

MINISTÈRE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT
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SCIENTIFIQUE ET DE L'INNOVATION

SECRETARIAT GENERAL

UNIVERSITE JOSEPH KI-ZERBO

Pôle d'excellence africain /Africamultiple
03 BP 7021 OUAGADOUGOU 03
Tel: +226 70 77 78 88 /75 71 41 89
Email: africamultiple.burkina@gmail.com
<https://acc-ouaga.org>



BURKINA FASO
Unité – Progrès - Justice



Project title

Knowledge State in Francophone West Africa: Experience of the State and institutionalization of science in Burkina Faso and Senegal

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Applicant(s)

1. Dr Natéwindé Sawadogo; Sociology; University of Ouaga II/ACC University of Joseph Ki-Zerbo
2. Dr Cyrille Semdé; philosophy; University of Joseph Ki-Zerbo/ACC University of Joseph Ki-Zerbo;

Collaborators

1. Dr Abdoulaye Sawadogo, University of Joseph Ki-Zerbo;
2. Dr Eveline Sawadogo-Compaore, National Centre for Scientific and Technological Research
3. Prof Mor NDAO, University of Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal
4. Prof. Katharina Schramm, University of Bayreuth, Germany
5. Prof. Jana Hönke, University of Bayreuth, Germany

Summary of the Proposed Project

Studying the trajectory of a “knowledge state” in Africa is a challenging task. This is ironic in the sense that the institutionalization of science is the oldest research topic in the sociology science (Ben-David and Sullivan 1975), going as back as the 1920's. Interestingly, the scholarly interest in this topic led to a significant shift in the understanding of science, which breaks with the scientism (Kleinman 2005) of the old paradigm and defines science as “an institution based on a set of values and standards to which scientists are expected to conform” (Vink 2007:38). Most importantly, studies on this topic have shown that the rise and consolidation of scientific institutions in Western societies can be explained by mainly state sponsorship, thanks to its perceived value for the political leadership. In contrast to this background about science in Western societies,

there is a gap in the literature on science in Africa regarding the status of scientific institutions in society; little is known about the relationship between scientific institutions and the other institutions of the social system –particularly the state, whose sponsorship has been shown to be historically instrumental, elsewhere, to the institutionalization of science. The few research on science in Africa have focused on scientific groups –universities, laboratories, networks, teams, and knowledge systems (e.g., Geissler and Molyneux 2011; Sandra Harding 2011), as if they were isolated from the larger social system. Without, however, the understanding of the articulations of these scientific institutions and the other institutions of the “total social and cultural situation in which they find themselves” (Crosland1967:x), the dynamics of scientific communities and their activities can hardly be understood. The present research project sets out to contribute to fill this gap in the literature on science in Africa, by looking at the configuration processes between the state and science in two African countries, namely Burkina Faso and Senegal.