

**What is Kwanzaa?** - Kwanzaa is a harvest festival (its name comes from the Swahili phrase “matunda ya kwanza,” which means “first fruits”) and celebration of African heritage and culture. It kicks off on December 26 and continues through January 1 with a feast called Karamu, which is held on New Year’s Eve.

Its roots trace back to agricultural traditions in ancient Africa. Many ancient tribes and societies traditionally marked the first harvests of the season with a feast, an opportunity to both strengthen the community and thank the earth for a bountiful harvest.

Kwanzaa first began in 1966 and was established by professor and activist Maulana Karenga as a way to bring the African American community together once a year for a celebration of its culture and heritage. Historically, many African-Americans didn’t know much about their cultural heritage, their ancestors having been stolen from their homelands and brought to the U.S. as slaves.

Once here, slaves were forced to abandon their traditional cultural practices and religions. This forced assimilation, along with the careless splitting up of families by slave owners, caused many to lose touch with their roots.

**Kwanzaa Traditions** - While some of the focus of Kwanzaa is the harvest (and the food!), it’s primarily about community-building, self-reflection and honoring African cultures and heritage.

Kwanzaa began as a way to connect African-Americans with “The Seven Principles” of African heritage—Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith).

**What Is The Meaning Of Kwanzaa?** - There are seven basic principles called Nguzo Saba. Together, these defining principles promote self-improvement and community-building.

Each candle represents one of The Seven Principles and is lit on one of the seven days of Kwanzaa, which is celebrated December 26th – January 1st. Each principle is represented by one of the candles in the kinara and is the focus of the celebration each night. The black candle in the center is lit first, followed by the three red candles on the left and the three green candles on the right.

The black, red and green candles mimic the colors the UNIA declared the official Pan-African colors. The black candle represents the African people and their unity, the red candles represent their struggle, and the green candles symbolize the future and hope. black represents the people, red is for the blood of those uniting and green is for the land of Africa.

**What Does 'Kwanzaa' Mean** - "Kwanzaa" is derived from the Swahili phrase "matunda ya kwanza," or "first fruits."

Kente cloth is a traditional hand-woven cotton fabric from Ghana, originating with the Akan people of South Ghana. It's a sacred, ceremonial cloth, so it is often used to make clothes and other fabric items people use when celebrating Kwanzaa. Each cloth has its own name, and the patterns found on different cloths have various symbolic meanings, so make sure you buy your Kente cloth from an authentic source who can tell you about what you're buying.

**How Is It Celebrated?** - Families celebrate Kwanzaa in many ways. Celebrations typically include a feast on Dec. 31, accompanied by dancing, African drums, singing, storytelling and more. Many also partake in the kikombe cha umoja, or unity cup, which is passed from person to person; some of the drink is poured out in honor of departed ancestors. The celebration is seven days long because a candle-lighting ceremony is held each evening on the kinara, a seven-stick candleholder. Each night, families and others in the community gather to discuss the true meaning of Kwanzaa.

**What To Wear?** - There is no dress code for Kwanzaa. Many choose to attend in traditional African clothing, while others just wear jeans. However, the official colors of the holiday are red, black and green (these are the colors of the kinara candles)

Here are some additional good information resources:

[Traditional Kwanzaa Gift Ideas to Make Homemade](#)

[Kwanzaa Facts: 5 Things To Know About The African-American Cultural Holiday](#)

[What is Kwanzaa: Recipes, Traditions & more](#)

[What is Kwanzaa? \(kids cartoon\)](#)

[Kevin's Kwansaa: Children's Books Read Aloud](#)

[The True Meaning of Kwanzaa: Disney's the Proud Family](#)

How to Celebrate Kwanzaa: The United Black Community [Part 1](#) [Part 2](#)

[Sesame Street: Kwanzaa](#)

*Information compiled by Jan Gillet, Board Trustee for the Spruce Grove Public Library*