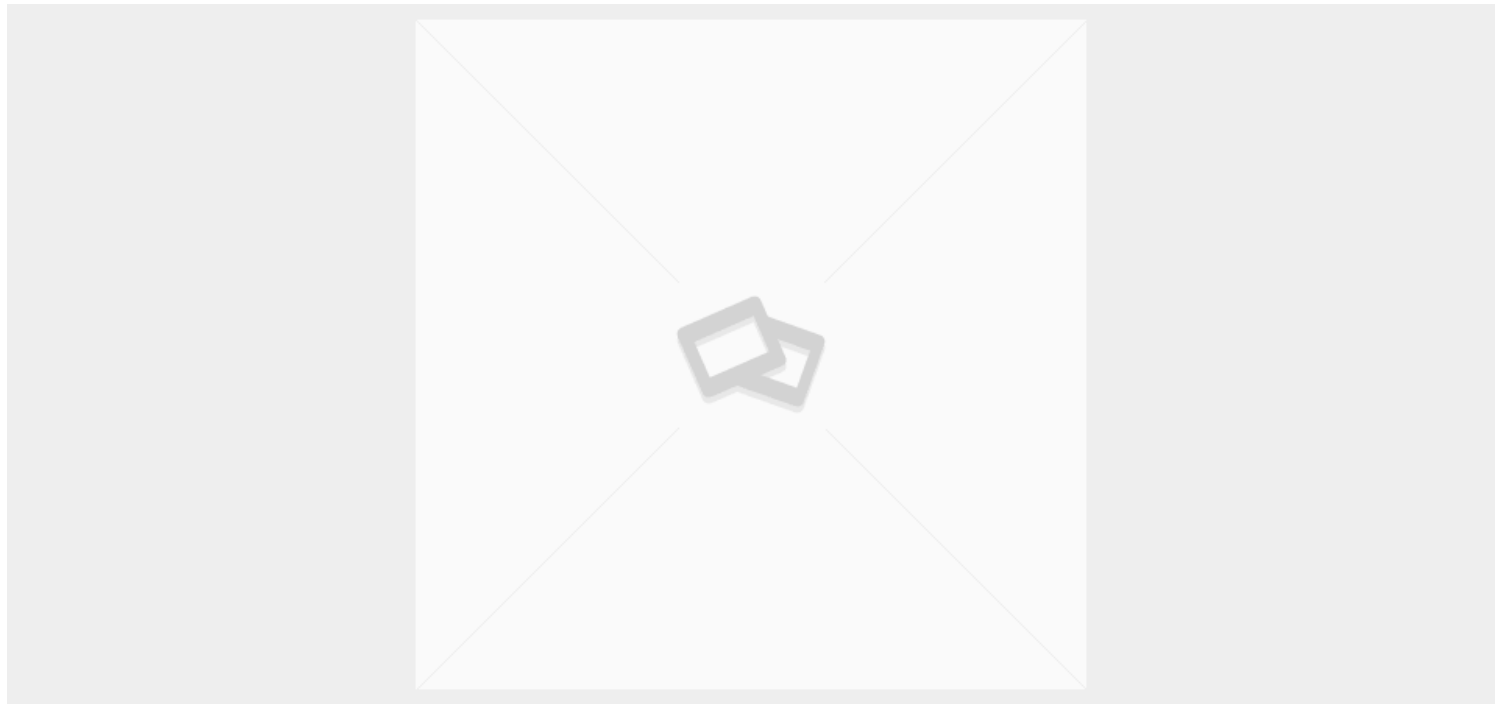


THE FEMININE OF ORIGINS

Posted on 30/01/2023 by officinedigitali





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by Marina Zaoli

Perhaps the actual image of the original feminine, which in itself becomes symbolic, and thus representative, is a sacred monument, carved into a stone niche, found in China, on the borders of Tibet, in the region of Yunnan (yun = cloud, nan = south). It represents a vulva resting on a lotus flower stem, and is a symbol of life being born. That which welcomes, which contains, which nourishes, which liberates, which accompanies, which grows. But even before that, what creates desire. The area in which this ancient sacred image is located is inhabited by the Bai ethnic group, one of the last remaining ethnic groups derived from matrilineal-type cultures, of which there is still one, today, in the same area, represented by the Mosuo people. And it is a truly precious eventuality to be able to verify again today, for one 'last time, the memory of such a society, now gone for millennia. Indeed, the tourism that is coming all the way there has already begun to create the first socio-economic disruptions. This is because until now life had been conducted at a completely natural pace, while now people have begun to rent rooms, open small eateries, and, inevitably, the areas most scenic or closest to the lake have been more successful than the others.

