

"Chicken Hips"
by Catherine Pigott

The women of the household clucked disapprovingly when they saw me. It was the first time I had worn African clothes since my arrival in tiny, dusty Gambia, and evidently they were not impressed. They adjusted my head-tie and pulled my lappa, the ankle-length fabric I had wrapped around myself, even tighter, "You're too thin," one of them pronounced. "It's no good." They nicknamed me "Chicken-Hips."

I marveled at this accolade, for I had never been called thin in my life. It was something I longed for. I would have been flattered if those ample-bosomed women hadn't looked so distressed. It was obvious I fell short of their ideal of beauty.

I had dressed up for a very special occasion –the baptism of a son. The women heaped rice into tin basins the size of laundry tubs, shaping it into mounds with their hands. Five of us sat around one basin, thrusting our fingers into the scalding food. These women ate with such relish, such joy.

They pressed the rice into balls in their fists, squeezing until the bright red palm oil ran down their forearms and dripped off their elbows.

I tried desperately, but I could not eat enough to please them. It was hard for me to explain that I come from a culture in which it was almost unseemly for a woman to eat too heartily. It was considered unattractive. It was even harder to explain that to me thin is beautiful, and in my country we deny ourselves food in pursuit of perfect slenderness.

That night, everyone danced to welcome the baby. Women swiveled their broad hips, and used their hands to emphasize the roundness of their bodies. One needed to be round and wide to make the dance beautiful. There was no place for thinness here. It made people sad. It reminded them of things they wanted to forget, such as poverty, drought and starvation. You never knew when the rice was going to run out.

I began to believe that Africa's image of the perfect female body was far more realistic than the

long-legged leanness I had been conditioned to admire. There, it is beautiful – not shameful – to carry weight on the hips and thighs, to have a round stomach and heavy, swinging breasts. Women do not battle the bulge, they celebrate it. A body is not something to be tamed and molded.

The friends who had christened me Chicken-Hips made it their mission to fatten me up. It wasn't long before a diet of rice and rich, oily stew twice a day began to change me. Every month, the women would take a stick and measure my backside, noting with pleasure its gradual expansion. "Oh Catherine, your buttocks are getting nice now!" they would say.

What was extraordinary was that I, too, believed I was becoming beautiful. There was no sense of panic, no shame, no guilt-ridden resolves to go on the miracle grape-and-water diet. One day, I tied my lappa tight across my hips and went to the market to buy beer for a wedding. I carried the crate of bottles home on my head, swinging my hips slowly as I walked. I felt transformed.

In Gambia, people don't use words such as "cheating," "naughty or "guilty" when they talk about eating. The language of sin is not applied to food. Fat is desirable. It holds beneficial meaning of abundance, fertility and health.

My perception of beauty altered as my body did. The European tourists on the beach began to look strange and skeletal rather than "slim." They had no hips. They seemed devoid of shape and substance. Women I once would have envied appeared fragile and even ugly. The ideal they represented no longer made sense.

After a year, I came home. I preached my new way of seeing to anyone who would listen. I wanted to cling to the liberating belief that losing weight had nothing to do with self-love.

Family members kindly started suggesting that I might look and feel better if I slimmed down a little. They encouraged me to join an exercise club. I wandered around the malls in a dislocated daze.

I felt uncomfortable try on clothes that hung so eloquently on the mannequins. I began hearing old voices inside my head: plaid makes you look fat... you're too short for that style...vertical stripes are more slimming... wear black". I joined the club. Just a few weeks after I had warn a lappa and scooped up rice with my hands, I was climbing into pink leotards and aerobics shoes. The instructor told me that I had to set fitness goals and "weigh in" after my work outs. There were mirrors on the walls and I could see women watching themselves. I sensed that even the loveliest among them felt they were somehow flawed. As their aerobics instructor barked out commands for arm lifts and leg lifts, I pictured Gambian women pounding millets and dancing in a circle with their arms raised high. I do not mean to romanticize their rock-hard lives, but we were hardly to be envied as we ran like fools between two walls to the tiresome beats of synthesized music.

We were a room full of women striving to reshape ourselves into some kind of pubertal ideal. I reverted to my natural stage: one of yearning to be

slimmer and most fit that I was. My freedom had been temporary. I was home, where fat is feared and despised. It was time to exert control over my body and my life. I dreaded the thought of people saying "she's let herself go." If it returned to Africa I am sure the women will shake their heads in bewildered dismay. Even now I sometimes catch my reflection in a window and there voices come back to me. "Yo! Chicken-Hips!"