

Ideal

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What would it feel like to suddenly find oneself in a place where women strive to be as fat as possible? Would it be liberating? Would it be easier to love one's body? Or would the same issues and pressures around eating and the body still arise, except in reverse?

I lived for four years in just such a place, among desert Arabs in Niger, a country that borders Nigeria in the south and Algeria in the north. Living in tents and simple adobe houses in the sparsely inhabited reaches of the southern Sahara, these Arabs

have for centuries cultivated an ideal of what Westerners would consider obesity in women, and girls are force-fed in order to achieve this ideal. In my work with these people, I quickly learned that even in the absence of glossy magazine pictures of fashion models, or any images of what women "should" look like besides the real-life women around them, body ideals are still very important. Intriguingly, however, attempting to achieve the fat body ideal did not seem to create the same feelings of personal anguish for these Arab women that striving for the thin body ideal seems to for many women in the West. As I learned to see the world through their eyes, I also discovered that changing the way I looked at the body was one of the hardest cultural leaps I, as an anthropologist and as a woman, have ever had to make.

Stepping on the Scale in Niger

I first came to this western corner of Niger in the mid-1980s as a Peace Corps volunteer posted to a village at a Saharan crossroads. I worked at the local clinic alongside local Nigerien nurses, weighing and measuring children and helping to treat, ironically, undernourished children. I soon discovered that women from all the diverse ethnic groups in the area wanted to be fat: Hausa, Zarma, Fulani, Tuareg, and the local Arabs. The Nigerien nurses I worked with, who were mostly from villages, would occasionally weigh themselves, just like women in the West might do when they find themselves in the vicinity of a scale. Unlike women in the West, however, who learn at an early age to remove shoes and as much clothing as possible before stepping on the scale for its verdict, the Nigerien nurses always put clothes *on*. They nonchalantly picked up their shawls, sweaters, and any other loose

items of clothing they had with them before stepping on the scale. Taking their shoes off to weigh themselves was out of the question, because this would subvert their goal, which was to weigh as much as possible.

Weighing oneself was probably a relatively recently learned behavior for these women, a new practice made possible by the clinic scale. But for them, as for women of all ethnic groups in Niger and indeed in much of Africa, the hope is always that one will be bigger, not smaller. Among the seminomadic Arabs of the region, who had long had slaves and who now hired servants to do much of the hard labor, the ideal of fatness was almost a *raison d'être* for women.

Nigerien Arabs and the Fat Female Ideal

One hot, still afternoon partway through my Peace Corps stay, I stumbled into a compound where an Arab girl sat alone on a mat, disconsolately stirring an oversize bowl of porridge with a similarly oversize ladle. A woman nearby spoke harsh words to her, urging her to drink up the porridge. It dawned on me that the unwieldy bodies of the village Arab women, extreme even among peoples whose women all strived for wide girth, was achieved through the more or less forced consumption of food in childhood. Soon I learned from my Arab friend Boukia that she had indeed undergone this fattening process as a child, which had endowed her with what she called the "beautiful" stretch marks on her arms. Boukia did not have the means now to properly fatten her own daughters, but she told me she would do so if she had access to the necessary quantities of millet and milk.

I left Niger after two years, when my Peace Corps work was

over. But I went back again in the early 1990s and moved to a predominantly Arab village to study the bodily ambitions of Nigerien Arabs in more depth.⁷ By hunting down information in old missionary and travelers' accounts, I had learned that a number of African peoples have had traditions of secluding girls before marriage and fattening them. However, the Nigerien Arabs and Mauritanian Moors to whom they are related seem to be the only ethnic group on record that begins fattening girls in early childhood. Historical accounts suggest that the practice has been going on for centuries across a wide swath of the western and central Sahara.

