



**REAFFIRMING KWANZAA AND BLACK CULTURE:  
QUESTIONING WRONGFUL AND DUBIOUS CONCERNS**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The questioning of Kwanzaa comes with each season of its celebration as a kind of background noise and verbal nonsense, noted for its racialized rancor and irrationality rather than its relevance and for its strange preoccupation with Kwanzaa's value and durability while annually announcing its imminent death. Each year the corporate media and its internet affiliates and imitators and those beyond known and recognized borders pose Kwanzaa as a kind of terminally-ill patient and conduct racial rituals performed for no other holiday, reading Viking runes and various other questionable signs to determine how close it is to death and dying. And each year there emerges a surly assortment of haters, howlers, fear mongers, venom spitters, stone throwers and mean-spirited types with various issues and ailments, expressing numerous kinds of ignorance, idiocy, falsehood, misinformation and disinformation about Kwanzaa and its creator.

It seems strange that so much dubious concern is placed on such an allegedly "insignificant" and "fragile" holiday. But much of this is a racialized casting of spells and cursing the assertive and different others in a context of change and accompanying apprehension about the diminished position of whiteness as the norm and needed reference for all things good and relevant. But although this year the old things repeated themselves with repulsive regularity, a new, different and significant counterthrust also occurred. In response to a pathetically uninformed and hateful attack on Kwanzaa and calls for its termination by a Wisconsin state senator, Glenn Grothman, Black people stood up with an added assertiveness and defiantly defended its integrity, described its meaning and beauty, and reaffirmed its value and validity in rich, varied and multigenerational ways.

This self-determined and defiant posture was first expressed in Wisconsin, especially in Milwaukee, which has a strong constituency of Kwanzaa celebrants. They were joined by some

White progressives who also condemned Grothman's racist remarks and his blaming teachers and progressives for teaching and respecting varied cultures and traditions. Also, CNN provided space for Roland Martin's and Ashleigh Banfield's exposure and criticism of Grothman's racialized and racist ranting, ignorance, hateful and curious whining, narrow-mindedness and hostility toward this holiday cherished by millions around the world. I was also invited to respond, but was unable to do so due to a conflict of schedule.

And Marc Lamont Hill of HuffPostLive held a varied and multigenerational discussion with Molefi Asante, founding theorist of Afrocentricity, and others, on the issue in which Kwanzaa and its validity were reaffirmed, Grothman was thoroughly criticized, and questions were raised of why Whites of this ilk find Kwanzaa so threatening, need to condemn a holiday that doesn't concern them and attribute to Kwanzaa things false, hostile and hateful. Again, I was also invited but was unable to participate. In addition, local affiliates of CBS Channels 2 and 9, and KTLA Channel 5 invited me to respond to what the interviewers also recognized as intemperate and outlandish remarks and to explain the real meaning and practice of Kwanzaa which I did.

It would be easy to see this attack as simply that of a racist rogue who needs psychological and educational assistance in coming to terms with a multicultural America. But he is a reflection of a greater problem, the persistent hold of racism on U.S. society and the anti-Black sentiment this engenders and sustains. Indeed, in a recent Associated Press poll, 51% of Americans expressed explicit anti-Black attitudes and 56% expressed implicit anti-Black sentiments. And it is in this context that Kwanzaa, Black culture and Black people are resented, resisted, and repeatedly attacked for various irrational, racialized and racist "reasons".

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The list of aches and pains Kwanzaa causes these complainers, whiners and haters are standard fare. It begins with a claim that Kwanzaa is not worthy of celebration because it's "made up", but all holidays are "made up", if we mean they are created by humans. However, the conception and creation of Kwanzaa required several years of linguistic, historical, cultural and philosophical Africana Studies—ancient and modern—continental and diasporan, and is a product of self-determined intellectual creativity—*Kujichagulia* and *Kuumba*.

It is also claimed that Kwanzaa is a divisive holiday that separates Americans. But no such claim is made of St. Patrick's Day, Hanukkah, Chinese New Year, Christmas or any other ethnic or religiously particular holidays, although it is obvious that not all Americans fit into these categories of difference and diversity. Here, the complainers confuse racial separatism practiced by the dominant society for centuries and self-determination which is a right and responsibility of every community and culture to define itself, name itself, create for itself and speak for itself.

Furthermore, it is claimed by some, that Kwanzaa is hostile and a threat to Christmas and Christianity. But Kwanzaa is a cultural holiday, not a religious one. And thus, African members of all faiths can and do celebrate Kwanzaa: Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Bahai and the ancient African traditions of Maat, Ifa, Dogon, Ashanti and others. For Kwanzaa does not contend or compete with any religious faith; rather it cultivates coming together and unity in celebration and commemoration on the basis of shared history and culture.

And there is also the claim that the creator and founder is flawed by being a person

convicted, Marxist, too radical and hostile to the established order and that this undermines the legitimacy of the holiday. But it is the height of hypocrisy and crocodilian concern to raise questions about Kwanzaa and its creator and celebrate numerous holidays whose subject and focus are persons deeply involved in genocide, enslavements, lynching and pogroms of varied kinds. Moreover, I have always maintained my innocence and insisted that my conviction for assault and false imprisonment was, like so many activists of the 60s, a wrongful conviction and that I was a political prisoner and victim of the FBI's Cointelpro (see *Maulana Karenga: UCLA Oral History* and Molefi Asante, *Maulana Karenga: An Intellectual Portrait*). Moreover, I am not a Marxist, but rather a cultural nationalist and pan-Africanist activist-intellectual, conscientiously and continuously engaged in the struggle for Black and human freedom and rights, racial and social justice and progressive social change for a half century. And surely, I will hold my ground and continue defiantly forward.

Yes, it is good for us as African people to center, sing and celebrate ourselves during Kwanzaa and at other self-determined times; to celebrate family, community and culture; to honor, recount and reflect on the sacred narrative of our history and culture, and those who brought it and us into being; and to recommit ourselves to our highest values that ground us in dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-preserving ways of understanding and asserting ourselves in the world. And we cannot and will not give it up or any of our core cultural values and practices to ease or eliminate the irrational unwarranted racial hatred, hostility and anxiety of others.

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