The reason why the Mosuo have remained a predominantly agricultural population with matriarchal and matrilineal character is because of the geographical location of their territory, which is encapsulated in a mountainous area at the end of a road leading to Lugu Lake, which, not coincidentally, means Mother Lake, and is a 7-hour drive from the nearest Naxi village. The Naxi were also a matriarchal population until a few centuries ago, but then their greater proximity to the Chinese Empire forced them to take on patriarchal-type characteristics, although the surname situation is still very uncertain, and sometimes matrilineal derivations are noted or still exist. The Mosuo live at an altitude of 2,700 meters in the foothills of the Himalayas, on the border with Tibet, and have always remained on the fringes of what was the Chinese Empire. They live by farming and fishing. It is as if they have remained crystallized in their behaviors since the beginning of human history.

There, as opposed to almost everywhere else in the non-Westernized world, being born a woman is a blessing. The village, as well as each individual family, is governed by a *Dabu* (an elderly, wise woman who was chosen from among the possible younger candidates by the previous *Dabu* for her skills in caring, loving, and managing the home and the little ones). Sometimes the *Dabu* may be joined by another *Dabu* to hold a family together, and they do not fight.

The children who are born, generally two per woman, but even fewer, as their philosophy is to have

only as many as can be cared for and kept as best they can, remain for the first three years with the mother, then are given to the *Dabu*, the head of their family, and they sleep with her, in her room and in her house.

However, the mother is recognized as the natural mother, and all women, even more so the mother's sisters, help in family management and maternal duties.

The father figure is represented by the mother's brother, who takes care of the little ones as needed. The birth father is not considered consanguineous (he belongs and is related only to the maternal family), but he is recognized by his children, even if he does not live with them. He will always remain living in his own mother's house, together with his sisters and her children, to whom he will be a father.

When a girl reaches the age of 13, she is given the traditional costume and the key to the "flower room." From now on, she can choose a lover, bring him to this room every night and love him freely. If the couple becomes stable, the lover will be introduced to the family and become their official partner until the story ends. In fact, the Mosuo do not contemplate marriage or a lasting union, as they think love is too fragile and precious a feeling to harness. There is in this custom, however, perhaps also the practicality and awareness of being better off with one's mother than with one's mother-in-law. Consider India, where chosen brides (and girls) are taken to their future husband's home as young as 3 to 4 years of age to be educated by his mother in the dictates of that family and the customs of that home, which is where they are to live anyway.

The mosuo house generally consists of three rooms: the main one with low benches and an always burning hearth, which is that of the *Dabu*. This is where guests are received and the little ones sleep; then there is another room for sleeping, and a final room, called the "chamber of mysteries" where women are taken to give birth and the elderly to die.

Society is permeated with religiosity; women also pray on the street and at work. There are, however, men consecrated to prayer and a kind of priest, who is the male *Dabu* chieftain, who performs the rites, but in particular is called upon to remove witchcraft and evil eye from women.

In this society there is, at least so far, no rivalry, no infidelity, no domestic violence. There is no possession, everything is shared, even the men, who are kept only as long as the passion and love lasts, so they too are very much involved, and then they are let go.

Such an example is most important in order to better understand what early human societies were like and how the female figure, the feminine so well described even by Teilhard, has these characteristics of caring, welcoming, free and universal love, of pulling toward life, toward becoming, toward creation, toward God.

"When a man loves a woman, he thinks at first that his love is for an individual like himself. Very soon, however, he is taken aback.... He thought he would find near him only a companion : instead, he realizes

that in Me he is in contact with the great secret Force, the mysterious Latency -- coming in this form to drag him along. He who has found me is on the threshold of all things. Not only by the intermediation of his sensibility, but by the physical connections of my own nature, I extend myself into the soul of the World... I am the access to the global heart of creation."

Women not only love a man, but even more, when they love him deeply, they know, they feel they have the power to replicate life, his own life over time, and they desire to do so beyond anything else. They have the power of creation and they know it. And so they take men by the hand and dissolve the fear of the unknown, of throwing oneself into an undertaking that would seem impossible.

Then again, how can we forget that the genetic mutation that created the first hominid from the ape was found in Africa in a female specimen?

Black Eve, the origin.

