

# THE MEANING OF KWANZA

Kwanza is a Swahili word meaning "first" and signifying the first fruits of the harvest. From December 26 to January 1, many people of African descent in America celebrate Kwanza.

In Africa, there are many customs which transcend the various ethnic groups found on the continent. One of these is the celebration of the harvest. At this time of the year, people come together to celebrate and give thanks for their good fortune. Working towards the harvest is a communal effort, as is the celebration.

Here in America in 1966, Maulana Ron Karenga and the U.S. Organization adopted the basic principles of the harvest in Africa to create the celebration of Kwanza. Karenga recognized that on the whole, Africans born in America do not live in an agricultural setting. Nonetheless, he sought to emphasize that the basic principles found in producing the harvest are vital to the building and maintenance of strong and wholesome communities.

In this way, Kwanza was developed. Kwanza is that time when we reflect on our use of the basic principles, share and enjoy the fruits of our labor; and recommit ourselves to the collective achievement of a better life for our family, our community, and our people.

Many people in the African American community of Clark County have been working to prepare for the "Celebrate Kwanza" evening set for Sunday, December 19th, at Clark PUD (Mill Plain and Ft. Vancouver Way). There will be a meal, a Kwanzaa guidebook for every family, and activities for all ages. This event is free and open to everyone.

Kwanzaa is the African American cultural celebration that is observed between December 26 and January 1st. Kwanzaa is a Kiswahili word (East African area) that means "the first fruits of the harvest." Kwanzaa is a unique American Holiday that pays tribute to the rich cultural roots of Americans of African Ancestry. Kwanzaa is based upon seven fundamental principle (Nguzo Saba) which serve as a useful guide for daily living for all people.

- They are:**
- 1. Umoja (Unity)**--To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race.
  - 2. Kujichagulia (Self-determination)**--To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for our selves and speak for ourselves instead of being defined, named, created for and spoken for by other.
  - 3. Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)**--To build and main-

tain our community together and make our sister's and brother's 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 heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.

The Clark County Department of community Services has provided some Substance Abuse Prevention funds to help sponsor this event, and the Homebuilders family counseling program is providing staff support in the planning efforts. The goals are to build upon family strengths through the addition of the Nguzo Saba (seven principles), and help families use the principles as tools in preventing alcohol and drug abuse.

The Bustling in America begins as the holidays grow near, as people prepare for Holidays my thoughts are about my family and our Kwanzaa. I love celebrating Kwanzaa because it is not a European holiday or a religious holiday; it's a Black celebration testifying to the richness of my African heritage. I'm estimated over 13 million Africa Americans observed Kwanzaa."

It's is the occasion that brings Black folks together regardless of their religion or their political affiliations. All ethnic groups in America have always had their holiday, the Irish have Saint Patrick Day, The Chinese have Chinese New Year, the Native American have their Pow Wows and the Jewish community have Hanukkah. Arriving in bondage nullified all African traditional holidays. The slave owner criminalized our celebration and tribal rituals, that's why I ask for blessings on Dr. Maulana Karenga for founding a Black Holiday here in America that my children, my community and I can celebrate with pride.

As Christmas commercials mock the meaning of gift giving, excitement and movement occupy my home as we make preparation for the Kwanzaa feast, gift making and the decoration of the table and house. To be inclusive of all the children I match a child per principle, this makes every one feel

good, and if they motivated they can practice their speech for their night lighting.

Usually I let the oldest child begin the first night for lighting the candle. He lights the night of Umoja (Unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination) is lit by the second child. This routine will continue with all seven children until we reach the last night of Imani (Faith). We really put honor in the lighting of the candles, so the children feel special by having that responsibility. If you have seven or more children then be creative so that all are included in the rituals.

Some say Kwanzaa means first fruits or the harvest celebration, it is a Swahili word. It is a seven day holiday that is celebrated from December 26 through January 1st. As mentioned earlier Kwanzaa holiday was started by an African American name Dr. Maulana Karenga.

This holiday allows us seven days to reflect on our great history in Africa, our mighty struggle in America, our superior accomplishments and the continual growth of the African race. We are an African people.

Though Kwanzaa can be a time to reflect the past, the present and the future, we must also strive to keep it interesting and inspirational for our younger people. Kwanzaa is very healing to the family because it teaches

patience, humility and it builds self-esteem based on the seven principles. In society that looks for immediate gratification it is important that we allow Kwanzaa to remain enjoyable to our children by asking for their input during the observance of the seven days.

It's important to begin preparation during late fall because to have a productive Kwanzaa you need certain items and brushing up on your Swahili is helpful for working the nightly rituals. However don't be discouraged from celebrating our holiday if you haven't become familiar with the language.

Every holiday has specific rituals and symbols that are associated with it. Ours are the Maka (table cloth), I recommend an attractive African print to cover the table or mantle. The Kinara (candle holder) is made by my husband out of wood. The seven candles are red, black and green candles. The Misibidi (ears of corn) which represents the number of children in the house. Lastly we need the unity cup for us all to drink from.

