

Jan Jansen
Seminar Iconisation and Ethnography

Bio

Jan Jansen (1962) is lecturer of anthropology at the Leiden University. He has published monographs on Mande artisans (griots, and blacksmiths), and divination and numerous bilingual, critical text editions of Mande oral traditions, with a special attention for the Sunjata epic. He is a founding editor of *African Sources for African History* (published by Brill, Leiden), and *Mande Worlds* (published by Lit Verlag, Munster).

Abstract

The medium makes the icon – Sunjata in the public sphere in Mali and beyond

Sunjata is considered by numerous Keita lineages in Mali and Guinea to be their ancestor. His name was mentioned for the first time by 14th century Arab writers, who picture him as the founder of medieval Mali Empire, which foundation was ‘reconstructed’ by 20th century historians to the 13th century. I will argue that, given Sunjata’s prominent and continuing presence in several ‘media’ (academic publication, professional training for schoolmasters, the land question of the 1990s, the present-day quest for ‘intangible heritage’) can only be understood if he is considered to be a (cultural) icon.