



Kwanzaa

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Not to be confused with [Kwanza](#).

Kwanzaa (/ˈkwɑːnzə/) is an annual celebration of [African-American culture](#) from December 26 to January 1, culminating in a communal feast called *Karamu*, usually on the sixth day.^[1] It was created by activist [Maulana Karenga](#) based on Karenga's research of African harvest festival traditions from various parts of [West](#), [East](#), and [Southeast Africa](#). Kwanzaa was first celebrated in 1966. A 2009 estimate placed the number of Americans who celebrate Kwanzaa between 500,000 and 2,000,000.^[2]

History and etymology

American [black separatist](#)^[3] [Maulana Karenga](#) created Kwanzaa in 1966 during the aftermath of the [Watts riots](#)^[4] as a non-[Christian](#),^[5] specifically African-American [holiday](#).^[6] Karenga said his goal was to "give [black people](#) an alternative to the existing holiday of [Christmas](#) and give black people an opportunity to celebrate themselves and their history, rather than simply imitate the practice of the dominant society."^[7] For Karenga, an anti-white figure in the [Black Power](#) movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the creation of such holidays also underscored the essential premise that "you must have a cultural revolution before the violent revolution. The cultural revolution gives identity, purpose, and direction."^[8]:63–65

According to Karenga, the name Kwanzaa derives from the [Swahili](#) phrase *matunda ya kwanza*, meaning "first fruits".^[9] [First fruits](#) festivals exist in Southern Africa and are celebrated in December/January with the [southern solstice](#). Karenga was partly inspired by an account he read of the [Zulu](#) festival [Umkhosi Wokweshwama](#).^[8]:84 It was decided to spell the



Seven candles in a [kinara](#) symbolize the seven principles of Kwanzaa.

Observed by	African Americans , parts of the African diaspora
Type	Cultural and ethnic
Significance	Celebrates African heritage, unity, and culture
Celebrations	Unity Creativity Faith Giving gifts
Date	December 26 to January 1
Related to	Pan-Africanism

Part of a series on African Americans	
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holiday's name with an additional "a" so that it would have a symbolic seven letters.^{[8]:228}

During the early years of Kwanzaa, Karenga said it was meant to be an alternative to [Christmas](#). He believed [Jesus was psychotic](#) and [Christianity was a "White" religion](#) that Black people should shun.^[10] As Kwanzaa gained mainstream adherents, Karenga altered his position so practicing [Christians](#) would not be alienated, stating in the 1997 book *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community, and Culture* that "Kwanzaa was not created to give people an alternative to their own religion or religious holiday."^[11] Many African Americans who celebrate Kwanzaa do so in addition to observing Christmas.^[12]

After its creation in [California](#), Kwanzaa spread outside the United States^[13] but does not appear to be directly observed in any African countries.^[14]


Nguzo Saba (The Seven Principles)

Kwanzaa celebrates what its founder called the seven principles of Kwanzaa, or **Nguzo Saba** (originally **Nguzu Saba** – the seven principles of African Heritage). They were developed in 1965, a year before Kwanzaa itself. These seven principles are all [Swahili](#) words, and together comprise the *Kawaida* or "common" philosophy, a synthesis of nationalist, pan-Africanist, and socialist values.

Each of the seven days of Kwanzaa is dedicated to one of the principles, as follows:^[15]

1. **Umoja** (Unity): To strive for and to maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race.
2. **Kujichagulia** ([Self-determination](#)): To define and name ourselves, as well as to create and speak for ourselves.
3. **Ujima** (Collective work and responsibility): To build and maintain our community together and make our brothers' and sisters' problems our problems and to solve them together.
4. **Ujamaa** ([Cooperative economics](#)): To build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together.
5. **Nia** (Purpose): To make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.
6. **Kuumba** (Creativity): To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.
7. **Imani** (Faith): To believe with all our hearts in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

Symbols

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A display of Kwanzaa symbols with fruit and vegetables

Kwanzaa celebratory symbols include a mat (*Mkeka*) on which other symbols are placed:

- a *Kinara* (candle holder for seven candlesticks^[16])
- *Mishumaa Saba* (seven candles)
- *mazao* (crops)
- *Mahindi* (corn), to represent the children celebrating (and corn may be part of the holiday meal).^[17]
- a *Kikombe cha Umoja* (unity cup) for commemorating and giving *shukrani* (thanks) to African Ancestors
- *Zawadi* (gifts).



