

Tales of Kwanzaa

In this discussion activity, we learn about Kwanzaa, what it is, and how it is celebrated.

Introduction

Kwanzaa is a pan-African holiday that started in the United States in the mid-1960s to celebrate African American culture, community, and family. Kwanzaa, which means “first fruits,” is celebrated December 26 to January 1. In this weeklong holiday, families observe *Nguzo Saba* (pronounced *en-goo-zah' sah'-bah*), which are the Seven Principles of Kwanzaa. The culmination of Kwanzaa is gift giving and a feast. The holiday celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2016, but its stories are far older.



THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF KWANZAA

The principles behind those tales are timeless and apply not just to pan-African communities but to all cultures:

Unity (Umoja): to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race

Self-Determination (Kujichagulia): to define and name ourselves, create and speak for ourselves

Collective Work and Responsibility (Ujima): to build and maintain our community together, and to make our brothers' and sisters' problems our problems, and solve them together

Cooperative Economics (Ujamaa): to build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses, and to profit from them together

Purpose (Nia): to make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their collective greatness

Creativity (Kuumba): to always do as much as we can, in the way that we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it

Faith (Imani): to believe with all our heart in our people, our parents, our teachers, our leaders, and the righteousness and victory of our struggle

Each of the seven principles is illustrated with a folk story. Every evening, the family gathers, the youngest child lights candles in a special candle holder, and one of the traditional folktales is told, followed by a discussion of a Kwanzaa principle.

Discussion Starters

- Have you ever participated in a Kwanzaa celebration?
- Which of the seven principles interests you the most? Why?
- Does your family tell stories when they gather? Would you like to share one of the stories?

Tales of Kwanzaa

Most of the Kwanzaa stories feature Anansi, who is an African folktale character. He is sometimes depicted as a spider. In fact, *Ananse* means “spider” in Akan, a language of Ghana. He is the personification of wisdom and knowledge in speech, and he is also known as a trickster. Anansi is so important and well-known that folktales of all kinds are known as Anansesem, or spider tales. There is even an Anansi story that tells how his name came to be associated with all folk stories.

Here are seven Kwanzaa tales.

Anansi and His Six Sons – A Story of Umoja/Unity

Anansi and his wife had six sons. When each was born, they spoke and announced their names. They were:

Trouble Seer: who could spot trouble from far away

Road Builder: who could build a road through anything

River Drinker: who could cause rivers to run dry

Game Skinner: who could skin any animal easily

Stone Thrower: who could throw rocks at great distances with perfect accuracy

Cushion: who could lie on the ground and make it soft as a pillow

One day, Anansi went on a journey. On his trip, he found a big, bright, shiny ball. He picked it up and was so taken by it that he didn't watch where he was going and fell into a lake, where a big fish swallowed him right up! Anansi decided that he would give the big ball to whomever rescued him.

Meanwhile, a month passed. His family was very worried about him. His sons gathered together and used all of their special skills to rescue him. Once Anansi was rescued, he didn't know which son to give the ball to, so he called upon the Sky god, Nyame, to help him. Nyame took the ball and put it in the sky until Anansi could decide which son was more deserving. The ball is in the sky to this day: we call it the moon.



Discussion Starters

- How do you imagine each of the sons used his special skills to help his father?
- Which of these skills would you most like to have?
- How do you think this story demonstrates the Kwanzaa principle of Unity?

The Three Tests – A Story of Kujichagulia/Self-Determination

Long, long ago, three tigers came to Africa. They gathered all the animals together and informed them that from now on, the tigers would rule everyone and the land would be known as Tigerland.

A mouse spoke up. “But we have a council, where we make all decisions together. We don't need—or want—a ruler.”

One of the tigers roared and extended his claws toward the mouse, who squeaked and ran until he reached a human home, where he lives to this day.

This scared the rest of the animals. But Anansi spoke up. “Great tigers, you are clearly superior to us, but just so that everyone will know that you are stronger, faster, and wiser, let’s have a contest.”

