

CASSAF: Inventory of Arts/Social Science Creations in African Studies, 2024-2025

Background and origin of the project

The [Scientific Interest Group](#) (“[Groupement d’Interêt Scientifique](#)” in French, GIS) “[African Studies](#)” is a network, supported by the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), linking laboratories and researchers in the humanities and social sciences whose work focuses on Africa and African diasporas. Its main mission is to raise the profile of African studies in France and encourage exchanges and collaborations between researchers. The GIS has created directories to list [structures](#) and [people](#) working in the field of African Studies, notably in France, and organizes academic [meetings](#) (study days dedicated to young researchers, bi-annual national meetings). Another way of raising the profile of African studies research “in the making” is the annual [thesis prize](#), which supports the publication of original, innovative work.

With the CASSAF project (for *Créations Arts-Sciences Sociales en études Africaines* in French), the GIS “African Studies” now intends to take stock of individual and collective approaches between the arts and the human and social sciences in African studies in the French-, English- and Portuguese-speaking areas of the African continent and its diasporas. It thus extends its scope beyond universities and research institutions, to highlight projects that combine human and social science approaches with artistic approaches. Of course, collaborations between researchers and artists are nothing new¹. The academic field is destined to influence the whole of society, both through the questions it poses and the answers it can provide. Research in the humanities and social sciences, by definition, reacts to and questions what the social world has to offer, including the artistic productions that emerge from it. By the same token, artists have long been able to seize upon the work - and sometimes the approaches - of the humanities and social sciences to better interrogate cultural, political and social phenomena in their own mediums (from the audiovisual and visual arts to literature, dance and theater, among others). So it is hardly surprising that researchers and artists have been working together for many years, in a wide variety of ways. The aim of these collaborations has been not only to reach out beyond the academic and artistic spheres, but also to take a reflective and sensitive approach to a wide range of issues, particularly in the field of African studies.

Within the various disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, for example, fields have developed around audiovisual writing (in anthropology and sociology in particular, but also in geography and cultural studies). “Participatory” approaches, which experiment with forms of co-production of knowledge between

¹ The development of a bibliography on this topic is part of the objectives of the project.

researchers and informants, also often make use of tools from the artistic field (sensitive and/or participatory mapping, photo-elicitation, forum theatre, etc.). In these practices, which blur the boundaries between the moments of research, analysis/writing and restitution, it is ultimately the production of knowledge that is re-interrogated: who produces knowledge? What kind of knowledge? For which audiences? And for what purposes (dissemination of knowledge for scientific mediation purposes, sensitive sharing of experience, circulation of hypotheses to fuel new questions, etc.)?

The proliferation of arts/sciences creations in recent years, fuelled by a growing enthusiasm on the part of researchers and artists alike, and increasing recognition and valorization on the part of academic and cultural institutions, seems to go hand in hand with a growing complexity in the ways in which they are defined, assembled and restituted. This is evidenced by the multiplication of terms used to describe them: "research-creation" and "co-creation" (which would seem to pursue an artistic and academic approach in equal measure), "alternative writing" (which would seem to consist more of artistic proposals for the restitution, and sometimes production, of research) or "innovative writing" (which would, however, do away with the many examples of hybridization and experimentation which, by definition, nourish the scientific approach in general). In practice, these various collaborative projects operate on the basis of partnerships between researchers and artists, the contours and positions of which are fluid (when these two "roles" are taken on by the same person, for example), which will do much to enhance their heuristic richness and appeal, particularly for the general public.

Project objectives

The aim of the CASSAF project is threefold:

1. Mapping arts/social sciences creations in the field of African studies

The aim is to identify creations combining the arts and social sciences in African Studies on the entire African continent, taking particular account of differences in linguistic contexts between English-speaking, French-speaking and Portuguese-speaking areas. This inventory will also take into account the place given to the dialogue between arts and sciences in the teaching of African studies (on the African continent and elsewhere in the world). Without claiming to be exhaustive, this project aims to lay the foundations for an open inventory of past and present collaborations.

