

KWANZAA

A Mile High Tradition



EVERYTHING
you wanted to know about Kwanzaa



by brother jeff

One

1966 The Birth of Kwanzaa



In the proper context, negativity is a powerful catalyst for change, a worthy opponent, an obstacle to overcome thereby allowing man to validate his existence and in this case his celebrations. August 11 1965 South Central Los Angeles is perfect example. Against a backdrop of smoldering heat, overt racism, poverty, unemployment, deplorable housing conditions and the battle cry of Burn Baby Burn our example unfolds. A routine traffic stop, a confrontation between a Black motorist and White highway patrolman, an angry crowd gathers, resistance occurs, a woman is manhandled, a broken bottle precedes smashed windows and upturned cars followed by five days of gunshots, anarchy, chaos, the deployment of 16,000 National Guardsmen, and ending with 34 dead, 100 wounded, 4,000 arrests and 200 million dollars in property damage.

As destructive as this rebellion was, the Watts Riot was not an isolated case. Throughout The Long, Hot Summers of the 1960s race rioting was eclipsing the non-violent civil rights movement. Passive resistance,

1965



Watts RIOT



...the Watts Riot was not an isolated case.

the plea for racial integration and faith in American democracy were discarded as anachronism and a new generation of protestors transformed We Shall Overcome into Black Power! After countless sit-ins, Freedom Rides, protest marches, mob attacks, arrests and deaths, longtime civil rights workers were turning militant and losing faith in the democratic process particularly after the August 1964 Democratic Party National Convention held in Atlantic City where the convention ignored Fannie Lou Hamer's question to America, asserted power politics, and refused to seat the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. This total disregard for due process and justice was so blatant that according to movement veteran Congressman John Lewis, "It sent a lot of them [civil rights workers] outside the system. It turned many of them into radicals and revolutionaries." "I don't know what I'm going to do," Dr. King told a reporter in 1966, "The government has got to give me some victories if I'm going to keep people nonviolent. I know I'm going to stay nonviolent no matter what happens, but a lot of people are getting hurt and bitter, and they can't see it that way any more."

Between 1964 and 1968, there was race rioting in Newark, New Jersey; Rochester, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; Cincinnati, Ohio, Detroit, Michigan and numerous cities nationwide. Most significant were the Harlem Riot of 1964, the Watts Riot of 1965, and the Detroit Riot of 1967.

Fueled by racial tension and frustration, America was going up in flames. Six months before the Watts Riot, Nation of Islam minister Malcolm X was assassinated in Harlem. His death gave birth to revolutionary organizations such as Us (United Slaves), Black Panther Party for Self Defense, Republic of New Africa, Malcomites and countless others. Three years after the death of Malcolm, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis and one hundred cities went up in flame; the wisdom of non-violence was on trial while Black rage swept America. When the smoke settled, beneath death, destruction and the smoldering ashes of the turbulent sixties, Kwanzaa was born.

Two

Kwanzaa 101

According to Kwanzaa's creator Dr. Maulana Karenga, "It [Kwanzaa] was created in 1966 in the midst of our struggles for liberation and was part of our organization Us' efforts to create, recreate and circulate African culture as an aid to building community, enriching Black consciousness, and reaffirming the value of cultural grounding for life and struggle."



Dr Maulana Karenga at brother jeff Cultural Center 1995

In his preface to *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, Karenga writes, "Clearly within these 30 years, interest in Kwanzaa has steadily grown and so has the number of its celebrants. This phenomenal growth, which includes over 20 million celebrants throughout the world African community, is engendered and sustained by the rich and varied meaning Kwanzaa has for us as a people. The holiday speaks to our constant quest to be rooted in our own culture, to speak our own special cultural truth in a multicultural world and to practice values and share a vision which reaffirms and reinforces the best of family, community and culture."



Community leaders unite annually to coordinate Kwanzaa celebrations.

Throughout the years, I have had the great fortune of traveling the length and breadth of this country into numerous communities along with some of the nations most notable African American thinkers, scholars, movement veterans, and activists. Being a native of DC—no, not Chocolate City, Washington D.C., I'm from Denver Colorado—I often hear: Are Black people in Denver? Not only are Black people in Denver, we tend to be very progressive and take our culture seriously. Representing only three percent of the states population, we don't have the luxury I see in many cities of taking Blackness for granted. As you can imagine Kwanzaa is huge in the Mile High City. In fact, Denver has one of the largest celebrations in the country. We have a Circle of Elders, Ujamma Market and a Twelve-Foot Kinara sitting in the heart of our community. My primary task as a member of the Denver Kwanzaa Committee, which dates back to the early seventies, is to educate the general public on Kwanzaa 101.

