Starvation, Representation and Power Relation: the media coverage of the 2005 starvation in Niger

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Introduction

The Western media's representation of African famines through shocking images of starving babies has been a matter of controversy. The media and humanitarian organizations, on the one hand, claim that famine is part of African realities that needs to be reported; and the usage of shocking imageries responds to the necessity of fundraising campaigns for the sake of alleviating suffering. Critics, on the other hand, charge this practice of being unethical and dehumanizing for the sufferers, not to mention that it conveys a biased and oversimplified representation of the phenomenon. Despite the controversy, more than forty years later, the same horrifying images continue flowing on our TV screens at every occurrence of famine, justified with the same argument and criticized with the same charges.

One of the reasons of this sterility is the fact that the debate is enclosed within one perspective: the Western representation of African realities. Throughout this time, the debate has not been able to open up to other perspectives such as the African representation of their own realities. The current paper seeks to address this shortage in the literature. It particularly examines the representation of the 2005 phenomenon of starvation in Niger by both Western and local Nigerien media. It addresses the questions: How different was the representation of the 2005 starvation in Niger between Western and Nigerien media? What explains this difference? And ultimately what are the consequences of this difference on the relations of power among actors involved in the subject?

The central argument of the paper is that the media coverage of the event of starvation in Niger in 2005 as well as the responses that it generated were determined by the discourse that has been historically constructed about starvation among the targeted audience. This argument is based on the assumption that in order for the media to make an event intelligible to its audience, it has to

construct it in a narrative that fits what is historically considered the "true" knowledge about that event within the audience. The responses in terms of practice that will derive from this whole process of representation will also be reflective of this "regime of truth" established by the discourse.

I intend to develop this argument in three stages. I, first, demonstrate that variations exist between Western and Nigerien media coverage of the 2005 starvation in Niger. Second, I argue that this variation in representation is explained by the discourse that prevails among each of the two categories of audience (Western audience and Nigerien audience). Finally, I suggest that the discourse not only determines representation, but it also legitimizes the relations of power between different actors involved in dealing with the event. Western discourse legitimizes a vertical and hegemonic relation of power that is expressed through the triumph of the principle of humanitarian imperative over the principle of sovereignty, while local discourse legitimizes a horizontal relation of power between local actors (The government, the opposition and civil society).

The Starvation of 2005 in Niger

In 2005, the population of Niger was once again hit by the phenomenon of massive starvation. Ongoing food insecurity is chronic in Niger and affects some of the population annually at differing scales and magnitudes, but this was the third widespread event with high levels of food insecurity since the mid-1990s. The causes of starvation in Niger are structural and circumstantial. The structural factors include chronic poverty, an endemic agricultural crisis, and the continuous inflation of food prices that has altered traditional strategies of survival of the local population and established a lingering situation of precariousness that transforms into a large scale starvation phenomenon as a food deficit occurs (A. Gado, 1993). The food deficit is mainly caused by circumstantial factors such as the drought and locust invasions. The food deficit results not in the

absence of food in the market, but in the increase of food prices in proportions that are not affordable to the low-income households. It is this inability to access high priced food in the market that push low-income families to resort to migration, changing or reducing their normal dietary habit, and raise the level of malnutrition, particularly among the children (Olivier de Sardan 2005). In 2004 a combination of drought and a locust invasion created an estimated food deficit of 223,500 tons, representing 7.5% of the total need of the population, but the starving populations were estimated at 3.2 million - 32% of the total population – (SAP report, 2005) [1]. This deficit was aggravated by the fall of the price of livestock which constitutes an important source of incomes for most Nigerien households. The confluence of the rise of food prices and the fall of incomes created a massive starvation that resulted in the migration of thousands of population from rural to urban area, and an increase in the rate of malnutrition among children (Olivier de Sardan 2005).

The crisis sparked an unprecedented rush of media and humanitarian organizations in Niger which propelled the country into the headlines of the largest media outlets in the world. Suddenly, the country that almost nobody hears about in the West, that is easily confounded with Nigeria and whose widespread stigmatized image is that of being "the poorest country in the world", became the interest of the most prestigious media, which engaged in publishing alarming images and papers, trying to rise indignation and emotion in the West (Tidjani Alou 2008: 39).

Importantly, however, the media coverage of this event differed between Western and local media. In the Western media's narrative, what happened in 2005 in Niger was a situation of *famine* that caused a massive death of starving population. The famine was described as a phenomenon suddenly provoked by the drought and the locust invasion which destroyed the crops of 2004

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[1] SAP: Systeme d'Alerte Precoce, is the government agency in charge of following food security issues in Niger.

leaving thousands of populations to starve to death. The phenomenon is, therefore, portrayed as an emergency that could only be prevented by a massive humanitarian intervention. The portrayal of the event as an emergency gave legitimacy to the humanitarian agencies to intervene despite the disagreement of the government, prioritizing the principle of humanitarian imperative over the principle of sovereignty.

The local media, however, had a different interpretation of the phenomenon. They portrayed it as a "*food crisis*" that increased migration of starving population toward the cities, obliged people to change their dietary habits, and brought some local, national and international networks of solidarity into action. Unlike the Western media, the local media considered the "food crisis" as a structural problem that lays bare the failure of the current democratically elected government to conceive and implement policies capable of resolving the problem. Therefore, rather than a call for a humanitarian emergency, this narrative suggests that the solution to the phenomenon of starvation was only conceivable through long term policies conceived and implemented by the Nigerien government.

In this paper, I question the reasons behind this divergent interpretation of the same event. Why Western media represented the event in a narrative of "famine" as massive death of the starving population and an emergency that only a humanitarian intervention could alleviate, while the local Nigerien media represented it in a narrative of "food crisis" that could only be solved through long term government policies?

Before providing my answer to this question, I consider previous efforts that examine the representation of African starvation in the media.

Representation of African starvation in the media

The representation of African starvation in the media has been a subject of intense scrutiny by scholars. The debate took shape in the 1960s, particularly after the flow of the images of the famine in Biafra (1967-1970). And then it evolved in the 1980s with the famine in Ethiopia and the Sahel (1983-84). Partly as a result of the boom in the mass media industry, it reached its peak in the 1990s-2000s with the famines in Sudan, and Somalia. A non-clear-cut categorization helps identify two tendencies in the literature: one criticizing the use of horrific images of Africans in the Western media and the other striving to understand the rationale behind the publications of those images.

Critiques of the representation of starvation in Africa through the use of "famine iconographies" crystalize around three concerns: the ethical issues that such a practice raises, the de-contextualization of the event of famine, and the compassion fatigue that it creates.

On the ethical ground, the display of the images of starving babies and emaciated families in the media sparked criticisms regarding the dehumanizing character of such images vis-à-vis the victims. Critics point to the fact that the images strip the sufferers of their dignity and reduce them to helpless and passive objects (Plewes and Stuart 2006; Michelle 2005, Morton, Salgado 2004). The term "pornography" is prominently used to refer to the unethical character of this practice (De Waal 1993; Plewes and Stuart 2006; Smillie 2005; Maynard 2007). The second critique argues that the publication of those images is not essentially wrong insofar as it captures a certain reality of the African continent that cannot be denied. What is wrong however, is the absence of context in most of the media representation of the starvation (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996; Campbell). Finally, the use of more and more horrific images was also criticized as the determinant factor of the phenomenon of "compassion fatigue" in

Western societies. This critique argues that "the more suffering that people see on their TV screens, the less concerned they feel (Finkielkraut 1998; Moeller 1999).

