

A phenomenological interpretation of Kerebe greetings

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ABSTRACT *This article argues that greeting among the Kerebe is a phenomenological project of everydayness in which the concept of being manifests itself in a dialogic manner. This is revealed through the four variables on which greetings are based: time, age, gender and relationship. The variables give us a glimpse of how the Kerebe view the question of temporality of being, the idea of being-for-the-other and the question of truth; and they cast some light on the general concept of a person in Kerebe thought. The article is oriented toward an inquiry into the concept of being-in-the-world from an African point of view.*

1. Introduction

The Abakerebe live on an island called Bukerebe in Lake Victoria, not far from the northern Tanzanian town of Mwanza. Bukerebe (written Ukerewe in Swahili), is surrounded by 26 smaller islands. Together they comprise one district under one governmental area commissioner; among the other islands are Bwiro, Bukara, Kweru, Ilugwa, Kamasi, Kunene, Nafuba and Ihara. The district has an estimated population of about 300,000 people. The main town is Nansio. There are also Bakerebe who live on the mainland in the Mara district. The Kerebe are basically agriculturalists and fishermen. Their staple foods are cassava meal, known as *obwita* (in Kikerebe) or *ugali* (in Kiswahili), sweet potatoes and bananas. The main cash crops are cotton and rice. The island is very fertile, and many kinds of fruits grow on it; those grown in abundance are oranges, bananas, pineapples, mangoes and papayas. Every homestead has at least 10 to 15 orange trees. The harvesting season gives some people a considerable and dependable income. The fishing industry has also made a number of people reasonably rich from sales of Nile perch, tilapia and *dagaa* fish (sardines). The island is the breadbasket of Mwanza town. Small as it is, it has nevertheless produced a significant percentage of Tanzania's intellectuals and literary artists. The Kerebe are also well known for their traditions, especially in the area of dances, oral traditions and epic narrations.

2. Greeting formality

The inhabitants of this island and other islands surrounding it have a kind of greeting formality that is a bit perplexing to those who do not speak the language – except the Abajita, with whom they share the islands and some mannerisms. Like greetings among other Bantu-speaking people, greetings among the Kerebe define kinship and good neighbourliness. They also delineate character and draw lines of relationships. Greetings are a manifestation of humanness and respect for other people, known and unknown. ‘To visit’ and ‘to greet’ are represented by one word, *kubwacha*. A visit (greeting) shows how much a relative values a relationship and suggests the way in which he or she wants it to continue. It is the highest manifestation of love and solidarity amidst the struggle for survival.

Greeting among the Kerebe is greatly phenomenological. This is perhaps what is unique and interesting about it. The entire formality of greeting puts emphasis on being. A greeting is an existential affirmation of being in time. It is an assurance that one still has another day to live, or at least a minute. A greeting is therefore always a venture into the nuances of the temporality of being. The Kerebe form of greeting reveals that the Kerebe concept of life is child-centred, an orientation which presupposes that the horizon of the future is what defines the present. Greeting among the Kerebe takes into consideration four variables: time, gender, age and relationship. The four variables have to be considered simultaneously before a greeting is uttered. To the Kerebe this consideration comes naturally, although contemplation may occur a few moments before one actually meets an approaching person. The most general verb for greeting is *kubwacha*, as noted above, but when the variables of time and age are considered, other verbs in causative form come into the picture. These aspects of greeting are subsumed in the following terms:

Kubwacha. This word is used more specifically from 5 a.m. to 6 p.m.. It means to see someone after darkness has evaporated. It can be used without considering the variable of age. As a general word, it can also cross the boundaries of time. It also means ‘to visit.’

Kulyaguzya. The word is used as ‘to greet’ from 6 p.m. to 5 a.m. It means to see someone after sunset. It can be used without considering age, but only during the time specified.

Kubwacha is plausibly derived from *ku-cha* ‘to turn to day,’ with implicit subject *obwire* ‘night’; similarly *kulyagusya* may be connected with *ku-gwa* ‘to fall,’ with subject concord *ly-* in implicit agreement with *izoba* ‘sun.’

Kusuzya. The word means to greet someone of equal age (a difference of one year can be tolerated). It is derived from another verb, *kusula*, which means to see someone, usually with the purpose of knowing the person’s health.

