

Mawenzi—a complete traverse from south to north

Fritz Lörtscher

(Translation: E. N. Bowman)

Kilimanjaro is divided orographically into the wide, slowly rising pediment, the two steeply rising summit pyramids of Kibo (6010 m) and Mawenzi (5355 m)* and the Schira ridge (4200 m) which adjoins Kibo to the west. The predominating rock of Mawenzi is felspar basalt and nephelin basalt. These remains of the cone of an old volcano are situated entirely on Tanzanian (formerly Tanganyika) territory, some 300 km south of the equator and approximately 250 km from the Indian Ocean. Mawenzi rises out of the pediment to a height of about 4200 m and is only a fraction of the original summit pyramid, for geologists are unanimous in thinking that Mawenzi must have originally considerably surpassed in height the existing summit of Kibo (6010 m). Nevertheless it is an impressive summit in its own right, a majestic summit wall with massive buttresses extending to the west and south. After formation of the volcanic cone, it is extremely likely that a series of settlements took place, in the course of which the entire eastern section of the summit collapsed. In this manner the original shape of this huge mountain was dramatically altered. However, atmospheric forces, which in these high regions combine the extremes of desert climate with that of the arctic, have had an infinitely greater destructive effect. In particular the huge faces, pinnaced ridges and isolated precipitous summits were carved out of the mountain range by insolation, ice action and erosion by wind and water. Today Mawenzi, with its thirteen separate peaks, appears as an impressive mountain block with steep rock walls, innumerable pinnacles, needles and towers and corrie-like indentations.

The two days' approach march took place under cold and rainy conditions through the rain forest and the heather zone. We left the clouds behind us and emerged into dazzling sunshine at about 3700 m. Accompanied by a native guide, Kisaka, from the Wadjaggen tribe, I left the Mawenzi col, situated at about 4200 m, and set off for the South Peak. Within the next half hour, wet mist enveloped us, but undaunted we followed the route up the south-west side of the mountain which was already familiar to me. The last few lonely, grey giant groundsel loomed out of the mist, for all the world like hobgoblins.

It was our intention to reach the South Summit from the east side, which had not been done before. Just as we reached the top of the scree, stones came rattling down from the west lateral ridge towards us. This created a

*In this communication the heights of subsidiary peaks have been quoted relative to the heights given above for Kibo and Mawenzi. The accepted heights for these peaks are now 5895 m and 5148 m respectively (see *A.J.* 60 97), so that all these figures should in fact be reduced by some 200 m.



46 *Kibo behind and Mawenzi.* Photo: Aerofilms Ltd

great impression on the native guide and he seemed reluctant to continue upwards. Some hundred metres higher up on the face a large quantity of shining icicles was poised, forming a marked contrast to the red and brown rock.

Suddenly, without any warning, rocks of various sizes whizzed down the face quite close to us as we clung to our holds. 'Haizuri'—'that's nothing', I said to Kisaka with a smile, and calmly went on climbing, feeling a little uneasy nonetheless.

However, when another big fall took place, it was too much for my native companion, who without a word shot down the mountain and lay down behind a large rock. When I reached him he was trembling all over and could not be persuaded to go on with me, as he thought the whole thing was much too dangerous. He went off down the mountain and I was left to continue on my own. The weather had surprisingly improved and I was above the clouds with only a little mist surrounding the two unnamed peaks A and B to my right. Prolonged scrambling over narrow ledges brought me to the foot of the unclimbed East face of the South Peak (5060 m). The steepness and roughness of these walls composed of lava are unique. Time and again the rotten holds broke away and crashed into the depths. I wasted much time and energy endeavouring to find safe and solid stances. A seemingly insurmountable



47 *Mawenzi—South peak.* Photo: Fritz Lörtscher

pitch loomed ahead of me but after a struggle I overcame it and attained the ridge. Shortly afterwards came the South Peak itself. As I had some time in hand I decided, after a short breather, to follow the North ridge, as both Mawenzi summits were free from cloud. The route led over pinnacles and towers, past rock ribs of rotten lava and obsidian, the beautiful laminations of which appeared to incorporate the complete colour spectrum.

I had been for some time well above the height of Mont Blanc and was frequently obliged to rest in order to allow my heart and lungs to recuperate. The increasing oxygen deficiency of the atmosphere was beginning to make itself felt.

As I took some time to abseil down from Latham Peak (5140 m) in the mist I almost failed to notice that it had cleared off Kibo (6010 m), and I was able to observe an unusual sight. I took out my camera and photographed the golden-yellow sun sinking over the 'Roof of Africa', apparently into the interior of Kibo's crater. I suddenly felt immensely cold, for the huge, cobalt-blue shadow of Kibo swept along the ridge with incredible speed. The last glow faded from the icy pinnacles of the northern ice-fields and disappeared behind the advancing clouds. The climber who witnesses such a sight is lucky indeed, it is a spectacle never to be forgotten.

I spent a lonely bivouac at 5100 m in complete silence, neither planes nor sounds of animals were to be heard. At last I could withstand the penetrating cold no longer, and as there was a full moon I set off again along the ridge at 3 am, at a height of 5150 m and with the temperature at -9°C . Just ahead of me I suddenly perceived the awe-inspiring sight of two large black and white vultures sitting on the next pinnacle, their necks unlovely and completely bare. These horrible birds stayed close to me for the rest of the day.



48 *The west side of Mawenzi, Hans Meyer Spitze on the left.* Photo: Fritz Lörtscher

There is a memorable panorama of the whole Kilimanjaro massif from the Mawenzi ridge, the view plunges vertically as from an aircraft on to gorges, hills, streams and primeval forest lying 3000 m down the east side of the mountain. The way led partly along the ridge or just below on the west side to the beautiful Purtschellerspitze (5240 m) passing *en route* the broad and elongated summit of the Klutespitze (5215 m) and the somewhat higher pyramid of the Borcherspitze (5235 m). The first and last of these peaks are somewhat apart from the main ridge and separated from it by deep notches. I had now only the main peak before me and late that afternoon I reached the highest point, the Hans Meyer Spitze (5355 m). The mid-day mists had come down rather early and had been swirling around the summit of Mawenzi for some time. The principal difficulty lay between the Borchers and Purtscheller peaks, involving narrow iced-up grooves. The southern peaks were more or less free from ice but there was snow lying on ledges on the north side and I had to take extreme care, owing to rocks covered with a thin layer of verglas. Whilst engaged in a rather complicated abseil manoeuvre stones rained down on me, followed by a large rock. My helmet and rucksack were struck, destroying my Thermos flask and a light-meter. It was a nerve-racking experience and for weeks afterwards I was awakened at night by the memory of this infernal cannonade.

I got a view for a short time of the northern slopes of Kibo from the North Summit (Nordecke, 5235 m). As far as the eye could see the limitless jungle, haunt of leopards, lay stretched out below me. Unlike the views from our own Alps, there were no meadows or neat little villages to be seen.



49 *Mawenzi*. Photo: Aerofilms Ltd

I started the descent and just as I reached the top of the Oehler Gully it began to snow. As I was preparing to abseil I heard a swishing noise and on turning round was just in time to see a large vulture glide over my head on motionless outstretched wings.

By the time I had reached the plateau I was very tired and hungry and had to cope with a thick layer of snow on the ground. I bivouacked behind a large block of lava at 4420 m, and despite the feeling of unutterable solitude I was thankful that fate had allowed me to have the satisfaction of achievement which I would not have exchanged with anybody.