Shaming Political Opponents: Extreme Speech and Scandal on a Nigerien Social Networking Site

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature and characteristics of extreme speech and opprobrious language[1] presented in a Nigerien online setting, a Facebook page called "*Affaire des bébés importé*s"[2], (Herein "*Affaire des bébés importés*" is translated from French to English, and the comparable term, "Baby-trafficking scandal Facebook page," is then used for clarity)[3], by examining a series of events framed as "the baby-trafficking scandal". These events gave rise to a myriad of linguistic inventions (jokes, insults, satire, cartoons, and different forms of humor). These had as their main intent an undermining of the moral authority of a political leader who was opposing the current government. The argument defended in the paper is the following: In countries like Niger, which are characterized by a fragile social cohesion and deep-seated ethnic rivalries, scandalizing adversaries through opprobrious language or extreme speech is more than an online expression of group divisions; it is also an avenue for transnational and deterritorialized communities to assert themselves in the political life of their countries of origin, thereby significantly altering the sharing of political authority. Actors involved in scandalizing activities use stigmatization, degradation, transgression, character assassination and other such attempts to undermine someone's reputation. The paper is based

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[1] This paper uses the term "opprobrious language" as it was theorized by J. B. Thompson in his book, *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*, Polity Press, 2000.

[2] The Facebook page "*Affaire des bébés importé*s" can be found at : https://www.facebook.com/Affaire-Des-B%C3%A9b%C3%A9s-Import%C3%A9s-Au-Niger-277362069115861/posts/?ref=page_internal

[3] Seemingly, all posts, comments, captions, newspapers quotations, etc. have been translated from French into English by the author. Niger is a French-speaking country and most related written, visual, audio information is in French.

on a qualitative analysis of videos, comments, and texts posted mainly on the Facebook page "Baby-trafficking scandal".

1.0 Introduction

To understand "the scandal of the imported babies" (otherwise known as "the baby trafficking scandal") it must be recalled that in the summer of 2014 the Nigerien (Niger Republic, not Nigeria) government arrested around twenty people, including twelve women, for "child concealment" and "false statement". Child concealment is defined here as an offense in which a woman appropriates the maternity of a baby without having conceived it. In this case, those arrested were accused of conceiving or buying babies in Nigeria as well as Benin and then importing them to Niger where they were integrated into their various families.

However, amongst the accused, was the wife of then President of the parliament, the National Assembly of Niger Republic, Mr. Hama Amadou who found himself accused of complicity and ordered to appear before the court. The presidential couple were accused of buying a pair of twins and subsequently trying to pass them off as their own. It should be noted that Hama Amadou was one of Niger's most important political figures. Prior to becoming president of the parliament, Amadou was the Premier minister of Niger Republic from 1995 to 1996, and again from 2000 to 2007. He also assisted the incumbent President,Mahamadou Issoufou, win the elections before heading the coalition of opposition parties.

The scandal therefore, quickly took a political turn because the opposition saw it as a manipulation intended to get rid of a formidable adversary. With the prospect of jail hanging over him, Hama Amadou fled the country, taking up refuge in France, He was eventually arrested and subsequently imprisoned in 2016, when he returned to Niger in an attempt contest

that year's election.. The imprisonment meant that he was unable to campaign in the second round where he would have faced President Mahamadou Issoufou. Evacuated from Niger for health reasons, Amadou did not return to Niger until December 2019 when he was immediately imprisoned in the civil prison of Koutoukale, in the south of the country.

The controversy and political grips around this scandal have, therefore, dominated the Nigerien media's attention inrecent years, the actors concerned using a manner of argumentative and persuasive resources to turn opinion in their favor. This involved opprobrious language and hate speech.

The paper discusses the framing of this scandal on a Nigerien social networking site, the Facebook page entitled the "Baby-trafficking scandal", through a series of events and the resultant linguistic inventions (jokes, insults, satire, cartoons, and many forms of humor).

Digital activism and scandal

On June 19, 2017, dozens of people gathered in front of the local office of the ICE-Homeland Security Investigations in Greensboro, North Carolina. They were protesting the arrest, a few days earlier, of Ali Marounfa, a Nigerien citizen who had been living in Greensboro for 25 years and who had two daughters born in America. According to the local media, Ali Marounfa was being detained at the Forsyth County Detention Center and could face federal charges and deportation or extradition. The protesters were claiming he could be tortured and killed if he was either deported or extradited to Niger. The reason was that Ali Marounfa (also known as Ali Téra) was one of the most influential activists in Niger Republic, despite not having set foot in that country for more than 20 years. He was particularly famous in Niger for the opprobrious language and extreme speech the government claimed he used on social networking sites like Facebook. This was especially palpable in his criticism of high

profile officials such as the President of Niger whom he constantly railed at and mocked in numerous widely shared online videos, with words bordering on insults.

