

Kwanzaa History

Kwanzaa is a seven day holiday created to celebrate black identity, encourage unity, and preserve African culture. Dr. Maulana Karenga, professor and chairman of Black Studies at California State University, Long Beach, founded Kwanzaa in 1966 in the hope that people of African descent would keep and celebrate their shared cultural heritage. Kwanzaa is observed from December 26 to January 1 culminating in a feast and gift giving.



The name Kwanzaa is derived from the phrase “matunda ya kwanza,” which means “first fruits” in Swahili. “First fruits” are African harvest celebrations. Dr. Karenga combined aspects of several different harvest celebrations to form the basis for Kwanzaa. At the first ceremony for the new holiday, seven children volunteered to carry the six letters in the word “Kwanza.” Not wanting to leave one child out, another letter “a” was added the end creating the word “Kwanzaa.”



Kwanzaa festivities focus on seven core principles, expressed in Swahili as Nguzo Saba. These principles, or values, are intended to unite individuals in the African heritage and reinforce family, community and culture. Each of the seven days of Kwanzaa is dedicated to one of the seven principles in the following order:

- *Umoja* (Unity): To strive for and to maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race.
- *Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination): To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves.
- *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility): To build and maintain our community together and make our brothers' and sisters' problems our problems, and to solve them together.
- *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics): To build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together.
- *Nia* (Purpose): To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.
- *Kuumba* (Creativity): To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.
- *Imani* (Faith): To believe with all our hearts in God, our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

As part of the celebration, family members decorate a table with special symbols. Each of these symbols represents the values of the African culture and is used to reinforce one's commitment to community, family and unity. According to Dr. Karenga, the basic symbols in are:



Mazao (Crops): These are symbolic of African harvest celebrations and of the rewards of productive and collective labor.

Mkeka (the Mat): This is symbolic of African tradition and history, the foundation on which we build.

Kinara (Candle Holder): This is symbolic of our roots, our parent people - continental Africans.

Muhindi (Ears of Corn): This is symbolic of our children and our future, which they embody.

Mishumaa Saba (The Seven Candles): These are symbolic of the Nguzo Saba, the Seven Principles, the matrix and minimum set of values which African people are urged to live by in order to rescue and reconstruct their lives in their own image and according to their own needs.

Kikombe cha Umoja (The Unity Cup): This is symbolic of the foundational principle and practice of unity which makes all else possible.

Zawadi (The Gifts): These are symbolic of the labor and love of parents and the commitments made and kept by the children.”

In addition, Dr. Karenga has added two additional symbols; one of which is the Bendera (Flag) which consists of the three colors of Organization Us. The colors are red, black, and green. The second symbol is the Nguzo Saba Poster, which is the Poster of the Seven Principles.

The setting of the table usually begins with an African tablecloth, which is then covered with the Mkeka. Next the Kinara is placed on the mat. Seven candles, the



Mishumaa Saba, are placed in the candle holder. One black candle is placed in the center, three red candles are placed to the left of the black candle, and the three green candles are placed to the right of the black candle. These candles represent the Seven Principles. The one black candle symbolizes the African people, the three red candles their struggle, and the three green candles their hopes for the future. The black candle is lit on the first day of the celebration. On each day of Kwanzaa, one candle is lit starting from left to right to commemorate each principle. After the Kinara, the Mazao and the Muhindi are placed on the mat. Next the Kikombe cha Umoja or The Unity Cup is added to the display.



The Unity Cup is used to pour libations in honor of ancestors. Books on African life, as well as African objects of art are also placed on the table to symbolize a commitment to heritage and learning.



Greetings during Kwanzaa are spoken in Swahili. The greetings are to create awareness and reinforce the seven principles. The greeting is “Habari gani?” which means, “What is the news?” The appropriate response is the principle of the day, i.e., “Umoja” on the first day, “Kujichagulia” on the second day and so on.

The Karamu, feast, is celebrated on the sixth day of Kwanzaa, New Year’s Eve. Family and friends come together to create and share traditional African dishes, tell stories, and enjoy African music. During the feast, libations are shared from a communal cup, Kikombe cha Umoja, passed to all guests.



The last day of Kwanzaa is the day for giving gifts of Kuumba, creativity. Gifts are usually exchanged between parents and children, with an emphasis on handmade and educational gifts.