

The Principles and Meaning of Kwanzaa

The holiday is a call to celebrate the richness of what it means to have African roots.



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Kwanzaa, which is observed from December 26 through January 1, is a seven-day celebration of African roots, observed by people of all faith backgrounds, since it's not tied to any religion. Instead, the African American and Pan African holiday is anchored by seven principles known as the Nguzo Saba which aims to inspire Black people to be united, self-determined, accountable for their communities, financially invested in Black-owned businesses, purposeful with their lives, creative and full of faith.

“Kwanzaa offers a new dialogue on Black culture, about our positive contributions to the world, and not just the negative stigma of race,” says Dr. Adam Clark, an associate professor of theology at Xavier University.

Read on to learn more about the principles of Kwanzaa, the meaning of the holiday, the symbolic colors of the candles used, and how you can engage in the traditions.

Kwanzaa means “first fruits.”

The word Kwanzaa comes from the Swahili phrase “matunda ya kwanza” or first fruits, referring to the agricultural harvest festivals that are found throughout Africa, according to Kelly Navies, specialist of oral histories for the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

The holiday originated to reaffirm and restore African heritage and culture.

Born out of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, and founded in 1966 in the United States by activist and educator Dr. Maulana Karenga, Kwanzaa was formed as a way to empower people to rediscover their African heritage and concretize the expression of the Nguzo Saba. This is a value system organized by seven key principles.

“The beauty of Kwanzaa is it doesn’t start Black history from slavery,” explains Clark, who is also the founder and co-editor of Columbia University’s Black Theology Papers Project. “It actually starts us as inventors of civilizations, people who first broke from the animal world, spoke the first human truths, wrote the first basic texts of human

knowledge, and so on,” he says. “That’s what Kwanzaa does, it gives us a long memory—a long cultural biography.”

Kwanzaa is steeped in tradition.

The concepts and symbols of Kwanzaa derive from traditions and practices found throughout Africa and the African diaspora, says Navies. She adds that the language used is Kiswahili, the common tongue of the Great Lakes region of East Africa, and one of the most widely-spoken languages in Africa.

The primary symbols of Kwanzaa are the seven candles (*Mishumaa Saba*), which represent the seven principles (more on that below), the candle holder (*Kinara*), unity cup (*Kikombe cha Umoja*), placemat (*Mkeka*), crops (*Mazao*), corn (*Muhindi*), and gifts (*Zawadi*). All items are displayed on the *Mkeka*. This serves as a reminder of how African heritage is built upon tradition.

The Kwanzaa candle colors are black, red, and green.

A key custom during Kwanzaa is the daily lighting of the *Kinara*.

On day one, the black candle—also known as the unity candle—is lit. On the second day, the red candle on the immediate right of the unity candle is burned. On day three, the green candle on the immediate left side of the unity candle is lit, and then the candles continue to alternate until you reach day seven.

Clark points out that black, red, and green are the colors of African American people, originally given by Marcus Garvey, civil rights activist and leader of the Pan-Africanism movement, which aimed to unite people of African descent globally. When observing Kwanzaa, the black candle symbolizes the people themselves, the three red candles are for the struggle or bloodshed in the past, and the three green candles represent the Earth or the abundance of possibilities the future holds.

Each day of Kwanzaa highlights a specific principle.

The first day of Kwanzaa honors **Umoja** or unity. That's when the goal of unity in the family, community, nation, and race is declared, says Navies, summarizing the description of Kwanzaa principles from Karenga's book *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*.

Kujichagulia or self-determination marks day two. The essence of this principle is the ability to “define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves,” she explains. Despite limited media portrayal of the Black experience, this principle summons a people to write their own narrative.

Next comes **Ujima**, which reveres collective work and responsibility for the development and preservation of Black communities. It's also a lens to process the problems of others as your own and challenges the practitioner to seek to collectively solve problems affecting the Black community.

Long before Beyonce created her directory of Black-owned businesses, **Ujamaa** or cooperative economics, urged Black communities to invest in themselves financially on the fourth day of Kwanzaa by operating or supporting Black establishments and creating ways to earn profits together.

Nia means purpose and is the focus of day five. The idea is to embolden the participant to “make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness,” describes Navies.

The sixth day's theme is **Kuumba**, which represents creativity. It also serves as a reminder to use the talents within to beautify and inspire the world at large, while understanding the importance of preserving the Earth for generations to come.

Finally, Kwanzaa is closed out with **Imani**: Faith. No dogma or doctrine here, just a moment to “believe with all our hearts in our people and the righteousness and victory of our struggle,” says Navies.

In *The Black Candle*, a 2008 documentary on Kwanzaa, narrated by the late Dr. Maya Angelou, she explains, “While the first principle

of *Umoja* brings us closer and harnesses our strength, the last principle, *Imani*, inspires us and sustains our togetherness. Let us have faith in ourselves, in our creator, in our mothers and fathers, in our grandmothers and grandfathers, in our elders, and in our future—knowing that we are more than keepers of our brothers and sisters, we *are* our brothers and sisters.”