The Nigerien government is known for being intolerant of both the local opposition and local media workers, imprisoning them regularly. Many journalists, opposition political leaders, students, and civil society activists are currently being detained by the hundreds in various prisons in Niger. Despite this fact, it should be noted that extreme speech is now pervasive on Nigerien online discussion forums, social networks, and political websites set up by the Nigerien Diaspora, wherein all matters of Nigerien affairs are discussed in ways that are sometimes far from being civil. Indeed, one of the most salient aspects of digital activism in Niger (and perhaps Africa in general) is that there is a clear difference between the language used in the mainstream Nigerien media that operates within the borders of the country and the political discourse being framed online on the various Nigerien platforms that the government cannot control. Online, most users feel there is no way to hold them accountable or responsible for what they say. Although the digital discourse in Niger is usually civil and polite, an increasing number of posts now have all the characteristics of extreme speech or opprobrious language, that is to say, utterances produced and exchanged between users online which are insulting and have the potential to damage the reputation of targeted individuals or negatively affect the character of those individuals.

Yet, notwithstanding these potentially dangerous implications, this set of discursive and political practices which academics variously call (under their diverse manifestations) extreme speech, incendiary rhetoric, opprobrious language, hate speech, trolling, flaming, etc., has thus far only been marginally analyzed by researchers in Africa. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to contribute to filling this gap by examining how extreme speech is manifested on Nigerien online settings. Drawing from the baby-trafficking case that started in 2013, and remains an ongoing political crisis in Niger, the paper discusses the way the scandal was framed on a

Nigerien social networking site, the Facebook page entitled the "Baby-trafficking scandal", through a series of events that gave rise to many different linguistic inventions (jokes, insults, satire, cartoons, and many forms of humor). To analyze these events in terms of their linguistic dimension, the paper focuses on Niger's politically active online communities and the growing role they are playing in the shaping of the new democratic governance, along with Niger's political debates, Niger's media language, and the everyday political parlance and political discussions happening in Niger.

The main argument of this paper is that in countries such as Niger, which are characterized by a fragile social cohesion and deep-seated political rivalries, scandalizing through extreme speech is not only the way that group divisions are expressed online; it (scandalizing) is also how transnational and deterritorialized communities assert their participation in the political life of their countries of origin and in so doing significantly alter the sharing of political authority. Scandalizing is part of what Bourdieu calls "the struggle of all against all" (Bourdieu, 1989, p 22) by using stigmatization, degradation, transgression, character assassination, and acts that are intended to undermine someone else's reputation.

This paper thus falls within the framework of the "structuralist-constructivist" theory devised by Bourdieu. Consequently, it conceives of scandal-related conflicts as the expression of a "symbolic struggle over the power to produce and to impose a legitimate vision of the world." (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 20). The position occupied by an agent in a particular struggle, endows them with specific dispositions, with different "visions of social divisions'' (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23). This term refers to visions of the self as well as visions of others, both of which constantly need to be maintained, reinforced, and imposed through all kinds of actions. Scandalizing, gossiping, labelling, stigmatizing, and categorizing through the use of extreme speech and opprobrious language are the most common of these actions.

Here, I analyze this language, as it is used in a Nigerien online setting through examining the statements and information available on the "The baby-trafficking scandal" Facebook page. A few other statements made on other activists' Facebook pages were also selected based on name recognition, i.e, those persons who are the most cited by the Nigerien media as being involved in scandalizing activities. That is the case of the activist Ali Téra (Ali Marounfa), whose deeds are now public and have been largely mediatized. The observations and conclusions I draw from the online posts are complemented with a Facebook page content analysis that collected and assessed instances of opprobrious language utterances and analyzed them to appraise how scandals are actually commented and framed online.

2.0 Literature Review

The study of scandal has been undertaken at diverse societal levels both in the so-called "primitive" societies as defined by classical anthropology, and in industrialized modern societies. As a total social phenomenon, scandal manifests at linguistic, psychological, economic and political levels, we can find all these aspects addressed either separately or together in diverse theoretical frameworks. However, the concept of scandal is also both understood and defined differently by various authors.

Thus, for an author like Thompson (2000), the word 'scandal' has first to do with morality, individual representation, and degradation. That is to say, to be a scandal, an event should be a moral transgression, which has come to be publicly known and publicly reproved. A scandal, Thompson says, "refers to actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response." (2000, p. 13). The public response that Thompson is alluding to here implies that some sentiment of

disapproval is expressed in one way or another (for example, as denunciations, demonstrations, public declarations, mediated disapproval, etc.).

From this perspective, it should also be noted that both classical anthropological and sociological studies have contended that a scandal essentially reaffirms cultural values and norms, clarifies moral boundaries, and brings people together. We find an example of this view in Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society* (first published in French in 1893). In it, Durkheim acknowledges the importance of scandal to the cohesion of society in the following way: "A common indignation is expressed. From all the similar impressions exchanged and all the different expressions of wrath there rises up a single fount of anger, more or less clear-cut according to the particular case, anger which is that of everybody without being that of anybody in particular. It is public anger." (2013, 79). Therefore, for Durkheim, scandal is one of the ways that society, as both a collective and an autonomous reality, expresses itself.

