

**THE SPATIAL ORGANIZATION OF STREET VENDING IN THE CITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO (RJ): REFLECTIONS ON THE WORK PRACTICES AND DYNAMICS OF MATEIROS ON CARIOCA BEACHES**

***A ORGANIZAÇÃO ESPACIAL DO COMÉRCIO AMBULANTE NA CIDADE DO RIO DE JANEIRO (RJ): REFLEXÕES A PARTIR DAS PRÁTICAS E DINÂMICAS DE TRABALHO DOS MATEIROS NAS PRAIAS CARIOCAS***

***LA ORGANIZACIÓN ESPACIAL DEL COMERCIO AMBULANTE EN LA CIUDAD DE RÍO DE JANEIRO (RJ): REFLEXIONES A PARTIR DE LAS PRÁCTICAS Y DINÁMICAS LABORALES DE LOS MATEIROS EN LAS PLAYAS CARIOCAS***



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**ABSTRACT:** The beaches of the city of Rio de Janeiro are spaces where a variety of activities take place, notably the street vending of mate tea, lemonade, and Biscoito Globo, recognized as intangible cultural heritage of the city (Rio de Janeiro, 2012). The so-called *mateiros*, known for wearing orange uniforms, walk along the sand carrying two containers on their shoulders and a bag of cassava biscuits to sell their products. Although commercialization occurs predominantly on the beaches, the activity is connected to other economic agents distributed throughout different parts of the city, from production to sale. This article aims to understand how this activity fits into the urban economy in light of Milton Santos' theory of the two circuits (1979). The results made it possible to identify the spatial organization of the agents involved, post-pandemic transformations, and commercialization practices on the beaches, based on the application of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, commented walks, and fieldwork carried out in three beach arcs: Leme-Copacabana, Arpoador-Leblon, and Barra da Tijuca.

**KEYWORDS:** Urban economy. Street vending. Mateiros. Circuits of the urban economy.

**RESUMO:** As praias da cidade do Rio de Janeiro são espaços nos quais variadas atividades são desempenhadas, com destaque para o comércio ambulante de mate, limonada e biscoito Globo, reconhecido como patrimônio cultural imaterial carioca (Rio de Janeiro, 2012). Os chamados *mateiros*, caracterizados por utilizarem um uniforme alaranjado, percorrem as areias com dois galões em seus ombros e uma sacola contendo biscoitos de polvilho para vender seus produtos. Porém, embora a comercialização ocorra predominantemente nas praias, a atividade se articula com outros agentes econômicos distribuídos por diferentes pontos da cidade, desde a produção até a venda. O artigo busca compreender, assim, como essa atividade se insere na economia urbana à luz da teoria dos dois circuitos de Milton Santos (1979). Os resultados permitiram identificar a organização espacial dos agentes que compõem a atividade, as transformações pós-pandêmicas e as práticas de comercialização nas praias, com base na aplicação de questionários e entrevistas semiestruturadas, além de percursos comentados e trabalhos de campo realizados em três arcos praianos: Leme-Copacabana, Arpoador-Leblon e Barra da Tijuca.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Economia urbana. Comércio ambulante. Mateiros. Circuitos da economia.

**RESUMEN:** Las playas de la ciudad de Río de Janeiro son espacios donde se desarrollan diversas actividades, destacándose el comercio ambulante de mate, limonada y biscoito Globo, reconocido como patrimonio cultural inmaterial carioca (Río de Janeiro, 2012). Los llamados *mateiros*, caracterizados por llevar un uniforme anaranjado, recorren las arenas con dos galones al hombro y una bolsa con galletas de almidón para vender sus productos. Aunque la comercialización ocurre predominantemente en las playas, la actividad se articula con otros agentes económicos distribuidos en distintos puntos de la ciudad, desde la producción hasta la venta. El artículo busca comprender cómo esta actividad se inserta en la economía urbana a la luz de la teoría de los dos circuitos de Milton Santos (1979). Los resultados permitieron identificar la organización espacial de los agentes involucrados, las transformaciones pospandémicas y las prácticas de comercialización en las playas, a partir de la aplicación de cuestionarios, entrevistas semiestruturadas, recorridos comentados y trabajo de campo realizados en tres arcos de playa: Leme-Copacabana, Arpoador-Leblon y Barra da Tijuca.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Economía urbana. Comercio ambulante. Mateiros. Circuitos de la economía.

## Introduction

With high temperatures for much of the year, the city of Rio de Janeiro attracts thousands of beachgoers to its shores. It is no coincidence that these spaces are among the most visited tourist destinations in the country (Brasil, 2018). Beyond leisure and tourism, the beaches also host sports activities, cultural expressions, and diverse economic undertakings, highlighting their multifaceted use. These spaces accommodate numerous tertiary sector activities, including the trade of goods and the provision of services. Such activities correspond to what is referred to as the “beach economy” (Souza; Lage, 2008), which includes, among others, small entrepreneurs—both formal and informal—who offer services and sell beverages, food, beach accessories, and souvenirs between the sunbathing areas and the boardwalk, generating approximately four billion reais annually in Rio de Janeiro (PMRJ, 2022).

Among the tertiary sector activities conducted in these spaces, street vending stands out. This can occur in fixed locations, such as stalls along the shoreline, or itinerantly, with vendors offering a range of products to beachgoers along the sand. Within the diversity of workers selling goods and services along the seafront, the vendors of mate, lemonade, and Biscoito Globo stand out due to their significant relevance to the city, to the extent that this activity on the beaches was declared part of Rio de Janeiro’s intangible cultural heritage (Rio de Janeiro, 2012).

Mate vendors—traditionally known as *mateiros*—are characterized by their orange uniforms featuring the logo of the Matte Leão company, one of the main producers of yerba mate in Brazil, although they are not formally affiliated with the brand. They traverse the beaches under the strong sun, carrying two containers on their shoulders: one filled with mate and the other with lemonade. In addition, they carry a bag of Biscoito Globo, available in either sweet or salty flavors. Thus, while the street trade of mate, lemonade, and Biscoito Globo occurs predominantly on Rio’s beaches, it is not limited to them, mobilizing various economic agents across different parts of the city, as exemplified by the Biscoito Globo factory located downtown.

This scenario raises several questions: Which agents participate in this economic activity? Where are they located? What relationships do they establish with one another? What changes have occurred in this activity in the post-pandemic context? And, specifically in the beach setting, what practices are adopted in the sale of these products? Accordingly, the main objective of this research was to understand how this activity integrates into the urban economy, identifying the agents involved and their relationships in light of Santos’ (1979) theory of the

two circuits of the urban economy. More specifically, the study aimed to: 1) understand how these agents organize themselves throughout the city; 2) identify organizational and technological changes in the activity during the post-pandemic period; and, finally, in the context of beach activities, 3) map the spatial practices of commercialization through commented itineraries (Thibaud, 2000)

Beyond this introduction, the article is structured into three main sections: (i) the research trajectory; (ii) results and discussion; and (iii) final considerations. The first section presents the methodological approach adopted, detailing the strategies and techniques applied throughout the investigation. The second section is dedicated to the analysis of empirical data, subdivided into four parts, addressing: the characteristics and dynamics of the vendors' work; the logistics and spatial organization of these agents across the city; the impacts of technological modernization and the pandemic on the lower circuit of the urban economy; and the spatial practices of *mateiros* on the beaches. Finally, the last section brings together the concluding considerations, synthesizing the main findings, discussing their contributions to the understanding of the lower circuit of the urban economy, and reaffirming the sale of mate on the beaches as a significant expression of Rio de Janeiro's popular economy.

