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## Color of the Holidays

by Davia L. Mosley

White-haired, blue-eyed Santas may be the norm for many during the holidays but African Americans are seeking out ways to embrace color and culture during the holidays. From buying black holiday figurines to celebrating Kwanzaa, to even making their own African American creations, many African American women across the country are adding color to the traditional White Christmas.

Lenora Phillips of Mississippi surrounds her four-year-old daughter Chloe with images of black Santas, angels and other religious figurines. She says when Chloe colors Santa, she colors his face brown. Lenora says she wants to instill in Chloe pride about the strides that black people have made. "I will teach her about the history of her race. A lot of sacrifices were made in order for her to be able to walk down the street, attend college and even have the type of job that I have or the rank that I have achieved in the military."

In addition to Christmas, some choose to also embrace Kwanzaa to further honor their culture. According to the official Kwanzaa website ([www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org](http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org)), this holiday was started in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga. It is based on seven principles (Nguzo Saba): unity (Umoja), self-determination (Kujichagulia), collective work and responsibility (Ujima), cooperative economics (Ujamaa), purpose (Nia), creativity (Kuumba), and faith (Imani). This holiday is celebrated from December 26 to January 1.

Nyya Regina Sistrun of Virginia has been celebrating Kwanzaa for the past 11 years and has recently begun this tradition with her one-year-old daughter Kyra. "With this tradition, I hope she realizes that being African American is something that should be celebrated," she says. "It is my hope that my daughter will learn to be proud to be an African American and that she will pass that lesson on to her children." Nyya says Kwanzaa is not a religious holiday, but a cultural one that helps African Americans feel connected to the continent.

"Kwanzaa is a fun and festive time in our home," she says. Nyya's Kwanzaa display, which sits next to her Christmas tree, consists of 7 red, black and green candles that represent the struggle of African Americans, our skin color, and Africa (respectively). "The table where the display rests is adorned with a Mkeka (mat), ears of corn representing the number of children in the household, [gifts] for each day of the Nguzo Saba, and different symbols representing African culture and education," she says.

Like Nyya, Ava Garnder-Jenkins of Detroit also celebrates Kwanzaa. She said she became interested in the holiday after visiting the Shrine of the Black Madonna Cultural Center and Bookstore and looking at their Kwanzaa display. She starting practicing the principles with her husband and family and has continued to do so for 10 years. "It was just something to really commemorate my own family as well as the black community as a whole," she says.

**The Right Coast**  
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Initially people were hesitant to celebrate with her, mainly because they were confused, thinking it was a religion and that Ava no longer wanted to celebrate Christmas. However, she says the two holidays are not related and that Kwanzaa is not a Christmas replacement for African Americans. "Kwanzaa is something that can be celebrated year-round because the principles are straightforward and they have nothing to do with the holidays," she says. "They have to do with life."

Ava says Kwanzaa can be celebrated in different ways as well. One holiday, she asked her nieces and nephews to create an impromptu performance centered on the holiday. "It was just beautiful," she says. "They came up with a song about Kwanzaa and about the ancestors. One of my nephews recited a poem." Ava still celebrates Christmas and keeps a black angel on the top of her Christmas tree. Nevertheless, Ava says African Americans need to be more proactive in embracing our culture. "We need to seek it out for ourselves," she says. "We have to make ourselves aware of our own culture and love it."

For those seeking cards with accurate representations of themselves, entrepreneurs Tawania Thigpen and Kimberly See have lines that have this and more. Tawania's line, The Paper Knot, has products that she describes as having a "new modern soul flavor." She said she wanted to create something that was modern and fun, representative of black women but not overly Afrocentric or with a kinte cloth look. She debuted a line featuring holiday cards in October 2006. She says mainstream stores could do a better job showing the diversity in the black culture when it comes to greeting cards and invitations. "I think they are outdated. [They don't] show the broadness of us as a culture." Her products can be seen at [www.thepaperknot.com](http://www.thepaperknot.com).

Kimberly See, owner of kemse & company, produces invitations and social stationary that also reflects African Americans. She currently has three items for the holidays and plans to expand lines in upcoming years. Kimberly says she was inspired to create her line because of the lack of representation. "I was frustrated by the fact that there wasn't anything out there that reflected my heritage and lifestyle," she said. Her advice for others in similar lines of work is to be in touch with the target audience. "Find out what their needs, likes and tastes are, and from there, keep them involved in the creative process." Her holiday invitations, along with the rest of her line, can be found at [www.kemseandcompany.com](http://www.kemseandcompany.com).

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