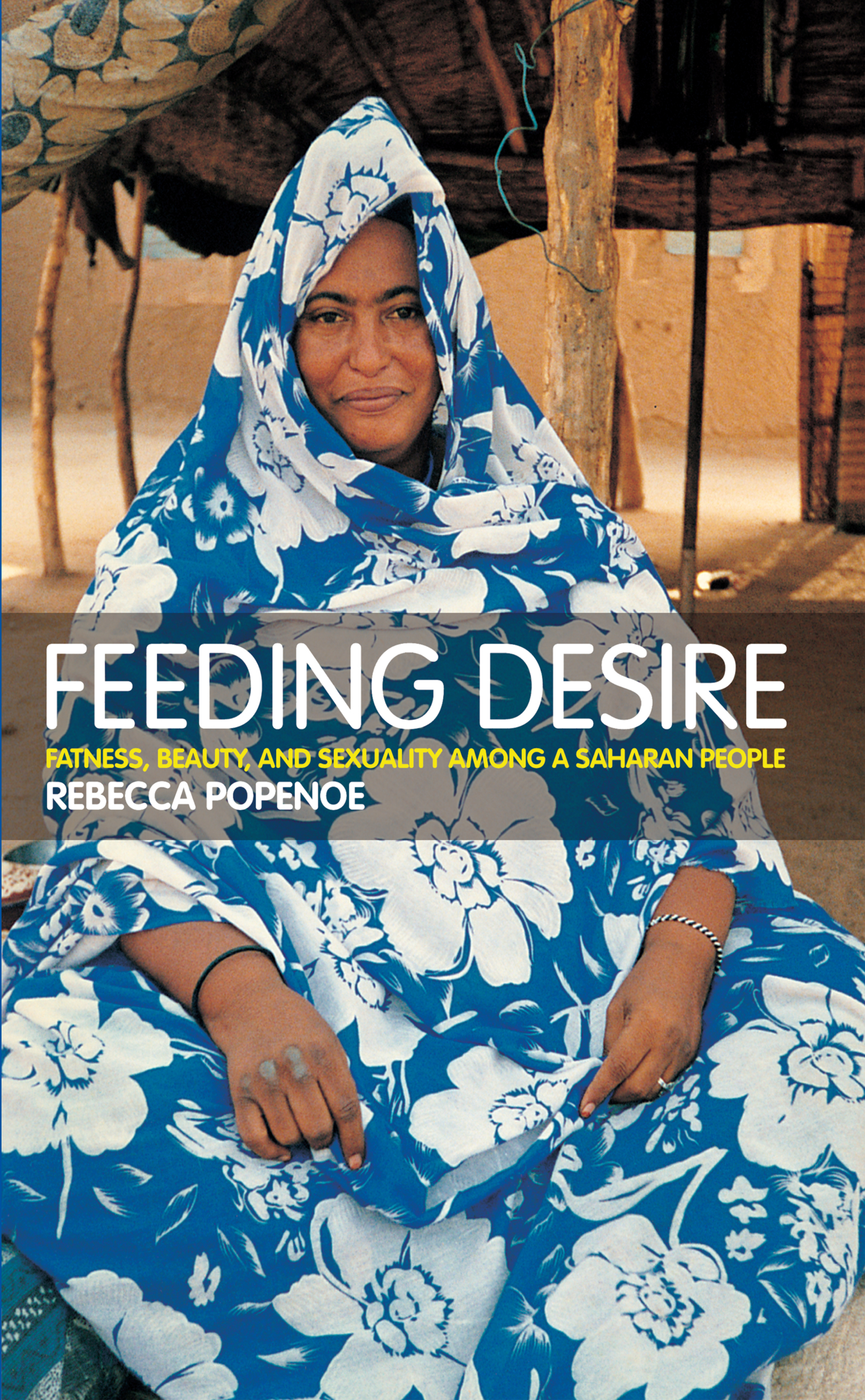
# FEEDING DESIRE

## FATNESS, BEAUTY, AND SEXUALITY AMONG A SAHARAN PEOPLE

REBECCA POPENOE



# FEEDING DESIRE

> A fascinating and extremely coherent piece of ethnographic writing . . . brings one into the homes and, ultimately, the minds of people with a very different culture.
>
> Misty Bastian, Franklin and Marshall College