## **Research trajectory**

Initially, a bibliographic review was conducted on street vending on beaches, which allowed the identification of three main lines of research. The first focuses on characterizing the profile of the vendors and understanding the spatial organization and urban morphology of the beaches, taking into account the use of spaces and their influence on the vendors' activities (Araújo *et al.*, 2012; Marçal; Borde, 2010; Reginensi; Gomes, 2007; Xavier *et al.*, 2015). The second line centers on the regulation of street vending and the conflicts arising from its presence in public spaces. Studies reveal the existence of various legal instruments governing the activity (Teixeira, 2021) and highlight the tensions generated by urban requalification policies, such as prohibitions and standardizations, which directly impact vendors (Reginensi, 2009; Serpa *et al.*, 2019), leading to the adoption of negotiation and reorganization strategies (Rabossi, 2011; Reginensi, 2004). The third line of research addresses the spatial practices of vendors, advocating for an attentive view of the beach as a heterogeneous space constructed through the everyday actions of these workers (Reginensi, 2018). In this context, studies by Bezerra (2006) and Parente-Ribeiro and Musset (2016) demonstrate how street vending practices are shaped

by quotidian elements such as travel routes, specific stopping and resting points, and methods of product preparation.

However, a gap was observed in studies that analyze street vending beyond the limits of the point of sale, encompassing the connections and complementarities of this commerce and the spatiality produced throughout the urban fabric. Commercial activities carried out on the beaches represent only the visible portion of a complex production network, which mobilizes diverse economic agents across the city. Therefore, it is crucial to understand not only the final stage—the sale of products—but also the intermediaries, that is, all actors involved in production, from the manufacturer to the consumer.

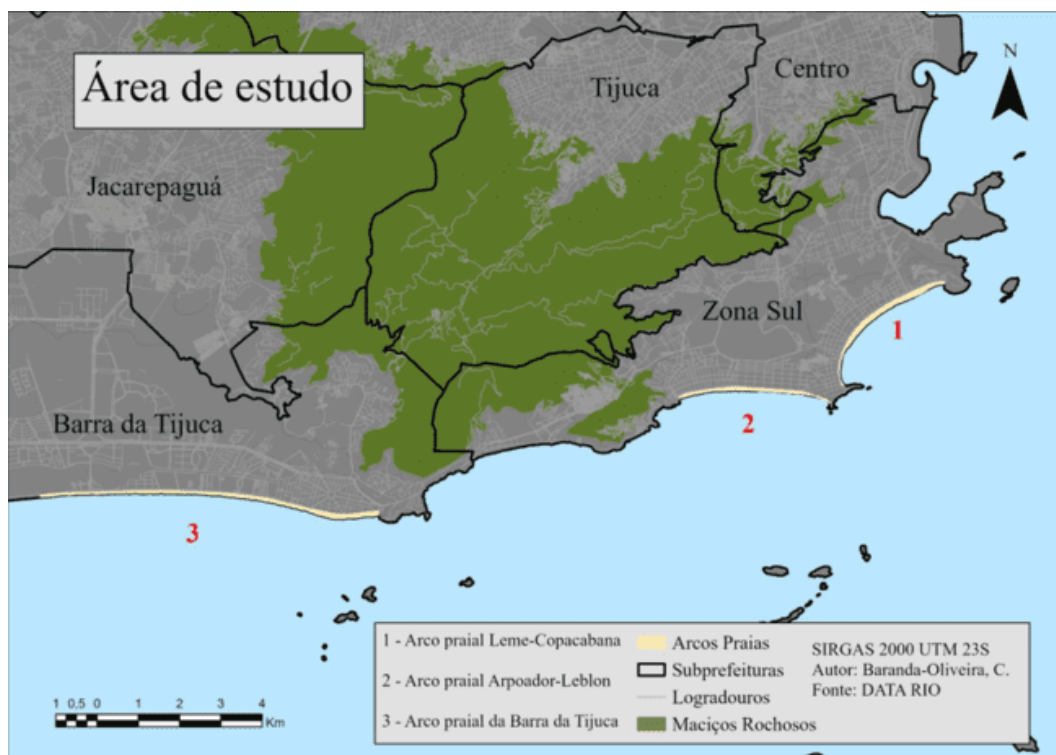
Accordingly, the research adopted the analytical framework of the two circuits of the urban economy theory (Santos, 1979). This theory is structured around the coexistence of two interdependent yet distinct subsystems: the upper circuit, linked to international capital, advanced technology, and formal production oriented toward the global market; and the lower circuit, composed of small-scale activities with low capitalization and a strong informal presence. While the upper circuit operates based on modern infrastructure, bureaucratic organization, and high technological input, the lower circuit survives under precarious conditions, sustained by direct social relations and little to no institutional support. Although distinct in organization and technology, both circuits are articulated through complementary and hierarchical relations, revealing structural inequalities in the urbanization of peripheral countries.

Subsequently, the study area for this research was defined (Figure 1), encompassing the beach arcs from Arpoador to Copacabana and from Leme to Leblon, including Ipanema Beach, as well as the coastal arc from Barra da Tijuca up to the height of Reserva Beach. The latter area represents a zone of expansion for the activity due to strong competition with other coastal arcs.

Based on the variables proposed by Santos (1979), a questionnaire was developed for the street vendors themselves, aiming to characterize the sale of mate, lemonade, and Biscoito Globo on the beaches. Between March 2021 and July 2022, 44 questionnaires were administered to vendors in the South and West Zones of Rio de Janeiro, contacted via Instagram, and interviewed by phone. This methodological strategy was adopted due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which temporarily closed access to the beaches, and it was maintained after the reopening of these spaces, given the impracticality of conducting in-person interviews during the vendors' working hours on the sand.

In parallel, to identify the spatial practices involved in the commercialization—that is, the ways in which vendors interact with urban space—the commented itinerary method was employed (Thibaud, 2000). This approach prioritizes listening to the perceptions, impressions, and daily gestures of workers, valuing the manner in which they experience, narrate, and interact with one another. A commented itinerary was conducted with a vendor on Ipanema Beach, whose observations and descriptions were subsequently transcribed. Additionally, the research was enriched through direct field observations and the accounts recorded during questionnaire administration.

**Figure 1** – Delimitation of the study area<sup>2</sup>



Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

## Results and discussion

### Work characteristics and dynamics

From the questionnaires applied to the *mateiros*, it was possible to characterize this economic activity from the perspective of Santos' (1979) theory. This approach allowed for the identification of central aspects defining the street vending of mate, lemonade, and Biscoito

<sup>2</sup> Translation of the writings in the middle caption: Arches Beaches; Subprefectures; Streets; Rocky Massifs.

