

Kwanzaa celebrates African culture

by Henry Duval

While many Americans prepare for Christmas a number of Black Americans are getting ready for an alternative Christmas season celebration — Kwanzaa.

A product of the 1960's Black Awareness movement, Kwanzaa has survived and grown. Today, it is believed that several million Americans embrace the spirit of Kwanzaa, a cultural expression to reaffirm African heritage.

The Afro-American holiday's name derives from the Swahili word, kwanza, which means "first." It is observed for seven days — Dec. 26 to Jan 1 — based on the African tradition of celebrating the harvest of the first fruits.

"While it's not African, it comes out of an African environment," says Dr. Robert J. Cummings, director of Howard University's African Studies and Research Program. "Kwanzaa grew out of the knowledge of African cultural life."

One of the values of Kwanzaa, Cummings emphasizes, is that it seeks to counteract the commercial aspect of Christmas. Personally made gifts are encouraged in the celebration of Kwanzaa.

Kwanzaa was introduced in 1966 by Black activist and educator Dr. Maulana Karenga, executive director of the Institute of Pan-African Studies in Los Angeles. "Kwanzaa is not a religious holiday. It's a cultural holiday," Karenga maintains.

He believes some seven million Black Americans and others today celebrate Kwanzaa, while other sources estimate three to five million.

Kwanzaa is basically observed in urban areas by a cross-section of people of different religions, class and age.

More people celebrate Kwanzaa in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Newark, N.J., than in any other major cities, says Karenga, who is also a visiting professor of Afro-American studies at San Diego State University and the University of California-Riverside.

"It has moved more and more into the mainstream of Black family life," stresses E. Ethelbert Miller, director of the Howard University Afro-American Resource Center.

Karenga points out that Kwanzaa demonstrations and observances are even growing in the nation's public schools. This is because of "demands of cultural pluralism" that each American ethnic group be represented by its own culture, language and holiday.

Each of the seven days of Kwanzaa is dedicated, respectively, to the principles of umoja (unity), kujichagulia (self-determination), ujima (collective work and responsibility), umjamaa (cooperative economics), nia (purpose), kuumba (creativity), and imani (faith).

On each of the days of observance, there are family or community gatherings, or rituals, to reflect on the meaning of the given day. Kwanzaa culminates in a traditional African feast — the karamu — on New Year's Eve.

In 1980, some 10,000 people gathered for an outdoor public Kwanzaa celebration in Miami. And about 2,000 to 3,000 people each year in Chicago assemble for the African feast karamu in a public celebration, says Karenga.

For some families, Kwanzaa replaces Christmas, while others observe both, stresses Dr. Russell Adams, chairman of Howard's Afro-American studies department.

Dr. Sidney "Kwaku" Walker and his family in Washington, D.C., have celebrated Kwanzaa rather than Christmas for the past 10 years. His

embrace of the Afro-American holiday grew out of his yearning to learn more about traditional African culture as well as his distaste for the commercial aspect of Christmas.

"Our children look forward to it (Kwanzaa) every year," says the 35-year-old Howard English instructor, who has three children. The family exchanges personally made gifts, or books, and reflects on the year ending and the prospects of the coming year, especially in accordance with Kwanzaa's seven principles.

While many Americans assemble around the traditional Christmas tree, the Walker family and others who celebrate Kwanzaa come together on the mkeka (straw mat), which symbolizes the foundation on which all else rests.

Placed on the mat are other African-rooted symbols, such as the kinara (candle holder), mishumaa (seven candles), kikombe (unity cup), mahindi (ears of corn) and zawadi (gifts for the children).

"Kwanzaa gets people back to sort of an involvement with the community and oneself," says Howard expert Robert Cummings. "It's not a whole lot of fanfare. People just do it."

What Kwanzaa means to children:

Kwanzaa is a time when Black people get together and have a great feast. And they light one candle for each principle. Candle number 1 is umoja — unity. Candle number 2 is for kujichagulia — self-determination. Candle number 3 is for ujima — collective work and responsibility. Candle number 4 is ujamaa — cooperative economics. Candle number 5 is nia — purpose. Candle number 6 is kuumba — creativity. Candle number 7 is imani — faith. Then the children sing songs to the people. And the people clap their hands and after that, the people walk around the room to get their children and go home.