In a paper written in 1963 and entitled *Gossip and scandal*, Gluckman espouses a perspective that is similar to Durkheim's. He states that gossip and scandal are "among the most important societal and cultural phenomena we are called upon to analyse." (1963, p. 307). He emphasizes the cohesive roles that both scandal and gossip play in society, stating that "gossip and even scandal unite a group within a larger society, or against another group…" (1963, p. 313). Also, much like Durkheim, Gluckman contends that gossip and scandal "maintain the unity, morals and values of social groups." (1963, p. 308).Seemingly, he views these two phenomena as events that manifest "the struggle for status" constantly taking place in society. Scandalizing, he declares "is also the principal manner in which internal struggles are fought… [they are the way] individuals and cliques …struggle for status and prestige." (1963, p. 313). Gluckman's views prefigure, in a certain way, the notion of symbolic power and symbolic struggle that Bourdieu (1989) will later develop in various publications.

According to Bourdieu, each member of society is endowed with a relative level of symbolic capital (name recognition, reputation, prestige, authority) and relative linguistic competence. In addition, there is an ongoing "struggle" for the acquisition of symbolic power or degradation, which represents one's diminishment in prestige, reputation, and honor. This struggle is for the imposition of meanings, that is to say, the way people actually are or are possibly perceived by others. In this struggle, language becomes the most important tool because, by way of labels, gossip and scandal, the competing agents achieve the degradation of various opposing proponents. Using this perspective, it can be argued that scandalizing is one of the tools social agents use to impose a vision of different social divisions.

Although classical anthropology and classical sociology have not restricted scandals to particular societies, certain authors, such as Markovits and Silverstein (1988), have argued that "scandals can only occur in liberal democracies" (1988, 8; quoted in Toepfl, *Managing public outrage: Power, scandal, and the new media in contemporary Russia*, 2011, p. 1301). In other words, scandals are essentially a modern phenomenon. As noted by Ekström and Johanson in *The politics of scandal: Power and processes in liberal democracies*, "political scandals are recurrent phenomena in modern democracies." (2008, p. 61). It should also be noted that political scandals in modern societies are further fueled by the development of mass media. In contrast with scandals originating in small scale preindustrial communities where people knew each other and where "hearsay" and face-to-face communication were the way scandals circulated.

2.1 ICTs and Political Scandals

Thus, with the advent of the Internet, mobile phones, messenger applications such as WhatsApp, and social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), ICTs are becoming a prominent trend in the process of mediating scandals. As these technologies carry and merge lexical, visual, and audio formats in ways that are instantaneous, interactive, deterritorialized,

ubiquitous, and far-reaching, the implication of their use in framing scandals is all the more significant for the actors involved. More importantly, the ordinary tools of social control (shaming, gossiping, scandalizing, etc.) are now migrating online and as the technologies develop, so do the options available for expressing all forms of negative sanctions in today's global popular culture.

Thus, in Africa, the "liberation of speech" that the advent of democracy and more recently the Internet has made possible, particularly in the case of the African Diaspora digital communities, sometimes comes down to a "language of opprobrium" (Thompson, 2000) that actually contributes to the moral degradation. Those affected are victims of a ritualistic destruction through insulting words, infamous images, and defamation of all kinds. Extreme speeches, framed against a backdrop of ethnic divisions, are legion, encouraged by the anonymity provided by the Internet and the many personalities that each of us can assume online. This situation gives rise to the proliferation, on social networking sites, of "forbidden" words in daily ordinary exchanges wherein the opposing sides seek to sabotage the authority of politicians or influential men belonging to different political parties, regions, or even different ethnic groups. In that respect, the "baby-trafficking scandal" we are examining here is a case that has all those characteristics.

3.0 The Baby-Trafficking Scandal

Niger is a West African country that has an average of 22 million inhabitants. It is infamous for having the fastest-growing population globally, while being the most impoverished nation in the world in terms of the human development index (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2016, 2016)*. Niger's recent political history

has essentially been characterized by a single-party dictatorship under Diori Hamani (1960-1974), then a military dictatorship under Seyni Kountché (1974-1987). Following which was a transition period (1987-1991) moving toward a democratic system which was fully implemented in 1991. However, the transposition to the liberal democratic system in Niger was marred by constant political instability, multiple coups d'états, and a prolonged economic crisis fueled by both insecurity and terrorism. This situation is mostly due to the small political elite of the country apprehending liberal competition as a struggle for survival where the aim is to annihilate adversity and establish unchallenged hegemony over the local constituencies.

Thus, the last thirty years in Niger have been marked by numerous instances of acrimonious political fights ending either in intervention by the army or the elimination of one or the other of the opponents. The most recent brawl has been going on since 2013 and involves Mahamadou Issoufou, the current incumbent president, and Hama Amadou, a former Prime Minister and former President of the Parliament and also leader of the main opposition party, now living in exile. Hama Amadou has been accused by the government of baby-trafficking and indeed risks being imprisoned if he ever comes back to Niger.

