

## Reconstructing the Ancient History of Drama through Afrocentric Lenses and AI Tools

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### Abstract

Afrocentrics have argued against the attribution of the origin of ancient drama history to the West. In the literary and drama sphere, the authorship of Aristotle's *The Poetics* and Plato's *The Republic* remains attacked by the Afrocentrics. They (Afrocentrics) posit that the origin of ancient drama history attributed to the West is a product of Western-European hegemony. Afrocentrics refute the Greek authorship of *The Poetics* and *The Republic*, and this has presented a conundrum in the search for the true origin of ancient drama history. This reality necessitates the need for drama critics to investigate history and ascertain the validity of Afrocentric positions. History is constituted by voluminous data, and it is often onerous and cumbersome to sift through history in a bid to resolve a contention. This paper argues that AI and several AI tools can help to make the analysis of history less cumbersome, offering an opportunity for drama critics to easily interrogate historical data as they search for the true origin of ancient drama history. Utilising documentary observation methodology, this paper highlights the benefits of employing AI tools in the research and discourse on the origin of ancient drama history. It was realised in this paper that in collaboration with the use of AI tools to interrogate ancient historical data, researcher's extent of personal study helps to validate conclusions arrived at by AI tools. This paper recommends that AI should be consciously but carefully incorporated into drama research as the world progresses technologically.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence (AI), Drama, History, Ancient, Afrocentric.

### Introduction

This paper addresses the controversial position of Afrocentrics regarding the origin of ancient drama history. The Afrocentrics, proponents of the Afrocentric ideology argue that the African agency ought to be prioritized during analytical discourse within the context of history and culture (Balakrishnan, 2020). Afrocentric positions emerge out of the belief that ancient Africa with Egypt as its flagpole nation is the bedrock of world civilization. This position of the Afrocentrics have been viewed as controversial and outrightly debunked by scholars who read the arguments of the Afrocentrics as the romanticization of mythical stories built on the motivational works of Black rights advocates such as Marcus Garvey (Lefkowitz, 1996). Afrocentrism as a body of ideology has developed hinging on the prioritization of Africa as the earliest destination of human civilization in the world.

The validity of the positions and counter-positions of scholars regarding the topical issue of ancient Africa as the source of world civilization and by extension – industrialization, evidently

lies in the conclusions that historical data can help observers to arrive at. However, there is the constricting problem of the voluminous nature of historical data, which can be a significant hindrance to arriving at a helpful and assertive conclusion on the issue at hand. Therefore, any channel that the challenge of interrogating voluminous historical data passes through to reach a resolve is important, and it helps to eliminate the onerous task of sifting through history. AI (Artificial Intelligence) tools offer platforms that can be used in historical studies to ease the task of scrutinizing quantum of historical data, saving time that can be invested in other endeavours. Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to computer aided tools which function as a source of help to make carrying out tasks that could be otherwise onerous for humans, easy. The use of Machine Learning and Deep Learning (an aspect of Machine Learning) to derive conclusions from a broad range of historical materials today, highlights the value that AI brings to the study of historical materials.

In the arts, AI presents benefits that continue to accrue growth and development to the field of study, though this reality is not limited to the arts alone. Specifically, the humanities are described today in the view of the influence of AI as the “digital humanities” (Donovan, 2023, p. 4) and this exemplifies the coalescence of computer backed innovations with ideas that are utilised in the arts. The inculcation of AI tools into drama studies therefore contributes to the digitization of the field of study, thereby exemplifying drama studies as belonging to the “digital humanities,” in this era of rapid infusion of technological contributions to the humanities.

This paper highlights the intellectual controversy raised by Afrocentrics, while also emphasising the manner through which the validity of the controversial ideology can be easily ascertained. The raging controversy between Afrocentrics and their opponents concerning the role of Africa and its contributions to the foundations of ancient knowledge, presents an opportunity to employ AI in a bid to analyse a broad range of historical data that can help to validate or invalidate the arguments of the Afrocentrics. The value of the application of AI to this debate is enormous, particularly for Africa and African theatre scholars, because the opportunity to easily interrogate a broad range of historical data can help to put in proper perspective the contributions or not of Africa to global theatre knowledge. Thereby bringing some measure of conclusion to the controversy generated by the position of the Afrocentrics.

