Waldir Onofre, black actor and director of Brazilian cinema (*)

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Abstract
The article maps the career of black actor and director Waldir Onofre (1934-2015), born in Itaguaí, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Originally from a humble family, he worked since he was a child: he was a shoeshine boy, sheet metal worker, locksmith, blacksmith and radio and television technician, an occupation he practiced for years, even when he was already dedicated to the arts. In 1953, he began studying acting and had a long career as a supporting actor in around 30 films. He directed one feature film (As aventuras amorosas de um badeiro, 1975), which is analyzed in more detail in this text, 4 short films and made 3 assistant directorships. He has worked, among others, with directors Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Cacá Diegues, Paulo Thiago, Miguel Borges, Sérgio Rezende, Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, Leon Hirszman, Arnaldo Jabor, Bruno Barreto and Sylvio Back.

Keywords: Brazilian cinema. Black cinema. Waldir Onofre. Black Brazilian actor. Black Brazilian director.
Introduction

It's not so easy to write about the career of black actor and director Waldyr Couto, artistically known as Waldir Onofre (05.08.1934 - 07.01.2015), due to the lack of in-depth analysis of his long career, which spans more than forty years.

The critical fortune of supporting actors and black filmmakers in Brazil is quite scarce. In this sense, we tried to access as much information as possible about the artist, researching in dictionaries, encyclopedias, websites, articles in academic journals, books and chapters of books on the history of Brazilian cinema in order to draw up a general map of the career of this professional who worked in cinema, theater and television across national borders.

As far as Onofre's filmography is concerned, which reached the significant number of forty films, involving his work as an actor, assistant director and director, we adopted a procedure established by film historians, which is to date the films when they were released on the exhibition circuit, whether commercial or not.

The search led us to the website historiografiaaudiovisual.com.br/filmes/waldir-onofre, accessed on 25.03.2023, which states that producer Tininho da Fonseca directed the film Waldir Onofre (1979, 30 minutes). Unfortunately, we couldn't find the tape. We only found out that the short film shows the artist going about his daily life in the streets of Campo Grande, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro, where he lived. Excerpts are shown from some of the films in which he took part as an actor, fragments from Cinco Vezes Favela, Perpétuo Contra o Esquadrão da Morte, Jesuíno Brilhante e o Amuleto de Ogum.

The work of the black actor and director

Born in Itaguaí (which in Tupi means river of the stone cove), in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro, and from a humble family, he worked as a shoeshine boy, ironmonger, locksmith and blacksmith. He took a course as a radio and
television technician, learning how to repair these devices, "an occupation to which he dedicated himself for years, even when he was already acting in theater, film and TV" (AUTRAN, 2011, p. 425).

He began studying acting in 1953, in a radio drama course with Berliet Júnior (1904-1973), José Assad's stage name. Berliet was considered, to use the language of the time, a "man of seven instruments": author, actor, radio actor, director, announcer, writer, editor, radio broadcaster, scriptwriter, presenter, producer and acting teacher, he had worked at the Mayrink Veiga, Philips, Nacional, Roquette Pinto and Clube do Brasil radio stations. When Waldir met him, Berliet was a producer at Rádio Nacional, in Rio de Janeiro, and had learned his first steps in acting and voice impostation from him (www.elencobrasileiro.com/2017/01/berliet-junior.html. Accessed on: 04.12.2023).

In 1956, Waldir entered the National Theatre Conservatory and stayed there for four years, until 1960, studying with João Bethencourt (1924-2006), a Hungarian director living in Brazil, and training with rehearsal director Jack Brown, a disciple of Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), and landing roles in some films.


About Waldir Onofre, Hernani Heffner wrote: "A highly regarded supporting actor due to his physical type, facial expressiveness and interpretative talent, he films selectively, almost always in villainous roles" (HEFFNER, 2012, p. 524). In 1966 Onofre set up a theater school in Campo Grande, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro where
he had lived for most of his life, at the Afonso Celso Gymnasium. The clientele was predominantly young students and residents of the neighborhood, which at the time had relatively few cultural facilities.