Kulolosya. This word means to greet someone who is younger by at least two years, a period that seems to have been the normal spacing time among the Kerebe. The word is derived from the verb kulola, which means 'to see,' usually 'to see first.' But in this case there is a suggestion of keeping watch over someone or something. The word implies that the older person could

have been told by parents to watch over the other when still young, regardless of gender, because the older saw the world first. The word *kulolosya* may also be connected with the word *lelota* which is a response given to a younger person.

Kuchatatya. This means to greet someone who is younger by far, usually a person whom, in terms of age, one could have fathered or mothered, regardless of gender. The word is a combination of two words: *kucha* (verb) and *tata* (noun). The word *tata* means father, but in accordance with the belief that ‘the child is the father of man’ (,óyíńká 1976; Tempels 1956), the word *tata* also means ‘son’ (i.e. it is used reciprocally in a father-son relationship).

Kulamyá. This is a special verb that is only used as ‘to greet’ with reference to a chief (*omukama*). The word is derived from the verb *kulama* which means ‘to live long.’ *Kulamyá* therefore means to wish a chief a long life. Among the Kerebe the word *kufwa* ‘to die’ is never used when referring to the chief. When a chief dies they say, ‘*Omukama yagaba engoma*’ (‘the chief has passed on the drum’), meaning he has passed on chieftainship to another. In Kerebe society the drum (*engoma*) symbolizes chieftainship. Hartwig (1976: 146-147) casts some light on the role of this drum in Kerebe culture. The drum, called *Matwigacharo* (‘the ears of the nation’), was beaten to inform the people of the death of a chief, the installation of a new chief, and enemy attack.

In the following subsections we consider greetings according to age, time and gender. The charts given show greetings between man and man, woman and woman, and between man and woman, depending on who starts the greeting formality.

2.1 Greetings between man and man (Chart 1)

<i>Time</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Greeting</i>	<i>Response</i>
5 a.m.-noon	Younger than respondent	<i>Sula</i>	<i>Lelota</i>
	Of same age	<i>Sula</i>	<i>Sula</i>
	Of younger generation	<i>Kampilebwachasugu</i>	<i>Bwachatata</i>
Noon-5 a.m.	Younger than respondent	<i>Lyagwasugu</i>	<i>Sibilota</i>
	Of same age	<i>Lyagwasugu</i>	<i>Lyagwasugu</i>
	Of younger generation	<i>Kampile-Lyagwasugu</i>	<i>Lyagwatata</i>

CHART 1: Man to man

The response **lelota** comes from the verb **lala** 'to sleep' (perfect stem **-lele**). **Lelota** is a short form of **olele ota?** ('How did you sleep?'). The response **Sibilota** is similarly derived from the verb **kusiba**, meaning 'to spend the afternoon,' (also 'to fast'). **Sibilota** is a short form of **osibile ota?** which translates 'How have you spent the afternoon?' The response **Lyagwasugu** means 'Yes, it [the sun] has fallen (set).' The word **sugu** is a polite word for 'yes,' with the connotation of 'yes, your honour.' The word **kampile** is an initial word that prefixes giving thanks and connotes high respect. It is perhaps connected with the

verb *kuha* 'to give.' *Bwachatata* means 'It (night) has turned to day, my son.' *Lyagwatata* means 'It (the sun) has fallen (set), my son.' The word *sula* is a short form of *nkusula*, which means 'I am visiting you to know your health'; the connotation is 'how is your health?' I must emphasize at this point that although some people use the long form to retrieve the original meaning, the words have become formulaic and serve as greetings. In this respect *Sula* means 'I am greeting you being a man, younger than you, in the morning,' and *Sibilota* means 'I am greeting you being a man, older than you, in the afternoon.'

Some people prefer to use the evening greeting from 4 p.m., while others start using it around 6 p.m., when the sun is actually beginning to set. The morning greeting usually begins after the second cock crow, which on Bukerebe Island is around 4 a.m. Normally the younger person initiates the greeting.

I must emphasize at this point that if one of the variables is wholly undefined there is no greeting. Gender must be clear, likewise age, time and relationship. A foreigner is a brother, a sister, a mother or a father. He or she is automatically absorbed into a well-devised system of human relations. The Kerebe view the world as one big group of people whose relationships are determined by gender, age and the actual moment of meeting. It is the actual moment of meeting that shows that you are in the world at that very moment in time. A greeting is therefore an affirmation of 'beingness' and wellness in time and space.

