

This Day in History... December 26, 1966

The First Kwanzaa

On December 26, 1966, Maulana Karenga celebrated the first Kwanzaa.

In 1965, a deadly riot rocked a largely African American neighborhood in Los Angeles, leaving 34 dead and 1,000 injured. Professor of Black Studies and former activist Maulana Karenga was disturbed by the violence. He wanted to help the African American community overcome the despair this riot, and ones like it, had caused. Karenga was then inspired by the African harvest celebrations to establish his own non-religious holiday that would stress the importance of family and community.

So, on December 26, 1966, Karenga led his community in celebrating the first Kwanzaa. The name is taken from a phrase meaning “first fruits” in Swahili, an East African language.



The first US stamp issued to honor Kwanzaa.



The seven robed figures represent the seven days and seven principles of Kwanzaa.

With its fusion of ancient African practices and African American ideals and aspirations, Kwanzaa is a non-denominational celebration. It is seen as a time for the gathering of families, and for rededication to the seven principles of *Nguzo Saba*, a set of values as expressed by Karenga.

The Kwanzaa principles are *Umoja* (unity), *Kujichagulia* (self-determination), *Ujima* (collective work and responsibility), *Ujamaa* (cooperative economics), *Nia* (purpose), *Kuumba* (creativity), and *Imani* (faith). Each day of Kwanzaa is dedicated to one of these principles.

During each evening of the seven-day holiday, family members light one of the seven candles of the *kinara* (candleholder), and then discuss that day’s principle. The first is the black candle in the center, which symbolizes African people everywhere. Three red candles, representing the blood of ancestors, are on the left. Three green candles, symbolizing the earth, life, and promise for the future, are on the right.

There are several items common to a Kwanzaa celebration that have special significance. They are the *mkeka*, a straw mat symbolizing the earth; *muhindi*, ears of corn that symbolize offspring; *zawadi*, gifts symbolizing the parents’ work and the rewards of children; *kinara*, a seven-space candle holder, symbolizing the stalk from which the African people grew; and *mishumaa saba*, seven candles symbolizing the Seven Principles.

Participants often exchange gifts. Near the end of the holiday, the community gathers for a feast called *karamu*, which may include performances, music, and dancing.

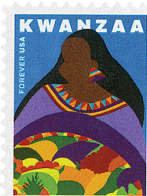
One of the biggest Kwanzaa celebrations is “The Spirit of Kwanzaa.” The event – which is held annually at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC – consists of dancing, singing, and poetry by members of the African American community.



Though Kwanzaa is rooted in African culture, people of all races and ethnicities are invited to celebrate.



Kente is one of the most widely known elements of African fashion.



Karenga hoped Kwanzaa would help “to constantly bring good into the world.”

Kwanzaa lasts from December 26 to January 1.

A special feast known as a Karamu is held on December 31.

In the seven-day celebration, there are seven symbols, seven candles, and seven letters in the name Kwanzaa.

People often exchange homemade gifts on the final day.

Through the years, Kwanzaa has become a true celebration. It is about remembering the past and looking forward to the future. The African American community has become more united because of the holiday. Kwanzaa has led to more recognition of the African American community and their valuable contributions to our society.

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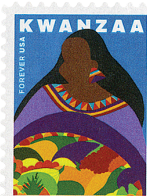
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