Kwanzaa, a Swahili word meaning first fruit is a seven-day, non-religious, non-political and non-hero African American cultural celebration based on agrarian harvest celebrations of Africa. Created in 1966 by scholar and cultural activist Dr. Maulana Karenga the celebration is observed annually from December 26 through January 1, and includes five basic activities—ingathering, reverence, remembrance, excellence and good.

KWANZAA



Denver has strong cultural tradition.

Kwanzaa, a Swahili word meaning first fruit is a seven-day, non-religious, non-political and non-hero African American cultural celebration.



Swahili is spoken throughout Africa, the Diaspora and Kwanzaa. It is Pan African favoring no particular African nation or tradition and therefore serves as a unifying language. A typical Kwanzaa greeting is: Habari gani (hah-bah'-ree-gah-nee), meaning what's the word? The response is the value being observed on that day. The first day's response is: umoja (oo-mo'-jah) habari gani—unity is the word.

The Seven Values



It is important to know the seven values and seven symbols central to Kwanzaa. The values bind the celebration together whereas the symbols are instructional and inspiration. Dr. Karenga explains each as follows:

1. Umoja (Unity)

To strive and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and race

2. Kujichagulia (Self-Determination)

To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves

3. Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)

To build and maintain our community together and make our brother's and sister'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

Three

Kwanzaa Symbols



Mazao (The Crops)

Symbolic of African harvest celebrations and the rewards of productive and collective labor

Mkeka (The Mat)

Symbolic of our tradition and history and thus, the foundation on which we build

Kinara (The Candle Holder)

Symbolic of our roots, our parent people—continental Africans

Muhindi (The Corn)

Symbolic of our children and thus our future which they embody
Mishumaa Saba (The Seven Candles)

Symbolic of the Nguzo Saba, the Seven Principles, the matrix and minimum set of values which Black people are urged to live by in order to rescue and reconstruct their lives in their own image and according to their own needs.

Kikombe cha Umoja (The Unity Cup)

Symbolic of the foundational principle and practice of unity which makes all else possible

Zawadi (The Gifts)

Symbolic of the labor and love of parents and the commitments made and kept by the children

Two additional symbols:**Bendera (The Flag)**

The colors of the bendera (flag) are black, red and green. As mentioned, black represents the people; red represents their struggle; and, green represents the future. The flag and colors are taken from the work and out of respect for the Honorable Marcus Garvey (1887-1940). His activism at the dawn of the twentieth century stressed a greater need for African American co-operation—ujima /collective work and responsibility. Garvey's insight holds true a century later:

The greatest stumbling block in the way of progress in the race has invariably come from within the race itself. The monkey wrench of destruction as thrown into the cog of Negro Progress, is not thrown so much by the outsider as by the very fellow who is in our fold, and who should be the first to grease the wheel of progress rather than seeking to impede it.

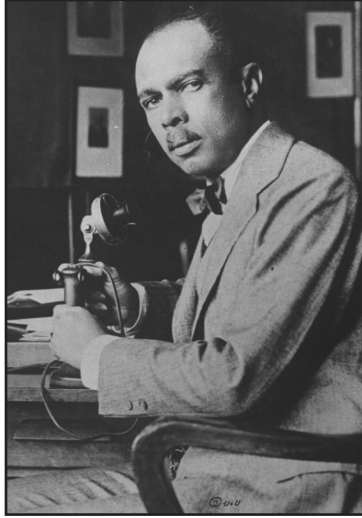
But notwithstanding the lack of sympathetic co-operation, I have one consolation—that I cannot get away from the race, and so long as I am in the race and since I have sense and judgment enough to know what affects the race affects me, it is my duty to help the race to clear itself of those things that affect us in common.

Nguzo Saba Poster (Poster of the Seven Values)

A written form of the seven values should be available and in plain view to reinforce the foundation of Kwanzaa and stress the importance of literacy. From papyrus, the walls of the pyramids, to libraries and universities throughout Africa literacy is central to African American culture. Literacy must be emphasized.

✧ Four ✧

Kwanzaa Activities



James Weldon Johnson

From intimate gatherings of family and friends to community wide public events, Kwanzaa celebrations reaffirm the best in us as a people by sharing the African American story in many creative ways. Whether through symbols, words, songs, dance, music, food or otherwise, every celebration reaches back beyond the enslavement blocks of Jamestown Virginia 1619 into the birthplace of civilization—Africa. From the mother continent Kwanzaa moves forward to inform the present and provides a guidepost for the future. The Black National Anthem: Lift Every Voice and Sing written by James Weldon Johnson in 1899 is a perfect Kwanzaa activity. It embodies the spirit of Kwanzaa and tells the entire African American story. If sung, honor James Weldon Johnson by singing all three verses. As our elders say—tell the entire story!

Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing

Written By James Weldon Johnson

Lift ev'ry voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmony of liberty;
Let our rejoices rise
High as the list'ning skies,
Let it resound far as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us.
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun
Of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chast'ning rod,
Felt in the days when hope
Unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which of fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears have be watered;
We have come, treading our path
Thro' the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by Thy might,
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy Hand,
May we forever stand
True to our God, True to our native land.

Whereas The Black National Anthem and many other activities reflect the host and are optional in Kwanzaa, libation, the lighting of the candles, the farewell statement, and harambee are not. They must be included.

Libation



Libation should be lead by an elder and includes the pouring of water in honor and remembrance of those ancestors who struggled before us and upon whose shoulders we stand. Water is symbolic of life. All life originates from and is sustained by water. After making the libation statement water is poured into a plant or bowl of green leafy vegetables as ancestral names are called. Ancestral names include those you want to remember—the highest form of honor.

Libation statement

Our fathers and mothers came here, lived, loved, struggled and built here. At this place, their love and labor rose like the sun and gave strength and meaning to the day. For them, then, who gave so much we give in return. On this soil we will sow our seeds, and build and move in unity and strength. Here, too, we will continue their struggle for liberation and a higher level of human life. May our eyes be the eagle, our strength be the elephant, and the boldness of our life be like the lion. And may we remember and honor our ancestors and the legacy they left for as long as the sun shines and the waters flow.

Candle lighting

The lighting of seven candles—one black, three red and three green, represent the seven values of Kwanzaa (the Nguzo Saba) and is the center piece of any celebration. This activity should be led by a young person. Children and youth must not only be prepared to accept the responsibility of lighting a flame; they must also be ready to explain the day's value.

Each day of Kwanzaa has one candle representing a corresponding value. For example, the value for day one is Umoja / Unity. Its corresponding candle is black and represents Black people. The black candle is always placed in the center of the kinara (candle holder). A group discussion focusing on the benefits of united Black people follows.

The value for day two is Kujichagulia / Self-determination. Its corresponding candle (left of center) is red and represents struggle. Abolitionist Fredrick Douglas (1818-1895) who courageously escaped and defied enslavement stressed, "Where there is no struggle there is not progress." A group discussion on self-determination follows the lighting of the first two candles—black and red. Day three the black, red and green candle (right of center) is lit followed by a discussion on collective work and responsibility. This alternating process is followed through the seventh and final day of Kwanzaa.

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Karamu (Feast)

As in all harvest celebrations, food is abundant. This is particularly true on December 31, and the Kwanzaa Karamu (first fruits feast). The feast is a time for young and old to come together throughout the community and celebrate. Drumming, song, dance etc. should be included. This is a time to connect or reconnect with community. The venue should be decorated in festive colors and everyone should contribute by bringing a food dish and a commitment to increased unity and continued struggle is reaffirmed.

Every Kwanzaa celebration concludes with Tamshi La Tutaonana—the farewell statement, and Harambee—let's all pull together.

Tamshi La Tutaonana (Farewell Statement)

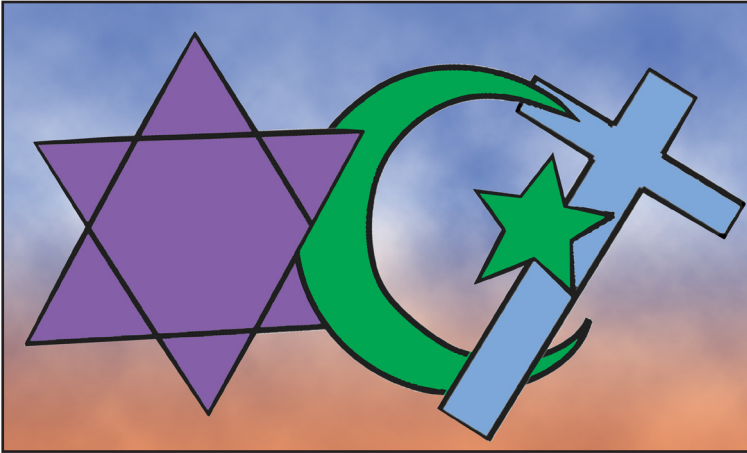
Strive for discipline, dedication and achievement in all you do. Dare struggle and sacrifice and gain the strength that comes from this. Build

Five

Avoiding Kwanzaa Misconceptions

To those less familiar with Kwanzaa, avoiding a few basic misconceptions and pitfalls will help ensure a fulfilling celebration.