2.2 Greetings between woman and woman (Chart 2)

<i>Time</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Greeting</i>	<i>Response</i>
5 a.m.-noon	Younger than respondent	<i>Ssula</i>	<i>Ielota</i>
	Of same age	<i>Ssula</i>	<i>Ssula</i>
	Of younger generation	<i>Ssula or Bwachaasugu</i>	<i>Ielota or Bwachaamawe</i>
Noon-5 a.m.	Younger than respondent	<i>Lyagwasugu</i>	<i>Sibilota</i>
	Of same age	<i>Lyagwasugu</i>	<i>Lyagwasugu</i>
	Of younger generation	<i>Lyagwasugu or Bwachaasugu</i>	<i>Sibilota or Bwachaamawe</i>

CHART 2: Woman to woman

The greeting *Bwachaasugu* and its response *Bwachaamawe* are a modern phenomenon. Traditionally only the queen-mother could greet other women *Bwachaamawe*, which is a man's greeting to a woman. *Bwachaasugu* has now become a general greeting to women who have a grandmother's status. The reason, in my view, for vulgarization of the greeting is the decline in respect for chieftainship that occurred when President Nyerere, immediately after independence, abolished it to reduce ethnic antagonisms and conflicts. The word *mawe*, which is attached to *bwacha*, means 'mother'; but in the same way as *tata* means 'son,' *mawe* also means 'daughter.'

It is also worth noting that it is the vowel length and tone that differentiate the women's **suula** from the men's **sula**, and that the words **bwacha(a) sungu**, **lwagwa(a) sugu**, and **bwacha(a) mawe**, are usually lengthened when women greet.

2.3 Greetings between man and woman (Chart 3)

Time	Age	Greeting	Response
5 a.m.-noon	Younger than respondent	Bwachamawe	Bwachaataata
	Of same age	Bwachamawe	Bwachaasugu
	Of younger generation	Bwachamawe	Bwachaataata
Noon-5 a.m.	Younger than respondent	Lyagwamawe	Lyagwaataata
	Of same age	Lyagwamawe	Lyagwaasugu
	Of younger generation	Lyagwamawe	Lyagwaataata

CHART 3: Man to woman

One thing that can be noted from this chart is that in the case of a man greeting a woman of the same age, the woman has to give the man a respectful greeting that is normally given to older persons. Younger women these days refuse to deliver this greeting. When this happens, both man and woman simply smile and continue with other procedures of the greeting formality. Notice also that women lengthen vowels to differentiate their greeting from the men's. The greeting does not change when the woman starts and the man responds.

2.4 Special greeting after a long separation (Charts 4-5)

Age	Greeting	Response
Younger than respondent	Kampile-sumalama	Tangunu
Of same age	Sumalama	Sumalama
Of younger generation	Kampile-sumalama	Tangunu

CHART 4: Man to man after long separation

Age	Greeting	Response
Younger than respondent	Malama	Mangunu
Of same age	Malama	Malama
Of younger generation	Malama	Mangunu

CHART 5: Woman to woman after long separation

When a woman meets a man or a man meets a woman, the 'woman to woman' model is adapted in the exchange of greetings. This special greeting is used between people who have not met for a long time, usually a year or more. In this greeting the person who has been away for a long time is wished long life by the one who has been around. Here the normal division of daily time does not apply; there is only immeasurable time.

2.5 Greetings according to relationship

2.5.1 In-laws (*ensanzi*)

In-laws regard themselves as equals. Parents of both sides greet each other *Sula!* / *Sula!* from 5 a.m. to noon; *Sibilota!* / *Sibilota!* from noon to 4 p.m.; and *Lyagwasugu!* / *Lyagwasugu!* from 4 p.m. to 5 a.m. This greeting cuts across gender. The same greeting is used between children of the two families and sometimes spreads into the two clans. The son-in-law and daughter-in-law use the same greeting for other members of the opposite side but not for the

