

The Eternal Doubt: How Many of us Blacks are There?

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The 2012 Populational and Housing Census was conducted in Cuba between September 15th and 24th. This is the most important statistical investigation on the island. Members of our civil society demand precise and reliable data of different sorts, among them regarding race, considered by many to be a forbidden subject.

According to declarations made by Juan Carlos Alfonso, Director of the Center for Populational and Development Studies (CEPD), race, as a concept, is very complicated with regard to its measurement, according to anthropology and genetics. “The

first populational model was created in 1774. Since then, and till 2012, the 18 censuses carried out have considered skin color.”

All information on censuses is garnered through people’s statements to voluntary personnel, mostly students and professors from professional technical schools and high schools. They are trained to check certain boxes indicating if the person before them is white, *mestizo-mulato* or black. Yet, Alfonso acknowledges that this metric can be subjective and gave the example of “people who say they’re younger than they are and others who say they’re older.”

How are those who pass for white counted?

Racial upheaval in Cuba is ever more intense. Generally, descendants of unions between a white man and black women, or vice versa, (*mestizos*) become confused from early childhood on by family comments like “you are almost white,” “don’t wear braids like blacks do,” or “your features are refined, you pass for white.”

These attitudes cause rejection of the black race, which is often promoted by blacks themselves, when they argue for “advancing the race”¹, and via Cuban television, in its dissemination of stereotypical models of beauty.

Having light skin does not make one white. This confusion or denial of race also influences what people declare at census time or a civil registries. The *jabao*² is recorded as a white on his or her birth certificate, which is irrefutable proof of who he or she is. When a black woman straightens her hair,³ her hair classifies her as a *mulata* or *india*. When a *jabá*⁴ straightens her hair, this assures she is white. If you contradict that, she shows you the ‘B’ on her national identity card, which indicates she is *blanca* (white).

Something akin to that happens with the census, because its data is based on what those surveyed say or whatever the census taker believes. If everyone who tries to be falsely white declares him or herself to be so, that explains why Cuba’s white population seems to grow.

The 2002 Populational and Housing Census and the black race

Ten years after the 2002 census, Cubans are certain that the number of blacks and *mestizos* is much higher than is revealed in the same. According to skin color, whites are 65% of the population; blacks 10.1% and *mestizos* 24.9%. The 1981 census had these percent-

ages at 66.1%, 12% and 21.9%, respectively. The greatest concentrations of blacks and *mestizos* were found in the eastern provinces: Granma, Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo.

Holguín is the only province where the white population has grown: it went from 78% in 1953 to 80.6% in 2002. It is commonly said that the capital of Holguín is the most racist on the island.

Is there positive racial discrimination in Cuban statistics?

According to international doctrine, positive discrimination sets policies with a view to giving preferential treatment to disadvantaged groups with regard to access to goods and services, as well as compensating them for the prejudices and discrimination to which they were subjected in the past.

In May 1961, the Cuban government did away with racial exclusivity. Notwithstanding, equality is more than everyone attending university, being seen gratis by doctors, and swimming at the same beaches. Equality also includes the actual possibility of having equal opportunities in all of society’s spheres.

Article 42 of the Cuba’s Constitution (1976/2002) prohibits discrimination on the basis of race and skin color. Yet, equality under the law has not achieved socioeconomic equality among diverse racial groups. Studies by the Center for Anthropology published in the journal *Temas* (2006) revealed that the black population lives in worse housing conditions, receives fewer remittances from abroad, and has less access to emerging areas in the new economy—such as tourism, where they represent a mere 5% of managers, professional and technicians. According to results by numerous evaluative National Surveys on Work and Home Economic Situations, by the National School of Statistics (ONE),

the proportion of black and *mestiza* persons who imbibe alcoholic beverages is higher than that of whites in all of Cuba's provinces, even though the most significant differences (those registering more than a 10 point difference) were seen in Santiago de Cuba, Villa Clara and Havana. According to official statistics, a more careful evaluation carried out according to skin color found that in all provinces blacks and *mestizos* were more likely to smoke than whites."The black population lives in poorer and more crowded conditions, and their numbers are higher in prisons and marginal neighborhoods like Arroyo Naranjo, the poorest neighborhood in the capital.

Far from being utilized to attenuate the situation, the ONE's statistics serve to highlight the historical injustice to which the black race has been victim in Cuban society. There is no mechanism for compensating blacks, particularly for the purpose of assuaging the inequality.⁵ There is not even an efficient process for defending victims of discrimination. Cuban courts do not have jurisdiction to defend human rights, even the right to not be discriminated.*

So, what comes after the 2012 census?

The October 5th, 2011 Decree No. 291, "About the Population and Housing Census," assigned to the National Coordinating Commission, and others at the provincial and municipal level, tasks and functions related to *Plan Censal*, till October 30, 2012. Information from the census allows for the evaluation of the country's situation and the formulation of socioeconomic policy, but "the census neither confers nor denies legality, nor does it have a negative incidence for people," according to the Director of the CEPD.

In fact, one of the recommendations made to Cuba by the Special Rapporteur of

the United Nation's Council on Human Rights about contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and other related forms of intolerance was to utilize census information as a way to more precisely evaluate the existence and reach of racial discrimination. It also requested interpreted, statistical data according to age, sex and racial origin on the prison population, because indices show that more criminal behavior is attributed to people from certain ethnic groups, and that another factor is the racial composition of the police force and judiciary. Yet, the Director of the 2012 Census asserted that "ethnicity or race are not measured, but rather skin color."Which leaves us with a simple question: how many of us blacks are there?

Notes:

- 1-A popular phrase referring to the union of blacks with whites, so their children's skin color and features become more refined. If this concept were completely accepted and instituted, it would bring about the eventual disappearance of blacks on the island.
- 2-A person whose skin is white or light, but whose features are those of an African descendant, even in hair texture
- 3-The straightening of curly hair with creams and chemical products.
- 4-The feminine form of *jabao*.
- 5-There are no statistics in the census that favor blacks.

***Editor's Note:** The 1986 Penal Code condemns the crime of apartheid (Article 120) and sees it as a crime against the right to equality of all citizens (Article 295). This includes offensive manifestations or demeanor towards people on account of their sex, race, color or national origin, and actions meant to impede the full exercise of the right to equality established in the Constitution on account of their sex, race, color or national origin. Courts are obliged by law to adjudicate those who commit these crimes, although many specialists on the subject have commented that those articles appear to have become dead letters.