Its finding, which dates it around 180 to 200,000 years ago, tells us the story of a being that began to differentiate from a purely biological, physical structure into an individual with an, albeit initial, capacity for psychism. Perhaps not yet fully, but certainly the change in messages that has taken place, in the transition from the visual and olfactory signals of monkey oestrus, to the appearance of a monthly cycle of reproduction and a permanent breast, has, albeit slowly, led to the transformation of the primitive, simple sexual drive, into the construction of feelings, of an attraction, no longer just chemical, but arising from bonds of sympathy, affection and love. The behavior was no longer just biological and 'forced' but 'psychologically' felt and chosen.

"As life went on, I began to embody myself in beings that I chose because they were particularly in my image."

The female figure of the beginning was really the origin, blending in with life itself. The life of the beings that populated the earth first, and also of all plants later. In fact, at a later stage it also becomes the mother earth that encloses in its womb the seed that leads to a new plant, to new life (from Pacha Mama to Ceres, etc.).

If we consider that it was from a woman that the entire population, male and female, was generated, that the life span was very short, and that the connection between birth and sexual intercourse was unknown, we can well come to understand how the magic of the female body was totalizing.

Archaeological studies indicate to us that originally the society was matriarchal, thus confirming that, as with other mammals, newborns were cared for and spent a long period only, or predominantly, with their mothers (as we said the average life span was very short) and that sociality was extrinsic within the mother + offspring group: an occurrence that destined for many millennia the female figure to be the main figure of reference, even in the images of deities.

Indeed, it is no accident that the earliest known deities in human history always represent mother goddesses everywhere.

Mother goddesses depicted with conspicuous female attributes, goddesses of childbirth, with the baby coming out between their legs.

Before that there was water, fog, the environment around.

"Gradually I became individualized as souls become susceptible to a richer, deeper, more spiritualized union."

In the beginning there was no real consciousness yet, there was only drive for life, that is, for movement and satisfaction of needs, in the absence of any boundary, any reality. Everything was indeterminate and undifferentiated, everything could be and turn into anything.

"Before the beginning of history, man lives in a state of formless anonymity Therefore, the time before history is the indeterminate, the chaos, the undifferentiated. The counterpart on the religious plane of this amorphous psyche is the indeterminate numinous, the primordial active substratum, the matrix from which the "Divine" and the gods will later crystallize."

But one thing was certain, or had been at the beginning of everyone's life. A body that welcomed, a breast that nourished.

The mother, the female figure thus brings life, the ability to beget, within herself, but likewise brings nourishment, thus still protection and salvation.

Milk had in primitive cultures a strong power of purification, salvation, and rebirth.

In Ireland, in an area of Celtic worship, there are two nearby hills, which were called the 'nipples of Anu,' in honor of an ancient mother of all gods. In fact, the Celts also worshipped predominantly female deities, and the cultural foundations, including the art of medicine, botany, agriculture, and prophecy, were held by women.

The female body was magical and sacred.

Milk, therefore, in all its many images also always has meaning of life.

Until recently, documentation could still be found, even in our areas, of how popular culture gave thaumaturgical value, healing properties to breast milk. Children's (very painful) ear infections were treated by inserting inside the ear canal, milk from a woman who was breastfeeding.

In Roman culture there was a ritual, called the Lupercalia.

in which the blood with which the foreheads of young boys were dyed and was a symbol of death, was cleansed with milk, which represented life instead. We also find a similar meaning in the

account of an Egyptian myth in which it is milk that magically heals Horus' eyes that had been torn out by Seth.

Menstrual blood, which is cyclical, is also related to the magic of the female body, like milk and water, and is the only blood that represents life and not death.

The red sky of the aurora, was visualized by the ancients as the blood of childbirth for the birth of the sun, just as the fiery sky of the sunset had meanings of rebirth: the red solar disk set in the west, only to rise again in the east, the next morning, and the red of the sunset, which was like the red of the aurora was a kind of guarantee of the cyclical return.

Similarly, in funeral rites and sacrifices, the predominant color used was red, which, representing the blood of childbirth, recalled new life.

Water was also one of the most powerful symbolisms accompanying the feminine, probably the ultimate feminine archetype. The water of childbirth, the water of the amniotic sac that protects and completely envelops the baby and helps it to be born, the water that quenches thirst, like milk, that purifies, that washes, that heals and heals wounds. Water and vapor, memory of the undifferentiated numinous, of pre-life, of pre-consciousness, of the time of omnipotence and dreaming, of permanence in the welcoming and protective body of the mother.