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parents or their brothers and sisters. In greeting a father-in-law or mother-in-law the normal greeting is used, but with more respect than that given to one's own parents. Extreme humility in delivery of greetings to the parents of a wife or husband is a measure of the character of a son-in-law or daughter-in-law. Fathers-in-law and mothers are not supposed to look directly into the face of their daughters-in-law and son-in-law. A similar requirement applies to the daughter and son-in-law, who must kneel during the entire greeting process, one knee for men and both knees for women. When greeting a mother-in-law, the son-in-law does not use the normal greeting. He is required to take a squatting posture and say '*Mwanagilamo mayo*' ('Have you slept well in this home, mother-in-law?') if the greeting takes place at home, or '*Mwanagilayo mayo*' ('Have you slept well there at home?') if meeting her on the way. The affix *-mo* stands for 'inside the home' and *-yo* for 'there at home.' It is taboo for the son-in-law to mention or call his mother-in-law by her name.

There is a special kind of greeting between brother and brother's wife. A brother's wife is greeted with special and carefully selected praise names. An example is given in Chart 6.

<i>Greeting (brother)</i>	<i>Response (sister-in-law)</i>
<i>Sula</i>	<i>Suula</i>
<i>Sula chombeka</i>	<i>Suula</i>
<i>Sula, you are the foundation of the home</i>	
<i>Sula niwewena</i>	<i>Suula</i>
<i>Sula, you are the beginning and the end</i>	
<i>Sula m̄anchw̄ant̄a galunḡa omugobe etc</i>	<i>Suula</i>
<i>Sula to you whose saliva seasons sour vegetables etc</i>	

CHART 6: Brother and brother's wife

The exchange is a play on metaphors and symbols that often provoke a smile from the sister-in-law and laughter from the listeners. This kind of greeting extends to all the sisters of brother's wife and to all the daughters of her brothers. Her husband extends the same greeting to them.

2.5.2 Woman greeting a brother

A woman, however much older than her brother, has to greet him *bwachaasugu* as she normally greets older men; and she has to greet him with great respect, usually with both knees on the ground. It is often argued that this is done because of the high status that male children hold in the Kerebe patrilineal system of kinship. The male children were traditionally the inheritors of their father's property. Modern women have come to question this ideology, and some no longer kneel to younger brothers, as they consider it demeaning. My view is that the prevention of incest is built into the Kerebe system of greeting. The high respect accorded to a brother prevents him from making any advances of a sexual nature. Among the Kerebe a brother is not allowed to make statements about the beauty of his sister or make comments referring to any part of her body. The kneeling posture of a sister greeting a brother makes the relation special.

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2.5.3 Greeting an uncle

Uncles are highly respected and have to be greeted *kampile bwachasugu* by men and *bwachaasugu* by women regardless of age. An uncle, however young, is always treated as older. This greeting is given to all male children of the uncle's family. This kind of respect may stretch for an entire generation. Grandchildren continue to respect their grandfather's uncles. Very often a joking relationship develops between uncles and children of their sisters, especially when the age difference is big. Uncles are the ones to run to in times of difficulties, and the ones to whom people feel free to reveal their innermost secrets and feelings. They also have special privileges in marriage procedures.

2.5.4 Greeting a husband

A husband is always regarded as an elder and is normally greeted with great respect by his wife. She greets him *suula*, and the husband replies *lelota* with an air of respectable pride. The way the couple greets each other often reveals what is happening in their home and the nature of their relationship. These days educated women are not comfortable with this 'inferiorization,' especially when the marriage has produced children now adolescent. Society is always keen to hear how couples greet each other. A wife who does not greet her husband as if she were younger than him is regarded as rude, uncompromising and ill-mannered – a behaviour usually associated with the way her parents brought her up. My view is that among the Kerebe wives were normally much younger than their husbands, and the age difference was big enough to warrant the greeting. There is respect as parents, but there is also respect in terms of age difference. As stated earlier, among the Kerebe a greeting that does take into consideration the four variables is not a greeting.

2.5.5 Royal greetings

The chief is normally greeted with praise names. Praises start from a distance. The normal formulaic greeting is *Kasinge lugaba kamelele wetu* 'Hail! the giver and ruler of us all.' The chief merely nods his head in appreciation. The person delivering the greeting puts palms together and makes a low clap as the greeting is uttered. Men bend slightly, while women kneel on both knees. The chief may wish to ask further questions in a greeting pattern to the person, especially those he knows and his relatives. But for the general public, a nod is enough. The chief may use the normal greeting formality to his brothers, sisters and uncles, but usually after he has received the royal greeting from them.