> She is beautiful to the eyes, oh my lord, and God gave her
> Gave her a breast new and green appearing like two balanced weights . . .
> Gave her a waist lined with stripes
> Gave her a thigh with stretchmarks reaching from her stomach to her knee
> Gave her calves beautiful and soft, you have never seen such creations
> Gave her a heel like none a son of Adam ever walked on.
>
> Poem recited by Boukia at Tchin Tabaraden, Niger, 1990

While the Western world adheres to a beauty ideal that says women can never be too thin, the semi-nomadic Moors of the Sahara desert have for centuries cherished a feminine ideal of extreme fatness. Voluptuous immobility is thought to beautify girls' bodies, hasten the onset of puberty, heighten their sexuality, and ripen them for marriage. From the time of the loss of their first milk teeth, girls are directed to eat huge bowls of milk and porridge in one of the world's few examples of active female fattening.

Based on fieldwork in an Arab village in Niger, *Feeding Desire* analyzes the meanings of women's fatness as constituted by desire, kinship, concepts of health, Islam, and the crucial social need to manage sexuality. By demonstrating how a particular beauty ideal can only be understood within wider social structures and cultural logics, the book also implicitly provides a new way of thinking about the ideal of slimness in late Western capitalism. Offering a reminder that an estimated 80% of the world's societies prefer plump women, this gracefully written book is both a fascinating exploration of the nature of bodily ideals and a highly readable ethnography of a Saharan people.

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## Fatness, beauty, and sexuality among a Saharan people

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TO MY PARENTS,
DAVID POPENOE
AND
KATHARINE SASSÉ POPENOE

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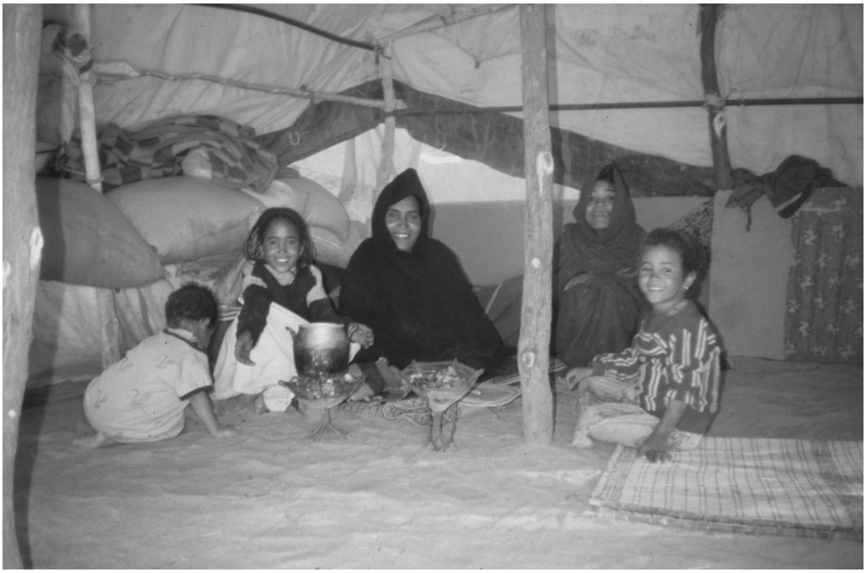

*Plate 1* Boukia and four of her daughters, El-Beytha, Denna, Reqia, and Maya (Egawan)

# PROLOGUE: THERE IS MORE TO BEAUTY THAN MEETS THE EYE

> People say sometimes that beauty is only superficial. That may be so, but at least it is not so superficial as thought is. To me, beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.
>
> -Oscar Wilde 1994 [1891]

This book seeks to shed light on what beauty ideals mean to society by examining one very different from the taut thinness that has become synonymous with beauty in the contemporary West. In the Sahara desert live about one million Moors for whom the ideal of female beauty has for centuries been to be as fat as possible. Girls are fattened on milk and porridge for several years leading up to puberty to attain the full, abundant, luscious look that is admired by men and women alike, and that is considered sexually desirable. Women work to maintain the folds of fat around their stomach, fleshy behinds, and stretchmarks on every limb by continuing to stuff themselves with particular types of food thought to fatten best. The work that follows explores this ideal among the easternmost group of Moors, here called Azawagh Arabs (a-ZAW-ag), using their ideal of beauty as a window onto their cultural world as well.

