

Motivated by the various stories written last year, I also opted for a story/screenplay structure for this assignment.

Abstract:

We follow the story of Manuel Sussan as he discovers Orinoko, a plant that's highly praised in western societies and whose cultivation is very profitable. Yet it ends up being a double-edged sword, bringing calamity and destruction to him, his tribe, and the area they occupied. Inspired by '*Pájaros de verano*' a movie about the marijuana trade within Colombian tribes on one side and the major societal problems with coffee plantations on the other, I tried to bring both aspects together in a plausible fictional scenario.

Keywords: Orinoko – Tribe – Money – Forest – Plague

"I don't know about this Charles, I mean I heard stories about this drink, and trust me, not pretty ones. There is this guy, two blocks down, don't get me wrong I'm not the gossip kind, but a friend of his neighbour told me."

"For fuck's sake would you please shut up!" Charles shouted after several shots at adjusting his tie.

"Where is Margaret? She was supposed to do the make-up."

"She called in sick!" said the cameraman "Didn't sound like it if you ask me, but what do I know. Anyway that's Sharon, the intern for I don't know what."

"Decor." whispered Sharon slowly sliding away to avoid the turned off camera pointed at her.

"Isn't that just great! Well listen Sharon, first of all, as far as I know Go juice is not illegal.

Secondly, look at me! Do you think I give a damn about whatever your two blocks down guy is up to? I'll give a quick lesson in the ways of this industry, you take the money wherever you can find it, if they pay the price, you advertise, period. Now finish this and go squeak at someone else."

"10 seconds!" yelled the director.

Sharon stopped for a while, realising how much of an asshole her idol happened to be, then quickly gathered the brush and powder and rushed backstage.

"We're up in 3.. 2.. 1.."

"Hello and welcome everyone, a lot has happened while we were off-air, from the floods in the south west to the shift of power on the council floor. We'll get to all of that soon, however. Our main story tonight concerns the trend taking the country by storm, Orinoko..."

Part I: Whatsoever a man soweth

Although he was by now used to starting at dawn, Manuel stumbled yet again on his way to the corral. He was already feeling the familiar regret after each night drinking, even more so today as he was supposed to head to town for his biweekly wool delivery.

"This stench doesn't make it any better," he mumbled packing the poor mule to what it seemed to be its limit.

The call bell sound was quickly followed by a roar like shout from the back of the shop,

"Manuel boy, I swear I could smell you from the other side of the road. You are running quite late today *hein?* What's the matter?" The shop keeper, Marel, was a chubby man, who had made it to his late sixties—surprisingly, if you account for all the tobacco he smokes daily.

"Rough night," muttered Manuel.

"We all have those young man, not as often as you do though. Get yourself together; I love making deals with you people, but this is getting way too frequent for my liking... Oh hey Jorge! What do you have for me there?"

“The same, a bit less than usual but you can’t ask the land for more than it can give.”

“Oh you can, you just have to know how to ‘ask.’ Anyway, it’s still better than nothing. Some of my clients would hate that but I’d rather lose some than all of them. Here you go.” Jorge took the big pile of bills the shopkeeper slammed on the bar, nodded and walked away.

“What was that?” exclaimed Manuel.

“That was Jorge delivering on time!”

“No, I mean the bag! What did he give you? And why do you pay so much for that little?”

“That was Orinoko. It’s the biggest hit now with those big city white-collars. And they pay a lot for it. Too bad I have to let some of them go since Jorge won’t be able to provide all that’s needed.”

“Why can’t he?”

“His tribe, unlike yours, lives in the mountainous regions. Not only that, but their elder is also against expanding, so there is not much he can do.”

Manuel’s eyes glistened when he heard those last words. He needn’t even utter a word for Marel to notice exactly what was going on his mind, and he saw the opportunity taking shape.

“And good thing you are here my boy. I was JUST thinking, I should give you seeds and you try to grow some. I hear the plains are treating you good lately. I say we both profit off that: you make extra cash and I don’t lose any clients. What do you say, kid?”

“Yes, sure, yes!”

By the end of the day, Manu was already back home. He hid the few seeds he got and slept, dreaming of future fortune.

Part II: Orinoko’s cruel snares

The soft knock echoed within the room, or office, as Manu enjoyed naming his newly built brick construct that stood like a sore thumb between all the cabins and leather tents.

“Come in!”

A hunchbacked old woman pushed the door and walked in.

“Revered mother!” said Manuel as he rushed to kiss both her hands and her forehead. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? Take a seat.”

Yatiri, for that was what the tribe called her, looked around in silence for few seconds.

“You are doing well for yourself I see...”

“One might say that, yes! The Orinoko’s sales have been going amazing lately. Soon I’ll be able to pay the boys even more and that would...”

“I dreamed of the *Talto*” interrupted Yatiri.

