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## **THEOQUILOMBISM: BLACK THEOLOGY BETWEEN POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGY OF INCULTURATION**

*Teoquilombismo: teologia negra entre teologia política e teologia da inculturação*

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**ABSTRACT:** Critical black thought has long denounced colonialism as the greatest intersubjective fracture in modern history which proved to be the most effective and durable instrument of universal domination. This fracture required the hierarchical classification of humanity, that is, the division between humans and subhumans, between dominated and dominators. In this Manichaeic world, people of African origin, their cultures and their spiritualities have been relegated to the primitive, inferior and diabolic. Black theology emerged as a radical protest against this genocidal drive of modernity and defense of the dignity of black life. However, we observe that colonialism persists as coloniality, with an unlimited capacity for updating. This also requires an update of the theoretical and conceptual tools to face contemporary racism. From the dialogue of theology with critical black thought arises theoquilombism, a theological reflection to think black liberation between black political theology and inculturation theology.

**KEYWORDS:** Theoquilombism. Black theology. Political theology. Theology of inculturation.

**RESUMO:** O pensamento negro crítico há tempos vem denunciando o colonialismo como a maior fratura intersubjetiva da história moderna, que se revelou o mais eficaz e durável instrumento de dominação universal. Fratura esta que exigiu a classificação hierárquica da humanidade, isto é, a divisão entre humanos e subhumanos, entre dominados e dominadores. Neste mundo maniqueísta, as pessoas de origem africana, suas culturas e suas espiritualidades foram relegadas ao

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primitivo, inferior e diabólico. A teologia negra surgiu como um protesto radical à essa pulsão genocida da modernidade e defesa da dignidade da vida negra. Entretanto, constata-se que o colonialismo perdura como colonialidade, em sua capacidade ilimitada de atualização. Isso demanda também uma atualização das ferramentas teóricas e conceituais para enfrentar o racismo contemporâneo. Da interlocução da teologia com o pensamento crítico negro surge o Teoquilombismo, uma reflexão teológica para pensar a libertação negra entre teologia negra política e teologia da inculturação.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Teoquilombismo. Teologia negra. Teologia política. Teologia da inculturação.

## *Introduction*

Monocultural and eurocentric theology legitimized the construction and maintenance of the state of *maafa*<sup>1</sup>, that is, the black holocaust, feeding the sociocultural imaginary of denying the *imago Dei* to a considerable portion of humanity. Under the holocaust that kidnaps the body and mind of blacks, the afrodiasporic population struggles to recover and reconstruct their existence, creating practices, spaces and other conditions for re-existence and humanization; provoking, throughout the history of domination, authentic fissures in the hegemonic order of the modern/colonial system/world.

The appearance of Black Liberation Theology in the mid-twentieth century, both North American and Latin American, is evidence of this afrodiasporic resistance. It is a political theology, that is, a theology radically opposed to capitalism, imperialism and eurocentrism. Its identity is shaped by the emancipation of blacks from all white structures, including the white church and its, consequent, theology (CONE, 1985). In a Brazilian context, Black Liberation Theology – also called Afro-Brazilian Theology – has its roots in the tradition of Liberation Theology, but with its emphasis on the racial factor (SILVA, 2013, p. 1769). Given that Black Liberation Theology emerged to unveil the racial aspect of domination and to struggle for the emancipation and dignity of afrodiasporics, there is no black theology that

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<sup>1</sup> The phenomena of kidnapping, imprisonment, slavery, colonization, objectification, ghettoization and genocide that the black population, regardless of territoriality, is suffering directly from 1500 until today, are called *maafa*, that is, black holocaust. *Maafa* is the process of kidnapping and physical and mental imprisonment of the black African population, in addition to the forced emergence of the afro-diaspora. This term was coined by Marimba Ani, and corresponds in Swahili to the “great tragedy”, the terrible occurrence, the death misfortune, which identifies the 500 years of suffering of people of African heritage through slavery, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, rape, oppression, invasions and exploitation. ANI, Marimba apud NJERI, Aza. Educação afrocêntrica como via de luta antirracista e sobrevivência na *Maafa*. Revista Sul-Americana de Filosofia e Educação. No. 31: May-Oct./2019, p. 4-17.

can escape political criticism of the modern/colonial system/world, since racism is a structuring of thought and action as it has been denouncing the entire tradition of critical black thought and, in recent times, decolonial thinking (COSTA-BERNARDINO; GROSFOGUEL, 2016, p. 15-24).

It is urgent to construct a black theology with updated theoretical and conceptual tools, as coloniality reveals the unlimited capacity to update the colonial power matrix and, of course, racism (BURASCHI; AGUILAR-IDÁÑEZ, 2017, p. 171). It is essential that black theology remains critical of the capitalist system and, above all, does not forget the therapeutic aspect, that is, the decolonization of subjectivity, so that the black person becomes an agent of his or her own liberation. This clinical dimension is important because one of the fundamental aspects of racism is to alienate black subjectivity, imprisoning it in countless pathological complexes.

On the other hand, we see that although both currents of theological thought – North American and Latin American – have made the ontological rupture, they lack the epistemological rupture, to do a step towards a process of inculturation, in which God and the human being can be named beyond the modern-western conception, that is, eurocentric.

A black theology with a focus on inculturation is still the great challenge and historical debt in Brazil and Latin America to African cultures. There is still no consolidated theological reflection that assumes the Afro-centric epistemologies, to carry out the Afro-Brazilian identity without the black Christians having to renounce the African cultures that constitute them.

A theological reflection in dialogue with the decolonial thought must act between two interconnected dimensions: the political theological and the theological of inculturation. It is a matter of dialoguing with critical black thinking to denounce the colonial power matrix and its incidence on black subjectivity and, at the same time, to assume Afrocentric epistemologies to move towards inculturation. The liberation of Afrodiasporians and Africans cannot be reduced to the anti-imperialist struggle, the anti-capitalist struggle and against white supremacy. It is necessary to go further. And search in the sources of African cultures for a different way of being in the world. This way of doing black theology we call theoquilombism<sup>2</sup> (CALDEIRA, 2020, p. 69-79).