The vain tigers liked that idea. So the next day, all the animals gathered. In each contest, they used trickery to beat the tigers. The humiliated tigers left Africa. And that’s why there are no tigers in Africa to this day.

Discussion Starters

- Have you ever experienced a situation where a bully tried to take over a group? What did you do, and how did the situation work out?
- Can you think of countries that are ruled by “tigers”? How about ones that are self-governing?
- How do you think this story demonstrates the Kwanzaa principle of Self-Determination?

The Great Drum – A Story of Ujima/Collective Work and Responsibility

The lion wanted to call a special meeting, so messengers traveled throughout the land to spread the news. The animals all came as soon as they heard, but it took three weeks for everyone to hear and arrive. The lion was very disappointed.

So Anansi suggested that they make a great drum that could be heard everywhere. As soon as the animals heard it, they would come right away. Everyone thought it was a fine idea. So the animals divided into groups, and everyone worked hard on the drum. Well, everyone except the monkey, who hid in the shade and ate berries all day long. But when the workday was done, he joined the others as though he, too, had worked hard.



Finally, the drum was finished. It was time to move it to the council circle. But it was very heavy, and everyone was so tired that no one wanted to carry it.

Wise Anansi spoke up. “I suggest that the laziest one among us carry the drum.”

Everyone started looking around, wondering who the laziest one was. Then the monkey stepped forward. “I am not going to carry that drum!”

All the animals laughed, and Anansi said, “No one mentioned your name, Monkey. We just said the laziest one should carry it. You are the one who thinks you have been the laziest.”

And it was agreed that the monkey should carry the Great Drum to the council circle.

Discussion Starters

- Have you ever worked hard on a group project and noticed that one person was not doing their fair share? How did this make you feel?
- Do you think it’s acceptable for some to work harder than others, as long as the work gets done? Why or why not?

- How do you think this story demonstrates the Kwanzaa principle of Collective Work and Responsibility?

The Feast – A Story of Ujamaa/Cooperative Economics

Once upon a time, there was a chief who decided to throw a splendid party for his people. He invited everyone, saying, “I will provide all the food and all the entertainment. All I ask is that each family bring a jug of wine, which we will pour into a huge pot, and thus all will be served.”

Everyone was very excited. On the day of the party, while they were putting on their best clothes, a farmer said to his wife, “Why should I spend good money for a jug of wine? This party is supposed to be free. I’m not buying wine.”

His wife replied, “But the king is providing everything else. A jug of wine isn’t too much to bring.”

But the farmer decided he would bring a jug of water instead. “After all,” he thought, “One jug of water in so much wine, who will notice?”

When everyone was gathered, the party began. The chief said, “Let every cup be filled, and let us toast to our fair land!” Everyone took a big sip from their cups. And they discovered that they were not drinking wine, but water, because everyone had had the same idea! So there was no wine at the party.

Discussion Starters

- Was the chief asking too much of his people when he asked them to bring a jug of wine? Why or why not?
- Can you think of a time when you followed the rules when others did not? Can you think of a time when you did not follow the rules and everyone else did? How did those stories turn out?
- How do you think this story demonstrates the Kwanzaa principle of Cooperative Economics?

The Name of the Great Tree – A Story of Nia/Purpose

In the land of the animals, there was a terrible drought. There was no food, and the animals were suffering. Then a ruler from the other side of the mountain arrived.

“I bring you a special tree,” he said. “This tree will bear fruit year-round, in all types of weather—even drought. All you need to do is to speak the name of the tree, and it will provide fruit for you.” The name of the tree was Awongalema.

The animals thanked the kindly ruler, who then returned home, a long journey far across the mountains.

The Great Drum was sounded to call everyone to see the tree. When all the animals arrived, Lion told the story of the ruler and the tree. Lion turned to Anansi and said, “Anansi, speak the name of the tree!”

Anansi replied, “I don’t know the name of the tree. I thought you would remember it.”

Lion said, “I don’t know the name! There were many of you here. Who remembers the name of the tree?” But no one knew the name. They decided to send someone to the ruler to ask the name. They sent Hare, because he was fast.

