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## Islam and the Body: Female Fattening among Arabs in Niger

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Anthropology of the body  
REBECCA POPENOE

Is there a specifically Islamic vision of the body? Given the nuanced nature of cultural understandings of the body and Islam's own variable expressions, this question is probably unanswerable, and indeed poorly phrased. Phrased another way, however, the question of the relationship between Islam and the body becomes more interesting: how do bodily practices in different Muslim societies articulate with different versions of lived Islam? My research among Arabs in remote northwestern Niger on the aesthetic of corpulent female bodies, and the practice of force-feeding young girls to achieve it, speaks to this issue.

The approximately 20,000 Arabs who today live in the Azawagh region in Niger arrived there a century ago from what is now Mali, and before that lived further north in what is now Algeria. Resembling the Moors of Mauritania in their use of Hassaniyya Arabic, a nomadic way of life until recently, and the fattening of girls, they call themselves simply 'Arabs', but I have chosen to call them 'Azawagh Arabs' after the region where they reside.

#### Fattening among Arabs of the Azawagh

While a corpulent female aesthetic is common in societies around the world, the practice of fattening is less so, though it too occurs in many places, including among Tuaregs who are neighbours to Azawagh Arabs and Moors, and in a number of sub-Saharan African and Pacific societies. Many visitors to the Sahel and Sahara have commented

goes through puberty, she slowly 'learns the value of fatness herself' and no longer needs an overseer, though if she has the good fortune to be married, her mother-in-law may encourage her progress. Adult women continue to try to maintain their fat by ingesting large quantities of grain, washed down with milk or water.

There are complex ethnotheories of nutrition and fattening that prescribe what foods to eat when and what foods to avoid, all closely bound up with the maintenance of proper 'heat' in the body. Women with stretchmarks and folds of fat are celebrated in song as well as everyday conversation.

When I asked men and women directly why girls fattened and why women strove for such corpulent forms, they answered me in one of three ways: 'because it is good/attractive (*zayn*)', 'because men like it', and 'because it makes a girl grow into a woman faster'. My own research, based on one and

lam', I want to distinguish their form of lived Islam from Islam as some essentialized category. The Islam of the Arabs of the Azawagh shares elements with Muslims everywhere, but also has its own local particularities.

Although no one I spoke with ever connected the practice of fattening to Islam (as, say, people in some societies mistakenly claim for female circumcision), the practice nevertheless contributed to a life that was in keeping with Azawagh Arabs' lived understanding of Islam. For heuristic purposes I divide these connections between Islam and fattening into two categories: ideas about the sexes and reproduction, and ideas about the body.

#### Islam and Fattening

The three 'simple' answers I received to the question of why girls fattened were grounded on three unstated assumptions about the sexes and reproduction which found legitimation in a particular reading of Islamic scripture: (1) that men and women should be as different from one another as possible, because God decreed that it should be so, and fattening enhanced this difference; (2) that desire was born of this difference and that desire was positive, if acted upon appropriately, and fat was sexy in its extreme difference from masculinity; and (3) that a girl's (and a boy's) God-given duties were to marry and produce children, and that fattening speeded up a girl's ability to reach this goal, by bringing her more quickly to puberty. In these ways the self-evident attractiveness of corpulent women was at least indirectly grounded in a vision of the sexes and of the life course that Islam upholds. To fatten, therefore, is a way for a girl to accede to a God-given order, for it constitutes an active embracing of sexual difference, as well as an embracing of woman's destiny and purpose as a Muslim.

Islam also provides reinforcement, if you will, for a particular way of understanding the human body. During one of my first weeks in the field, an incident occurred that brought this home to me. While making a rest stop on a trip, I pricked myself on a thorn, and quickly sucked off the drop of blood that emerged. A teenage boy in the pick-up truck we were travelling in turned and said to me immediately: 'Muslims don't do that. Things that come out of one's body are not pure.'