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<sup>2</sup> Theoquilombism [in Portuguese: teoquilombismo] is a concept that we coined to denote our political place and, above all, the assumption of multiple Afro-Brazilian and afrodiasporic resistances as a theological place. Quilombism, in turn, is a historical-social scientific concept coined by Abdias Nascimento to describe the complex of meanings and praxis of the liberation of the quilombo. The term “quilombism” expresses the idea of (re)existence expressed as “human, ethnic and cultural affirmation”, through which the black population integrates a liberation practice and takes charge of its own history. See: NASCIMENTO, Abdias. *O Quilombismo. Documentos de uma militância Pan-Africana*. São Paulo: Ed. Perspectiva; Rio de Janeiro: Ipeafro, 2019, p. 273-312.

## 1 *Black political theology*

Engaging in theological thinking in interlocution with decolonial thinking is important for two reasons: a) this critical theory helps to unveil the domination of the modern/colonial system/world in which racism emerges as the main axis (QUIJANO, 2007, p. 93-126); b) the analysis of coloniality contributes to the updating of theoretical and conceptual tools in the confrontation of contemporary racism, since we see that classic anti-racist thinking and action are in crisis and also need to renew their theoretical and conceptual tools (BURASCHI, AGUILAR-IDÁÑEZ, 2017, p. 171).

A path signalled by the analysis of coloniality passes through the rehabilitation of the tradition of critical black thought, turned invisible by the Latin American academy, especially by theology. This invisibilization of the tradition of critical black thought means that many ideas worked by black Marxists<sup>3</sup> are treated as novelties. However, as Ramón Grosfoguel points out, the concealment of the black origins of critical theories – such as the “system/world” theory, “coloniality of power” and “internal colonialism” – ends up reproducing epistemic racism which continues to affirm the inferiority of black thought and the superiority of white thought (GROSFOGUEL, 2018, p. 11). For this reason, critical black thinking is considered to be *avant la lettre* of decolonial thinking. Which is at least a way of doing “epistemic justice” to the tradition of critical black thought.

### 1.1 *Theology in dialogue with critical black thought*

Given the real racist complexity, it is only from an interdisciplinary dialogue that one can ascend to reality. In this dialogue, critical black thinking is central, in order for theology to remove the eurocentric lenses that prevent it from discerning the lived world of the blacks in a structurally racist society. Some authors of decolonial criticism are part of the genealogy of black critical thought, because it was black intellectuals who first denounced the intrinsic link between capitalism, colonialism and racism. In this current, Walter D. Mignolo speaks of capitalism, modernity and coloniality as “three members” of the equation of modern/colonial system/world (MIGNOLO, 2007, p. 26).

In this horizon, black political theology is a reflection in interdisciplinary dialogue with afrodiasporic and African thinkers, since it starts from colonialism and, consequently, from coloniality as the main fracture of modern civilization which installed itself as an immutable reality, as was already denounced by Aimé Césaire in *Discurso sobre o colonialismo* (Discourse on

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<sup>3</sup> Thinkers considered black Marxists: Aimé Césaire, W. E. R. Du Bois, Cedric J. Robinson, Frantz Fanon, Angela Davis etc.

colonialism, 2006). Césaire affirmed that it is not possible to recognize any human value in colonialism, since “colonization strives to *decivilize* the colonizer, to brutalize him, in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to hidden instincts, for greed, for racial hatred, for moral relativism”. What we have in colonialism is a permanent process of dehumanization, because the colonizer “to have a good conscience he gets used to seeing in the other the *animal*, he exercises to treat him as an *animal*, he tends objectively to transform himself *in animal*” (CÉSAIRE, 2006, p. 17.23-24).

Frantz Fanon, who was a pupil of Césaire, also did not cease to affirm that racism and colonialism should be understood as socially generated ways of seeing the world and living in it (FANON, 2008). For him, racism not only imprisoned black people in a false *imago* produced by the white, but that whites and blacks were captured in a metaphysical and essentialist view of themselves whose liberation “must tend to the universalism inherent to the human condition” (FANON, 2008, p.26.27 and 28). This requires overcoming the pathological disorder of self-identification and identification of the other through a hierarchical chromatic table designed by coloniality.

It is striking that theological reason does not dialogue with critical black thought, since theology is precisely a discipline that aims to respond with hope of redemption to humanity’s historical dramas. And black thinkers do not cease to proclaim that colonialism is the root of intersubjective violence and, as Achille Mbembe summed it up, “the spectacle par excellence of the impossible community” (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 9).

Within this theoretical and historical framework, another fundamental characteristic of a black political theology is to turn its eyes to the process of deontologization of blacks and thus to seek to understand the roots and traumatic effects of colonialism on black subjectivity. Effects that are updated and perpetuated through coloniality, which specifically in Brazil goes through a systematic process of concealment under the myth of racial democracy. In this specific sense, the analyses of the revolutionary and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon become central<sup>4</sup>, since it was him who best described in *Pele negra, mascaras brancas* (*Black skin, white masks*, 2008) the damaging effects of the colonial situation on black subjectivity. Effects that did not disappear with the legal decolonization. That is, he analyzed the “different positions that

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<sup>4</sup> Frantz Omar Fanon (1925-1961) was born into a middle-class family in Fort-de-France, the administrative capital of Martinique, a French colony in the Caribbean. He served the French army during World War II in the fight against Nazism and fought for the liberation of Algeria. It will be these two challenges – Nazism and colonialism – added by the bitter encounter with metropolitan France and the first flashes of African independence, the founding experiences and keys to the reading of his whole life, work and language. Achille Mbembe, speaking of Fanon’s universality, affirms that it is in these “three clinics of the real” that the name Fanon is born, grows and runs out. And more. In these three scenes, “the essence of his word is due, similar, in its dramatic beauty, in its sparkling and its luminous brilliance, to the *verbo* in the cross of the god-man threatened with madness and death” (MBEMBE, 2012).

blacks adopt in the face of white civilization” (FANON, 2008, p. 29). And he also presented the prognosis, so that there could be black liberation, the *decolonial struggle of the condemned of the earth* (FANON, 1968).