In 1967, as mentioned above, Onofre made Perpétuo contra o Esquadrão da Morte (Perpetual against the Death Squad), a film in which he played his most important role, as assistant director to Miguel Borges. In this film, he played opposite Milton Moraes, Eliézer Gomes, Roberto Bataglin and Rogério Fróes, with a script by Marcos Farias and Borges and producers Luiz Carlos Barreto, Farias and Borges. Onofre plays the bandit "Cara de Cavalo", famous in the police chronicle of Rio de Janeiro in the 1960s.

In the so-called cangaço cycle, "a genre about popular bandits from the northeast of Brazil" (AUTRAN, 2011, p. 425), as well as Maria Bonita, queen of the cangaço, Onofre also acted in Jesuíno Brilhante, the cangaceiro (1972). He made three films with Paulo Thiago (1945-2021): Os senhores da terra (1971), Sagarana, o duelo (1974), an adaptation of the work by João Guimarães Rosa (1908-1967), with music by Tom Jobim and Dori Caymmi and Jorge, um brasileiro (1989), based on the novel of the same title, published in 1987, by Oswaldo França Júnior (1936-1989). He worked with Leon Hirszman (1937-1987) on A falecida (1965), with a cast led by Fernanda Montenegro (1929), adapted from a play by Nelson Rodrigues (1912-1980), and with Cacá Diegues (1940) on Ganga Zumba (1964) and Quilombo (1984). The first film is a portrait of the life of the leader of the Quilombo dos Palmares, Ganga Zumba (1638-1678), with music by maestro Moacir Santos (1926-2006) and performed by Nara Leão (1942-1989), with African dances and rituals performed by the Sons of Gandhi, based on the book of the same name, published in 1962, by João Felício dos
Santos (1911-1989). Quilombo, on the other hand, is a Brazilian and French co-production with a historical slant based on the same book by Felício and on Palmares, by Décio de Freitas (1922-2004), which tells the story of the slave Zumbi.


Onofre worked with director Sérgio Rezende (1951) on three films: O homem da capa preta (1986), based on research by historian Israel Beloch (1942) (CATANI, 2022); Doida demais (1989), a drama with a script by Jorge Durán and Rezende; and Mauá - o Imperador e o Rei (1999), which follows the childhood, enrichment and bankruptcy of Irineu Evangelista de Sousa (1813-1889), an entrepreneur from Rio Grande do Sul, better known as the Baron of Mauá.

On television, particularly on TV Globo, he acted in four soap operas, two of which were written by Janete Clair (1925-1983) - Irmãos coragem (1970-1971) and O homem que deve morrer (1971-1972) -, one by Gilberto Braga (1945-2021), Corpo a

However, in spite of his long career as an actor, spanning more than four decades and having appeared in dozens of films, plays and soap operas, working with different directors, Waldir Onofre found the best welcome in Nelson Pereira dos Santos (1928-2018), with whom he acted in O amuleto de Ogum (1975), Memórias do cárcere (1984), a biographical drama adapted from the book of the same name by Graciliano Ramos (1892-1953) and A terceira margem do rio (1994), a Franco-Brazilian production based on the short story of the same title from Guimarães Rosa's book Primeiras estórias (1962). It's important to note that in Memórias do cárcere and A terceira margem do rio, Waldir was assistant director.

At the beginning of the 1970s, he wrote the script for As aventuras amorosas de um padeiro, which was to be his only experience as a director of a feature film. After about two years of trying unsuccessfully to film the script, Onofre showed it to Nelson Pereira dos Santos, who agreed to produce the film, a suburban comedy in which ginga and malice set the tone, which was released in 1975 - in the following lines we will make detailed comments about this film.

For Luiz Felipe Miranda, the 1970s were "a time when some black directors appeared, such as Odilon Lopez, Waldir Onofre, Agenos Alves, Afrânio Vital and Antônio Pitanga, Agenor being the most active of them..." (MIRANDA, 1990, p. 73).

Onofre directed four other short films: Cinema Brasileiro e sua comercialização (1979), "with testimonies from producer Luiz Carlos Barreto, director Miguel Borges and exhibitor Roberto Darze" (AUTRAN, 2011, p. 425); two others in 1980 (Domingo da rapaziada and Clóvis, a alegria do carnaval) and, in 1982, Clóvis na Zona Oeste.