The second tendency focuses on the examination of the rationale behind the use of negative imagery in representing Africa. One of the views, defended by Benthall (1991) argues that the effectiveness of fundraising for relief assistance is function of the publicity an event receives in the media. Donors do not usually mobilize until the media spotlight a specific disaster. "But the problem with famines is that they just are not considered newsworthy until the dying begins" (Joel Charney 1991). Humanitarian agencies, therefore struggle to find a way to dramatize the situation in order to bring the media to pay attention. (Susan Moeller 1999).

Also, the rationale of the media representation of African suffering is explained by the internal political economy of the media in which the images of suffering are commoditized. The media is considered to be a business entity that operates in a tough competitive environment where sensationalism and emotion rank high among the strategies used to hook the audience (Moeller 1999, Clark 2004, Rubython 2002, Cane 2002). Each media agency strives for the most dramatic and sensationalist pictures that would help to boost its dominance (Moeller 1999: 19). This internal political economy also explains the reason why the media do not pay much attention to the context in which the event occurs. Moeller (1999) and Peter J. Schraeder & Brian Endless (1998) argue that American audiences have become less and less interested in foreign politics and particularly African politics. As a result, the percentage of articles and the time devoted to the coverage of African affairs shrunk considerably to the extent that famines, which take months or years to come about, fail to be covered until they have become very dire; that is what makes them seem hopeless and unpredictable.

The last explanation of the rationale of the use of famine iconography is the discursive approach developed by Myer et al. (1996), Campbell (2003), Dunn (2003), and Lamers (2005). This approach considers the Western media coverage of contemporary famines in Africa as the extensions of older "discourses" about Africa constructed in the West. The argument is summarized by Campbell who says "In the European imagination, 'Africa' has been produced as a site of cultural, moral, and spatial difference, populated by 'barbarians', 'heathens', 'primitives', 'savages'… from the first encounters to contemporary international relations scholarship, this discursive economy makes available the interpretative resources for subsequent imagery" (2003: 69). This approach connects the literature on the representation of African famine to the vast literature on the representation of "the others" in general. Indeed, certain literatures consider the representation of the "others" in the Western media as reflective of the dichotomous system of hegemony between North/South, black/white, colonialist/indigenous (Mistry, 1999; Doty,1996; Hall, 1995; Freeth, 1985; Ferguson, 1998; Pierterse, 1995). This approach stresses the asymmetrical encounters between the West and the other, where the former has enjoyed hegemonic power. It interprets the contemporary representation of African society in the Western media as a veiled form of the perpetuation of the discourse of racism and colonialism that characterizes the previous encounter of the Western and African societies.

The works discussed above, when taken together, have greatly advanced our understanding of the representation of African famine in the media. Yet the explanations proposed have remained unsatisfactory for a number of reasons.

First, it is only a slight exaggeration to consider the whole literature on the representation of starvation in Africa as a Western internal debate. It more or less implicitly addresses the question: How do we – Westerners - see Africa? And how accurate is our representation of

Africa and of African realities? The way Africans see themselves or represent their own realities is totally absent from the literature. This fact carries the implicit idea that Africans do not own the power and agency to define who they are; and that this power belongs to the West. In other words, it reinforces the very argument that the literature on representation fights against. Not taking into account the fact that the events that happen in Africa have meaning for Africans themselves is a bias of representation that scholars of representation need to consider.

This critique constitutes the point of departure of this paper. Indeed, the main contribution of this paper to the literature is the examination of the African representation of their own realities as compared to the Western representation of those same realities.

My second critique is related to intentionality. It appears, more or less explicit in the literature, that African societies are intentionally portrayed in the way they are for the purpose of hegemonic power relations or business commodification. Taking intentionality in representation for granted may be hazardous in regard to the difficulty to confirm it. My approach toward intentionality is rather Foucauldian, in the sense that I consider representation, in Ferguson's terms as "unintended outcome", "authorless strategies" that result from collective wisdoms (2003: 20).

The Representation of African starvation: A Discursive Approach

This paper uses the discursive approach to make its argument. The discursive approach is particularity appropriate because it allows approaching representation not as an end in itself, but as a means to understand the power relation that it legitimizes. In this section, thus, I will summarily describe my approach of discourses, define the two concepts of high stake in this analysis – *famine* and *food crisis* - and finally present my sources of evidence.

<u>The Discursive approach</u>

The term "representation" is used in this paper to refer to the process of making meaning of a reality in the way that it becomes intelligible to the audience. The concept of discourse is used in the same sense as in Dunn (2003) and Doty (1996): "the conventions for establishing meaning, designating the true from the false, empowering certain speakers and writers and disqualifying others" (Quinby 1994, xv). This discourse I am referring to has, therefore, three main characteristics: (1) it represents the framework of understanding within which the whole process of representation happens; (2) it is historically constructed around some core ideas that are considered to be fundamentally true; (3) and finally, it delineates the regime of truth about "knowledge" and subsequently the practice that stems from it.

The discursive approach has important implications with regard to social action and agency. It rejects, according to Dunn, theories such as (neo) Realism and (neo) Liberalism, which argue that actors are motivated by "inherent (universal) interests, rational means-ends preferences," or "internalized norms and values." Dunn claims that "social action and agency result because people are guided to act in certain ways and not others by their sense of *Self* and *Other*, as defined at that particular place and time. Agency can only be understood by recognizing the various discursive narratives in which actors find themselves" (Dunn, 2003: 12).

Definition of Concepts

The argument of this paper is based on the difference between two key concepts: famine and food crisis. Although there is no consensus over the definition of these concepts, I here summarize the views and provide the meaning that each concept will hold throughout this study.

Famine

There is a long-lasting controversial debate over the definition of the concept of famine. The most important point of contention is the scale of the disaster that is considered sufficient to

bear the historical connotation of the concept. Two approaches are identified: first, the approach of Malthus (1890), Masefield (1963) and Sen (1981) argues that in order to differentiate between "regular starvation" and "famine" there is a need to push the latter to its extreme. The ideal types of "famine" from this trend's perspective are the famine of 436 BC, when thousands of starving Romans "threw themselves into Tiber; or in Kashmir in AD 918, when "one could scarcely see the water of Vitasta [Jhelum] entirely covered as the river was with corpses"; … famine is a particular virulent manifestation of its causing widespread death" (Sen, 1981:39-40). This definition considers "famine" as synonymous of massive and widespread death of starving population. It occurs as a result of a sudden shock as opposed to starvation, which is more structural and regular.

The second approach defended by Rangasami (1985) and Walkers (1989) is less extreme. It defines famine as "a socio-economic process that causes the destitution of the most vulnerable, marginal and least-powerful groups in a community, to a point where they can no longer, as a group, maintain a sustainable livelihood. Ultimately, the process leads to the inability of the individual to acquire sufficient food to sustain life (Walkers, 1989: 6). It is remarkably clear that for this current, the death of population does not constitute the indicator of the concept of famine. This definition is then quite similar to the definition of the concept of food crisis.

