



Christmas History, Tradition & Symbols

The History of Kwanzaa

Occurring each December, Kwanzaa is a non-religious, African-American holiday celebrating African culture, heritage and unity. Based on African harvest festivals, Kwanzaa was created in 1966 by Doctor Maulana Karenga, a Professor at California State University in Long Beach, California. The name is derived from the Swahili phrase *matunda ya kwanzaa*, meaning "fruits of the harvest". Observed by millions of African-Americans around the world, the Kwanzaa holiday is week long celebration, lasting from December 26 to January 1, and involves seven guiding principles called *Nguzo Saba*. The seven principles are:

Umoja: Unity

Kujichagulia: Self-determination

Ujima: Collective Work and Responsibility

Ujamaa: Cooperative Economics

Nia: Purpose

Kuumba: Creativity

Imani: Faith

In the Kwanzaa ritual, seven candles are placed in a branched candle holder called a *Kinara*, which symbolizes the roots African Americans have with the continent of Africa. The Kinara is set upon a *Mkeka*, or mat, which is usually made of straw. Three green candles are placed on the left, three red candles on the right and a black candle in the center. The candles, or *Mishumaa Saba*, are representative of the seven principles of the celebration. One candle is lit each day of the Kwanzaa celebration, beginning from left to right.

The colors of Kwanzaa – black, red and green – also have a special significance. Black symbolizes the faces of the African people, Red symbolizes the blood they have shed, and Green represents hope and the color of the motherland. On December 31, the Kwanzaa feast, known as the *Karamu*, is held. Meaning "place of joyful gathering" in Swahili, the Karamu feast is the highlight of the Kwanzaa festival and decorations for Karamu incorporate the colors of Kwanzaa and an African theme.

Kwanzaa gifts are given mainly to children. Though they may be given any time during the festival, they are usually presented on January 1, the last day of the celebration. According to

Dr. Karenga, gifts should include a book, representing the value of learning, and a heritage symbol, a reminder of African history and tradition.

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