In the 1980s, he turned his attention "to setting up a pioneering project, an agency dedicated exclusively to black actors" (HEFFNER, 2012, p. 525).
The amorous adventures of a baker: a movie full of naughtiness and mischief

Waldir Onofre began filming his first and only feature film in 1974, at the age of forty, after having already worked in theater, television and made a dozen and a half films. And, as has already been written in this text, the film only came to fruition after Nelson Pereira dos Santos liked the script, written by Waldir himself, and decided to produce it in partnership with Embrafilmef.

There is no exhaustive critical fortune on the film, although we have located some very well-written sources that help us in our argument. However, we will not be using the texts by Stam (2008) and Lapera (2009), which, although relevant, focus mainly on the ethnic and racial dimensions of Brazilian culture - cinema in particular. Robert Stam's book, for example,

[...] analyzes Brazilian cinema in terms of ethnic and racial issues. It should be noted that the focus of the work is the multicultural problematic of the Brazilian fiction film universe. From a multidisciplinary perspective, it discusses, among other topics, how the images of blacks and Indians have been constructed in Brazilian cinema (NERY, 2010, p. 211).

First, we're going to transcribe the summary (or synopsis) of the film, from one of the promotional materials - a printed, colorful leaflet that I found in our archives. Paulo César Pereio, the baker, has a red rose in his mouth and is carrying a bread basket filled with illustrations of the main characters in the film. A black banner reads "SUBURBAN ADULTERY". The back of the leaflet reads, in very small font:

Ritinha (Maria do Rosário) is a humble young virgin who lives in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. She marries an older man, the conservative Mário (Ivan Setta). Months later, Ritinha realizes how boring her married life is, especially when it comes to sex. That's when she meets Marques (Paulo César Pereio), who, if he's nothing more than a stupid Portuguese baker, at least makes her fantasies come true in bed. And he ends up taking photos of the two of them having sex. Later, Ritinha meets Saul (Haroldo de Oliveira), a black artist whose lover she becomes. But Marques, overcome with jealousy, reveals the photos to her husband, creating a huge mess. A popular satire exploring issues such as marital infidelity, racial prejudice and the desire for social ascension.

Rev. Pemo, Fortaleza, v. 5, e10890, 2023
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47149/pemo.v5.e10890
https://revistas.uece.br/index.php/revpemo
ISSN: 2675-519X
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From the style of the brochure, which also informs us that the film won the Golden Kikito at the Gramado Film Festival in 1976, I believe it was produced by a film club, as part of a cycle or special screening.

Waldir, in a statement at the end of the 1990s, said that the "job market for black actors here in Brazil is practically nonexistent" and that "the look is the Aryan look", in cinema, television and advertising. Anyone who wants to make a movie, like him, has to "write, direct, act and chase money" (CULTNE CINEMA). From the same source, actress Zezé Motta (1944) says that Onofre is a tireless worker, who fights tirelessly to "foster the culture of the West Zone", praises As aventuras..., "a masterpiece", adding that the filmmaker's career has been very difficult. "He had a lot of projects saved up, which he couldn't realize due to lack of support, sponsorship, and because he was discriminated against. Let's not beat around the bush!" (CULTNE CINEMA).

The film was shot in 1974, and Waldir was ironically called the "Fellini of Campo Grande" by many neighbors in the neighborhood where he had always lived. The amorous adventures of a baker, writes one of the critics who analyzed the film, "was supposed to be a popular film about the middle class" (MELO, n.d.), in which the young Rita oscillates between three men: Mário, her white husband; the Portuguese baker, Marques and the black marginal artist, Saul. "A love triangle that is an ethnic synthesis of Brazil" (MELO, n.d.).

Mário is the ultimate representation of the conservative and reactionary middle class, living life "based on prejudices and platitudes". He goes with a friend to the popular bar in the neighborhood where he lives and when he sees the hustle and bustle and the regulars, he says to his friend: "This is what it's like here: all they think about is fucking around. I'm even thinking of moving to Ipanema".

We mustn't forget that the movie is set in the mid-1970s, in the midst of the military dictatorship, and women marrying virgins was still a value cultivated by more conservative classes. Mário, for example, already married, refuses to go to a motel.
with Rita, who was trying to "spice up" the couple's insipid sex life ("never a motel!" she says during a trip). The head of the family, on another occasion, refuses to spend extra money, because he was saving up to buy a color television.