In the analysis of the narratives that follows, it is clear that when Western media use the concept of famine, they refer to the definition provided by the first approach insofar as the concept is used to refer to a sudden breakdown that occasioned a massive death of starving population. In contrast, although it happens that local media use the term of famine as well, the content of the narrative however suggests that it rather refers to the disruption of the normal condition of life, exactly in the sense defined by the second approach.

Food Crisis

Contrary to the concept of "famine," the concept of food crisis is relatively new. It refers to the stage before the upper end on the continuum of starvation. Food crisis can be understood as a crisis of food resources created by a structural agricultural deficit or a market crisis that disturbs the usual mechanism of supply and leads to an inflation of the prices of the food, rendering its accessibility problematic to the poor people. A food crisis can be moderate or severe. Vanhaute (2011: 52) considers food crisis as the "contemporary hunger" since "famine" as starvation unto death is disappearing. In fact, in the contemporary market system and the development of transportation, it is hardly possible that a rupture of food supply for an entire country or an entire region to persist for as long as it takes for an entire population to starve to death. Drawing on Vanhaute, one can summarize the difference between famine and "food crisis" in the scale of the crisis, namely the dying of starving populations which characterizes famine as opposed to "food crisis", and secondly, the structural and endemic aspect of food crisis as opposed to the accidental character of famine.

Sources of Evidence

Diverse sources of evidence support the argument I make here. Those sources of evidence are constituted, mainly, of 60 newspaper articles that I selected from both the Western and Nigerien media outlets (30 articles in each category). In the Western media categories, I selected articles from two media outlets in each of United Kingdom, United States and France. In UK, I selected 8 articles from BBC News and 3 articles from the Guardian; in the US I selected 6 articles from the New York Times and 5 articles from CNN; in France I selected 5 articles from Liberation and 3 articles from RFI. Among the Nigerien media, I selected 30 articles from 6 newspapers: 16 articles from *Le Republicain*, 7 from *L'Evenement*, 2 articles from each of *Alternative, La Roue de*

l'Histoire, and *La Griffe*, and finally 1 article from *l' Enqueteur*. The choice of these articles is

dictated first by the need of diversification of the sources of evidence; second, by the reputation of

these media outlet and their influence on the debate over the event of starvation in Niger; and third,

by the availability and accessibility of the materials. In addition to these written articles, I also use

video and audio reports, books and academic articles on the 2005 starvation in Niger.

Table 1: Sources of Evidence

Western media			Local media	
United Kingdom	BBC News	8	Le Republicain	16
	The Guardian	3	L'Evenement	7
United State	The New York Times	6	Alternative	2
	CNN.com	5	La Roue de l'Histoire	2
France	La Liberation	5	La Griffe	2
	Radio France Internationale	3	Enqueteur	1
Total	Total	30	Total	30

The analysis that follow is based on this corpus of media narratives.

Variation in the representation of 2005 starvation: The dependent variable

The dependent variable of this study is the variation between Western and Nigerien media

representation of the 2005 starvation in Niger. My assumption is that Western media represented

the event of starvation in a narrative of famine, while Nigerien media represented it in a narrative

of food crisis. Variation between these categories is not a given. It has to be demonstrated. For this

purpose, I applied a quantitative method of content analysis to the 60 selected articles.

The variation in these articles, put together, can be summarized in 5 main indicators: scale,

imagery, attitude, agency, and focus. Each can be considered as binomial, meaning it either

supports the argument of *famine* or that of *food crisis*. I coded these indicators as categorical

variable and use the data to run a logistic regression. The indicators are interpreted as follow:

- Scale: the scale of the starvation is presented either in the forms of death, using expression such as "massive deaths", "thousands of death", or in the form of suffering such as 'malnutrition, diseases, food shortage, etc. often accompanied with superlatives "severe", and "chronic".

- Imagery: This refers to the use of images or prose descriptions to portray the event and the victims. Some narratives use shocking images of starving, dying babies, or portray the starving societies as primitive; whereas other narratives, use dignify images of the victims and describe them in heroic terms.

- Attitude: the attitude of the victims is either depicted as desperate, helpless, and passive, or as resourceful, capable of deploying multiple survival strategies to manage the situation. These strategies range from selling properties, migration, and changing the food habit.

- Agency: Part of the narratives suggests that only a massive humanitarian intervention could save the victims, while the other part acknowledges agency to local actors emphasizing the initiatives of the Nigerien government as well as the networks of solidarities that developed between members of families, communities and the nation.

- Focus: One trend of the narratives focuses almost entirely on the activities of Western NGOs; the event of starvation and the victims matter only insofar as they trigger compassion and donation. The other trend, in contrast, emphasizes the causes of the starvation, situates the responsibilities, and expands on the daily struggle of the victim.

I break down the content of the articles into words and expressions that refer to each indicator. For the first indicator, for instance, I identify in each text all the words and expressions that refer to the scale of the starvation, then, I classify them according to whether they refer to "death" or to simple "suffering". After the classification, I proceed to counting the number of words referring to each category. If the number of words and phrases referring to "death" prevail

over those of "suffering", the narrative is considered a "death narrative". On the contrary, if the words and phrases referring to suffering outnumber those referring to death, the narrative is considered a "suffering narrative". The process goes the same way with the other indicators. Finally, if the number of words or phrases referring to the indicators of famine outnumbers those referring to food crisis, the overall narrative is considered a *famine narrative*. On the contrary, if it is the food crisis words and phrases that prevail, then the overall narrative is considered "food crisis" narrative. Using these data, I run a logistic regression to find out whether there is a difference between Western and Nigerien narratives. The result of this regression analysis is reported in table 1. The table shows a significant difference between Western and Local media in their representation of the 2005 starvation in Niger.

Table 1: Variation of narrative between Western and local media

Variables	Coefficient
Constant	-1.833***
	(0.539)
Famine/foodcrisis	3.704***
	(0.761)

(*) significant at .05; (**) significant < .05; (***) significant < .01

The positive sign of the coefficient (3.704) confirm that the Western narratives are predominantly famine narratives, while the local narratives are primarily food crisis narratives. At the aggregate level, table 2 shows that each of the five indicators in the Western narrative is significantly different from the indicators in the local narratives. These results confirm our assumption of the existence of variation between the representation of the 2005 starvation in Niger in Western and local media.

