

Kwanzaa Starts December 26th

Written by Robert ID607

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Kwanzaa starts Sunday December 26th. It is celebrated Dec.26th - Jan.1st.

Kwanzaa is a 7-day celebration of African-American values and traditions and their continued reality. "Kwanzaa" means "first-fruits of the harvest". It is celebrated by many North Americans of West African descent in recognition of their African heritage. The candles of a seven-branched candelabrum, each representing a different attribute such as unity, self-determination, responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith are successively lit over the seven days of the festival.

Kwanzaa, an African-American holiday which celebrates family, community, and culture, is the fastest growing holiday in the U.S. An estimated 18 million Africans celebrate Kwanzaa each year around the world, including celebrants in the U.S., Africa, the Caribbean, South America, especially Brazil, Canada, India, Britain and numerous European countries.

The holiday was created by Dr. Maulana Karenga, a scholar-activist who is currently professor and chair of the Department of Black Studies at California State University at Long Beach. Several cities in the U.S. have issued proclamations in honor of the celebration of Kwanzaa. Among them are Baltimore, Buffalo, Los Angeles, Miami, Newark, New Orleans, New York, and Philadelphia.

Kwanzaa as an African-American holiday belongs to the most ancient tradition in the world, the African tradition. Drawing from and building on this rich and ancient tradition, Kwanzaa makes its own unique contribution to the enrichment and expansion of African tradition by reaffirming the importance of family, community, and culture.

In his book titled, *The African-American Holiday of Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community, and Culture*, Dr. Karenga explains that KWANZAA is based on ancient African harvest celebrations. The word KWANZAA comes from the Swahili phrase "matunda ya kwanza" which means "first fruits." KWANZAA is celebrated seven days, from December 26th through January 1st, a period which represents the end of an old year and the beginning of a new one. This time in African culture is called "the time when the edges of the year meet," which is a time of celebration, focus, and assessment.

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African harvest celebrations have five basic aspects which KWANZAA also shares. They are: 1) in gathering of the people; 2) special reverence for the Creator and creation, especially thanksgiving and commitment; 3) commemoration of the past, especially paying homage to the ancestors; 4) re-commitment to our highest ethical and cultural values, especially Nguzo Saba (The Seven Principles); and 5) celebration of the Good of life, especially family, community, and culture.

Dr. Karenga created Kwanzaa to reaffirm African-Americans' rootedness in African culture, to reinforce the bonds between them as a people, and to introduce and reaffirm the value of the Nguzo Saba, The Seven Principles of Kwanzaa. The central reason Kwanzaa is celebrated for seven days is to pay homage to The Seven Principles of Kwanzaa which in Swahili are: Umoja, Kujichagulia, Ujima, Ujamaa, Nia, Kuumba, and Imani. The principles are also known as The Seven Principles of African American community development and serve as a fundamental value system.

Kwanzaa is represented by seven symbols: Mazao (crops), Mkeka (mat), Kinara (candle holder), Mishumaa Saba (seven candles), Muhindi (ears of corn), Zawadi (gifts), and Kikombe Cha Umoja (unity cup). The candle holder has seven candles, one black, three red and three green. The colors are black for Black people, red for their struggle and green for the hope and future that come from the struggle.

Each ear of corn represents the children in the family and community. The gifts are primarily for the children, but other family members can also receive gifts. The gifts should include a book and a heritage symbol to stress the ancient and continuing stress on the value of education and reaffirm the importance of culture and tradition. The unity cup is used to pour libation for the ancestors and it is drunk from as a ritual to reinforce unity in the family and community. All seven symbols are put on a Mkeka (straw mat). The Kwanzaa setting piece which includes the seven symbols is placed on a table or any other central location in the home.

The lighting of the candles begins on the first day of Kwanzaa, December 26th. The black candle is the first candle lighted. The second day of Kwanzaa, the black candle is relighted as well as the first candle to the left, a red candle, December 27th. Each day every candle which has been lighted is relighted along with the next candle of that day. Candles are lighted left to right alternately. The lighting practice is ordered to represent first the people (the black candle), then the struggle (the red candle), then the future and hope (the green candle) which comes from the struggle.