On the morning of Umoja the children begin to decorate the house. We choose our most beautiful African fabric to put on the table. We also find our most festive looking basket to put the corn in. The basket or bowl should be from Africa and made by an Afri-

can person. The Unity cup gets polished and filled with a nice non-alcohol beverage. My cup is a pretty copper color but many families use wooden cups for their drink. My Kinara was hand made by my husband and painted by the children and myself. Kinaras can be expensive but that they last a life time if maintained properly. However if you know someone with minimal carpentry skills or a student who is taking wood shop, I am sure you could have one made for reasonable cost. Kwanzaa is a time of sharing therefore it is important that our holiday be economically sound for the participants. Regardless of ones income level, all persons should be able to participate in Kwanzaa, so it is important that we honor the simplicity of the celebration.

The sooner you invest in your Kwanzaa necessities, the less stressful the celebration will be. I encourage you to purchase or make your needed items before December 26. Many of the materials needed for decorating are often in relatives or your own home. That's the enjoyment of Kwanzaa to be creative and explore where the desired things are with in our community.

My husband and I compete with the children for who will have the best decorating ideas. Decorating ground rules include only items with an Afri-

can background, that includes items that our grandparents my have made and the Caribbean. Red, black and green are symbolic colors and should be remembered when choosing decorations.

The things that we have used have been African fabric, we have placed African violet plant, Black are, figurines, African beads, or things that our ancestors may have owned. African books and various styles of Kwanzaa greeting cards can really enhance the house.

My guest are usually amazed at the simplicity of the African centric decor of the house that gives such a strong message during this celebration. The kinara is placed on my dining room table and will remain there until the holiday is over. During this time I am more apt to make sure African music is playing, and that the atmosphere remain observant of our culture. Sweet Honey and the Rock an acappella group has a wonderful Kwanzaa song that children enjoy hearing. I also urge you to visit the library during this time to locate literature to help support the Kwanzaa rituals.

Mental and spiritual knowledge of the Nguzo Saba (the seven principles) is as important as the physical appearance of the home. The principles are the foundation of the cel-

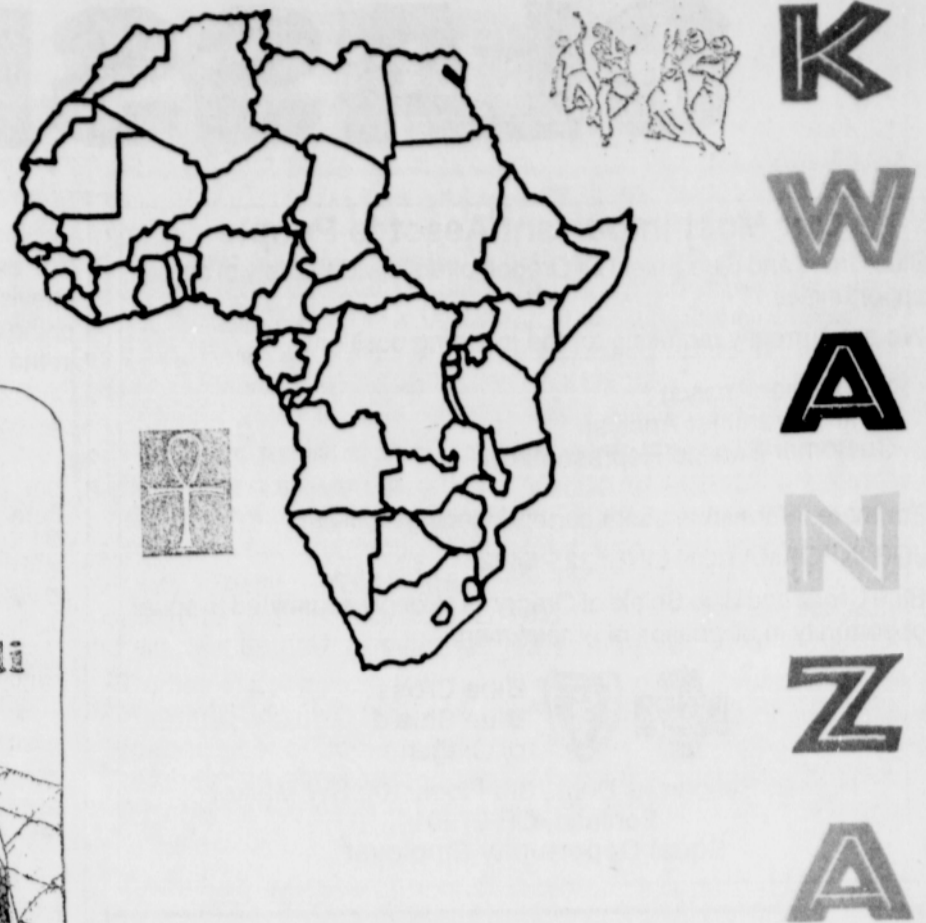
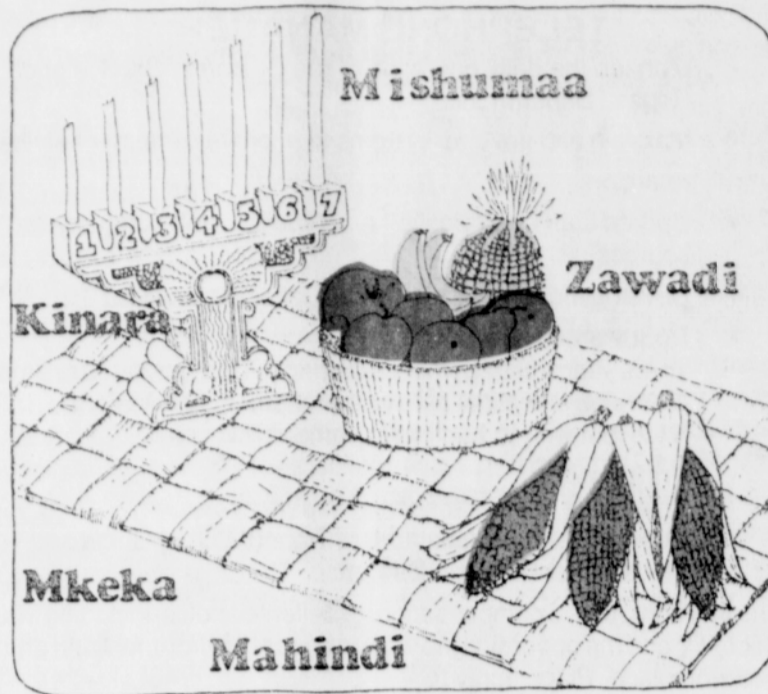
bration and substance for a sound family, sisterhood and brotherhood linkage. The feast is on the last night, we all cook favorite African or Southern dishes. We dress up in our finest African attire, head wraps and kufis (African skull caps) are displayed. With African centric clothes readily accessible the sky's the limit for dress up.

