Strümpell" in the 1922-23 article: perhaps after the war he decided to use his second name Friedrich to differentiate his scholarly work from his military writing. (In 1926 he published a historical memoir on the German *Schutztruppe* in Cameroon as "Kurt Strümpell, Oberstleutnant a.D. [Lieutenant Colonel, Ret.]".) However, there seems to be nothing else, military or scholarly, published under the name "F. Strümpell", and there is no evidence that he wrote anything further about Cameroonian linguistics or ethnography under any form of his name. It seems unlikely that we will ever know why only the 1922-23 paper bears the byline "F. Strümpell", but at least we can be confident that we are dealing with only one author.

Knowing that, we can also absolve most later authors of charges of sloppy scholarship. Authors who cite only one of Strümpell's publications generally cite the form given in the original: historians and ethnographers, who are most likely to know Strümpell's 1912 monograph on the history of Adamawa, usually refer to him as "Kurt" or "K.", while linguists who cite him in connection with his 1922-23 paper use "F." Linguists who cite both the 1910 ("Hauptmann") and the 1922-23 ("F.") papers –

like Kähler-Meyer, or, more recently, Boyd (1989) – tend to attribute them to “F. Strümpell”, although a few who are also involved with history and ethnography and know that these are all the same person (like Judith Sterner and Nicholas David, e.g. David 2014) attribute all Strümpell’s work to “Kurt Strümpell” (or “K. Strümpell” or “K. F. Strümpell”), regardless of what it says on the byline. This is the solution Connell and I adopted for our translation of Kähler-Meyer.

The other forms of Strümpell’s name in the literature, however, can clearly be treated either as errors (like “H.” for “Hauptmann”) or as guesses. At least one author (Kleinewillinghöfer 2011) presumably knows that “F.” and “K.” were the same person, but puts the two initials in the incorrect order, as “F. K. Strümpell”. There is also at least one case where incorrect details, once published, appear to have been propagated from one bibliography to another: in a sociolinguistic survey of the Adamawa language Mambay, Hamm (2002) cites Strümpell’s 1910 paper as the work of “R. Strümpell”; a subsequent paper on Mambay by Anonby (2006) follows suit, and in a later publication Anonby (2008) then goes on to transform “R. Strümpell” into “R. Kürt Strümpell”.

One document, however, is in a class by itself as a source of misinformation. This is a typewritten copy of an English translation of Strümpell’s 1912 history of Adamawa that is kept in the Bodleian library in Oxford. The translation is the undated work of an unknown translator and is part of the collection of the Nigerian National Archives in Kaduna. In 1956, Anthony Kirk-Greene, an ethnographer and historian who served as a British colonial administrator in Nigeria, came across a copy of this translation in Maiduguri (Northern Nigeria) and had a typewritten copy prepared for his own use. In 1995 he donated his copy to the Bodleian along with brief notes about how he obtained it. In the library’s catalogue entry for this

document (webpage: Bodleian n.d.), Kurt Strümpell is listed as Karl Strumpell and is said to come from Bavaria, not Braunschweig. He is also said to have served as a colonial administrator in German Togoland until he became Resident in Adamawa in 1906, which is difficult to reconcile with his documented presence in the pacification campaigns in Cameroon in the first few years of the 20th century. It is impossible to determine the source of these errors, but there is good reason to doubt that either Kirk-Greene or the Bodleian's cataloguers are responsible. David Zeitlyn (personal communication) reports that the copy of this translation in the Nigerian National Archives is attributed to "Karl Strumpell", and it seems plausible that the other misinformation first came into existence when Kurt became Karl.

Does any of this matter? Surprisingly, it probably does. In particular, whether Strümpell was in Togo or Cameroon in the first years of the 20th century is relevant to a very current issue: who should own collections of artifacts taken from European colonies a century or two ago? The Municipal Museum in Braunschweig, which has a large collection of objects donated by Strümpell during the first few years of the 20th century, is currently part of a major project investigating the provenance of such collections in several museums in Lower Saxony (the PAESE project, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and begun in 2019; webpage: PAESE n.d.; see also Kadege 2020). The apparently baseless suggestion that Strümpell was in Togo could easily keep the PAESE researchers fruitlessly occupied searching for details and could prevent them from making genuine discoveries about his actual movements in Cameroon. My search for Hauptmann Strümpell started out as little more than an academic exercise in bibliographical thoroughness, but what I ended up finding suggests that it is never too late to set the record straight.

Postscript: Further investigation has revealed that the substitution of “Karl” for “Kurt” is found only on the title page of the Bodleian’s typescript, and that the author’s name is correct at the end of the preface on p. 3. This suggests a simple typist’s error, perhaps because of an illegible handwritten original. However, it remains unclear how and when Braunschweig became Bavaria, or where the statement that Strümpell spent time in Togoland originates. In any case the information in the Bodleian’s catalogue entry has now been corrected.

Picture sources and acknowledgements

The two pictures of Strümpell included here are taken in the first instance from online sources (Ziegen 2015 and Kadegge 2020). The picture in which he is wearing a hat clearly shows the insignia of a first lieutenant (*Oberleutnant*) (see webpage: Wikipedia, German military ranks) and must therefore date from before 1909. It is part of a small Strümpell exhibit in the Sandelsches Museum in Kirchberg an der Jagst, near Hornberg Castle, where Strümpell spent his last years; it was donated to the museum by Strümpell’s grandson and appeared in print in König 2014, a pamphlet published by the museum as copyright holder. I am grateful for permission to reproduce it here.

The picture in which Strümpell is hatless (and seemingly somewhat older) is taken from a website about the German experience in World War I, which includes a section (webpage: Kamerun n.d.) dealing with the 1914-16 war in Cameroon. According to the website’s creator, Hubertus Ochsler, its ultimate source is untraceable; its resolution is too poor to determine Strümpell’s rank, but it may date from the period after the war.

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David Zeitlyn, for steering me away from an egregious historical error.

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https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Strümpell (If the automatic link does not work please check how your browser is dealing with accents. Note there is u-umlaut in the wikipedia address.)

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