

Emiliano Minerba

Knowledge is rhythm

Versifying philosophy in Wolof Sufi poetry

DE GRUYTER

Emiliano Minerba is currently a researcher in African Literatures at *LLACAN – Langage, Langues et Cultures d'Afrique* (CNRS – UMR 8135). His research interests vary from Wolof Islamic poetry to studies on versification in several African literatures.

ISBN 978-3-11-223363-4
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-223364-1
DOI <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112233641>



Dieses Werk ist lizenziert unter der Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Lizenz. Weitere Informationen finden Sie unter <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

© 2026 publiziert von Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston
Dieses Buch ist als Open-Access-Publikation verfügbar über www.degruyter.com.

www.degruyter.com

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 818343).

Contents

Towards philology and poetics, again and again — VII

Dalilu — XI

Dalilu — translation — XIII

1 Introduction — 1

2 The Quest for Authentic Knowledge — 7

- 2.1 Islam in Senegambia throughout history — 7
- 2.1.1 Sufi proselytism in pre-colonial Senegambia — 9
- 2.1.2 The birth of the Muridiyya — 13
- 2.2 Muridism in thought and literature — 16
- 2.2.1 Islamic poetry in Senegambia — 17
- 2.2.2 Knowledge as action — 19
- 2.2.3 Semantics of *ma'rifa* — 23
- 2.2.4 Semantics of *xam-xam* — 28
- 2.2.5 *Xam-xam* as *ma'rifa* in practice — 32
- 2.3 Methodology: the experience of the text — 33
- 2.3.1 Poetry: knowledge, art and action — 35
- 2.3.2 The text as a living body — 42

3 Samba Jaara Mbay — 45

- 3.1 A biographical sketch — 45
- 3.2 Embodied knowledge: *Layoo naak réew mi* — 49
- 3.3 The *šayḥ* and the society: *Gànnara* — 54
- 3.4 Sound inaccessible knowledge: *Ġaqb al-Mağḍūb* — 64
- 3.5 The sea and the fish: *Boroom Tuubaa* — 76
- 3.6 Conclusive remarks — 83

4 Moor Kayre — 85

- 4.1 Biographical sketch — 85
- 4.2 A neglected poet — 86
- 4.3 Between *ta'lim* and *tarbiya* — 90
- 4.4 Between Muḥammad and Bamba — 94
- 4.5 Feeling *ḥaqīqa* — 104
- 4.5.1 Echoing concepts: *dikr* and *fikr* — 104

VI — Contents

4.5.2 More echoes: *xalam, xol, xel* — **109**

5 Mbay Jaxate — 125

5.1 A biographical sketch — **125**

5.2 Poetics of *persona-verità* — **127**

5.3 The self, the words, the actions: *Ma tàgg Bamba* — **129**

5.4 Pushing to meaning, pushing to action — **137**

5.5 Knowledge and action: a manifesto — **142**

5.6 Praise-song, praise-philosophy — **149**

6 Muusaa Ka — 168

6.1 The poet's life — **169**

6.2 The poetics of *tempestas* — **170**

6.3 Outer and inner nature: *Njuuj-Njaaj* — **188**

7 From verse to *xam-xam* — 211

7.1 From *ma'rifa* to *xam-xam* — **211**

7.2 Poetry and the embodiment of knowledge — **219**

References — 227

Name Index — 233

Wolof terms — 235

Arabic terms — 236

Towards philology and poetics, again and again

Roberto Gaudio

When I was asked to write a preface to this volume, my first reaction was to wonder why me; me, who, out of a certain caution, have always tried in my scholarly work to keep some distance from religious literature. My second thought turned to the title, *Knowledge is Rhythm*. This assertion, when associated with the religious domain — and keeping clearly in mind the work of analysis and translation carried out by Emiliano Minerba — ended up linking my reflection on this book to that of a French intellectual: Henri Meschonnic. It was at that point that I truly decided to write this preface. I realized that, although this volume is among the works of Minerba that are furthest from my own area of expertise, it nevertheless preserves a deep proximity: our scholarly trajectories and, above all, our projects concerning the discipline itself are profoundly aligned. I am referring here to an aesthetic approach to textual interpretation and to a philological attention that recognizes the text as possessing a non-negotiable centrality.