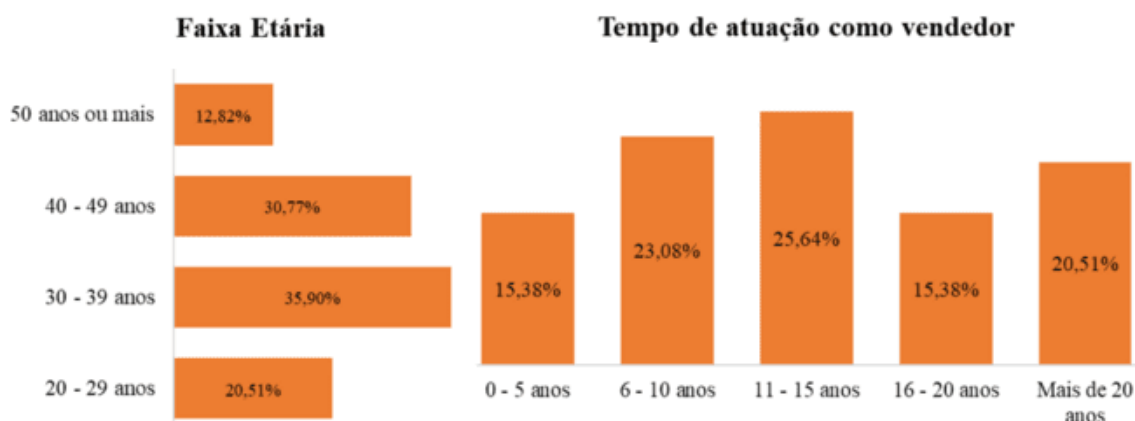


Globo on the beaches, particularly regarding technology use and organization. The analysis not only reveals the specificities of these workers' daily routines but also provides elements to understand the dynamics structuring this practice, which is characterized by low technological input, informality in relationships, and adaptability to seasonal conditions.

Street vending of mate on Rio de Janeiro's beaches is characterized by high physical demands: vendors traverse long stretches of sand under intense heat, carrying heavy containers during extended working hours. This occupation exemplifies what Kalleberg (2009) defines as precarious labor, that is, a form of employment marked by uncertainty, instability, and the full transfer of risks to the worker. Lacking formal protection and operating under constant productivity pressures, the physical, temporal, and social costs of the activity fall entirely on the vendors themselves. Unsurprisingly, the occupation is predominantly performed by men aged 30 to 49 (Graphic 1), an age range that provides the strength necessary to meet these demands. There is also a significant presence of young adults aged 20 to 29, for whom selling mate often serves as an entry point into the labor market, while participation among workers over 50 is limited, reflecting the physical constraints inherent to the occupation.

Regarding tenure in the activity (Graphic 2), there is a heterogeneous distribution, with a notable concentration of vendors with 11 to 15 years of experience, indicating the coexistence of both established and emerging career trajectories. Selling mate in containers on the beaches, therefore, combines renewal and continuity, constituting a traditional and enduring occupation in the urban landscape of Rio de Janeiro. It is not uncommon for vendors to have worked in this field for over two decades, including one respondent with 26 years of experience.

**Graphs 1 and 2** – Age range of the interviewed foresters and time working as a salesperson<sup>3</sup>



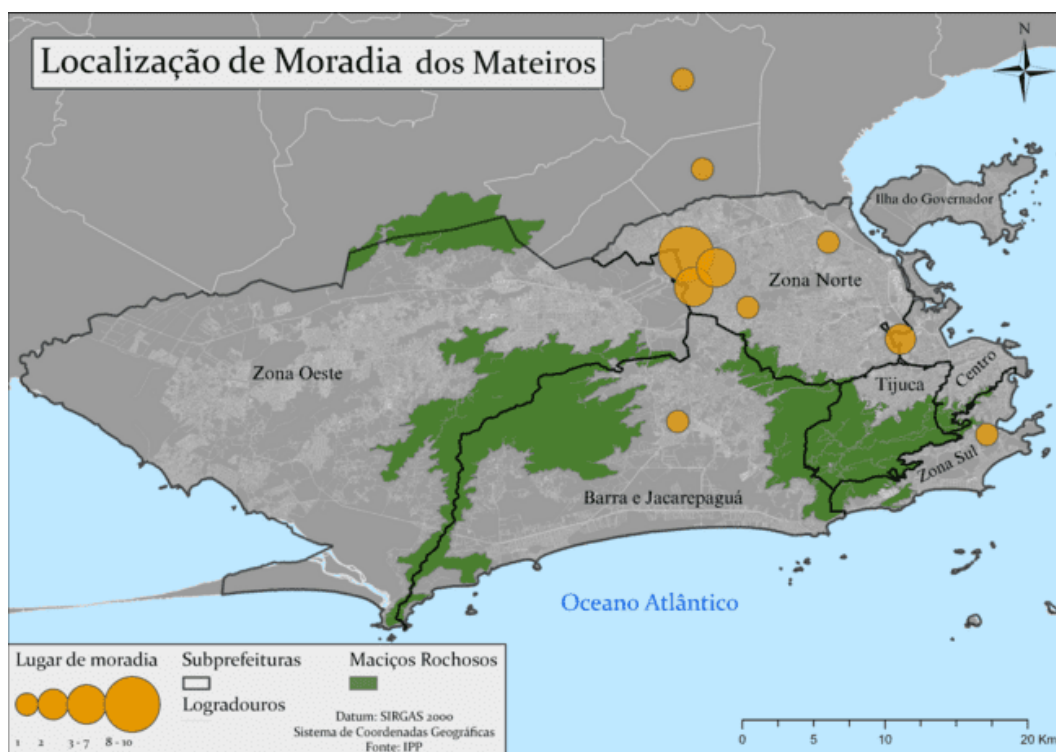
Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

Although some workers engage in supplementary occupations to secure their livelihoods—such as security guards, barbers, delivery workers, app drivers, motorcycle taxi drivers, or doormen—for the vast majority of respondents, selling mate on the beaches is recognized as their primary economic activity. This configuration directly relates to the concept of livelihood strategies, whereby urban workers, faced with labor market instability, develop approaches that integrate multiple economic activities—often simultaneously—to ensure their material reproduction (Natarajan *et al.*, 2022). As noted by Roever and Skinner (2016), it is common for these workers to combine diverse occupations, whether formal or informal, autonomous or subordinated, assembling varied repertoires to sustain themselves.

Mate is prepared in the vendors' own homes (Figure 2), with low capital investment and in small quantities due to the impossibility of storage. This immediate-production logic—without inventories and with minimal inputs—is a central feature of the lower circuit (Santos, 1979), resulting from material constraints and limited access to formal credit. A concentration of vendors' residences was identified in the Vila Palmeirinha community, located between the neighborhoods of Guadalupe, Honório Gurgel, and Marechal Hermes in the city's North Zone (Figure 6). Vendors were also found to reside in other municipalities, such as São João de Meriti and Belford Roxo. Within the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, residents were identified in Penha Circular, Madureira, Benfica, and Barros Filho in the North Zone; Santo Cristo in the Central Zone; Jacarepaguá in the West Zone; and Botafogo in the South Zone.

<sup>3</sup> Left chart translation: Title - Age Range; 50 years and older; 40-49 years; 30-39 years; 20-29 years. Translation of the graph on the right: Title - time working as a salesperson; 0-5 years; 6-10 years; 11-15 years; 16-20 years; more than 20 years.



**Figure 2** – Location of *mateiros*' residences

Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

The concentration of vendors in a specific area of the city—Vila Palmeirinha—facilitates the diffusion of practices and ways of working among them, as familial, kinship, and proximity-based relationships are deeply intertwined with the activity. Many vendors initiate their children, nephews, cousins, brothers-in-law, friends, or neighbors into mate vending, since agreements are made verbally and trust is a fundamental component. These interpersonal relationships, grounded in trust and the transmission of family ties, are, according to Santos (1979), a cornerstone of cohesion within the lower circuit, essential for the functioning of informal activities and the transfer of practical knowledge. In an interview with the newspaper *O Globo*, Seu Zé, one of the pioneers of the activity, notes, “our neighborhood is known for the *mateiros* [...], if you see several vendors leaving together, they are definitely heading to Honório Gurgel” (D’elia, 2019, our translation).