We know that Fanon was looking directly at the body of the colonized subject in Algeria, but his diagnosis and prognosis goes beyond the French colony<sup>5</sup>, reaching other subjects and regions that also went through colonial violence, as is the case in Brazil. His clinical view is important, as it diagnosed that “colonialism encompasses both the impact of the social world on the emergence of human senses and identities and the individual and collective situations of historical re-signification of the world” (FAUSTINO, 2018, p. 148). Thus, Fanon put the things into their proper place by explaining that the complexes of the blacks, attributed as essential characteristics of the blacks, in fact, have external causes. He stated the social origins of the colonial subject’s psychic suffering.

If he [the black] is so submerged by the desire to be white, it is that he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society whose consistency depends on the maintenance of that complex, in a society that affirms the superiority of a race; it is to the exact extent that this society causes him difficulties that he is placed in a neurotic situation (FANON, 2008, p. 95).

Fanon’s diagnosis and prognosis become essential for everyone who wants to think a reasonable way out of the intersubjective violence that takes on global dimensions, whose roots go back to the colonial situation. This is one of the reasons for recognizing the “universality of Fanon” (MBEMBE, 2012) for thinking about the advent of a new human being. In this horizon, we may not forget that the advent of a new human being is the central proposal of Christianity under the binomial *theosis/kenosis*, as Saint Irineus already pointed out; for if in *kenosis* there is incarnation as a human-divine despoliation, in *theosis* there is the qualification for the transformation of life until it makes the peaceful and innovative presence shine that cuts through subjectivity and elevates it to the reconciled human condition.

Regarding Fanon’s universality, Mbembe states that all of his work consists in taking on him “the suffering of the man who struggles, describe that suffering and understand it in such a way that a new man arises from that knowledge and from that struggle” (MBEMBE, 2012, p. 10). In other words, it seems difficult to understand the humanization process as an act of being fully human and divine (*kenosis-theosis*) outside the critique of the historical dehumanization produced by the colonial power matrix, which is perpetuated as the substratum of intersubjective relations.

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<sup>5</sup> To understand the diagnosis and prognosis for the black liberation of the psychiatrist and revolutionary Fanon, it is necessary to use not only *Pele negra, máscaras branca* (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952), but also *Sociologie d’une révolution* (*Sociology of a revolution*, 1959) e *Os condenados da terra* (*The condemned of the Earth*, 1961), as well as the author’s other writings.

## *1.2 Racism as denial of the humanity of the other*

Colonialism, which operates through racism, is above all a coordinated project of dehumanization with an incredible capacity to update itself whose essence consists in the denial of the human condition of the other on the basis of racialization. Colonialism and racism renurture themselves from the deontologization of the blacks, that is, from condemning them to “live in the zone of not being” where they are denied an authentic existence, as stated by Fanon (FANON, 2008, p. 26).

Following the path opened by Fanon, decolonial thinking explains that the theoretical and historical construction of the racial subject took place within the modern/colonial system/world as a structuring axis of the colonial power matrix which proved to be the most effective and durable instrument of universal domination (QUIJANO, 2007, p.93-126). Racism, therefore, is not only the phenotypic and racial discrimination of individuals, but it is, above all, a form of hierarchy between inferiors and superiors in favor of domination.

Unfortunately, the foundation of this hierarchy of humanity has its roots in the debate on the “Rights of the peoples” – with Fray Francisco de Vitória and Fray Bartolomeu de Las Casas in controversy with Gines de Sepúlveda – when questioning whether the Indians were human beings with full theological and legal rights, since in the eyes of Europeans the indigenous peoples had no religion. In the Christian imaginary of those times, not having a religion was synonymous with not having a soul and, therefore, being expelled from the realm of the human to the realm of the animal. From this theological suspicion about the humanity of the other, “religious racism” was engendered as the first racist debate in modern history which during the first fifty years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century preceded the eruption of racism of color (GROSGUÉL, 2012, p. 90).

Under a Christian-theological tribunal at the service of the imperial state, this debate about the Amerindians moved between the recognition of their possible humanity and the affirmation of their animality. Finally, the Amerindians had their humanity recognized, thus legitimizing the evangelizing agency of the New World, since beings considered beasts could not be evangelized. However, this recognition of the humanity of the Amerindians increased the demand for African slaves, under the status of non-humans and, therefore, liable to be enslaved. Thus, for Nelson Maldonado Torres, this “misanthropic skepticism”, that is, the theological suspicion about the humanity of the other, was crucial to develop the coloniality of being and of knowledge, together with racism and ontological exclusion (MALDONADO-TORRES, 2007, p. 145).

Along with the implementation of the African people’s slavery agency, that is, the control of work, there was a symbiosis of the racist religious discourse with the racist discourse of color. Thus, the racialization of humanity by phenotypic categories was configured as the main factor

for the expansion and globalization of the modern/colonial system/world (GROSFOGUEL, 2012, p. 90). For Aníbal Quijano, racialization denotes the construction of identities forged under the category of race – coined to express the domination relations of the world capitalism power pattern – as the foundation of new geocultural identities (QUIJANO, 2007, p. 119). Thus, racism is a historical and theoretical construction that creates an invisible line to forge racialized and hierarchical identities.

This racial line separates humanity ontologically and epistemologically into two groups: on the one hand, the human and, on the other, the subhuman. That is, on the one hand, the dominators and, on the other, the dominated. The functioning of this racial line did not go unnoticed by the clinical look of Fanon who described it stating that people who are above the racial line are socially recognized in their humanity as human beings with subjectivity, as well as with access to human/citizen/civilian/labor rights. In contrast, below this line are those people who are considered subhuman or nonhuman, that is, they have their humanity questioned and thus subjected to violent processes of dehumanization (GROSFOGUEL, 2012, p. 93).

