



AMERICAN COMMEMORATIVES



KWANZAA

From December 26 to January 1 each year, many African-Americans celebrate a holiday with its roots in ancient African harvest celebrations. In 1966, during the Civil Rights Movement, scholar and activist Maulana Karenga revived the tradition of these harvest celebrations, calling the holiday Kwanzaa. (In Swahili, “matunda ya kwanza” means “first fruits”).



During the days of Kwanzaa, Karenga wanted African-Americans to honor their collective history and commit to improving themselves and their communities. Karenga developed seven principles for African-Americans to consider during Kwanzaa: unity, collective work and responsibility, faith, creativity, cooperative economics, self-determination and purpose. These principles are called the “nguzo saba,” Swahili for “seven principles.”

The ancient harvest celebrations had five central activities, and so does Kwanzaa. First, community members, family and friends come together. Second, they honor their creator and all of creation. Third, they reflect on and honor their ancestors and consider the lessons of history. Fourth, they pledge to abide by high ethical and cultural values by respecting older people, caring for vulnerable people, and so on. Fifth, they celebrate the “good of life”—everything from struggle to achievement.

As they are to so many holidays, candles and light are central to Kwanzaa. Seven candles are lit, one for each of the principles. The holiday involves various other rituals, from singing and dancing to storytelling and feasting.

The last day of Kwanzaa is a day of assessment. People consider whether they are fulfilling their role in the community and other important issues.

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Kwanzaa

Many winter holidays involve the lighting of candles and the gathering of family and friends. Kwanzaa is no exception. During the seven days of Kwanzaa, from December 26 through January 1, candles are lit in honor of the holiday's seven principles: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. The gathering of family and friends is one of the five central activities of Kwanzaa. The other four activities are honoring the creator and the world, remembering the past, celebrating the "good of life" (from culture to struggle), and committing to high ideals (from justice to respect for elders).

African-Americans have been celebrating Kwanzaa since 1966, when activist and scholar Maulana Karenga created the holiday. Its roots are in ancient African harvest celebrations. The holiday is named after the Swahili word for "first fruits."

Karenga believed that African-Americans could improve their situation in society by delving into their cultural heritage. During Kwanzaa, celebrants recite poetry, dance, sing, and drum. They tell stories and eat good food as they consider where they have come from and where they are going.

Even when it is freezing outside, winter holidays like Kwanzaa warm the spirit.



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