

WHAT DOES KWANZAA MEAN TO US?

by Racialicious Special Correspondent [Latoya Peterson](#)

Going through my normal morning blog reading ritual, I came across [a link](#) to an article on [the declining popularity of Kwanzaa](#).

The article begins:

When I first learned about Kwanzaa in the 1980s, I questioned the need to create an observance for African Americans. It felt too contrived: all those symbols and paraphernalia, all that ritual. Even the Swahili names for the seven days of the holiday rang false: Swahili is an East African language, and the majority of African Americans have origins in West Africa.

Still, the holiday caught on; Kwanzaa cards and wrapping paper lie on the shelves next to supplies for Hanukkah and Christmas. There is a Kwanzaa postage stamp, and each year, President Bush issues a Kwanzaa message. I've grown to appreciate Kwanzaa because I've seen how it unites disparate, even hostile, segments of the African American community.

These days, though, I fear for the future of Kwanzaa. The latest figures, from a 2004 study by the National Retail Foundation, say that just 13 percent of African Americans observe the holiday. When I go to Kwanzaa ceremonies, the audience is mostly folks in their 40s and older. I don't see the younger people, the ones who need to embrace Kwanzaa and keep it vibrant.

When they look at Kwanzaa, do they see a relic from the '60s?

Interesting question.

(For those of you not familiar with the specifics of Kwanzaa, please go and read the article. Before we continue, I need everyone to understand that Kwanzaa is NOT a substitute for Christmas.)

Kwanzaa is a strange holiday and it is still seen as not quite legitimate. After all, it is a cultural holiday in a season of religious based holidays. In some ways, Kwanzaa is kind of a relic from the 60s. That was back when African-Americans were struggling to form a national identity and show solidarity and that led to some of the pan-African celebrations and customs the community has embraced.

Now, many African-Americans are comfortable with their identity and have focused more on their individual lives. Kwanzaa is more of an after thought.

I was raised with Kwanzaa when I was younger. Every year, Mom broke out the kente cloth table mats, the ear of corn, the wooden chalice thing she bought from the black expo, our wooden carved kinara and the red, black, and green candles. We celebrated Kwanzaa every year for about five years.

As my sister and I entered adolescence our enthusiasm for the holiday waned. After a while, we stopped formally celebrating Kwanzaa.

(Though, I must mention that we were subject to random pop quizzes. “Spell *kujichagulia* and tell me what it stands for!”)

As an adult, I don’t celebrate Kwanzaa. (I also have yet to find enough Christmas spirit to decorate my studio.)

That will change in a few years though, when I have children.

You see, Kwanzaa is very useful in helping children to understand their identity, to know who they are. The discussion of the [Nguzo Saba](#) is actually an excellent springboard into conversations about identity, community, responsibility, and purpose. Even if a child doesn’t think about Kwanzaa at all for the other 51 weeks each year, the lessons of Kwanzaa will remain with them.

I learned to understand *umoja* (unity) which is why I feel a strong call to serve my community.

I learned about *kujichagulia* (self-determination) which inspires me to keep pushing toward my goals and making my dreams into a reality.

I try to practice *ujima* (collective work and responsibility) which means I will go out and support my community in various ways. This is mainly financial (seeking out black owned businesses) but will later expand to being a mentor and a foster parent.

Becoming a business owner and networking with other black professionals allows me to employ the principle of *ujamaa* (cooperative economics).

My entire life is dedicated to *nia* (purpose). Why am I here? What am I supposed to do to improve my community? What is my role?

Learning to use your skills to benefit your community is a practical application of *kuumba* (creativity). Encouraging others to tap into their creative self is also important to me.

Believing in others and believing in ourselves is the cornerstone of *imani* (faith). Imani is the final principle, used on the final day of Kwanzaa. And then your new year begins allowing you the opportunity to put these principles into practice.

Kwanzaa is a holiday that allows you to reconnect with yourself and your community. It allows for understanding and it encourages reflection.

Does anyone else celebrate Kwanzaa? What are your impressions of the holiday?