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December 31st is the evening upon which the Kwanzaa Karamu (Feast) is held. This special evening is a time for feasting upon a variety of African-influenced meals as well as acknowledging the importance of history, culture, and family. (Check out the Kwanzaa Recipes in our main collection!)

When preparing for this special evening, special items, or symbols, are necessary. There are seven symbols. These items should be displayed as part of the Kwanzaa Karamu:

- 1) Mazao (fruit and vegetables)

- 2) Mkeka (place mat)

- 3) Kinara (candle holder for seven candles)

- 4) Vibunzi (ears of corn reflective of the number of children in the home)

- 5) Zawadi (gifts - usually for the children)

- 6) Kikombe Cha Umoja (community cup)

- 7) Mishumaa Saba (the seven candles)

*Dr. Maulana Karenga is professor and chair of the Department of Black Studies at California State University, Long Beach. He also is the director of the Kawaida Institute of Pan-African Studies, Los Angeles, and national chairman of the organization Us, a cultural and social change organization. Moreover, Dr. Karenga is chair of the President's Task Force on Multicultural Education and Campus Diversity at California State University, Long Beach.

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Meaning of the 7 Symbols

Mazao: Fruits, Nuts, and Vegetables

Mazao, the crops (fruits, nuts, and vegetables), symbolizes work and the basis of the holiday. It represents the historical foundation for Kwanzaa, the gathering of the people that is patterned after African harvest festivals in which joy, sharing, unity, and thanksgiving are the fruits of collective planning and work. Since the family is the basic social and economic center of every civilization, the celebration bonded family members, reaffirming their commitment and responsibility to each other. In Africa the family may have included several generations of two or more nuclear families, as well as distant relatives. Ancient Africans didn't care how large the family was, but there was only one leader - the oldest male of the strongest group. For this reason, an entire village may have been composed of one family. The family was a limb of a tribe that shared common customs, cultural traditions, and political unity and were supposedly descended from common ancestors. The tribe lived by traditions that provided continuity and identity. Tribal laws often determined the value system, laws, and customs encompassing birth, adolescence, marriage, parenthood, maturity, and death. Through personal sacrifice and hard work, the farmers sowed seeds that brought forth new plant life to feed the people and other animals of the earth. To demonstrate their mazao, celebrants of Kwanzaa place nuts, fruit, and vegetables, representing work, on the mkeka.

Mkeka: Place Mat

The mkeka, made from straw or cloth, comes directly from Africa and expresses history, culture, and tradition. It symbolizes the historical and traditional foundation for us to stand on and build our lives because today stands on our yesterdays, just as the other symbols stand on the mkeka. In 1965, James Baldwin wrote: "For history is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the facts that we carry it within us, are consciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations." During Kwanzaa, we study, recall, and reflect on our history and the role we are to play as a legacy to the future. Ancient societies made mats from straw, the dried seams of grains, sowed and reaped collectively. The weavers took the stalks and created household baskets and mats. Today, we buy mkeka that are made from Kente cloth, African mud cloth, and other textiles from various areas of the African continent. The mishumaa saba, the vibunzi, the mazao, the zawadi,

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the kikombe cha umoja, and the kinara are placed directly on the mkeka.

Vibunzi: Ear of Corn

The stalk of corn represents fertility and symbolizes that through the reproduction of children, the future hopes of the family are brought to life. One ear is called vibunzi, and two or more ears are called mihindi. Each ear symbolizes a child in the family, and thus one ear is placed on the mkeka for each child in the family. If there are no children in the home, two ears are still set on the mkeka because each person is responsible for the children of the community. During Kwanzaa, we take the love and nurturance that was heaped on us as children and selflessly return it to all children, especially the helpless, homeless, loveless ones in our community. Thus, the Nigerian proverb "It takes a whole village to raise a child" is realized in this symbol (vibunzi), since raising a child in Africa was a community affair, involving the tribal village, as well as the family. Good habits of respect for self and others, discipline, positive thinking, expectations, compassion, empathy, charity, and self-direction are learned in childhood from parents, from peers, and from experiences. Children are essential to Kwanzaa, for they are the future, the seed bearers that will carry cultural values and practices into the next generation. For this reason, children were cared for communally and individually within a tribal village. The biological family was ultimately responsible for raising its own children, but every person in the village was responsible for the safety and welfare of all the children.