Manu frowned. He had been suspecting this visit will turn out a certain way but now he was sure of it.

“It’s a bird of ill omen. The earth bares neither fruit nor wild herbs most of the year. This parasite of a plant has killed it. Our herders wonder even deeper in search of grazing land, losing precious livestock constantly in the process. Is this truly worth it?”

“You tell me, revered mother. Almost every family is working in my plantations. They are well paid. They can buy all they need from the city. As for the herders, if they didn’t persist they would be as welcome as the rest.”

“Do not neglect the signs son, lest you regret it later.”

“With all due respect, I think it’s time for us to aim higher, to hope for better life standards than the ones the elders hold dear. I have been to the city too often, I know what we can aspire to and I have no doubt that you do too. The only difference is that I act to make it happen and just for that, I think the gods are smiling upon me.”

“Well I surely wish I will be proven wrong, dear,” said Yatiri as she let out a long sad sigh.

Suddenly the door slammed and a boy, no older than thirteen, burst in all sweating.

“Manuel sir, there have been...” he was cut short by Manu’s cold stare. The boy saw Yatiri, bowed his head and slowly started walking backwards.

“It’s alright, I was done anyway you may come in.” she smiled.

The kid waited in the corridor until she went out then looked at Manuel.

“Next time remember to knock first. Now tell me, what was it you were shouting?”
“We lost yet another delivery, and three men. The survivors claim it was Jorge’s group.”
“Third time in a month. He’s becoming bolder. This can’t be tolerated any longer! Go tell Rodrigo I need to see him. Now!”
“On it ...”

Part III: The blood price

“He has profaned it!” shouted one of the elders.
The clamour grew louder and louder.
“Blood was spilled, our children’s! We demand retribution!”
Manuel was as silent as a grave. He looked around and all he could see were people screaming, pointing their fingers at him. He couldn’t discern what it was they were saying yet the anger in their eyes was more than enough to keep him at bay.
“Silence!” yelled Yatiri “I will not tolerate such accusations under my roof! My people respect the gods as much as yours. Now, since I called this meeting, I reserve myself the right to moderate it. Do any of you object to that?”
As it was expected, Yatiri’s reputation went past her tribe. She was a respected figure in all similar communities.
“Good. To start with, I propose that Manuel Sussan here step up and clarify exactly why he committed such a disgraceful act.”
Manuel didn’t react.
“Manuel!” said Yatiri, in a reprimanding tone.
Her voice woke him up from his trance. He stood up and walked closer towards the circle of elders.
“What...” he cleared his throat for an instant and continued, “What is it you desire from me revered ones?”
“As if it wasn’t obvious enough,” grunted someone in the audience. “We call for an explanation of your wrongdoings.”
“They forced my hand, I had to avenge the death of my men. So was the will of their family and my duty as their chief.”
“You shed blood on sacred ground, Manuel.” The sadness could be heard in Yatiri’s voice.
“Again, I was given no choice, revered one. As for Jorge,” Manuel looked at the elder of Yuka, Jorge’s tribe “As for your loss, feel free to come to my office after this and I’m sure we’ll come to an agreement.”
The whole crowd was flabbergasted hearing this. The Yuka’s elder stood up and calmly said “Nothing would replace the death of our sons. Yatiri, you failed in preserving what we hold holy and for that I curse you and this whole enterprise. We shall never step foot here again.” With a slow nodding, others showed their approval of his words and followed him out, leaving Yatiri devastated.

Part IV: Go big or go home

“The only way we have to ensure this keeps being economically viable for both parties is to pump up production a minimum of thirty percent more.”
He took his black leather attaché case and placed it on the table, pulled a folder from inside, and started referring to all the numbers, explaining what they are supposed to represent. Manuel wondered how a man of such inoffensive and calm appearance could sound so threatening. The accountant paused for a moment, then, noticing that Manuel was no longer following, he asked “Are you aware of what this implies, sir?”
“Not quite, no.”

“Allow me to quickly walk you through it then. Your client, my boss, is recording a constant rise in expenses. The supply line, that is all the delivery trucks, are costing way too much and taking too long. Planes are out of question unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless you provide more Orinoko. As you would expect, we are not flying half full planes. After crunching the numbers we have come to thirty percent extra production.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

“And why is that?” exclaimed the accountant.

“All of our land is dedicated to the plantations, and we are currently at our maximum capacity.”

“Well I beg to differ...” He pulled a second folder from his bag. Various drawings of maps spilled out of it on the table. It took him a few seconds to rearrange them all on the desk, then he pointed to the one on top.

“We studied the area, thoroughly, as you can see. Here are the current plantations, also the majority of your tribe’s land. It is quite large and we are certainly happy we could get the most out of it. Yet, all around, this forest area, is unused and...”

“And it should remain so!” protested Manuel.

“Why is that?”