Water represents the beginning, the primary source, the depth of the unconscious. It is the tepid primordial ocean in which the first life forms were created. It is the depth of the lakes and bogs near which the northern peoples performed sacrifices.

Another ancient symbol representing the maternal-feminine is the Uroboros, which Jung also refers us to with his studies on the subject. This is an Egyptian image that depicts a dragon biting its tail and is hermaphroditic and presexual, exactly what the child thinks of its mother and the world in the early stage of life. Its meaning is the flow of nourishment. It does not present polar tensions within itself, nor is there yet separation in the two sexes. In fact, as M. **Klein** was able to ascertain, every newborn experiences a similar initial reference image: the mother containing the father, incorporated within.

Since there is also not yet, at this stage of development, self-perception, and the ability to record and memorize, to differentiate pleasure-pain reactions, what is experienced is a form of autarky and self-sufficiency that borders on omnipotence and perfection. The world experienced in this situation is magical, numinous and pleromatic; one lives in a state of borderlessness and without any kind of consciousness, what was called by **Levi-Bruhl** "*Participation mystique*." Its archetype corresponds to the great-mother.

The spiral and labyrinth, the ancient caves, cultic cathedrals of prehistoric times, also represent the mother's body, a safe place to stand, to pray, to ask, to be heard.

The feminine then, has always been, as it is now, patient, welcoming, protective.

In separation cases, how many mothers, as a percentage, care for and raise their children, without abandoning them, compared to fathers? How many women are there compared to men who welcome a life that is born, always, a priori, without considering the difficulties, without considering that it is their body that will have to support and face each event?

How much, in a situation of living together in male groups, compared to female groups will we have strong contrasts, prevarications, violent actions?

It is clear that each sex was created for its own specific task. Women must welcome, nurture, build, men defend, measure, act.

"The woman brings, in a fixed time,

Life and death enclosed in its belly,

man carries them inextricably

tied to the eyes, hands and arms,

The tribe dies when you don't hunt."

Or, as an old saying goes: with a woman there is always love, with a man there is always war.

But just as the maternal, female figure had the power of life, equally, specularly, as time goes on, she acquires, in the human imagination, which is being formed, the power of death. Death that was predominantly represented, experienced, in the son's failure to identify himself, fearing that he would be imprisoned, harnessed within his mother, unable to exist of his own life.

One may recall, in this regard, an ancient legend from North American mythology about a shaman, Old Man, who created out of mud first animals and then a woman and a child,

but could not create immortality precisely because of this woman. In fact, she asked Old Man, while they were standing on the bank of a river, whether life would be eternal. The man replied that he had not thought about it yet, but that he would make that decision after he threw a piece of dung into the water. If this had floated, the men would have died for only four days, after which they could have revived, otherwise they would have died forever. The dung floated, but the woman was not happy and took a stone, announcing that if it sank the men would die, even though in dying they would feel sorrow, pain and compassion for each other, and threw it. The stone sank, and it was because of this that the woman was to blame for the death.

It can be observed very well in this narrative how the need for autonomy vis-à-vis the mother and, even more powerfully, matriarchal deities, leads to the expression of male self-generation. Men, who had never been able to identify with maternal and feminine creativity, and had indeed had to obey, as sons, are now determined to take over. The transition, however, is not easy, nor painless, and the damage noted in the male-female relationship is highlighted here, but more so the rejection of the sense of powerlessness and subservience suffered by men and caused by having been managed and manipulated by female figures, previously, while blaming them, at the same time, for being abandoned, (maternal) abandonment that always meant death.

In every mythology it is female figures who are the weavers of life and death, the masters of time, in the imagery of the primitive, as well as in that of the child, and it is always on the woman that the guilt of original sin is unloaded, because it is on her that one's needs for autonomy are projected and the guilt of having had the symbiotic, perfect, pleromatic state of the beginning terminated is experienced as her own.

Also found in this legend, although now misrepresented, along with the creation narrative is that of life after death and the possibility of rebirth. We find there, in fact, as in many other myths, a descent to the underworld for a certain period (the four days of death) before the beginning of true life.

In the history of every people on earth we can see how, at the advent of patriarchy, male deities are brought forth from older female deities. But we will also see how there is nothing like the figure of Mary, which differs from everything else, does not repeat any other mythology, but is true history.

From the moment in fact when patriarchy is born, from the emergence from that suffocating sense of indeterminacy of the son vis-à-vis the mother, which we see arising at a certain point in history, when those belonging to the male sex will free themselves from the mother figure and take over, we witness the birth of the first male deities. And all will be born of a mother goddess of the beginning, such as Larth, the sacred king of the Etruscans, son of the mother goddess Uni, holder of supreme power and first absolute authority, from whom the Lari were also descended.

