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Lagos, Nigeria—With no success, Nigeria had been sending contestants to the Miss World pageant for years. Winners of the Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria went year after year to the Miss World competition, and year after year the beauty queens performed remarkably poorly.

Guy Murray-Bruce, the executive director of Silverbird Productions, which runs the Most Beautiful Girl contest, said he had almost resigned himself to the fact that black African women had little chance of winning an international competition in a world dominated by Western beauty ideals.

Then in 2000 he carried out a drastic change of strategy in picking the Most Beautiful Girl and Nigeria's next international representative.

"The judges had always looked for a local queen, someone they considered a beautiful African woman," Mr. Murray-Bruce, 38, said. "So I told the judges not to look for a local queen, but someone to represent us internationally."

The new strategy's success was immediate. The Most Beautiful Girl of 2001, Agbani Darego, went on to clinch the Miss World title in Sun City, South Africa, last October. She became the first African winner in the contest's 51-year history.

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Her victory stunned Nigerians, whose country had earned a worldwide reputation for corruption and fraud. Now, all of a sudden, Nigeria was No. 1 in beautiful women. Ms. Darego, who was 18 at the time, instantly became a national heroine.

But soon pride gave way to puzzlement. In a culture where Coca-Cola-bottle voluptuousness is celebrated and ample backsides and bosoms are considered ideals of female beauty, the new Miss World shared none of those attributes. She was 6 feet tall, stately and so, so skinny. She was, some said uncharitably, a white girl in black skin.

The perverse reality was that most Nigerians, especially those over 40, did not find the new Miss World particularly beautiful.

The story does not end there, though. In the year since her victory, a social transformation has begun to take hold across this nation, Africa's most populous.

The change is an example of the power of Western culture on a continent caught between tradition and modernity. Older Nigerians' views of beauty have not changed. But among young, fashionable Nigerians, voluptuousness is out and thin is in.

"After Agbani won, girls look up to me and ask me how to get slim," said Linda Ikeji, 22, an English major at the University of Lagos.

"Before, fat girls were the rave of the moment," said Ms. Ikeji, who is 5 feet 8, weighs 130 pounds and now finds work as a part-time model. "Some fat girls thought they had an advantage over me. But Agbani changed everything."

Here in Lagos, the commercial capital, the thin "It" girls are now called *lepa*, using a Yoruba word that means thin but that was not applied to people before. The *lepa* girl has had a popular song written about her, called simply "*Lepa*." Nigeria's booming film industry has capitalized on the trend by producing a movie, "*Lepa Shandi*"; the title means a girl as slim as a 20-naira bill.

To anyone who has traveled across the continent, especially in West and Central Africa, the cultural shift is striking. In the United States slimness may be an ideal, but many ethnic groups in this region hold festivals celebrating big women. In Niger many women take livestock feed or vitamins to bulk up.

Among the Calabari people in southeastern Nigeria, fat has traditionally held a cherished place. Before their weddings, brides are sent to fattening farms, where their caretakers feed them huge amounts of food and massage them into rounder shapes. After weeks inside the fattening farms, the big brides are finally let out and paraded in the village square.

Ms. Darego, the same Miss World who has helped change young Nigerians' perception of beauty, belongs to the Calabari ethnic group—and thus may seem particularly unattractive to her own people.

"If she was in a crowd of other African women, I wouldn't regard her as a beautiful woman," said Ken Calebs-Olumese, who does not belong to that ethnic group but, as the owner of the exclusive Coliseum nightclub here, knows beautiful women.

"The average African woman is robust, has big hips, a lot of bust," he said. "That's what she offers in terms of beauty. It's in our culture." Mr. Calebs-Olumese, who is 56, drew a blank at the mention of *lepa*. Still, he acknowledged that he was "speaking from my generation's perspective."

While the transformation in youthful tastes was linked to the Miss World victory, it started, some said, with an earlier event.

"In 1998, M-Net, the South African network seen across Africa on satellite television, opened a search for the "Face of Africa." The winner was promised a three-year, \$150,000 modeling contract with the Elite agency in New York.

Not surprisingly, M-Net, which shows mostly American movies and TV shows, chose a skinny, 6-foot-2 teenager from Lagos, Oluchi Onweagba, who was not considered particularly pretty here but became a hit on the runways.

"That was the start," said Frank Osodi, 36, a fashion designer whose studio in the Surulere district in Lagos was a hive for models and beauty queens one recent morning. "Before, if you were thin, people thought you were sick, like an AIDS patient. Now if you have a skinny member in your family, you don't have to be ashamed."

Indeed, parents are now urging their daughters to take part in beauty pageants. In the past, the

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Most Beautiful Girl competition drew just enough contestants to hold a pageant, Mr. Murray-Bruce said. For the 2001 contest there were only 40; this year there were 400.

No one is predicting whether the youthful preference for thinness represents a fad or a lasting cultural change. But Maureen and Mary-Jane Mekowulu, slim 18-year-old twins who are students at the University of Nsukka in southeastern

Nigeria and were visiting their parents here, said they would continue to exercise every morning and abstain from eating after 6 P.M.

"Because of Agbani, people have realized that slim is beautiful," Maureen said of the Miss World.

And the Most Beautiful Girl of 2002 would reinforce that impression, said the contest's producer, Mr. Murray-Bruce. "She's even skinnier than Agbani," he said.