The closing night is Imani (Faith), we thank our Creator, acknowledge our ancestors, discuss the seven principles in numerical order. Before the night is over gifts are exchanged between family and friends. Originally Kwanzaa gifts were to be hand made, I try to honor that custom, so my family and I give things that are easy to make, such as hand made bathrobes, pot holders, painted pictures, strung beads, plants or Black educational books.

Kwanzaa is my testimonial that we are an African people and we must take time out to reflect on our global heritage and for seven days give our full attention to the recipe (the seven principles) for aiding ourselves, family, community and motherland with health and inspiration. If you haven't celebrated Kwanzaa, do it this year, it only gets better with practice.

Written by Shafia M. Monroe, A Mother and executive director of Imani Women's Support Project, Inc.

## CELEBRATE



### 1993 Festival Of Events

#### December

(26) Umoja/Unity Children's Program  
2-4pm Presented by the Black Educational Center

(27) Kujichagulia/Self-Determination  
African History Jeopardy Game  
7-9pm Presented by the Sirius Study Group

(28) Ujima/Collective Work And Responsibility  
"The African Legacy In Collective Work  
And Responsibility"  
7-9pm Presented by nationally recognized artists  
Adriene Cruz and Charlotte Lewis

(29) Ujamaa/Cooperative Economics African Marketplace  
7-9pm Presented by the Black Educational Center  
Parents Organization

(30) Nia/Purpose "Voices Of Our Youth"  
7-9 Presented by the Urban League of Portland  
Whitney Young and Street Academy Program

(31) Kuumba/Creativity "Karamu! The Big Feast"  
6-9pm Presented by various community organizations.

January 1, 1994 Imani/Faith Family Day  
Celebrate Kwanzaa at home with family/friends.

Location Multicultural Senior Center  
5315 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

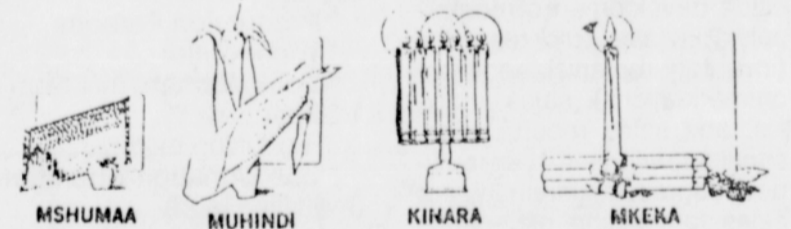
Kwanzaa Activities Coordinated By the Black Educational Center, For Information Call 284-9552



#### Symbols

There are symbols which have a special meaning to the celebration of Kwanzaa. The mkeka is a straw mat which symbolizes the tradition as the foundation on which all else rests. The kinara is a seven-space candle-holder, representing the original stalk from which black people originated.

The seven candles, or mishumaa, stand for the Seven Principles. The Mahindi are the ears of corn which represent the offspring (children) of the stalk (father and mother of the house). The zawadi or gifts represent the fruits of the labor of the parents and the rewards of the seeds sown by the children.



## "Kwanzaa It's A Black Thang And You Would Understand"