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Greeting in Yorubaland: An Epistemological Establishment and Acknowledgement of a Person's Being and Existence

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Abstract

The Yoruba society evolves with the metaphysical, moral, political and social values of communal existence and even with the wake of urbanisation and civilisation, the communal orientation still permeates the lives of Yoruba people. The concept of 'Èyàn' or 'Èniyàn' which translates as human being, carries metaphysical significance within Yoruba thought. It goes beyond the mere identification of a person and embodies a moral and social ideal. Amongst these social and cultural ideal is a Yoruba culture of greeting, a communitarian status quo whereby an individual's behaviour and being are defined by the ways in which they recognise and establish the being and existence of members of their community. The implication of this is that greeting, within this context, is defined by the establishment of èniyàn. The main aim of this paper is to argue that greeting, in relation to personhood, has an impact on the establishment of one's existence and being. Since the Yoruba conception of èniyàn (person) encompasses metaphysical and pragmatic ideas (which include but are not limited to individualism and communitarianism; physical and spiritual constituents of a person; and destiny of an individual), this paper focuses only on the discourse of acknowledgement and establishment of èniyàn, which are directly evaluated by greeting a person as an individual and as a member of a particular community. This paper does not merely disclose how the various concepts of èniyàn (person) are represented in the works of African scholars such as Olusegun Gbadegeshin, Sophie Oluwole, John Mbiti, Wande Abimbólá and Bolaji Idowu, but moves beyond these to situate the epistemological understanding of greetings in Yorubaland and how they establish and acknowledge a person's being and existence within the community.

Keywords: Being; Community; Èniyàn; Existence; Individual; Personhood Social Sciences

1. Introduction

African scholars have over time dwelled on the interpretations and explanations of human nature and the reality of human existence (Fayemi, 2009), from the metaphysical components of a person to ethico-social interpretations and psychoanalytic explanations. However, few or no efforts have been placed on the existential significance of one of the cultural practices of humans, that is, greetings. African communities are known for their unique cultural practices and traditions. One of such practices is greetings, especially as practiced in Yorubaland, predominantly located in south-western Nigeria and home to the Yoruba people, one of Africa's largest ethnic groups. Greetings in Yorubaland are not mere formalities; they are deeply embedded in the Yoruba culture and reflect the values, beliefs and social structures of the Yoruba people. The way greetings are exchanged can indicate respect, social status, age and even the time of day. The significance of these greetings extends beyond politeness, as they serve as a metaphysical underpinning of the acknowledgement of a person's being. In Yoruba culture, greeting is more than a customary exchange. It is a profound expression of being. As Odeyemi (2024) observes, the Yoruba understanding of personhood (*èniyàn*) is rooted not in biology, but in communal relationships and ethical conduct. One does not attain full moral personhood at birth; rather, an individual becomes a true person (*èniyàn gidi*) through consistent social engagement and the demonstration of good character, particularly in connection with others (p. 119-120). This cultural practice reflects a deep respect for individuals and a recognition of their presence in the world. This is tied to the common belief that individuals are evaluated in relation to their community. It is important to note that irrespective of the person being greeted, greetings among Yorùbá people represent authority, politeness, incapacitation and a mode of educating young people (Opoola and Adeoye, 2019; Schleicher, 2011), but beyond these, greetings also portray the importance placed on interpersonal connections (Segun, 2018) and the spiritual dimensions of human interaction. Greetings in Yorubaland represent more than just a polite exchange of words; they embody a metaphysical establishment and a heartfelt acknowledgment of an individual's essence. Greetings serve as a gateway to understanding the deep reverence for human connection and the spiritual significance attributed to interpersonal interactions. This paper starts by exploring the nuances of a person and proceeds to evaluate greetings in Yorubaland and how these customary salutations encapsulate the essence of one's being and lay the foundation for meaningful social relationships. The paper concludes that the interpretation of greetings are not mere salutations but captured by the concept of *èniyàn* and its relationship with the cosmos.