It does not matter that Minerba does not explicitly use or cite Meschonnic: the absence of such a reference does not diminish his work in any way. Minerba and Meschonnic in fact converge on a fundamental point, which concerns the priority of sense (also understood as perception) over theory, that is, an inductive approach to the material to be investigated or analysed, as well as the decisive importance they both attribute to rhythm — an importance that emerges clearly not only at the level of theory, but also in Minerba's concrete analyses of the stylistic structures, where rhythm functions as a vehicle of knowledge and, at the same time, as a means through which the verse itself is learned, whether formally or informally, rather than as a mere formal ornament.

Ni la théorie du rythme, ni la théorie du sens, ni celle du sujet ne sont constituées. Mais jamais aucune théorie n'est constituée. L'erreur initiale serait d'attendre, pour l'une, que l'autre soit plus assurée. Aucune des trois n'est un préalable à l'autre. Sauf à attendre indéfiniment. Si le sens, le sujet, le rythme sont liés, travailler à l'un c'est les travailler ensemble. (Meschonnic 1982: 78)

This convergence is not accidental. Rhythm is not an external form, nor an ornament of discourse: rhythm is flesh, and flesh is life. As such, it does not require preliminary theories or conceptual justifications in order to exist. Rhythm happens; it precedes and traverses discourse and communication, and it is precisely for this reason that it constitutes the place where knowledge and subjectivity become embodied. It is in this sense that one of the central passages of Minerba's book should be read, where, on p. 68, he writes:

The identification here is a clear example of embodiment in application: the body of the knower, in this case the poet, becomes the body of the *persona-verità*, the Master, and by that, that body becomes the knowledge of the Master itself. It is worth noting that, if one accepts the two concepts of *persona-verità* and embodiment as ways to transmit knowledge, then it is absolutely equal and indifferent to say that “the knower embodies his master” or “the knower embodies the knowledge of his master”. According to this perspective, we do not have knowledge, but we are knowledge; consequently, any distinction between the knower and the known matter is a confusing abstraction.

Here the text not only thematizes the body, but assumes it as the very locus of knowledge. The text becomes body, but the body, in turn, becomes knowledge. This may appear as a vulgarization of Merleau-Ponty: I do not possess a body, I am one. In this conception of embodying knowledge, Minerba’s approach and the religious horizon of the *Wolofal* texts resemble one another. Minerba arrives at this position through hermeneutics (maybe Ricœur) and through his studies on the Swahili poet of Ukerewe Euphrase Kezilahabi (Kezilahabi 1985; Gaudioso 2019): if the text is body and the body is what we are, then distance disappears; poetry, with its knowledge and its rhythm, becomes our blood.

At this point, one might legitimately ask why, then, such centrality should be granted to texts — which might appear as “things” — rather than focusing more directly on bodies, persons, and society. Why insist on the centrality of the text when the experience conveyed by these texts is eminently embodied?

First of all, a necessary clarification is in order: the text is not a thing, it is not an object, and it does not belong to the realm of material goods. Texts belong to the immaterial goods of every culture, whether written or oral; if they are not remembered, read, or listened to — and if through this practice they do not become flesh and consciousness — they simply are not. Only in this latter case do we begin to treat them as objects, believing that having written, printed, or digitally recorded them may preserve them (something I sincerely hope!). But texts are not their supports: texts are neither paper nor ink, neither books nor megabytes. Texts have different supports and modes of registration: memory, writing (by hand or print), analog recording, or more recent digital forms of various kinds. These forms certainly modify the ways in which texts are experienced, but the human being has not evolved further, and it still remains to be demonstrated that reading or listening to Giacomo Leopardi has a wholly different effect today than it did in the past on our flesh and our consciousness. The text is that fixed linguistic unity, constituted and woven so as to hold together.