The marriage is going badly, Rita no longer feels any desire for Mario. She comments on this to her friends, who suggest that she get involved with one or more lovers. They are enchanted by observing the black and white workers who work on a construction site, with Rita embarking on the idea of the hypersexualization of black men - among them Waldir Onofre himself, who ends up taking part in Rita's dreamlike scenes: he is wearing a helmet and robe and, instead of speaking, he grunts.

He accepts the court that Marques, the Portuguese baker, gives him. According to Melo, the figure of the baker "...is the very caricature of the explorer, or rather the 'conqueror', in both senses. Pereio's interpretation reinforces a thick, fake Portuguese accent, full of cacophonies and foreign expressions". The baker's friends are rascals, drunks and idlers and, at one point, when they try to fight with one of Rita's suitors, the Portuguese man shouts: "You Brazilians don't even know how to fight capoeira!".

It is on Rita that the main issues of the film will fall, "especially controversial issues at the time, such as abortion and adultery" (MELO, n.d.); in other words, she is the central character of the whole plot, and not the baker of the work's title, nor Mário or even Saul, who becomes Rita's black lover - they are all secondary characters in the plot. Luís Alberto Rocha Melo raises a relevant dimension, writing that in As aventuras..., the black man and the woman appear as corresponding forces. And it's no wonder that the final shot is of Rita possessed by Pomba-Gira. In this respect, Onofre's film attempts a very clear synthesis of Nelson Pereira's cinema (especially O amuleto de Ogum (1975). In fact, it's curious that Nelson Pereira dos Santos is the producer of As aventuras... If O amuleto de Ogum is a kind of counter-plan to Rio, 40 graus (1955), in terms of the filmmaker's relationship with 'popular reality'. As aventuras amorosas de um padeiro would be equivalent to O grande momento (1958, directed by Roberto Santos) in Nelson's career as a producer. After all, Onofre's film fits in perfectly with Nelson's ideals at the time, since it is a work of popular intent that
rejects the sociologizing vision of the intellectual who sees reality 'from the bottom up' (MÉLO, n.d.).

The Portuguese man tries to maintain his relationship with Rita by offering her whatever he thinks will please her, such as "a grapette", sex in the country house, rides in the car of the year, bar-hopping in the south zone, etc. On one of the trips to the country house, one of Marques' friends photographs the couple having sex, which leads to a major imbroglio. This is because, soon afterwards, Rita meets Saul, a painter and marginal black artist, who becomes her new lover. He sings to women, sells his paintings to gringos and tourists and uses the formula "if it sticks, it sticks" to survive. He hooks the young woman easily, which arouses the ire of Marques, who sends Rita's husband Mário the "photos of the betrayal". The scene where the photos are shown in the bar "...is an example of the altar of machismo in patriarchal society" (LIMA JÚNIOR, n.d.).

Mário is devastated and starts drinking desperately, rejecting any closeness with Rita. When she reveals that she is pregnant and intends to have an abortion, he rejects this possibility, declaring that he wants to keep the child, but without Rita. She despairs, seeks out Saul and raises the possibility that he is the child's father. He says that this is impossible, as he is sterile, but at the same time, he also rejects her having an abortion. He says that he understands that this is the reason (sterility) that, for him, his works are incomplete.

The film opens up two areas for discussion: Saul's frustration at his non-integration into society (as a black artist on the fringes of established cultural production) and his conservative stance on Rita's desired abortion (MÉLO, n.d.).

Rita once again tries to reconcile with Mário, who rejects her again. But as they were still married, and there was no such thing as divorce in Brazil at the time, the Portuguese Marques and Mário join forces so that a formal separation can take place. Hence the expressions and songs that make use of heavy popular pejoratives, including "the cuckold" - who is even treated benevolently by the people of the outlying neighborhood where the action takes place.
It is from this alliance between the betrayed that the film takes a new turn, making its popular vocation even clearer, with the confirmation of the adultery, with everything coming together, the people running through the streets to the sound of a heavy samba, shouting: "Let's see the adultery!" The cuckold getting drunk to drown his sorrows, umbanda setting the tone, the supposed crime turning into a party, absolute chaos. Everyone laughing at the misfortune. The film, in its own way, is an acid criticism of the moralistic customs of Brazil, which is an anarchic country on the surface, but in reality is sexist, homophobic and racist.

