



Kwanzaa

History and Overview



Kwanzaa will be 55 years old this year. Maulana Karenga, a black nationalist who later became a college professor, created Kwanzaa as a way of uniting and empowering the African-African community in the aftermath of the deadly Watts riots. Having modeled his holiday on traditional African harvest festivals, he took the name “Kwanzaa” from the Swahili phrase, “matunda ya kwanza,” which means “first fruits.” The extra “a” was added by Karenga to accommodate seven children at the first-ever Kwanzaa celebration in 1966, each of whom wanted to represent a letter.

There are **seven symbols** involved during Kwanzaa; mazao (crops), mkeka (mat), kinara (candleholder), muhindi (corn), kikombe cha umoja (unity cup), zawadi (gifts), and mishumaa saba (seven candles). The seven candles are placed on the kinara that symbolizes ancestry and the stalk of origin. There are three red candles that represent struggle, three green candles that represent the land and hope for the future, and one black candle that represents the people of African descent. All colors reflect common colors found on African flags and pay tribute to African gods.

The black candle is placed at the center of the kinara to honor the principle of **unity**. The three red candles placed on the left honor the principles of **self-determination, cooperative economics, and creativity**. The three green candles placed on the right honor the principles of **purpose, collective work and responsibility, and faith**.

Families may choose to dress up or decorate their homes in the colors red, green, and black. Gift giving is encouraged. In order to avoid over-commercialization, gifts handed out to family members on the last day of Kwanzaa are often homemade. Alternatively, some participants may opt to purchase educational or culturally-themed items from black-owned businesses.

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