

How to Celebrate Kwanzaa on Your Campus

by Dr. Charles Taylor

The purpose of this article is to encourage colleges to integrate this cultural holiday into their student activity calendars, thus allowing all students to experience this unique celebration. The celebration works well in residence halls and with student organizations taking the lead.

What is Kwanzaa?



Kwanzaa (KWAHN-zah) is a seven day African American cultural holiday, observed by peoples of Afrikan descent worldwide. It is a joyous celebration to reaffirm traditional Afrikan social values. It is therefore non-religious and non-heroic. The word "Kwanzaa" is derived from a Kiswahili phrase, "MATUNDA YA KWANZA" (mah-TOON-dah yah KWAHN-zah), meaning "first fruits." In Afrika, harvesting the first fruits or crops of the season was cause for celebration. The African American version of Kwanzaa was inspired by the traditional Afrikan ritual

celebrating the harvest of the first fruits. An extra 'a' was added to the ending of the word Kwanzaa to distinguish the African American celebration.

Before proceeding with the principles of Kwanzaa, I should explain why Afrika is spelled with a K. Dr. Nantambu presents a concise analysis of the reasons for spelling Afrika with a K, based on the work of poet and writer Haki Madhubuti in Haki's book *From Plan to Planet* (1973). Nantambu (2002) suggests four main reasons for the alternative spelling:

1. K is used by most traditional languages in Afrika, instead of the letter C.
2. Replacing K with C, such as 'Congo' instead of 'Kongo', 'Accra' instead of 'Akkra' was particularly a practice taken up by the British and Portugese colonizers, and can be considered equivalent to corruption of the Afrikan languages. So the alternative spelling is meant to return to the original language.
3. Furthermore, history seems to suggest that the spelling 'Africa' was used after Afrikans were scattered all over the world and therefore using 'K' symbolizes a reunion of Afrikans.
4. The K is also symbolic of Afrikan political language that attempts to remove the identity forced on it by colonialism and creates its own linguistic identity.

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The Seven Kwanzaa Principles

At the core of Kwanzaa are the seven principles on which it is founded. The practice of Kwanzaa according to Maulana Karenga (1999), its founder, is the fulfillment of the spirit of sharing, common good, freedom in collectivity and a strengthening of the human bonds between people. These principles reflect a shared destiny, shared rights, shared responsibility, and sharing as a value that defines us as humans.

These principles emphasize that the best goods in life, are those that we share with others. This includes freedom, justice, love, kinship, friendship, and communal bonds. Karenga maintains that human beings cannot enjoy any of these things unless they share it with others. Any end achieved cannot be beneficial unless it entails an increase in the common good. In that spirit the Kwanzaa celebration is incomplete unless it is shared with someone else.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES



- UMOJA—(unity)—to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race.
- KUJICHAGULIA—(self determination)—to define, name, create for, and speak for ourselves instead of being defined, named, created for and spoken for by others.
- UJIMA—(collective work and responsibility)—to build and maintain our community together, and to make our sisters' and brothers' problems our problems and to solve them together.



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- UJAMAA—(cooperative economics)—to build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses, and to profit together.
- NIA—(purpose)— to make our collective vocation the building and development of our community, in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.
- 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.
- 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.(Maulana Karenga, 1966)

The seven principles remind us, that not only is human destiny a shared destiny, that cannot be achieved by anyone of us alone, but that we need to work together, in harmony with each other, to realize our human mission. Such harmonious existence implies the reaffirmation of equal status and inherent worthiness of every person. Based on this foundational principle of equality of all individuals, it reaffirms the right to a quality education, the right to a safe space, access to sufficient economic resources to maintain a decent lifestyle, the right to self determination, and the right to justice and freedom, as fundamental human rights (Karenga, 1999). By the same token, it reminds us, of our responsibilities to work collectively in order to ensure that no one is deprived of these rights.

When Was Kwanzaa Founded and by Whom?

Kwanzaa was created by university professor and cultural scholar Dr. Maulana Karenga in 1966. His vision has resulted in one of the most important holidays observed by African Americans in the United States.

When is it Celebrated?

The annual seven day ritual begins the day after Christmas, December 26, and ends on New Year's Day—January 1.

Why Should Your Campus Celebrate Kwanzaa?

Kwanzaa is meant to foster a reunion of African American families and peoples, to recognize African American achievements, and to be a time for cultural renewal and re-dedication to strong family values.