The collective machismo takes place in a bizarre way, with several men running around the lawyer, the policeman and a crowd who want to see and celebrate the act of adultery. One of the men shouts that there will be "free cachaca and food!". In the middle of the hubbub, the crowd comes across a funeral, leading more than one critic to consider that the samba symbolizes adultery, pleasure and life, while the funeral represents death (LIMA JÚNIOR, n.d.; MELO, n.d.).

The film begins in the church, with Mário and Rita's wedding, and ends in an umbanda session by the beach, "showing that between blacks and Portuguese, liberals and conservatives, singularities and clichês, nothing escapes us, everything is Brazil" (LOBO, n.d.). Through Saul, the black religion emerges as the ultimate savior.

The santo is lowered, the atabaques sound and all the characters (including the extras) are taken over by the orixás. Rita suddenly incorporates a Pomba Gira and laughs at the general trance. A fanciful, absurd narrative resource, but full of irony" (MELO, n.d.).

The cinematography by Hélio Silva is airy and modern, the editing by Raimundo Higino is efficient and the main trio of the cast, with Paulo César Pereio, Maria do Rosário and Haroldo de Oliveira, fully meet the expectations of competent acting professionals.

Luís Alberto Rocha Melo concludes his review of As aventuras amorosas de um padeiro by pointing out that the film dialogues with pornochanchada, discussing racism, prejudice and the conservative imaginary of the middle class, as well as the lower class, in addition to power relations and feminism.
At the same time, it rejects intellectual sophistication and reinforces the popular intention in the construction of the characters. At times it seems to strive for television naturalism, but suddenly some narrative trick dismantles this conviction. It mixes documentary and fiction without worrying about attributing any 'truth' or 'falsehood' to one or the other. Dealing directly with clichés and genre traps, the work is a film in constant flight, which follows one of the logics of religious syncretism: mixing to escape (MELO, n.d.).

Unfortunately, Waldir Onofre only directed this feature film. A defender of the rights of black people and anti-discrimination causes, the filmmaker allowed himself, at the very end of As aventuras amorosas de um padeiro, when the whole mess is set up, with gossip, macumba, adultery, a funeral and a carnival block coming together, to put into the speech of the colonizing Portuguese the total lack of understanding, with a racist background on top of that, of what he is observing: "Macumba at a time like this! That's black stuff!"

Final considerations

To talk about Waldir Onofre is to talk about someone who struggled incessantly to survive from his craft, from his artistic activity, in a country that had - and still has - a practically armored market for black actors and directors, in which "the Aryan look", as he pointed out, ensures almost all the opportunities.

Waldir fought as best he could with the weapons he had: a vigorous physique, good voice, talent and perseverance. However, he was an eternal supporting actor in his long filmography and directed only one feature film, As aventuras amorosas de um padeiro (The Love Adventures of a Baker) (1975), in which good humor, mischief, life in a Rio suburb and the marks of underdevelopment set the tone.

Our purpose in this work was to try to recover his trajectory with the relatively few sources of information available. At various times, perhaps a little too strongly, we felt like the fictional character of Professor Hermógenes Goldstein, in the novel
Evaluator, by Argentine literary critic Noé Jitrik, who said: "research is like that, reality escapes everywhere: three parts of conjecture and a fourth of disenchantment" (JITRIK, 2002, p. 79).

References


**Filmography¹**

**Actor**

1963 - Canalha em crise (Miguel Borges).
1964 - Ganga Zumba (Cacá Diegues).
1965 - A falecida (Leon Hirszman).
1967 - Perpétuo contra o Esquadro da Morte (Miguel Borges).
1968 - Maria Bonita, rainha do Cangaço (Miguel Borges).
1969 - Macunaíma (Joaquim Pedro de Andrade).
1969 - Sete homens vivos ou mortos (Leovegildo Cordeiro).
1970 - Pobre diabo ama Rosa Meia-Noite (Miguel Faria Jr).
1971 - Os senhores da terra (Paulo Thiago).
1971 - O Barão Otelo no barato dos bilhões (Miguel Borges).
1972 - Jesuíno Brilhante, o cangaceiro (William Cobbett).
1973 - Toda nudez será castigada (Arnaldo Jabor).
1974 - Sagaraana, o duelo (Paulo Thiago).
1975 - O amuleto de Ogum (Nelson Pereira dos Santos).
1976 - O homem de papel (Carlos Coimbra).