Those seeking favours from the chief sometimes exaggerate the performance with lots of praises and extreme humility. Traditionally, those who held positions in the chieftom, like headmen (*abakungu*), had to go and pay homage to the chief with gifts collected from their areas. The act of taking these gifts to the chief is also called *kulanya*.

The mother of the chief is greeted with the normal greeting, but she replies *bwachaata* and *bwachaamawe* to men and women respectively. As pointed out earlier, women greet her as if greeting a man. The wife of the chief may also use the same greeting if she wants to assume authority over other women.

3. *Mode of Delivery*

When an old man meets a woman who is a relative, the woman will step out of the path and kneel down to deliver the greeting without looking him straight in the face. The normal greeting is *bwachaasugu*, and the old man will reply *bwachamawe*. This is normally followed by the sentence, *Mwanagilayo, ankwonka?* 'Did you sleep well and is the child suckling?' The first question from him is always *akwonka?* 'Is the child suckling?' The woman will answer *akwonga sugu* 'the child is suckling, your honour.' The old man will then ask *Mwanagilayo kuzima?* 'Did you sleep well there in your home?.' The emphasis all the time is on *obuzima* 'wellness', which is a basic element in Bantu concepts of life (Tempels 1959; Mbiti 1969; Nkurunziza 1989). She will then narrate the health of the whole family while still kneeling. When she finishes, it is her turn to ask the old man the formulaic question *Newe abomwawe bata?* 'And how are the ones who reside in your homestead?'. The old man will then narrate the health of his family diligently. The exchange often occurs in an interactive dialogic manner, punctuated by exclamatory words of encouragement for the speaker to continue and to answer follow-up questions. When the old man finishes, the first part of the greeting formality is over. The woman will then stand up and explain where she is going, the people she is going to see and for what reason. The old man will also explain his destination. But all the time the well-being of the people to be visited remains at the centre of the greeting conversation. This is the second part of the greeting. The third part is the ending of the greeting. The content of this part is mainly messages, greetings to the family at home and to the homes of her destination and the final farewell.

Traditionally this is what it means 'to greet.' A greeting normally lasts five to ten minutes. But when two old men or women meet, a greeting may last for fifteen minutes or more. Sometimes they may look for shade, sit and continue with the conversation, especially when an event has befallen one of the two families. Another reason for their greeting taking a longer time is that both of them have many people staying in their homesteads, including grandchildren and possibly great-grandchildren. It is rare for the whole family to be in good health, considering the malaria bouts that often strike the islanders. Apart from their many householders, old people have a lot to tell about their own ailments. These are often narrated as complaints, with explanations resembling a doctor-patient dialogue. Sometimes changes of behaviour among youths of the new generation become part of the greeting. An old man might say, 'We are well, but your son! Since he came back from town with his talking box we have never known peaceful sleep.' When one person takes a long time over greeting another, it is a sign that they know one another well.

As can be observed from this mode of delivery, the question of being is at the centre of the greeting formality. Even in the same homestead, those who get up first in the morning are obliged to greet those who are still sleeping before going to the field or on any other errand. Being is connected with good health and the well being of the entire family and the clan. A person who is in good health is one who can work. It is for this reason that if one meets a person or people who

are working, the first word that is uttered is *Milimo?* 'How is work?'. The person who is working will respond *Milimo nizyo!* 'Yes this is work!', meaning the work is going on well. The person who is passing usually helps the worker for a few minutes before continuing with the journey. In this instance the act of working becomes part of the greeting formality. This emphasizes the idea that to work is to survive. Work is an affirmation of existence, and the person greeting the worker joins in this affirmation of being.

