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Rituals of our lives



A 5x52' series

Produced by ARTE FRANCE & TOURNEZ S'IL VOUS PLAÎT PRODUCTIONS

“*Ritual of our Lives*” is a documentary series of 5X52’, which questions and deciphers the major stages of our lives as humans. For this task, we are accompanied by anthropologist Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke.

Why this series ?

Being born, growing up, seducing, bonding, dying: this cycle of life is immutable. It is the very foundation of our condition as a human being, beyond culture. It leads them inexorably towards the end – after all, to advance in life is to approach death, and from this point of view, to live becomes a frightening adventure! This is why humans have invented accompanying rituals that allow life to be structured in specific stages: the collective rituals of passage from one state to another allow the individual to construct a levelheaded perception of their mortal condition.

“*Rituals of our Lives*” proposes to meet those who, throughout the world, celebrate these “passages of life”. Purification, isolation, pain, transformation of the body: each group has its own practice, its beliefs, its prohibitions, which reveal its identity. To share with them these ritual is to penetrate at the heart of their culture, to understand their fears, their desires, their vision of life, their way of responding to “the difficult task of growing up”.

In the end, the outlook presented in “*Rituals of Lives*” will allow us to question our own anxieties and perspectives.

“*Rituals of our Lives*” is also a way to reflect on the usefulness of these ritualized occasions. Today, our Western societies are becoming more and more emancipated from them: people are free to live out their love with whomever they choose, cremation is secular, and graduating is no longer a widely recognized official entry into the world of adults. What do rites of passage bring to practitioners? How do they help them to pass a stage in life? How do they change the ones performing them?



The comparative method

“*Ritual of our Lives*” is articulated in 5x 52’, each episode being centered around one of the great stages that punctuate our lives: being born, growing up, seducing, bonding, dying.

In each episode, Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke will meet two peoples who approach these times of passage differently. **These two examples will support a reflection on the topic – by echoing each other, or on the contrary by clashing.**

This comparative method makes sense in an anthropological series such as “*Ritual of our Lives*”, because comparison is indeed a fundamental operation of scientific reasoning in this discipline. It allows us to identify universals, continuums, but also singularities and contrasts. Besides, this method allowed Claude Lévi-Strauss to highlight, through extra-European ethnography, certain general properties of the mental schemes that unite us.

The comparison will be made in two directions: a so-called “lateral” comparison – that is to say one that will allow us to compare and to put in resonance the two rites that we will attend – and a “frontal” comparison – that, in Anne-Sylvie’s words, **will confront our own experience as Westerners to the practices described in the documentary.**



The direction

“*Ritual of our Lives*” will be a series directed by Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke. Written like an anthropologist’s logbook, she will report first hand on her travels, her encounters, her sensations, and her thoughts. Without ever directly engaging with the camera, she will guide us in our reflections, providing us with insights and theoretical frameworks that will allow us to better understand what is happening on screen. In the series “*Rituals of the World*” produced for Arte (15x26’), **Anne-Sylvie has skilfully walked the fine line between sharing knowledge, deciphering, and intimacy of the story.** We wish to recreate this harmonious type of narration.

Each film will begin with a “teaser”, that will blend images of the two rituals we will attend, and that will allow us to set the tone for the themes we will tackle. Thus, from the beginning, the audience will know that they are embarking on a journey in two times that will support their reflection on the passage of life we will be talking about.

The construction of the film will not be binary: Anne-Sylvie’s second meeting will have been announced by the teaser, but above all, it will naturally result from the questions remaining at the end of the first ritual. We also imagine an “overlap” of the two stories; that is to say a moment when, visually, the two rituals will blend in the image, as in the teaser, to re-announce the second chapter of the film. This second story will deepen our understanding of the first one: for example, after having lived through a coming-of-age ritual with a young boy, and having understood the main features of these times of transition from childhood to adulthood, we will question the very specific position of young teenage girls in traditional societies, by going to meet one of them. The stories will therefore be written in continuity.