¹ We would like to thank the historian of Brazilian cinema, Luiz Felipe Alves de Miranda, for the dialog established when preparing Waldir Onofre's filmography.
1976 - **Marcados para viver** (Maria do Rosário).
1978 - **A dama do lotação** (Neville d’Almeida).
1979 - **O caso Cláudia** (Miguel Borges).
1984 - **Memórias do cárcere** (Nelson Pereira dos Santos).
1984 - **Quilombo** (Cacá Diegues).
1986 - **O homem da capa preta** (Sérgio Rezende).
1987 - **Running Out of Luck** (Julien Temple).
1987 - **Leila Diniz** (Luiz Carlos Lacerda).
1984 - **Memórias do cárcere** (Nelson Pereira dos Santos).
1989 - **Sonhei com você** (Ney Sant´ Anna).
1989 - **Doida demais** (Sérgio Rezende).
1994 - **A terceira margem do rio** (Nelson Pereira dos Santos).
1994 - **O que é isso, companheiro ?** (Bruno Barreto).
1984 - **A terceira margem do rio** (Nelson Pereira dos Santos).
1999 - **Mauá, o Imperador e o Rei** (Sérgio Rezende).
2002 - **Lost Zweig** (Sylvio Back).

**Assistant Director**

1967 - **Perpétuo contra o Esquadrão da Morte** (Miguel Borges).
1984 - **Memórias do cárcere** (Nelson Pereira dos Santos).
1994 - **A terceira margem do rio** (Nelson Pereira dos Santos).

**Management**

1975 - **As aventuras amorosas de um padeiro** (feature film).
1979 - **Cinema Brasileiro e sua comercialização** (short film).
1980 - **Domingo da rapaziada** (short film).
1980 - **Clóvis, a alegria do carnaval** (short film).
1982 - **Clóvis na Zona Norte** (short film).

**As aventuras amorosas de um padeiro** (1975): Technical sheet²

Production: Regina Filmes e Embrafilme (Empresa Brasileira de Filmes S.A.)
Duration: 109 minutos
Screenplay, Script and Direction: Waldir Onofre
Producer: Nelson Pereira dos Santos
Associated Producers: Tininho Nogueira da Fonseca e Sergio Otero
Editing and editing: Raimundo Higino
Photography and Camera: Hélio Silva

² The technical sheet was transcribed from the movie poster.

Workers: Erley José, Silvio Zilman, José Salim, Francisco Nagen, Ramiro de Paula, Carlos Alberto, Waldir Onofre.

Police: Odir Ramos, Aníbal de Souza, Cláudio.

And with the Escolinha de Teatro do Instituto Tamandaré.

Music with Crys Babies, Bloco Carnavalesco Unidos da Ponte, Bloco Carnavalesco Unidos da Vila Jardim e Regional de Thimóteo.

Assistant Director: Lael Alves Rodrigues

Camera Assistant: Antonio Segatti

Continuity: Caio Márcio

Scene Photography: Clóvis Scarpino

Electrician: Geraldo Tolentino

Production: Epitácio César, Luiz Carlos Lacerda, Sergio Otero de Freitas, Tininho Nogueira, Zedrey.

Scenography and Costumes: Carlos Branco

Lab; Cine Lab Leader

Sound Technician: José Tavares

Sound design: Geraldo José

Gentlemen: Ivo da Silva, Elidio Rodrigues e Carlos Cruz.

They dress the actors: Ziki Modas, Londonveste, Boutique Plick, Sapataria Elo, Self Center.


Pintores: Euclides Lagedo, Donald Cerut, Armon, Saul.
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**Responsible publisher:** Lia Fialho

**Ad hoc expert:** Paulo Morais-Alexandre e Nárgila Mara da Silva Bento Bento.

**How to cite this article (ABNT):**

Received on June 20, 2023.
Accepted on December 6th, 2023.
Published on December 11, 2023.