The baby-trafficking scandal started in 2013 when Hama Amadou, who was an ally of the President, helping him win the elections two years earlier, decided to join the coalition of opposition parties while still in the position of leader of Parliament. Shortly after his decision, local governmental newspapers started spreading the rumor that he was involved in a baby-trafficking network coming from neighboring Nigeria and that his last twin babies were not his own children. He was accused of having "bought" these babies in Nigeria. The prosecutor of the republic "independently" decided to order an investigation into the case. The government then lodged a request with Parliament, which voted to impeach him and have him arrested along with his wife. However, Hama Amadou was able to flee the country and go into exile in France. His supporters and the opposition political parties accused the government of having

plotted his ousting. While a myriad of events unfolded, the most prominent was certainly the media frenzy sparked by what is now termed "the baby-trafficking scandal" which continues to polarize the two sides of the political spectrum in Niger years later.

The polemics were especially heightened by the use of information and communication technologies, particularly social networking sites like Facebook, the messaging service application called WhatsApp, and the use of mobile phones to spread written messages, videos, photographs, and all kinds of online content related to the case. The Nigerien Diaspora living in North America, Europe   and elsewhere in the world, are particularly involved in these polemics because of easier access to ICTs than those living in Niger, although, as we shall see below, this is becoming less and less true today. Some of the most revered digital Diaspora activists became particularly involved in online activities that framed and spread information related to the baby-trafficking scandal. As these were followed by thousands both in Niger and abroad, they quickly became famous for being the champions of either one side or the other.

One of the most infamous digital activists is Ali Téra (Ali Marounfa). Ali Téra is believed to be a member of the opposition party Lumana (the party of Hama Amadou). He is a 56-year old man who has been living in Grensboro, North Carolina, for more than twenty years. As of 23 May, 2018, his Facebook page[4] lists more than 23,000 followers. In a country like Niger where the number of Facebook users is still small: According to 2018 figures provided by Internet World Stats, a startup that constantly monitors use of the Internet all over the world, 440,000 people were using Facebook in Niger as of 31 December 2017. Therefore, this level of "followship" (23,000 followers) for an individual like Ali Téra is quite impressive. According to Michael Hennessey, as of 19 June, 2017, Ali Téra was "listed as a federal detainee

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[4] Ali Téra's Facebook page can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/aliteralarevolution/

at the Forsyth County Detention Center, with no bond allowed - which is the standard for any federal inmate - according to jail officials." (2017, online). Ali Téra is also described as "a vocal critic of Niger's government and their management of the country's resources and finances, who uses social media to present his opinions." (Hennessey, 2017, online). Before being arrested, Ali Téra frequently posted videos on his Facebook page where he could be seen verbally attacking the Niger government, particularly the President of the country. In his videos, Ali Téra primarily uses the Zarma language with the occasional use of the Hausa language. These two are the most spoken dialects in Niger. As he rarely speaks in French, there is a high probability that he is not well educated. It is also clear by the way he speaks that the audience he is targeting are the illiterate people who form the bulk of the Niger Republic's population.

While actors such as Ali Téra are worth mentioning, the focus of this paper is on the Facebook page entitled the "Baby-trafficking scandal" (The Affair of the Imported Babies). The page which was created by anonymous pro-governmental Nigerien activists, has an overtly "hostile" stance towards the former Prime Minister, Hama Amadou, making him the central figure of their attacks. This Facebook page was created in July 2014. According to its creators, it was set up to mobilize "national and international non-governmental organizations" against "the perpetrators and accomplices of child trafficking in Niger." (Facebook page "The Baby-trafficking scandal"). The cover page highlights a photograph of new-born babies in a maternity ward. On the left side is the photograph of a child and the phrase "Not for sale." The posts offer all kinds of newspapers articles, updates, comments, photos, caricatures, and speech balloons juxtaposed on photos, captions, subtitles, and numerous other visual effects. The primary function of the post is mocking Hama Amadou, noted herein, as the central character of the page. Although the number of posts on this Facebook page are quite limited (numbering

only in a few dozens), it provides context into how the scandal is being framed online using extreme speech and opprobrious language.

3.1 The Online Framing of the Baby-trafficking Scandal

When analyzing scandal, one must first take into account the forms of expression favored by the proponents because one of the most important aspects of any scandal is its linguistic dimension. According to John B. Thompson, the linguistic forms in which scandal is expressed "are all what I shall call "opprobrious discourse" (2000, p. 20). He adds that opprobrious discourse is a "kind of moralizing discourse which reproaches and rebukes, which scolds and condemns, which expresses disapproval of actions or individuals" (2000, 20). Language, therefore, becomes an instrument of power, which is particularly salient in events like scandals. The reason is that language is not made up of just utterances. As demonstrated by J.A. Austin in his *Speech-acts Theory* (1962), utterances are by their very creation and presentation a kind of action. According to Bourdieu, those who pronounce them are endowed with the power to do by saying, particularly when they have (or might gain) sufficient authority to make happen what they declare. This aspect of linguistic utterances is known as the performative effect of discourse.

