

Ti Manno: the haitian prophet

Abstract

This work explores the popular view of the constitution of the Haitian Konpa artist, “Ti Manno,” as a prophet, similar to Bob Marley, of the African masses on the island of Haiti. Using a structurationist, structural Marxist, understanding of consciousness constitution, phenomenological structuralism, I explore the origins of Haitian consciousness divided between, “the children of Pétion v. the children of Dessalines.” The former representing the racial-neoliberal identity and views of the mulatto/Arab/black elites; and the latter, the economic reform and social justice of Dessalines as articulated by the African masses in the ghettos, provinces, and mountains. This article suggests that the 1970s and 80s music of Ti Manno speaks to the latter against the ideological positions of the former.

Keywords: African-Americanization, vodou ethic and the spirit of communism, religiosity, black diaspora, dialectical; anti-dialectical, phenomenological structuralism

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Introduction

Born Antoine Rossini Jean-Baptiste, Ti Manno, the Haitian Konpa singer dubbed “the Prophet” in the Haitian community, began his musical career in Goniaves, Haiti, where he had been born on May 30, 1953. Ti Manno is dubbed the prophet of the African masses in the Haitian community because the content of his lyrics sought to expose and deride the racial-class thinking that divided Haitians both in Haiti and in the United States, and made the African masses of the island the pariahs of the West (Glick-Schiller and Fournon, 1990). Many Haitians believe that his music not only speaks to both the discriminatory practices of the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks against the class, culture, and language of the African masses as well as a celebration of the latter, but they are a harbinger of the disastrous effects of the neoliberal (privatization, open markets, and deregulation) purposive-rationality of the former for the island. This work explores the constitution of the Haitian Konpas artist, “Ti Manno,” as a prophet of the African masses on the island of Haiti. Using a structurationist, structural Marxist, understanding of consciousness constitution, phenomenological structuralism, I explore the origins of Haitian consciousness divided between, “the children of Pétion v. the children of Dessalines.” The former representing the racial-neoliberal views of the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks; and the latter, the economic reform and social justice of Dessalines as articulated by the African masses. The article suggests that the music of Ti Manno speaks to the latter against the ideological positions of the former, and many of his prognostications (which predates him), i.e., deforestation, poverty, racial-class warfare, displacement, anarchy, and underdevelopment, under neoliberalism have come to plague the island and its people. Moreover, contrary to the position of Nina Glick-Schiller and Georges Fournon (1990) which views the lyrics of Ti Manno and the movement he inspired as representing the transnational identity of Haitian immigrants which allowed them to accommodate to and resist the realities of race and class in both Haiti and the United States. I conclude that such an interpretation undermines the African agential initiatives of the Haitian masses who have been trying to implement their worldview, the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism, unto the world since the originating moments of the Haitian Revolution, August 14th, 1791. Ti Manno embodies and articulates the cultural-class struggles of the Haitian masses against the purposive-rationality of the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks and their white allies. His Lyrics speak to the conditions, identity, and quest for economic and social justice of

the Haitian masses who are exploited by their own brothers and sisters who have allied themselves with their former colonial rulers, France, Canada, and the United States in order to implement neoliberal policies of the capitalist world-system that adversely affect the economy and social conditions of the masses in favor of the French speaking, Catholic/Protestant, factory/hotel-owners, and educated elites on the island.

Background of the problem

Traditional liberal bourgeois interpretations of the Haitian revolution attempt to understand its denouement through the sociopolitical effects of the French Revolution when the National Constituent Assembly (*Assemblée Nationale Constituante*) of France passed *la Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in August of 1789.¹⁻⁴ The understanding from this perspective is that the slaves, many of whom could not read or write French, understood the principles, philosophical and political principles of the Age of Enlightenment, set forth in the declaration and therefore yearned to be like their white masters, i.e., freemen seeking liberty, equality, and fraternity, the rallying cry of the French Revolution at the expense of their own African purposive-rationalities, which they constituted at Bois Caïman. Although, historically this understanding holds true for the mulattoes and free educated blacks or *Affranchis* who used the language of the declaration to push forth their efforts to gain liberty, equality, and fraternity with their white counterparts while holding on to slavery. This position is not an accurate representation for the masses of Africans who met at Bois Caïman and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, to some extent, who would assume the reins of the Revolution following the capture and death of Toussaint Louverture in 1802.

