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Opinion | Commentary

Christmas, Kwanzaa and Chanukkah

Holiday Diversity

By Julianne Malveaux

Habari Gani begins the greeting. It is Swahili for “what’s happening”. During Kwanzaa, the seven days between December 26 and January 1, the response reflects the particular day of Kwanzaa. On December 26, the response is Umoja, which means Unity. On December 29, the response is Ujamaa, which is cooperative economics. On the last day of Kwanzaa, January 1, the response is Imani which means Faith.

We are all indebted to Mualana Ron Karenga for his development of the Kwanzaa concept in 1969, and for the millions of people who celebrate African history and heritage. As a Christian, I worship and mindful of the birth of the Christ Child and the fact that somehow, as a greeting, Happy Holidays has swallowed Merry Christmas.

The Happy Holidays greeting is intended to be inclusive, intended to encompass Christmas, Kwanzaa, Chanukkah, the Winter Sol-

stice, and just about everything else. It is intended, by some, to indicate that we are sensitive to everybody’s needs, holidays and religious diversity. Still, I think we lose just a little bit of something when we decide to group everything into “the holidays”. We lose the majesty of the Christ Child’s birth, a day that most of our nation celebrates. Three in four of all Americans are self-identified Christians. Should we swallow the uniqueness of the season and the celebration, miracle, and renewal that it implies?

Our Jewish brothers and sisters also celebrate holy times in Chanukkah. This celebration of lights, of rededication, has special meaning that should not be reduced to just another holiday. Those of us who are not Jewish may not need to celebrate Chanukkah, but we should be aware, mindful, and commemorative. Religious diversity means knowing about and acknowledging each other’s holy moments. We

lose some of that with the generic Happy Holidays.

Kwanzaa is a celebration unto itself. Karenga developed the holiday and its celebration in the late 1960s to affirm the African American vision and values. The seven principles, umoja (unity), kujichagulia (self-determination), ujima (collective work and responsibility), ujamaa (cooperative economics), nia (purpose), kuumba (creativity) and imani (faith) are all principles that represent the foundation of community growth and development, and a celebration of family and culture. Millions have taken the principles and used them as a way to affirm strength and resilience in the African American community. I am especially mindful of the principle of ujamaa, cooperative economics, as it undergirds much of the work that I do. So when somebody says habari gani to you on December 29, please respond with ujamaa.

Kwanzaa does not substitute or

supplant Christmas. It is an entirely different reality. It is an end year celebration of family, faith and community, a celebration of life. A forty plus year tradition is a rich and rewarding way to bring us all together.

We should have enough room in our collective consciousness to allow for multiple year-end celebrations. Christmas, Kwanzaa, and Chanukkah each commemorate different facets of American life. And then there is the winter solstice, the changing of the seasons, the shortest day of the year, and yet, too a celebration. Yes, we need to have enough room to celebrate all these things in their distinctness. To swallow them all up in a Happy Holidays greeting is a politically correct way of both lumping us all together and ignoring the richness of our differences and how our differences add to the ways we live and celebrate our lives.

Sexual Abuse

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He was angry that – once again – his attempt to kill himself had failed but that was before his life greatly changed when his story was featured in a major magazine a few months ago. He now believes his days of trying to take his life are over as he now has become a role-model to other young males who suffered similar abuse and grew to question their sexuality. After effects of abuse vary from person to person and not all males who have been abused go on to identify themselves as gay; some are heterosexual and others prefer to be categorized as bisexual. A common thread for them all, however, is the emotional scars that become the root cause of much trauma and difficulty these boys and men face throughout their lives.

“They hold on to this anger and aggression and they do several things,” Lassiter said. “They maladaptively cope by inducing drugs onto themselves or it manifests in angry and aggressive outbursts where they’re quick to pull a gun, or they can’t keep a job, or are in and out of

prison.” Some, he continued, even go on to become sexual abusers themselves or involved with child pornography.

Where are the healthy villages?

He firmly stands by his position that early intervention and therapy must become part of the healing process for abused boys if they are to break the “vicious silence” and cycle of dysfunction that has burdened the overall Black community for centuries, even back to the times of American slave trading. “There’s generational trauma that’s never been taken care of so parents have been victims of incest and it comes through the generations, then it happens to children,” he said, specifically regarding cases of intrafamilial abuse. He noted that when Caucasian boys are molested, there are systems in place, with easy access, to offer help, whereas for Black boys, the resources are “far, few and in-between.”

He made reference to the oft-repeated proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child,” but suggests a better view would be “It takes a healthy

village to raise a healthy child” and further said the villages are not healthy and need to be made whole.

Along with the lack of resources for Black males, Lassiter explained that most conversations about the many issues negatively affecting the Black community leave out the accounts of abuse all members of the Black family experienced when slavery was legal in America. “We don’t talk about what slavery did to the Black child. We don’t talk about the filthy slave master who raped the Black child with his twisted, freaky psychology,” he said, going on to describe how those raped children had their innocence stolen and suffered silently; attempting to make sense of why the White slave owner was not only raping his mother but his father too.

Sexual trauma linked to unhealed abuses from slavery?

Lassiter boldly mentioned the history of “White male deviant behavior” and how that manifested in their “obsession with the Black male penis,” something he believes lends validity to the view that the slave

owners may have had more pleasure in raping the Black male than the female. History shows that many times Black males were castrated and their genitals cut off, sometimes after they were lynched and hung from a tree. In some cases, the genitals were placed in a jar – as a keepsake - for display on the fireplace mantle of a Caucasian homeowner. “We don’t talk about the challenges that Black males face at the expense of being raped by White slave masters,” Lassiter said. “Just the way Black males have been demasculated, robbed of anything, dehumanized and most of it is centered around sexual politics.” All this and more, he said, are part of the generational trauma, “the post traumatic slave syndrome disorder” that many, even today, still suffer from and don’t talk about.

Hudson also believes that his innocence was stolen from him at age 13 when he was raped by a 17-year-old Caucasian male, a violent act that was his first introduction to sex. To men and others who abuse, he sends a direct message in case such perpetrators lack understanding of the real

and enduring damage their actions produce. “You’re taking something. I had my virginity taken from me. Do you know how hard that is?” he asked. “I can never freely give it up. You took my purity, my only thing that was given to me that I had the right to give up.”

Breaking the silence of abuse, as Hudson has done, greatly aids men and boys in their healing process, Lassiter said, even though admitting one was abused can be difficult for males who have been influenced in society to be super-macho, to never cry, show emotion or show vulnerability. For males who adopt that view of masculinity, Lassiter explained they may feel they are strangers or outcasts in the overall Black community but that for their emotional health, they will fare better by learning to speak out and express that they were sexually molested. Even as tragic as that is, these men, by such action, will show they have decided to become “wounded healers” who tell their narratives, not just for themselves, but to help “other Black males who are suffering in silence.”