In the more remote village where I now established my strange Western presence, women were wonderfully welcoming, though it made little sense to them that, given their illustrious history and Muslim pioussness, I'd want to ask questions about something as banal as fattening. Since a number of girls were being quietly fattened in corners of their tents, however, I soon learned the basic facts of the practice. Under the close watch of a female relative, girls begin ingesting large quantities of milk and porridge every day, starting when they lose their first teeth and continuing until they reach adolescence. The pudginess they develop is thought to (and, according to biologists, probably does) hasten the onset of puberty and the possibility of childbearing. Ideally, girls in this society are married in early adolescence. By then, women told me, girls have "learned the value of fatness themselves" and maintain their fatness on their own throughout their adult lives by stuffing themselves with a kind of dry, homemade couscous thought to maintain fleshiness in more mature women. Yet the women seemed reluctant to talk about this, and I soon learned why. To talk a lot about fattening was to risk casting the evil eye

on the young girls whose central purpose in life at this stage was to make their blossoming young bodies sexually attractive and beautiful. Even if one did not consciously mean to cause ill, commenting on a girl's fat could indicate envy and, according to local theories of health and morality, cause the girl to lose weight or become sick.

The risk that anyone would cast the evil eye on me, however, was minimal. My own bodily charms, meager as they were in my own country, certainly meant even less in this Saharan world. At home, where I flattered myself that my subtly visible collarbones were an ideal element of a young female body, in the eyes of the people I was living with, these bony protrusions brought to mind only unflattering images of scrawny cows! They coveted instead a smooth chest with no hint of collarbones and a long neck on which to display gold and bead necklaces. Since women who have their veils up to cover their hair and body may still show their face and neck, there is particular attention paid to making this area beautiful. When I would return to the village from brief trips to Niger's capital, Niamey, "fattened" there on Western foods I longed for after long stretches of the desert diet, the women would all comment appreciatively that my collarbones were not quite so noticeable. They were attuned to every pound I would lose or gain, far beyond even my own awareness.

These Nigerien Arab women spent as much time as possible sitting or lying down, letting servants do the work of carrying water and cooking. But whenever they did raise themselves, they took the opportunity to show their large bodies off to advantage. Walking as slowly as they could, they swayed their buttocks from side to side, emphasizing this most important feature of a woman's charms. Once, a young man who worked for one of the families I

spent time with sent all the women present into peals of laughter imitating this walk, wildly poking his butt out from side to side as he tripped across the sandy yard. In one of the many seeming contradictions of this Muslim society of veiled women, men told me they could readily identify any woman at a distance from her walk and her silhouette. The veil that conceals is just as important for what it reveals.

I was considered so skinny that the Niger women I lived with did not, in fact, consider me fully a woman. "Why don't you marry Ahmed?" they said, referring to a sixteen-year-old boy, alerting me to the fact that even though I was in my late twenties, without a suitably rotund body I was essentially a young girl in their eyes. With what they considered my sticklike body, I was clearly abnormal. I think that my hosts' distaste for my thinness made living alone in their midst easier: Certainly no man would really want me, and so I was not a threat to the women in any way.

So important are big buttocks to femininity in Niger that the simple dolls girls make out of clay often have no arms or legs but do have clearly demarcated buttocks. A woman, like these dolls, should ideally not have to labor, walk, or really move at all. By contrast, male dolls—and men themselves, it often seemed—were all arms and legs. The male dolls were merely two crossed sticks with a piece of cloth thrown over them. It is an apt representation, as Nigerien Arab men tend to be thin and wiry, constantly on the move.

It was not easy for me to learn to appreciate the Nigerien love of stretch marks. Stretch marks are sung about glowingly in a love song as a "waist lined with stripes," and all young women

hope to acquire them on their legs and arms, as well. "Anyone can get stretch marks on their stomachs," women told me, but stretch marks on your arms and legs are a real achievement. When my friend Boukia made me a cloth doll to take home with me, she stitched a scrap of striped cloth across the doll's stomach, thereby mimicking the vaunted stretch marks.

When I asked people in the village whether the extreme fat body ideal was perhaps on the wane, both men and women told me that they no longer liked very fat women as they used to in the old days.² But when I asked them to name a woman who they thought was beautiful, they inevitably mentioned the very fattest women in the community. And although in less remote areas of West Africa, where Western values and images have made inroads, Western body ideals are contending with fatter traditional ones, the Nigerien Arab women I knew never believed my seemingly self-serving claims that women where I came from wanted to be as thin as possible. They cited an apparently pleasingly plump French nurse with the organization Doctors Without Borders who had once passed through town as clear evidence that Westerners did indeed prefer a female body much more portly than my own.