### **The Place of Artificial Intelligence in Historical Data Analysis**

In the process of handling and analysing historical data, it is a fact that historians are often confronted with a large volume of data which they must sift through to arrive at a conclusion. The process of perusing these historical materials requires great human effort which introduces stress that lead to a defective analysis of data. The existence of AI with the capacity to make work easy during historical research has certainly had some impact on the interrogation of historical data. Spina (2023) notes that:

Historical research - since Herodotus – is based on a closed reading methodology and the analysis of a limited number of documents. Numerous digitisation projects – like the collection of the Library of congress with millions of newspaper pages and the Finnish Archives’ Court records dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century – pushed historians to start using machine learning (deep neural networks, in particular) to organise and examine historical documents... ChatGPT is an AI system constructed upon models that enable it to generate syntactically accurate texts and statements... Nowadays, digital historians have at their disposal three different HTR (Handwritten Text Recognition) platforms (i.e, tranScriptorium, eScriptorium, Transkribus), which aim for the same goal while being structurally different. (pp. 127 - 128)

The assertion by Spina exemplifies the importance of AI in historical research, stating AI systems that are helpful in the cumbersome work that historians do. There is no mention of the manner in which AI tools interact with oral repositories of knowledge in the assertion by Spina. However it is clear from the scholar's position above that historical materials in the form of texts, statements and thus – physical systems of storing knowledge are open to being subjected to analysis by AI tools. The close reading and application of methodology that historians engage in, derives immense help from computer assisted systems which aid in increasing work achievement and reduce stress that is often attributed to analysing a broad range of data. The availability of several AI platforms that can help in historical data analysis like Spina has highlighted above, reveals the extent to which Artificial Intelligence has been adopted in the field of history. Donovan (2023) states that:

Historians say the application of modern computer science to the distant past helps draw connections across a broader swath of the historical record than would otherwise be possible, correcting distortions that come from analyzing history one document at a time. (p. 2)

Donovan's assertion helps us to locate the importance and value of AI in the society, with emphasis on the role that it plays within field of historical research. His position reminds us of the concrete fact that AI has come to occupy an important aspect of historical data analysis by helping to ease the work load involved in achieving such analysis. With the controversy sprouting from the ideology of Afrocentrics that there is need to disregard efforts by European scholars to appropriate ancient knowledge systems from Africa as theirs, there is need to interrogate African historiography. AI tools such as tranScriptorium, eScriptorium, Transkribus are argued to be efficient platforms through which text based data on African historiography can be interrogated. Polygraphs, Voice Stress Analysis and Speech Processing techniques AI tools are oral or audio based AI platforms that can be used to analyse speech based historical data to ascertain their validity. The import of the Afrocentric position lies in countering centuries of materials that has been produced and continues to be produced, specifically within the field of drama, which prioritises the West (Europe) as the source and origin of ancient drama history in the world. Europeans have not sat idle and allowed such credit simply taken away from them, and thus the Afrocentric position has generated heated arguments presenting claims and counter-claims on their position. This has led to the controversy that is poignant to the concern of this paper. The value that AI offers in compiling and cross-referencing historical data can be helpful in addressing the controversy between the Afrocentrics and their detractors.

### **Afrocentric Ideology and Prevalent Counter-Positions**

Afrocentrism in contemporary scholarship has found its way into the curriculum of higher institutions of learning such as Temple University USA among others, through the knowledge gleaned from the work of scholars like: John Henrik Clarke and specifically Molefi Kete Asante. The Afrocentric ideology has and continues to receive rebuttals from scholars such as Mary Lefkowitz, Guy Rogers and Frank Snowden Jnr, among others. The controversial nature of the arguments of the Afrocentrics cannot be dismissed, considering that it argues to be an ideological theory that is against the decentering of the Black man and emphasizes pushing the Black Man away from the periphery and marginalized areas hitherto occupied in academic and historical discourse, to a centre position.