The *Affranchis*, embodied in the persons of Toussaint Louverture and Alexander Pétion, for examples, like their black American middle class counterparts in America, pushed for liberty, equality, and fraternity with their white counterparts at the expense of the Vodou, libertarian communist discourse, and Creole/kreyol language of the enslaved Africans who were not only discriminated against by whites but by the mulattoes and free blacks as well who sought to reproduce the French language, Catholic religion, and liberal capitalist laws of their former slavemasters on the island.³⁻⁵ In fact, what role should mulattoes and free blacks play in the Revolution is at the heart of a bitter disagreement between Toussaint and Dessalines. The latter, Dessalines, a *houngan*, vodou priest, given the brutality he experienced

as a slave, which stood in contradistinction to Toussaint's experience as a literate free Affranchis, wanted to kill many of the free and mulatto Affranchis along with the whites because Dessalines discerned that they played a role in their yearning to be like their white counterparts in oppressing the enslaved African masses, and given the opportunity they would reproduce the slavery system and the Absolute thesis or ideas of the whites on the island.^{1,2} Hence Dessalines promoted a form of economic reform, social justice, and racial slaughter grounded in "an eye for an eye" ethical discourse, "we have rendered to these true cannibals [(the whites)], war for war, crime for crime, outrage for outrage; yes, I have saved my country: I have avenged America" (Jean-Jacques Dessalines cited in Buck-Morss).³

It is not enough, however, to view Dessalines's discourse and discursive practices along the inverted black-nationalist and pan-Africanist lines of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm-X, Henry Highland Garnet, and W.E.B. Du Bois as highlighted by Susan Buck-Morss.³ His movement as highlighted in the discourses of the Haitian historian Byyaniah Bello and Vodouist, Max Beauvoir, was not only cultural and racial, but it was also class-based. Dessalines, prior to his assassination, was seeking land and economic reform, racial and cultural pride, and social justice for the African masses on the island "whose fathers were in Africa" at the expense, some believe, of the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois property owners on the island.^{2,5}

Toussaint Louverture, however, believed that the technical and governing skills of the *blancs* (whites) and Affranchis would be sorely needed to rebuild the country, along the lines of white civilization, after the revolution and the end of white rule on the island. In fact, Toussaint was not seeking to constitute the island of Haiti as an independent country, but sought to have the island remain a French colony without slavery.¹⁻⁵ Although Dessalines's position would become dominant after the capture of Toussaint in 1802, his (Dessalines's) assassination by a plot between the mulatto, Alexandre Pétion, and petit-bourgeois black, Henri Christophe, would see to it that the Affranchis's purposive-rationality would come to historically represent the ideals of the Haitian quest for independence and the Republic, which it produced.⁵ This purposive-rationality of the Affranchis, to adopt the Catholic/Protestant Ethic and spirit of capitalism of whites by recursively reorganizing and reproducing their language, French, religion, Catholic, and ways of being-in-the-world, liberalism and capitalism via the Haitian Republic and its ideological state apparatuses, is, however, a Western liberal dialectical understanding of the events and their desire to be like their white counterparts, which stands against the anti-dialectical purposive rationality of Boukman, Fatiman, the rest of the maroon Africans who congregated for the Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman/ Bwa Kayiman, and the subsequent position of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who in the minds of many, contemporary, Haitians sought social justice and economic reform for the African masses on the island following the Revolution (1791-1804).