### ***1.3 Racism as an existential deviation***

“To be black is to be violated in a constant, continuous and cruel way, without pause or rest, by a double injunction: that of incarnating the body and ideas of the Ego of the white subject and that of refusing, denying and cancelling the presence of the black body” (SOUZA, 1983, p. 8). Being under this double injunction that the Afro-Brazilian psychiatrist Neusa Santos Souza speaks of when analyzing the experience of Afro-Brazilians in social ascension is indeed an experience of living removed from their ability to produce life based on an existential projection. Such is the condition of the black man and woman imprisoned in the false *imago* that the white created to subject them to permanent domination and dehumanization: to live “psychic annihilation”. In the wake of Fanon, Souza diagnosed in this double injunction the desire for self-annihilation, since the “black, in the desire to whiten, desires nothing more and nothing less than the extinction of himself. His project is to cease to exist in the future, his aspiration is not to be or not to have been” (SOUZA, 1983, p. 5). This is because colonial society made him believe, as Fanon stated, that as a black he had only one destiny: to become white (FANON, 2008, p. 188). This is the “coloniality of the being” with the imposition of the *imago* under the adjective of emotions, deities, beliefs and language in order to carry out the humanism of Western civilization. That is, to be condemned to live in the area of non-being:

It is, in fact, a life lived alienated from any possibility of cultivating an existential project and ontological affirmation, under the weight of dehumanization; a

way of living expelled from the possibility of cultivating your own existential home. This means to exist not for oneself, but for another who lodges in the psyche, to whom one wants to conform or ends up living a depreciable existence (VILLA; VILLA, 2018, p. 176)<sup>6</sup>.

In this consists of the efficacy of racialization, colonization and dehumanization, that is, it produces such an alienation in the colonized subject that it converts it into a non-being. It is the result of an ontological split, without which the functioning of the colonial power matrix cannot operate. And not just that. But the skepticism of the blacks about the human nature is no longer exclusive to the colonizer and, once the false imago is introjected, the blacks themselves start to question their own humanity.

Thinking about the reality of Afro-Americans, Orlando Patterson calls this phenomenon “social death” (PATTERSON, 1982, p. 38), imposed by means of symbolic instruments of domination which converted enslaved blacks into nameless persons, invisible as human beings. This social death, in turn, led the enslaved/colonized blacks to ask themselves: “What am I?”, instead of asking “Who am I?” (GORDON, 1997, p. 104); since their human condition is not something given beforehand. This is, in effect, the “existential deviation” imposed on blacks by the white civilization of which Fanon speaks, that is, what is called “black soul” is nothing more than a “construction of the whites” (FANON, 2008, p. 30). This existential deviation causes the racialized colonized black subjects to internalize their colonization process, generating their conditions of non-existence.

For Fanon, the way out of both psychic annihilation and social death goes through desalienation and decolonization, which involves unlearning all imposed and accepted by colonialism and the dehumanization project to relearn how to be free women and men. Even recognizing that whites and blacks must participate in this process of learning and unlearning, the fanonian decolonial struggle focuses, above all, on individuals who inhabit the zone of non-being, that is, the *condemned of the land*.

Fanon explains his objective in the decolonial struggle: “We want to help blacks to free themselves from the arsenal of complexes germinated within the colonial situation” (FANON, 2008, p. 44). And in order to carry out decolonization and dehumanization, Fanon makes use of “sociogeny” as a sociodiagnostic method to analyze and intervene in the lived experience of black racialized/colonized subjects subjected to dehumanization. He understood that both the problem of the split subject and his or her release were a social issue. In effect, “sociogeny” points to the reflexive determination between capitalism, colonialism and racism and also to the historical possibility of an emancipatory anti-colonial praxis that takes into account the objective and subjective aspects of human existence (FAUSTINO, 2018, p. 148).

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<sup>6</sup> All translations from Spain to Portuguese were the author's.

Sociogenesis has as its central purpose to restore humanity through “self-determination and self-liberation”, that is, to facilitate the formation of subjectivity, self-reflection and liberation praxis. Thus, the teaching consists in enabling the sub-other to take a position in which he or she can recognize and do things for themselves (WALSH, 2013, p. 46).

With sociogeny, Fanon intends to make explicit the connection between the subjective and the objective, between, on the one hand, the inferiority complexes of the black and colonized peoples and, on the other hand, the particularly oppressive structure of colonial society [...] [connection that could help] the black person to become aware that the only alternative for liberation is to act in relation to social change [...]. Sociogeny becomes a [...] *science for humanity*. [...] a kind of pedagogy whose function is not to “educate” in a traditional way, but to facilitate black self-liberation, acting against structures of oppression and those that deny their ontological weight (MALDONADO-TORRES, 2005, p. 159).

Knowing the ways in which the colonized subjects act, it is possible to consider ways of decolonization and liberation of bodies that have undergone a long process of colonial domination, as well as to observe the emergence of possibilities that undergo decolonization, such as: creative forms of existence generated from the production of a life disengaged from the model of dehumanization and western domination (VILLA; VILLA, 2018, p. 178). Only through desalienation and decolonization is born a political subject capable of overcoming “the desire to be and to exist in the body that is not his or her habitat, especially when this is the result of an induction to the historical renunciation of the very ways of apprehending, affirming and reaffirm a body scheme blurred by the historical and structural power production” (VILLA; VILLA, 2018, 178) which black women and men were forced to accept subjectively in order to inhabit the zone of non-being.

This is what is radically new in Fanon’s sociogenesis: the “invention of existence”, which must be understood as “creation”. It is precisely the capacity for creation that is the main characteristic of the active part of being, part of the practice of freedom, of creating, inventing and living with others, that is, being radically human (WALSH, 2013, p. 44).

Ignoring the great fracture in the intersubjectivity caused by colonialism – which is constantly updated – thus implies both turning a blind eye to the reality of historical victims and also making it impossible to open the horizon of *koinonia*. Furthermore, to ignore racism or to deny its existence and incidence in subjectivity is to place oneself geopolitically on the side of oppression and, consciously or unconsciously, to become an accomplice in ontological-existential and epistemic racism (MIGNOLO, 2015, p. 446). A political theology sensitive to the struggles and resistances of the afro-diasporic community must be committed to the disengagement of the colonial power matrix and, of course, to the eurocentrism of traditional theology, and to open up to other epistemologies that have been silenced.

## 2 *Black theology of inculturation*

Decolonial criticism highlights epistemicide, the result of the war against native peoples – in our specific case against African peoples and cultures –, calling them primitive and uncivilized as well as making their ancestral knowledge and their ancient wisdom invisible. For this reason, a black theology that intends to go beyond the criticism of eurocentrism and the modern/colonial system/world must take the leap and do *epistemic justice*, assume the African worldview and the afrocentric epistemologies in the theological work.