Great care will be taken in the meeting. Anne-Sylvie has the gift of being able to weave sincere and powerful links with the people she meets. Her great capacity to listen and the accuracy of her exchanges are a major asset that gives warmth and closeness to the story.

To translate this intimacy, we will favor tight, long-focus frames on the faces of the people with whom she exchanges. Anne-Sylvie will be present in the frame as a lead-in, to signify the exchange. However, she will not take up too much screen space. Contrary to “*Rituals of the World*”, where she assumed the role of passer-by, she will be filmed here as an anthropologist at work. As a matter of fact, this entire documentary is about her work, since she intends to publish at the end of these meetings – both in scientific journals, where she will propose research articles, and with a more general public publisher. The real “heroes” will be the people she will meet. We will make a portrait of them, that is to say that we will film them in their daily life, before the ritual, to understand their state of mind before the rite of passage. We will try to understand “their environment”, what they expect from this ritual, and finally, the “benefit” they gained from it. This issue will be the narrative thread in our story.

“*Ritual of our Lives*” will also be an opportunity to discover different territories, often far away – a whole new world, sometimes extremely wild – and multiple landscapes. Beyond the setting, these places are often constitutive of ritual practices: the Xavantes must learn

Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke

Graduated from the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Humanities, Anne-Sylvie decided in 2009 to branch out into anthropology. She entered the EHESS and became a student of the most famous French anthropologist still alive: Maurice Godelier, himself a disciple of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

He offered to give her the field materials he collected 40 years earlier in a small tribe in Papua New Guinea, in order to pursue her doctoral research and to observe the socio-cultural changes over more than a generation. Anne-Sylvie settled for a year in a village in the mountains of Papua, with no water, no electricity, and no means of communication with the outside world but for a fickle satellite phone. She was quickly considered part of the community, which gave her a local name and let her share its daily life.

Anne-Sylvie was then a key character of the anthropological series *"Rituals of the World"* 15x26' for arte.



Episode summaries

1 - Being born

“An unborn child already has a past.”

- Henry de Montherlant

When a child is born... What other world do they come from? To be recognized and admitted by society, they must be given a name, registered in a lineage, “declared” among their own... Each society has created rituals to welcome newborns.

In this first episode, Anne-Sylvie will question this first “passage of our life”. As we will see, this biological act is often ritualized, but it is also a major social act.

Anne-Sylvie will first go to **India, to the Mundas, a tribe settled in the state of Jharkhand.** Here, birth is linked to the accomplishment of several rituals that take place before and after it. The main objective of the birth ceremony is to protect the child from all evils and to instill in them the fundamental values of the tribe. Anne-Sylvie will meet Satya, a young woman in her twenties who is still exhausted from her delivery. The labor lasted 18 hours, the contractions were terrible, and several times she thought she would never make it. When it was born, the baby was all blue and it took a long time to cry out, so Satya was worried: it was her first child and she found it too small, too fragile...

Anne-Sylvie then meets Makita among **the Ekondas Pygmies in the DRC.** The Ekonda custom is that, like Makita, young women who become mothers for the first time return to live with their parents for a period of 2 to 5 years after the birth of their first child. These women are then called “Walé”, which refers to the first-time nursing mothers.

For the anthropologist Maurice Godelier, there would be a direct link between the making of an individual and the way of thinking about their birth. **A child would not only belong to their parents, they would also belong to society...**



2 - Growing up

“Entering adulthood is another birth. It is a difficult passage. Until your death, and even beyond, you will have to grow, grow again, become ever more adult”.

- Henri Gougaud. Writer.

In this episode, Anne-Sylvie will question the time of passage from childhood to adulthood through two encounters: that of Getolio, a young boy from the **Xavante tribe in the Brazilian Amazon** who must fight and draw blood with a heavy club made from a root to show his bravery and his ability to bear pain. Two “qualities” that will make him enter the world of men.