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Campus traditions play an important part in students' lives. Long after students have graduated, they will remember the community celebrations on campus that they were once part of. Research also supports the idea of celebration on campus to reaffirm the collective identity of the student body so that students come to see themselves truly as parts of a whole (Taub, 1998). With the multitude of cultural identities that are represented on our campuses today, it is essential for campus celebrations to be inclusive of everyone, so that on a voluntary basis, each can learn from the other and there is no sense of cultural exclusion.

Celebrating Kwanzaa on campus, can bring students together, and make them feel like part of a community rather than isolated individuals. It is also an excellent opportunity to familiarize all students with a holiday celebration that is so important to a large segment of the U.S. population. It's an opportunity for students to envisage their Black peers as people with a rich cultural heritage rather than a people defined by the history of slavery in the United States. On the other hand, for the Black students it can promote a sense of belonging and community, as well as an opportunity to teach and learn about cultural values from the Afrikan tradition.

How is Kwanzaa Celebrated?

Kwanzaa is celebrated with a daily ritual. This ritual includes a candle-lighting ceremony, passing of the unity cup, an affirmation, a pledge, a discussion of what the principle of the day means and the use of Kiswahili words to begin and end the ritual.





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Cultural Symbols and Kwanzaa Display

Kwanzaa is filled with symbolism and ritual. The celebration involves inexpensive cultural symbols and a unique display. Here is what you need to create your display:

- Mkeka (mm-Kay-kah), a mat is used to represent Afrikan traditions, symbolizing the foundation on which all else rests.
- Kinara (kee-Nah-rah), a candleholder, represents the traditional stalk of Afrikan ancestry.
- Mishumaa Saba (mee-Shoo-mah Sah-ba), seven candles, which are placed in the kinara. Three are red, three are green, and one is black, representing Nguzo Saba (nn-Goo-zoh Sah-bah), the seven principles on which Kwanzaa is based. In the ceremony, the black candle is always lit first to represent the present, followed by red representing the past, and green which represents the future of Afrikan people.
- Vibunzi (vee-Boon-zee), ears of corn, represent the number of children in a family. If you don't have children, corn can still be used to represent yourself as your parents' child.
- Kikombe Cha Umoja (kee-Koom-bay cha oo-Moh-jah), is a communal unity cup that is used in the ceremony to share the drink. This act of passing and drinking from the unity cup depicts unity among Afrikan people.
- Mazao (mah-Zah-oo), crops, fruits and vegetables are symbolic of products generated from hard work and are fruits from the labor.
- Zawadi (zaa-Wah-dee), gifts, represent rewards for outstanding achievement in applying the Nguzo Saba during the year. Typically these are homemade or inexpensive gifts since Kwanzaa is a non-commercial holiday.
- Bendera Ya Taifa (ben-Der-ah yah tah -ee-fah), tri-colored flag. In addition to the seven symbols above, most celebrations include the bendera and a framed copy of the Nguzo Saba as part of the Kwanzaa display.

Here's how to arrange the display:

Place the Mkeka on a table. Next, place the Kinara on the Mkeka. Arrange the three red and the three green Mishumaa Saba to the far left and far right in the Kinara. Place the one black candle in the center of the Kinara. You can also hang a colorful poster or framed copy of the Kwanzaa principles above the display. Then place the Vibunzi along the sides of the Kinara and place the Kikombe near it as well. Be sure to add an array of Mazao on the table and place the Bendera Ya Taifa close to it. Lastly, a variety of Zawadi can be placed around



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the table. You now have a complete and colorful Kwanzaa display. If you are unable to obtain all of the Kwanzaa cultural symbols, please keep in mind that it is the Kwanzaa principles that are most important.

Beginning the Kwanzaa Celebration

Although I will describe how to celebrate the 7-day holiday, I realize most campuses will only be able to have a 2 to 3 hour ceremony so you will need to modify this celebration for your campus. Just include those parts of the celebration that fit your schedule and interests. Let's begin:

Opening Ceremony



Kwanzaa begins with an opening ceremony. When I facilitate public celebrations I like to start with a procession into the Great Hall, auditorium, meeting room or wherever the program will take place. I have a student lead the procession carrying the bendera. As the procession enters the hall the audience is asked to stand:

"Would you all please rise as we sing the Black National Anthem-Lift every voice and sing by James Weldon Johnson; and observe the Kwanzaa flag designed by Marcus Garvey. Please remain standing after the song while we recite the Kwanzaa pledge in unison."

I recommend that you provide lyrics to the song 'Lift every voice and sing' by James Weldon Johnson to the participants. We usually pass the lyrics out as people arrive or place them in their seats in advance.