I wanted, of course, to fit in, and I had no trouble adapting to my Arab hosts' taste in clothing, jewelry, or sandals. I soon did my best to have the right kind of gold necklace with red beads and the right kind of local dress, in light tie-dyed cotton for everyday and heavy indigo for special occasions.

Yet even as I learned intellectually to see in a certain fullness of figure the beauty they saw, I could not apply the same aesthetic to my own body. Should I try to get fat just while I was there, simply to fit in? The idea was impossible to, well, stomach.

I could pile my hair on top of my head as women did there, waltz about draped in desert finery, rub indigo on my lips, and put kohl around my eyes—even carefully veil my body and hair before older men. But to gain weight to comply with a foreign aesthetic felt like betraying myself and giving up my identity in a way that none of those other adaptations to local culture did. My own body ideal was just as much a construct as fatness was here, but it was too deeply integrated into my self-image to give up.

My difficulty in adapting to the thought that I should acquire a different kind of body is, I think, due to the fact that the bodily shapes and sizes that societies idealize are not so much fashion as they are physical manifestations of beliefs and practices that are anchored in a wider set of cultural values. For me, the sleek, streamlined female body I had been conditioned to emulate carried connotations of self-discipline, strength, industry, and general virtue. To change from wanting to look thinner to looking fatter was not like changing my taste in shoes, just because fashions changed. Much more was at stake: a whole set of values that I could not just shake off. I couldn't just shake them off because they were fundamental to the cultural world from which I came.

Where Do Body Ideals Come From?

Although there seems to be a tacit public assumption that Western society is marked by more extreme bodily ideals than ever before in history, and that those ideals are more hegemonic or oppressive than at any time in history, my own experience in Niger calls this idea into question. We are not unique in the lengths women go to achieve a bodily ideal, nor are we unique in how well developed the ideal is. To give just one example in addi-

tion to the desert Arabs I have described, the late Yale art historian Sylvia Boone studied girls' initiation among the Mende people of Sierra Leone in West Africa. She found that what women (and men) were most fascinated with were their own ideals of beauty, inculcated largely in initiation ceremonies. Boone had enough material to write an entire book about the highly detailed and developed ideals of body, face, and hair that people described to her, including high buttocks, a plump body, very dark and oiled skin, and graceful movement.³

According to Nancy Etcoff, a professor and psychologist who has researched beauty ideals historically and cross-culturally, ideals of body shape and size have probably been around as long as modern humans have.⁴ There is a degree of arbitrariness to the ideals: neck rings here (Burma), nose rings there (India), a well-shaped male calf here (historically, in the West), a lotus-shaped female foot there (China). But body ideals are also grounded not only in cultural values but also in environmental realities and economic orders. Generally speaking, fat bodies are appreciated where food is hard to come by, and thin ones are admired in places where food is abundant. Since food abundance has been relatively rare historically, it is not surprising that, according to one estimate, around 80 percent of human societies on record have had a preference for plumper women.⁵ Because humans evolved in environments of scarcity, they developed (unfortunately for us today) a desire for fatty foods and the ability to store fat easily—for women, in their behinds and stomachs.

In tandem with greater food security, but also with vast social and cultural changes, today modern Western ideals of slenderness seem to be sweeping across the world. Even in West Africa, where traditional beauty contests have long celebrated zaftig

female bodies, things are changing. In the 2001 Miss World beauty contest, Nigeria, after performing poorly for years, entered a tall, svelte young woman whose skinny appearance appealed to few in Nigeria itself. She won. In the time since then, many women in the younger generation have quickly begun adapting to the Western-inspired ideal, especially in more urban areas, even as older Nigerians shake their heads in dismay. This revolution in national aesthetics is not taking place in a vacuum. The way has been paved not only by Western cultural influence but also by economic changes that make it possible to see the body in a new way and that make new kinds of bodies desirable.

