

CARNIVAL of the SPIRIT

Seasonal Celebrations
and Rites of Passage

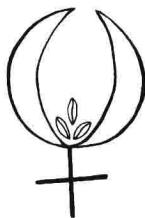
Luisah Teish

Author of JAMBALAYA

~· *Carnival of the Spirit*

*Seasonal Celebrations and
Rites of Passage*

Luisah Teish



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~• *Acknowledgments* •~

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Preface

Each year millions of people walk outside their shelters, look at the sky, smell the wind, and make plans for the coming seasons.

Many of these people will repeat the physical and ceremonial acts prescribed by their culture and religion for centuries. Some will want to honor the ways of the past but need something more personal, more directly related to their own experience and desires. Others will find that they have needs for which no ritual currently exists. This book is written for the creative person who seeks to honor the past in a new way.

Carnival of the Spirit integrates the ritual and ceremonial practices of several “tribal peoples” with the perceived needs and demands of our times. This blend of practices is flavored by the influence of Yemonja and Oshun.

Yemonja is the Mother Goddess, whose power is manifested in family life and domestic affairs. She nurtures us through the cycles of Life. She teaches us to walk and talk, from infancy to maturity.

Oshun, the Yoruba Goddess of Love, Art, and Sensuality, represents the Erotic in Nature. She also brings culture and refinement

to human life. Through Her, walking evolves into Dance, talking becomes Song.

When Yemonja and Oshun flow together, everyday life becomes a celebration. I am Their servant, Their taste-tester, Their transcriber.

Although much of this book is drawn from Yoruba culture, it is not a book of orthodox Yoruba ritual. Neither is it a book about Santeria—an Afro-Cuban cult recently (circa 1940) immigrated to the United States. This is a book about the seasons of the Earth and the effect they have had on individual and community life for thousands of years. Spring. Summer. Fall and Winter. Virtually all people on Earth celebrate the passage of time with food, music, dance, offering, and the reenactment of myth. Everywhere a harvest is celebrated.

This book is transcultural. It discusses the cultural notations that have been made on eco-centric reality. The eco-centric reality, the nature of the land a people inhabit, contributes more to ceremonial similarities and differences than skin color, hair texture, or buttock size.

The Transcultural Past

Centuries ago the trans-Atlantic slave trade brought millions of Black people from their motherland, Africa, to the so-called New World. They were dispersed throughout the Western Hemisphere, with large concentrations in Brazil, the Caribbean Islands, and the North American colonies. In those places, Native American

folk-knowledge, pagan ceremonial practices, and enforced Christian theology were added to their own beliefs and practices.

The Catholic church sponsored the slave trade and demanded that their critters be baptized, take Christian names, and worship the saints. In most places the Black Codes forbade slaves to marry, own property, speak their own language, or worship their gods.

But like most people, the Africans managed to acclimate themselves to the land, people, and culture around them. And in the process they created rituals and celebrations that are both old and new. This is true everywhere that people of African descent are found.

My own quest for spiritual liberation began with Egypt, the wonderful, mystical cradle of civilization. The quest for Cosmic Joy took me to Africa where the deities walk among human beings and dance *is* worship. The need to walk in balance was answered by my Native American ancestors. The culture's call to Earth reverence and stewardship resonates with Ibo theology (Nigeria) and is imperative to health in this time of ecological crisis. The African and Native American traditions are blessed with elders who have preserved the stories and rituals in spite of centuries of oppression.

So the ceremonial practices examined here are primarily African. But Native American and pre-Christian European practices are also considered because they have contributed to the diaspora. Eastern and South Pacific cultures are given honorable mention where appropriate. Everywhere the Earth is revered.

Somewhere in the distant past our ancestors observed certain truths about the activities of Nature and the behavior of human

beings. Whether it was done intuitively or scientifically, they created songs, dances, and rituals with the intention of recognizing, attuning with, and celebrating the seasons. Tradition was based on the needs of the time and on the perceived needs of the future. Today we must access the needs of our time and determine *what* should be done differently. If we are wise, what we create will take us into the future. To create wisely we must understand the thoughts and feelings that led our ancestors to action.

