



**REAFFIRMING THE ESSENTIAL MESSAGE OF KWANZAA:
PLACING THE NGUZO SABA AT THE CENTER**

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DR. MAULANA KARENKA

AS WE MOVE ONCE AGAIN INTO THE MONTH of December and the season of celebration of the good at the year's end, Kwanzaa will again assume its rightful role as a distinct, definitive and defining African cultural presence at the table of these times. It's anchoring, orienting, and uplifting significance is affirmed through its embrace and practice by millions of African peoples throughout the world African community on every continent in the world. Thus, it is ever important to affirm and reaffirm the essential message and meaning of Kwanzaa, always placing its core values, the Nguzo Saba, the Seven Principles, at the center. Here I want to suggest a careful reading and re-reading and studying of my definitive book on *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, (University of Sankore Press) and offer herein excerpts and ideas and discussion for a beautiful and deeper engagement with it.

As the creator of Kwanzaa, my essential intention was and remains to provide a foundation for a rich understanding and correct practice of *Kwanzaa* and at the same time, furnish a framework for its continued development in ways that maintain its integrity, enhance its beauty in concept and practice, and contribute to its expansive meaning as a living and life-affirming tradition. In such a context, we all become self-conscious keepers of the tradition and therefore share the collective work and responsibility (*Ujima*) for the maintenance of its authenticity and excellence, resisting violations of its integrity and spirit and building on its base in self-determining and enhancing ways.

There is no way to understand and appreciate the meaning and message of Kwanzaa without understanding and appreciating its profound and pervasive concern with values. In fact, Kwanzaa's reason for existence, its length of seven days, its core focus and its foundation are all rooted in its concern with values. Kwanzaa inherits this value concern and focus from *Kawaida*, the African philosophical framework in which it was created. Kawaida philosophy is a communitarian African

philosophy which is an ongoing synthesis of the best of African sensitivities, thought and practice in constant exchange with the world. Kawaida is further defined by its central focus on views and values and its commitment to an ongoing dialog with African culture which involves using it as a resource rather than a reference. That is to say, asking it questions and seeking answers from it to fundamental concerns of human life. And no questions are more central than what values should we hold concerning ourselves, others, life and the world.

It is a fundamental Kawaida contention that values are the hinge on which human possibilities turn. That is to say, as categories of commitment and priorities, values produce and sustain thought and practice which either diminish or enhance human possibilities. In other words, what you define as important and put first in your life determines your human possibilities. The choice of buying more records (or CDs) than books and dancing one's life away clearly diminishes one's human possibilities. Likewise, a people's choice to allow an oppressor to educate their children have also limited their human possibilities. And a people whose paradigms of thought and practice are borrowed from its oppressor clearly have limited human possibilities. Thus, values are essential to the quality and potential of human life.

Moreover, Kawaida teaches that values are also important because they are a core component of culture and interact with practice in creating and sustaining the fabric and forward or backward motion of culture. For values support or oppose various kinds of practice which, in and through the context of the cultural process, can lead to the liberation and development of a people and its culture or their enslavement and destruction. This is not to say practice itself does not shape or give rise to values. For there is a reciprocal relationship between values and practice. As Haji Sekou Toure suggests, practice shapes values. But for practice to shape values, values must exist, and this, at one level, suggests the priority of values. In other words, right value-

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orientation precedes and makes possible the right kind of practice.

But again, it is important to see the reciprocal interaction of cultural values and cultural practice. For even though we start with cultivating the values for a particular desired life-affirming practice, it is in practice that their worth is affirmed or disproved. Moreover, practice rooted in positive life-affirming and life-developing values, creates a context which not only sustains positive traditional values, but also gives rise to new and even more expansive ones. Thus, practice is indispensable but values are the original point of departure which prompts and provides guidelines for practice.

At the heart of Kwanzaa and the hub and hinge on which the holiday turns, are the *Nguzo Saba*, The Seven Principles. These principles not only call forth a practice that aids in our preservation and constant renewal of the tradition, but also offers a value system that, if embraced and lived, enhances and enriches our self-understanding and self-assertion in the world. Indeed, these principles offer clear and compelling alternatives to some of the major problems of our times.

In place of hateful division and alienation, the principle of *Umoja* (Unity) stresses the oneness of being, the common ground of humanity and the needful togetherness of our families and people; in place of the suppression of persons and peoples and the violation of their rights to lives of dignity and decency, the principle of *Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination) upholds the right and responsibility of freedom and flourishing for every person and people; and in place of vulgar individualism and shameless self-promotion at the expense of others, the principle of *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility) encourages the constant search for common ground and solidarity and cooperation for common good.

In a world of unjust and unequal distribution of wealth, predatory appropriation of others' resources and unpursued possibilities of ending poverty, the principle of *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics) maintains the value of shared work and shared wealth, and the inalienable rights of all to an equitable and just share of the good and goods of the world. In a world where purposeless is pervasive and narrow concepts of interests threaten and undermine the common good, the principle of *Nia* (Purpose) puts forth the concepts of the collective vocation of constantly building and enhancing the good of community and the ethical self-understanding of being chosen and choosing to bring good in the world. In a world where lives and lands are destroyed regularly and persons, whole peoples, and the environment are relentlessly degraded, the principle of *Kuumba* (Creativity) teaches us the ethical obligation of *serudj ta* - to heal, repair and transform our community and the world, making them more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited them.

AND FINALLY, IN A WORLD AND TIME WHEN faith is government funded, gospels of personal prosperity have replaced the ethical emphasis on social justice, and hopelessness and cynicism abound, the principle of *Imani* (Faith) teaches us to believe in the Good, the right and the possible, and to join our faith with work and struggle to create the good world we all want and deserve to live in. It is this vision and these values pointing towards bringing and sustaining good in the world that has inspired and informed the creation and growth of Kwanzaa. And every idea, symbol and practice in my book, *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, reflects and reaffirms this central understanding of the message and meaning of Kwanzaa.▲

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