Supplemental representations include a Nguzo Saba poster,^[18] the black, red, and green *bendera* (flag), and African books and artworks—all to represent values and concepts reflective of African culture and contribution to community building and reinforcement.^[19]

Observances



A woman lighting candles for Kwanzaa. The black candle in the middle represents unity, the three green candles on the right represent earth, and the three red candles on the left represent the struggle of African Americans or the shedding of blood.^[20]

Families celebrating Kwanzaa decorate their households with objects of art, colorful African cloth such as *kente*, especially the wearing of *kaftans* by women, and fresh fruits representing African idealism. It is customary to include children in Kwanzaa ceremonies and to give respect and gratitude to ancestors. *Libations* are shared, generally with a common chalice (*Kikombe cha Umoja*) passed around to all celebrants. Non-African Americans also celebrate Kwanzaa.^[2] "Joyous Kwanzaa" may be used as a greeting during the holiday.^{[21][22][23]}

A Kwanzaa ceremony may include drumming and musical selections, libations, a reading of the "African Pledge and the Principles of Blackness," contemplation on the *Pan-African colors*, discussion of the African principle of the day or a chapter of African history, a candle-lighting ritual, artistic performances, and, finally, a

feast of faith known as *Karamu Ya Imani*.^{[24][25]} The greeting for each day of Kwanzaa is *Habari Gani?*,^[26] which is Swahili for "How are you?"^[27]

At first, observers of Kwanzaa avoided the mixing of the holiday or its symbols, values, and practice with other holidays, as doing so would violate the principle of *kujichagulia* (self-determination) and thus violate the integrity of the holiday, which is partially intended as a reclamation of important African values. Today, some African American families celebrate Kwanzaa along with *Christmas* and the *New Year*.^[28]

Cultural exhibitions include the Spirit of Kwanzaa, an annual celebration held at the *John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts* featuring *interpretive dance*, *African dance*, song, and poetry.^{[29][30][31]}

Karamu

A *Karamu Ya Imani* (Feast of Faith) is a feast typically on December 31, the sixth day of the Kwanzaa period. The Karamu feast was developed in [Chicago](#) during a 1971 citywide movement of [Pan-African](#) organizations. Hannibal Afrik of Shule ya Watoto proposed it as a community-wide promotional and educational campaign. The initial *Karamu Ya Imani* occurred on January 1, 1973, at a 200-person gathering at the Ridgeland club.^[32]

In 1992, the [National Black United Front](#) (NBUF) of Chicago held one of the country's largest *Karamu Ya Imani* celebrations. It included dancing, a youth ensemble and a keynote speech by NBUF and prominent [Black nationalist](#) leader [Conrad Worrill](#).^[33]

The celebration includes the following practices:

- Kukaribisha (Welcoming)
- Kuumba (Remembering)
- Kuchunguza Tena Na Kutoa Ahadi Tena (Reassessment and Recommitment)
- Kushangilia (Rejoicing)
- Tamshi la Tambiko (Libation Statement)
- Tamshi la Tutaonana (The Farewell Statement)

Adherence

The popularity of celebration of Kwanzaa has declined with the waning of the popularity of the [black separatist](#) movement.^{[34][35][36][37]} Kwanzaa observation has declined in both community and commercial contexts.^{[38][39][40]} [University of Minnesota](#) Professor [Keith Mayes](#) did not report exact figures, noting that it is also difficult to determine these for the three other main African-American holidays, which he names as [Martin Luther King Jr. Day](#), [Malcolm X Day](#), and [Juneteenth](#).^{[8]:210,274} Mayes added that [white](#) institutions now also celebrate it.^[2] Certain communities of the [Nation of Islam](#), an African American [Islamic](#) group, celebrate Kwanzaa.^[41]



A 2003 Kwanzaa celebration with Kwanzaa founder [Maulana Karenga](#) at the center, and others

In a 2019 [National Retail Federation](#) poll, 2.6 percent of people who planned to celebrate a winter holiday said they would celebrate Kwanzaa.^[42] Roughly 14% of the United States population is [African American](#).

Starting in the 1990s, the holiday became increasingly commercialized, with the first [Hallmark card](#) being sold in 1992.^[43] Some have expressed concern about this potentially damaging the holiday's values.^[44]

Recognition

The first Kwanzaa [stamp](#), designed by [Synthia Saint James](#), was issued by the [United States Post Office](#) in 1997, and in the same year [Bill Clinton](#) gave the first presidential declaration marking the holiday.^{[45][46]} Subsequent presidents [George W. Bush](#),^[21] [Barack Obama](#),^[47] [Donald Trump](#),^[48] and [Joe Biden](#)^[49] also issued greetings to celebrate Kwanzaa.

[Maya Angelou](#) narrated a 2008 [documentary film](#) about Kwanzaa, *[The Black Candle](#)*, written and directed by [M. K. Asante](#) and featuring [Chuck D](#).^{[50][51]}

In the special episode of the animated series *[Arthur](#)*, *[Arthur's Perfect Christmas](#)*, (2000) Brain's family celebrated Kwanzaa as a family, and added a Kwanzaa Ice Cream Special (red, black, and green ice cream) to their ice cream shop menu.^[52]

Practice outside the United States

Other countries where Kwanzaa is celebrated include [Jamaica](#), [France](#), [Canada](#), and [Brazil](#).^[53]

In Canada it is celebrated in provinces including [Saskatchewan](#)^[54] and [Ontario](#). Kwanzaa week was first declared in [Toronto](#) in 2018.^[55] There are local chapters that emerged in the 2010s in provinces like [British Columbia](#), where there are much smaller groups of the diaspora, founding members may be immigrants from countries like [Uganda](#).^[56]

See also

Portals:  [United States](#)  [Holidays](#)

- [Public holidays in the United States](#)

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