Hence, for many Haitians on the political front and Vodou community, the events at Bois Caïman and Jean Jacques Dessalines's ideological positions of economic reforms and social justice, do not fit well within the attempt by many Western scholars such as CLR James,¹ Laurent Du Bois,² and Susan Buck-Morss³ to conceptualize the social agency of Dessalines and the African participants of Bois Caïman within the Hegelian master/slave dialectical thinking. The latter position holds true for Alexandre Pétion and his descendants, the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks. The events at Bois Caïman as I see it represents an anti-dialectical rejection by the African participants of white culture and god for the actualization

of an African ethos (Absolute), lakouism and the Vodou ethic and the spirit of communism, as a "class-for-itself," a group of people with their own gods and culture, who rejected the inhumanity of the whites, their gods, and capitalist social system, which Dessalines via his nationalization plan was seeking to implement.

These two worldviews, the Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism and the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism, are embodied in the ideological metaphor, the children of Pétion v. the children of Dessalines, used in opposition protest movements, contemporarily.⁶ The latter ideology signifies economic reform, land (re) distribution, and social justice, the rallying cry of the Haitian masses as represented by Assad Voley and the opposition movement against the current President, Jovenel Moïse; while the former represents wealth, capitalism, and the neoliberal agenda of the West as represented by the Haitian oligarchs. Ti Manno's lyrics parallel this ideological divide and represent the discourse and discursive practices of the African masses on the island. That is to say, Ti Manno's music embodies and articulates not only an attack on the discriminatory racial-class practices of the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks against the class positions, culture, and language of the African masses as well as a celebration of the latter, but it speaks to the disastrous effects of the former on the latter and the island during the early stages of neoliberalism in the early 70s.

Theory

In this article, the understanding of consciousness constitution is grounded in the neo-Marxist understanding of structurationist theory as articulated by Paul C Mocombe,⁶ Pierre Bourdieu,⁷ Anthony Giddens,⁸ Marshall Sahlins and Jurgen Habermas.⁹ The understanding from this perspective is that consciousness is a duality, i.e., the internalization by social actors of the rules and regulations of a social structure that they recursively (re) organize and reproduce as their practical consciousness. Within the logic of structurationist theory alternative practical consciousnesses are rare and result from structural reproduction and differentiation as brilliantly captured in the work of Pierre Bourdieu⁷ who in *Distinctions* looks at how capital (political, economic, social, and cultural capital) reproduces and differentiates French capitalist society. Mocombe⁶ in his structurationist theory, phenomenological structuralism, fixes structurationist theory, via the constitution of Haitian identity, to account for alternative forms of praxis outside of structural reproduction and differentiation.

The Constitution of Haitian identity within the emerging global capitalist world-system of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represents one of those rare occurrences where practical consciousness deviates from both structural reproduction and differentiation. If the African American experience as encapsulated in slavery and the civil rights movement dialectically represents the intent of former slaves to be like their masters, given their internalization of the ideology of the latter, which the recursively organize and reproduce as their praxis, the Africans of Haiti who met at Bois Caïman, the originating moments of the Haitian Revolution, attempted to do the contrary. That is, they, anti-dialectically, rejected not only their slave status, but the very practical consciousness of their former slavemasters. At the national level, their discourse and discursive practices, lakouism and the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism, would eventually be supplanted by the practical consciousness of the *Affranchis*, free blacks and mulattoes, seeking, like their liberal bourgeois black American counterparts in America, equality of opportunity, distribution, and recognition with their *blanc* counterparts. Prior to this usurpation, however, the Vodou and Kreyol ceremony at Bois Caïman under the leadership of Dutty

Boukman and Cecile Fatiman, the Vodou mambo priestess, is a rejection of both slave status and European civilization, and cannot be, contrary to Susan Buck-Morss's³ work, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, conceptualized within the framework of Hegel's master/slave dialectic. In essence, when the Haitian Revolution commences in 1791, there are three distinct groups vying for control of the island, the whites (*blancs*); free people of color and mulattoes (*Affranchis*), and the enslaved and escaped (maroon) Africans of the island. The former two shared the same European culture, which stood against the lakouism and Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism of the majority of the Africans.^{2,4,5}