In this regard, one of the terms that are frequently found in the posts attacking Hama Amadou call him "the baby-trafficker" or "the Igbo twins' father" stressing the fact that Hama Amadou is a Fulani of Niger who is supposedly claiming he is the father of children who are Igbo of Nigeria. It should also be noted that the scandal itself has been conveniently dubbed "the baby-trafficking" scandal. It is also alternatively known as the "case of the imported babies." With the aid of software that records word frequency, it was revealed that the following seven were the most commonly used words in relation to this scandal (newspapers

articles, comments, captions, balloons, etc.),: "Hama" (72 times); "affaire" (scandal) (36 times); "Babies" (31 times); "Children" (28 times); "Trafficking" (16 times); "Prosecutor" (15 times); "Justice" (13 times); and "Shame" (12 times). These kinds of words, when used together, are not only evocative, but also carry very negative connotations. To recall Haviland, they are words that "facilitate evaluation and transform mere narrative into gossip…" (1977, p. 122). According to Haviland once again, "words with evaluative implications draw communicative power from their positions in sense systems." (1977, p. 123). What Haviland means is that these are words that make readers feel obligated to react, to approve or disapprove and therefore, to implicate themselves by taking a position and evaluate the scandalous people.

Haviland lists a second aspect of these kinds of words, which is that they "concern key aspects of the protagonists' behavior" (1977, p. 123). In essence, they are terms that place a clear emphasis on behavior and personality and indicate the central role played by norms in an evaluative discourse. Indeed, words that are used to evaluate have moral and ethical implications; they classify people according to their respect for the supposed norms. These are words that serve to express a collective moral indignation of which the scandal is the objective manifestation. They also create a context of distrust that has as its main consequence the undermining of the authority and reliability of scandalous people (herein Hama Amadou) and affect the sense of their declarations, the words they say, and the way these words and their ideas are understood by those who receive them. In that respect, even more telling is the fact that, in case of the baby-trafficking scandal, the characterization of the event as a scandal through the use of evocative and derogatory words is accompanied by profuse visual materials.

As stated earlier, the Facebook page entitled "Baby-trafficking scandal" highlights a photograph of new-born babies in a maternity ward with that of a baby girl and the phrase "Not for sale." On the same Facebook page, numerous other photographs of babies, pregnant Nigerian women allegedly involved in the so-called "baby-factory" scandals, as well as Hama

Amadou and his wife carrying the twins, are posted to illustrate the case. Using the ICT potential for contextual dislocation (meaning the distortion of facts or meaning that can result from presenting any information out of context), even images are only remotely related to the case are also presented under the heading, "baby-trafficking" or "baby-trafficker". They are part of several online strategies of disqualification that are not only linguistic, but also have a multidimensional characteristic (audio and visual) that is both far reaching and ubiquitous. They have as their goal the "unveiling" of the malpractices of the "trafficker" and thereby arouse a public sentiment of dishonesty by presenting Hama Amadou as dubious and hypocritical. Thus, not only does this social networking site reach a global audience, but it also amplifies the scandalous nature of the event by making it possible to adjoin visual informational details that "speak for themselves."

From this perspective, digital photo manipulation is the main way that images are used to frame the scandal. Photographs which have been doctored or altered are presented with deceptive speech balloons and captions on the "Baby-trafficking scandal" Facebook page. For instance, in a photograph dated February 13, 2015, one sees the image of three new-born babies and a round stamp with the word "Paid", encircled by the words "Amount received in full. Approved and delivered. The Officer." An illegible date is also indicated. On another photo dated November 4, 2014, one can see an image of two newborn babies, an accusing finger as well as the Unicef (United Nations Children Fund) logo with the words: "The Convention on the Rights of the Child." One recurrent photograph presents Hama Amadou with the twins in hand, as if he had been caught in the act by photographers and was now being exposed for all to see. This kind of photograph is reminiscent of the widely practice of "shaming" thieves in Niger by taking their photographs with the stolen items in hands and showing the related photographs on television and in newspapers, a deterring measure routinely performed by the local police. In the case being examined here, all the photographs are posted with the intention

of persuading the viewers that "baby-trafficking", a repulsive moral infringement involving Hama Amadou really took place. Further to that, this high-ranked personality betrayed the public confidence placed in him and, therefore, should no longer deserve any consideration.

