



## Women's rights owe to ethnological studies

By Patrick Deval

A better understanding of the role of women remote societies contributed to the emancipation of women today

[International women's day](#) owes more to ethnology and anthropology than most people think. Indeed, studies of primitive societies have contributed to our current vision of the role of women in society. What is remarkable is that these studies have brought into perspective our own cultural evolution. This is true of women's emancipation movement in Western countries. Feminists have gathered inspiration from the work of anthropologists and ethnologists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until today. Better understanding the role of women in diverse human societies from a broad spectrum of cultures has helped Western women draw helpful comparison to assert their own rights.

### Voting rights

Take, for example, the case of the women's [suffrage movement](#) in the United States at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has been heavily influenced by ethnologists and anthropologists. Indeed, early feminist activists mentioned in their books the emancipated condition of Native American women. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, [Alice Fletcher](#) related experience after she was sent on a mission in a Sioux tribe by the Peabody Museum, in New Haven, Connecticut, USA. The ethnologist suffragette claimed that Indian women enjoyed greater freedom than their more recently arrived Western counterparts. She pointed out that their rights to make children or not, to divorce, vote or have access to property were recognised in their societies.

This kind of knowledge also influenced her contemporary feminists, which include [Susan B. Anthony](#), who was the founder of the New York newspaper *The Revolution*, in 1868. Its motto was: 'The True Republic : men, their rights and nothing more; women, their rights and nothing less.' Another notorious author supporting the cause of women

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was [Matilda Joslyn Gage](#), author of *Women, Church and State*, a book published in 1893, which took every opportunity to blast every fatherly image in her writings.

### Sexual equality and freedom

Going one step beyond the battle to acquire the right to vote, women also relied on anthropology to gain greater sexual equality. Towards the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two American ethnologists were particularly involved in such a debate. The first is [Ruth Benedict](#), a theoretician of cultural relativism in anthropology, who focused on Native Americans. The second is [Margaret Mead](#), a cultural anthropologist, who published controversial studies of sexuality in Oceania. They both contributed much to the advance of equality among sexes in their own culture.

Further to the work of anthropologists and ethnologists, historians too brought some depth to the understanding of occidental women's sexual status. For example, 19<sup>th</sup> century historian, [Jane Ellen Harrison](#) was one of the founders of modern studies of ancient Greek religion. She would, for example, have looked into the practices of the devotees of the god Dionysos, who were the menads, a group of very liberated women. Another defender of the importance of women's sexual freedom was one of Harrison's contemporaries, [Margaret Murray](#). In a book called *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, she looked at the level of freedom women enjoyed in pagan pre-Christian religion, which helped fuel feminists' resistance to church oppression.

Over time, drawing comparison between cultures in such a way became a science. This is the case with the work of [Denise Paulme](#) in France, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In her essay about the morphology of African tales, *La Mère dévorante*, she demonstrated the universality of modern psychoanalysis archetypes found even in the heart of Africa.

Further 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnological work, in France, also influenced women's emancipation movements. This is the case of the work of [Germaine Dieterlen](#), who studied Dogon people of Mali in the 1930s, and recognised the dignities of their women and enlarged our vision of what it is to be human. In addition, another French ethnologist, [Germaine Tillion](#), who went on a mission in the Aurès mountains, campaigned for Algerian women's emancipation.

Finally, today the work of the highly respected French anthropologist and ethnologist [Françoise Héritier](#) goes one step further. Her views enrich our reflections on sexual difference, interpreted as a binary and unequal principle. Such an approach, she believes, is at the root of masculine domination in most cultures. In her books, she analyses the role of the woman's status in prohibiting incest. She also looks at exchange traditions in most ancient societies, which considered women as merchandise in the context of marriages. In addition, her studies about parenthood and alliances in African societies are nurturing a new perception of being human.

Ethnology and anthropology have definitely influenced the way Western women's emancipation movements have flourished over the past few centuries. Looking into remote communities has helped women to counter the overbearing cultural influences of the likes of patriarchal or Church influences restricting their freedom. 21<sup>st</sup> century women in Western countries thus embody the triumph of scientific understanding of the role of women in various remote societies— arising from social and human science studies—over rigid social structures.

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