

# Kwanzaa: A Celebration of African American Culture

Kwanzaa (December 26 to January 1) celebrates African American culture. Kwanzaa is a product of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. It is a cultural festival celebrated along with other holidays. Each day celebrates a different principle, including unity and faith, honored by lighting a candle each night. Kwanzaa is a recent addition to an expanding number of holidays celebrating the diversity of the United States.

## Importance of Holidays

Holidays and festivals are significant aspects of a nation's culture.

They provide insights regarding what is fundamental to its people. The first and foremost example in the United States is the celebration of the Fourth of July. Other leading holidays are Thanksgiving and Christmas. Our nation's annual schedule works around these holidays.

## Holidays For Certain Groups

Certain holidays celebrate groups of people. St. Patrick's Day celebrates the Irish.

Some holidays have a dual purpose. For instance, Columbus Day does not merely honor someone who discovered America. Columbus Day is a day to celebrate Italian heritage. When Italian Americans were not treated as 100% American in the early 20th Century, celebrating Christopher Columbus was a way to emphasize how they were indeed American.

Either way, these holidays are accepted as part of the holiday cycle.

## African History Month

Carter Godwin Woodson (1875-1950), a son of former slaves, is known as the "father of Black History." He promoted the importance of the study and teaching of black history.

A week in February was chosen to celebrate African American history because the birthday of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass was born then.

The celebration became very popular. The Civil Rights Movement increased interest in black history. Many people pushed for a month-long celebration.

A time to focus on different groups of people, including Women's History Month, is now a popular tradition. Was there a way to combine this with a holiday celebration?

## Origins of Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa is a product of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s.

African Americans fought for an equal place in American society. The struggle for equality included a movement for empowerment and respect for African-American culture. Pan-Africanism, a respect for the unity of Africans worldwide, arose.

African-American activist and educator Dr. Maulana Karenga created the celebration in 1966. "Kwanzaa" comes from *matunda ya kwanza*, which means "first fruits" in Swahili, one of the most spoken African languages. The saying honors the **joy and unity** of the harvest season.

Seven children were present for the first Kwanzaa celebration. So, an extra "a" was added.

## **A Cultural Holiday**

Kwanzaa is celebrated from December 26 to January 1.

It honors African and African American culture and history. Kwanzaa is a cultural holiday. It is not a religious holiday like Hanukkah or Christmas.

Dr. Maulana Karenga promoted the festival as an alternative to Christmas. Christmas was dominated by "crass commercialism" and filled with white icons, including a white Jesus.

People of all religious faiths can enjoy both Kwanzaa and their chosen celebrations.

## **Seven Days of Kwanzaa**

Seven is a symbolic number for the celebration of Kwanzaa. There are seven days, seven principles, seven candles, and seven symbols.

Kwanzaa teaches seven principles (*Nguzo Saba*), each having a day to shine.

The seven principles of Kwanzaa are *umoja* (unity), *kujichagulia* (self-determination), *ujima* (collective work and responsibility), *ujamaa* (cooperative economics), *nia* (purpose), *kuumba* (creativity) and *imani* (faith). The principles arise from African traditions.

People come together each day to light a candle like Jews celebrate Hanukkah. A menorah is a candleholder used for Hanukkah. The kinara is the candleholder for a Kwanzaa celebration.

## **A Day For Everyone?**

Kwanzaa is a celebration of African-American culture.

Dr. Maulana Karenga argues that it is a day that everyone can celebrate. For instance, Cinco de Mayo is a holiday that celebrates Mexican heritage. Everyone can enjoy the holiday.

Kwanzaa is a means for everyone to celebrate African history and culture. Africans are likely to be in charge of the celebrations and rituals. Nonetheless, others can take part in various ways.

Other countries celebrate Kwanzaa, including the United Kingdom, Jamaica, France, Canada, and Brazil. The true sign it has arrived is its inclusion in a Hallmark Channel film.

#### QUESTIONS:

1. How does Kwanzaa reflect the cultural and historical significance of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, and what impact did this movement have on the creation of the holiday?
2. In what ways does Kwanzaa differ from traditional religious holidays like Christmas and Hanukkah, and how does it serve as a cultural alternative to these celebrations?
3. What role did Dr. Maulana Karenga play in the establishment and promotion of Kwanzaa, and how did the holiday come to symbolize the unity and empowerment of African and African American culture?
4. How do the seven principles of Kwanzaa, derived from African traditions, contribute to the cultural and communal significance of the holiday, and how are they reflected in the daily rituals of the celebration?
5. In what ways does Kwanzaa provide an opportunity for people of diverse backgrounds to engage in the celebration of African history and culture, and how has it been embraced beyond African American communities in various countries?
6. How does Kwanzaa's emphasis on unity, self-determination, and collective responsibility align with the broader cultural and historical context of African American heritage and the Civil Rights Movement?
7. What parallels can be drawn between the origins and purpose of Kwanzaa and the establishment of other cultural heritage celebrations, such as African History Month and Women's History Month, in the United States?
8. How has the inclusion of Kwanzaa in popular culture, such as its portrayal in a Hallmark Channel film, contributed to its recognition and acceptance as a significant holiday celebrating African American culture and history?