A variety of newspapers articles with an anti-Hama Amadou slant can also be found on the Facebook page "*Affaire des bébés importés*" ("the Baby-trafficking Scandal Facebook page"). While claiming that their core purpose is informing the public about related events, those posting on the page have been deliberate in selecting only those newspaper articles that have the potential to shock public morality or the public sense of decency. This view can be seen in the mocking and derogatory character of both the titles and the contents. A few of those titles are: "Babies at all costs" ("Algaita Info", an article posted on May 2, 2015); "The Baby-trafficking case: The affair has no political dimension"; (La renaissance du Niger; Article posted on October 15, 2014); "Baby-trafficking scandal in Niger: An imbroglio on the DNA test"; (La Renaissance du Niger; article posted on August 2, 2014). Reports the from public protector's press conferences are also posted online and presented in a manner that only directs public outrage towards the political opponent.

3.2. Masculinity, Fertility, Power, and Online Scandal

In the social context of Niger, the fact that "babies" are involved in the naming of the event is very significant for the purpose of this current study. Mistreatment of children not only evokes cruelty, but also is one of the most repulsive moral transgressions particularly when, as in the African context, it always brings to mind notions of a "hidden agenda" and covert activities that have to do with augmenting one's power or wealth through human sacrifice. Such activities instill fears of a religious, quasi-superstitious nature, particularly because, in popular beliefs, babies are sometimes (albeit very rarely) involved in secret cults that deal with

power and power control. Wealthy or politically powerful men are sometimes believed to be members of secret societies or to have gained what they have through dubious and supernatural acts involving criminal activities. Using this perspective, numerous veiled and disparaging statements are presented in multiple ways on this Facebook page to show that Hama Amadou was really involved in such covert activities as demonstrated below:

"He was doing this human trafficking since… We will soon publish the list of imported babies some of which are around 26 years old." (Facebook page "Affaire des Bébés Importés au Niger", February 13, 2015).

"I dreamed that the baby trafficker "Pablo" Hama Amadou was arrested." (Facebook page "Affaire Des Bébés Importés au Niger", October 27, 2014. Translated from the French.).

Clearly, the implication behind framing the event as a "baby-trafficking" deals with masculinity and the representations of power and masculinity in Africa. If a man (supposedly) found himself needing to "buy" babies, people may believe that he could not "naturally" have them meaning that he has failed the test of virility and, therefore, is not fit to be a leader. In the context of Niger and maybe even beyond, these are very subtle innuendos that while never spoken precisely, are commonly understands to be true. "Not being a man" is herein reinforced by the idea that the culprit is a coward who then fled the country as soon as his malpractice behaviors came to be known as seen below:

"Escape! Guilt! Delirium! Ridiculous! A real lack of personality!" (Affaire Des Bébés Importés Au Niger, September 14, 2014. Translated from the French).

The captioned images of the accused are another facet of the online strategy of disqualification. Grimacing images of Hama Amadou are shown with captions like the

following: "It's not prison, but the crime and the flight that are shameful." (Facebook page "Affaire Des Bébés Importés au Niger", September 14, 2014. Translated from the French).

"Such a waste! It's the beginning of a political menopause." (Facebook page "Affaire Des Bébés Importés au Niger", September 9, 2014. Translated from the French).

Seemingly, different linguistic strategies for disqualification are built around the notions of fertility, legitimacy, family, and descent so as to portray the target as a wrongdoer. Indeed, these are not just about the personality of Hama Amadou. His supporters who oppose the incumbent President use the same kinds of strategies to damage the reputation of the country's leader. Thus, while Hama Amadou has been ironically nicknamed the "twins' daddy", disparaging statements about the legitimacy and origins of the incumbent president are also presented as facts by his supporters. Here are some extracts of statements made in Zarma by Ali Téra on 17 January 17, 2018, and posted on his Facebook page as a video:

"Mahamadou Issoufou (the president of the country) is nothing more than a bastard. May God curse him."

Diallo Abdoulaye, a pro-Hama digital activist is also known as having made the statement:

"L'enfant de Malika est pour Bazoum." (The baby of Malika is for Bazoum.")

Malika is the second wife of the President while Bazoum is the Foreign Affairs Minister. The message is cleverly implying that there was an affair between the wife of the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The central role that the terms "legitimate child" and "legitimate descent" play in this scandal illustrate the close link between the notions of masculinity, fertility, and the systems of political legitimization in the social representations in Niger. Who descends from whom remains a central preoccupation in the pre-colonial societies in Africa, because the answer to this question is not only what determines the place occupied within the lineage, but also the

position that is conferred by the society upon the birth of a child. It determines roles, attributes, and positions. Better still, even though we are talking here in the democratic context, we cannot help but notice that citizens still attach great importance to the ability to conceive children. Traditionally a leader is expected to have heirs (usually males) who will ensure the continuity of the lineage and the transmission of power inside the family. Conversely, the inability to do so is seen as an indication of a leader's inability to rule. That is why quarrels and conflicts related to genealogical legitimacy of opposing proponents about who is the true "blood heir" have always occupied, in Niger at least, a central place in the dynastic narratives and how identity filiations are counted, recorded, manipulated, and transmitted over the generations.