The whites, were divided between large plantation owners and petit-blancs, artisans, merchants, and teachers, were independent-minded, and like the American colonists wanted independence from their mother-country, France, where their rights were not represented. The petit-blancs were more racist and feared the alliance between the larger landowners and the *Affranchis*. The *Affranchis* were free people of color and mulatto property and slave owners on the island who shared the religion, culture, language, and ideology of their white counterparts and wanted to remain a French colony. However, unlike the majority of white large plantation owners the majority of the *Affranchis*, like Toussaint Louverture, for example, they did not want independence from France. They simply wanted their rights as property owners recognized by France, not an independent nation-state. Following independence, they would come to constitute a Francophile neocolonial oligarchy on the island seeking, by the 1970s, to implement neoliberal policies at the expense of the libertarian communism of the lakou system and the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism of the Haitian African masses.^{4,6}

The enslaved and escaped Africans of the island were divided between field slaves, domestic slaves, and maroons. The domestic slaves, like their African-American counterparts, house slaves, more so identified with their slavemasters. However, for the most part, the field slaves and maroons, because of their relative isolation from whites, domestic slaves, and free blacks, sought to reproduce their African ways of life in a national position of their own. In the end, the Revolution would come down to a struggle between the *Affranchis* and the enslaved and maroon Africans of the island, the latter of whom commenced the Haitian Revolution on August 14th, 1791 at Bois Caiman. Following the Revolution, between 1804 and 1806, the purposive-rationality of the enslaved and maroon Africans would become the *modus operandi* of the Haitian nation-state until October 17, 1806 when Jean-Jacques Dessalines was assassinated by Alexander Pétion and Henri Christophe. At which point, the purposive-rationality of the *Affranchis* with their emphasis on capitalist wealth, French culture, religion, and language became dominant at the expense of the African linguistic system and culture, kreyol, Vodou, and communism of the African masses on the island who took to the provinces and mountains following the death of Dessalines. The "Pétion v. Dessalines" ideological metaphor as articulated by the contemporary opposition movement in Haiti embodies this racial-class struggle on the island. Moreover, the lyrics of Ti Manno's music, which dates from the 1970s, speaks not only to the discriminatory practices of the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks against the culture, religion, and language of the African masses, but they are a harbinger of the disastrous effects of the neoliberal purposive-rationality of the former for the island and its people since the death of Dessalines.

Discussion

Ti Manno began his musical career as a member of the Haitian

Konpa band, Les Diabes du Rythme. In 1970 Ti Manno traveled with the band to the United States. He remained in the United States for nine years, playing first with Volo Volo of Boston, Les Astros de New York, and then with D. P. Express in New York. With both his popularity growing among the Haitian masses in the US and some racial-class tensions between himself and the predominantly mulatto members of D. P. Express, he subsequently launched his own band, the Gemini All-Stars, in 1981. At the height of his musical career in the United States, he returned to Haiti in 1979, where he remained for five years. In 1984 he returned to the United States where he died in 1985. Ti Manno published five albums with his band, the Gemini All-Stars. As the Anthropologists Nina Glick-Schiller and Georges Fouron highlight, at first, Ti Manno's music was, like that of so many of his generation, a variation of "Haitian mini-jazz," a cross between the popular Haitian music of the sixties called "Compas Direct" and the popular French music of the same period called "Ye-Ye." Mini-jazz was first popular with young members of the Haitian petite bourgeoisie, but by the late sixties it had been widely accepted by Haitian youth in general. As did other composers of mini-jazz, Ti Manno wrote lyrics that were mainly romantic; his songs were made for dancing, not to convey any social or political message.¹⁰⁻¹⁶

