

# Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa is a seven-day African American and pan-African holiday celebration that runs from December 26<sup>th</sup> to January 1<sup>st</sup> every year. The festival is a nonreligious holiday inspired by western and southern African first-fruits celebrations. The word Kwanzaa refers to the Swahili phrase “*matunda ya kwanza*,” meaning “first fruits.” Kwanzaa is largely an African American holiday but is also now celebrated outside the United States, especially in areas with African-descended populations, such as in the Caribbean.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, the originator of Kwanzaa, explained that the holiday is an opportunity to “reflect on the expansive meaning of being African in the world, on the context and issues of our times, and on our way forward in struggle.” Dr. Karenga also explained that Kwanzaa is a “celebration of freedom.”

## History of Kwanzaa

Kwanzaa was devised in 1966 by Dr. Karenga, an activist and professor at California State University – Long Beach, to encourage a stronger sense of community among African Americans. Dr. Karenga developed the idea for Kwanzaa after the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles, during which there were violent clashes between police and African American residents. Since then, the celebration of Kwanzaa has spread, primarily within the United States and other countries with African-descended populations.

## Observance of Kwanzaa

Each of the seven days of Kwanzaa honors a principle: unity (*umoja*), self-determination (*kujichagulia*), collective responsibility (*ujima*), cooperative economics (*ujamaa*), purpose (*nia*), creativity (*kuumba*), and faith (*imani*). Those celebrating are meant to reflect and discuss the principle of the day. Kwanzaa has several important associated symbols, such as fruits, vegetables, nuts, a straw mat, a candle holder known as a kinara, ears of corn, gifts, a communal cup, and candles in red, green, and black. One candle is lit for each day of the holiday.

Celebrating Kwanzaa often involves storytelling, songs, dance, and shared meals. On December 31<sup>st</sup>, the sixth day of Kwanzaa, people observe with the *karamu*, or collective feast. The seventh final day is marked by exchanging gifts.

Celebrating Kwanzaa doesn't necessarily mean exclusively celebrating Kwanzaa. Many families celebrate Kwanzaa in addition to other winter holidays such as Christmas.

### **Scheduling**

Kwanzaa is typically celebrated outside of standard work hours, but it is important to remember that employees may request time off or a modified schedule to be with their families during the week of the celebration. Supervisors should work with employees to accommodate these requests.

### **Acknowledging Kwanzaa**

If you would like to recognize Kwanzaa with your colleagues and friends who celebrate, saying, “Happy Kwanzaa” would be appropriate.

**For more useful information on world religions, subscribe to Tanenbaum’s online resource, [Religion at Work: A \(Human\) Resource](#). Visit the Tanenbaum [Workplace Resources](#) page for additional Tanenbaum fact sheets and contact Tanenbaum at [membership@tanenbaum.org](mailto:membership@tanenbaum.org).**