Traditional Christian theology, that is, monocultural and eurocentric Christianity, when approaching African cultures and their spiritualities practically relegated everything to the primitive and diabolical. In such a way that the salvation of the black person implied the renunciation of their underlying cultures and spiritualities. Thinking about theoquilombism presupposes, of course, a rapprochement with African cultures and establishing an intercultural dialogue. In the Brazilian case, these cultures were and are preserved above all in the Candomblé *terreiros* (JAGUN, 2015, p. 131). We may not forget that Candomblé was born out of afrodiasporic resistance to preserve its cultural and spiritual heritage in the midst of all kinds of persecutions. African reminiscences, their rituals, cults and deities were brought together and organized into a religion despite ethnic differences: Candomblé, born in Bahia in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (PARÉS, 2018, p. 13-56).

We still need to engage in a deep intercultural dialogue with African cultures, as was the desire expressed by many Afro-Brazilian theological subjects, such as bishop Dom José Maria Pires, affectionately recognized as Dom Zumbi: “We believe more and more strongly that the blacks can be disciples of Christ and to live in the Church without ceasing to be blacks, without renouncing their culture, without having to abandon the religion of the Orixás” (PIRES, 1997, p. 31).

Indeed, more than a strictly academic dialogue, it is rather about an ontological process of becoming black in which we are inserted, through which afrodiasporic subjectivities are constituted. In this ontological process of becoming black, a unique feature of the Afro-Brazilian experience (CALDEIRA, 2020, p. 81), it appears that black theology needs to enter into dialogue with Africa and its own epistemologies in order to overcome eurocentrism and at the same time engage in a decolonial attitude. It is recognized that this is a long and complex path, which involves getting closer to afrodiasporic cultures and their multiple epistemologies.

In order to signal a path of inculturation<sup>7</sup> to be followed, this text briefly recovers African Christology.

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<sup>7</sup> We are aware of the interdisciplinary debate on the issue of inculturation, in which critics of the concept of inculturation advocate overcoming and assuming the concept of interculturality. However, we maintain the perspective of inculturation because we understand that

## 2.1 South-south dialogue: a brief approach to African theology

*African theology tries to demonstrate that African religious experience and heritage were not illusory and that they should have formed the vehicle to convey the truths of the Gospel in Africa.* Desmond Tutu

Without intending to trace the genesis of African theology, it is worth pointing out that it emerged as a contextual theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is, of course, a “theology made in Africa, resulting from the identity of the African people, using African concepts of thought and speaking to the African context” (MASHAU; FREDERIKS, 2008, p. 109). Although the development of African theologies is considered a recent phenomenon and is mainly marked by opposition to white and monocultural Christianity, this does not mean that Christianity arrived in Africa only in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The New Testament itself testifies to the expansion of Christianity in Africa, with the account of the “Ethiopian”, Queen Candace’s eunuch, in Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:26-40). There is also an account of the initial founding of the Church in Egypt (presumably by Mark) in Alexandria. And the role of African Church Fathers, such as Augustine and Tertullian, cannot be ignored. Indeed, Christianity prospered in North Africa during the early centuries of Christianity, spreading south to Nubia and Axum (present-day Ethiopia). It was, however, after the arrival of Islam that the Churches in North Africa weakened, certainly by internal divisions. However, prominent Churches such as the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church remained (MASHAU; FREDERIKS, 2008, p. 110).

After the 15th century, with the arrival of Portuguese and European missionaries, Christianity grew and became one of the main religions in Africa, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (MASHAU; FREDERIKS, 2008, p. 110). It was this rooting of Christianity in Africa that led to the development of an African Christian theology, with the aim of thinking about African identity and African theology with global relevance. Thus, a “decolonizing Christianity and a liberation theology that integrates the fundamental elements of African anthropology” breaks out (TAMAYO ACOSTA, 2017, p. 84).

It will be, therefore, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the appearance of different contextual theologies, that African theology will boil, marked by the desire to “interpret the essentials of the Christian faith in the authentic African language in the flow and turbulence of our time, so that a genuine dialogue can take place between the Christian faith and African cultures in

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a true process of inculturation has implied an intercultural relationship, since it is guided by a symmetrical relationship between cultures, that is, by a fundamental equality between them. In this context, this is what the Amazon Synod affirms when speaking of “inculturation in interculturality”.

constant change" (POBEE, 1979, p. 16 apud MASHAU; FREDERIKS, 2008, p. 112). It is important to note, however, that given its complexity, extent and variety of cultural expressions in Africa, one cannot speak of African theology in the singular, but African theologies in the plural. Charles Nyamiti, defending unity in plurality, says that "an absolutely uniform African theology is an undesirable fiction" (NYAMITI, 1969, p. 2).

## 2.2 Method of African theology

Within the plurality of African theology, the contextual method seems to prevail, as in almost all so-called Third World theologies (MASHAU; FREDERIKS, 2008, p. 109). That is, a theology that starts from the context and then reflects and acts. In Latin America, Liberation Theology enshrined this method as *seeing-judging-acting*, which consist of an inversion of the hermeneutic circle, which gives primacy to the context. In Africa, such a contextual method is called "reverse hermeneutics" or "contextualization", as a testimony that Africans are taking their context seriously and striving to answer theologically the christological questions they face. This method generates some discomfort because it can be interpreted as relativizing the Bible. It is important to emphasize that starting from the contextual does not mean underestimating biblical exegesis without which it seems difficult to bring about significant changes to the community of faith (MAGEZI; IGBA, 2018, p. 6). What is intended, rather, is to let the Bible answer the concrete questions of the communities, that is, questions that are being asked within each culture.

Although not an exclusive method of African theology, this "reverse hermeneutics" has gradually become the "hallmark of African theology".