But in a society like that of Nigerien Arabs, where a former slave population still does much of the cooking, water-carrying, and grain-pounding, an elite Arab woman's achievement of weighty immobility signals her ability not to work—indeed, makes it impossible for her to work. Their economy is also based on the herding of animals and long-distance trade, all carried on by men. When women drink the milk from men's animals and eat the grain men buy with their earnings from trade, they become potent symbols of their menfolk's success, transforming the goods men produce into desirability. Women's bodies thus constitute a convenient and symbolically potent place for men to invest their earnings.

A capitalist economic order like that of the West, on the other hand, needs both male and female bodies as workers and as consumers. Cultural critic Susan Bordo has pointed out that this means that individuals need to be self-disciplined and diligent workers, like the orderly and hardworking machines that have been the basis of our economy since industrialization.⁶ Our bodies should reflect these values in the sleek, efficient, machine-

like contemporary body ideal. But since capitalism encourages—indeed, requires—the never-ending expansion of markets and the purchase of the commodities that are produced for those markets, we are also exhorted to consume and indulge. By this logic, our bodies should be anything but self-denying and machinelike; instead, we should give in to our every whim and fancy. This tension between production and consumption, argues Bordo, creates the tension that pervades women's lives especially. Men are still the prototype of the productive worker, but women are now expected to both work outside the home and remain the primary shoppers and consumers. We should work out at the gym and restrain our appetites in order to express our diligent, energetic, and efficient natures as individuals (i.e., workers). But we should also indulge as dutiful consumers, in all manner of things available to us through the marketplace, not least the Big Mac, tall latte, and the jumbo muffin.

And yet, neither the environment nor economics determine bodily ideals entirely: otherwise, all people who live in deserts and herd animals for a living would have the same beauty ideals, which they don't.

Social orders and cultural values also play their part in making one type of body seem more pleasing than another. For Nigerien Arabs, for example, overarching notions of male and female make fat women and skinny men seem natural and desirable. Women and men are considered by Nigerien Arabs to be very different types of creatures, and their bodies should reflect this in fleshy, immobile femininity and hard, upright masculinity. A thin woman is considered "like a man" just as rounder men are

considered slightly feminine. Women can actively abet the gender difference intended by God by making their bodies as different from men's as possible, i.e., by getting fat.

In the West, by contrast, where women and men are now thought to be essentially similar, women are expected to resemble men in ways bodily as well: hard muscles, able movement, none-too-exaggerated curves.

Another cultural factor that contributes to the fattened aesthetic in Niger has to do with conceptions of a healthy body. In stark contrast to the West's machine-model bodies, Nigerien Arabs see bodies more like the vessels they use for cooking and carrying water. They are potentially leaky, contain potent substances, able to be opened or closed, and—at their most healthy—they are full and cooking!

A healthy body should also, for them, be balanced in terms of the forces of "hot" and "cold" that are thought to pervade the universe. To be not too hot and not too cold means having a body that is quite "closed off" to the world around it, rather than "open" to all the winds and spirits that could enter it. Women are at an immediate disadvantage in achieving this healthy, strong, closed off bodily state, because, as the Nigerien Arabs say, women have three openings rather than two: a mouth, an anus, and a vagina. Women even sometimes playfully referred to themselves as "the cut ones" referring to their "open" genitals. When you are open, you get "cold," and women find themselves in the unfortunate position of being open all too often, notably when they have sex, when they menstruate, and when they give birth. Getting fat helps make one closed off and hot. It does so both by filling the body with energy, and by enclosing that energy by swelling the body and its openings.

If our body ideals are not entirely arbitrary but embedded in many aspects of our lives, then this explains, at least in part, why we are held so deeply in the thrall of how we think our bodies should look—in the West as in remote Niger. This, one may note, is at odds with the idea promoted by Naomi Wolf⁷ and others that female body ideals are the result of the patriarchy, capitalist enterprises, and the media. Clearly male desire, media images, and advertising have a lot to do with why women go to great lengths to make their bodies look particular ways, why they feel intense pressure to do so, and why they may suffer greatly trying to meet the ideals. But it is a matter of anthropological record that many societies without capitalism or media images and with varying degrees of gender equality have preferences for how female bodies, in particular, should look: usually youthful, curvaceous, and plump. And women in many places expend considerable effort trying to live up to the ideal.