Consequently, a standard route was identified for these vendors, particularly those residing near Vila Palmeirinha. This route involves the use of trains on the Deodoro and Belford Roxo lines, departing from the Marechal Hermes, Rocha Miranda, and Barros Filho stations and arriving at São Cristóvão station. From there, they board bus line 461, which stops near São Cristóvão train station and proceeds to Ipanema Beach (Figure 3). In the past, some vendors transferred between the train and the metro at São Cristóvão station, disembarking at a South

Zone station. However, due to the high cost of this option (R\$7.50), it has gradually been phased out.

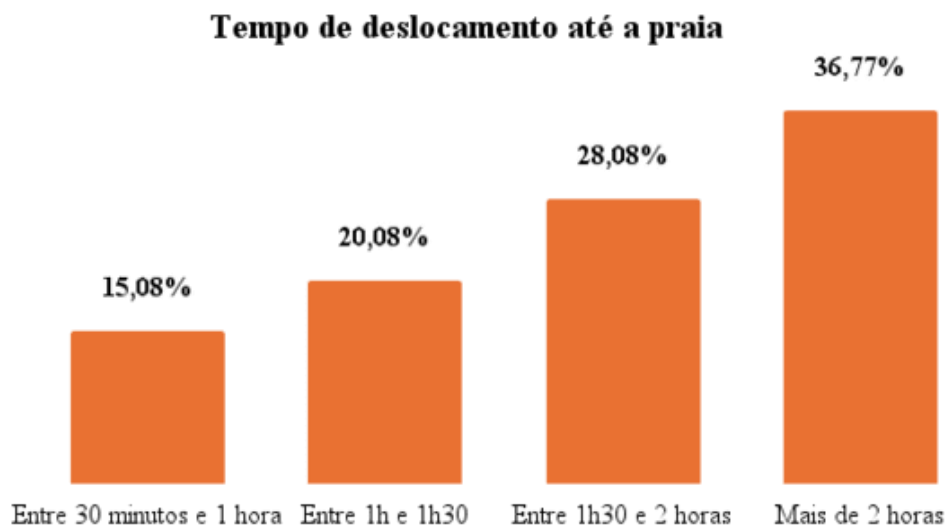
**Figure 3** – Map of the main route taken by vendors from Vila Palmeirinha to the beaches<sup>4</sup>



Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

To reach their workplace, approximately 80% of the interviewed vendors use two or more modes of transportation, with over half reporting travel times exceeding one and a half hours, and the majority indicating journeys longer than two hours (Graph 3). This daily commute constitutes a significant portion of the physical, emotional, and financial effort these workers expend before even beginning their sales activities. Only a minority have private vehicles, which allow them to reduce travel time to under an hour. As Roever and Skinner (2016) argue, mobility is a fundamental component of the informal work experience, particularly when workers must travel long distances to access economically valuable locations, such as the beaches in Rio de Janeiro's South Zone.

<sup>4</sup> The orange circle represents the place of residence and the quantity (the larger it is, the more people live there). This applies to all figures that have this quantification.

**Graph 3 – Travel time to the beach<sup>5</sup>**

Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

The economic dimension of the activity is strongly influenced by seasonality, which directly affects vendors' earnings and the organization of their working hours. During the summer, daily earnings can reach R\$300, driven by high tourist circulation and longer stays on the beaches, whereas in winter, these values decline drastically, sometimes falling below R\$50 on certain days. This instability, typical of informal occupations, reflects dependence on external variables such as weather and pedestrian flow (Standing, 2014). Product pricing also follows its own logic, characterized by flexibility: prices are adjusted on a case-by-case basis through promotions and direct negotiations, a pattern characteristic of the lower circuit, in which prices respond more to situational dynamics than to market norms (Santos, 1979). The same seasonality structures workers' use of time and routines; in summer, their workdays extend from early morning until early evening, whereas in winter, activity is limited to periods of peak demand, between late morning and late afternoon.

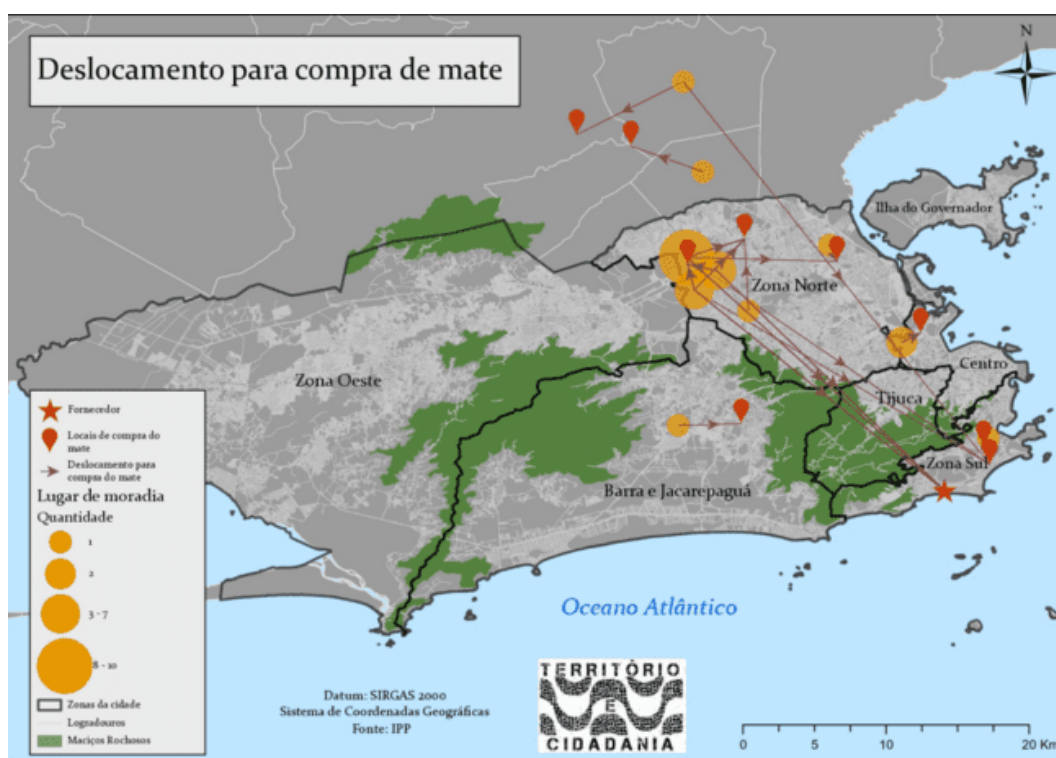
### **Logistics and organization across the city**

Although mate sales occur predominantly on Rio de Janeiro's beaches, the activity extends its networks beyond the city's coastal areas, connecting suppliers and multi-located intermediaries. The circulation of inputs, products, and services—from supply centers to the

<sup>5</sup> Translation: Title - Travel time to the beach; Between 30 minutes and 1 hour; Between 1 hour and 1 hour 30 minutes; Between 1 hour 30 minutes and 2 hours; More than 2 hours.

point of sale on the beaches—constitutes a typical productive spatial circuit, which, according to Castillo and Frederico (2010), is structured through the geographically distributed articulation of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption stages. A clear relationship of complementarity with the Biscoito Globo industry was observed, as vendors are primarily supplied through wholesalers. Additionally, two types of services are associated with the activity: the purchase or rental of containers and the provision of uniforms by seamstresses.