This book will explain the origin of well-known holidays and introduce some that are unknown in the Western world. It follows the Western Sun-oriented calendar.

My intent in writing this book is to invite you to a closer alignment with your environment and to promote extended family unity. The book contains guidelines and suggestions for creating your own celebrations. Examples of rituals performed by my extended family are given. I hope they inspire you to creativity and beauty.

Folk and Family Lore

As a storyteller I experience myth and folklore as one of the great ancestral gifts. They tell us what a people think of themselves and their world. The origins of most beliefs and practices can be found in those stories. *Carnival of the Spirit* is laced and embroidered with myth, folklore, and poetry.

Three kinds of tales are presented here: authentic, composite, and original.

The Authentic Tales: The authentic tales are the product of a tribe of people. They belong to no individual but come from ancestral memory. I have treated them in two ways: repeated and returned.

A repeated tale is simply that. It is repeated directly as told to me by elders or quoted from an anthology.

A returned tale is one whose message is essentially the same as it has been for centuries, but I have adjusted the environment and updated the language to clarify its relevance to our times. I have taken the old message and turned it into the morning news.

The Composite Tales: At times I weave together a collage of tales from several cultures. This is done to show the compatibility and continuity of the tale and to compensate for what has been lost through cultural rape. Folktales and folk customs have always borrowed from each other to create an understanding of our collective experience.

I don't, however, say that a tale is African if my source is Native American. That is cultural rip-off. If it is a "Southern tale" with African people on a Native American landscape, both of these factors are acknowledged. Sometimes I combine a returned tale with modern information to illustrate their shared wisdom.

The Original Tales: The original tales are personal. They are dramatizations of episodes from my own life. Some also describe the experiences of extended family members, workshop participants, and ritual attenders. I record their experiences with their permission. In instances where I *must* camouflage certain facts I have used a label name (Sister A), changed the date (once upon a time), or renamed the city (Yuppieville). This is to protect the privacy of those involved. The sequence of events, the emotional reactions, and the consequences of the ritual remain accurate. Stories from my personal experiences are presented with all the understanding and humor that *hindsight* bestows. In all cases the sources are cited and credit is given where credit is due.

If you record your experiences with seasonal rituals, eventually your family will produce a body of folklore about itself. These stories yield insight and are a lot of fun.

Happy Holidays

There are as many seasonal celebrations as there are days of the year. Time and space require that I make some choices and assumptions.

This book assumes that you live in a community of women, men, and children; and that you love and respect Nature. It assumes you have a need and a desire to create rituals. I have chosen to discuss specific culturally based holidays (Christmas, Día de los Muertos, Yam Festival) in the narrative. But my ritual recommendations are “generic.” They address the characteristics of the season (Winter) belonging to all who experience it. They are recommendations, not dictates. Use them as guidelines for creating your own rituals. Tailor them to suit your own needs and circumstances.

Most of the rituals require a small budget and a lot of creative work. You may increase the budget, but the beauty and power of the ritual will be lost if you decrease the creative work. You may perform these rituals in conjunction with or instead of the conventional holidays. Minimally, the seasonal celebration should occur in its season. Dress for the weather!

This book is written to help you celebrate life: to enliven your spirit, to stimulate your mind, to beautify your body, and to strengthen the bonds of your community.

It is a gift from the Goddesses, from Yemonja and Oshun. It is written in Their voice, Their tone. I have put pen to paper and transcribed Their song.

~• Preface •~

May the music of the Mother and the Muse dance through your life and that of the planet eternally. To all my relations, give thanks for life.

In Kinship

Yeye'woro Luisah Teish

TheaScribe

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Introduction

The Old Folks Say

What's yo' name now chile?

Whitley did you say?

Are you any kin to . . . ?

Did yo' people come from
down round Texas way?

Say yo' grandpa worked the railroad?

How they call his name?

Was he a tall man with big eyes?

Was his wife called . . . Auntie Mame?

Did yo' grandma have 'leven chillun?

Nine boys and two gals with buck teeth.

Was yo' Uncle Joe a cattle man

Or did Joe herd up sheep?

You sho walk a lot like my sister

Hips justa swaying to & fro.

Girl ya might be my second cousin

With colored folk, ya just never know.