By requiring ablutions, the emptying of all bodily wastes, and the cleaning of all sexual fluids from the body's surfaces before every prayer, Islam could be said to send a strong if unarticulated message: that the body as the physical icon of the person is most holy and most valued by Allah when uncontaminated by the flows, accretions, and processes of regular physical life. By forbidding prayer when there is any kind of discharge from women's bodies, Islam portrays the uncontaminated, unbounded, leaking body as problematic, and holds up the whole, 'closed' body as pure and desirable. That is, while the body in many ways constitutes a vehicle for religious expression (ablutions, prayer postures, wearing of amulets), some aspects of bodily nature, especially women's bodily nature, are perceived as profoundly contradict-

ory to the body that Islam upholds as pure and virtuous. This, at least, seemed to be the way in which Azawagh Arabs 'read' Islam.

#### 'Openness' and 'Closedness'

This particular Islamic understanding of the body played itself out in one of the most common tropes used by Azawagh Arabs to analyse illness: 'openness' and 'closedness'. Sickness was widely considered to be due to and to result in bodily 'openness', and an attractive and desirable woman should be 'closed', as well as 'hot' (the two qualities indeed go together). Women, with their many natural openings (mouth, anus, and especially vagina), needed to be particularly careful to keep their bodies closed. Fattening contributes to the 'closedness' of the body in several ways: by closing off the body's openings amidst swelling flesh; by increasing the 'heat' of the body, which keeps the body from leaking; and by making it physically more difficult for women to move about, thereby containing them in less danger-laden inner spaces of the tent or yard.

This trope not only made sense in light of Islamic rules about the necessary state of the body for prayer, but was also itself applied to Islamic scripture. For example, the body's 'openness' and 'closedness' was a central trope of the creation story as it was related to me by an old woman. Both Adam and Eve bit into the apple, but for Adam it stuck in his throat, creating the Adam's apple, while for Eve it flowed right through her, creating her menstrual period. Eve's punishment was, in a sense, that the female body became plagued with uncomfortable and impure secretions, while the male body was able to contain things and keep its boundaries clear, enabling life in spirit- and wind-laden open, public spaces.

The struggle of women against their bodily 'openness' emerged in another religious context as well: how heaven was imagined. In addition to flowing milk and the ever-present company of female relatives, women's representations of heaven also included bodily wholeness and containedness. In the words of one young woman, in heaven, 'you won't defecate, or have mucous, or be sick.'

In short, while Azawagh Arab women's bodily practices were in no way determined by Islam or even read explicitly as grounded in Islam, they fit with ways of understanding the body that were also upheld by the Islam of Azawagh Arabs. Even though fattening and notions of the body's 'openness' and 'closedness' almost certainly have their roots in a pre-Islamic world, local expressions and understandings of Islam, and local ideas about the body, coincided with and reinforced one another. In this particular context, it may not be inappropriate to speak of an Islamic vision of the body. ♦

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PHOTO: REBECCA POPENOE

#### Young unmarried women (some divorced) at a baptism.

on the female aesthetic there previously. Ibn Battuta had already remarked on it among Berbers in what is now Mali in 1356; in 1799 the Scottish explorer Mungo Park wrote poetically about 'a prevalent taste for unwieldiness of bulk' among Moor women; numerous European explorers and colonialists made passing reference to it; and, in the 1980s the French anthropologist Aline Tauzin finally put it in a more ethnographically sensitive light in her writings on Mauritania.

The practice among Azawagh Arabs is, in brief, as follows:

When a girl of the higher caste loses her first baby teeth, an older woman is charged with overseeing her fattening process (*al-blauh*). Until the girl reaches puberty, she is given a large bowl of milk or porridge several times a day and is enjoined to empty its contents, under threat of physical force at times. As a girl

a half years in the Azawagh in the early 1990s, found that behind these simple utterances lay a more complex story. This story, though focused on notions of appropriate male and female behaviour, sexuality, and health, was not unrelated to Islam. Before I explore these connections in more detail, however, I want to say something about 'Islam' in the context of Azawagh Arab life.

#### Islam for Azawagh Arabs

Unlike many other nomadic Arab peoples, for whom Islam has been described as something of a backdrop to more immediate tribal or ethnic concerns, the Azawagh Arabs, both men and women, asserted their Muslim-ness above all other aspects of their identity. They consider themselves to be direct descendants of the companions of the Prophet, and hold their own Muslim-ness to be of a higher, truer standard than that of the peoples around them. Although they themselves hold their Islam to be 'true Is-