Two more words need a bit of explanation because they are part of the greeting formality: 'goodbye' and 'thank you.' The concept of 'goodbye' among the Kerebe follows the variables of time and context or circumstance. During the day, the one leaving will say *Msibemo* 'Have a good stay during the day', and the one being left will answer *Yee sugumsibeyo* 'Yes your honour, have a nice stay too where you are going.' Another form of bidding farewell is in the saying *Lichali* 'The sun is still young and shining.' The words are often said when there is a possibility of meeting again before sunset. This means that you don't have to greet each other again when you meet during the same demarcated time of the day. In the evening and at night it is *Mnagilemo / Mnagileyo* 'Sleep well in' / 'Sleep well there.' But when saying goodbye to people working or doing something, the one passing will say *Mzikolega* 'Continue working as I go.' Sometimes the nature of the work is mentioned. The passer-by can say *Lyombeka?* when greeting people building a house (*kwombeka* 'to build') and then *Mwombekehoga* or *Mwombekega* 'Continue building as I go.' Even when people are sitting down talking, the introductory greeting is *Mhoile?* 'Are you resting talking?' When bidding farewell, the saying is *Mheyohoga* or *Mhoyega* 'Stay well talking as I go.' When greeting the bereaved, the saying is *Mwanagilamo mumabeho?* 'Did you sleep well in the cold?' When leaving, the saying is *Mnagilemo mumabeho!* 'Sleep well in the cold!' Coldness is mentioned because people sleep outside the house for three days after a burial. The saying for 'thank you' reflects the centrality of hospitality in a society; hence the Kerebe say *Wakola kuzima* 'You have done well' or *Wasemazya* 'You have caused things to be well or to happen.' The response to this is *wasemezya kusima* 'thank you also for causing things to be well through thanking.' Reciprocity is implied; it means 'there will be a day when you will come to my rescue.' To do good to others is to cause something good to happen. *Wasemezya* is therefore a phenomenological expression of the causality of goodness that is associated with being. In a greeting, the words are used towards the end of the greeting formality. People say, *Wasemezya kwizatubwacha* 'You have done well to come and greet us.'

In the sayings 'goodbye' and 'thank you' as conceived by the Kerebe, we notice the concept of wellness. Good sleep is the basis of good health and wellness. A person who does not wake up well is sick, and one who does not wake up at all is dead. In the word *wasemezya* we see the idea that doing good to others is a cause of the continuity of 'goodness' and of the well-being of others.

4. *The phenomena of time and change*

The phenomena of time and change occupy the centre of the greeting formality, especially where two people have not met for a long time. This is why the normal greeting is abandoned in favour of the special greeting for long separation. In this greeting people ask questions about the physical aspects which have markedly changed over time on a person. Questions move carefully into elements of causality. Questions will be asked about where the person was, what he was doing, what happened and so forth. If the greeting takes place at home, observable changes in the home's environment will be explained, beginning with people who have passed away and moving on to newly constructed houses or heavy rains and disasters. Children will be called so that the visitor may observe how they have grown and a proper introduction can be made. These detailed explanations of phenomena are the ones that make a 'greeting' and a 'visit' one and the same thing.

The phenomena of change and time make the art of greeting a person one does not know a very tricky one. People who change unusually quickly – for example, by being grey-haired before their time – usually smile without responding when given respectful greetings they do not deserve. Those who grow tall fast or change fast are perceived by society as moving faster than time. And those who are stunted move slower than time. I once had a Korean visitor who was forty years old. He posed an ontological question among the villagers. 'He is a boy,' they said, 'but the voice is not his!' They did not know what greeting to accord him. Normal physical indicators of time and change include grey hair, baldness, loss of teeth, loss of sight and hearing, wrinkles, stooped posture and reduced control of gait and voice; objects like a walking stick and a hat also contribute to the suggestion of time and change. These are some of the signs one must consider before delivering a greeting. When two young men or women who don't know each other meet, the greeting formality is even trickier. Sometimes the face, height and body may help them size one another up other in terms of age, but youths often opt for a respectful greeting.

It is normal to hear people arguing about a greeting, the young and the old alike. If such arguments take place at home, it is usually the mothers who are called to settle the matter. A mother may simply say, 'When I was pregnant, this one was already walking.' Once the question is resolved, the younger one must start the greeting formality with respect. The one who deserves a respectful greeting will immediately say *mpa embwacha yange* 'give me my rightful greeting.' The younger one will withdraw the earlier greeting and start the proper one.

Of the four variables, that of relationship is the most unstable. You may be travelling in bus seated next to a person you do not know, talking in a jovial way and cracking jokes. But when you discover that the man is a brother to your father-in-law, he becomes a new person altogether. First you have to withdraw the earlier greeting and give him his rightful one, and then you may have to change seats with someone else in accordance with the code of conduct and respect attached to the new person.