Mishumaa Saba: The Seven Candles

Candles are ceremonial objects with two primary purposes: to re-create symbolically the sun's power and to provide light. The celebration of fire through candle burning is not limited to one particular group or country; it occurs everywhere. Mishumaa saba are the seven candles: three red, three green, and one black. The back candle symbolizes Umoja (unity), the basis of success, and is lit on December 26. The three green candles, representing Nia, Ujima, and Imani, are placed to the right of the Umoja candle, while the three red candles, representing Kujichagulia, Ujamaa, and Kuumba, are placed to the left of it. During Kwanzaa, one candle, representing one principle, is lit each day. Then the other candles are relit to give off more light and vision. The number of candles burning also indicate the principle that is being celebrated. The illuminating fire of the candles is a basic element of the universe, and every celebration and festival includes fire in some form. Fire's mystique, like the sun, is irresistible and can destroy or create with its mesmerizing, frightening, mystifying power.

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Mishumaa saba's symbolic colors are from the red, black, and green flag (bendara) created by Marcus Garvey. The colors also represent African gods. Red is the color of Shango, the Yoruba god of fire, thunder, and lightning, who lives in the clouds and sends down his thunderbolt whenever he is angry or offended. It also represents the struggle for self-determination and freedom by people of color. Black is the people, the earth, the source of life, representing hope, creativity, and faith and denoting messages and the opening and closing of doors. Green represents the earth that sustains our lives and provides hope, divination, employment, and the fruits of the harvest

Kinara: The Candleholder

The kinara is the center of the Kwanzaa setting and represents the original stalk from which we came: our ancestry. The kinara can be shape - straight lines, semicircles, or spirals - as long as the seven candles are separate and distinct, like a candelabra. Kinaras are made from all kinds of materials, and many celebrants create their own from fallen branches, wood, or other natural materials. The kinara symbolizes the ancestors, who were once earth bound; understand the problems of human life; and are willing to protect their progeny from danger, evil, and mistakes. In African festivals the ancestors are remembered and honored. The mishumaa saba are placed in the kinara.

Kikombe Cha Umoja: The Unity Cup

The kikombe cha umoja is a special cup that is used to perform the libation (tambiko) ritual during the Karamu feast on the sixth day of Kwanzaa. In many African societies libation are poured for the living dead whose souls stay with the earth they tilled. The Ibo of Nigeria believe that to drink the last portion of a libation is to invite the wrath of the spirits and the ancestors; consequently, the last part of the libation belongs to the ancestors. During the Karamu feast, the kikombe cha umoja is passed to family member and guests, who drink from it to promote unity. Then, the eldest person present pours the libation (tambiko), usually water, juice, or wine, in the direction of the four winds - north, south, east, and west - to honor the ancestors. The eldest asks the gods and ancestors to share in the festivities and, in return, to bless all the people who are not at the gathering. After asking for this blessing, the elder pours the libation on the ground and the group says "Amen." Large Kwanzaa gatherings may operate just as communion services in most churches, for which it is common for celebrants to have individual cups and to drink the libation together as a sign of unity. Several families may have a cup that is specifically for the ancestors, and everyone else has his or her own. The last few ounces of the libation are poured into the cup of the host or hostess, who sips it and then hands it to the oldest person in the group, who asks for the blessing.

Kwanzaa Starts December 26th

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Zawadi: Gifts

When we celebrate Imani on the seventh day of Kwanzaa, we give meaningful zawadi (gifts) to encourage growth, self-determination, achievement, and success. We exchange the gifts with members of our immediate family, especially the children, to promote or reward accomplishments and commitments kept, as well as with our guests. Handmade gifts are encouraged to promote self-determination, purpose, and creativity and to avoid the chaos of shopping and conspicuous consumption during the December holiday season. A family may spend the year making kinaras or may create cards, dolls, or mkekas to give to their guests. Accepting a gift implies a moral obligation to fulfill the promise of the gift; it obliges the recipient to follow the training of the host. The gift cements social relationships, allowing the receiver to share the duties and the rights of a family member. Accepting a gift makes the receiver part of the family and promotes Umoja.

You can find out more about Kwanzaa at that the Official Kwanzaa web site [HERE](#) .