Mate leaves (Figure 4) are acquired from wholesalers located throughout the city. This territorial dispersion, as Castillo and Frederico (2010) note, is typical of urban productive circuits, where different agents and stages are spatially distributed according to costs, accessibility, and local operational conditions. Generally, vendors prefer establishments near their residences. However, more distant wholesalers may be chosen when they offer a better cost-benefit ratio. Many *mateiros* alternate between different purchasing points. Vendors often pool resources to buy large quantities collectively, thereby further reducing costs. Nonetheless, it is also common to purchase small quantities at markets near the beach to supply only the following day's work. Two logistical patterns thus emerge: wholesale tied to the place of residence and retail linked to the place of work. These practices reflect an adaptive circulation logic, in which the location, as Dantas (2016) argues, functions as a decisive material base in organizing the flows within a productive circuit.

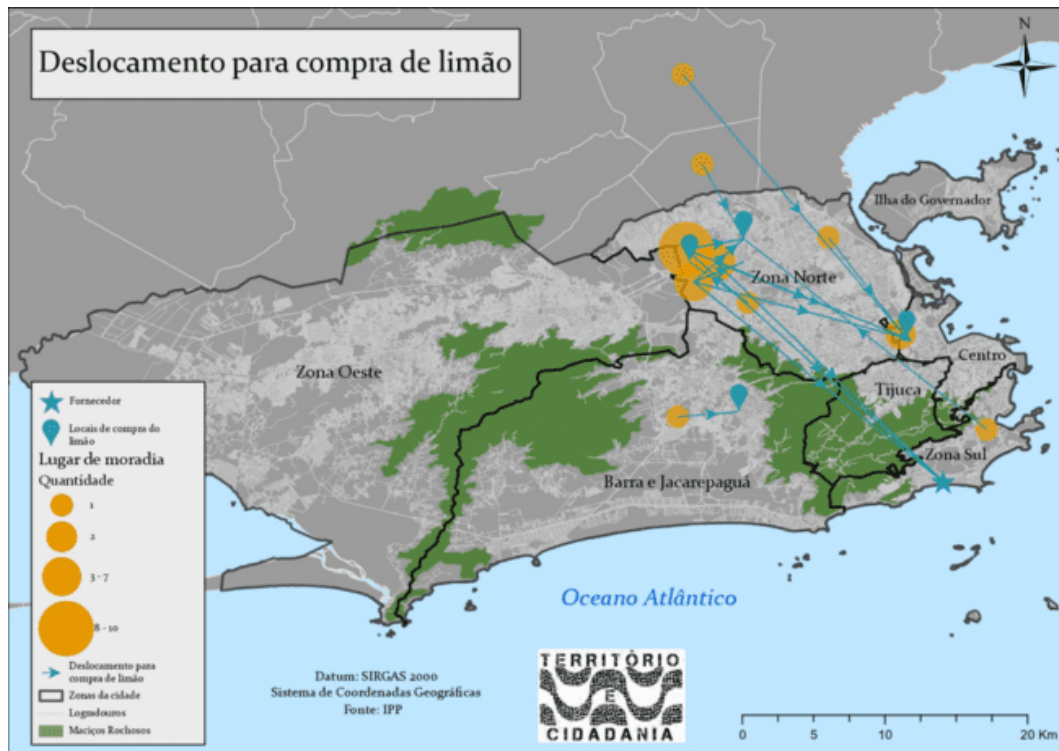
**Figure 4** – Travel for Mate leaf purchases<sup>6</sup>

Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

Similarly, the acquisition of lemons (Figure 5) occurs primarily through wholesale, but in a more concentrated manner. Vendors predominantly rely on CADEG and CEASA, the city's main food distribution centers, located in the North Zone neighborhoods of Benfica and Irajá, respectively. On these occasions, collective purchases are also organized to minimize costs and reduce the frequency of weekly trips. In this way, these distribution centers function as strategic logistical nodes, connecting producers, wholesalers, and street vendors, and facilitating the flows that integrate the different stages of the productive spatial circuit (Arroyo, 2008; Santos, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Translation: star – supplier; Location point – Place where mate is purchased.

**Figure 5** – Travel for lemon purchases<sup>7</sup>

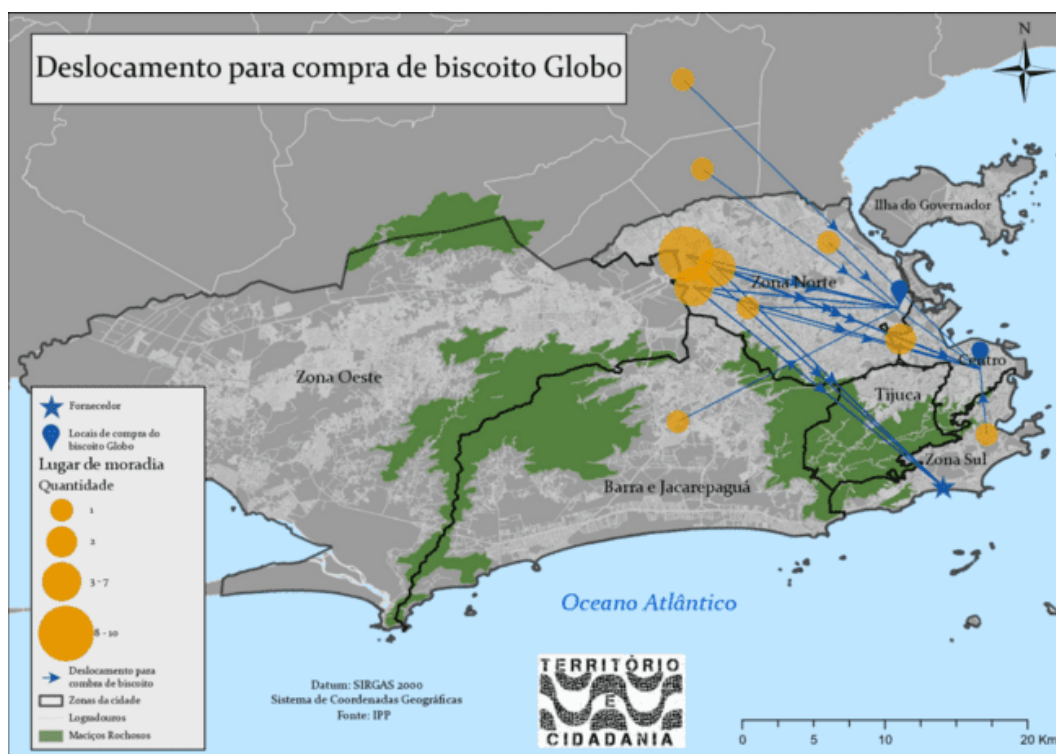


Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

The acquisition of Biscoito Globo (Figure 6) is concentrated at two main points in the city: the Panificação Mandarinino LTDA factory in the central region and a resale outlet located in the Maré community in the North Zone. During the summer, when beach demand increases, vendors make more frequent trips to restock their supplies, usually two to three times per week, due to the product's short shelf life, as its cassava starch quickly loses crispness. In winter, this frequency decreases, often limited to a single weekly trip or only during peak days, such as weekends. Seasonality, therefore, regulates the logistical flows and temporal organization of the activity, requiring constant adaptation to fluctuations in demand. In summer, long lines at the factory force workers to arrive before opening to secure their supply, under the risk of compromising part of their working day. Additionally, limitations on the number of bags per vendor, due to the small-scale production, reduce the efficiency of the purchase process. As an alternative, many vendors turn to the resale outlet in Vila do João, despite higher prices, taking advantage of its strategic location near the city's main expressways, which reduces travel time and allows them to begin work more quickly.