Therefore, if Hama Amadou did in fact "buy" the children, that act could be indicative of how desperate this man of power was. Adding fuel to claims that he indeed sought to prove his "masculinity" so as to be deemed fully qualified to rule. Seemingly, the powerful symbolic damage caused by the "baby-trafficking scandal" on the image of this man of power shows how important the question of masculinity is in the minds of Nigerien voters. The scandalous character of that event comes from the representations about one's ability to exercise power in relation to one's ability to have children "naturally". Other ways of acquiring them of course exist, but they do not fulfill the goal of proving one's fitness to rule.

It is worth noting that to date, noone has convincingly proved that the babies involved in this scandal were bought or even that they were Nigerians. No Nigerian individual ever claimed the babies, and the Nigerian government never filed any kind of complaint or made any formal declaration regarding the "trafficking" of these babies. Further to this is the absence of evidence showing that the babies are in fact Igbo. However, in the framing of the scandal, these babies are known as "the Igbo twins". Indeed, characterizing them as "Igbo" not only lets everybody suppose that they could not possibly be Hama Amadou's babies, but it also weakens their use as an effective token in the political legitimization game. In the context of the Nigerien

society, this aspect has to do with the major role that kinship plays in building political legitimacy. It also has to do with power, identity, and the place and representations of children in the family.

Since filiation has always been seen as something "natural", the notion of "artificially born" children or the notion of children acquired by means other than a "natural" one seems to break the popular image of kin relatedness. This links individuals to their ancestors and thus plays a great role in   creating a sense of belonging to the group while providing the group with a sense of "ownership" and inclusiveness upon that person. This sense of belonging brings with it duties, obligations and rights, among which is the right to claim power as an heir or claim one has the "fitness" to exercise power as a genitor of an heir. Thus, precise knowledge of immediate parenting as well as collective memory, are the bases of lineage formation, a part of communities' cohesiveness, and how power is shared between members of the society. This is true for small tribal groups as well as for larger ones, such as ethnic groups and nations. This central aspect of biological parenting as it relates to power is especially salient in pre-capitalist societies where indeed it sustains all aspects of identity through generations.

3.3 The Increasing Centrality of Social media for Framing Extreme speech

In Niger as elsewhere in the world, a number of factors have concurred to explain the use of social media to spread extreme speech. First of all, spread of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in Africa in conjunction with the process of democratization, contributed to a "liberation of speech" and a "disinhibition" in activists. However, even before ICTs became widespread in Niger, many observers and commentators were already describing the newly instituted democratic system as "lacking civility" and boarding on anarchy. The first years of this democratic experience in particular were characterized by a kind of "war in the

trenches" between members of the political parties with constant brawls, scandals, insults, and inflammatory language used both in the ordinary media and the abundant statements and counterstatements of politicians and their supporters. This scenario is not unique to Niger. In fact Nyamjoj states that, "instead of seeking to curb intolerance, fanaticism and extremism of all kinds in accordance with the logic of liberal democracy, some of the media have actually fueled them." (2005, p. 56). A neologism that soon spread throughout Africa to describe this situation simply likened democracy to "democrazy". The idea of "democrazy" has been coined to describe the kind of "Darwinian battle for survival" between opposing political actors and their followers based on their understanding of democracy and an actual transposition of pre-democratic forms of political affiliation to fit in the new system.

These pre-democratic forms of political affiliation can be seen in the highly personalized forms of the political discourse in the country, especially the personalized forms of both political criticism and media discourse that, in Africa at least, are not unique to Niger. By personalized forms, I mean that ad-hominem attacks prevail in the debates over opinions and ideas, and scandalizing and shaming political adversaries tends to replace fact-based, sound political debates on the best way to manage the government.

For example, in everyday political debates, the political agendas of the various parties are rarely mentioned either by those who are supposed to defend them or by those who are supposed to oppose them. Journalists rarely say anything about them. In contrast, scandals, rumors, and "personal" criticisms are legion. On the other hand, the political positions adopted by the agenda setters are never understood as being different political positions—ideas, programs, analyses, and proposals on how best to manage "the city" (as Plato would have put it) —but instead simply as positions of individuals who are sometimes identified only as being opposing and competing ethnic communities. Also, in the early 1990s, the democratic experience and the freedom that goes with it were new to many people, and thus, both the

political actors and the media had not yet mastered the subtle rules that govern the battle of ideas in mature democracies. As Niger was coming out of its long period of dictatorship during which "order and discipline" were the main behaviours expected from citizens. This sudden liberation of speech and the relaxation of the authoritarian control over the masses gave way to the release of long-contained tensions which were then manifested as extreme, disorganized, unrestrained, and eccentric attitudes and pronouncements, the kind of which are usually only found in festivals. As an example, the National Sovereign Conference that, in 1991, instituted democracy lasted not less than…three months (!) during which all kinds of strange and comical characters gave a show, made a spectacle of themselves. Thus, there was that general in the army, who publicly burst in tears and wept like a child, fearing he's going to be arrested, tried and executed. There was this adviser of Seyni Kountché, who spoke "pidgin French" and was obviously an illiterate, making the assistants laugh each time he muttered a few words. There was the "tropical Savonarola" who mimicked photographs of Lenin haranguing crowds. There was the wife of Seyni Kountché who boldly stated that all the men in assistance were trembling lambs by the time her husband was alive, and countless semi-dramatic, semi-comic instances of an assembly that looked like an informal village palaver instead of being a gathering of the nation's elite conferring on the future of the country.