2. Èniyàn: the question of being in Yoruba Worldview

Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, Immaculata Omojola and Mike Bazza note that a human being is not merely a living entity but a conscious being that is endowed with reflective awareness and the agency to shape its own path towards fulfillment (Ikechukwu, et.al, 2021). In Yoruba cosmology, to be *èniyàn* is to be a responsible and virtuous individual, one whose existence is intertwined with the well-being of the community. In this worldview, an individual who fails to contribute meaningfully to their community is not truly *èniyàn* — though they may possess the physical characteristics of a human, they lack the essential virtues that define true personhood (Ikechukwu, et.al, 2021). Scholars argue that there exists a profound distinction of the constituents of a person within Yoruba traditional thought, where the physical body (*ara*) and the spiritual elements (*orí* and *ẹ̀mí*), are seen as distinct yet inseparable components of human personality. The spiritual elements — *orí*, often understood as the personal deity or destiny, and *ẹ̀mí*, the vital force or breath of life — are considered essential to the existence and individuality of a person. Without these spiritual elements, the physical body loses its vitality, and the essence of what it means to be human ceases to exist (Falola and Akintúndé 2016; Hallen and Sodipo 1986, 105).

Wande Abímbólá puts forward a deep analysis of personhood rooted in Yoruba philosophy. He emphasises that a person, or *èniyàn*, in Yoruba thought, is not merely an individual with biological

existence but is deeply intertwined with community, destiny and spirituality (Abímbólá, 2006). Abímbólá underscores the belief that every person is born with a pre-ordained destiny, or *ayé*, which is chosen before birth in consultation with the divine. This destiny guides one's life path, and it is the individual's responsibility to fulfill this destiny. A key aspect of his analysis is the concept of *orí*, which refers to both the physical head and the spiritual essence or soul that carries one's destiny. For Abímbólá, the development and fulfillment of one's destiny are central to achieving full personhood.

He also stresses the communal aspect of personhood. He believes that an individual's identity is inextricably linked to their community. The saying "A person is a person through other people" reflects the idea that communal relationships are fundamental to the construction of personhood. Abímbólá argues that the well-being of the individual and the community are interdependent, and one's moral standing and recognition as a person are achieved through active participation in communal life. On her part, Sophie B. Oluwole challenges the Western individualistic notion of the self and emphasises the relational and communal aspects of personhood. In her view, a person is not merely an autonomous, rational agent as often depicted in Western philosophy but is deeply connected to others within the community. She highlights the Yoruba concept of *omolúàbí*, which refers to a person of good character and stresses that personhood is achieved through ethical conduct and active participation in community life (Oluwole, 2007). For Oluwole, personhood is a process, something one earns through actions and interactions, rather than an inherent status. This is buttressed by Akin Odebunmi who notes that *omolúàbí*, a cultural concept, embodies the essence of the ideal Yorùbá person, deeply intertwined with the construction of Yorùbá identity. He believes that the concept is anchored in the principles of virtuous conduct, social cohesion and moral integrity, which collectively echo the philosophical idea of politeness, understood as the expression of socially appropriate behaviour, and finds its roots in the linguistic and performative expressions of respect and communal warmth, manifested through greetings, morally guided interactions and the ingrained rituals of social exchange. These practices are not mere formalities but are essential to sustaining the moral fabric and collective ethos of the Yorùbá society (Odebunmi, 2015). Similarly, Joseph Oluyemi and Fagbamila Olumide (2021) frame greetings as more than customary acts but key enactments of the *omolúàbí* ideology, emphasizing respect, humility, discipline and social responsibility. In this sense, greeting is treated not simply as etiquette but as a performative marker of good upbringing and moral integrity, through which individuals demonstrate their alignment with communal values and social hierarchies. Within this framework, appropriate greeting behaviour, such as kneeling by females, prostrating by males and timely verbal salutations, signals deference to elders and affirmation of one's place within the familial and social structure.

Building on traditional African perspectives, Segun Gbadegeshin argues that a person is not an isolated individual but a being deeply embedded in social and spiritual contexts. His analysis is particularly noted for its integration of metaphysical, ethical and communal dimensions of personhood. He opines that in Yoruba thought, a person, or *èniyàn*, is defined by more than just biological existence. Central to his analysis is the concept of *orí*, which represents a person's spiritual essence and destiny (Gbadegeshin, 1984). For Gbadegeshin, the *orí* is crucial in determining one's character and life path. He argues that achieving personhood involves aligning oneself with the *orí*, which requires living a life that fulfills one's pre-ordained destiny (Gbadegeshin, 1984). Gbadegeshin notes further that a person is not born with full personhood but must cultivate it through moral actions and participation in communal life. The Yoruba concept of greeting is central to this process. It aligns with Gbadegeshin's assertion that moral character is not just an individual pursuit but a communal responsibility (Gbadegeshin, 2003). To him, a person's existence and identity are deeply connected to their community, and in return, they are expected to contribute to the community's well-being, which supports and shares in their destiny. He argues that mutual relationship is central to the purpose of human life and the fulfillment of personal life is achieved by bearing fruit, while the

fulfillment of communal life comes from being valuable to one's community. Invariably, the significance of an individual's life is determined by their dedication to social values (such as greeting) and their role within the community (Gbadegeshin, 1991).

