

## **The Story of Kwanzaa**

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This is the story of Kwanzaa, a celebration of African American culture. Traditionally, the seven days after Christmas through New Year's Day, African American's celebrate our culture annually with Kwanzaa from December 26 through January 1. Created by Dr. Maulana Karenga, an activist, author, and professor of African American studies, the weeklong event was first celebrated in the 1966.

Dr. Karenga created the Kwanzaa celebration in 1966 after the Watts rebellion that occurred in Watts and the surround Los Angeles communities August 11, 1965. He tailored the even specifically as an African American holiday with the goal of giving African Americans an opportunity to celebrate themselves and their history.

For Dr. Karenga, a major figure in the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s, the creation of such holidays also underscores the essential premise that a cultural revolution must happen before the violent revolution. The cultural revolution gives identity, purpose, and direction.

According to Karenga, Kwanzaa comes from the Swahili phrase, "matunda ya kwanza" meaning "first fruits of the harvest" or simply "first fruits." He intentionally spelled the holiday's name with an additional "a" so that it would have a symbolic seven letters. After its initial creation in California, Kwanzaa spread across and outside the United States.

The seven principles stand at the heart and origin of Kwanzaa. The seven days of Kwanzaa celebrates Nguzo Saba, the seven principles of African heritage. Originally developed in 1965, the seven principles of Kwanzaa or Nguzo Saba comprise Kawaida, a Swahili word meaning "common." Each day of Kwanzaa features one of these seven principles.

Day 1: Unity or *Umoja* – to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race.

Day 2: Self-determination or *Kujichagulia* – to define and name ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves.

Day 3: Collective Work and Responsibility or *Ujima* – to build and maintain our community together and make our brother's and sister's problems our problems and to solve them together.

Day 4: Cooperative Economics or *Ujamaa* – to build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together.

Day 5: Purpose or *Nia* – to make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

Day 6: Creativity or *Kuumba* – 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.

Day 7: Faith or *Imani* – to believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

The seven symbols of Kwanzaa include:

*Mkeka* or mat – that symbolizes the foundation of the African diaspora, tradition, and heritage.

*Kinara* or candleholder – symbolizes African roots.

*Mishumaa Saba* or seven candles – emblematic of Nguzo Saba the seven principles of Kwanzaa. These candles embody the values of the African diaspora.

*Kikombe Cha Umoja* or unity cup – symbolizes the foundation, principle, and practice of unity.

*Mazao* or crops – symbolize African harvesting celebrations as well as the rewards of productivity and collective labor.

*Vibunzi* or ear of corn – represents children and future which belongs to them.

*Zawadi* or gifts – represents parental labor and love as well as the commitment parents make to their children.

*Bendara* or flag – the colors of the Kwanzaa flag are black, red, and green. These colors were originally established as colors of freedom and unity by Marcus Garvey. Black is for people, red for the struggle endured, and green for the future and hope of their struggles.

Kwanzaa observances usually include daily candle lighting ceremony, drumming and musical selections, libations, readings of the African pledge and the principles of blackness, a reflection on the Pan-African colors, a discussion of the African principle of the day or a chapter in African history, artistic performance, and often on December 31, New Year's Eve, a feast of faith or *Karamu*.

The greeting for each day of Kwanzaa is *habari gani* which is Swahili for “how are you?” Families celebrating Kwanzaa decorate their house with objects of art, colorful African clothes such as *kente*, especially the wearing of kaftans by women, and fresh fruits that represent African idealism.

*This transcript of “The Story of Kwanzaa” is part of the Humanities Kansas Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit [humanitieskansas.org](http://humanitieskansas.org) or call 1-888-416-2018.*