The Black race and the Black man have prior to the emergence of Afrocentricity, been described as signifying a people and race that had no valuable history and thus, no significant contribution to the world. Therefore presenting the theoretical ideology of the Afrocentrics has raised a lot of arguments and counter-arguments that still rages on up until today. Based on the

nature of diverse involvements in the pursuit for understanding the importance of ancient Africans and their contributions to the origin of global knowledge, there are several definitions of the concepts of Afrocentrism. The idea of Afrocentrism is an intellectual bloc that houses Afrocentricity and its supporting consciousness. Nairuta et al. (2024) asserts about Afrocentricity that it:

... challenges the orientation of history that is foreign to the history of the African subject; it demands an epistemological location that places the critic/scholar inside the African experience and African ideals and values at the centre of inquiry framed by African codes, paradigms, symbols, motifs, and myths, which give meaning to the history of the African subject and a sense of place in the global arena. By breaking free from the historical constraints of the fixed European historicism, Afrocentricity generates new interpretations, new criticisms, and ultimately new knowledge. (p. 246)

The questioning of the West as the origin of rationalism, and the movement to inculcate Africa as a powerful source of influence on early Greek civilization by Afrocentrics is an attempt to unfetter themselves from the shackles of European historicism, within which their existence and being as Africans have been defined for a long time. In the spirit of Homi K. Bhabha and other postcolonial and poststructuralist theorists, the Afrocentrics emphasise the effects of colonial actions and the need to analyse structures often imposed by powerful Western sources. Afrocentrics delineate themselves from the marginalization that the Black race has been attributed with for a long time, delving into ancient history to redefine themselves and promote the historic value that they believe Black people have always had in the world. Okoye (2023) gives a broad personal understanding of the Afrocentric ideology when he states that:

The Afrocentric movement is a series of Activities by concerned African and African-American Scholars (AAS) educators and directed towards achieving the particular end of ensuring that the African heritage and culture, its history and contribution to world civilization and scholarship are reflected in the curricula on every level of academic instruction. Advocates of Afrocentrism demand a reconstruction and rewriting of the whole panorama of human history in its account of the origin of mankind, the origin of philosophy, science, medicine, agriculture, architecture, etc. (p. 29)

Noting that Afrocentricity has been interrogated and promoted by many Afrocentric scholars, Chawane (2016) states that what is common among the several attempts by Afrocentric scholars as they try to define Afrocentricity “is that they all call for a change in the way that the world has been viewed, a change that should encompass all attributes of human existence, with emphasis on the centrality of African experience” (p. 80). It can be deduced from the positions of the Afrocentrics and the ideology of Afrocentricity that has been highlighted so far in this paper that Africa is at the centre of the Afrocentric mind frame. There is a conscious effort made by the Afrocentrics to position Africa as a global source of ancient knowledge systems, thus debunking the widely held perceptions that Africa is a “dark continent” with no value to offer to the world. Chawane puts it more succinctly with the assertions that represent the mind-set of the Afrocentrics thus:

The Greeks can remain firmly in control of whatever cultural legacy they bring to the world. What Afrocentrists firmly believe is that it is important to demonstrate that ancient Egyptians must be seen in the correct light, which is that ancient Egypt was before ancient Greece as ancient Greece was before Rome. (2016, p. 84)

The arguments and positions of the Afrocentrics have not developed out of nowhere but have been built on the research and writings of scholars such as: George G. M. James, Chancellor Williams and Martin Bernal; among others. In George G. M. James’ *Stolen Legacy: Greek*

*Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy* (2023), James asserts scathing postulations upon which the Afrocentrics have further built their arguments. Among his several assertions, some of the prominent ones include his observation that:

As one attempts to read the history of Greek philosophy, one discovers a complete absence of essential information concerning the early life and training of the so-called Greek philosophers, from Thales to Aristotle. No writer or historian profess to know anything about their early education. All they tell us about them consists of (a) a doubtful date and place of birth and (b) their doctrines; but the world is left to wonder who they were and from what source they got their early education, and would naturally expect that men who rose to the position of a Teacher among relatives, friends and associates, would be well-known, not only by them, but by the whole community. (p. 14)

James raises some plausible points above, which prompts critics to look deeper in a bid to understand the true position of the authorship of certain philosophies by Greek scholars. He also observes that:

The term Greek philosophy, to begin with is a misnomer, for there is no such philosophy in existence. The ancient Egyptians had developed a very complex religious system, called the Mysteries, which was also the first system of salvation. . . The history of Aristotle's life, has done him far more harm than good, since it carefully avoids any statement relating to his visit to Egypt, either in his own account or in company with Alexander the Great, when he invaded Egypt... Another point of considerable interest to be accounted for was the attitude of the Athenian government towards this so-called Greek philosophy, which it regarded as foreign in origin and treated it accordingly. Only a briefly study of history is necessary to show that Greek philosophers were undesirable citizens, who throughout the period of their investigations were victims of relentless persecution, at the hands of the Athenian government. Anaxagoras was imprisoned and exiled; Socrates was executed; Plato was sold into slavery and Aristotle was indicted and exiled; while the earliest of them all, Pythagoras, was expelled from Croton in Italy. Can we imagine the Greeks making such an about turn, as to claim the very teachings which they had at first persecuted and openly rejected? (pp. 7 - 8)

