

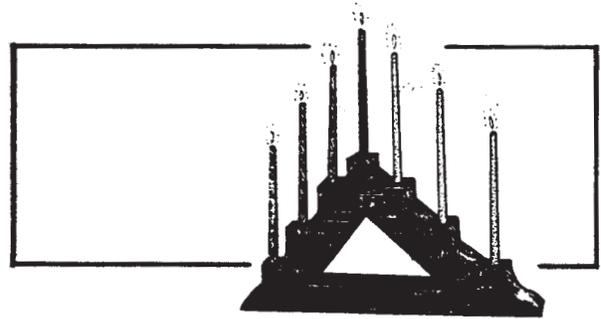
# Kwanzaa, the African-American Celebration of Ancestry

December 26 through January 1

Kwanzaa is an example of a cultural holiday. It is not religious, political, or heroic. It is uniquely American in its recognition of the cultural foundation common to Americans of African descent, and an estimated 18 million people observe the holiday each year. It was originated by Dr. Maulana Karenga, now chairman of the black studies department at California State University, Long Beach. The name itself, Kwanzaa, is taken from the Ki-Swahili language and means “the first fruits of the harvest.” Although it was not purposely designed as a substitute for Christmas and New Year’s Eve and Day, it can be celebrated in that way or it can be celebrated as an enriching addition to other more conventional holidays.

Kwanzaa is based on seven fundamental principles (Nguzo Saba) that can be used all year as guides for daily living.

1. Unity (*Umoja*)
2. Self-determination (*Kujichagulia*)
3. Collective Work And Responsibility (*Ujima*)
4. Cooperative Economics (*Ujamaa*)
5. Purpose (*Nia*)
6. Creativity (*Kuumba*)
7. Faith (*Imani*)



Kwanzaa is celebrated with symbolic objects that reflect both traditional and modern concepts important to the African-American people. There are seven basic symbols and two additional optional ones.

1. Fruits and vegetables (*Mazao*)
2. A place mat (*Mkeka*)
3. The candle holder for seven candles (*Kinara*)
4. Ears of com symbolizing the children in the home (*Vibunzi*)
5. Gifts (*Zawadi*)
6. Communal unity cup (*Kikombe Cha Umoja*)
7. Seven candles-one black, three red, three green-representing the seven principles (*Mishumaa Saba*)
8. The seven principles printed large for all to see (Nguzo Saba)
9. The black, red, and green flag of the modern Black nationalist movement (*Bendera ya Taifa*)

There are many ways to celebrate Kwanzaa, and although it is not a religious holiday, it may be helpful to ask someone who is familiar with its celebration to help. At the very least, a table should be prepared with the symbolic items. Each evening, or each day in school, a candle is lit, beginning with the black one which is placed in the center. As each candle is lit, the principle it represents is recited. The person who lights the candle can tell what that principle means to him or her.

# **Kwanzaa, the African-American Celebration of Ancestry** *(cont.)*

A feast, the Kwanzaa Karumu, is held on the night of December 31st. People who plan to celebrate New Year's Eve hold the feast earlier in the evening. The table is decorated with the symbolic items, and the gifts, which should be educational and creative and given as a reward for merit, are exchanged. The feast itself usually consists of chicken, fish, rice, yams or sweet potatoes, and other vegetables. Everyone should make some contribution to the feast, bringing a cooked dish or something else that will add to the feast.

The place where the feast is held, whether it is in a school, a church, a community center, or at home, should be decorated. The decorations should be ethnic and reflect the use of the symbolic colors: black, red, and green. The entertainment, which can go on throughout the feast, should consist of African music, dances, stories, and chants. The celebrants are encouraged to wear ethnic clothing and hairstyles.

## **Making It Work**

Create a Kwanzaa setting in the classroom. Ask students to bring symbolic items from home or create them from ordinary classroom materials.

Turn a piece of driftwood, or even scrap lumber that has been sanded and painted, into a candleholder by gluing on long tacks upside-down. Simply stick the tack points into the bottoms of the candles.

Make placemats from woven strips of paper. Each student can make one for his or her desk in preparation for a feast. Use black, red, and green construction paper.

Have students print the "seven principles" on poster board and illustrate them. Place these posters around the classroom.

Ask groups of students to research, plan, and rehearse African songs and/or dances and perform them for their own class and for other classes.

Plan a Kwanzaa Karamu (feast). Use all of the decorations and the entertainment your students have created. Assign different dishes to groups of students or individuals. Create appropriate invitations and invite the students' parents or another class to join you for the celebration.

Allow students to create gifts for one another and/or for the guests. Since Kwanzaa strives to de-emphasize commercialism, the gifts should be made by the students and should reflect crafts that are relevant to the African heritage.

Prepare and learn one or more African games to play during your party or at free times during school.