

# Kwanzaa

## Pre-reading

Questions: What do you know about Kwanzaa? What would you like to learn about it?

Definitions: Heritage – customs and beliefs of past generations

Unity – acting as one; being joined together



## Reading\*

Kwanzaa is an African-American celebration. It was established in 1966 during the Civil Rights era by Dr. Maulana “Ron” Karenga, a scholar and social activist. The word Kwanzaa is a Swahili word that means “first fruits.” The celebration is based on African harvest rituals as well as beliefs and values of traditional African customs. It has no ties to any religion.

The annual celebration begins on December 26 and lasts for seven days. The number seven is significant. There are seven letters in the word Kwanzaa. Also, there are seven **principles** of Kwanzaa that focus on strengthening black families and communities. The seven principles are:

1. Unity – We help each other.
2. Self-determination – We decide things for ourselves.
3. Collective work and responsibility – We work together to make life better.
4. Cooperative economics – We build and support our own businesses.
5. Purpose – We have reason for living.
6. Creativity – We use our minds and hands to make things.
7. Faith – We believe in ourselves, our ancestors, and our future.

Kwanzaa is a cultural celebration of heritage. It is a time for learning and understanding one’s past and creating common purposes and goals for the future. It is also a time of joy and sharing. During this week long celebration, families get together and celebrate one principle each day.

Colors and symbols are a large part of the celebration. Red, black and green are the main holiday colors. Red represents courage and blood. Black stands for the color of the skin. Green represents faith, the land, and harvest.

On December 26<sup>th</sup> the head of the household gathers and arranges the symbols of Kwanzaa. First he or she spreads a straw mat on a low table or on the floor. Then the kinara, a candle holder, is placed in the center of the mat. Seven candles (three red, one black, and three green) are placed in the holder. Ears of corn, one for each child in the family, are placed on the sides of the mat. Gifts, a unity cup (reinforcing the value of unity in the family and community), and a basket of fruit are also placed on the mat.

The head of the household says, “Habari Gani” which means, “What’s the news?” The other family members respond by saying the name of the principle of the day. Next the “Harambee,” a gesture meaning “lets’ pull together” is done seven times. The right arm is raised with the hand open and the hand is closed while pulling the arm down.

Each person then tells of their understanding and **commitment** to the principle of the day. Stories are shared and families discuss how to live the principles each day of the year.

A feast called Karamu takes place on the 6<sup>th</sup> night, December 31. It is at this time that the gifts are opened. The gifts are reminders of what has been learned during the week, as family members have focused on their history as a people, and have made commitments for the new year.

\*Revised selection – original text by Tracy Cady and Joy R. Lazenby. Reprinted with permission by Deborah Byrnes, Ph.D., Utah State University.

## Understanding

1. What colors are associated with Kwanzaa? Why are those colors used? \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_
2. What does the word **commitment** mean? \_\_\_\_\_  
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3. Why is the number seven a significant one during this holiday? \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_
4. How long has Kwanzaa existed? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Who created it? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What is the purpose of this holiday? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Why do you think it begins on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December? \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_
8. What does the word **principle** mean in this reading? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Writing

Option A: Summarize the reading in your own words.

Option B: If you celebrate Kwanzaa, write about how you celebrate it.

Option C: Which of the principles of Kwanzaa do you feel are most important? Why?

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