

Kwanzaa Background

What is Kwanzaa?

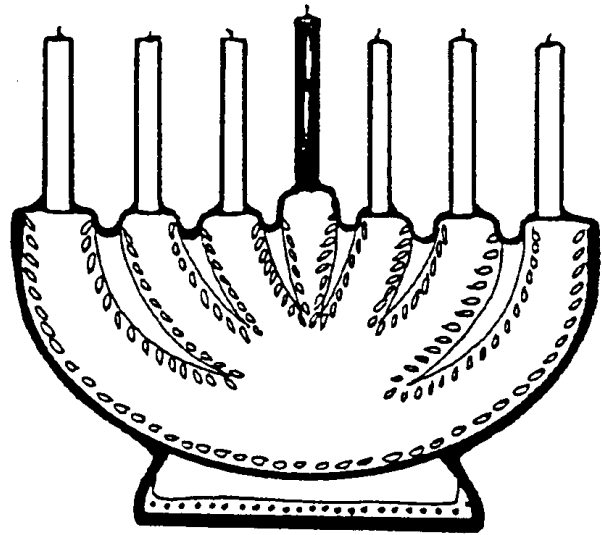
Many cultures have special celebrations. In 1966, Dr. Maulana Karenga decided African Americans should have a celebration that would be uniquely theirs. He wanted this celebration to occur between December 26 and January 1 each year. He thought it would give African Americans a chance to learn about their African heritage, as well as plan for the future.

From where did the word Kwanzaa come?

In Africa, many tribes celebrate the first harvest of the crops. In Swahili this celebration is called *Matunda ya Kwanza* which means “First Fruits.” Dr. Karenga used this name *Kwanza* to tie the new holiday to this tradition. However, he changed the name of the holiday to *Kwanzaa* by adding an extra “a.” The purpose of this change in spelling was to show that the holiday was built on the old tradition, but also represented the beginning of a new tradition. The spelling now uses seven letters which indicate the number of days included in the holiday.

How is Kwanzaa celebrated?

There are special objects used for the Kwanzaa celebration. The first is *mkeke* (m-KEH-ka), which is a handmade mat. Next is a *kikombe cha umoja* (kee-KOM-beh chah oo-MO-jah) which is a cup that everyone drinks from to show that African Americans are a united people. One ear of corn, called *muhindi* (moo-HIN-de), is put out for each child in the family and is a reminder that children are the hope of the future. Next is the *kinara* (ki-NAH-rah), a wooden candleholder. It holds seven candles—one candle is black to symbolize African Americans, three candles are red to symbolize hard work and the fight for freedom, and three candles are green to symbolize hope. The last items on the table are gifts. They are called *zawadi* (zah-WAH-dee) and are handmade.



Each night for seven nights the family gets together, and one candle is lit as someone explains the belief for that day. On the first night, the black candle is lit to celebrate *umoja* (oo-MOE-jah), which means unity. On the second night, a red candle is lit for *kujichagulia* (koo-jee-cha-goo-LEE-ah), which means self-determination. On the third night, a green candle is lit for *ujima* (oo-JEE-mah), which means collective work and responsibility. On the fourth night, a red candle is lit for *ujama* (oo-jah-MAAH), cooperative economics. On the fifth night, a green candle is lit for *nia* (NEE-ah), which means purpose. On the sixth night, a candle is lit for *kuumba* (ku-OOM-bah, which means creativity. It is on the sixth night that the family has a huge feast. However, the last night is thought to be the best. All the candles are finally lit, and the belief is *imani* (ee-MAHN-ee), which means that good will always happen. After the candles are lit, everyone exchanges their *zawadi*, or gifts.