<sup>7</sup> Translation: star – supplier; Location point – Place where the lemon is purchased.



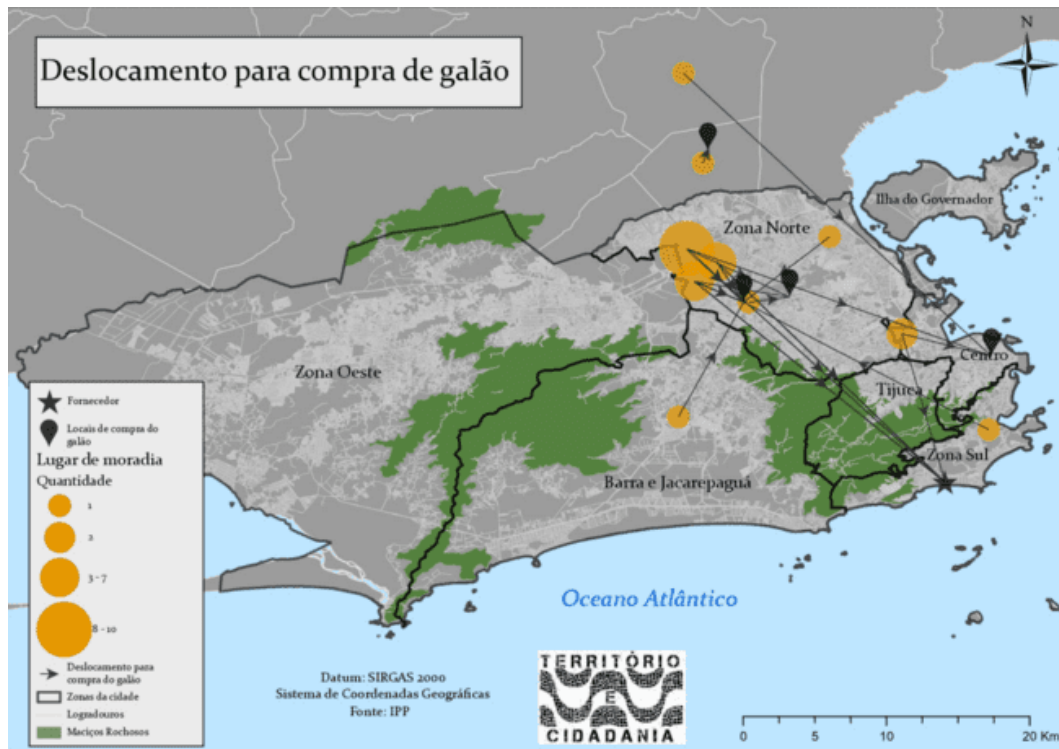
**Figure 6** – Travel for Biscoito Globo purchases<sup>8</sup>

Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

The purchase of gallons (Figure 7) occurs mainly in Madureira, in the northern part of the city, and also at a point of sale located in the central area of the city. In addition, repair and maintenance points were identified in Marechal Hermes (near the Vila Palmeirinha community) and in São João de Meriti, a municipality belonging to the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro. The repair of these tanks is strategic, since they are expensive to replace. The price of a pair is around R\$3,000, which reveals another business opportunity in this sector: tank rental. Some vendors buy more than one pair and hire others to work for them on the beach. The amount that the renter collects during a day's work is shared with the owner. They call this arrangement “half and half.”

<sup>8</sup> Translation: star - supplier; Location point - Place of purchase Biscoito Globo.

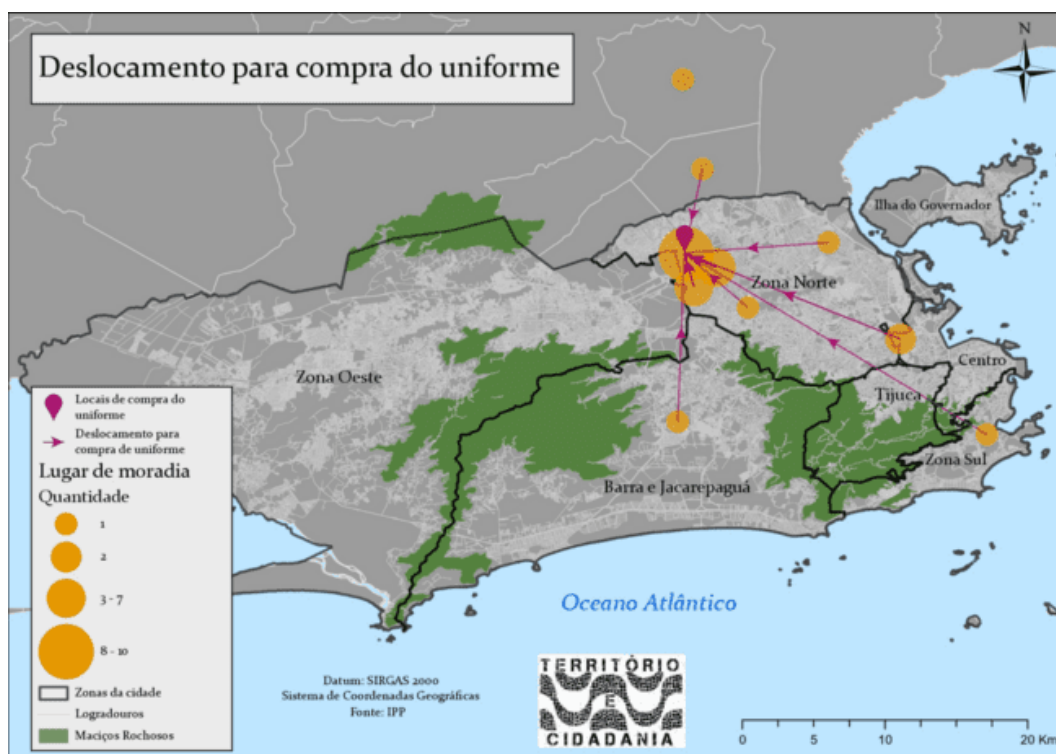
**Figure 7** – Traveling to purchase a gallon<sup>9</sup>



Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

Uniform procurement (Figure 8) is even more concentrated, with a single supplier located in Vila Palmeirinha. Although there is no formal relationship between the vendors and mate-producing companies, many wear orange uniforms displaying the Matte Leão logo, remnants of a former loyalty program. After the brand was acquired by Coca-Cola, the program was discontinued, but the uniforms remained in use. According to reports, the retention of the logo is due to the symbolic value of credibility it conveys to consumers, functioning as a sign of product authenticity. While not all workers adopt this form of free advertising, the color orange has become widely normalized. The uniform thus serves as an identifier for the *mateiros*, providing visibility and signaling the vendor's presence and occupation on the beach.

<sup>9</sup> Translation: star – supplier; Location point – Place where the gallon is purchased.