This situation was worsened by the advent of new information and communication technologies that give any user the possibility to spread any kind of information they wanted to groups of users that went far beyond those of professional media workers. Thus, after 2000, social networking sites, blogs, Twitter, and messenger services like WhatsApp increasingly became the main channels and sources for information-seeking citizens, the channels through which news of all kinds then spread. Better yet, activists from all sides of the political spectrum set up Facebook pages, websites, and WhatsApp conversation groups politically affiliated to

powerful personalities whose views they then promoted through both laudation and inflammatory statements. (Alzouma, 2014).

Thus, the political debates on Facebook have tremendously increased over the last few years owing to the growing influence of a few political commentators and activists who are widely recognized and followed in Niger, some of whom we presented above. One of the main factors that also explains this situation is the rapid increase in mobile phones access and adoption, as opposed to simply access to the Internet using computers, the costs of which are prohibitive for the overwhelming majority of Africans. Another factor is the fact that members of the Diaspora who do use ICTs now have formed a new, deterritorialized, globalized, and transnational community which activities the political leaders are unable to control, because these members are not living within the boundaries of the State. Although Facebook does not provide anonymity, the fact that the members of the Diaspora live outside the borders of the country explains why they can and do behave in ways that are unrestrained. For example, Ali Téra many times has claimed he is "untouchable", probably because he is living in the United States. This is what Benedict Anderson calls "a politics without responsibility or accountability" (Anderson, 1992, p. 11).

Indeed, living outside the country and being at the same time able to affect internal debates and internal events in what some term "long distant nationalism" (Anderson, 1998), gives a disproportionate amount of power to actors who hold no leadership position in the national polity. As those activists have thousands of followers who eagerly wait for their next posts, these actors have an online presence and an online persona that clearly are in contrast with who they are in their everyday lives. For example, in the real world, these actors would not be able to draw crowds and loyal followers on the streets to defend their views. However, in the virtual world, they have tens of thousands of loyal followers who regularly read, comment, and are influenced by what they say.

The power or authority associated with their virtual persona far exceeds the one that would be associated with their real persona. In the virtual world, they can challenge people at the highest levels of society by simply sabotaging their authority and giving a kind of revenge and satisfaction to the "commoners" and the "honest little ones" with whom they identify. However, in the real world they are not considered to be the equals of their enemies. Thus, in the context of Niger, the relative fame that Ali Téra has gained is an indication of how ICTs are changing the political landscape of the country. The political elite, the leaders of the country and the most politically influential people in Niger, are overwhelmingly composed of literate people, those who went through the Western-style type of schooling, who speak French and who own power due to the fact that they can indeed read and write in French. If we exclude these traditional leaders, illiterate people never have had any kind of political audience because the language of the powerful and the language of politics in Niger is mostly French. However, with the advent of ICTs, new activists are now able to reach huge audiences through their audio releases, videos, and photographs that have effects similar to those of face-to-face communication. This is one of the ways some of the most powerful political figures are now being disempowered or at least challenged in their position as men of power. They no longer have a monopoly on political communication.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper analyzed the nature and characteristics of extreme speech and the opprobrious language developed on the Nigerien online setting called "Affaire des bébés importés" ("The Case of the Imported babies" or "the Baby-trafficking scandal" Facebook page). Drawing on the baby-trafficking case that has sparked, since 2013, an ongoing political crisis in Niger, it discussed the way scandal is being framed on that particular Facebook page. The paper particularly emphasizes the growing role that Niger's politically active online Diasporic

communities are playing in the framing of Niger's ongoing political debates using scandal. The paper also shows that scandalizing takes place within the "struggle for the imposition of meanings" (Bourdieu, 1989, 22) by using stigmatization, degradation, transgression, character assassination, and acts that consist of undermining someone's reputation. In this ongoing struggle, social media are becoming a prominent trend when mediating scandals. In Africa and Niger in particular, they are now powerful tools for framing and spreading scandals and using opprobrious language. This is now the expression of how democracy is understood and being experienced in Niger.

However, the online framing of scandals also is related to representations of masculinity, power, and legitimacy in Niger. In other words, the social and cultural contexts not only explain the choice of the scandal lexicon and its scripts, but also how people react and contribute to mediating and spreading it through various means. From this perspective, certain questions should be further examined in relation to the study of online scandal in Africa and the ways in which the evolution of this phenomenon is influenced by structural factors that are not always directly linked to the event itself, such as the level of access to ICTs, the influence of the Diasporic communities' digital activism, conflicting interests of ethnic groups, the commodification of news, new kinds of political affiliations, and the political influence exercised by activists using this social media.

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