

Interview with

Juan Antonio Madrazo

National Coordinator of the *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration*

Pablo P. Méndez
Courtesy *Cubanet*

Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna, who is 42 years old, has a degree in Business Administration. He has welcomed *Cubanet* into his home, where one sees pictures of Antonio Maceo, Celia Cruz, Duque Hernández, Teófilo Stevenson, Carlos Acosta and other black Cuban celebrities hanging on the walls. We go out on the terrace after drinking a wonderfully delicious cup of coffee his mother prepared for us.

Cubanet: According to official statistics, what is the percentage of African descendant people in Cuba?

Juan Antonio Madrazo: 10%

CN: Is that questionable?

JAM: Of course. Cubans are the first to question it. When you get on a bus or walk the streets, it becomes obvious to you that there is a much higher number of blacks. There are cities with a whiter population, but there are also places where the opposite is true. Anthropologist Juan Antonio Alvarado was one of the first to question these official statistics, and the real numbers are a State secret. We do have access to information gathered by specialists at the Cuban Institute of Genetics that reflect their disagreement with the official

numbers. According to them, at least 60% of Cubans are African descendants. I assure you that the government exerts pressure on any and all intellectuals involved in the national conversation about African descendant demographics, people such as library scientist Tomás Fernández Robaina, essayist Robert Zurbano (who heads the literary branch of the *Casa de las Américas*), and researcher Inés María Martiatu (who actually is better known abroad than in Cuba). These race issues have been under discussion since 1986, at UNEAC conferences, for example, but the regime manages to silence demands for a national conversation.

CN: Why does the government hide the real numbers concerning Cuba's real ethnic composition?

JAM: For political reasons. For this, you have to go back and review our history. In 1962, José Felipe Carneado, who at that time was an ideological executive for the United Party of the Socialist Revolution, publicly certified that racial discrimination had been eradicated by revolutionary decree. Afro-Cubans—who were considered an ethnic minority—would receive equality. Concomitantly,



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there emerged a rhetoric—or more accurately—an emotional blackmailing strategy that stipulated that blacks had the Revolution to thank for now having become real people, that they should study and work under the protection of those Olympian white gods who had liberated them from their oppressor, and that they should be eternally and limitlessly grateful and loyal to them in exchange. Since then, black Cubans were used as a weapon or cannon fodder for defending the Revolution, because they were considered to be the ones who most benefited from it. This manipulation was criticized even at the beginning, by intellectuals of a stature like Carlos Moore, Juan René Betancourt, Iván César Martínez and Juan Benemelis, who had to go into exile, and have been vehemently demonized by pro-Castro forces.

CN: How many black Cubans are there among the rank and file members of the Communist Party?

JAM: Their number is considerably high.

CN: How about their presence in high positions in the Party and Government?

JAM: It is totally cosmetic. Very few of the highest positions in this regime are occupied by blacks. There are no black Vice Ministers or high ranking Generals in the Interior Ministry or Armed Forces. I think there are only two black Major Generals in the Army. It has been demonstrated that blacks can go no higher than Brigadier General. Cuba's international campaigns in Angola and Ethiopia are used to mask the regime's discriminatory nature. It produced few high ranking black officers, like Brigadier General Víctor Schuher Colás, who was the most brilliant strategist of the Angolan northern front, yet he was not even promoted to Major General after his death. Soviet academics noticed this racial inequality in the Cuban governmental elite and it was thanks to them that Esteban Lazo—an *apparatchik* with no revolutionary baggage—was promoted to the Politburo. There is also a dearth of blacks in Cuba's diplomatic corps.

CN: What kind of discriminatory acts are most reported in Cuba?

JAM: The most common and relevant one is the excessive police harassment of black citizens, who they consider potential criminals and oblige to who their identification cards, and can be fined or arrested if they don't. In 2010, public opinion condemned SB-1070, the law adopted in Arizona designed to deal with illegal immigrants. In Cuba, this kind of discriminatory violation has been practiced for 40 years, and it is used against Cubans. Of course, I don't know if any international, human rights group has repudiated this.