2. Building a common library for theoretical and methodological reflection

The aim here is to accompany this inventory of arts/science creations in African studies with a review of existing literature on alternative/innovative writing, research-creation and arts/humanities and social sciences collaborations in general. The aim is to take note of the debates that nourish artists and researchers who engage in these approaches. Our aim is not to establish a methodological guide or dictate standards, but rather to provide resources for all those embarking on arts/science collaborations, a fortiori in the field of African studies.

3. Asking questions that explore the ethical, institutional and political issues involved in these creations

We realize that arts/science collaborations highlight issues that the academic world is often reluctant to tackle head-on, even though they are crucial and urgent to grasp, at a time of debate around the decolonization of knowledge in African studies.

For example:

- the subjectivity and positionality of the researcher and artist
- the place of emotions and sensitivity in research
- the work schedules and rhythms
- the modalities of partnerships between researchers, artists and academic and cultural institutions in the North and South (which may sometimes involve forms of extractivism)
- authorship (who is the author, what are his/her legal, intellectual and moral rights?)
- dissemination (how are the symbolic - and sometimes material - gains from these collaborations distributed? How does *open access* bring new considerations about what is shared, shareable, reusable, etc.?)
- remuneration (how should these creations and their circulation be financed? According to which status, which geographical area and which administrative procedures?)

By providing some answers, or at least some insights based on concrete experiences, we hope to stimulate reflection on what it means to produce and co-produce knowledge when these collaborations, which are intended to be horizontal, operate in a context of structural asymmetry between North and South.

Implementation

The CASSAF project is supported by a steering committee, a scientific committee and a post-doctorate researcher recruited for the project and integrated into the steering committee. As a first step (2024-2025), we will produce a state-of-the-art report presenting the results of the research carried out by the postdoc researcher,

together with a summary of the initial reflections conducted in connection with this state-of-the-art report. This inventory could be accompanied by a participatory online database - potentially in the form of an atlas or cartography - listing all the projects identified at this initial stage. The inventory and database could also be used as a basis for academic and artistic publications and events, particularly for the general public (symposium/study day, collective work/journal issue, exhibition, etc.).

At the end of this first stage of review and reflection, the GIS “African Studies” will continue its support for arts/sciences creations, for example by accompanying their production and promotion to the African studies community in France and internationally.

The role of the steering committee is to coordinate the project (by contributing to the state of the art bibliography and the inventory, notably by participating in the definition of the data collection protocol, in collaboration with the post-doctoral researcher). It is made up of :

- Sarah Andrieu (anthropologist, Université Côte d'Azur/URMIS and GIS)
- Kadiatou Barry (GIS steering support officer)
- Chloé Buire (geographer, CNRS/LAM)
- Camille Desile (digital humanities engineer, LAM/USR Afrique au Sud du Sahara)
- Noémie Goux (geographer, Passages/UBM, member of the GIS young researchers' committee)
- Emilie Guitard (anthropologist, CNRS/PRODIG and GIS)
- Stéphanie Lima (geographer, INU Albi/LISST and GIS)
- Hervé Pennec (historian, CNRS/IMAF-Aix and GIS)
- Marian Nur Goni (art historian/Université Paris 8)
- The postdoctoral researcher recruited by GIS

The scientific committee, made up of a dozen researchers and artists invited by the steering committee, will meet three times. Its role will be to contribute to the framing of the state of the arts (boundaries of arts/science collaborations, sharing of personal experiences of collaboration) and to reflections on epistemological, methodological and ethical issues. Members of the scientific committee also act as watchdogs for collaborations likely to be included in the database, and as ambassadors for the CASSAF project in the academic and artistic spheres.

Calendar of events:

- July 4, 2024: Announcement of the project as part of the 2024 “Meeting of the African Studies in France” (REAF), Nice
- November 1, 2024: Start of postdoc contract
- Mid-to-late November 2024: 1st scientific committee meeting

- End of March 2025: 2nd scientific committee meeting
- Early to mid-July 2025: 3rd scientific committee meeting
- July 31, 2025: End of postdoc contract
- Early 2026: Publication of the inventory and online launch of the participatory database, accompanied by an academic/artistic event

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