



**SERIOUSLY CENTERING THE NGUZO SABA OF KWANZAA:
PRACTICING THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF KAWAIDA PHILOSOPHY**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IT IS NOT AN EXAGGERATION OR MIS-UNDERSTANDING to assert with no small measure of consideration that *Kwanzaa* and the *Nguzo Saba* have united African peoples on common ground in ways no other institution or cultural practice has. These interlocked cultural institutions and traditions have brought us together in joyful celebration of ourselves, our families, communities and culture unlike any other celebration or value system. This holiday and its core values have reached across our various identities of nationality, religion, sex, gender, sexuality, age, class and level of consciousness and brought us together on the common ground of our history, culture and peoplehood as Black people, African people, in a word, being ourselves in the world.

This year marks the 61st anniversary of my introduction of the *Nguzo Saba*, the Seven Principles, which are the core values of *Kwanzaa* and of *Kawaida* philosophy out of which I created both *The Nguzo Saba* and *Kwanzaa*. As I have taught for sixty years, the message and meaning of *Kwanzaa* is rooted, above all, in its profound and persistent concern with values, communitarian values, values that center togetherness and shared good and stress and strengthen family, community and culture.

In fact, one of the reasons I created *Kwanzaa* was to introduce the *Nguzo Saba* and other communitarian values. *Kwanzaa*'s length of seven days was not

only in emulation of the Zulu first fruit celebration, *Umkhosi woKweshwama*, but also to dedicate each day to one of the Seven Principles. *Kwanzaa* derives this concern for and focus on values from *Kawaida*, the African philosophical initiative from which it was created.

I defined *Kawaida* philosophy as *an ongoing synthesis of the best of African sensibilities, thought and practice in constant exchange with the world*. *Kawaida* is further defined by its commitment to an ongoing dialog with African culture, asking it questions and seeking from it answers to the fundamental issues confronting African peoples and the world. And no questions are more central than what values should we hold concerning ourselves, others, life and the world.

Kawaida's emphasis on values is drawn from the value emphasis in ancient African philosophy. Whether in the classical African civilizations of ancient Egypt, Ashantiland or Yorubaland or in the smaller societies of Dogon, Dinka or Lovedu, the stress on value instruction and values as central to character and conduct are powerfully present. In ancient Egypt the stress on moral instruction and moral formation of the human person is rooted in the practice of the ethics of *Ma'at*, goodness and rightness in the spiritual, natural and social sense. I selected these seven core values on the basis of both tradition and reason.

Selecting them from the African communitarian tradition and in the con-

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text of the Black Freedom Movement, I chose them with considered appreciation for the legacy of our past, the realities of our present and the demands of our future. Our most definitive condition is that we were and are a community in oppression and resistance, and our values, I decided, should reflect and lend support to this righteous and relentless struggle. And at its heart, ours is a struggle to be ourselves and free ourselves, develop, flourish and come into the fullness of ourselves in our ongoing quest for African and human good and the well-being of the world.

As I have written in my book, “Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture,” although there are many other communitarian values which I could have chosen, I selected these seven core values, the *Nguzo Saba*, for four basic reasons. First, they were selected because of their prevalence and recurrence in communitarian African societies, therefore reflecting a pan-African character; their urgent relevance to the Black Freedom Movement and our struggle for liberation, rebuilding community both nationally and globally, and contributing to a new history of possibilities and shared good for humankind; the cultural and spiritual significance of seven in African culture; and finally, their teachability of seven principles in terms of learning and living them and their foundational emphasis.

In this context of continuous struggle, we can only achieve our liberative goals in the most expansive interests of our people and humankind by seriously

centering the values we hold dear in our daily lives. And this means for us, constantly reflecting on, practicing and promoting the *Nguzo Saba* and the liberatory philosophy of Kawaïda. Indeed, in these dangerous, difficult and demanding times, the Seven Principles offer us *an anchor of cultural grounding, a moral compass for moving forward, and a very African and human incentive to create and sustain good for our people, the world and all in it.*

In the face of a world plagued with hostility and hatred, alienation, conflict and division, we must practice the principle of *Umoja* (Unity) stressing the oneness of our people, the common ground of our humanity, and our shared vital relationship with the natural world.

In the face of repeated denials and violations of persons and peoples’ rights to freedom, sovereignty and self-rule, we must practice the principle of *Kujichagulia* (Self-determination), upholding the right and responsibility of every people to be free and to build and live their lives as they determine, whether in Haiti, Africa, Palestine, or elsewhere in the world. In opposition to vulgar individualism and the quest to find a comfortable personal places in oppression, we must practice the principle of *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility), constantly searching for common ground and cooperation for common good, a shared and inclusive good.

In opposition to the capitalist and imperialist plunder, genocidal pillage and appropriation of other people’s lives,

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lands and wealth, we must practice the principle of *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics) upholding the values of shared work and wealth, and the right of all to an equitable and just share of the goods of the world. In a world of alienation, antagonism, apprehension and the erasure of vital moral norms raising questions of what to do, we must practice the principle of *Nia* (Purpose), pursuing our collective vocation of constantly building and developing community and honoring the African ethical imperative to bring good in the world.

IN THE FACE OF WANTON DESTRUCTION of peoples, futures, possibilities and the

world and all in it by the radically evil and grotesquely greedy, we must dare to practice the principle of *Kuumba* (Creativity) following the ancestral teaching of *serudj ta* – the ethical obligation to constantly repair, renew and re-make the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

And in the cold and frozen face and heart of the faith killers, the peddlers of pessimism and the worship of wealth, war and power, we must dare to practice the principle of *Imani* (Faith) believing in in the good, the right and the possible and working and waging righteous and relentless struggle to achieve these shared goods.▲

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