As far as the tourist industry is concerned, black citizens with university degrees and who are fully fluent in three languages cannot hope to work as tourist guides or managers at any of our finest hotel chains. What they can barely get is work involving food preparation, housekeeping, maintenance and custodial duties. Some say that white Cuban managers, with their Party cards tucked in their pockets, have stated: "We don't want any blacks here." Others, the more diplomatic ones, put the blame on preferences expressed by the European companies that co-own these hotels.

The presence of black leaders in certain ministries, like those involving Foreign Investment, Foreign Commerce, Foreign Relations and the ICAIC (the Cuban National Film Institute), is quite negligible. The only kinds of positions they do get are as Party secretaries and union leaders, that is, as political agitators. There have also been accusations of discrimination in the cultural arena, for example, at the National Lyric Theatre, the Cuban National Ballet, and other institutions. The lack of any pedagogy regarding racial integration, both in schools and in the media, is equally discriminatory. As you see, then, the situation is complex.

CN: According to the word on the street, black Cubans make up a large portion of Rapid Response groups. Do you have anything to say about this?

JAM: I don't deny it. I acknowledge this as a consequence of the manipulation I mentioned earlier, the use of a segment of society labeled as "victims" and turning them into "victimizers," defenders of a regime that supposedly benefited them and gave them full rights. For the naïve or unwary, this scenario obviously puts the dictatorship in a favorable light. Yet, this abominable practice was already used during the era of Spanish colonialism, in the nineteenth century, when the *Pardos y Morenos* [Brown and Black] Militias, Black Guerrillas, and Colored Spanish Casino groups were created for the purpose of undermining the spirits of the pro-independence troops.

CN: What results does official publicity's exploitation of black images seek?

JAM: This is vulgar and contradictory propaganda. A fence on Rancho Boyeros Avenue shows a smiling Afro-Cuban with the words: "The change that Cuba needs is more socialism." Yet, most blacks live in the most incredible poverty. For more than 60 years, they have subsisted in the very same neighborhoods in Centro Habana, La Cueva, Palo Cagao, Hindaya, Pocitos and the infinite number of shantytowns on Havana's periphery. Paradoxically, few of them live in Nuevo Vedado, Miramar, Kholy, Country Club, Siboney or other, better, Havana neighborhoods. The most recent economic reforms have not benefited self-employed blacks because a large number lack good homes (infrastructure), or families abroad that can help them financially, with capital, to start a business (because blacks have emigrated far less than white Cubans).

CN: What projects has the *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration* (CIR) proposed for itself?

JAM: Work, work and more work. We document racial discrimination through the *Citizens' Observatory*, offer conferences, publish and tirelessly struggle so that the diaspora can become aware of the fact that the race issue needs to be dealt with now—and not after democracy is reestablished in Cuba. We have also crafted a plan to civically denounce the poor coverage given to the centennial commemoration of the massacre of the Independents of Color, and the fact that the documentary *1912: Voices for the Silence* was not promoted and shown enough. A people that does not deal with its errors runs the risk of committing them again.

CN: Do you get opposition or resistance from other, officialist, black Cubans or institutions?

JAM: We do, from pro-regime intellectuals like Miguel Barnet, Guillermo Rodríguez

Rivera, Esteban Morales and Gisela Arandia, as well as from officialist projects like the *Cofradía de la Negritud* [Brotherhood of Blackness] and the now defunct *Color Cubano*. All of them are employed to demoralize us before our public, and characterize us as terrible black dissidents connected to the Bush Plan. The political police's intimidation and repression of all the young people who try to get closer to us—and their numbers are growing every day—is another example of this, and it happens because the regime is aware of the fact that racial discrimination is like a time bomb that could suddenly start a rebellion.

CN: If there were a free and democratic Cuba, would blacks institute another Independent Party of Color?

JAM: That would not be viable. We are struggling for racial integration and dreaming, like Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. In a free and democratic Cuba, blacks and whites will work together to rebuild the country, the battered country that communism has left us.