While it seems counterintuitive that those thin, willowy models staring down from billboards aren't somehow the engines behind the compulsion we women in the West have to look sleek and slim, my four years living in a culture without any media images whatsoever, but with a body ideal every bit as pronounced and sought after as ours in the West, has convinced me otherwise. The pictures of trim and trained, airbrushed, collagen'd and Botox'd bodies could disappear from our visual world, and it is not likely, I now think, that we would cease striving to get our bodies to look a certain way.

Reading the Body: Fat Is Sexy

When I traveled to Niger, I was interested in "the body"—then a hot topic in the social sciences. With time, however, my interest in the body as a purely social symbol waned. Instead, I came to see the body more as my Arab hosts seemed to see it: as a potential object of beauty, and as an object of sexual allure. The fattening that these Arab women engaged in was certainly a kind of cultural work, expressing in physical form many cherished values and reflecting the social order. But to Nigerien Arabs themselves, the fat female body was largely a simple matter of aesthetics. Just like thin bodies in the West, fat bodies in Niger were appealing because they were, quite simply, attractive.

Even if biological realities, economic circumstances, gender constructions, and conceptions of health and the body underlie Nigerien Arabs' appreciation of fat women, it is not in these terms that they talk about fat women. In fact, they don't talk about fat women much at all, not only because of fears about the evil eye, but also because fat is ultimately about sex, and sex is something you don't talk about. When I spoke lightheartedly with teenage boys about the beauty of fat women, though, their insolent response was telling: they squeezed the air with their hands, in imitation of the pleasures of making love with a fat woman. When I gently broached the topic of the appeal of fatness with a woman known for her lack of appropriate reserve, she shot back, clearly annoyed at my naïveté, "Look, would you rather sleep on that mattress over there or on this hard ground?"

The sexiness of rolls of fat, stretch marks, and large behinds that girls invest so much in achieving here, however, creates a bit of a conundrum for women. For, as in so many societies, Nige-

rien Arab females should be sexy but not be too eager for sex. So how do you consume voraciously and sexualize your body while simultaneously distancing yourself from sexuality? Fattening and fatness itself, it turns out, contain plenty of room to do both: to excite *and* deny sexuality.

As girls flesh out their bodies, creating the contours of Rubenesque, fertile womanhood through their unceasing ladlefuls of porridge, they are expected to become ever more silent and still. Once breasts and pubic hair appear, women begin to veil their increasingly desirable bodies. And as they grow older and fatter, movement becomes more difficult, so their activity is curtailed, even as they excite lust in men. And, in a familiar logic, the more unattainable women are, the more they appeal.

In other words, while fatness is highly arousing, it also imposes an immobility and closed-off-ness on women that is thought to protect them from the potential dangers of sexual forces. Fatness is thus simultaneously a condition of desirability and a means of keeping female sexual lust in control—under a veil of fat, as it were.

Individualism and Body Ideals

Both Nigerien Arab and Western body ideals contain numerous "messages." Both are rather extreme; both are largely unquestioned in their respective societies; and in both places, women devote considerable time and energy to achieving them. Yet in the West today, the slender body ideal is experienced by many women as deeply oppressive, morally wrong, and a menace to young girls, even as women continue to emulate it. This is in stark contrast to the Nigerien Arabs. Women there did not seem

to regard the imperative to be fat as problematic or troubling to their sense of self in any way.

This struck me as a paradox. Why did Western women, with more opportunities and more power than women have had at any time in history, feel so threatened by their beauty ideal, whereas Nigerien Arab women, with seemingly much less agency in their lives, do not seem threatened by their equally extreme body ideal? One could argue that precisely because Nigerien Arab women lead more circumscribed lives, the constraints on their bodies are not experienced so acutely. But the puzzle is this: in the West, where women choose their own partners (and can choose to divorce them), choose their own careers (and can actually have careers in the first place), and choose their own personal styles in clothing and adornment, why do so many feel so helpless and threatened in the face of beauty ideals? How do women with so many concrete freedoms and opportunities simultaneously feel victimized by an abstraction?