Hare ran swiftly through the villages, over the mountains, across rivers, and through the brush until he found the ruler. “Oh, great ruler, what is the name of the tree?”

The ruler told Hare the name, which was Oowungalema. Hare repeated the name, then began the long sprint back to the land of the animals. Along the way, he stopped to drink in a river. The water was cool and inviting. Hare lingered long, relaxing and enjoying the rest. Then he sprinted home.

When he arrived, everyone was very excited. Now they could eat! Hare went to the tree to speak its name. “Oowagumba! No, that’s not it. Uumumuuumuu! That’s not right. Oogabooga!” But Hare could not remember the name of the tree.

Finally, Lion said, “We must send someone else.” So Antelope was sent. Antelope sprinted over the mountains, across rivers, and through the brush until she came to the ruler. She learned the name, then turned around and began running home. But she tripped on a tree root, hit her head, and so the name was again lost.

Then they sent Leopard, but he got distracted chasing a monkey, and he, too, forgot the name. Others also tried and failed. Finally, shy Tortoise said, “I could go.” The other animals started jeering and making fun of Tortoise, because she was known to be slow.

“Don’t make fun of Tortoise,” said Anansi. “She may succeed where others have failed.”

Before Tortoise left, she consulted with her wise, ancient mother. “How will I remember the name during the long journey home?”

Her mother replied, “You must repeat the name over and over, no matter what happens. Then you will be successful.”

So Tortoise set out. After many days and nights, she arrived at the palace of the ruler, who told her the name of the tree: Oowungalema. Then Tortoise started home, repeating the name again and again. When Monkey teased her, she said, “Oowungalema.” When she passed the river and the nice cool water, Tortoise said, “Oowungalema.” When she got home, and the baby animals ran to her to greet her, she only said, “Oowungalema.”



Finally, the Tortoise returned to the tree. All of the animals gathered anxiously around. Lion said, “Tortoise, can you speak the name of the tree?”

Tortoise said, “Oowungalema.” And fruit sprouted abundantly on the tree. At last, the animals were able to eat! They were very grateful to Tortoise, who was not distracted like the others but stayed true to her purpose.

Discussion Starters

- Why do you think the ruler traveled so far to give the animals a tree for food? What would have happened if the ruler had not come?
- Can you think of a time when you stayed true to your purpose, despite many distractions? Can you share your story?
- Can you think of people like Tortoise, who are assumed to be incapable of a task because they aren’t as quick or clever as others? Has this ever happened to you? What did you do?

Anansi Writes a Song – A Story of Kuumba/Creativity

The ruler of Korro, a small kingdom, was a lion named Simba. One day, a traveling storyteller came to Simba's village. He played his lute and sang stories about heroic women and men and their great deeds. He sang about events throughout the world. The king and his people loved the music and the stories. When the storyteller finished, he said, "King Simba, would you give me a small token in exchange for my performance?"

King Simba flew into a rage. "You dare ask me, the great Simba, King of Korro, for a token? You should be honored that I listened to you! You should pay me!" Then he ordered his servants to give the storyteller fifty lashes and throw him out of the kingdom.

The storyteller made his painful way home and told all of his friends what had happened. They were shocked and angry to hear of the abuse and suffering caused by King Simba. Anansi was one of the storyteller's friends, and he decided to write a song expressing the feelings of the storyteller's friends. Here is the song:

Simba the Lion, king of Korro,
Is very fat and flabby,
Simba the Lion, king of Korro,
Is a fool, and his mane is shabby,
Simba the Lion, king of Korro,
Has an ugly face and his teeth are few,
Simba the lion, king of Korro!

Anansi used a very catchy tune for the song, and soon it was being sung throughout the land. Women would sing it as they did the wash; children sang it as they played their games; men sang it while farming. It was sung at festivals and celebrations. Soon it was popular throughout Africa.

King Simba heard the song, and he called for the storyteller. "Did you write this song about me?"

The storyteller replied, "I did not. It was Anansi. But everyone sings it now."

