Habari Gani? What's the News? "Imani" Faith!

So goes the traditional greeting and answer on the seventh day of Kwanzaa, a unique holiday created 40 years ago by Dr. Maulana Karenga to celebrate African-American heritage and culture.

The seeds of the festival were planted during the Watts Riots of 1965, which had a profound effect on Karenga, then a graduate student. He began searching for a positive way for his community to reaffirm their African roots, delving deep into the wisdom, traditions and festivals of East Africa, a search that bore fruit with the first observation of Kwanzaa by Karenga and his family in December 1966.

Kwanzaa takes its name from the Swahili phrase matunda ya kwanza, meaning "first fruits," and, although based in African culture, it is uniquely American. (Karenga chose to use the Swahili language for its importance as a symbol in the Pan-Africanism movement of the 1960s.) The holiday is celebrated annually during a succession of seven nights (Dec. 26 through Jan. 1). Each day, celebrants greet each other with the phrase "Habari Gani?", which means "What's the News?" The answer depends on which principle is being honored that day.

There are seven principles of Kwanzaa, called Nguzo Samba. According to Karenga, the first day is dedicated to Umoja (Unity): To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation and the world-African community. The second day is devoted to Kujichagulia (Self-determination): To define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves instead of being defined, named, created for and spoken for by others. Then Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility): To build and maintain our community and to solve problems together the way we bonded to solve problems in the past. Then Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics): To build and maintain businesses using our collective economic strength to fill the needs of the community. Then Nia (Purpose): To have pride in ourselves and our ancestry so we can look within ourselves to build and plan for the total community. The sixth night is a celebration of Kuumba (Creativity): To do as much as we can to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than it was when we inherited it. And the final night is rooted in Imani (Faith): Believing in our people, our parents, our teachers and our leaders by honoring and remembering the best of our history, the best of ourselves and the best of our dreams and aspirations for the future.
Or, as Terrie Williams concisely lists the seven virtues in her book, "A Plentiful Harvest," as community, calling, responsibility, thrift, love, creativity and spirituality.

Kwanzaa is a family holiday at core, and it focuses on a nightly candle-lighting ceremony invoking the day's principle. The mkeka (a straw mat) or a cloth in traditional colors is spread on a table; upon the cloth rests a kinara candleholder, a mazao (a bowl of fruit and vegetables symbolizing harvest), the kikombe cha umoja (unity cup) and ears of corn to represent children, who are the future of the African-American community. The kinara holds seven candles—one black, three green, three red—symbolizing the seven principles. The last items on the mkeka are there as visual reminders of a common cultural heritage: African art, sculptures and books by and about Africans and African-Americans.

During its first years, Kwanzaa was carefully kept separate from other holidays and celebrations out of concern that mixing the two would compromise the principle of self-determination and thus violate the intended purpose of reclaiming important African values. Today, many families celebrate the festival alongside Christmas and New Year, believing that Kwanzaa is an opportunity to incorporate and fuse elements of their particular ethnic heritages into the more culturally prevalent holidays.

Similarly, where at its inception Kwanzaa was celebrated only by African-Americans wishing to strengthen a connection with their African heritage, over the years, the festival has drawn in an ever-increasing pool of celebrants, changing and transforming according to need.

Today, it even is celebrated by people without African descent. Karenga's most recent interpretation of the holiday emphasizes its potential role as a celebration of our common humanity.

"Kwanzaa is not a reaction or substitute for anything," says Karenga on his Web site. "In fact, it offers a clear and self-conscious option, opportunity and chance to make a proactive choice, a self-affirming and positive choice as distinct from a reactive one."

Any particular message that is good for a particular people, if it is human in its content and ethical in its grounding, speaks not just to that people, it speaks to the world."

A Kwanzaa feast (potluck dinner) will be held Dec. 29 at the Holy Ghost Catholic Church in Opelousas. The celebration will begin at 7 p.m., and the meal will follow. Admission is free. For more information, call (337) 948-9364.

The Kwanzaa feast traditionally features African recipes and produce brought from Africa.

(Submitted Photo)