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Ideal

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Shocked and Inward

I don’t think.

Hence, to think.

Do can’t, we hope this book will stimulate you, now and in the future, to think about how we live and what is happening around us. We are currently preparing a book that will examine the many dimensions of life and how they interrelate. We think

about life, our goal can also be summed up in two little words:
Nigerian Women and the Fat Female Ideal

Stepping on the Scale in Nigeria

In my recent trip to Nigeria, I observed the prevalent perception of body weight, especially among the younger generation, where being thin is considered a beauty standard.

Step 1: Wearing Tight Clothing

In Nigeria, women often wear tight clothing, particularly during social gatherings or special occasions. This practice is believed to accentuate the silhouette and emphasize the curves, which is considered attractive.

Step 2: The Nigerian Nipple Exchange

The Nigerian Nipple Exchange is a practice among some women, where they exchange their nipples in a manner that enhances their overall attractiveness. This is done to gain the attention of potential suitors or to achieve a desired body image.

Step 3: Nigerian Diet

The Nigerian diet is predominantly high in carbohydrates, especially rice, which is a staple food. Women often try to balance their meals by including a variety of vegetables and fruits to maintain a healthy weight.

Step 4: Nigerian Fitness Routines

In Nigeria, fitness routines often include traditional dance forms and calisthenics to maintain a slim figure. These activities are popular among women who want to stay fit and maintain a toned physique.

Step 5: Conclusion

The Nigerian beauty standards are influenced by cultural, religious, and social factors. Women in Nigeria work hard to maintain a certain body image, which is often associated with beauty and attractiveness. In conclusion, the Nigerian beauty standards are dynamic and continue to evolve with changing trends and societal values.
woman. It is not about falling or falling to fall. Rather, it is about awareness and becoming aware of the reality of one's own experiences and the perspectives of others. To truly understand and appreciate the complexity of the world, we must cultivate a mindset of curiosity and openness. This involves recognizing the limitations of our own knowledge and the importance of seeking diverse viewpoints. We must be willing to challenge our assumptions and confront the uncomfortable truths that lie beneath the surface. In this way, we can foster a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us.  

Focus on the present, not the past. It is easy to get caught up in the past and dwell on past mistakes or achievements. While it is important to learn from our experiences, we must also be mindful of the present moment. The past is gone, and the future is uncertain. By living in the present and focusing on the task at hand, we can achieve greater success and fulfillment.  

Embrace the journey, not just the destination. Life is a continuous process of growth and change. Instead of focusing solely on the end goal, we should enjoy the journey and appreciate the people and experiences along the way. This mindset helps us cultivate a sense of gratitude and appreciation, and allows us to find joy and fulfillment in the present moment.  

In summary, cultivating a healthy balance of focus and perspective is key to achieving success and happiness in life. By prioritizing self-awareness, embracing the present moment, and finding joy in the journey, we can create a fulfilling and meaningful life.
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 round 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 valued 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. 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 Westeners 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 addition 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.

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. 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. 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 breasts 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. 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 machine-like; 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 economies 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, Nigerian 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 Nigerian 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 thin, my four years living in a culture without any media images whatsoever, but with a body ideal every bit as pronounced and sought after 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, Nigerien 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 Nigerian 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 Nigerian 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 Nigerian 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 given 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 Nigerian 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 Nigerian 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 Nigerian 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 Nigerian 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*
and company live of the more expansive Russian extra-light olive
prescoce, and figure on newly cut-up pump between ovens. We raise
pieces of Italian pottery. We sip the Romanian tinctures when
recess in the leafy dining room surrounded by charming lights
and periscopic letter-corral furnishings nestled among olive
hills. There, the view from my room: spire-bordered sliver, rolling hills.

Incessantly in mid-November is misty and cool. It with a luminous
island from time immemorial, or a lovely one and warm: Castle.

I'm standing in a charming Russian village that looks as if it has ex-

Anne Merney

on our own attitudes toward them. Helped at least a little by
ent to diminish the ideals themselves. Better perhaps to work
m any woman in the West today. But, are these things, is this way, be different?

It has become such an obvious, even illusory-inducing task for so