Uni, the mother of all gods, from whom the Roman Iuno was derived, Juno, was the first, the only, the origin, the great mother of the Etruscans, the universal parent, the protector of childbirth, the dispenser of maternal and nurturing power intended for living creatures for their prosperity and growth.

So was Atum to the Egyptians. Atum was the only son begotten by Nun (female deity who represented the dark primordial water of nonexistence, that which was before creation, the totalizing mother goddess of the beginning). Atum was associated with the earth, as he was born from a hillock that rose from the waters, and was the father of all other gods. Her hand was itself a deity, the mother of creation, and she was given the appellation "the mother who is father."

Men take power and supremacy over women, create male deities, but behind, within them are still female deities. In fact, the terrible, secret, water-related power of the female deity will never

disappear completely and will continue to exist, represented by a sacred lake, often found at places of worship. Very interesting in this regard was the belief, leading to the fear, which was always alive in the Egyptians, that at some point Nun, who after creation had not disappeared but had surrounded the heavenly firmament and guarded the sun, moon, sky and earth, as well as the boundaries of the underworld, might break the sky and fall down, devastating the world.

The memory of this Egyptian deity expresses in the clearest way the image of the primitive female deities, identified with water, steam, etc., who continue to exist even after the advent of the new patriarchal deities as an all-enveloping mother, now outdated, but still most powerful. It would seem, at this point, that the fear of their power and wholeness remains because of the guilt of men who forcibly appropriated the primitive power of women.

Another documentation of this passage and its violence comes to us from Fromm's study of Sophocles' trilogy, particularly in that of the last book. His analysis shows us that the struggle against paternal authority is at its core and that this rebellion is rooted in the ancient conflict between the patriarchal and matriarchal systems of society. Oedipus, like Aemon and Antigone, represents the matriarchal principle; they rebel against a social and religious order based on the powers and privileges of the father, embodied by Laius and Creon.

"The conflict between the two principles develops further in the course of the tragedy. Antigone insists that the laws she obeys are not those of the Olympian gods: "For it is not from today, not from yesterday, that they live: eternal they are and unknown to all is the time when they were sanctioned"; and, we may add, the law of burial, of the return of the body to Mother Earth, is rooted precisely in matriarchal religion. Antigone represents human solidarity and the principle of all-embracing maternal love.....For Creon, deference to authority is the supreme value.....Authority in the family and authority in the state are the two supreme interdependent values upheld by Creon. Children are the property of their fathers and their function is to "be useful" to their father. The "patria potestas" in the family is the basis of the sovereign's power in the state; citizens are the property of the state and its sovereign, and "indiscipline is the greatest of evils.".....The two principles have now been brought into sharp focus, and the conclusion of the tragedy simply leads the action to the point of final decision. Creon has Antigone buried alive in a cave-again a symbolic expression of his connection to the earth goddesses."

One can no longer submit to maternal and female power. This is the reason why Adam is punished, and Eve with him. But it was Adam who indulged Eve's curiosity, her acquiescence to the serpent's evil dictates. He did not prove himself worthy of the Lord's trust; he preferred to follow the advice of a woman, the one who had hitherto had absolute power, and once again tries to entice him with her means of seduction, tied to earth and not to heaven, tied to instincts, sexual and material desires and not to those of loyalty to the father, which are typical and fundamental in a patriarchal regime.

It is from this point that man created the two dichotomous images of the feminine remaining bound

to the earth, sexuality, and expectation, and the masculine rising to the heavens, the intellect, the conquest of new spaces.

But she will always remain the woman who will connect the human to the divine, who will act as a bridge between earth and heaven. She will always remain the woman who will give life to her children and raise them, sacrificing her time to give them time in which to live. And it will be the woman who will remain the master of time, with her body marking it inexorably.

As Jaqueline Barthes explains in her interesting article *"We discovered women's surprising connections with the universe, with time, with that which surpasses us, we discovered a "structural" predisposition to love in its version of "self-giving," a solidarity not only with the universe, but also with that which attracts us, while remaining fundamentally mysterious to us. And this grounds in her the inability to separate the two dimensions of our being, its bodily dimension and its spiritual dimension."*

In this same sense of the feminine here appears to us the figure of Mary.

