

BOOK BREAK

Kwanzaa: Holiday rich in cross-cultural traditions



ESTHER LITTMANN

What is Kwanzaa? How is it celebrated? Where did it originate? These questions plus many more are answered in "The Complete Kwanzaa" (Harper Collins, 1995, \$23). Its author is Dorothy Winbush Riley, editor of numerous textbooks on African-American history, former librari-

an and administrator in the Detroit School System and presently principal of an elementary school.

Created by Maulana Karenga of Los Angeles in 1966, Kwanzaa combines African and American customs to create a holiday rich in cross-cultural traditions and ethical significance.

Karenga's objective was to identify and develop seven core principles "by which Black people must live to rescue and reconstruct (their) history and lives." These principles, called "Nguzo Saba" in Swahili, are unity (Umoja), self-determination (Kujichagulia), collective work and responsibility (Ujima), cooperative economics (Ujamaa), purpose (Nia), creativity (Kumba) and faith (Imani).

During the week between Dec. 26 and Jan. 1, each principle is affirmed and

explored on a separate day, with ritual candle lighting, display of appropriate symbols and inspirational readings. The sixth day of Kwanzaa is also celebrated with a feast for family and friends, and the seventh with an exchange of simple handmade gifts "from the heart."

Unlike Christmas or Hanukkah, Kwanzaa isn't based on the celebration of divine birth or the commemoration of a historical event. Kwanzaa's roots lie in Africa's ancient harvest, an annual event accomplished through the communal efforts of the whole tribe. The same ethical principles practiced by the ancestors of African-Americans — unity, cooperation and purpose — are needed today to create healthy and prosperous communities, Riley writes.

"The Complete Kwanzaa" contains everything a celebrant needs to know to observe the holiday on several levels: ethical, cultural and culinary.

Organized around the seven core principles, each discussed in its own chapter, Riley's guidebook also contains profiles of famous African-American role models who have molded their lives in accordance with the ethical teachings of Kwanzaa. Personal testimonies of Bill Cosby and Michael Jordan are interspersed with biographical sketches of Booker T. Washington,

Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King.

Notable black poets like Howard Thurman remind celebrants that this is the "Season of Remembrance" when "empty vessels of hope fill up again" to "match the darts of despair with the treasures of dreams." Or, like Gwendolyn Brooks, they warn "in music-words devout and large, that we are each other's harvest . . . each other's magnitude and bond." Equally inspiring is folklorist Zora Neale Hurston's story of the legendary High John de Conquer, who rode the winds in his journey to America to breathe hope and purpose into his enslaved countrymen.

One of the finest literary selections in Riley's book is "The Feast of the New Yam," the description of an African harvest festival as told by world-renowned Nigerian author Chinua Achebe in his post-colonial novel "Things Fall Apart."

Like the festival of ancient times, Kwanzaa celebrates nature's bounty with hearty meals shared by family and friends. The author includes 42 traditional recipes in her book, like Chicken Yassa, Stewed Okra and Sweet Potato Pie.

Proverbs and black and white photographs of African art works round out a book that affirms the eternal values and

truths common to all mankind, yet does so through the special historical and cultural experience of African-Americans. There is much for people of all races and ethnicities to learn and enjoy in "The Complete Kwanzaa." What a terrific book to own and share during this holiday season!

Esther Littmann, a resident of Bloomfield Township, is a lecturer of English and German at Lawrence Technological University in Southfield.

Poetry reading scheduled

Award-winning poet Richard Tillinghast will read from his newest collection, "The Stonecutter's Hand," 8 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 13, at the Coffee Beanery, 152 N. Woodward, Birmingham.

Come and read your work in the open mike session that follows. Tillinghast will be available for book signing after the reading. The event is presented by the Words on Wednesdays reading series.

Admission is free. Donations accepted to support the reading series. Call (810) 693-7344 for more information.

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