

THE **SMOOTH** GUIDE TO

KWANZAA

When it comes to holidays, Kwanzaa gets no love. Everyone has heard of it, but where did it come from and what does it mean? Find out with our primer on America's most mysterious holiday.

By Justin Remus



ORIGINS

Spawned by the Black Power movement of the 1960s, Kwanzaa was originally conceived by the scholar/activist Maulana Karenga in 1966 as a non-Eurocentric, secular alternative to Christmas. It was the first holiday created exclusively for African Americans, who would celebrate it with rituals, reflect on their past, reconnect to their African cultural identity, abandon negative self-images and, ultimately, distance themselves from the “dominant society.” Karenga was highly influenced by Malcolm X, who advocated that African Americans return to Africa spiritually and culturally even if they could not do so in person. Inspired by Black liberation ideology and Pan-Africanism (the uniting of all people of African descent worldwide), Kwanzaa was Karenga’s vehicle for Black Americans to pay tribute to their roots and forsake the commercialism attached to Christmas, with its cultural and economic exploitation of Black consumers. Celebrated from December 26th through January 1st, Kwanzaa was never intended to be a religious holiday. Karenga, no fan of religion, is on record stating that Christianity was a White religion that had no place for Blacks. As Kwanzaa has been absorbed into the mainstream and observed by Christians, Karenga eventually softened his stance, stating that Kwanzaa can be celebrated simultaneously with Christmas or even by those of non-African descent. Today, many African Americans celebrate both Kwanzaa and Christmas.



THE FOUNDER

Kwanzaa creator Maulana Karenga is a story unto himself. The 14th child of a small farmer in Maryland, he became a professor and chair of Black Studies at California State University, Long Beach. In the 1960s, he co-founded The Organization Us (“Us Black People”), a Black nationalist group targeted by the FBI as a “subversive” social movement. Us, which had a paramilitary youth contingent called the Simba Wachanga, initially cooperated with their rival Black Panthers, but tensions between the two groups eventually led to a shootout. Karenga remains a controversial figure because of his involvement with the Simba. He was also convicted in 1971 of assault and false imprisonment, based partially on the testimony of a woman saying that she and another woman were stripped and beaten with an electrical cord by Karenga and one of his cohorts. Karenga justified his extreme behavior, saying one of the women attempted to assassinate him, although he produced no tangible evidence to support his claims. Some scholars have argued that his imprisonment was politically motivated. Upon his release, he revamped the dormant Us, and the group is still active to this day. In 1995, he helped organize and pen the mission statement for the Million Man March. Karenga has outlasted his enemies, and he has lived to see Kwanzaa become an institution.



ETYMOLOGY

How did Kwanzaa get its name? The word derives from the Swahili phrase “*matunda y kwanza*,” roughly translated as “first fruits of the harvest.” Kwanzaa’s weekly timeline draws upon the annual harvest celebrations that once took place across Africa. The harvest represents the rewards of productive and collective labor.



PHILOSOPHY

Kawaida, a Swahili term for tradition and reason, is the underpinning of the *Nguzo Saba*, the seven principles of Kwanzaa, formally known as the seven principles of Blackness. Each day of Kwanzaa is dedicated to one principle. Malenga’s official Kwanzaa website lists them as such:

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, to make our brothers’ and sisters’ problems our own, 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 building and developing 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 heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

SYMBOLS

There are seven basic symbols designed to illustrate the seven principles: a decorative mat (*Mikeka*), usually straw, that hosts other symbols on top, a *Kinara* (a candle holder with seven candles, not unlike a menorah in its basic shape), the seven candles themselves (*Mishumaa Saba*), a communal cup (*Kikombe cha Umoja*), gifts (*Zawadi*), corn (*Muhindi*), and other crops (*Mazao*). There are also two supplemental symbols: a poster of the seven principles and a black, red, and green (the pan-African colors) flag (*Bendera*).



CELEBRATION

Kwanzaa is colorful and full of artifice. Families decorate their homes with art, fresh fruit, and the African cloth known as *kente*. Women wear *kaf-tans*. Children especially are encouraged to participate, especially the lighting of the candles of the *Kinara*—one black one in the middle (*Umoja*), three green and three red on the sides. Each day a candle is lit, alternating from the left to right. After the lighting of the candles, libations (*Tambikos*) are shared with a “unity” cup. If the ceremony is done properly, small amounts of the libation are poured in four corners of the room to represent the four cardinal points of the globe. Although children may drink the libation, adults perform the ritual, with everyone offering respect and gratitude to their African ancestors. Families can exchange gifts every day, often connecting the presents to each principle, or they may save gift-giving for the final day. Anything can be given, but handmade gifts are generally valued more than storebought items. Some examples include sculpture, drums, folk instruments, baskets, games, pillows, and wooden or clay beads. A *Karamu*, an African feast, is shared at the end of Kwanzaa. The greeting for each day is “*Habari Gani*,” which is Swahili for “What’s the news?”



CULTURAL IMPACT

No one knows for sure how many African Americans celebrate Kwanzaa. One poll conducted in 2004 estimated that it hovered around 5 million people, but Karenga has quoted a much higher figure. Large celebrations are routinely held in museums and performing arts venues. The performances feature African dance, song, and poetry. Various Kwanzaa postage stamps have been issued by the U.S. Postal Service. But perhaps the ultimate compliment is that it is now standard protocol for U.S. presidents to wish “Joyous Kwanzaa” every holiday season. Who would’ve predicted that back in 1966?