Anne-Sylvie will then go to **Papua New Guinea** – a territory she knows well since she went there for her “field research” – to meet Sillas, a young girl from the Sepik people who is going to be scarified to enter the community of adults of her tribe. This ritual is identical for boys and girls, but is not practiced at the same time for both genders. It consists of having the back scarified in multiple places, so that the skin, while healing, blisters and forms what look like scales, like on crocodiles, the tribe’s totem animal. The crocodile, renowned for being strong and dangerous, is considered a protective ancestor and is venerated by the whole tribe.

These two ways of living out the end of childhood question a period of life that does not seem to exist in these traditional societies: **adolescence**. In the West, where rites of passage such as military service have disappeared, the time of adolescence is getting longer and longer, and with it a certain unease. As if the wandering between two worlds – that of the children and that of the adults – did not have a clear ending. **As if this unraveling provoked a psychological discomfort that could go as far as a profound disorder.**



3 - Seducing

“Seduction is always the object of a social codification, whatever the studied society”.

- Gilles Boëth, anthropologist

The time of seduction, as a preamble to the creation of a couple, is a highly ritualized passage of life, because seduction is a language, a means of communication with the other that is intrinsically cultural: the cues that one emits in this language, verbal or not, must be perceived and understood by their intended recipient. While seduction can occur at any age, it is considered a ritual of passage when it acts as a clear boundary between the solitude of the adult individual, and couple life.

In this episode, Anne-Sylvie will attend two powerful and ritualized times of seduction with young adults in search of a soul mate.

The first one will take her to **China, in Guizhou, a province in the southwest of the country**, where the Miao minority celebrates the Sisters' Meal Festival. It is considered the oldest festival in Asia dedicated to lovers. Latsi is participating this year for the first time.

She is 19 years old and it has been several months since Tao lak, a young man from her village, made his interest in her clear. He passes in front of her house, looks at her, smiles at her as much as he can. They have known each other since childhood, but she has hardly ever spoken to him. A few months ago, her friends told her that he wanted to declare his love for her at the Sisters' dinner. Now that she knows, Latsi looks at him differently. It is true that he is a hard-working young man, kind and rather easy on the eyes. But marrying him, spending her entire life with him... Her parents also noticed his coming and going; in this small village, secrets do not last long. Latsi's mother told her that her father thinks he is a suitable match. In 3 days, during the ceremony, she will have to give Tao lak an answer...

Anne-Sylvie will then go to meet **a young Ethiopian girl, Kawa, who belongs to the Mursi tribe, who live in the southwest of the country**, in the valley of the Omo river, near the borders of Sudan and Kenya.

Kawa is 16 years old, and in the next rainy season she will marry Boddo, a young man from the village. Today, for the first time, the women are going to give her her very first lip plate. All are gathered for the event. Kawa has painted herself the plate that they will insert. The women have told her to brace herself for this painful moment. She is not afraid, she wants to do it, to see the pride in Boddo's eyes...

But we should also emphasize that for the Mursi, as often, seduction is not only a prelude to love and sex: it is also a social relationship, and a relationship of power. The bigger the plate, the more beautiful the woman is (according to their society's standards of beauty), and the more power she has...

4 - Bonding

“Marriage is a life in life”.

- Honoré de Balzac

During this episode, Anne-Sylvie will question one of the most common rituals in our human societies: marriage. With its usual corollaries: fidelity and the complementarity of the sexes.

First, Anne-Sylvie will go to **Vietnam, to the Hmong tribe**, an ethnic group of about 10 to 20,000 people spread between the Vietnamese, Chinese and Laotian borders. They fled into the jungle and the mountains, hunted by the Vietnamese army for having helped the French during the Indochina war, then the Americans during the Vietnam war.