We have copiously quoted James to reveal his discontent with the Eurocentric position that alienates Africa from the credits it deserves as an ancient source of influence to the world knowledge system. James raises intriguing questions concerning Eurocentric claims of ancient knowledge systems. His arguments and positions correlate with the positions of Martin Bernal who wrote *Black Athena* (1987).

However, the positions and postulations of ideologies upon which the Afrocentrics have built their ideas, have met oppositions at the hands of their detractors. The effect of Afrocentric thought is that credits of ancient philosophical thoughts that they argue to have originated from Africa such as *The Poetics* and *The Republic* attributed to Europe ought to shift back to Africa. This they (Afrocentrics) believe will help to strip Africa of the denigrating description as a "dark continent" and thus would shine light on Africa as a continent of innate value and essence. Mary Lefkowitz currently stands as the most prominent scholar against the arguments of the Afrocentrics. She edited a compendium of work titled: *Black Athena Revisited* (1996) alongside Guy Rogers, which was essentially written to counter the arguments initiated by Bernal in his book. In *Black Athena Revisited* scholars opposing the position of the Afrocentrics wrote against assertions that Afrocentrism has promoted over time. Lefkowitz and Rogers (1996) begin the book with the note that:

Few professional classicists in the 1980s would have imagined that the English-speaking world would take such wide interest in another amateur attempt – this time much more systematic and extensive – to discover the true extent of Greece’s debt to Egypt and the civilizations of the near East. (p. ix)

Apart from referring to Bernal’s work as amateur and the works of the Afrocentrics as “myth,” Lefkowitz and Rogers also take great effort to express the implausibility of the Afrocentric arguments. Marcus Garvey is a poignant figure whose writings and ideological stand served as a launch pad for Afrocentric ideology. However, Lefkowitz (1996) rubbishes the validity of Garvey as a believable source. She notes that:

Marcus Garvey (1887 – 1940) the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, began to study history while he was a teenager in Jamaica, and he used his knowledge of Egyptian and African history to help promote racial emancipation . . . Garvey thought of history as a means of instilling self-confidence in a people who had lost faith in themselves and had been compelled to lose touch with their past . . . Garvey’s claims are not supported by the citation of any archaeological or linguistic data. It was not his purpose to assess the evidence objectively. He was not a historian; he had a use for the past. He needed the past to show that it was not the fault of Black people that they had no great historical achievements to look back on . . . (p. 7)

Lefkowitz attacks the foundations of Afrocentrism and calls readers and scholars alike to discredit the perceptions and arguments that are promoted by the Afrocentrics and their supporters. She goes more direct at George G. M. James, countering the arguments that he presented in his book. Lefkowitz notes that:

James suggests various ways in which the knowledge of the Egyptian mysteries could have been brought to Greece from Egypt. Certain Greek wise men studied there, such as Solon and Pythagoras. Because Aristotle had been his tutor, Alexander the Great gave the philosopher the money that he needed to buy books for his Academy in Athens. Other Afrocentric scholars have gone farther, implicating Aristotle in the takeover of Egyptian knowledge; not content with the notion that the Greeks simply failed to acknowledge the Egyptian sources of their wisdom . . . Not a single one of these assertions about cultural expropriation and scholarly dishonesty can be directly substantiated from ancient sources. . . (pp. 8 - 9)

Some of the counter-positions that have been made regarding the claims of the Afrocentrics are presented in this paper as headlined by Mary Lefkowitz, who is the most prominent among those who argue for attribution of ancient knowledge and rationalism to Greece and the West. Therefore, this reality of diverse perspectives on the origin of ancient knowledge and philosophy based on the arguments of Afrocentrics and those against them, presents a conundrum for scholars especially African scholars, particularly in the field of drama.