Beauty ideals have come under attack in recent years for their associations with the oppression of women and with eating disorders. It has been claimed that they are primarily the result of media pressure or male fantasies, and that as such they can and should be rooted out and abandoned. A differing perspective will be argued here, however: that these ideals persist not primarily because of their imposition by a powerful few or by forces extrinsic to the individuals held in their sway, but because they are deeply embedded in wider cultural values and social structures that we are all party to. While not denying the complex relationship among beauty, the media, and the male imagination, the analysis offered here seeks to shed light on the way in which beauty ideals have deeper and broader wellsprings and are an integral and inescapable part of human social life. It follows that, in contrast to the view that beauty ideals are deeply problematic in their very nature, this work finds that investment in their achievement, while potentially burdensome and open to exploitative purposes, is also a kind of cultural work that contributes to the identity, well-being, and honor of both individuals and the social groups to which they belong.

Although certain elements of fashion may be fleeting, random, and superficial, aesthetic ideals are on the whole not random or arbitrary, but are related in complex ways to a society's ideals in other spheres of life. Beauty ideals take their cues from political, social, and economic realities (van Damme 1996). In modern Western societies, for example, where men and women are expected to fulfill similar roles, the ideal female body, in general terms, is mannish – lean and trim – whereas among Azawagh Arabs, where women and men are thought to be very different sorts of creatures, women should look as little like men as possible – round and fleshy. These ideals could be said to express cultural and economic values in another register, and in this way cannot be understood outside of their context. A look at history shows that ideals of beauty tend to change in sync with wider social and economic changes. Look only at dress over the past 200 years in the West, where men's fashion became increasingly somber when new male roles as self-disciplined producers emerged with industrialization, and women's fashion grew increasingly masculine (suits, shoulder pads, pants) as a belief in the equality of the sexes became widespread. My analysis of Azawagh Arab society will show how their beauty ideals also reflect and express social ideals such as "closedness," and are predicated on an economic system in which the fruits of men's active labor are "invested" in passive female bodies. In short, this work attempts to show, in keeping with Oscar Wilde's quip, that the significance of outer appearance is anything but superficial.

## Beauty universals and cultural particulars

Neither the contemporary West nor Azawagh Arab society is exceptional in the time and energy they invest in modifying the human body, even though they represent two ends of the spectrum with respect to preferences for body shape and size. All societies have notions of what is beautiful and all societies modify the human body in some way. Archaeological finds from 30,000–50,000 years ago indicate that enhancing the body through adornment of various kinds accompanied the emergence of modern cultural life. Aesthetic ideals and the modification of the human body to achieve them thus appear to be human social universals that have been part of societies throughout history. Even if modern capitalism and the media do their best to profit from the seemingly universal human tendency to want to improve upon nature's givens, modifying and adorning the body to particular ideals appear to be a part of the human condition.

When Sander Gilman (1999: 3), who has written extensively on plastic surgery, states that "[i]n a world in which we are judged by how we appear, the belief that we can change our appearance is liberating," we should not let ourselves think that a world in which people are not judged by appearance exists just over the horizon. "All cultures are beauty cultures," as Nancy Etcoff (1999: 23) puts it in her book, summarizing evidence from anthropology, psychology, and biology which suggests that appearance matters everywhere, and that humans are in some way programmed to respond to beauty, in both its universally shared and its culturally particular manifestations.

Beauty does not lie only in the eye of the beholder. Universal ideals of beauty seem to include symmetry, smooth skin, youthfulness, and, for women, hips that are wider than their waists (Etcoff 1999; Singh 1993). This last ideal holds whether or not the society prefers fatter or thinner women, and the Azawagh Arab example supports this finding – even there it was desirable to have something of an hourglass figure, albeit on a large scale. While societies around the world apparently share these general aesthetic ideals, however, their opinion of which hairstyles, adornment, body size, form of body parts, and many other features are attractive varies widely.

On the issue of what constitutes beauty, researchers have reached the surprising conclusion that what is considered beautiful is often that which is most average. This discovery has its beginnings in the work of the eugenicist Francis Galton (1878) in the 1870s, when he attempted to arrive at the facial features typical of the average criminal. When he superimposed on each other the photographic images of a number of convicted murderers and robbers, he found to his disappointment not the expected sinister facial features of criminality, but a more attractive countenance than any of the criminal mug shots alone presented. In more recent experiments as well, the composite of many faces turns out a face more attractive than that of the individuals that make it up. Humans react positively, in other words, to looks that deviate least from the mean, be it in nose length, lip size, or eye shape (Etcoff 1999: 145).