They have always perpetuated a rather surprising tradition. One day a year, a love market is organized to allow young couples to form; but also, and perhaps especially, to allow already married men and women to briefly reconnect with their paramour or childhood sweetheart. This market takes place in Sapa, at the foot of the church, at the same market as the ethnic minorities of the country come to sell their handicrafts. Here, we talk about love and sex. Young and old, married or not, come to make acquaintance, to court, to look for a fling or the romance of a lifetime. They come down from the highlands between friends or in couples, several times a year, taking the opportunity to break with the harshness of daily life, made of work in the rice fields or in the farms.

Anne-Sylvie will then fly to **Kenya, where the Kuria people** still observe an ancestral tradition, the “nyumba ntobhu”: at the death of their husbands, women can marry younger girls. This union between people of the same sex has nothing to do with a homosexual relationship. Its purpose is to prevent the marginalization of women who have not had children within a community. It also serves as a way for a widow to keep her deceased husband’s inheritance – his property normally going to the other men in the family. Tribal law prohibits them from receiving the inheritance of their deceased husbands. If they have no sons, everything the husband owned is divided among the brothers and men of the family. In order for the widow to remain in her home, she must marry another woman who must give her a son. The aim is to perpetuate the lineage, but also to put food on the table for the widow.

It is commonly considered that marriage is a legitimate structure for the construction of kinship; and in a traditional way, a classic scheme of “man + woman = child” is projected into this structure. The anthropologist Maurice Godelier, a specialist in kinship, has however identified 182 different kinship systems! Homoparentality is a part of this vast palette. We include this situation, even if there is no homosexuality, because it is indeed about having a child with a person of the same sex. According to him, it is necessary to underline that childhood is valued, since Rousseau in the 18th century. Love is not at the forefront of our societies: there are children, who cement the family. Kinship systems are therefore not designed for parents

but for children, who are the real vectors of continuity. And it is the same for the women of the Kuria people: the child, in this case the son, is the one who gives status, wealth and stability. **The union, as a preamble to parenthood, is thus a constant that echoes the choice of many peoples today: that of granting same-sex couples the right to marry.**



5 - Dying

“What do we do with the dead, and above all what do they do with us? : these are the questions that every culture faces and tries to answer.”

- Patrick Baudry – University of Bordeaux 3

In this last episode, Anne-Sylvie will question the last rite of passage in every human being’s life: the passage from the world of the living to that of the dead. Through the meeting of the Indian Ayush, and the **Spanish Ignacio**, we will discover that social death is often disconnected from physical death.

On the ghats, these stairs leading into the Ganges, a black smoke with a heavy smell rises from the braziers and embraces Anne-Sylvie. Where the cremations take place, the fires burn day and night, without interruption. For Hindus, being cremated in Varanasi (Benares) allows to reach the “moksha”, the extinction of the soul, the ultimate goal of the believers, and thus to put an end to the cycle of reincarnations. This tradition has existed for nearly 3,500 years. It is estimated there are about 200 cremations per day. The Dalits (untouchables) are in charge of the whole cremation process – from the maintenance of the fires to the supply of wood, including the sale of flowers and other decorations for the deceased’s final journey. A task considered impure. Women are forbidden, for fear that their tears would “retain” the soul of the deceased.



Anne-Sylvie then goes to join **Ignacio in As Neves, Spain**; a small isolated town where every year a religious ritual is held. A surprising one, to say the least: the pilgrims express their gratitude to Santa Marta de Ribarteme, the patron saint of resurrection, after having survived a near-death experience. The pilgrimage to Las Nieves is unique because of this tradition of pilgrims arriving at the church in an open casket, showing their respect and gratitude to the saint who spared them. The coffins are carried in solemn procession throughout the city by the relatives of the “almost dead”. Some people carry their empty coffins to the church themselves.

In anthropology, it is considered that whatever form the funeral takes, it always testifies to the desire to ward off death and prepare the life of the deceased in another world. **Here, the conjuring function of the ritual shows the strength of life, by using the symbolism of death and by diverting it.**



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