



## Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals

By Luisah Teish

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**A Marvelous Blend  
of Memoir, Folk Wisdom,  
and Afro-American Beliefs.**

Actress, storyteller, and priestess Luisah Teish dramatically re-creates centuries-old African-American traditions with music, memoir, and folk wisdom.

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**Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #48249 in Books
- Brand: Unknown
- Published on: 1988-03-03
- Released on: 1988-03-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .65" w x 5.31" l, .48 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 288 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

""Jambalaya is a gift, open to all people, a gift of an ancient tradition, a gift of stories and celebrations, a gift of Teish's own history and voice, the voice of a strong, knowledgeable, and wise black woman." -- Starhawk, author of "Truth or Dare""A book of startling remembrances, revelations, directives, and imperatives, filled with the mysticism, wisdom, and common sense of the African religion of the Mother. It should be read with the same open-minded love with which it was written." -- Alice Walker, author of "The Color Purple""Teish reveals a wealth of new visions and ancient wisdom from a cultural heritage unknown to most readers. To a style of writing that is friendly and relaxed, Teish adds the spice of her wonderful sense of humor. This is a book that sharpens the intuitive sense in each of us and encourages us to that inner knowledge." -- Merlin Stone, author of "When God Was a Woman"

#### About the Author

Born and raised in New Orleans, Luisah Telsh is a priestess of Oshun in the Yoruba Lucumi tradition. She teaches classes on African goddesses, shamanism, and the Tambala tradition.

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### Chapter One

#### Growing Up Tipsy

*Somehow I knew that there was much more going on than was apparent on the surface. My existence and that of the things going on around me caused me to question everything, always looking for the deeper meanings.*

I was born in the city of the Voudoun--New Orleans, Louisiana. My paternal grandmother's shotgun house stands at 1018 St. Ann Street. The Maison Blanche, the former home of Mam'-zelle Marie La Veau, the voudou priestess for three generations, is recorded as being 1022 St. Ann Street. To this day my grandmother's house carries a sign that reads, "The Marie La Veau Apartments."

New Orleans-like the San Francisco Bay Area, where I now live-is a psychic seaport. The psychic energies of many people living and dead hovers over the city of New Orleans, possibly because of the water. Visitors to the city become "tipsy" after being there only a short time. "Tipsy" is the name given to that state of mind that precedes possession. (It is also used to mean slightly drunk.) I grew up tipsy.

I spent many days and nights in the dark, mysterious house of my grandmother, Maw-Maw Catherine Mason Allen, while my mother and father were at work.

Due to the limited perceptions of a child and the nature of memory, I can only describe it vaguely. I remember a big, too soft, and bulky double bed in the middle room. This is the place where my cousin Frank Jr., took refuge from the whippings he seems always to have earned. He used to hide under this bed to smoke cigarettes; but for me smoke and Frank were not the only things hiding under that bed.

Perhaps I had eaten too many pickles that night and overindulged in the delicious teacakes and sweet potato turnovers my Maw-Maw used to bake in the woodstove. Whatever the external cause, when I laid my head

on the duck-down pillow covered with an immaculate muslin pillowcase, I just couldn't sleep. Everything was so still and quiet that I could not tell whether the numerous and barely distinguishable adult relatives of mine were asleep in the front room or out for a night of church. I could have been there alone without concern because everybody on the block was somehow kin to me and would have come running at the slightest disturbance.

But tonight as Wind slipped slowly through the cracks in the wooden fence that enclosed the backyard, no one seemed to be afoot. At least, no one human. I could hear only the wind and the irregular tapping of Maw-Maw's white dog, who was born with only three legs. I was always afraid of that dog and kept a safe distance between us, not because he was in any ways vicious but because his eyes were always red and I had been told that he knew when somebody was going to die.

I lay there listening to his tapdance against the wind and stared at the ceiling thoughtlessly. After a period of time that I cannot judge, a feeling of apprehension began to creep over me. Somebody or something was moving snakelike and slowly under the bed.

Was it Frank? Had he crawled under it to avoid a whipping and fallen asleep? Had Maw-Maw's creepy dog gotten under the house and situated himself directly beneath the bed? When I asked myself these questions, Wind told me, "No, *Cher*." As my fear mounted, I became aware of a sensation of lifting subtly. My back seemed not to touch the buttons of the mattress. I kept rising and rising until I seemed to be five feet above the bed. I remember thinking that if I kept rising like this I was going to bump into the ceiling and smash my already flat nose. "I wanna go down," I said nervously inside my head, and at that moment my face seemed to sink through the back of my head so that my chest and feet were still facing the ceiling but my face was looking down at the bed. And what a sight it saw!

There under the bed was an undulating, sinewy, mass of matter as brown as the waters of the muddy Mississippi River. It was squeezing out from under the bed on all sides like a toothpaste tube with pin holes in it. The brown was taking forms, humanoid but undistinguishable by gender. They were getting higher, showing heads with eyes, bellies, legs, outstretched arms, and I was getting closer to the bed. My face, now only a few inches from the sheet returned to the other side of my head, and as my body descended I looked at these brown humanoids towering over me. I seemed to shake uncontrollably, my muscles moved about as if I had no bones. I opened my mouth, screamed but the sound was made only inside my head. The brown-folk seemed to take a deep breath as my body settled on the mattress. They touched me and their matter slipped into my muscles and ran through my veins. The floodgates opened and as a warm astringent liquid sank into the mattress, I sank into sleep.

I remember telling my mother about this dream. She laughed, stroked my head and asked me if I recognized any of the people who had come from under the bed. I told her, "No, Ma'am," and the matter was forgotten.

This happened when I was about five years old. Twenty-three years later I got a piece of an explanation of its meaning. A Puerto Rican woman water-gazed for me, and-without knowing my story--told me to make two dolls for my unknown ancestors and keep them under my bed.

Across the street from Maw-Maw's house was a classic French Quarter home complete with veranda and cast-iron lattice work. I used to sit on the steps of my grandmother's house and stare at the balcony. There was a little girl, brown-skinned . . .

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