Malik Bell, Age 7

Though Kwanzaa is a small word it means a lot to me. There are a lot of things I like about Kwanzaa. I like when we feast and sing and dance. We put red, black and green decorations all around. We get love and care. We get gifts and celebrate the seven principles. I love Kwanzaa, don't you?

Ebony Williams, Age 6

I like Kwanzaa because it is fun and we get surprises. We sing and dance and do a lot of things. Like we eat, drink, talk and watch the children dance. We have food like noodles and turkey and rice and cornbread and cookies and cake and popcorn and pickles.

Alitash Smith, Age 9

I love Kwanzaa. Kwanzaa is good. Happy Kwanzaa to you. I love you, Mom and Dad. I like Kwanzaa because it's fun and I like it because you can sing and you can dance and you can play and talk. Mothers and Daddies can come to the Kwanzaa program. I know you love Kwanzaa.

Benny Carson, Age 6

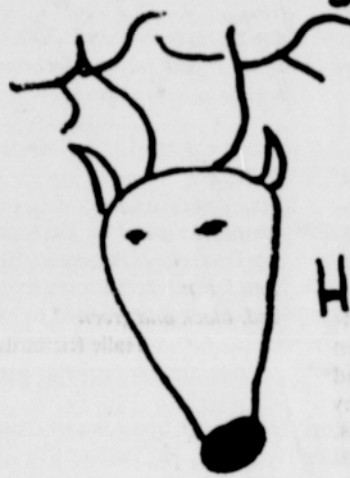
What does Kwanzaa mean to me? It means it's the best time of the year. At Kwanzaa time I go over to my mother's friend's house and have Kwanzaa. I love Kwanzaa. Kwanzaa has 7 principles, too! The seven principles are umoja, kujichagulia, ujima, ujamaa, nia, kuumba, and imani. All of them together are the Nguzo Saba. The symbols of the Nguzo Saba are: the ankhi, Afrika, mishumaa, kinara, mkeka, kikombe, sun, muhindi, zawadi, karamu.

Arietta Ward, Age 8

One day I went to a village and I saw a whole bunch of children. And people were dancing. They had chicken and they had fruit. A brother named Syid said, "I will tell you about Kwanzaa." For Kwanzaa we do work. We worked so hard to build our pyramids. We get our zawadi and we make our fruit. We get our corn and we do our coloring for our Kwanzaa book. We light the candles for the seven principles and the first candle we light is for umoja, unity. Then we light another candle each night. Our people are so strong we built the pyramids. I like school because we learn so much about the strong African Brothers and Sisters.

Syid Seifuddin, Age 6

Hope you have a fun x-mas and get lots of good things



Ho, Ho, Ho

Love, Alison

I like Kwanzaa because we help set up the Kwanzaa table. We make things at school. We sing and dance and shine with seven nice principles — umoja, kujichagulia, ujima, ujamaa, nia, kuumba, imani. We eat things like noodles and chicken. We have all kinds of games to play.

Jamila Ormond, Age 6

Do you know what I like about Kwanzaa? Kwanzaa is a time when Black families get together and sing songs and get presents and dance and play and eat and read and have fun. They have a big feast. Have a Happy Kwanzaa.

Ifanyi Bell, Age 6

(Continued on Next Page)



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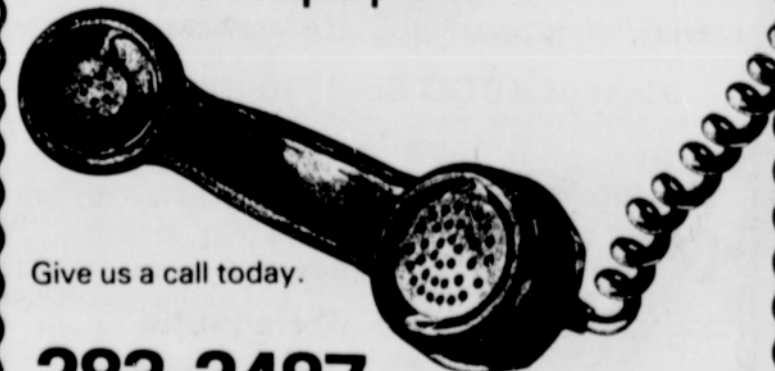
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