King Simba said, "I will pay you handsomely if you will tell Anansi to stop the song." But the storyteller refused.

"Once a thing is done, it cannot be undone. You did not have to beat me, but you did. You cannot undo the beating. Anansi did not have to write the song, but he did. He cannot undo the song. It is being sung throughout Africa. It cannot be stopped now."

Anansi's song is sung to this day.

Discussion Starters

- Do you think some people are more important than others and should not have to pay for work done for them?

- What do you think of Anansi’s creative way of protesting the way King Simba treated the storyteller? Was the protest appropriate? Why or why not?
- Should people be paid fairly for their work? How do you determine what is fair?

Two True Friends – A Story of Imani/Faith

Once there was a king who was hated by his people. Cruel actions were carried out in his name, and he was thought of as a despot. The truth was, he wasn’t really a bad person, but his advisors were evil and had convinced him that the people were out to get him and weren’t to be trusted.

A group of rebels got together and decided that the only way to get out from under the oppression was to kill the king. So they got together to decide who would try to assassinate the king. A young man named Pythias volunteered to do it, but he said he couldn’t do it for two days. His sister was getting married, and since their father was dead, he was the only one who could walk her down the aisle.

The rebels said they couldn’t wait two days, because the king would be out of the castle the next day on a hunting trip, and this would be their only chance to accost him outside his stronghold. They pressured Pythias to do it the next day, and reluctantly, Pythias agreed.

He hid in the forest with a bow and arrow, awaiting his chance. It was his bad luck that he was spotted by one of the king’s guards as he stood, arrow cocked, awaiting the king’s approach. He was captured and brought before the king. The king’s advisors suggested Pythias be brought to the town center and executed there as an example to all others who might consider assassinating the king.

When he stood before the king, Pythias said, “I do not regret what I have done. I accept my fate. I only ask that you wait one day, so I may walk my sister down the aisle. There is no one else who can do it.”

The king said, “Am I a fool, to let you free? I know you will run away. I tell you what, find someone to take your place on the gallows, and I’ll let you go.”

Pythias had a good friend named Damon, who was a true friend to Pythias. He knew Damon would do this favor for him. He called out to the crowd for Damon. Damon was found and brought before the king.

“Of course I will do this for my friend,” said Damon. “I know he will return.”

The king was amazed, but he had made a public promise, so he let Pythias go.

Pythias rode as fast as he could and returned in time for the wedding. As soon as the wedding was complete, he jumped on his horse and raced back to the city. As he was riding, his horse fell and broke its leg. Pythias was panicked, because he knew Damon would be executed in his stead if he didn’t return by midday.

As he ran through the woods, he encountered a man on a horse. “Give me a ride! I must get back to the city by midday for my execution or another will be killed in my stead.”

The man said, “That’s an amazing tale. I want to see if what you say is true.” So, Pythias jumped onto the back of the man’s horse and together, they raced to the city.

Meanwhile, the king was mocking Damon. “You are a fool. Pythias will not come back.”

Damon calmly replied, “He will return. That is the nature of true friendship. Do you not have a true friend, that you do not understand?”

Just before midday, Damon was led out to the town square and a noose was placed around his neck. “So much for true friendship,” mocked the king.

Then Pythias came riding in on the back of the man’s horse. “Stop! Stop!” he shouted. “I have returned! Do not hurt Damon!”

The king was shocked. “I’ve never seen friendship like this in my entire life,” said the king. “It is a precious thing, and I will not destroy it. I will set you both free on the condition that you let me be your friend, too.”

The three became the best of friends. Damon and Pythias took the place of the bad advisors, and the king became a just, fair ruler, and there was peace and prosperity throughout his land.



Discussion Starters

- What happens when, like the king, we put our faith in people who do not have our best interests at heart?
- Did you think Pythias would return? Why or why not?
- Have you ever had a friendship as close as Damon and Pythias? Would you like to share a story or two about this friendship?

Additional Activity

For additional information: Watch this [video on the history](#) of Kwanzaa