Gradually this methodology – focussing on the African contexts – became the distinctive marker for African theology. Thus, the quest for African theology and identity which began as a retort to the legacy of Western missions and colonialism, gradually developed into a project of its own; and, sailing on the sea of Africanness and African nationalism, it developed into a free, self-determining theological project that emphasizes liberation and African worthiness, thus also theologically taking charge of their own destinies. (MASHAU; FREDERIKS, 2008, p. 116-117)

Thus, African theology was born and developed with the aim of "'Africanizing' Christianity and theology and taking root in African soil". This means that, for the theological hermeneutical method, "Africanization represents the beginning of a new theological trend towards a search for an authentic African interpretation of the Christian faith" (MARTEY, 1993, p. 65).

The theological reflection called African theology in which Christology is the most developed subject, is marked by two main approaches which correspond to the schools of African theology, namely: liberation and inculturation (NYAMITI, 1991, p. 3). The first was typified as "Black theology" and was largely influenced by African-American and Latin American

theologians, with a more political-sociological emphasis. With the keyword “contextualization”, this theological current sought to take seriously the context of each human group and people in their own terms and in all their cultural, religious, social, political and economic dimensions in order to discern what the gospel tells people in their context. Its aim is for people’s particular needs and hopes to be understood and met. The other trend, with an emphasis on inculturation, is by far the most developed in black Africa (NYAMITI, 1991, p. 3). Based on an anthropological-cultural approach, in the theological reflection of inculturation the term indigenization appears as a key concept. In the African context of the proclamation of the gospel, indigenization helps in the Africanization of Christianity and in the removal of its foreign elements to guarantee its relevance in the African context. In this perspective, the theology of inculturation seeks an ever-greater interaction between gospel and culture (MASHAU; FREDERIKS, 2008, p. 118-119).

This perspective of inculturation has been criticized for producing “confusion and distortion” of the Christian message and “disseminating syncretism”, especially in Christology (POTGIETER; MAGEZI, 2016, p. 6-7). However, Mashau and Frederiks question: who is it that “decides what syncretism is and what is authentic inculturation and / or contextualization of the gospel in Africa?” (MASHAU; FREDERIKS, 2008, p. 120).

Indeed, through “reverse hermeneutics”, African theology is moving towards an authentic inculturation of the Christian faith. Safeguarding its distinctions and transformations imposed by the state of *Maaafa*, it seems legitimate to think of the contribution of the theological method of African “reverse hermeneutics” to leave the secular unilateral relationship between Christianity and Afro-Brazilian cultures. In this relationship, evangelization is characterized more as (neo-)colonization to implement the monocultural version of eurocentric Christianity and, consequently, the rejection of the particularities of afrodiasporic cultures. This involves the almost total rejection of African cultures, as if they had nothing to contribute to our understanding of the saving mystery revealed in Christ. In Africa as well as in the black diaspora, inculturation is still a pending task.

Inculturation of the Gospel remains a prime, if not the prime, item on Africa’s agenda. For too long, embracing Christ and his message meant rejection of African cultural values. Africans were taught that their ancient ways were deficient or even evil and had to be set aside if they hoped to become Christians. But it is clear today that that process of Christianization was often a process of Europeanization. The bitter irony, as African theologians have pointed out, is that African values and customs are often closer to the Semitic values that pervade the Scriptures and the story of Jesus than the European Christian values that have been imposed upon them. Colonial patterns of domination undermined African Christians in two ways: by demeaning their own sense of worth and dignity as Africans, and interposing European cultural values between them and the Gospel message. (SCHREITER, 1991)

In addition to restoring the self-esteem and sense of dignity of Africans and afrodiasporics, inculturation must reveal other faces of Christ so that, like the Bible itself, one can speak of Christologies. This means that although it is recognized that “the whole Revelation is already given [...] its meaning is not completely explained” (BRIGHENTI, 1998, p. 56). That is, without denying that the Incarnation of the Word is the full revelation of God, it must be recognized that we do not have all the necessary conditions to understand the whole set. Hence the importance of other cultures for access to the different forms of the Loving Mystery of the Real which we call God, to help us name Him in other possible ways, since “every revelation is received and expressed according to the way of its recipients” (BRIGHENTI, 1998, p. 53).

The inculturation of the Gospel and the Church will be more authentic as each cultural expression of the Christian faith stands out for its uniqueness. [...] In this process, it is essential to take into account that, although each culture appropriates the truths and values of Christianity in its own way, revealing a particular meaning in each one, none of them has them exclusively. (BRIGHENTI, 1998, p. 59)

In this sense, “reverse hermeneutics” can contribute to the rise of other expressions of the face of Christ that are totally unknown and even rejected by monocultural and eurocentric Christianity. To this end, it briefly approaches the African theological aspect of inculturation, that is, the reception of revelation from African cultures, more specifically to the devotion to ancestors that so deeply marks the *homo africanus*.

### ***2.3 Christology and ancestral devotion***

In the search for a more incarnate approach which not only values traditional African cultures, but sees them as indispensable for an adequate contextualization of the gospel in Africa, the project arose to use the ancestral concept to elucidate Christology in an African environment

Although it is a very controversial project, even for the African Continent, it is believed that it can illuminate the experience of black women and men immersed in the ontological process of becoming blacks and above all in the relationship with religions of African matrix, a matrix marked, as in Africa, by the cult of ancestors. Monocultural Christian theology affirms the incompatibility between Christian faith and African cultures, mainly because of the cult of ancestors and Orixás<sup>8</sup>. This apparent contradiction

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre Verger, talking about the Yoruba ethnic group, one of the ethnic groups that populated Brazil which can also correspond to countless other African ethnic groups, makes the distinction between “cult of the ancestors” and “cult of the Orixás”. The first refer to the “direct ancestors of the family”. And the second, the Orixás (Voduns for the fonts), are their “distant ancestors whose memory was lost more or less on the night of time and whose divine character is maintained mainly by their current descendants” (VERGER, 1981).

between Christ and the Orixás constitutes a knot for the construction of Afro-Brazilian identity, especially for black Christians. Many black Christians, specifically Catholics, clandestinely live what is called “double belonging”, await with some expectation the day to openly assume their Afro-Brazilian identity. In effect, this designation of “double belonging” only makes sense from the point of view of Western civilization, founded which is on the Platonic dichotomy and excluding Manichaeism.