KWANZAA PLEDGE

We pledge to be:

KEEPERS OF OUR CULTURE

WISE IN OUR DECISIONS

ACTIVE IN OUR COMMUNITIES



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NOBLE TO OUR ELDERS

ZEALOUS IN OUR EFFORTS FOR PROGRESS

ADVOCATES FOR OUR CHILDREN

ACHIEVERS IN ALL OF OUR ENDEAVORS

(Taylor, 1994)

After the audience is told they may be seated, an opening Tamshi La Tambiko (Tahm-Shee Lah Tam-Bee-Ko) or libation ceremony is performed. Dip your fingers in to the Kikombe Cha Umoja- unity cup, and sprinkle drops of water in the directions of the four winds: north, south, east and west and say:

"This is to acknowledge the displacement of Afrikan people worldwide. As we begin this celebration let us pause to remember all who came before us and their great sacrifices. I want to honor my parents and Brother- Ollie who have crossed over. If you want to honor a loved one who has died please call out their names now."

Give people in the audience a chance to shout out the names of their loved ones who have crossed over. After others have had a chance to acknowledge their loved ones, say: "May their memory always live in our hearts because love is eternal." Then continue by saying:

"Let us also honor the motherland Afrika, while pledging to lift America to a higher calling." Conclude the opening ceremony by saying: "Harambee!" and ask the audience to repeat it. Harambee is a continental Afrikan chant and means, "let's pull together."

Optional

Many people are curious about the Kwanzaa flag. So sometimes before I explain the principles I'll quickly tell the audience about the Kwanzaa flag. In the Kiswahili African language it is called ben-der-ah. The tri-color flag was designed by Marcus Garvey and adopted for use by Dr. Maulana Karenga, the founder of Kwanzaa. The colors of the ben-der-ah are black, red, and green. Black is symbolic of African people and represents the present; red is symbolic of the blood we've shed in our struggle for freedom and represents the past; while green represents the land and hope for the future.

The Principles and Seven Daily Rituals are Fun and Meaningful

During the next seven days let us renew our commitment to the Kwanzaa principles and let them renew in our hearts a belief in our people. Harambee!



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HARAMBEE is spoken at the end of every principle.

Now we are ready to celebrate the first principle of Kwanzaa. We're going to have fun as we share this gift of culture.

HABARI GANI means what's the news or what's happening? It is the official greeting of Kwanzaa and is repeated daily. Every time I greet you with HABARI GANI, you respond with the name of the principle for that day? For instance the Kwanzaa principle for Day 1 is: UMOJA, so if I say HABARI GANI, you say: UMOJA.

On each of the 7 days of Kwanzaa, a different principle is celebrated.

Each principle includes the following in the daily rituals:

- Kwanzaa greeting: Habari Gani
- Lighting of the candle(s)
- Reciting an Affirmation
- Passing of the Unity Cup
- Activity
- Blowing out the candle(s)
- Harambee!

DAY 1 (December 26): principle is: UMOJA (oo-Moh-jah), meaning unity. Greeting & Candle Lighting

Greeting & Candle Lighting

After we greet each other: HABARI GANI, and respond with UMOJA, it is time to light the first candle. The eldest person is asked to light the candle. Only one candle is lit on the first day-the black candle, symbolizing unity among Afrikan peoples.

The candle lighting ceremony is very important. There is one black candle, three red and three green candles. These are the MISHUMAA SABA (the seven candles) and they represent the seven principles. The black candle is lit first on the first day of the celebration. And the remaining candles are lit afterwards from left to right on the following days. The black candle indicates that the people come first, and then the red candle which recognizes



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our struggle and finally the green candle which acknowledges our hope that comes from the struggle. The red candle also recognizes the past while the green candle represents the future.

Affirmation

As the candle burns we recite an affirmation in unison. Here is the affirmation we recite to observe the principle UMOJA: "Unity within the family, nation and race, will uplift our spirits and preserve our cultural base."

Passing the Unity Cup



After the affirmation, we pass the unity cup, which is usually filled with water or juice. Beginning with the eldest person, each person takes a drink from the cup and briefly tells what the principle of the day (UMOJA) means to him or her and then passes the cup until all have drunk.

Because of health concerns I would not recommend passing the unity cup in public places. I would suggest replacing the cup with something such as fruit native to Africa, or bread made in a traditional African way that people could share. Whoever has the fruit or bread plate must tell what that principle means to him or her before passing it.

Optional

I often ask people to recite the Kwanzaa pledge here before we start our activity.