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Those not satisfied with the greeting they are accorded may simply refuse to respond. It is then up to the person who uttered the greeting to demand an explanation. Another polite way of refusing to accept a greeting is to reply with the same greeting accorded to you. The other person will realize that you are dissatisfied. For instance, a person may think that he or she is older and say *lelota*. The person being greeted would reply *lelota* to express dissatisfaction. The greeting *Lelelota!* / *Lelelota!* 'I am older' / 'I am older' does not exist. One of the two must yield, or else they must greet one another as equals: *Sula* / *Sula*.

One observation in a postcolonial vein may be made. Today all four variables are shifting signs, a circumstance that has added some sparkle to old wine. The complexity and unpredictability of Kerebe greeting has brought the question of being to the foreground. Today's children seem to grow faster. Women wear trousers, smoke and wear hats. Men wear necklaces and plait their hair. The watch has affected the traditional Kerebe method of demarcating greeting time. Relationships have grown wider and gone beyond racial divides. The gay community has shifted the gender sign even further. In my view, in the midst of these phenomenologically shifting signs of the postmodern world, the Kerebe greeting formality has become even more relevant, because it continually demands that we think about what we truly are before we deliver a greeting. It will only be irrelevant when we see ourselves as nothing.

5. Conclusion

Greetings among the Kerebe highlight the following issues in African philosophical and social thought: the structure of kinship, the concept of otherness, the idea of truth and the question of being in time. On kinship it can be observed that through greetings society is kept alert on a daily basis to the importance of blood relationships. At the social level, Kerebe greetings inculcate respect among people with well-demarcated points of reference – age, gender, time and relationship.

In a Kerebe greeting we see the concept of being-for-the other. The person one meets immediately confronts one's being, and negotiation between the two selves begins. In this encounter, the self as it truly is, in time and gender, stretches out to appropriate the other, while at the same time seeking to be appropriated by the self of the other as it truly is. The meeting point is acceptance of each other as human beings. A greeting is therefore a discourse of everydayness. It is a disclosure of being and an invitation to be understood and accepted as a human being through unconcealment. The fact that the Kerebe say, 'I am greeting you, being younger, in the morning, being a man/woman, related to you in such and such a manner' reveals that what they stress is the quiddity, or 'whatness' of a person as he or she truly is. To refuse to be greeted as younger/older, a woman/man or a relative is to refuse to be appropriated by the other. It is to deny one's 'whatness.' It is also a denial of a space in the social hierarchy, set in primordial time, which is a point of reference to the concept of being in time. It is only through reciprocity with other beings that being-in-the world is humanly possible.

The idea of verifying truth after truth in time is the backbone of Kerebe greetings. Greeting among the Kerebe is not fixed once and for all and for everyone. Although a general structure exists, time, age, sex and relationship finally determine the kind of greeting to be accorded to a person. There is no blanket greeting like the Swahili 'Habari gani?' or the English 'Good morning.'

Since in a crowd there are bound to be several people who differ from you in one or more of the variables, a greeting is earned in terms of the values of the four variables, through a dialogic process by which agreement on a particular greeting sign is reached at a particular moment in time. Greeting is a phenomenological project that is carried out on a daily basis. The person you greet as a younger person today can be older tomorrow if he marries or is married into the family, or when a relationship you did not know about comes to light.

On the question of being, it can be observed that Kerebe greetings reveal the fact that a human being is not a completed project but always a project in the making, one that continuously loses and gains some aspects of life individually and socially, and reinvents himself or herself in time, gender, age, and relationship, taking into account natural phenomena. A greeting forces a person to 'think being.' It is a human discourse of everydayness and an idiom of existence. It is through the greeting formality that the Kerebe experience of 'being-in-the world' manifests itself. This experience is contemplated whenever they meet.

The idea of transcendence is embedded in the exchange of greetings, for the horizons of the past, present, and future are central to the meaning of each greeting uttered. When a person dies the Kerebe weep loudly, saying *Obabwacheyo!* 'greet them when you arrive there.' Through the greeting system we see that the world of the living-dead and that of the living are not separated by abstraction but by a reality. In Kerebe greetings, ontological and temporal issues occupy the centre of being. To be or not to be is a daily question.

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