Table 2: Variation of indicators between Western and local media

Variables	Coefficient
Scale	7.37***
Imagery	3.67*
Attitude	20.1***

Agency	13.1***
Focus	23.93***

(*) significant at .05; (**) significant < .05; (***) significant < .01

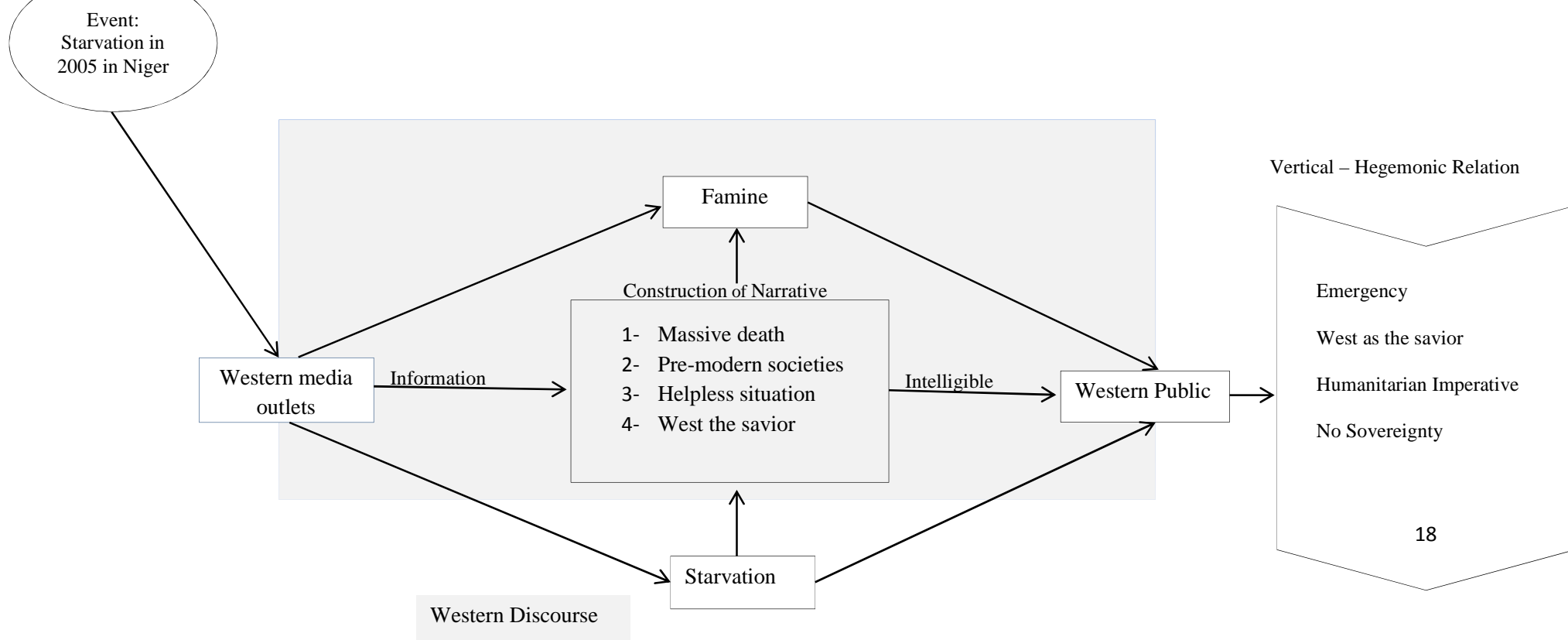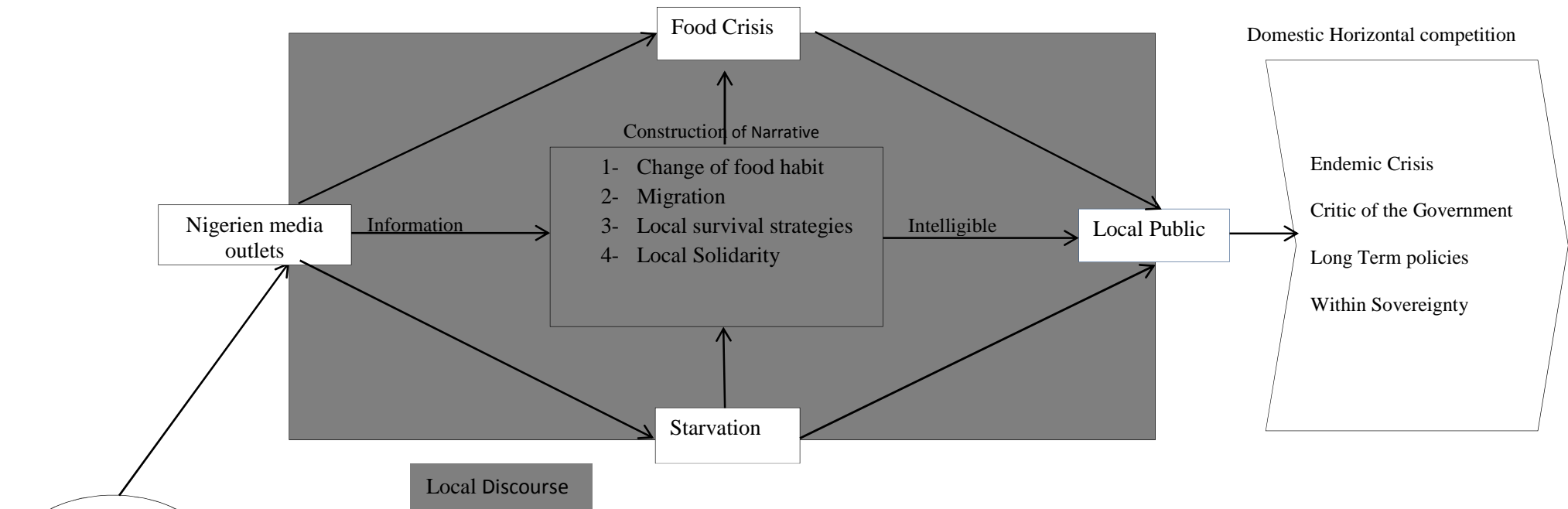This shows that variation exist, I now turn to a discussion of how we might understand it.

Unpacking media Representation of Nigerien starvation

Representation, in Hall's terms, means "using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent the world meaningfully, to other people." It is also "an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture (Hall, 1997: 16). My argument is that the media representation of the event of starvation is determined by the discourse that prevails among the audience. I start with a graphic depiction of the mechanism of representation, then move to the examination of the two discourses within which the representation happens, and finally the narratives used by each media outlet to make the event intelligible to its audience.

Quadrilateral Graphic of Representation

Mitchel's (1990) quadrilateral figure helps to summarize the argument of this paper. It shows why the event of starvation that happened in Niger in 2005 was represented differently by local and Western media. While the local media operating within local discourse used a narrative of "food crisis" to render the event intelligible to its audience, the Western media operating within a different discourse translated the event into a narrative of famine in order to make sense of it to their audience. This system of representation appears congruent with the argument that the representation of an event by the media depends on the discourse that have been historically built about this event among the audience. In other words, in the process of representation, the media needs to translate any event into a narrative that fits the discourse that has been developed about this event among the audience. Furthermore, it shows that the responses that result from the two systems of representation in terms of power relations also differ as a consequence of the difference

in the discourse. The local discourse led to a horizontal domestic competition whereas the Western discourse led to vertical hegemonic relations of power. In what follows, I will analyze in detail both of the discourses (Western and local) and the narratives (famine and food crisis).