Activity

This is the ideal place to have students recite poetry, perform a skit, sing, or engage in some type of cultural activity that the entire audience could participate in. If it is a small gathering people could share personal stories that relate to UMOJA.

Blowing Out the Candle & Harambee

I like to have people form a circle and then the candle is blown out. Lastly in unison we say Harambee as loud as we can. Try to make the room shake. This brings an end to the celebration of the first principle-UMOJA. With our spirits filled, we eagerly anticipate rejoicing in the second principle on day 2.

DAY 2 (December 27): principle is: KUJICHAGULIA (KOO-GEE-CHA-GOO-LE-AH), meaning self-determination. Repeat the 7-daily rituals.



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- Kwanzaa greeting: Habari Gani
- Lighting of the candles: black first, then red
- Reciting an Affirmation
- Passing of the Unity Cup: what does Kujichagulia mean to you?
- Activity
- Blowing out the candles: always blow out the black candle last.
- Harambee! [Repeat this twice]

DAY 3 (December 28): principle is: UJIMA (oo-Gee-mah), meaning collective work and responsibility. Repeat the 7-daily rituals.

- Kwanzaa greeting: Habari Gani
- Lighting of the candles: black first, then red, then green
- Reciting an Affirmation
- Passing of the Unity Cup: what does Ujima mean to you?
- Activity
- Blowing out the candles: always blow out the black candle last.
- Harambee! [Repeat this thrice]

DAY 4 (December 29): principle is: UJAMAA (oo-Jah-mah), meaning Cooperative Economics. Repeat the 7-daily rituals.

- Kwanzaa greeting: Habari Gani
- Lighting of the candles: black first, then red, then green, then red
- Reciting an Affirmation
- Passing of the Unity Cup: what does Ujamaa mean to you?

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- Activity
- Blowing out the candles: always blow out the black candle last.
- Harambee! [Repeat this four times]



DAY 5 (December 30): principle is: NIA (Nee-ah), meaning purpose. Repeat the 7-daily rituals.

- Kwanzaa greeting: Habari Gani
- Lighting of the candles: black first, then red, then green, then red, then green

- Reciting an Affirmation
- Passing of the Unity Cup: what does Nia mean to you?
- Activity
- Blowing out the candles: always blow out the black candle last.
- Harambee! [Repeat this five times]

DAY 6 (December 31): principle is: KUUMBA (Koo-oom-bah), meaning creativity. Repeat the 7-daily rituals.

- Kwanzaa greeting: Habari Gani
- Lighting of the candles: black first, then red, then green, then red, then green, then red
- Reciting an Affirmation
- Passing of the Unity Cup: what does Kuumba mean to you?
- Activity
- Blowing out the candles: always blow out the black candle last.
- Harambee! [Repeat this six times]



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DAY 7 (January 1): principle is: IMANI (ee-Mah-nee), meaning faith. Repeat the 7-daily rituals but great ready to enjoy the Karamu (kah-Rah-moo), feast. This is truly a festival with food, music, family and friends. It is symbolic of celebrating the Afrikan harvest.

- Kwanzaa greeting: Habari Gani
- Lighting of the candles: black first, then red, green, red, green, red, green
- Reciting an Affirmation
- Passing of the Unity Cup: what does Imani mean to you?
- KARAMU
- Blowing out the candles: always blow out the black candle last.
- Harambee! [Repeat this seven times]

The Karamu is a potluck where all the students attending can bring a dish to share and gifts to exchange with each other. Usually the gifts are handmade or inexpensive since it is not intended to be a financial burden on anyone, and neither is it meant to promote consumerism, rather unity in collectivity. People celebrate by holding talent shows, readings, skits, playing music and dancing. It is a time of great fellowship and joy. After all of the celebrations, students can sit and reflect on what Kwanzaa means to them and how they plan on keeping the principles alive throughout the New Year.

Closing Ceremony

When the reflections have ended it's time to bring the Kwanzaa celebration to an end.

We do this by blowing out one candle at a time and repeating the name of the principle the candle represents. Have different students blow out the candles and repeat the name of the principle as s/he blows it out. They should be blown out in this order.

