Mathers Museum Exhibit Depicts an African Society “on the Verge”

between mid-September 2005 and the end of January 2006, Indiana University’s Mathers Museum of World Cultures exhibited a photographic ethnography, The Mandara Margi: A Society Living on the Verge, created by James H. Vaughan, emeritus professor of anthropology at IU Bloomington. With an approximate population of 250,000, the Margi reside near or on top of the Mandara Mountains, which form a portion of the border between Nigeria and Cameroon. The 51 photographs in color and black and white are of the eastern Margi taken during five periods of fieldwork ranging from 1960 to 1987, almost all in Gulak District in the villages of Kirngu and Humbili that Vaughan knew intimately.

“I did not present ‘photographs of Africans,’” says Vaughan, who attributes the exhibition’s success to his close association with his subjects. “These were the pictures of my friends and neighbors, identified by their personal names, in some instances described by their personalities.”

As Vaughan explains, “The Margi were, quite literally, a people on a verge (steep incline), and at the time I studied them, they were on the verge (edge, order) of changes so drastic that one might say the society shown in these pictures has virtually disappeared.”

The third sense of the word “verge”—its original dictionary meaning—a also applies: it is the sacred staff or symbol of authority that the ptil, or chief, carries (as in a 1970s photograph above of Ptil Yarkur in conventional Muslim attire).

The exhibit included detailed ethnographic descriptions by Vaughan. Some of these are excerpted below to accompany a selection of his photographs.

Although the Mandara Mountains are not high, they are rugged with volcanic cores and boulders in profusion. Clan communities are situated only as the topography permits:

concentrated upon a mountain peak or dispersed along a plateau. This topography had important consequences for all the Mandara populations: no large social or political units; localized clans grouped into small autonomous political units; people who were independent, resourceful, and provincial with little knowledge of the world beyond.

The ability of the Margi to exploit their habitat was largely based upon their mastery of iron technology, making small farming implements as well as weapons of self-defense by which they maintained their independence from the intrusive Fulbe who raided and enslaved them well into the first quarter of the twentieth century. Iron technology was intricately tied into the social fabric of Margi society, which was divided into two castes. The majority farmer’s caste (mbilim) smelted magnetite into stock iron while the ingkyagu caste fabricated the implements and included the society’s potters, leather workers, basket-makers, and morticians. The two castes were united in a symbiotic relationship.

Margi society is patrilineal, patrilocal, and polygynous. Men give authority and structure to the society; women give it life and joy. These women are not subservient drudges

Verge sb. Late ME . . . A rod or wand carried as an emblem of authority or symbol of office . . . The extreme edge of a cliff or abrupt descent . . . The brink or border of something towards which there is progress . . .

—Oxford English Dictionary
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trapped in polygynous marriages; they are frequently co-wives who conspire to outwit their husbands. Nor are they without options. More than three quarters of all divorces—in 1960 the Margi divorce rate was six times the U.S. rate—are initiated by women. No sound is so characteristic of village life as the sound of women’s laughter, no gossip so frequent as the stories of wives eloping with lovers.

Pottery is the exclusive domain of inskyagu women. The quality of the pots was excellent, and their sale provided a reliable though modest cash income. A woman would typically produce 20 or 30 pots a week to sell in a local market. Sometimes an itinerant entrepreneur would buy 16 to 20 pots, load them on a donkey, and then walk more than 100 miles to the large northeastern market of Maiduguri to sell them. In the 1960s, a local mbilim man had the brilliant idea of “special ordering” a larger number of pots and shipping them by truck to Maiduguri, and the production of pots rapidly increased. In the photo at right, stacks of pots are bound in cornstalk racks at terminals along the roadside to be picked up by trucks chartered exclusively for the pottery trade. This change in the marketing of pottery was far more than economic; it became revolutionary when Margi middle-

Ptil Yarkur’s Grandson Unexpectedly Visits Exhibit

Over the past 30 years, James Vaughan had kept in contact with Waziri Ahmadu, one of the Margi he knew as a boy, and had informed him about the exhibit. Now an agricultural development official with the Nigerian government, Ahmadu happened to be in the United States on business and came to Bloomington for a day, just when Vaughan was unfortunately out of town. Instead, his son, Richard Vaughan (second from left), a librarian in the IU School of Law—Bloomington, took him to the exhibit, where Ahmadu was thrilled to see photographs of his grandfather, Ptil Yarkur, his mother, and many other relatives and friends. Of the traditional rural life depicted there, Ahmadu said nostalgically, “A lot of the scenery, the way of life, it’s gone now.” Also shown here are Paul and Roxana Newman, who visited the Vaughan family in Margi country during the 1970s.

As he was touring the exhibit, Ahmadu remarked that it would have delighted many people back in Nigeria if only they could have seen it. This comment inspired Vaughan to realize that he could actually put the entire exhibit on a Web site that the Margi themselves could access because computers are now available in many schools and offices in Nigeria. The Web project would reach out to the largest audience possible, not only the Margi and other Nigerians, but also students and scholars worldwide who are interested in African cultures. With support from the Mathers Museum, the African Studies Program, and the Office of International Programs, Vaughan hopes to launch the Web site by the end of summer 2006. For further information on the exhibit or Web site, contact James Vaughan at vaughan@indiana.edu.

–RMN
leadership retreats, and publishing opinion pieces and reports on issues of global importance. The hope is that such efforts will help build a new generation of globally conscious leaders who can shape an American foreign policy appropriate for an increasingly interdependent world. AID is supported by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Open Society Institute, DarMac Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, Connect US, and its many participating universities. Collectively, they offer scholarships to students attending AID-sponsored events such as the conference at IUPUI.

CASE, which did most of the organization for the meeting, is an innovative program within Indiana University’s Center for the Study of Global Change, created and directed by IU Bloomington senior Kathleen Claussen (see article, p. 14). It utilizes the scope and power of videoconferencing technology to connect students from around the world for lively interactions and conversations about pressing global issues. Of the conference, Claussen was enthusiastic: “We were overwhelmed by the positive responses to the conference! There were so many good ideas flowing by the end of the day—I know that our conversations have already led to committed action on different campuses worldwide. We could not have asked for a more thoughtful and intellectually stimulating environment, and I am so grateful to all the IU administrators who made it happen.”

—RMN

For more information about CASE:
www.indiana.edu/~case

For postconference blog browsing:
globalcitizenconference.wordpress.com

For postconference blogs at IUSB:
ee.iusb.edu/index.php?/adp/blog/optimism_and_global_citizenship/

men and Ingkyagu potters began to intermarry, leading to the eventual dissolution of the caste system. With the independence of Nigeria in 1960 and an emerging regional identity, the horizons of Margi men expanded. Many converted to Islam or, in fewer cases, to Christianity, and that inevitably brought about many changes in customs as they adopted behaviors that they associated with “modernity.” They eschewed customs that they now thought of as “pagan,” eventually doing away with slavery and adopting Muslim robes as well as Western attire. Perhaps the most important impetus for cultural change came when the Ptl converted to Islam, for he then ceased to engage in any traditional rituals, effectively ending Margi public religion. With this, the entire society, even the most remote villages, became vulnerable to change. One might say that the society depicted in this exhibit has virtually disappeared.

—James Vaughan