“We were born to exist, not to know, to be, not to affirm ourselves. Genesis has caught our condition better than our dreams and our systems have,” Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran reflected in his *History and Utopia* in 1960. He added, “He who aspires to complete freedom only comes to it as a return to his starting point, to his initial enslavement.”

The prophecy remains relevant as Cioran incisively defines the disturbing social and political scenario we are immersed in, where uncertainty not only determines daily and personal parameters but also makes the freedom at our disposal increasingly intangible. The question arises as to whether there has ever existed a society of the origins, as it were, where being has prevailed over assertion, where the political sense is expressed without a referent, or where the latter is deprived of any power.

**The power of difference**

By observing the conditions of power in simple societies where central concepts and mechanisms lie outside the categorical relationship “right and state, sanction and strength,” we move into more complex environments (at first sight elusive but no less rigorous) that determine values and social organization, and invest it with a pervading, referential, structurally motivated reality which constitutes its identity.

Initiation is the crucial moment when we pass from natural life to cultural awareness: it corresponds to a rite and at the same time to a process allowing access to the mythical, religious, social, and technical knowledge of the society of pertinence, thus becoming a full member after overcoming trials and demonstrating reliability, the ability to guard secrets, and endurance to physical pain. The presence of blood, a cruel element of life and death in both representations, in its symbolic importance sanctifies the difference of state, class, and pertinence granted the initiate.

What occurs during the rite is permanent, establishing membership of the world of “men,” of tribal knowledge, of what in modern parlance might
be defined as the appropriation of one's own history, identified with the
dominant group of power. The ritual representation evokes death and res-
urrection, where the latter means the rejection of the state of non-being,
of shameful and effeminate insipience, in favor of the condition of being,
achieved through the knowledge of myth, an essential truth to understand
individual and collective life and confer meaning, and from which all other
capabilities and possibilities will derive. These capabilities are ritual: war
investiture, membership of secret societies, and of "age groups" that regulate
juridical, administrative and political functions; the possibilities are those of
knowing the foundation and origin myths and the means of access to the
afterworld and the ancestors, the right to life, and an explanation of the
world.

In these contexts, women’s difference is expressed by the non-access to
power, understood both as the operation of command and as knowledge.¹
Multidisciplinary research in linguistics, psychology, philology, history, and
anthropology suggest that mythopoeia is a male peculiarity; nonetheless
women, without the initiate’s knowledge of the meanings of myth, have
been adept at using it in its magical and operational function. Detailed
ethnographic research suggests that we should not confuse the practice of
magical, divinatory, or therapeutic arts, sometimes allowed to women, with
the attribution of an exercise of power. In shamanism, for example, the
priestly investiture and the social authority he subsumes are denied to a
woman, who can only develop therapeutic, prophetic, and occult powers.
Although women possess the power of continuity through their offspring
and through quotidian routines in caring and healing, harvesting and seed-
ing, weaving, home-making, basket-making, and pottery, songs and music
(a power apparently free and informal but extremely cohesive in reality), the
power of women remains essentially private. As ethnographic enquiry has
evidenced, exceptions concern only partial and marginal aspects of com-
mand or military tasks, subject to the influences and interests of lineage and
kinship. First-person administration of autonomous power remains a myth
forbidden to a woman as the most effective taboo.

The conception of matriarchy is one of Bachofen’s intellectual construc-
tions, a formal and cultured exercise predicated on a classical and mytho-
logical humanism through which he articulates a hypothesis proffered on
the basis of his own conjectures. Historical, archaeological, and anthro-
logical data negate any empirical support for the existence of matriarchy.
Although the phenomenon may have been desired, it was unrealizable
owing to women’s prior exclusion from power.

Guaranteeing that everyday life remains the same in its immutable prin-
ciples, the feminine function is still a power, however, on a cultural, social,
and consequently political level. The anthropologist extends her gaze to the
ties, obligations, and charges assigned by kinship to social order, the econ-
yomy, and the hereditary transmission of simple societies. Morgan (1969) had