

How to Celebrate Kwanzaa

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Co-authored by **67 contributors**

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Kwanzaa is a holiday invented in 1966 by Maulana Karenga through which African Americans can connect with their heritage and culture. It's celebrated from December 26 through January 1, with each of the seven days focusing on one of seven core values, or *Nguzo Saba*. A candle is lit on each day, and on the last day, gifts are exchanged. Since Kwanzaa is a cultural holiday rather than a religious one, it can be celebrated alongside Christmas or Hanukkah, or on its own, although Karenga wished for it to be celebrated instead of Christmas and Hanukkah, as he felt these holidays were simply symbols of the dominant cultures in America.^[1]

Things You'll Need

- ☐ Mkeka (woven mat)
- ☐ Flag materials
- ☐ Corn
- ☐ Green tablecloth
- ☐ Black, red, and green candles
- ☐ Gifts of different principles

Steps



1 **Decorate your home or the main room with the symbols of Kwanzaa.** Put a green tablecloth over a centrally located table, and on top of that, place the *Mkeka* which is a straw or woven mat that symbolizes the historical foundation of African ancestry. Place the following on the *Mkeka*:

- **Mazao** — fruit or crops placed in a bowl, representing the community's productivity.
- **Kinara** — a seven-pronged candle-holder.
- **Mishumaa Saba** — the seven candles which represent the seven core principles of Kwanzaa. Three candles on the left are red, representing struggle; three on the right are green, representing hope; and one in the center is black, signifying the African American people or those who draw their heritage from Africa.
- **Muhindi** — ears of corn. Lay out one ear of corn for each child; if there are no children, place two ears to represent the children of the community.
- **Zawadi** — various gifts for the children.
- **Kikombe cha Umoja** — a cup to represent family and community unity.



2 Decorate around the room with Kwanzaa **flags**, called *Bendera*, and posters emphasizing the seven principles. You can purchase or make these, and it's especially fun to make them with the kids.^[2]

- See [How to make a flag](#) for details on flag making. Click [here](#) for detailed instructions on how to color in the Bendera.
- If you or your children enjoy making flags, try making [African national or tribal](#) flags in addition to the Bendera.



3 Practice the Kwanzaa greetings. Starting on December 26, greet everyone by saying "Habari Gani" which is a standard Swahili greeting meaning "what is the news?" If someone greets you, respond with the principle (Nguzo Saba) for that day:^[3]

- December 26: "*Umoja*" — Unity
- December 27: "*Kujichagulia*" — Self-determination
- December 28: "*Ujima*" — Collective work and responsibility
- December 29: "*Ujamaa*" — Cooperative economics
- December 30: "*Nia*" — Purpose
- December 31: "*Kuumba*" — Creativity
- January 1: "*Imani*" — Faith.
- Non African-Americans are also welcome to participate in greetings. The traditional greeting for them is "Joyous Kwanzaa."



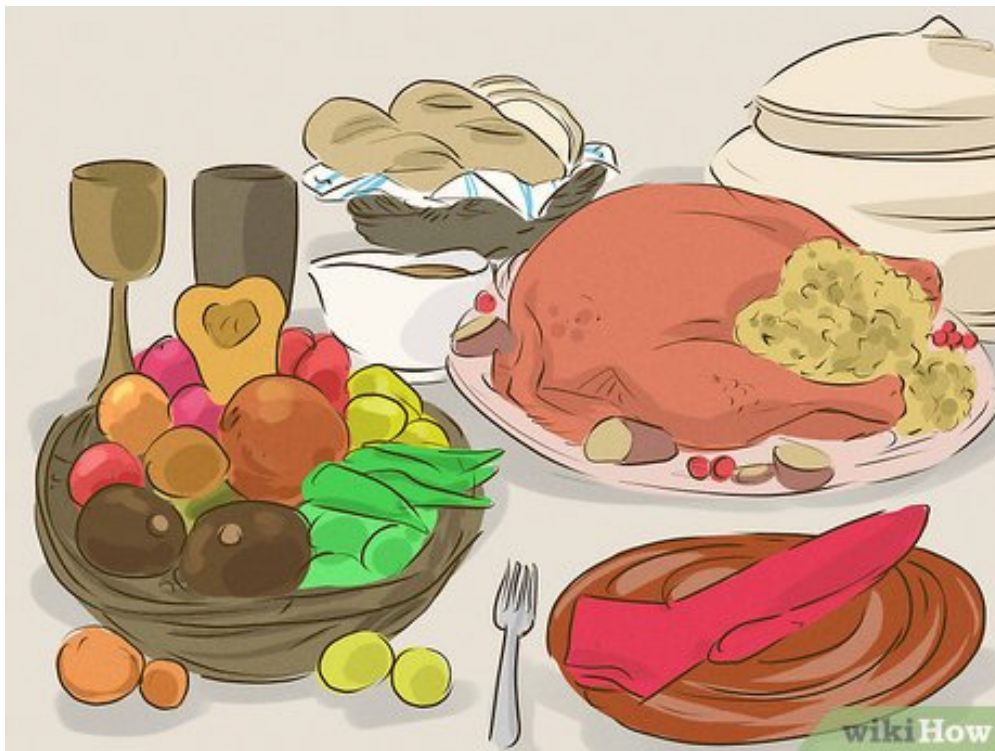
4 Light the Kinara daily. Since each candle represents a specific principle, they are lit one day at a time, in a certain order. The black candle is always lit first. Some people light the remaining candles from left to right (red to green) while other people alternate as follows:

- Black candle
- Far left red candle
- Far right green candle
- Second red candle
- Second green candle
- Last red candle
- Last green candle



5 Celebrate Kwanzaa in a variety of different ways. Pick and choose some or all of the following activities throughout the seven days of Kwanzaa, saving the feast for the sixth day. Kwanzaa ceremony may include:^[4]

- Drumming and musical selections.
- Readings of the African Pledge and the Principles of Blackness.
- Reflections on the Pan-African colors, discussions of African principles of the day, or recitations of chapters in African history.
- The candle-lighting ritual of the Kinara.
- Artistic performances.



6 Have the Kwanzaa Karamu (feast) on the sixth day (New Year's Eve). The Kwanzaa feast is a very special event that brings everyone closer to their African roots. It is traditionally held on December 31st and is a communal and cooperative effort. **Decorate** the place where the feast will be held in a red, green, and black scheme. A large Kwanzaa setting should dominate the room where the feast will be held. A large Mkeka should be placed in the center of the floor where the food is placed creatively and made accessible to all to serve themselves. Before and during the feast, an informative and entertaining program should be presented.

- Traditionally, the program should involve welcoming, remembering, reassessment, recommitment and **rejoicing** concluded by a farewell statement and a call for greater unity.
- During the feast, drinks are to be shared from a communal cup, the *Kikombe cha Umoja*, passed around to all celebrants.



7 Give out the gifts of Kuumba. Kuumba, meaning **creativity**, is highly encouraged and brings a sense of self-satisfaction. The gifts are usually exchanged between the parents and children and are given out traditionally on January 1st, the last day of Kwanzaa. Since the giving of gifts has very much to do with Kuumba, the gifts should be of an educational or artistic nature.[5]



Community Q&A

Question

What artistic performances could I do?



Community Answer

You could play an instrument, do a dance, read a poem you wrote or that was written by someone else, or sing a song about your heritage, culture, or ancestors.

Helpful 51 Not Helpful 3

Question

What is a mkeka mat?



Community Answer

A traditional straw or woven textile mat, called a mkeka, is one of the seven symbols of Kwanzaa. Those who celebrate Kwanzaa view the mkeka as the base for the other six symbols of Kwanzaa, representing the idea that nothing can be built without having a foundation upon which to rest.

Helpful 50 Not Helpful 4

Question

Can I still put up a Christmas tree if my new spouse wants to celebrate Kwanzaa with me and my children?



Community Answer

Sure! You can decorate it with red, black and green so that it will be more Kwanzaa-like.

Helpful 60 Not Helpful 13

Question

What do the candles stand for?



Community Answer

The red candles stand for struggles, the green stand for hope, and the black represents the African people.

Helpful 83 Not Helpful 19

Question

What do I do on the second day of Kwanzaa?



Community Answer

The second day is about self-determination. Talk with family about what that means and looks like to you. Do an activity that requires determination from everyone. Discuss your ancestors and people of color who were/are self-determined and successful.

Helpful 64 Not Helpful 18

Question

What do I give on the first day of Kwanzaa?



Community Answer

Umoja is not about giving, but more about coming together as one community. Usually, the Unity cup is shared by all in the room. Harambee (Swahili for unity) is chanted 7 times.

Helpful 64 Not Helpful 23

Question

What should I wear during a Kwanzaa celebration?



Community Answer

Wear traditional African clothing, especially dashikis and African-print dresses and headdresses.

Helpful 57 Not Helpful 18

Question

Can Kwanzaa be celebrated in any part of the world, even if I am not African American?



Community Answer

Yes, anyone anywhere in the world can celebrate Kwanzaa, there are no restrictions.

Helpful 27 Not Helpful 6

Question

Where can the candle holder, communal cup and other items used to celebrate Kwanzaa be purchased?



Community Answer

Try searching on amazon.com or eBay to purchase these items.

Helpful 62 Not Helpful 25

Question

Do the candles stay lit for the seven days?



Naomi Keglovitz-Haynes

Community Answer

The candles must stay lit for the seven days, but you can decide when you would like to take them down after the seven days are over.

Helpful 33 Not Helpful 11



Tips

- Kwanzaa means "**first fruits of the harvest**" in the African language Kiswahili. Many of the phrases used in Kwanzaa are in Swahili, which was the language chosen to represent African heritage.

References

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