Food Crisis

Construction of Narrative

1- Change of food habit
2- Migration
3- Local survival strategies
4- Local Solidarity

Nigerien media outlets

Information

Intelligible

Local Public

Domestic Horizontal competition

Endemic Crisis

Critic of the Government

Long Term policies

Within Sovereignty

Starvation

Local Discourse

Event: Starvation in 2005 in Niger

Famine

Construction of Narrative

1- Massive death
2- Pre-modern societies
3- Helpless situation
4- West the savior

Western media outlets

Information

Intelligible

Western Public

Vertical – Hegemonic Relation

Emergency

West as the savior

Humanitarian Imperative

No Sovereignty

Starvation

Western Discourse

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<u>The Discourses</u>

Discourse helps explain why there is variation between Western and local media reporting of the phenomenon of starvation in Niger. The discourse I am referring to has three main characteristics: (1) it represents the framework of understanding within which the whole process of representation happens; (2) it is historically constructed around some core ideas that are considered to be fundamentally truth; (3) and finally, it delineates the regime of truth about "knowledge" and subsequently the practice that stems from it.

Western discourse on African starvation:

The Western discourse regarding starvation in Africa can be traced back to the early coverage of West African famine in the 1960s, precisely, during the famine that resulted from the war of Biafra between 1966 and 1970 (Benthall 1993: 92). Horrible images of starving children flowed in the Western media at that period, creating emotion and indignation. The success of the publication of the first images created a rush of journalists to the African continent searching for stories and images of similar atrocities (war, famine, poverty, diseases, etc.). Moeller (1999: 19) says, in order "to boost their dominance, each of the [media] agencies strives for the most dramatic pictures." Subsequently the Western discourse about African famine was constructed around three characteristics: stereotypic imagery, formulaic narrative, and humanitarian emergency.

There exists a historical background to the Western discourse about African famine that can be rooted to the first encounter between the West and African societies. The first explorers of the African continent described the people living there as animal-like, savages, primitives, uncivilized. This stereotypical imagery of the African societies remained the same or even more far-reaching in the contemporary era. Many professors who teach African studies in the US open the course by assessing their student's knowledge of Africa, and the responses they get are pretty

similar. Fair (1993) testifies in this terms, 'Each semester when I ask my students…to describe for me their images and ideas of "Africa," [or] "Africans… I get the usual litany of stereotypical, negative, and often condescending description. To my students, 'Africa' is …an 'impoverished,' 'falling apart,' 'famine-plagued,' 'full of war,'… 'weird,' 'brutal,' 'savage,' 'primitive,' 'backward,' 'tribal,' 'undeveloped,' 'having AIDS,' 'lazy,' 'crazy'…'fighting all the time,' 'sexually active' … and 'black.''' Many similar testimonies confirm the degree to which these stereotypes are anchored in the collective memory of Westerners.

In addition, the word famine, used in the sense of massive death of starving population, refers to a specific characteristic of pre-modern societies. De Waal (1993) argues that the word "famine" was prominently used in both medieval France and England where it originated. However, after the advent of the modern era, it almost completely disappeared from use in those two countries – or at least not used to signify massive death of starving population. Subsequent usage of the word was directly or indirectly linked to hegemonic relationship (colonialism in the case of Ireland, India, and Africa).

This pattern of relating famine to primitivism appears clearly in the coverage of the African starvation by the Western media. According to Moeller (1999: 149), the 1991-1993 Somali famine was described in the Western media as follow: "The Somali culture is "in the dark age" or a type of "harsh, primitive social Darwinism," a "biblical-caliber death and destruction; its troubles seems like Old Testament plagues, irrevocable and inevitable", a "famine of apocalyptic proportions is unfolding" or most frankly "Apocalypse has descended upon Somalia" Somalia is "a human nightmare", "pure hell", a "Pandora's box" or "an unexploded health bomb close to detonation." Somali violence is "a hurricane of interclan wars", or a form of the Stockholm syndrome.'

Besides being stereotypical, the discourse that has been constructed in the West about African famine is also formulaic. The standard of the coverage and the structure of the narratives are common to all the situations of starvation in the continent. For example, there are striking commonalities between the BBC report during the Ethiopian famine in 1984 and the report on Somalia in 1991 and Niger in 2005. The images show disrupted societies, skeletal children crying, helpless mother carrying dying babies, the death of a mother's last child, dying on camera, and funerals. Likewise, the words put on these videotapes are also similar. The very influential report of Buerk describing the Ethiopian famine in 1984 started with these words: "Dawn. As the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem, it lights up a biblical famine, now, in the 20th century. This place, say workers here, is the closest thing to hell on earth. Thousands of wasted people are coming here for help. Many find only death… Death is all around. A child or an adult dies every 20 minutes…" (Buerk, 2005) In a similar fashion, Hilary Anderson portrayed the Nigerien starvation in these terms, "…We journeyed more in the desert of Niger and entered a valley of death", she also says "there are children dying every day. Just in this small locality, nobody even knows how many thousands of children have already died." Filming the burial of a child, she says, 'This one year old couldn't fight the famine that is far bigger than him. No one even counted how many have already died." Formulaic coverage has a standard. Journalists do not come to discover what is happening but to confirm what they already know is happening.

Finally, the message that accompanies the narratives of African famine is that of hopeless societies that are unable to take care of their own. They are exposed as being trapped in a situation where they do not have any power of agency. Unless the Western societies, to whom the power belongs, decide to help, they will not be able to survive. Therefore, the message is conveyed in a very sensational way, aiming to touch the public's emotion and trigger sympathy and solidarity. It

holds "the reader accountable of the disaster that is happening and to say that "whether the victim lives or dies depends on what you do next. Turning away is therefore killing the victim." (Moeller 1999: 9) This discourse also can be rooted in the early encounter between the West and Africa and the solidarity with the savages that yielded to the civilizing mission endeavor.

I argue that this description is what constitutes the "regime of truth" about African famine in the Western countries. Any description of starvation in Africa that does not fit this "knowledge" will not make sense for most of the Western public. This might explain why most the Western public do not respond to African disaster early. Disasters in Africa are not really disasters unless there is massive dying, until the narrative accompanied with the images is constructed consistently with the discourse.

Local Discourse about starvation

The discourse of starvation in Niger is a product of the sociopolitical and economic history of the country. It was largely shaped by the long experience of the phenomenon of starvation by the population, as well as by the public disenchantment vis-à-vis the promises of the democratization and liberalization processes in which the country has been engaged since 1991.

First, the phenomenon of starvation in Niger has a long history. In a catalog established by A. Gado (1993: 49), it appears that since 1870s famines have been occurring in Niger at a periodic cycle with a rate of at least one occurrence every decade. This cycle continue until the 1980s when the occurrence accelerated to become at least once every four years. The rural populations concerned by the phenomenon represent 80% of the population, and agriculture is considered the principle activity for 84% of the population. Throughout history, the populations have developed strategies that allow them to survive the crisis with less hardship, preventing them, therefore from starving to death. According to Olivier De Sardan (2005), these strategies range from investment

in livestock during the years of surplus of production in order to sell them during the period of crisis, seasonal migration of young people to the cities to engage in income generating activities (but when the crisis becomes acute migration can involve entire families), change of the dietary habits to include export products (rice, paste food, cassava flour…) or edible wild leaves and roots. In addition to these strategies, there are networks of solidarity that have been created at communities level (organizations such as cooperatives, banks of grain, tontines…), national level (Programs *Food-For-Work*, *Cash-For-Work*, sale of cereals at reduced price…), and even at the international level involving Nigerien living in the diaspora who organize to transfer funds to families and communities in their village (Olivier De Sardan 2005). Nigeriens use only one term to refer to all kinds of starvation. This term is in Hausa "Yunwa", and in Djerma "Harey". It means hunger, dearth, food crisis and famine. When the crisis is exceptionally hard, they give it a proper name such as "El Buhari" for the famine in 1984 (Olivier De Sardan: 2005). It is to say that Western categorization of starvation with famine meaning massive death of starving population at the top of the continuum and the hunger of every day at the bottom is totally alien to them. This long experience of starvation lived by many generations has shaped the understanding of the public about what starvation is.