This begs the question, then, of how it is possible that so many extreme features have come to represent loveliness in diverse societies: bound feet, ringed necks, scarified torsos, corsetted waists, or the elongated flat bodies of contemporary fashion models. Nancy Etcoff (1999: 225) hypothesizes that the extreme thinness of catwalk fashion models, just like the extraordinary size of football players, is a consequence of competition: if being thin is valued, then being a little bit thinner than the next woman will give you an edge. The same could be said for long necks, small feet, or fatness: if looking plump is considered attractive, looking a little plumper than the woman in the next tent will be considered an advantage. A slight leaning toward one favored feature or another readily escalates to an extreme. Thus when thin or very fat bodies become emblems of status, our natural aesthetic instincts to see beauty in what is average are overridden. This argument holds true both for the class-stratified West, where cheap food is fattening and where keeping trim and fit costs money, and for the Arabs in the Azawagh, where being able to consume a lot of food and resist movement has helped elite women distance themselves from lower castes.

Studies in the West, at least, have also found that people seem to respond to beauty in predictable ways. Psychological tests have demonstrated that even small babies react to beauty, staring longer at faces that adults have judged to be more beautiful (Langlois *et al.* 1990). Studies and tests also find that more attractive people have an easier time persuading others of their views, are assumed to be more intelligent, and are more readily let off the hook if accused of a crime (Etcoff 1999: 46–49). Adults judged to be more attractive have an easier time getting not only mates, but also in many cases jobs (Etcoff 1999: 65, 83–85). Fortunately for most of us, beautiful people do not seem to be happier, and indeed their advantages in life are not overwhelming – nothing that a charming personality and a good CV can't overcome (Etcoff 1999: 85–88). That beauty confers advantage does not mean that we should welcome this human instinct – we can choose to try to fight it – but if we want to fight "lookism" we had best start by acknowledging the role appearance seems to play in human life, whether we like it or not.

## Fatness and fattening cross-culturally

Although with increasing affluence and Western influence more and more societies across the globe are beginning to adhere to bodily ideals of streamlined, willowy thinness, the vast majority of human societies have had ideals that tend toward plumpness, especially for women. A medical researcher of obesity, Peter J. Brown (1991: 49), estimated on the basis of an analysis of a large set of anthropological data, the Human Relations Area Files, that "the desirability of 'plumpness' or being 'filled out' is found in 81 percent of the societies for which this variable can be coded." Moor society does not seem to have entered into this statistical compilation, since Brown also notes that "[n]o society on record has an ideal of extreme obesity," an observation that is contradicted by both Moor society and some communities of Tuareg. Note that because of its negative connotations the biomedical term "obesity" is misleading in a discussion of positive and admired large bodily ideals in other cultures where fatness is often culturally associated with health, not illness. Indeed the word "fat" is also problematic because of its negative connotations in English, but for lack of a better term I use it in this work.

In addition to a wide literature on fatness as a biomedical condition (see for example Brown 1991; McGarvey *et al.* 1989) and as a stigmatized body form in the West (see for example Bordo 1993; Stearns 1997), a number of studies have tried to ferret out the cultural meanings assigned to bodily "abundance" in societies where it is valued. The medical anthropologist Anne Becker (1995: 5) found that for Fijians, body presentation and size is "not formulated as a project of the self," as in the West, but is profoundly about an individual's embeddedness in a social network. A robust body shows not that one has personally exercised self-discipline, but instead that one is well connected within a community of caring that has kept one well fed. Among Jamaicans, Elaine Sobo (1993: 32) also found that fatness is a positive trait, connoting "happiness, vitality, and bodily health in general." Like Azawagh Arabs, Jamaicans also make a distinction between good, moist fat and bad, dry fat; the goal, especially for women, is a look of plump ripeness. A plump body also indicates "happiness, beauty, and sexual appeal" for working-class women in Egypt (Ghannam 1997: 17). In general, the association around the world between female fatness and happiness, well-being, sexiness, beauty, and social status contrasts starkly with modern Western readings of fatness as indicative of laziness, lack of self-control, ill-health, low status, and unattractiveness.