It was during his years in New York that Ti Manno began to transform the content of his lyrics. He had arrived in the United States at the height of the black power and antiwar movements. There was open discussion of revolutionary and nationalist ideologies in both the United States and the Caribbean. This atmosphere influenced the young musician. While his music remained the dance music of the mini-jazz, the words of his songs began to address various aspects of Haitian realities in the United States and Haiti. Among those known to have directly influenced him were Bob Marley and the Rastafarians. He found in Bob Marley a model of the contribution a singer could make to his nation and people (pg., 334). Ti Manno's contribution to his nation and people was not only to speak to both the discriminatory and exploitative practices of the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks against the culture, religion, and language of the African masses, which he celebrated, but his music was a harbinger of the disastrous effects of the neoliberal purposive-rationality (deregulation, marketization, free-trade, privatization, personal responsibility, etc.) of the former for the island and its people. Ti Manno embodied and articulated the purposive-rationality, the libertarian communism of the lakou system and the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism, of the African masses on the island as they experienced and endured the class differentiating effects of capitalism under American neoliberal policies.¹⁷⁻²⁵

The neoliberal project, privatization, deregulation, free-trade, etc., of the Haitian elites, in keeping with the initiatives of the American empire, the hegemon of the global capitalist-world system, was to drive the African masses off of their lands and into the capital city, Port-au-Prince, and other cities, New York, Nassau, etc., throughout the globe, as a cheap labor force for agribusiness, factories, tourism, and the entertainment and sports industries of the oligarchical class. In the place of neoliberal exploitation of the masses, Ti Manno called for social solidarity, subsistence agriculture, and the celebration of African culture. In the 1981 hit song, *Exploitation*, Ti Manno highlights the exploitation of the African masses by the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks who sought and seek wealth and money at the expense of the masses in the provinces who grow poor and sick, while the former grow rich. He opines, "we are all Africans and the children of Dessalines (*Nou tout se neg l'Afrique, Pitit ou se Dessalines*) so why are we exploiting each other as our slave masters did?"²⁶⁻³⁵

Exploitation se sa kap detruï le monde

Nou refuse poun observer

Loi Bondye mete

Nou pito aji ak mechanste

Tout Komandman Bondye mete you nou rejeter

You nou fe le contraire de sa bib la pale

Exploitation is destroying our world,

The rich is getting richer and the poor is getting poorer

We Black people need more togetherness to progress (spoken by Ti Manno)

Exploitation se sa ki koz tout piti mouri soufri

Pandan ke sak rich ap vin pi rich

Egalite fraternite se sa poun observer

Pou la vil fe you sel ak la champagne

Yon sel dwet pamanje

Se l'union dwe success

Egoyis pa janm bay

Fe ou gen fraternite pou youn gen pou lot

Si provens pa desann

Capital pa manje

Nou tout se neg l'Afrique

Pitit ou se Dessalines

Pou Kisa youn ak exploiter lot

For Ti Manno, as he posits in the song *Kiliti pa nou* (Our Culture), Haitians have their African culture, vodou folklore and religion, the drums, rara music, and conch horns, which they used to break the chains of slavery against their former white slavemasters only to be divided and hated by the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks who want the masses to adopt capitalist relations of production, French culture, the catholic religion, and opera at the expense of what is African amongst them. This cultural division, he further highlights in the song *Neg Kont Neg* (black man against black man), has led to the hatred and exploitation of the masses by the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks, who have adopted the capitalist way of their former slavemasters for economic gain and wealth at the expense of the African masses in the provinces. This exploitative relationship that developed after independence, he further suggests, is the reason why the African masses in the provinces were and are deforesting the island, which began in slavery, to make charcoal and risking their lives on makeshift boats to immigrate to the United States and elsewhere. The mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks in the government in Port-au-Prince exploit the resources of the country for their own personal wealth and capital accumulation, while the masses cut down trees to make charcoal and makeshift boats (what he calls Canter) in order to survive and leave their land in the provinces for better economic opportunities in the capital (which leads to overcrowding) and elsewhere where they face stigmatization, discrimination, humiliation, and further exploitation as a cheap labor force in the capitalist world-system. In the 1981 song, *Cantèr* (word naming and describing the makeshift boats), Ti Manno addresses these issues