1. IMANI (Green) FAITH
2. KUUMBA (Red) CREATIVITY
3. NIA (Green) PURPOSE
4. UJAMAA (Red) COOPERATIVE ECONOMICS



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5. UJIMA (Green) COLLECTIVE WORK & RESPONSIBILITY

6. KUJICHAGULIA (Red) SELF-DETERMINATION

7. UMOJA (Black) UNITY

After the candles are out you may want to say these closing remarks: "Let's remember why we celebrate Kwanzaa each year. According to the founder Dr. Karenga, "Kwanzaa:

- is a celebration of the family which first forms us, names, nurtures and sustains us, and teaches us upright and uplifting ways to understand and assert ourselves in the world.
- is a celebration of the community which calls us into being as a people, serves as the source and center of our strivings and struggles together to live good and meaningful lives, create, advance and sustain culture, and play the rightful role that our history, shared hope and dedication to the good demand of us.
- is a celebration of the culture that brought humanity and human civilization into being, formed the first disciplines of the human knowledge, gave deep spiritual and ethical insight and grounding to our ancestors and the world, and offers us valuable and timeless insights to engage the critical issues of our time.
- teaches and cultivates cultural grounding and ethical principles and practices dedicated to the cooperative creation and sharing of good in the world.
- comes with an ethical insistence that we think deeply about our lives and the world we live in, ask what does it mean to be Afrikan living in this our time and meet our ethical obligations to ourselves and the world." (Karenga, 12 December, 2010).

Then ask the eldest person in the room to raise the KIKOMBE CHA UMOJA and recite the closing TAMSHI LA TAMBIKO (libation statement):

"As we conclude our annual Kwanzaa celebration, let us remember that the true meaning of Kwanzaa lies in its principles. If we strive to live these principles daily we will not only have learned valuable lessons from our Afrikan past, we will have assumed responsibility for our future. You are each leaving with three powerful gifts which no one can take away from you. You have:

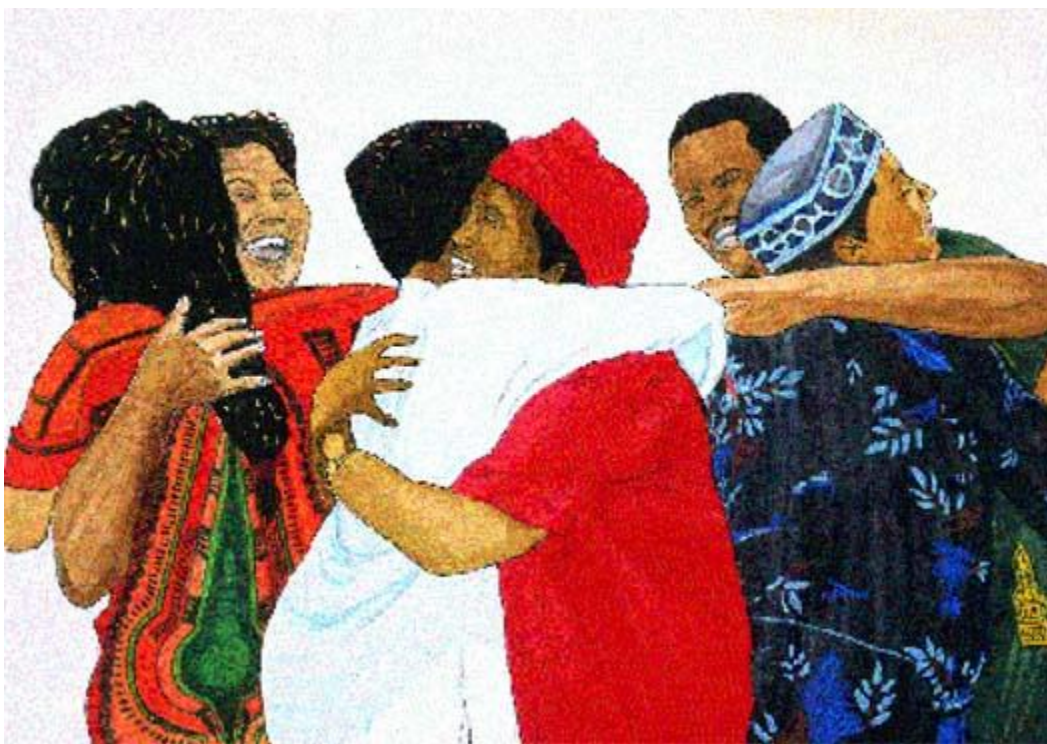
1. Seven Kwanzaa principles to keep you grounded and on course;
2. You have an inner light that was strengthened by the daily lighting of each candle; and

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3. You have the knowledge and comfort that you are part of a family, community and people, so you will never, ever, be alone.

Therefore, go forward in faith and hope. Peace be with you. Repeat after me: Harambee (seven times). Now give the person next to you a big hug and wish each other well. This brings an end to the Kwanzaa celebration!





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