Second, in late 1991 when the democratization process started with the National Conference, Nigeriens were enthusiastic about getting rid of the military regime that has ruled the country since 1974 and which Niandou Souley (2009) qualifies of being "one of the most austere and repressive on the African continent". The advent of the democracy and liberalization was welcomed with a lot of enthusiasm and hope that it will open a new page of liberty and economic prosperity. However, very quickly, these hopes faded. Two years after the first pluralist elections, the country plunged into a deep political crisis with two coup d'état and two military transitions. The economic

situation of the country was worse during the 1990s with the accumulation of many months without the government being able to pay the salaries of the workers. In 2000, a new government was democratically elected. However, as soon as the new regime took office, stories of massive corruption started to splash across the front pages of the newspapers. The government opted for a confrontation, imprisoning journalists and civil society activists. Civil society members criticized this attitude as being indicative of, "a totalitarian vision of the state and management of public affairs… Journalists' associations also denounced the "acts of attacking the freedom of the press [...], threats, sanctions and intimidations used to shape information..." (Gazibo, 2009: 53). Totalitarianism, mismanagement and corruption were some expressions of the disenchantment vis-à-vis the achievement of the democratization process. Furthermore, when the report of the Human Development Index for 2004 was published, Niger was ranked the second poorest country in the world. This gave the opposition and the civil society movements including the media, a sound argument to further criticize the government.

This social and political context of the early 2000s in Niger favored the emergence of a strong and diverse civil society which engaged in challenging the government on issues of governance. Their opposition heightened in January 2005 when the newly reelected government engaged in a very unpopular policy of increasing taxes on the most consumed products. In reaction to these policies and a general dissatisfaction of the government's handling of the country, the civil society movement engaged in strikes, demonstration, and dead city operations against expensive lifestyles" in the country. These demonstrations led to the arrest of many civil society leaders in March 2005. The local media engaged strongly in the movement by intensifying its critiques against the government. By the time the Nigerien government surrendered to open negotiations in late April, the information about the starvation in the countryside had already started circulating.

Thus, the local coverage of the event of starvation in 2005 inherited directly from the mood left by that crisis but was largely determined by the discourse formulated on the basis of the long experience of the phenomenon by the local population and the mood of disenchantment vis-à-vis the promises of the democratization process.

The Narratives

The narrative of famine

As I argue above, the Western media coverage of the phenomenon of starvation in Africa is determined by the discourse that has been historically built in the West about famine and African societies. In order to make the event meaningful to their audience, the media narrative has to be congruent with the general discourse that has been constructed about the event. The narrative about the event of starvation in Niger was constructed around five important aspects, all of them consistent with the Western discourse about African famine.

First, the Western media reports considered the event to be a sudden breakdown resulting from the drought that hit the country the previous year and the locust invasion that destroyed the few crops that survived the drought. One of the earliest reports states, "Children are dying as a result of the famine brought about by drought and a locust plague"[2] This depiction of the problem as circumstantial rather than a complex structural problem makes it easier to think about the possibility that a quick humanitarian intervention can solve it.

Second, the coverage emphasize a lot on the archaic and primitive aspects of the Nigerien societies. The NYT reported that "until Niger addresses its problems of primitive farming, primitive health care and primitive social conditions, infants will continue to die."[3] Hilary

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[2] BBC, No food aid as hungry flee Niger http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4655225.stm
[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/05/international/africa/05niger.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 Accessed on 3/27/13

Anderson of BBC, whose reports were very influential on raising awareness about the phenomenon in the West, put it in these terms:

"If you were just passing through as a traveler you could drive for hundreds of miles along the narrow strip that hugs the bottom of this giant country …the only thing that might tweak your concern would be the regular sight of malnourished children standing naked outside their huts… But were you to take a left or a right off the main road - the only tarred road in the region - and travel into the villages, you'd find one of the ugliest and saddest human plights on this continent…We went to village after village, and each time we were immediately surrounded by a crowd of women begging us for help, showing us their sick children, thinking we were foreign and so could do something. Looking around almost every child was malnourished, some with pot bellies and the tell-tale orange hair of kwashiorkor, the type of malnutrition that leaves your body bloated with fluid, and with open wounds. Others were emaciated and frail, with protruding ribs - their bodies starving to death slowly by wasting away".[4]

In another report, she commented an ugly image of a nomadic family eating a rotten meat covered by flies, saying "In desperation they began to eat this…, the rotten meat of the carcasses of their dead cattle"[5]; another commentator says "… I have seen with my own eyes in the 21st century people having to eat grass and tree leaves".

Third, the stories and images of deaths are an overwhelming feature of all the reports; images of children that died while the reports were going on or shortly after being filmed. As an example, Hilary Anderson mentions: "Another child, Rabilu, was fighting for his life, infection has spread to his lung. Niger's hunger has been prevented a long time ago, but that did not make any difference to him. Rabilu died a few hours after we have filmed him. The images of burial of babies, the women witnessing the number of children that they lost during the crisis, the images of carcasses of cows… were all evidences used to demonstrate the scale of the disaster, that the starvation turned Niger into a "valley of death". According to her the dying was so massive that even the

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[4] BBC Niger's Children Continue dying http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4274728.stm
[5] British Aid Flight reaches Niger
http://news.bbc.co.uk/player/nol/newsid_4710000/newsid_4716400/4716425.stm?bw=nb&mp=wm&news=1&bcws=1

medical centers stopped "keep[ing] records of names, but put the medical files of those who have died in a pile that gets picked up and dumped somewhere else"[6]

Fourth, the situation of starvation was depicted as desperate and only the Western intervention can save people from dying. This appears clearly through statements like this: "We have seen shocking images of families desperate to survive, trying to find nourishment by boiling up leaves and grass. … We can make a difference. Just a few days of food aid can save a child's life. The crucial thing is to act quickly before it is too late."[7] The few cases of initiatives to tackle the issue that the reports indicate were those coming from Western NGOs such as the medical centers operated by MSF (Doctors Without Borders), the distribution of the food aid sent by the British, Italian and French governments. The reports harshly criticized the delay in the response by the international community indicating how the "aid agencies working on the ground feel ashamed at the world's slow reaction - every day they see children dying right before their eyes". [8]

Some would argue that images in the TV tend always to focus on negativity. The negative representation of African starvation is, therefore, not an exception. However, although this argument holds some truth, it goes without noticing that in the case of Africa, the representation tend to focus not only on negativity but particularly on emphasizing the primitive aspect of the societies, the savageness of the Africans.[9]

Narrative of food crisis

The local discourse about starvation in Niger – as argued above - is based on two aspects of Nigerien sociopolitical and economic history: the long experience of the endemic starvation and the disenchantment vis-à-vis the democratization promise to change the situation of acute poverty

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[6] BBC, Niger Children Continue dying, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4274728.stm
[7] Dougray Scott adds http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/4738309.stm#
[8] No food aid as hungry flee Niger: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4655225.stm
[9] Christopher Hitchens African Gothic http://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/archive/1994/11/hitchens199411

in the country. Consistent with this discourse, the narrative of the coverage emphasized three important aspects of the crisis.