Mary acquiesces, welcomes. She is not frightened when the angel speaks to her. She already knows, already feels that a new life is forming in her body, and she already loves it. He is not afraid.

She will raise her son knowing that he is not hers, that she is only a conduit between heaven and earth, between divine and human, she will convince Joseph, and Joseph will believe because he feels that it is truth what she says.

The image of the feminine, of the feminine as Teilhard would say is this, and it remains over the centuries, over the millennia. It is the same one we still find today, perhaps just a little modified in the newest generations, where male and female roles are more interchangeable.

But as long as it is a woman's body that welcomes the new life and it is her job to grow and nurture it, these characteristics will remain.

On the other hand, even in today's figurative references, isn't every image of Our Lady with Child again the symbol of offering oneself, one's body for the other, of waiting for the needs of others, of being able to identify oneself, to understand the needs of the child?

And Mary is not a deity; she is a simple, humble maiden. No one knows her. Only God sees her and chooses her for her gifts of humility, faith and condescension.

Three times in Luke's Gospel we find this very sweet and extremely meaningful phrase: *"Mary, on her part, kept all these things pondering them in her heart."* (Luke 2:19 - 1:66 - 2:51)

Mary is a woman, human, who welcomes a human son, knowing, however, that he is God's son. He is frightened, of course, but he believes, he welcomes, and he stands strong, waiting for what is to come. He remains in the shadows, but he is a most important reference, especially for the infant Jesus.

Powerful image of the feminine that transcends time and brings us to God.

"Placed between God and the earth, as a place of common attraction, I make them come toward each other passionately....so that in me the meeting in which the birth and fullness of Christ is consummated, through the ages, may take place. I am the Eternal Feminine."

And we well know and have firm records of how it is still the mother figure who primarily and initially brings children closer to the need for transcendence, the search for and knowledge of God. If the mother teaches how to pray, teaches how to trust, how to believe in Jesus and His love, the relationship with prayer and God will remain in the children for a lifetime. There will be times of estrangement or rejection, but that nourishment given along with milk and motherly love, tangible and present, will be a good refuge, a good resource and a good hope for the span of the whole existence.

It is the feminine, then, that not only welcomes but is able to teach, motivate, understand, perhaps even foreshadow (an extra sensitivity recognized by all). In Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 28:20) the first to learn of the resurrection are the two Marys, who had gone to the tomb. It is their faithfulness, their humble, compliant, silent, but absolutely constant presence, which never fails, that is rewarded with the angel's words. *"Do not be afraid you! I know you seek Jesus the crucified. It is not here. He is risen as He said; come and see...."*

This is why Mary of Magdala in the Middle Ages was called the 'apostle of the apostles,' because, together with the other Mary, she was at the tomb when the angel arrived and had seen him first, and to her the angel had spoken. She had been the first to know. Learning about the Risen One. To find that the tomb was empty.

It is to her that the angel announces the great joy; it is she who is invited to run to the other apostles to announce the resurrection.

P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Directions of the Future*, SEI, Turin, 1996, pp. 83

Ibid, p. 84

Ibid, p. 84

Neumann E. , *History of the origins of consciousness*, Astrolabe, Rome, 1978 (Zurich 1949), pp. 55

As if the matter before it could 'psyche,' 'reflect,' felt, had a kind of memory both of the nothingness, the chaos from which it was drawn, and of the One, the Force that had organized it and was making it conscious.

Calvetti A. *To the origins of myths, fairy tales and legends. Theoderic and other protagonists*, Longo, Ravenna, 1995

M. Zani, *Living Life*, MEF, Florence, 2006

On the Christian significance of the evolution and similarities of myths and legends in all peoples of the earth, cf. M. Zaoli, "*A psychological contribution to the theory of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*," Teilhard aujourd'hui, Quaderni, Turin 2014, M. Zaoli, *Dalla fiaba al rito dal mito all'inconscio*, Panozzo, Rimini, 2002

Also on this, cf. M. Zaoli, *From fairy tale to ritual from myth to the unconscious*, Panozzo, Rimini, 2002, in which it is pointed out how it seems that the unconscious already 'knows' for what destiny we have been chosen (cf. St. Paul), as if the breath of life of the divine breath (Genesis 2:7) received at the beginning maintained within matter a memory of its past and future.

Fromm E., *The Forgotten Language*, Bompiani, p.192

Jaqueline Barthes, About the feminine mystery, Teilhard aujourd'hui 14 - February 2014, pp. 49

P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Directions of the Future*, SEI, Turin, 1996, pp. 85

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