Well they busted up our families.
And they sold the chillun apart.
We ain't got no papers for knowing
Just a funny kind of thump in de heart.

Guess the name don't matter none
Whitley, Jackson or Mo'
If the skin is black and the eyes shiny.
Then we be kinfolk for sho.

Luisah Teish, 1984

Food and Spirits

As a child I enjoyed the fuss and fanfare of the holidays. In my mother's household Thanksgiving and Christmas were always big affairs, especially in the kitchen.

We never made a lot of fuss over the Christmas tree or the Easter baskets. The dinner table and the food were the main attractions. We took a fold-up table out of the closet and pushed it flush with the kitchen table. The table was set with a linen cloth, blue pattern plates, silverware, the "good" glasses (which came in a box of oatmeal), and a bottle of Manischewitz or Mogen David wine. My mother never allowed any other wine on the table. She said it was "holy" wine. As a child I knew nothing about kosher products and still do not know how we came to respect a Jewish tradition in a Black Catholic household.

On holidays our kitchen and living room became "the front room," where eating, dancing, singing, and general socializing took place. The "back room" (the bedrooms) became the nursery and

dorm for children and elders to lie down, and the bathroom remained itself. The house was magically transformed with pieces of cloth, lamp shades, and bowls of fruit and nuts laid about.

But the real magic was the cooking. It took several days to prepare all the food. Let's say the turkey got thawed on Wednesday afternoon. We didn't just throw it in a pan of water and let it ride. Oh no! We had a ritual: Take the turkey and set it in the sink with the plastic wrapper in place. When the ice begins to melt on the outside of the package, take the plastic off and place the turkey in a pan with slightly warm water (never hot!). As the turkey thaws, this water gets cold and has to be replaced.

Eventually the turkey would yield its inner bag, and the neck, liver, and gizzard were removed. The neck was then thrown in a pot to boil until the meat fell off the bone. This meat was minced and put aside in a bowl. Later it would be stirred into a brown gravy made of turkey stock and flour.

A big pan of cornbread was made, unleavened but with lots of butter. It would be set aside while my sisters and I chopped seasoning for the dressing: yellow and green onions, celery, garlic, and bell peppers. Moma would sprinkle black pepper and seasoning salt with minced garlic on the inside and outside of the turkey. Then we'd put the unbaked turkey in the refrigerator for a few hours to "let the seasoning settle in." We referred to him as "Mr. Turkey" and told him how good he would look and taste.

The unleavened cornbread and chopped seasoning would be mixed together with oysters, shrimp, or sausage, moistened with turkey stock, and sprinkled with sage. Voilà! This was homemade dressing. The turkey would be stuffed in its belly and neck cavity, dripped with a seasoned butter, and covered with a wet tea towel.

The pot was covered and placed in a slow oven so that the turkey cooked overnight. Several times this pot would be opened to the sound of oohs and aahs and the smell of wonder.

This journey into the world of holiday cooking began on Thanksgiving with the turkey and ended on New Year's with Creole cabbage. Holiday cooking usually took about three days. What a ritual it was! There was the business of how fine or how coarse to chop this or that vegetable. We watched yeast dough rise and get punched down again. At some point Aunt Marybelle Reed (Ibae)* or Miz Theresa would come by to debate the virtues of butter versus oleo or try their best to get my mother to accept an iceberg lettuce salad. But Moma would have none of it. A large pot of hot eggnog was made and neighbors dropped by to get a glass (with brandy or rum), report their cooking progress, fuss about something in the news, or recount stories that had changed some small but significant thing about their lives. Take lettuce salad for example:

Way back in nineteen forty-ought something, Miss Irene went into a restaurant in downtown New Orleans. It was one of them semi-chic places down on Canal Street not too far from the ferry. It was one of the few nice places where colored people could eat downtown. Miss Irene went in and ordered crab cakes and lyonnaise potatoes and of course a salad came with it. The waitress took her order cheerfully and returned in a few minutes with a bowl of salad and a Barq's root beer. The salad had several kinds of lettuce in it, along with some green onions, mushrooms, and pieces of bright red tomatoes. Miss Irene had asked for Thousand Island

* Ibae: a salutation of blessing for those who have passed over.