First, the designation of the event was ambivalent. The concepts of "famine" and "food crisis" were alternatively used to mean almost the same thing; the severe situation of food shortage that resulted in the rise of food prices, pushed impoverished people to change their food habits and increased migration - mostly of young males - to the cities in search of jobs that allow them to make money and support their families left back in the villages. The narrative also mentioned few cases of death, mostly quoted from the reports of international NGOs and media. This ambivalent use of the term "famine" and food crisis was due to the fact that they were considered to be synonymous. However, the content of the narrative informs us about the sense in which they were used. In the narrative, far from being a sudden breakdown, the starvation of 2005 was portrayed as an endemic problem in Niger. Although the effect of the drought and the locust invasion was not ignored in the narrative, they were considered as aggravating factors of a structural agricultural crisis that was ongoing for more than a century. Many times the narratives referred to the memories of the great starvation of 1973 and 1984 to stress this endemic pattern of the crisis.

Second, unlike the Western narrative that portrayed the starving people as trapped in a desperate situation where they have either to receive foreign aid or to die, the local narrative emphasized the strategies developed by the population to survive and also on the local network of solidarity. The most important strategies are on one hand, the reduction of the daily number of meals or the change of food habits which consists in the over-consumption of diets that are either usually rarely consumed or not consumed at all. These diets include cassava flour, edible wild roots and leaves. Aghali Abdelkader reports many evidences of the victims testifying that they

resorted to eating boscia senegalensis, for example, which in normal situations is not consumed[10].

On the other hand, migration is another strategy that people historically use to deal with the agricultural crisis. In normal years, it concerns usually young males but Abdelkader mentions many cases of entire family or even entire villages that migrated. He quotes a farmer: "there are only women in the village. All the men are gone to exodus… but they sent some money to their family here. We survive somehow." Apart from this, the narratives also focus on the development of local networks of solidarity.[11] These are networks created at different levels, village, region, national and even international, by Nigeriens leaving in the diaspora. Le *Republicain* mentioned the initiative created by the government to mobilize support from Nigerien.

Third, more than anything else, the critiques against the government's policies, prior and during the crisis were the most prominent topics covered by the local media. Four aspects of these policies received extensive comments: the inability of the government to put concrete policies in place to solve the endemic agricultural crisis, the inadequacy of the program of food distribution, the accusation against certain member of the government of corruption in the program of food distribution and finally the denial of the existence of famine by President Tandja. For example, *Le Republicain* celebrated the fact that foreign aid is directly distributed by the NGOs to the victims instead of going through the government. The report says, "the foreign aid that are intended to solve the famine created by Tandja and Hama (the President and the Prime Minister) is not going through the predators intermediate, the acolytes of the regime but goes directly to the starving population through the humanitarian organizations because the regime's program of "sale of cereals at affordable price" and the famous "special program" have miserably failed".

Power relations

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[10] http://www.republicain-niger.com/Index.asp?affiche=News_display.asp&ArticleID=1443&rub=Dossiers

[11] (http://www.republicain-niger.com/Index.asp?affiche=News_display.asp&ArticleID=1891&rub=Actualit%C3%A9s

The discursive approach of representation that I adopted in this work allows for the consideration of representation as a justification for action and practices. In other words, to paraphrase Dunn (2003, 5), representation has political consequences; discourse is not simply words and ideas but also the actions and practices that enact the idea, that make it "real." In this section, I will argue that the two systems of representation that I defined above translate into action. I argue that the Western representation of the 2005 starvation in Niger yielded to a hegemonic relation of power between Western humanitarian organizations who brandished the principle of humanitarian imperative and the Nigerien government who denied the occurrence famine and tried to limit humanitarian intervention. The local representation of the event generated, by contrast, a domestic political competition opposing the government to the political opposition and civil societies. The latter accused the former of mismanagement and bad policies that allowed a structural problem to continue and exacerbate. The fundamental contrast between the two relations of power is that for the Western humanitarian activists, framing the event in a narrative of famine transforms it in an emergency situation that requires a humanitarian intervention. According to the principle of humanitarian imperative, in a situation of emergency, humanitarian intervention does not have to abide with the rule of sovereignty. For the local contenders, however, starvation is a structural issue that can only be solved through long term policies put in place by the government. Therefore, solutions must be considered within the framework of sovereignty.

Vertical-hegemonic relations of power

There exists a relation of partnerships between the Western media and the humanitarian organizations. The former seeks where to find stories and the latter knows places to find stories but seeks to spread its message for fundraising that the former can effectively achieve. Both Moeller (1999) and Benthall (1993) analyze this mutually beneficial relationship. The interest of

the Western media and the humanitarian organizations converges also in the construction of the event of starvation in a narrative of famine. For the media, the spectacle of death, primitivism and desperation make the story perfectly intelligible to their audience because it meets their expectation about African famine. The sensationalism and emotion that are embedded in the narrative also provide a strong hook on the audience, not to mention the condescending feeling of satisfaction for being different from that "other". For the humanitarian organizations, transforming the distant suffering in such harrowing narratives and bringing it close to the Western public, allows them to mobilize donations. They make their audience accountable for what happens next, whether the victim lives or dies depends on what the audience decides to do. Turning away is synonymous of killing the victim. Also, portraying it as an emergency gives them all the necessary leeway they need for intervention. This beneficial interrelationship between the media and the humanitarian organization is at the origin of the vertical power relation resulting from the Western representation of African famine. De Waal argues that "The concept of poverty is bound in to what we (the-non-poor) can do to alleviate it... Likewise, the contemporary English concept of "famine' is bound in to what relief agencies can do to alleviate it. The point of this is not to pronounce upon the ethic of the aid business, but to place famine relief in the context of power relations between rich and poor countries". (De Waal, 2005: 32)

The framing of starvation in Niger in 2005 as a situation of emergency has two main consequences in terms of power relations. It first suggests that the local populations are in a situation of breakdown; they no longer have the power of agency to survive the situation, and the power is with the West, whose intervention becomes the only chance for this population to survive. Second, the local government is also considered to have failed in securing its people from the breakdown. Therefore, its legitimacy over the control of the sovereignty of the country is

challenged. This last aspect is the result of the interpretation of humanitarian principles that privileges the principle of humanitarian imperative over the principle of state sovereignty. Sovereignty in its new understanding refers to "responsibility not just Rights." According to the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), "[T]he responsibility to protect its people from killing and other grave harm was the most basic and fundamental of all the responsibilities that sovereignty imposes – and if a state cannot or will not protect its people from such harm, then coercive intervention for human protection purposes, including ultimately military intervention, by others in the international community may be warranted in extreme cases (ICISS report, 2001).[12]