**Figure 8 – Travel for Uniform Purchases<sup>10</sup>**

Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

### Technological modernization, the pandemic, and changes in the circuit

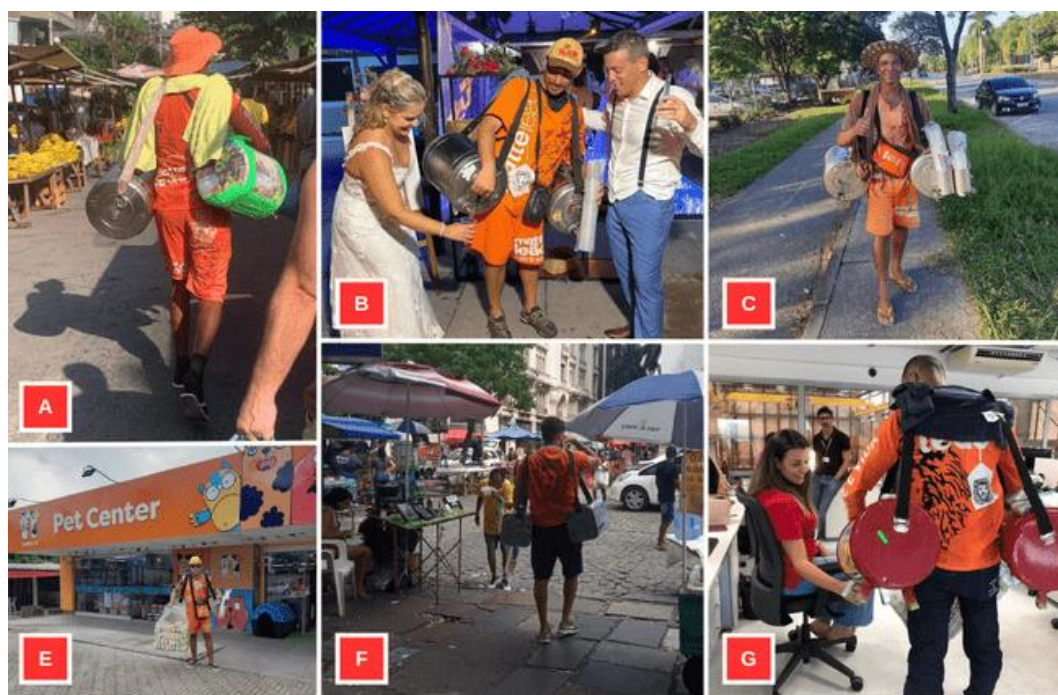
Santos (1979) already highlighted that technological modernizations profoundly affect the structure of the lower circuit, influencing its organizational forms. In this context, more recent studies by Silveira (2004; 2009; 2015; 2022a; 2022b) indicate that urban dynamics acquire new dimensions in light of the unique techniques, information, and financial flows generated by globalization. As Silveira notes, the use of new technologies in the lower circuit must be considered, since an increasing number of techniques are becoming accessible and are applied within the functioning of activities in this circuit, such as mobile phones, social networks, and the internet (Silveira, 2009). Furthermore, these technologies contribute to what the author describes as an “enriched everyday life” within the lower circuit, expanding its modes of action and incorporating variables previously exclusive to the upper circuit, such as productive consumption mediated by technical devices (Silveira, 2022a)

In the case of mate sales on Rio de Janeiro’s beaches, these transformations have become evident through the incorporation of digital payment methods, such as credit/debit

<sup>10</sup> Translation: Location point - Place where the uniform is purchased.

cards and PIX, breaking the exclusive reliance on cash described by Santos (1979). This reconfiguration reflects the advancement of “everyday financialization” (Silveira, 2015), which redefines economic inclusion through credit and digitalization, even in highly informal sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this process, driving adaptation and reorganization within the informal labor market. As Marvin *et al.* (2023) emphasize, this period imposed new sanitary, temporal, and technological requirements that necessitated adjustments in production, circulation, and consumption practices, including within the lower circuit. Within this context, *mateiros* expanded their presence beyond the beachfront through home deliveries and operations in other urban spaces, largely facilitated by Instagram as a tool for promotion and interaction. Observations indicated that vendors were conducting mate sales in multiple city locations (Figure 9), including local markets (A), the Uruguaiana boardwalk in downtown Rio (F), and even at the UFRJ cafeteria (C). Moreover, it has become common to hire them for events such as weddings (B), store openings (E), and corporate gatherings (G).

**Figure 9** – Montage of *mateiros* selling mate, lemonade, and Biscoito Globo in locations beyond the beaches



Source: Prepared by the author (2024) based on photos posted by the vendors on their social media.

These practices demonstrate the diffusion of an “informational rationality” (Silveira, 2015), in which technology—even when adopted in a precarious manner—reorganizes economic relationships, expands the spatial reach of circuits, and redefines modes of production and consumption across the territory.



In the post-pandemic period, a complexification of mate sales organization on the beaches became apparent, accompanied by the emergence of new economic actors. Notably, a new intermediary supplier (Figure 10) has arisen, centralizing stages of the production process and distributing ready-to-sell inputs, consolidating a vertically integrated business model. This shift represents a significant change in the dynamics of the activity. Traditionally, mate vendors were small-scale producers, responsible for preparing the beverages and selling them directly to beachgoers. The appearance of this intermediary signifies an evolution toward a more formalized organizational rationality. Such productive reorganization aligns with the “tendency toward intensifying business logic even within popular segments” (Silveira, 2022b, p. 143, our translation), confirming that the lower circuit is not isolated but rather subject to systemic pressures from contemporary capitalism.

**Figure 10** – Unloading of goods and filling of gallons for product preparation

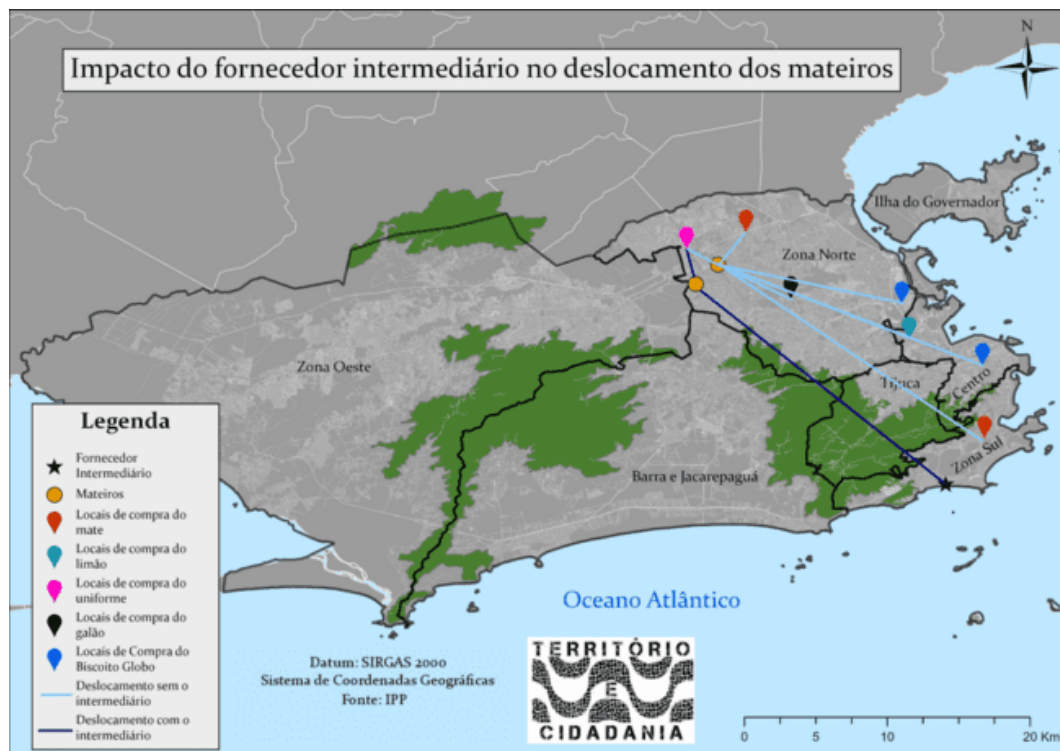


Source: Baranda-Oliveira (2022) and Brasil-Machado (2023).