### **An Insight to Eurocentric and Afrocentric views of Drama**

In the literary field and the field of drama particularly, Ruth Finnegan has popularized the perception that Africa has no drama. This has pitched evolutionists set of scholars against the relativists, with the evolutionists supporting Finnegan and the relativists standing against her assertion. The argument of the evolutionist hinges on the point that Africa has quasi-drama and that this kind of drama only has potentials of what could be molded into full-fledged drama. Finnegan (2012) states that:

Though some writers have very positively affirmed the existence of native African drama (Traoré 1958, Delafosse 1916), it would perhaps be truer to say that in Africa,

in contrast to Western Europe and Asia, drama is not typically a wide-spread or a developed form. There are, however, certain dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena to be found . . . (p. 485)

Eurocentric view of art and African life that denigrate and describe Africans based on the Western standards is a motivation that has stimulated Afrocentrics to come up with their own ideology and philosophy that puts Africa in the centre and removes it from the periphery that agents of European hegemony ascribe it to. In a sharp criticism of positions such as Finnegan's and in relation to Afrocentric thoughts regarding drama in Africa, Enekwe (1981) in his paper: *Myth, Ritual and Drama in Igbo-Land* explains how African drama does not need to conform to Western standards.

The controversy that has brewed so far in drama studies as a result of the differing positions between the evolutionists and the relativists, which is connected to the disagreement on the origin of ancient philosophical knowledge between the Afrocentrics and their oppositions, deserves to be resolved. This is because a resolution can particularly help to decongest the study of drama, introducing more clarity to the field of knowledge. This resolution can only come however through the presentation of concrete facts, to reveal which of the different sides is dwelling more on myth and which is arguing based on facts. The facts that can help to arrive at this resolution lies essentially in historical data that exist in physical and oral forms.

#### **Artificial Intelligence Tools as Aids in Ancient Drama Historical Analysis**

AI tools have been highlighted in this study, which can be helpful in analysing text and statement based historical data that can reveal facts on the role or not of ancient Africa in the origin of drama. These texts often need to be fed into the AI tools and then they are analysed to discover correlations and distortions which help to highlight factual issues in the historical data. These AI tools help to reduce stress and fasten the work of the researcher. However oral historical data pose a different challenge as they cannot be fed into text based historical data analysis tools such as tranScriptorium, eScriptorium and others. However Artificial Intelligence platforms such as the Voice Polygraph tools can be fed oral historical data to ascertain the validity and truthfulness of the data. Polygraphs work on people, so in instances where the historical data is inherent in a person in oral form, the Polygraph can be used to ascertain the validity of the historical data presented by the person. Also Voice Stress Analysis and Speech Processing techniques AI tools presents alternatives to the use of Polygraphs, exploring the potential of audio feature tools to identify dishonesty (Kamal, Mohammed & Khalaf, 2024). These tools can be used to scrutinize historical oral based data in order to ascertain their validity and the extent of how factual they are.

Essentially this paper argues that AI tools can be helpful in analysing the text and oral components of African and European historiography. This can be done in order to ascertain the validity of the arguments that scholars have brought up, which has birthed the controversy regarding the place and role of Africa's contributions to the worlds philosophy and drama studies. AI has come to play a poignant role in the various field of knowledge. While African drama currently traces its nature and form to an etymology that is different from the Western drama, the arguments and propositions of the Afrocentrics now have called for an entirely different approach to the study of drama in Africa and across the world. For if the origin of ancient drama history attributed to the West comes from Africa, then what is the validity of the assertion made by Finnegan and her adherents?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be helpful in this regard to aid in the analysis and sifting through of historical data without human bias which can help to direct scholars to the extent of influence that ancient Africa had on ancient Greece with emphasis on drama. Currently, the arguments

between Western and African drama scholars do not thoroughly interrogate ancient African drama history, which is a task that can be more easily engaged in with the help of Computer Machine Learning and Computer Deep Learning capacities.

### Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a valuable resource that should be adopted in several fields of knowledge, such as theatre to help in the analysis of voluminous data that can provide problem solving insights within the field of knowledge. The advantage that it presents in being able to significantly assist in resolving the controversy that exist in dramatic studies concerning the contributions of Africa to ancient drama history, points to its immense importance. Thus it would be a significant growth to the field of drama if AI is consciously but carefully inculcated in order to promote the growth of knowledge and the revelation of concrete facts that can help to solidify ideological positions in the area of drama scholarship.

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### Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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