For African cultures – and consequently Afro-Brazilian ones – this expression does not make sense since they are constitutively open to otherness and to the different, because they understand themselves as incomplete and are intrinsically relational (ANI, 2015, p. 29-83).

Fragments of this open and plural human conception can be seen in the eloquent testimony of Father François de L’Espinay, in his deep immersion in Candomblé. In his article “The religion of the Orixás – another Word of the One God?”, he reports the shock he felt when he discovered that the women of the Orixás cult declared themselves “Catholic too” (L’ESPINAY, 1987, p. 643). Father L’Espinay found that the biggest problem for the encounter between Christianity and ancestral cults is the announcement of Jesus Christ, because “the Word would use the Orixás to speak to the Candomblé people?” (L’ESPINAY, 1987, p. 639). The relationship of Jesus Christ and the Orixás is a major issue for the inculturation of the Christian faith.

The Negro believes that God speaks to him through the Orixá and above all through the whole tradition coming from the ancestors [...] Jesus the Son of God, God made man, Savior and Redeemer does not enter into Candomblé theology. In return, he is neither denied nor rejected nor despised; but in concrete we will say: ‘Jesus Christ is the way for Christians to talk about one of our Orixás’. (L’ESPINAY, 1987, p. 646 – emphasis added)

In fact, in Father L’Espinay’s observation lies the great crossroads between Christ and the Cult of the Orixás, the devotion to the ancestors. If it is assumed that Christ is the incarnate Word, he has no place in the Cult of the Orixás. If, on the other hand, it is assumed that he is only one among the many Orixás, then the fact of the Incarnation of the Divine Word is automatically denied. In an attempt to understand this relationship, Father L’Espinay goes on to say: “God speaks in very different ways that complement each other, and that each religion has a sacred deposit: the word that God told it” (L’ESPINAY, 1987, p. 649). What are then God’s ways of speaking to African cultures? How to express the Christian faith in their own expressions, patterns of thought and cultures?

In Africa, Christians found themselves at this same crossroads. For more than 40 years, they have been answering this crucial question through the elaboration of a “Christology of the Ancestors”. This is important because of the position held by the ancestors in African spirituality and,

above all, the desire for Christ to be recognized in African cultures in his human-divine mystery. It is important to say that the African religion is monotheistic, as well as Candomblé as an Afro-Brazilian religion, that is, it is believed in the existence of a Supreme God (JAGUN, 2015, p. 97). In other words, the authority of the ancestors is not in opposition or conflict with the Creator, but in the African worldview they are mediators between human beings and God.

The authority of ancestors is derived from the religious worldview that informs African ontology. While they rank above the living elders, ancestors are not above the Creator. Nonetheless, ancestors are involved in the very conception of life – family, clans, community, and the visible and the invisible worlds. For this reason, ancestors “do not occupy a single ‘position’ in a structural sense but are embodied in a number of different ways in a wide range of activities and material culture. These multiple manifestations suggest a variety of possible identities for ancestors rather than a unified model.” Whereas ancestors can be said to be “biologically dead”, they are understood as alive. In this case, they are the “living dead” elders who are the guardians of the land, life and morality. (KAOMA, 2016, p. 165).

The Ancestors as living dead and mediators par excellence of the vital energy are experienced in the form of an “other presence”. This is the difference between European ancestors and African ancestors. The formers are remembered as a memory within the family, but African Ancestors are invoked on all important occasions. They are present throughout the life of the Africans, sharing food and drink in communion with the community. So that Jesus’ expression “Behold, I am with you every day” (Mt 28:20b) makes perfect sense for Africans (KABASÉLÉ, 1991, p.120).

Thus, outside the understanding of the African universe, it is difficult to understand the mediation of the Ancestors, that is, their presentification. The African universe is hierarchized, especially the Bantu one, in which “all beings share in the life of the Supreme Being at different levels according to their nature”. And the human being occupies the center, sharing the life of the Supreme Being at the most complete level. However, “this participation is indirect”, because in a universe hierarchized between the Supreme Being, the world of the Spirits and the world of human beings, there are intermediaries (KABASÉLÉ, 1991, p. 123).

It was to the Ancestors that God first communicated the divine “vital force”. Thus, they constitute the highest link, after God, in the chain of human beings. But they still remain human beings. In their death passage they have become more powerful than other human beings – in their capacity to exert influence, to increase or to diminish the vital force of earthly beings. In their present state, they behold both God and God’s subjects. (KABASÉLÉ, 1991, p. 117-118)

Charles A. Wanamaker, on the other hand, argues that this mediating function of the Ancestors between God and living human beings already seems to be an influence of Christianity, above all among the South African Bantus who

were unaware of the conception of a personal divinity. “Before the introduction of a personal God by Christianity, the Ancestors could not have an intermediary role, because there was no personal God to mediate with. This caused the Ancestors to be seen as omnipotent in the lives of their living families” (WANAMAKER, 1997, p. 281–298). Undisputed, however, is the fact that today in all of Black Africa there is a conviction that, although no one has ever seen God, he nevertheless maintains contact with his creatures. This contact is made by intermediaries who are the beings closest to the Source of Life, that is, the Ancestors (KABASÉLÉ, 1991, p. 123). It is this worldview that informs ancestral Christologies in African theological thought.

Evidently, the proposal for a Christology of the Ancestors involves a movement of de-hellenization of Christianity, that is, of decolonization of Christology, since de-hellenization and decolonization can be thought of as synonyms (VASCONCELOS; HURTADO, 2016, p. 480). “Decolonization presupposes deconstruction at every level of inherited monocultural theological schemes that have enclosed Christianity by impeding its creativity” (TOMICHA CHARUPÁ *apud* VASCONCELOS; HURTADO, 2016, p. 477). If Christ is the Messiah for the Jews, Logos and Kyrios for the Greeks, it seems legitimate and indispensable to think of Christ from the distinctive mark of devotion to the ancestors of African cultures<sup>9</sup>.

### 2.3.1 *Christ, the Ancestor*

Within the perspective of inculturation, Charles Nyamiti identifies two ways that African theologians approach a Christology of the Ancestors. On the one hand, there are “those who try to build an African Christology from the biblical teaching on Christ and then strive to find the relevant christological themes based on the African cultural situation”. On the other hand, “there are those who take African cultural formation as their starting point for christological elaboration” (NYAMITI, 1991, p. 3)<sup>10</sup>.