I believe the pressure women feel from body ideals in the West has little to do with the ideals themselves, as we tend to think. Instead, it has to do with the social context in which we try to live up to those ideals. Specifically, it is our culture of individualism and achievement that makes our bodily ideals feel so oppressive.

If a Nigerien Arab woman fails to get fat, this is thought to be due to her innate constitution, or because she is ill, or because someone has bewitched her. In the West, on the other hand, where we have the *freedom* to develop an individual identity, we also have the personal *duty* to do so. It is up to each individual to determine his or her own fate, and characteristics—from temperament to appearance—are readily interpreted not as givens

but as under an individual's own control and design. Thus, if a woman fails to live up to the ideal, it is thought to be her own fault.

The opportunity to invent oneself imposes a great burden on the psyche as well as on the body. If we lived, by contrast, in, say, an African village where every individual's life course was far more predetermined, a woman in an advertisement might not automatically be read as a reproach or reminder of personal failing. Who a woman's father is, what village she lives in, what social group she belongs to—these are the things that define the parameters and possibilities of her life in this Nigerien society, not her own efforts and ambitions, although they, of course, may also affect her identity and the outcome of her life.

In the West, where we are not so tightly embedded in social networks that give us our identity, we have to search for ways to be and ways to look, and thus the available role models and images can have enormous pull. I suspect that if images of women representing various body and beauty ideals were to come to remote Niger, women might get inspiration for a new hairdo or jewelry from them, but they would not feel challenged, threatened, or taunted by the images the way many women in the West seem to feel. Their lives are not a self-designed project in the way the lives of women (and men) in the West are. The sense of inner responsibility for each pound lost or gained does not carry the weight, so to speak, that it does for women in the West.

The nature of eating disorders reflects this, for while most women in the West are exposed to images representing the coveted thin body ideal, it is girls at the ages when they are expected to develop their identities and define themselves as women who are most prone to develop anorexia or bulimia. And to the extent

that eating disorders are beginning to crop up outside the West, it seems to be in societies and situations where women have gained increased freedoms and where an emphasis on achievement and individualism is beginning to be felt.

Free at Last?

Is it depressing or liberating to learn that women in the middle of the Sahara desert, without *Baywatch*, MTV, or *Seventeen* magazine, also devote much of their energies to achieving a particular body ideal? I hope that it is liberating to realize that our contemporary Western bodily ideals are just one of many possible sets of ideals. And it should be sobering to learn that our society does not have a monopoly on beauty ideals—even extreme ones.

Even after two years working at the health clinic in Niger, I still took off my sandals when I stepped onto the scale. I still felt a twinge of happiness if I weighed less rather than more, and I still thought my life was going better if I was thinner rather than fatter. But I also had come to see the beauty of those around me in their fatness. I, too, found a thin Nigerien woman less attractive than a fatter one, and when I came home to the United States, I began to find American women who approximated the Nigerien ideals attractive, even if I still held to the thin ideal simultaneously. (I have met a few women back home who would be considered absolutely luscious in Niger—but I refrain from telling them for fear that they would take it the wrong way.)

Then, after returning to Niger after my initial stint, and living in the desert with Nigerien Arabs for two years, I finally did start “reading” even Western slenderness in a new way. Thin women started to appear severe and manly to me, as if their bod-



Author and friend in Niger. Photo courtesy the author

ies were denying life rather than affirming it, pulling back from sexuality rather than celebrating it.

Ironically, I have pondered the cultural pressures that make women want to be thin so long that I no longer feel the pull to be thin, even if I understand it intellectually. This change of mental attitude has not led to any change in my weight; it just freed up the part of my female brain that I have seen jokingly labeled in a cartoon as “Things I Shouldn’t Have Eaten.”

Most of all, however, I have come to feel that body ideals, as recurring aspects of human societies both historically and cross-culturally, are part of important cultural work humans engage in. Working to live up to a bodily ideal is to engage in making life meaningful and bringing the pleasure of beauty into the world, however one’s particular society defines it. It is a shame that

it has become such an odious, even illness-inducing task for so many women in the West today. But, fat or thin, it may be difficult to eliminate the ideals themselves. Better, perhaps, to work on our own attitudes toward them, helped at least a little bit by knowing about places where fat itself is ideal.