

Wouter van Beek
Seminar Iconisation and Ethnography

Bio

Wouter van Beek is Professor of Anthropology of Religion at Tilburg University and Senior Researcher at the African Studies Centre. He has performed extensive research in West Africa, first in North Cameroon (Kapsiki/Higi), then in Mali, among the Dogon, for over more than a generation. He has published on the religion, ecology and social systems of both groups, and has also worked in Namibia and South Africa. Thematically, not only religion, but also tourism is one of his publication topics, as both groups are visited by tourists, though in different ways and frequencies. The tourist angle will be very important in this panel, as will be art.

Abstract

Icons and the hegemony of a semiotic field: the case of the Dogon

Iconisation refers to the emergent dominance of a sign within a given semantic field. Following Charles Peirce, signs can be signals, icons or symbols. Signals have a restricted meaning, following rather precise conventions, like traffic signs. Icons are signs in which the content resembles its meaning, often metonymically (*pars pro toto*) or in general representation. Symbols have a more fluid connection between sign and meaning, with in principle an arbitrary link between form and meaning.

The use of the term 'icon' in sociology/anthropology implies that a given person – as is most often the case – is gaining dominance over a particular semantic field: Elvis Presley as the icon of pop music (or of continual resurrection ...), or recently Michael Jackson. The figure is ascribed hegemonic status in that particular domain. In fact, this is a mirror of the semiotic meaning of icon: a person's hegemony in that field implies not that he looks 'like' the field, but that the field is accruing his likeness: his image has become the image of the field.

So the shift from semiotics to sociology implies the shift of the visual likeness of the sign towards a hegemonic situation in which the field cannot be imagined beyond the hegemonic figure. In the first case the icon looks like the field, in the second the field looks like the icon.

The Dogon seem to have such a hegemonic position in the field of 'indigenous people' in West Africa, actually in several fields. One is tourism, an activity that on the whole follows iconic trends, one is art and traffic in art, and one is visual representation, like photographers. In this contribution the pathway will be sketched by which the Dogon have become the icon of West African indigenous culture, through its peculiar history of French colonization, the pre-empting of Dogon culture through early anthropological expeditions, and the explosion of the mythical component in the Griaule days.