



HAPPY
KWAN
ZAA



Kwanzaa

For the river in Angola, see [Cuanza River](#). For the currency, see [Angolan kwanza](#).

Kwanzaa (/ˈkwɑːnzə/) is a week-long celebration held in the United States and in other nations of the Western African diaspora in the Americas. The celebration honors African heritage in African-American culture, and is observed from December 26 to January 1, culminating in a feast and gift-giving.^[1] Kwanzaa has seven core principles (*Nguzo Saba*). It was created by Maulana Karenga, and was first celebrated in 1966–67.

1 History and etymology

Maulana Karenga created Kwanzaa in 1965 as the first specifically African-American holiday.^[2] According to Karenga, the name Kwanzaa derives from the Swahili phrase *matunda ya kwanza*, meaning “first fruits of the harvest”.<ref name="Holly Hartman"Kwanzaa Honoring the values of ancient African cultures"> http://www.infoplease.com/spot/kwanzaa1.html Missing or empty |title= (help)</ref> The choice of Swahili, an East African language, reflects its status as a symbol of Pan-Africanism, especially in the 1960s, although most East African nations were not involved in the Atlantic slave trade that brought African people to America.^[3]

Kwanzaa is a celebration that has its roots in the black nationalist movement of the 1960s, and was established as a means to help African Americans reconnect with their African cultural and historical heritage by uniting in meditation and study of African traditions and *Nguzo Saba*, the “seven principles of African Heritage” which Karenga said “is a communitarian African philosophy”.

During the early years of Kwanzaa, Karenga said that it was meant to be an “oppositional alternative” to Christmas.^[4] However, as Kwanzaa gained mainstream adherents, Karenga altered his position so that practicing Christians would not be alienated, then stating in the 1997 *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community, and Culture*, “Kwanzaa was not created to give people an alternative to their own religion or religious holiday.”

Many African Americans who celebrate Kwanzaa do so in addition to observing Christmas.^[5]

2 Principles and symbols

Kwanzaa celebrates what its founder called the seven principles of Kwanzaa, or *Nguzo Saba* (originally *Nguzu Saba*—the seven principles of African Heritage), which Karenga said “is a communitarian African philosophy,” consisting of what Karenga called “the best of African thought and practice in constant exchange with the world.” These seven principles comprise **Kawaida*, a Swahili term for tradition and reason. Each of the seven days of Kwanzaa is dedicated to one of the following principles, as follows:

- *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 our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

Kwanzaa symbols include a decorative mat (Mkeka) on which other symbols are placed: corn (Mahindi) and other crops, a candle holder *kinara* with seven candles (Mishumaa Saba), a communal cup for pouring libation (Kikombe cha Umoja), gifts (Zawadi), a poster of the seven principles, and a black, red, and green flag. The symbols were designed to convey the seven principles.^[6]



A woman lighting kinara candles

3 Observance

Families celebrating Kwanzaa decorate their households with objects of art, colorful African cloth such as kente, especially the wearing of kaftans by women, and fresh fruits that represent African idealism. It is customary to include children in Kwanzaa ceremonies and to give respect and gratitude to ancestors. Libations are shared, generally with a common chalice, *Kikombe cha Umoja*, passed around to all celebrants. Non-African Americans also celebrate Kwanzaa.^[7] The holiday greeting is “Joyous Kwanzaa”.^{[8][9][10]}

A Kwanzaa ceremony may include drumming and musical selections, libations, a reading of the African Pledge and the Principles of Blackness, reflection on the Pan-African colors, a discussion of the African principle of the day or a chapter in African history, a candle-lighting ritual, artistic performance, and, finally, a feast (*karamu*). The greeting for each day of Kwanzaa is *Habari Gani?*^[11] which is Swahili for “How are you?”^[12]

At first, observers of Kwanzaa avoided the mixing of the holiday or its symbols, values, and practice with other holidays, as doing so would violate the principle of *ku-jichagulia* (self-determination) and thus violate the integrity of the holiday, which is partially intended as a reclamation of important African values. Today, many African American families celebrate Kwanzaa along with Christmas and New Year’s. Frequently, both Christmas trees and kinas, the traditional candle holder symbolic of African American roots, share space in Kwanzaa-celebrating households. For people who celebrate both holidays, Kwanzaa is an opportunity to incorporate elements of their particular ethnic heritage into holiday observances and celebrations of Christmas.

Cultural exhibitions include the Spirit of Kwanzaa, an annual celebration held at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts featuring interpretive dance, African dance, song and poetry.^{[13][14][15]}

The holiday has also spread to Canada, and is celebrated

by Black Canadians in a similar fashion as in the United States.^[16]

4 Popularity

In 2004, BIG Research conducted a marketing survey in the United States for the National Retail Foundation, which found that 1.6% of those surveyed planned to celebrate Kwanzaa. If generalized to the US population as a whole, this would imply that around 4.7 million people planned to celebrate Kwanzaa in that year.^[17] In a 2006 speech, Ron Karenga asserted that 28 million people celebrate Kwanzaa. He has always claimed it is celebrated all over the world.^[1] Lee D. Baker puts the number at 12 million.^[18] The African American Cultural Center claimed 30 million in 2009.^[19] In 2011, Keith Mayes said that 2 million people participated in Kwanzaa.^[19]

According to University of Minnesota Professor Keith Mayes, the author of *Kwanzaa: Black Power and the Making of the African-American Holiday Tradition*, the popularity within the US has “leveled off” as the black power movement there has declined, and now between half and two million people celebrate Kwanzaa in the US, or between one and five percent of African Americans. Mayes adds that white institutions now celebrate it.^[7]

The holiday has also spread to Canada, and is celebrated by Black Canadians in a similar fashion as in the United States.^[16] According to the Language Portal of Canada, “this fairly new tradition has [also] gained in popularity in France, Great Britain, Jamaica and Brazil”, although this information has not been confirmed with authoritative sources from these countries.^[20]

In Brazil, in recent years the term Kwanzaa has been applied by a few institutions as a synonym for the festivities of the Black Awareness Day, commemorated on November 20 in honor of Zumbi dos Palmares,^{[21][22]} having little to do with the celebration as it was originally conceived.

In 2009, Maya Angelou narrated the documentary *The Black Candle*, a film about Kwanzaa.

5 See also

- Pan-Africanism
- *The Black Candle* – a film about Kwanzaa
- Dashiki – A shirt or suit worn during Kwanzaa celebrations
- Kaftan (boubou) – A dress worn by women during Kwanzaa celebrations

6 References

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- [22] Celebration of *Kwanzaa* on the 28th anniversary of Olodum School in Salvador, Bahia.

7 External links

- Official website
- *The Black Candle*: a Kwanzaa film narrated by Maya Angelou
- Why Kwanzaa was created by Karenga
- The History Channel: Kwanzaa
- Interview: Karenga discusses the evolution of the holiday and its meaning. Tavis Smiley (NPR)

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