This reorganization directly impacts the spatial dynamics of the circuit (Figure 11), altering the movement patterns of mate vendors across the city. Vendors linked to the intermediary undertake fewer trips—typically only two: one to collect the products and another to acquire the uniform—compared to independent vendors, who must complete at least five separate journeys to obtain their materials. In exchange for the reduced logistical burden, they remit half of their profits to the supplier. This represents a redistribution of productive functions and a rationalization of flows that, according to Silveira (2022b, p. 147, our translation), reflects

the “reorganization of urban networks through the concentrated diffusion of production and the expansion of segmented consumption”. This new configuration confirms that the lower circuit is not marginal to modernization but is constantly shaped and reconfigured by it, albeit under conditions of precarity and adaptation.

**Figure 11** – Impact on the spatial dynamics of the circuit following the emergence of the intermediary supplier<sup>11</sup>



Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

### Spatial practices of the *mateiros*

The beach functions as a space of both conflict and cooperation, where different social and economic agents compete and interact, seeking to serve the greatest number of consumers at the lowest possible cost. This co-presence generates spatial practices aimed at minimizing competition and maximizing profits, grounded in careful observation of both the environment and other actors. Simultaneously, neighborhood ties, kinship, and daily interactions among vendors foster the development of a shared universe of practices and language. This shared repertoire reflects processes of collective learning and the circulation of practical knowledge,

<sup>11</sup> Translation of the caption from top to bottom: Intermediate supplier; *Mateiros*; Places to buy mate; Places to buy lemons; Places to buy uniforms; Places to buy gallons; Places to buy Biscoito Globo cookies; Travel without the intermediary; Travel with the intermediary.



aligning with the concept of situated activities, which, according to Garfinkel (1986), are methods recognized and generated by the agents themselves in concrete contexts. When these practices are repeated over time, they form what Thibaud (2013) terms the “sensitive experience of space,” in which individuals perceive, adjust to, and respond to the environment through gestures, rhythms, and embodied modes of action. For *mateiros*, their expressions and actions reveal a specific lifeworld, the intelligibility of which requires careful observation of their temporal and spatial modes of operation.

Many of the interviewed *mateiros* rely on support networks that facilitate resupply during their shifts, either through the intermediary supplier or informal agreements with local beach stall operators. In such cases, the stall also functions as a space for rest, socialization, and product exchange. This exchange is not limited to interactions with stall owners; the broad availability of products among street vendors encourages a bartering dynamic: a cup of mate can be exchanged for a pastry or a sandwich, for example. As Bezerra (2006) notes, these exchanges reveal a logic of solidarity that transcends purely commercial dimensions, structuring forms of mutual support within the informal economy.

Regarding the terminology used, one distinctive feature of this activity is the use of catchphrases, vocal expressions that vendors employ to attract the public’s attention. Some use generic calls such as “Look at the mate! Ice-cold with lemon!” while others develop their own slogans, making them recognizable even from a distance. An internal slang term was also identified to refer to newcomers: “*cavalinho*.” If they resist carrying the containers, they become “*cavalinhos de raça*” (strong little horses); if not, “*cavalinhos fracos*” (weak little horses). These expressions form part of the symbolic repertoire of the category, composing a lexicon that expresses belonging, experience, and peer recognition (Bezerra, 2006).

*Mateiros* rarely switch the beach where they operate. Each delineates a specific area within the same shoreline. It is uncommon, for instance, for a *mateiro* from Ipanema to move to another beach. Certain elements of the urban morphology, such as lifeguard posts and stalls, serve as spatial reference points for this division. Crossing these boundaries—even though informal—is perceived as “client theft” and often causes tension among vendors. Consequently, their routes are repeated over the years, consolidating relationships with a specific clientele. However, the area of circulation is adjusted according to visitor flow. During periods of low attendance, the vendor expands their route to reach more potential customers; conversely, when the beach is crowded, the route tends to shrink. This variation primarily accounts for the

physical effort required, as each container weighs approximately 20 kg, imposing limits on mobility.

The low frequency of bathers also leads vendors to adopt strategies that may initially seem unusual: remaining stationary. This tactical appropriation of waiting space echoes Parente-Ribeiro and Musset's (2016, p. 38, our translation) argument, which considers waiting not as passivity but as a resource, becoming "a mode of action, a way of reconfiguring presence in the territory and capturing the attention of a potentially consuming audience". In some beaches in Rio de Janeiro, sports activities such as beach volleyball, footvolley, and beach tennis take place between the boardwalk and the stalls. Vendors circulating in these areas are frequently called upon during breaks, prompting some *mateiros* to cultivate relationships with the players and arrive early at the beach—even during low-traffic periods—to remain near the games and sell their products. In doing so, they not only serve the athletes but also attract other visitors arriving at the beach or passing along the boardwalk.

The walk of vendors along the sand is a characteristic feature of this activity. Since the beachfront is often densely occupied, movement does not occur linearly but rather in a zigzag pattern, maneuvering around beach umbrellas to cover as much of the sunbathing area as possible—that is, the space between the stalls and the sea where potential customers are concentrated. The pace of this movement is constantly adjusted: vendors overtake each other to take advantage of more promising areas, while strategically slowing down in sections with no visible competition, allowing for longer presence and greater sales opportunities. Reports indicate that *mateiros* must maintain constant attention to both customer calls and the positions of their colleagues, continuously adjusting their trajectories. These micro-decisions regarding pace and direction, as Thibaud (2013) notes, express an understanding of the environment, in which the body acts as a sensor of the dynamics organizing the beach space.

Furthermore, interactions and the use of the beach by vendors are governed by informal norms that guide movement and prevent conflicts. As Garfinkel (1986) describes, these rules emerge from practices established in situ, continuously updated and reproduced through daily interactions. A recurring example is the maintenance of an approximate distance of 50 meters between vendors, ensuring a more orderly distribution and minimizing disputes over clientele. If a vendor notices a colleague operating in the upper part of the sunbathing area, they tend to direct their path toward the lower zone, avoiding overlap. Conversely, moving back in front of an approaching vendor is considered inappropriate, as it directly interferes with their route. This demonstrates a clear territorial behavior associated with this type of trade.

## Final considerations

This study sought to understand how the sale of mate, lemonade, and Biscoito Globo on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro is embedded in the urban economy, in light of Milton Santos' (1979) theory of the two circuits. The results showed that, although concentrated on the beaches, this activity involves a complex network articulating buying, production, and selling processes, extending beyond the shoreline and across different urban areas of the city. It was possible to characterize the dynamics structuring this practice, marked by low technological use, informal relations, and adaptability to seasonal conditions.

The study also highlighted recent transformations in the lower circuit, particularly the incorporation of digital technologies in the post-pandemic context. The use of social networks and digital payment methods expanded the activity's reach beyond the beaches, while the emergence of intermediary suppliers promoted a more verticalized model, simplifying operations for connected vendors.

Finally, the beaches emerged as spaces of both competition and cooperation, where *mateiros* develop strategies to optimize earnings and avoid conflicts. Informal rules, alternating movement patterns, and modes of trade illustrate how these workers produce a specific "lifeworld," shaped by shared practices and constant negotiation with the urban space. This study thus contributes to recognizing the street trade of mate not merely as an economic activity but also as a unique manifestation of the urban economy and a living expression of everyday life in Rio de Janeiro.

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