Do not abandon your religion or deity



Kwanzaa is not a religion. It is a seven-day celebration based on African American culture—that which we as a people have in common such as our African origin. African Americans of all religions and backgrounds can and do participate. Therefore, do not get drawn into: What religion are you or; Where is Kwanzaa in the Bible, Koran, Metu Neter, Bagavegita (insert your preferred holy book here _____)? Unity is a value observed in Kwanzaa, not division. The seven values include—unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, creativity, purpose and faith. These universal values can be found in all religions rooted in good.

Do not get stuck at the symbol

There are many forms of communication: oral, written, art etc. Kwanzaa is communicated through symbols and the meanings are greater than the objects—candles, corn, cup etc. Do not allow the symbols to become heated points of contention. For example, the colors black, red and green in Kwanzaa are taken from the work of and out of respect for the Honorable Marcus Garvey (1887-1940). This pioneering figure fathered the Back to Africa Movement of the 1920s. Black represents the people; red represents their struggle; and, green represents the future. Now some would argue the order as: black, red, and green, while others red, black and green and still others, green, black and red! This is a clear example of missing the point or getting stuck at the symbol.

Do not fear ritual

The word ritual often conjures up images of blood, human sacrifice, superstition and fear. It should not. Anything done repeatedly and in the same fashion is ritual—like working Monday through Friday, nine to five. Rituals are everywhere in daily life and prevalent in celebrations worldwide. Have you ever witnessed African Americans huddled together drinking spirits? More often than not, before anyone takes a sip, a lil is poured out for those who aint here? This ritual of African origin based on honor and remembrance is called libation. Libation is also a part of Kwanzaa—without liquor of course.

Just as there are many forms of communication there are many ways to honor and remember—photographs, letters, songs, special items etc. An African proverb states: as long as the names of our ancestors are on our lips, they will never die. The pouring of libation and the calling of names during Kwanzaa is in honor and remembrance of those ancestors who struggled for liberation and upon whose shoulders we stand.

Do not go bankrupt

In America, prophets and profit compete. This competition is especially intense during the holidays. As it relates to Christmas the prophet is being overwhelmed by the profit. Behold, Santa has risen. Some even argue its time for a movement to put Christ back into Christmas. This is an example of how consumerism becomes intertwined with celebration. Profit—the bottom line is the backbone of any business and therefore American business existence is largely dependant on the spending habits of holiday celebrants. The irony is, celebrants drive

themselves into debt and depression trying to keep up with the costly demands of the holiday season.

Avoid the marketers and merchandisers; do not go into debt celebrating Kwanzaa. There is gift giving, however, gifts are generally for children and must be earned. They should be handmade, educational or inspirational, include a heritage symbol and not lay a financial burden on the giver. The giver must also be acknowledged and given credit for the gift.

Do not be intimidated by the Kwanzaa Police

In human gatherings self-appointed experts tend to emerge. No one seems to know from where they come; they just are. They know everything and possess the only valid opinion on any given subject. In Kwanzaa gatherings they are pure polemicists and own a closet full of weekend African garments purchased from Walmart. Their authority derives from an alleged role in the 1960s movement, however, movement veterans can't recall knowing them. They are fluent in two or three Swahili phrases and can pronounce ku-ji-chag-u-lia with minimal effort, and because they know everything, they are notorious during planning sessions for shooting down the ideas and aspirations of others. Interaction with the Kwanzaa police usually results in nothing more than heated arguments. Do not get sucked in by the self-appointed expert. When the talking is over and the work begins, they miraculously disappear.

Do not expect each celebration to be identical

Have you ever tasted bean pie? If not, the combination may seem rather strange. The usual response to this question is the same as many who hear about Kwanzaa for the first time—yuck, what is that? After finally being persuaded to taste bean pie or celebrate Kwanzaa most people fall in love. The yuck of unfamiliarity often turns to—ummmm, that's delicious.

As good as bean pies are, depending on the cook each one is a tad different. They vary in size, texture and even taste; some are sold packaged in clear wrap while others in pink boxes. Regardless of difference, there is commonality: the navy bean. Likewise Kwanzaa celebrations vary depending on the host. As long as the common elements and spirit of the celebration are in place, there is no problem.

Do not forget the reason for Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa was created in part to develop self-awareness and community reconstruction. Sadly, the social conditions that inspired this celebration in the 1960s still persist today—racism, poor health and housing conditions, incarceration, drugs, gangs, violence, illiteracy, hopelessness etc. In fact, the charred remains of the rioting of the sixties can still be seen in cities across America. The reason for Kwanzaa must be at the forefront of all celebrations, if not, these gatherings will be nothing more than annual events based on symbols without substance. For example, it's hard to justify celebrating ujamma/cooperative economics while African American businesses continue to close. If the objectives of Kwanzaa are to be realized, the values must be observed throughout the year.