These rules fully played their role in 2005 in Niger. In fact, despite the government's denial of the existence of any emergency in the country, International Humanitarian Organizations decided otherwise and engaged in humanitarian intervention dealing directly with the starving population sometimes through local NGOs and civil societies. The government was isolated from the whole operation. This is the reason why in his interview the President complained that from the $45m dollars raised the government received only $2.5 million. The remaining money was managed directly by the humanitarian organizations. This explains why De Waal - in response to a question asked by Paul Richards of "who cries famine and for what purpose?" - argues that:

"The gulf between the understandings of people in Africa who suffer famines and those who avowedly try to help them is now greater than ever before. It has been widened by the advent of the mass media and by the phenomenon of disaster tourism. The exaggerated perceived severity of the famine and the inert semantic of "emergency" (an "emergency" is not expected to have ways of dealing with itself) become reasons for panic and for ignoring the opinion of local people. The

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[12] International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001), pp. 8, 69 (hereafter *ICISS Report*).

event is defined by foreigners, who create and perceive moral imperative for external intervention. The famine victims live (or die) under an alien definition (De waal, 2005: 30).

<u>Horizontal Competition</u>

The starvation crisis of 2005 in Niger came as a "true shock and produced a reconfiguration of the political landscape and the balance between authority and society" (Gazibo, 2009: 52). Unlike the Vertical-Hegemonic power relation enmeshed in the international humanitarian organizations, the political crisis that the 2005 starvation generated at the national level had nothing to do with hierarchy. The battle was engaged in a flat arena where the government, defending its policies, confronted the coalition of the political opposition and civil society movements. The points of controversy were the semantic debate over whether a famine or a food crisis had happened in Niger, the agreement or disagreement over the humanitarian interventions, and finally, the appropriate policy to adopt in order to deal with the issue.

The position of President Tandja was to downplay the scope of the crisis by calling it a "food crisis" rather than famine. This position was motivated according to Gazibio by three political stakes: the historical memory (the famine of 1974 and the coup d'etat which it served to justify), the symbolical dimension (the famine indicates the leader's misfortune falling on his fellow citizens) and the personal variable (President Tandja was one of the instigators behind the 1974 coup)" (Gazibo: 38). However, for the opposition, the concept of famine was appropriate to the situation; even though the content that they give to the concept is clearly different from the Western narrative. Gazibo explains the stake in this term "[The] semantic debate raged because the stakeholders in Niger's political space realize that describing problems also involves imposing a meaning on them, specifically with regard to their causes and the subsequent political blame" (2009: 38). The opposition criticized the attempt to downplay the scope of the disaster by the government of being irresponsible. They further established "a causal relationship between the

regime's governing methods and the prevailing situation in the country. One opposition newspaper wrote, "Since President Mamadou Tandja has been reelected, the people have harvested an extreme deterioration in their living conditions..." Gazibo (2009: 47). According to Issoufou (the opposition leader at the time and the current President), the famine was not only a result of climatic problems, but also the result of "five years of catastrophic mismanagement of the country." He says "we are dealing with incompetent leaders [...] who do not care about the situation in which our people find themselves." (Ibid: 48)

Second, concerning the debate raised by Tandja over the violation of the state sovereignty, again the opposition disagreed with the President and supported the intervention of the international humanitarian organizations, emphasizing not on the semantic aspect of the debate itself, but rather on the need of population for help whether it was a "famine" or a "food crisis". Later, this position was also joined by the Prime Minister Hama Amadou, leaving President Tandja isolated internally and externally. The reason behind the rally of the opposition leader and the prime minister was not necessarily that they adhere to all the background ideas and ideals of the intervention but it was a political strategy that intended "to create an image of a man of people" (Gazibo: 49) In fact, it appeared anti-ethical and politically indefensible, for a normal citizen, to prevent starving people from accessing food aid based on a contention over the appropriate concept to define the crisis with. The defection of the Prime Minister from the position of the President sowed the seeds of the political divorce between the two. The divorce culminated in 2007 with a successful motion of censure that ousted the prime minister from office. The motion of censure was suspected to be supported by the President.

However, although the opposition supported the humanitarian intervention they claimed that the starvation in Niger is a structural problem and its solution should be imagined within a

framework of long-term policies. For them it is the responsibility of the government to put in place these policies. In other words, contrary to the Vertical-hegemonic stand, for the opposition a durable solution of the problem of starvation in Niger can only be approached within the framework of sovereignty, with the involvement of state apparatuses. Issoufou described what had happened as a problem of poor management. He recommended that "only good government of the country and the definition and implementation of a modern agricultural policy can protect the people of Niger from [food] insecurity.[13]

Conclusion

In this work I have demonstrated that the media coverage of the event of starvation in Niger was determined by the discourse created throughout history about this event within the targeted audience. I argue that in order for the coverage to be intelligible to its audience, the media has to present it in a narrative that is congruent with the general discourse that has been historically constructed about this event and the concerned societies. Western media used a narrative of famine as a sudden breakdown that occasioned a massive death of starving population in order to make sense to their audience, for which, only that description corresponds to the regime of truth concerning African starvation. This is the notion that African societies are primitive societies experiencing primitive kinds of famine with massive death of starving and desperate population that needs to be saved by them. On the other side, the local media used the narrative of "food crisis" as an endemic problem that increased migration and effected change in food habit. This representation can be explained by the need to make the information intelligible to an audience that has experienced the phenomenon for many generations and that is angry for not seeing any change despite the promises of the democratization and liberalization processes.

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[13] Le Republicain, Le PNDS se prononce sur la situation alimentaire" Le Republican, 26 May 2005: p. 5.

Second, the power relations that evolved from these two systems of representation was also different due to the framing of the crisis as an emergency by the Western media and as a structural crisis by the local media. In fact, an emergency refers to a breakdown beyond the "power" of the local population and their government. Hence there is an absolute necessity for the Western intervention to save them from dying. Also, since the government is incapable of protecting its own people from this deadly breakdown, its control over the sovereignty of the country is challenged. The principle of humanitarian imperative became prioritized over the principle of sovereignty. Contrary to this vertical hegemonic relation produced by the narrative of "famine," the narrative of "food crisis" yielded to a horizontal domestic competition between the government on the one hand and the political opposition and civil society's movement on the other hand. The former denied the existence of famine, condemned the political use of the people's suffering for private purposes, and defended its policies. The latter, on the contrary, accused the government of mismanagement and irresponsibility. Each one is trying to position itself as the best protector of the interest of the country. The common ground of these two competitors is that the problem of starvation in Niger will not be solved by quick humanitarian intervention out of the country's sovereignty but through long term policies conceived and implemented.

One the main shortcoming of this study is, certainly, the ambiguity and over-generalization of the terms "western" and "local" used throughout this study. Using the terms "western media" or "Nigerien media" is irremediably misguiding, as it implies a monolithic view within these categories. This is actually not the case. Western media, as well as the local Nigerien media, are very diverse and they do not all have the exact same representation of African suffering. The argument of this paper is, therefore based on the major trends. My claim is that there are important commonalities among the major media in both the units of analysis that could allow generalization.

I tried to diversify my sources of evidence so that the realities I analyze here represent those major

trends in both the units.

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