Even within the United States, however, various subgroups of the population do not share the dominant white value placed on thinness in women. The anthropologist Emily Massara (1989) noted the lack of stigma attached to "obesity" among Philadelphia Puerto Ricans after marriage, since it connoted a successful marriage to a husband who provides adequately for his wife. Fatness has also been shown to possess positive connotations for black American women (Sims 1979; Styles 1980), who associate it with strength, health, and invulnerability (Brown 1991: 47–48); for Mexican-Americans (Ross and Mirowsky 1983); and for Native Americans (Sims 1979; Smithson 1959; Bennett and Zingg 1935). In a study of adolescents in the United States Mimi Nichter (1994) found that in contrast to white American girls who defined an "ideal girl" primarily in terms of a svelte body, African-American girls considered body size generally less important than personality and style factors. These studies all serve to suggest that, even in the face of strict notions of female beauty and health perpetuated by doctors, the media, popular culture, and the dominant white majority, contrasting female bodily ideals have a particular tenacity as markers of identity, honor, and well-being among marginalized and non-dominant ethnic groups within American society.

As the example of married Puerto Rican women above suggests, ideals of body size are not necessarily constant over a woman's life-span. While there are peoples like Fijians and Moors who consider a certain plumpness in females appropriate at all life stages, in many cultures female fatness is particularly cultivated at two moments: just before and just after marriage.

In a number of societies girls are intentionally fattened before marriage, sometimes in quite ritualized ways. According to a missionary account from 1923, the pastoral Banyankole of Uganda began preparing a girl for marriage at age eight by making her drink large quantities of milk every day and restricting her movement, a practice remarkably similar to that of the Moors (Roscoe 1923: 116–117). More common, though, is a briefer period of fattening before marriage. Among the Efik of southern Nigeria, for example, girls spent up to two years in fattening huts to attain a rotundity that, along with clitoridectomy and a special hairstyle, signaled their readiness for marriage (Malcom 1925). Similar practices have been described among other peoples in this region of southern Nigeria, including among the Annang (Brink 1989) and the Igbo (Emecheta 1976).[1] In East Africa the Haya in Tanzania (Weiss 1992: 546) and the Bagesu of Uganda (Roscoe 1915: 173) have had a custom of fattening girls before marriage, and among the Kipsigis of Kenya fatter girls are said to fetch a higher bride-price (Borgerhoff Mulder 1988). In Papua New Guinea there is also at least one society where girls are fattened before marriage (Mosko 1985). Elsewhere women's ability to fatten after marriage signals a successful marriage and a husband who provides well for his family, as among the Puerto Ricans Massara studied and in Greece (Hirschon 1993: 62). Among the Zarma in Niger married women have held contests after the harvest season to see who can become the fattest, valuing especially rolls of fat around the neck (Stoller 1992).

In addition to its associations with female readiness for marriage or the achievement of a successful marriage, fatness has another set of associations around the globe that are ungendered: associations with royalty, power, and elite status. This reading of fatness holds among the Zulu (Gampel 1962), in highland New Guinea (Strathern 1971) and in many parts of Polynesia. Even among the Nigerian Efik who built fattening huts, fatness was something only the elites had the resources to achieve (Malcom 1925).

Just like slenderness in the West, fatness is admired in numerous societies not for any practical function it is seen to achieve, such as fertility, but for its connotations of more abstract aesthetic and social values. For Moors the meanings of female fatness resonate with those found in other societies that value plump female bodies, with primary emphasis on beauty, sexiness, womanliness, and social status. Moors are remarkable, however, in that fattening begins so young, goes on for so long, and is in fact the central preoccupation of women's lives alongside childbearing, childrearing, and being good Muslims.

A risk posed by generalizing about fattening around the globe is that similar bodily ideals may be seen as the products of a single, universal logic. Yet there is no such universal cultural logic to fattening. The meanings of fatness vary from culture to culture, just as the hourglass figure of

Scarlett O'Hara or a Victorian lady – feminine daintiness – does not have the same set of cultural connotations as the wasp waist of a contemporary supermodel – self-control and fitness. Whether or not there is an underlying biological reason for certain bodily ideals, within any given culture the meanings attached to these ideals are particular to that society and are embedded in its particular political, social, and economic contexts. Even "marriage" and "status" vary in meaning from society to society, so that the more deeply we understand another culture, the less explanatory these seemingly universal terms become.