Through the way of tradition and culture there are theologians such as John S. Mbiti (1986), Edward Fasholé-Luke (1974). Fasholé-Luke, for example, argues that the Christology of Ancestors must begin with the doctrine of the communion of saints as a fixed theological premise on whose base the African cultural ideal of ancestry can be included (1974, p. 209-221). From culture to tradition, on the other hand, predominate the vast majority of African Christologies, such as “Christ, the Ancestor” by Charles Nyamiti

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<sup>9</sup> It is a fact that the question of ancestry is not restricted to African cultures, it signals a universal dimension. However, it is necessary to examine the way in which ancestry is perceived and lived in African cultures in their particularities.

<sup>10</sup> “There are those who attempt to construct an African christology by starting from the biblical teaching about Christ and strive afterwards to find from the African cultural situation the relevant christological themes. Secondly, there are those who take the African cultural background as their point of departure for christological elaboration”.

(1984), "Christ, the Proto-Ancestor" by Bénédet Bujo (1992), "Christ, the Ancestor" by François Kabasélé (1991), "Jesus, Master of Initiation" by Anselme T. Sanon (1991), "Christ, the Great Ancestor" by John S. Pobee (1979), among many others.

Nyamiti, one of the greatest references on Ancestral Christology, claims that Christ brought Ancestral mediation to its full realization through the incarnation. Becoming the Ancestor par excellence.

Through the incarnation Christ assumed the whole of human history, including the legitimate aspirations of our ancestors. This assumption of the future which the ancestors sought to guarantee is assured because our ancestors' experiences have been made efficacious in Jesus, crucified and risen. Thus the incarnation enables Christ to be the unique and privileged locus of total encounter with our ancestors and allows them to be the locus where we encounter the God of salvation. (NYAMITI, 1991, p. 10)

Looking at his Ancestral Bantu tradition, Kabasélé, in turn, believes that the Christology of Ancestors should begin with Jesus' role as mediator. He argues that Christ fits into the category of Ancestor because he is the synthesis of all mediations (KABASÉLÉ, 1991, p. 123-124). This does not mean that African Christians no longer need to resort to their ancestors, as it is not a matter of thinking that Christ would have abolished the role of the Ancestors (KABASÉLÉ, 1991, p. 124)<sup>11</sup>. Rather, African Christology understands that the experience of Ancestral mediation can perfectly be assumed by the Christian faith, recognizing in Jesus Christ the Ancestor par excellence.

Still in this perspective seen from "below", Bujo models the concept of Christ as the Proto-Ancestor, thus giving it a transcendental and immanent character. Since Christ, the Proto-Ancestor, not only brings African veneration to fulfillment, but transcends and purifies it in the light of biblical revelation.

Jesus, the Christ, identified himself with humankind, so that he constitutes their explanation. From now on, Jesus makes his own all the striving of the ancestors after righteousness and all their history, in such a way that these have now become a meeting-place with God of salvation. Above all, Jesus Christ himself becomes the privileged locus for a full understanding of the ancestors. The African now has something to say about the mystery of the Incarnation, for after God has spoken to us at various times and in various places, including our ancestors, in these last days God speaks to us through the Son, whom God has established as unique Ancestor, as Proto-Ancestor, from whom all life flows for God's descendants (cf. Heb1:1-2). (BUJO, 1992, p. 83)

This means that the African, having perceived the Divine in the concept of the Ancestors, finds its typical and maximum expression in Christ. The contextualization of Christ as the Proto-Ancestral is connected to the

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<sup>11</sup> "Is this to say that Bantu Christians no longer have recourse to their Ancestors? In other words, has Christ as Ancestor abolished the role of the Bantu Ancestors? It would seem not" (KABASÉLÉ, 1991, p. 124).

biblical idea of the Incarnation of the Word (Jn 1.14). By assuming human form and becoming part of this world of human beings, "God can no longer be the 'immutable'; God assumed the mutability ... The kenosis, the emptying, happened" (BUJO, 1992, p. 82).

In view of the above, an African look at the historical Jesus of Nazareth recognizes in him, not only someone who lived the African ancestral ideal in the highest degree, but, above all, someone who took this ideal to a totally new realization. In his "sayings and deeds", Jesus brought life and vital strength to the full (cf. Jn 10.10). To seek the face of the African Christ is to find an African name for him: Christ, the Ancestor. In Christ, the Ancestor, the "African identity is best achieved by self-identification with Christ, the black par excellence" (NYAMITI, 1991, p. 6). It is evident the need to move towards a theology of inculturation, which can advance the decolonization of Christology and, thus, access to other faces of Christ. A multi-cultural and, at the same time, multi-cultural face.

## *Conclusion*

For centuries Christianity has been identified with European culture, despite the roots of the Christian tradition being deeply in Semitic and African cultures, with well-documented Asian influences. The diversity that constitutes the Christian faith has been hidden, giving way to eurocentric and monocultural Christianity, in view of a project for the domination of modern civilization. As a result, Christ does not seem to fit into African and afrodiasporic spirituality and has often been associated with the religion of the oppressor and, therefore, a foreigner to African cultures; challenging theological reflection to say its word of hope in African categories.

Thinking of the confluence between a political theology and a theology of inculturation, following the theologian Charles Nyamiti, it must be recognized that any theology of true and integral inculturation must also be political, liberating, and vice versa. This means that a political theology understands that there is no liberation without the therapeutic dimension which is beyond a certain relief from illness or extinction of hunger, or any goods and services. Evidently, it involves all of this, but overcomes it. It includes a transformation of the world, as the system/ world does not involve an authentic liberation; since it needs the alienation of the other to survive. What is more, for an African soul, an authentic liberation as a promise of full life involves its political relationship with the Ancestors and its current relational dimension. It is in these integral terms that black liberation must be pursued, where the transformation of current political and economic structures must come accompanied by a reconstruction of the ways of thinking of African cultures and their own self-esteem, as well as the inculturation of their own theological thinking.

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