



**US, KUUMBA AND MY CREATION OF KWANZAA:
RESEARCH, REFLECTION AND THE LIBERATING VISION AND VALUES**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IN MARKING THIS THE 61ST ANNIVERSARY of the founding of the organization Us and the development of the *Nguzo Saba*, it is also important to commemoratively note that this year is also the 60th anniversary of the global pan-African holiday, *Kwanzaa*, a celebration of family, community and culture. Indeed, the organization Us and the holiday Kwanzaa are linked and interrelated in philosophy, fashioning and founding. For it is from my philosophy *Kawaida*, that I conceived the idea of and founded the vanguard organization Us, and that I envisioned and created the culturally grounded holiday *Kwanzaa* and the *Nguzo Saba*, the Seven Principles. And although I began research in continental African cultures and languages in college and through early independent study that would be a central source of my envisioning and creation of Kwanzaa, it is in the context of Us that I created Kwanzaa and that the advocates (members) of Us embraced and supported its creation and were the first to practice and promote Kwanzaa and its core principles, the *Nguzo Saba*.

As I've always noted, others were also key to Kwanzaa's expansion and becoming a world-encompassing pan-African holiday celebrated by millions of African peoples throughout the world African community. Those at the center of this practice and promotion were *Kawaida* formations, independent organizations who were influenced and guided by *Kawaida* philosophy and especially the *Nguzo Saba*. These included the East and Uhuru Sasa Shule, Brooklyn; The Committee for a United Newark and Congress of African

Peoples, Newark; The Institute of Positive Education, Chicago; Ahidiana, New Orleans; Ujamaa School, Washington, D.C.; and the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI), national. In addition to these major institutions, countless other organizations and persons taught and practiced the *Nguzo Saba* and Kwanzaa and shared it with others locally, nationally and internationally. Thus, the envisioning and creation of Kwanzaa is my intellectual creation, but its development into a world-encompassing pan-African cultural tradition is an *ujima* achievement, a collective and cooperative work of our people around the world.

Kwanzaa is often presented as a recent-history holiday, but its roots are in a longer history, the ancient African first-fruit celebrations from which I developed its fundamental activities and gave it its name. Indeed, the name Kwanzaa is taken from the Kiswahili phrase "*matunda ya kwanza*", the first fruits. Although I studied numerous first fruit celebrations from ancient Egypt to modern times, I focused most on the Zulu first-fruit celebration we called *Umkhosi* for short, but whose whole name is *Umkhosi woKweshwama* which literally means festival of tasting or enjoying the first fruits. I especially drew from it its seven-day duration and its placement at the end and beginning of the year. And I drew five fundamental common activities from the many continental African first-fruit holidays in all their diversity.

As I explained in my book, *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, these common activities are: the

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ingathering of the people to reaffirm and reinforce the bonds between them; *special reverence for Creator and creation* to give thanks and thoughtful recommitment to preserve and protect the earth which makes possible the abundant good of harvests; *commemoration of the past*, practicing the morality of remembrance of our honored ancestors whose lives and legacies offer us libraries of lessons and models of human excellence and achievement; *recommitment to our highest cultural ideals* of shared good in the world and especially centering and practicing the Nguzo Saba in our daily lives; and *celebration of the Good*, the good of life and love, family, community and culture, field and forest, earth, air and water, and the good of cultivating, reaping and sharing the rich harvests of collective work for good in the world.

Kwanzaa's modern origins are in the freedom-focused and transformative struggles of the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960s, and its essential message and meaning is also shaped by our resolute strivings and struggles for freedom, justice and associated goods. Thus, Kwanzaa came into being, grounded itself and grew as an act of freedom, an instrument of freedom, a celebration of freedom and a practice of freedom. It grounded itself and grew as *an act of cultural resistance and a self-determined act of creation and practice* without our seeking permission or approval from others; as a special space and means of *cultivating cultural and political consciousness and possibilities of freedom*; as a self-conscious celebration of *the sacredness, soulfulness and beautifulness of African peoples* in all our diversity and defiance; and as *living the Nguzo Saba* as a

culturally grounded pathway to a liberated and uplifted life.

To become totally involved in the Black Freedom Movement, I left my doctoral studies at UCLA as the Movement's Black Power phase was emerging. Indeed, the first reason I created Kwanzaa was to contribute to the Movement and serve our people in meaningful and effective ways. Thus, I focused on building institutions leading to my founding our organization Us, developing the Nguzo Saba, creating Kwanzaa, and cooperatively establishing the African American Cultural Center.

Also, I created Kwanzaa to reaffirm our rootedness in African culture, returning to the whole of our history and cultures for models of the best of what it means to be African and human in the world. Thirdly, I created Kwanzaa to institute a time when we as African people all over the world could come together, reinforce the bonds between us, celebrate ourselves, and meditate on the awesome meaning of being African in the world. Furthermore, I created Kwanzaa to introduce and reaffirm the importance of communitarian African values, values that center togetherness and shared good and stress and strengthen family, community and culture.

And our core communitarian values are the *Nguzo Saba*, The Seven Principles, which are:

Umoja (Unity);
Kujichagulia (Self-Determination); *Ujima*
(Collective Work and Responsibility);
Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics); *Nia*
(Purpose); *Kuumba* (Creativity); and
Imani (Faith).

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THUS, IN SPITE OF THE VARIED DESCRIPTIONS of Kwanzaa, it is best understood as *an intellectual and cultural creation, a product of my years of research, reflection and crafting a vision of a new world and way forward grounded in uplifting and liberating values of shared good*. This is the real and evidence-rich history of Kwanzaa, in stark and steadfast contrast to any latter-day fictional Narratives and nonsense claims of alternative origins of Kwanzaa, including imaginary

surrogate mothers and fathers, fabricated co-creators, and myths of a little child leading Us and me to the light of creation. Indeed, my creation of Kwanzaa and its creativity is an embodiment, expression and model of the Sixth Principle, *Kuumba*, which asks and urges us, not to falsely claim or dishonestly deny others' creativity, but in our own way "to do always as much as we can in the way we can in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it."▲

DR. MAULANA KARENGA, Professor Emeritus of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa and the Nguzo Saba; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org, www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org.