I return, however, to the one generalization that can fairly be made in connection to bodily fattening around the world and that is crucial to the approach of this book: that all societies socialize the "natural" body in particular ways, whether by fattening, altering body parts (neck elongation or footbinding), piercing, tattooing, cutting hair, genital operations, or merely socializing the body to particular types of clothing (Brain 1979). Put another way, the "natural" body is never enough. To modify and adorn the body so that the person inhabiting that body conforms to his or her particular society, and indeed is made properly human, can be said to be a human universal. This work explores how the universal drive to make the natural body social takes place in one particular cultural setting.

## Preview of the book

The Arabs of the Azawagh region considered it impossible to imagine that where I came from women did not want to be fat; indeed, I think they never believed my protests to the contrary. That they were not particularly talkative about fattening themselves suggests how deeply and how successfully the fat female bodily form encapsulates much that is utterly taken for granted by, and utterly dear to, members of this society. When I asked people directly about the aesthetic, they almost invariably answered, "because it is beautiful." To both men and women it seemed a rather nonsensical thing to come asking questions about. The aesthetic, like beauty aesthetics everywhere, seemed so obvious and natural to its adherents that they had little incentive, indeed little cause, to reflect upon it.

To the people among whom I lived, the things it would make sense to inquire about were their history, their Muslim faith, and their place in Allah's world. Consequently, for the first few months of my fieldwork I was frustrated by the chimerical nature of my subject. There it was before me in the flesh, persistently part of women's everyday practice, and yet it seemed to have little presence in discourse. Fattening's centrality to the culture was proclaimed by women's every mouthful, but was relatively absent in the daily conversations of women, men, and children.

Although I did not see it right away, however, I came to realize that the Azawagh Arabs' vision of themselves, and my own particular interest in fattening, were not so unrelated after all. The answers to my questions about fattening lay embedded in those same daily conversations. Both their official version of themselves, as well as their conscious daily concerns, struggles, joys, and aspirations, revolve around a set of understandings of how the world works and what it is to be human that are reflected also in the corporeal story that their female aesthetic tells.

The relative lack of public commentary on the process of fattening itself was due not only to the aesthetic's tacit centrality, I soon learned, but also to the simple fact that fat is sexy, and sex is not something one talks about openly in the Azawagh. By fattening, girls make their bodies desirable to men, but girls and women should not be seen to relish their own sexiness, even though they are well aware of its significance. Thus as girls fatten they also learn to subdue their own behavior, finally beginning to veil when their bodies become fully womanly, and fully sexually desirable, with the first signs of puberty. Although sexuality is the seat of both pleasure and family increase, its potent force is also threatening to family bonds and the social order (cf. Mernissi 1975), and thus it must be kept in check not only behind veils of cloth but also, at least publicly, behind veils of silence. The appeal of female fatness is in this way embedded in a particular Islamic vision of sexuality and desire.

The appeal of fatness is also grounded in a fading nomadic world in which milk is still the most valued of foodstuffs, flowing rich and white from animal udders and invested, so to speak, into the lush, moist fat of women's bodies. In this way the milk that comes from the animals men own and manage is transformed into the stuff of women's status and desirability, and ultimately into the breastmilk that nourishes future generations. Milk and women's bodies encapsulate value, both material and symbolic, for the community as a whole.

Several tropes recur in my analysis: closedness and openness, stillness and mobility, and dryness and wetness. Women's bodies, for example, should be closed, still, and wet on the inside but dry on the outside. These same qualities are significant in different arenas of Azawagh Arab life, such as in understandings of maleness and femaleness and illness and health. By reiterating these themes I do not mean to suggest that all is neat and harmonious across the Azawagh Arab world (cf. Douglas 1982), but merely that a number of qualities that are significant for making sense of the their ideal of beauty do recur in different registers. I also note where conflict occurs, for example around marriage, and how the ideal mediates some of these perduring social tensions, in particular allegiance to one's natal family vs. one's marital family and the control of sexual desire.

My narrative has been shaped by the path I personally traveled in coming to make sense of the Azawagh Arab world, starting in chapter 1 with how I came to their corner of Niger. The following chapter describes what is known about fattening in the past in the Sahara, and then describes the