“It is sacred land, very important for everyone here, me included. I made that mistake once before, I wouldn’t do it twice.”

“Seriously now, as I was saying if we could use this western part...”

“I am being serious!” interrupted Manu again.

“Oh! I see, this ends it then.” he said while packing.

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll have to find another provider, sir.” he pronounced, heading for the door.

“Wait” shouted Manu “Can I think it through for a while?”

“Sure, see you in two weeks?”

“Yes. In two weeks.”

The door slammed and Manu just sat there holding his head between his hands. He has been living this way for a while now: a lot of people rely on him for their income, their survival. He can’t just stop now that he has come this far. It will take him an eternity to rebuild a new network with new clients, and in the meantime who is going to provide for all those whose land was given to his plantations—or better, lost to it? He had to decide.

Part V: Fire will come

“What have I done?” he whispered to himself, watching the flames rise in the sky. Flocks of birds surged out of the canopy, escaping the smoke.

What was happening before Manuel’s eyes was worse than his scariest dreams, a true vision of hell. A deafening blend of gibbers, squeaks, and growls mixed with the crackling of the blaze. He was sure what he has done was the lesser evil, yet seeing it unfold right in front of him made him doubt his actions more than ever. He had been sitting there for what seemed to be an eternity, during which the fire got way out of his control, ravaging the land left and right. His men were desperate, waiting for instructions which never came, their shouts falling on deaf ears. The only hope to stop this massacre was that nature would prove merciful and that the rain and river would kill the flame’s propagation. And merciful she was.

The next day, everything became calm again. Manuel spent the night in the surroundings of the forest. He preferred the reeking of burnt bodies to the confrontation with Yatiri and everyone else. Was it fear or guilt that induced such a feeling, he couldn’t quit tell, maybe it was both or maybe none. Whatever the answer is, one thing was sure: he can hide no longer. Sooner or later he will have to explain it all, and it was better to rip this bandaid off as quick as possible.

Yatiri, accompanied by two of the neighbouring tribe's elders, was resting in the shadow of a small tent, eyeing a cloud of sand in the distance. It was certainly Manuel's cars. Once there, Manu ordered his men to take leave and headed towards Yatiri.

"Revered Mother." He bowed to her, then nodded respectfully to the other two.

She looked at him, and there was neither anger nor sadness in her eyes. There was no feeling whatsoever, which made it the more unsettling for him to keep eye contact. As he grabbed the chair to join them, the old woman said, calmly:

"Don't. This won't be long. Your presence here is needed, yet not welcome."

Confused, he stepped back and waited.

"Why?" she asked.

"It was either that, or pretty much everyone around here would be out of work."

"Wasn't it not enough to have all of our land?"

"My clients needed more, I had to provide it."

"So it is what I feared: the vicious circle of greed. You are caught in it."

He didn't dare to answer.

"That forest was not yours to burn. We all depended on it. You are from this day onward exiled from this tribe. We cannot force you to move, after all, it is your father's land. However, I banish you from every gathering and ceremony. Now out with you."

Part VI: A bitter harvest

"Charles! We are live in three, two, one..."

"Hello and welcome everyone! Before we start, I would like to warn you today's episode is a bit of a special. Instead of the occasional comedy parts, we would like to dedicate the next thirty minutes to the plague ravaging southern Thiva. Some of you might be whining 'Charles, that's not what I tuned in for!' and I do understand that; watching an old guy lecturing you in his ostentatious accent is not the best way to spend your afternoon stoned. However, I want you to bear with me for a while here and I promise you I wouldn't be holding a monologue if I knew as much as you on the matter. First, to put everything in context, Thiva, or should I say the place where most of the Orinoko you are drinking is produced, is currently going through a country-wide pandemic. Taking into account the consequences of our negligence during the last outbreak of the corona virus, we thought it was worth it to dive deeper in this matter. To help us with that we turn to our correspondent on the field, Ainoha. Ainoha, how is the state of affairs in southern Thiva?"

"Hello Charles! As you can see I am in the company of doctor Sanata, one of the best virologists around as well as Professor Guerenabarrena, a biologist and renowned environmental activist.

First, Doctor Sanata, how would you describe the situation now?"

"Thank you for the introduction. Overall, the numbers have stabilized across the country to the point that it can be handled with our current resources; nevertheless, this in itself is not a good enough indicator. Unfortunately, the southern part of the country, that is where all started, is still registering a rise in cases."

"As the doctor mentioned," said Ainoha, "the outbreak started in the southern region, and for that we turn to Professor Guerenabarrena. Professor, you recently wrote an article which was a massive success in the scientific community. In it, you treat of the intricacies surrounding the beginning of this pandemic and the reasons for its fast spreading. Would you mind walking us through it a bit?"