of the Haitian peasants deforesting the countryside for Charcoal, constructing makeshift boats, and leaving their lands for the capital city and the United States under the emerging neoliberal discourse of the 1970s. He advises them, in keeping with the environmentalism and subsistence ideology of the Lakou system, to stay on the land and grow crops to feed their families as opposed to enduring the arduous journey to the United States and elsewhere: "Taking a wooden boat is a great danger; you sold everything you have to pay for the trip, while you left your family in distress. The trip often claimed many lives; those who made it to the refugee camps still faced struggle, racism, and hardships in their quest for economic freedom. You must stop cutting the tree to build boat; and invest in agriculture. With God's grace, you will survive and send your kids to school. You need to work the land and improve your life."³⁶⁻⁴¹

In the song *N'an Danje* (translated, we are in Danger) Ti Manno picks up on this theme of Haitian discrimination, immigration, poverty, and exploitation. He addresses the stigma, discrimination, humiliation, and exploitation Haitians face when they leave Haiti in search of better economic opportunities abroad. Ti Manno sings, "We are in danger wherever we go: whether it's in the United States, Nassau, Bahamas, Venezuela, Peru, Canada, Bolivia. We are in danger. Although we helped many of these nations to gain their independence, yet they show very little gratitude, instead they treat us like second class citizen. They use Haiti's poverty status as a stigma to isolate and humiliate us."⁴²⁻⁴⁷

In further advising the Haitian masses, Ti Manno in the song, *L'argent* (money), proposes education as key to cultivating their minds over the incessant need for wealth and capital accumulation. He advises young Haitian men not to be discouraged and continue down the path of education for that is their "passport" to the future and a better life. Money, according to Ti Manno, is superficial and has no class. The key to resolving Haiti's situation, according to Ti Manno, are education, a return to the island by the Haitian Diaspora, and agricultural production for self-sufficiency and subsistence, the basic tenets of the libertarian communism of the African's lakou system and the Vodou Ethic and the spirit of communism. In song after song, Ti Manno embodies and highlights the discrimination, humiliation, and exploitation of the Haitian masses as they experienced and endured the United States' neoliberal policy provisions (privatization of land for export agribusiness, tourism, importation of food such as rice that drove the peasant class off their lands, etc.) the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks were seeking to implement during the Duvalier regime of the 1980s.⁴⁸⁻⁵⁶ For many Haitians, his words were, and have proven to be, prophetic as Haiti today is completely deforested (ninety-eight percent of the island is deforested), the poorest country in the West Hemisphere where less than five percent of the population own eighty to ninety percent of the country's wealth, and over thirty percent of the population resides in the diaspora outside of Haiti. Ti Manno's music and lyrics, contrary to the position of Nina Glick-Schiller and Georges Fouron (1990) who view the lyrics of Ti Manno and the movement he inspired as representing the transnational identity of Haitian immigrants which allowed them to accommodate to and resist the realities of race and class in both Haiti and the United States, embodies the cultural-class struggles of the Haitian masses against the purposive-rationality of the mulatto elites and petit-bourgeois blacks and their white allies. His Lyrics speak to the conditions, identity, and quest for social justice of the Haitian masses who are exploited by their own brothers and sisters who have allied themselves with their former colonial rulers, France, Canada, and the United States in order to implement neoliberal policies that adversely affect the economy and social conditions of the masses in favor of the French speaking mulatto, Arab, and petit-bourgeois black elites on the island.⁵⁷⁻⁶²

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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