A second answer comes to us from the Senegalese world. In a well-known passage by Birago Diop (1960: 64) we read:

Écoute plus souvent
Les choses que les êtres

These verses, which open and structure the poem like a refrain, have often been misunderstood in early translations, which obscured their literal meaning by domesticating them to a Western worldview. English and Italian translations have preferred to render the passage as “*listen more to the things / than to the words spoken*” (see Soyinka 1995; John and Wake 1964). This choice probably derives from the difficulty, within a dualistic framework, of accepting that a text considered representative of African spirituality could invite one to “listen more to things than to beings”. Perhaps the first translators fell into the following misunderstanding of these lines: they supposed that beings are superior to things; in Western philosophy, from Plato to Kant, being is “the idea/the noumenon” (but also “being” and “subject/object” in Scholasticism and its interpretation of Aristotle), while the thing is its earthly manifestation. Within this framework, Diop’s invitation is unsettling: it does not devalue being, but rather removes the thing from a position of ontological inferiority (see Gaudioso 2025). The “thing” — the text, one might say — thus becomes a place of listening and of knowledge.

A third answer, more strictly disciplinary, concerns the very craft of those who work in literary studies. Why grant centrality to texts? Because this is precisely what a literary investigation does. What other tools, indeed, does the scholar of literature possess? Is it possible and legitimate to investigate these texts from other perspectives? Certainly. Every discipline is partial and tells us something. But if our aim is to interrogate their textuality — that is, why these discourses constitute themselves as texts, whether oral or written — then we must turn to philology. If, instead, we wish to understand why a language turns back upon itself in a pre-communicative act, then we must turn to what Ingeborg Bachmann, in her Frankfurt lectures (2006), claimed she could not even properly define: poetics. Philology and poetics are not ancillary disciplines within literary studies, but constitute their very foundation: the former guarantees the critical existence of the text, the latter renders intelligible its functioning as an artwork. Without philology there is no study of the text; without poetics there is no study of the art of texts.

Once again, Meschonnic comes to our aid when he states that “la critique doit être théorie du sens, et de ce qui, dans le sens, déborde le sens, où agit le rythme” (Meschonnic 1982: 60). It is precisely for this reason that Minerba proposes a literary study of *Wolofal* texts. His literary analysis does not reduce these texts to documents, but restores to them their poetic rationale. In this sense, *Knowledge is Rhythm* reverses a now well-established tendency in Africanist studies: instead of applying sociological, cultural, historical, political, religious, or philosophical frameworks to literature, Minerba performs the opposite movement. He takes texts that would normally be analysed for their religious or philosophical value and subjects them to a rigorous literary analysis.

This does not mean that other disciplines are absent from the interpretative horizon of the volume. On the contrary, philosophical discussion is clearly present in the exegetical work; the historical dimension emerges in the succession of figures and poetics; and comparative perspectives are not lacking. What is striking, however, is the rigour with which these tools are employed. Interdisciplinarity in this book does not serve to dilute disciplinary rigour, but to strengthen the analysis of textual matter. It is also for this reason that this volume is destined to occupy a significant place not only in African studies, but in literary studies more broadly.

Finally, there is a constitutive element of Minerba's work that goes beyond what has been said so far and deserves to be made explicit: his relationship with Moudou Bitèye Faye. This relationship cannot be reduced to that between researcher and informant. It is rather a master–disciple relationship, in which the researcher accepts becoming a student. It is also, profoundly, a philological relationship: Faye is not an informant of the language, but an interpreter of the text in its artistic, religious, cultural, and linguistic integrity. Through this apprenticeship, Minerba develops a practice of slow reading (and thus philological), attentive, word by word, which informs the entire methodological framework of the book.

In this sense, *Knowledge is Rhythm* is not merely a study of Murid *Wolofal* poetry, but a broader reflection on what it means to read, interpret, and know texts — and through them. It is perhaps precisely this quality that makes the book, despite the specificity of its object, remarkably relevant for anyone seeking to understand Senegal, and urgent with regard to the questions that today traverse literary criticism and African studies alike.

Roberto Gaudio
Tenure-track Assistant Professor
University of Naples “L’Orientale”