"That would be my pleasure. I will try to keep it short, but I would highly recommend reading the article itself for a deeper perspective. We were able to establish a very strong link between the forest fires of last months and the virus emergence. The main reason was proven to be land clearing started by the tribes situated in the area, and the contact between wildlife and the population consequently increased significantly. This is favourable ground for many infectious diseases, usually confined to wildlife, to spill over to people. The idea itself is not at all new; recall the case of malaria: clearing patches

of forest appears to create an ideal habitat along forest edges for the mosquitos, the most important transmitter of malaria in the Amazon.”

“Would a displacement of the population be a feasible solution?” asked Ainoha.

“Sadly that strategy has a few problems. The obvious one would be purely logistical: these tribes, although occupying small areas, number in the thousands of individuals. On the other hand, there is the cultural issue: the structure of their society is very dependent on their relation with their environment, and such a procedure would have dire consequences. We are currently working with the government on alternative solutions.”

“Let’s hope it all calms down as soon as possible. Thank you both for your precious time and information. Back to you Charles.”

Part VII: ... that shall he also reap

“It was him! He brought the wrath of the spirits upon us!” shouted a man pointing at Manuel’s family house. His name was Pepe, a shepherd. Despite his relatively young age, Pepe was respected by a lot of his kinsman, even the older ones.

“I see you gather before me... hungry... terrified... clutching your babes to your breast.” he continued. “You stand at the precipice! Your ways have failed you, so now you turn to the spirits! And yet you do not plead? You do not kneel to dust your heads with ash? Instead you wail ‘Why have they forsaken us?’ We must look into the trials we failed long ago! First, it was the soil. His Orinoko siphoned it off to the last drop; no crop would grow but that parasite. And what did we do? Did we rise against it? No! Nothing! We welcomed it! Gave our sweat and tears to cultivate it. Then there was blood! Bloodshed on our sacred earth. Was that enough? True, we protested and argued yet, in the end, we let him bite and bite away. He grew confident, heeded no warning, ignored the voice of reason as much as that of threats and burned out forest down. It was a lesser evil he said. The spirits didn’t see it in the same light! They called this plague down upon us, dragging to the grave our sons and daughters. Folks, we can’t expect the gods to save us from ourselves! We have to chart a course back into the light! Will we find the strength to banish him for good? Nay, is the time we took this in our own hands. Unite around me and let us stand up for our survival.” Everyone was cheering in what looked like a scary bloodlust. Yatiri, who was listening in the back, didn’t react. It was clear to her that it had all spiralled out of her control. There was nothing she could do, nothing she wanted to do.

Manuel was not oblivious to what was was brewing around him. He knew that the news of the disease being somehow linked to his previous acts was now common knowledge. He tried to soften the impact, called for doctors, donated to those with lost relatives, but that seemed to be but a small drop of good in an ocean of blunders. It felt like he was sitting on a ticking bomb, ready to explode, erasing in an instant him and this entire empire he had built.

As he was contemplating this whole situation in the calm of his office, he heard a knock followed by soft footsteps.

“Revered mother!” he stood up in a rush.

“Leave! Now!” she said, then walked out before he even had the time to utter a word.

Was it a threat? A warning? An order? He couldn’t quite tell, yet the grave tone of Yatiri’s words was enough to convince him of the urgency.

He called his wife, Olivia, to the room and ordered her to get the kids and start packing. Despite her constant questions, he gave no answer. He knew she was attached to this tribe and that discussing this with her would be of no help. As soon as she left, he opened his safe, took everything he could carry. “It is more than enough to start a new life,” he thought. He also hid a gun in his pocket. He bought once for the aesthetic of it, never came to his mind to use it, never needed to, until now.

In the cover of darkness, they loaded everything in the car. He took one last look at this land that was his father’s and his father’s before him, then jumped in the driver’s seat. He would probably have to bribe a guard or two to get out of the quarantined south. But the options were few, the stakes high, and for now there was only one solution.

Scholarly sources:

My major sources were mainly readings from the course:

June Nash, 2007, "Consuming Interests: Water, Rum, and Coca-Cola from Ritual Propitiation to Corporate Expropriation in Highland Chiapas" in Cultural Anthropology

Terence Turner, 1995, "An Indigenous People's Struggle for Socially Equitable and Ecologically Sustainable Production: The Kayapo Revolt Against Extractivism" Journal of Latin American Anthropology

Jacqueline S. Solway, 1994, "Drought as a 'Revelatory Crisis': An Exploration of Shifting Entitlements and Hierarchies in the Kalahari, Botswana" Development and Change (as inspiration for a crisis scenario)

Roy A. Rappaport, 1967, Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations among a New Guinea People, Ethnology (Ritual aspect of the tribe's relation to nature)

As well as other sources:

Elizabeth H. Loh, 2015 Targeting Transmission Pathways for Emerging Zoonotic Disease Surveillance and Control