

Kwanzaa Not on Students' Holiday To-Do List

Contributed by Drew Daniels and Dante Mozie - Black College Wire
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Indifference, ignorance given as reasons

The celebration of Kwanzaa has connections to academia. Its founder, Maulana Karenga, was a professor of black studies at California State University at Long Beach from 1989 to 2002. When he created Kwanzaa in 1966, many of its early practitioners were African-American college students.

But today, it's hard to find black students who observe the seven-day celebration, which begins on Dec. 26 and culminates in a feast and gift-giving on New Year's Day.

"I do not think many African-Americans celebrate Kwanzaa for the same reason we do not do other things that can enhance our culture -- ignorance," said Dallas Lee, a 21-year-old Langston University English major. "If African Americans took time to research the meaning behind each day in Kwanzaa, they would realize that the holiday is not just a way of boosting store sales. Instead, it is meant to instill and carry though important cultural ideals that are not practiced 365 days of the year."

However, Lee said he has not celebrated Kwanzaa in a long time. "Honestly, my family once celebrated the holiday," said Lee, who is from Chicago, Ill. "I have not celebrated it in a while, because it is not the popular thing to do."

Like Lee, Cedric Solan, a 25-year-old pharmacy doctoral student at Xavier University of Louisiana, has memories of the celebration. "I recall one of my friends who celebrated Kwanzaa," Solan said, but added, "I do not know anything about Kwanzaa."

Valencia Johnson, a junior English education major at South Carolina State University, said although she doesn't celebrate Kwanzaa, she understands its themes.

"I know about the seven concepts that each day is supposed to represent," said the Sumter, S.C., native. "A lot of the concepts surround the different themes, such as the unity of family (and) community."

Siobhan Little, a sophomore political science major at the University of South Carolina, said she is very familiar with the history and traditions of the cultural holiday, even though she hasn't celebrated Kwanzaa since she was a child.

"It's a non-religious, seven-day African-American event surrounded by seven principles such as self-determination, unity and collective work and response," Little said. "It was created to instill pride among blacks and to remind them of their heritage."

Tiffany Kamuche, 21, a Texas Tech senior sociology major whose father is from Nigeria, said she remembers learning about Kwanzaa in elementary school, but has forgotten it. "I don't know anything about Kwanzaa. If you were not in an environment where people celebrate Kwanzaa you wouldn't know anything about it," she said, adding most of her African friends "are either Christians or Eastern Orthodox."

Kofi Khamit-Kush, 18, a Morehouse College sophomore from Brooklyn, N.Y., has celebrated Kwanzaa his entire life and grew up in an Afrocentric household. He believes his fellow students lack interest in Kwanzaa "probably out of ignorance. It's not something that's supposed to take the place of Christmas. They think it's a substitute for Christmas--it's something different. It's not a 'Black Christmas'," Khamit-Kush said. "It's not that at all."

Overall, however, interest in Kwanzaa has grown nationally. According to annual surveys by the National Retail Federation, 4.7 million Americans in October 2007 said they would participate. This is an increase from 1.6 percent, as reported by the same organization in 2004.

When he created the celebration, Karenga, who also founded the Pan-African organization Us, centered Kwanzaa around Nguzo Saba, or "Seven Principles" in Swahili. The principles are: Umoja (Unity), Kujichagulia (Self-Determination), Ujima (Collective Work and Response), Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics), Nia (Purpose), Kuumba (Creativity) and Imani (Faith).

Kwanzaa is also centered around nine symbols, seven of which are basic, and the remaining two are supplemental. Among the seven basic symbols are Mazao (The Crops), which are symbolic of celebrations of African harvest, Mkeka (The Mat), which symbolizes African history and tradition and Mishumaa Saba (The Seven Candles), which are symbols of the Seven Principles of Kwanzaa.

The two supplemental symbols are Bendera, a flag with the African colors of red, green and black; and the Nguzo Saba poster of the Seven Principles.

In his annual founder's message for 2007, Karenga states, "As a first-fruits harvest celebration, Kwanzaa invites and encourages us to be thankful for the abundant good of the earth and to act in ways that show we will and consciously work for the well-being and wholeness of the world."

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