There is a distinctive quality to the African conception of personhood, one that finds profound expression in the act of greeting—a practice that sets it apart from many other cultural frameworks, particularly those of the West. Odeyemi articulated this when he explained what Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) terms an “ontological progression” within African philosophical frameworks, particularly in Yoruba culture. In this view, personhood is not a fixed status automatically conferred at birth, but a gradual process of becoming. An individual begins life as a mere entity, an “it”, and slowly acquires the status of a person (*niyan*) through active participation in communal life and the assumption of moral responsibilities. This transformation is not merely biological, but both ethical and social (p. 118). An important aspect of this progression is the practice of greeting, which serves both as a sign and a means of social integration. Greeting is more than politeness; it affirms mutual recognition, acknowledges shared humanity and a reinforcement of one's embeddedness in the moral community. Through repeated acts of greeting, individuals enact and affirm their growing status as persons.

In contrast, In Western philosophy, personhood is usually seen as something a person has naturally, either from birth or very early in life. It is often linked to certain mental abilities like thinking, reasoning or being aware of oneself. For example, the philosopher René Descartes (1996) believed that being able to think is what makes someone a person. This is summed up in his famous saying, “I think, therefore I am.” Similarly, Immanuel Kant (1997) argued that a person is someone who can make moral decisions using reason, and who can act freely and responsibly. Later philosophers like John Locke (1975) and Peter Singer (1993) also believed that what makes someone a person is their ability to be conscious, to reflect on themselves and to plan for the future. In this Western view, personhood is something that comes from within an individual, based on their mental or moral capacities, rather than something given by the community or earned over time. In African thought, however, personhood is relational and achieved. It is something one must earn through appropriate moral conduct, social engagement and community affirmation. Greeting, as a daily ritual, becomes a small but significant gesture in this moral journey toward becoming fully human.

3. Sociocultural Significance of Greetings in Yorubaland

Greetings play a significant role in Yoruba culture and serve as a key component in social interactions and community life. They convey respect, reinforce social bonds and reflect the hierarchical structure of the society. In Femi Akindele's “A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Yoruba Greetings” (1990), he presented an account of greetings as culturally embedded, hierarchical and identity-affirming acts within Yoruba society. He engaged on fieldwork across southwestern Nigeria, to demonstrate that greetings are not superficial exchanges but context-sensitive rituals defined by age, status and social proximity. Akindele categorized these greetings into temporal, situational, and the more elaborate pedigree forms, which encapsulate ancestral pride and communal memory. He maintained that such greetings reinforce societal norms and sustain kinship ties. Particularly notable is his attention to dialectal variation and the sociolinguistic significance of physical gestures like prostrating or kneeling, which accompany verbal greetings. This implies that in Yoruba culture, greetings are a fundamental part of daily life. The importance of greeting someone properly cannot be overstated, as it is seen as a reflection of one's upbringing and respect for others. The Yoruba people believe that a proper greeting opens the door to effective communication and good relationships. Akintoye noted that “greetings in Yoruba culture are seen as a moral duty, deeply ingrained in the social consciousness of the people (Akintoye 2010, 34),” hence, Oyekan Owomoyela writes that, *Eni tó gbajúmò tí kò mò èyàn-án kí, òun òbúrẹ̀wà ègbẹ̀ra* (The dandy who does not know how to extend greetings to people is no different from a boor) (Owomoyela 2005, 120).

Yoruba greetings establish the interconnectedness of individuals within the community. For instance, the greeting, *Báwo ni?* (How are you?), does not just inquire about physical health but also about the person's overall well-being, including their emotional and social state. Thus, the expected response, *Mo wà* (I am), resonates with Cartesian affirmation of existence and well-being. It signifies that an individual's existence is validated and supported by the community and reflects the Yoruba belief in *èniyàn*, the concept of personhood that is not just about individual identity but also about one's place and role in society. The Yoruba language has a variety of greetings tailored to different times of the day, situations and relationships. For example, *E káàárò* is used in the morning, "*E káàsán*" in the afternoon, and *E Káalé* in the evening. Each greeting is accompanied by specific gestures, such as kneeling or prostrating for women and men, respectively, when greeting elders. This physical act of greeting, known as *idòbálè* (for men) or *ikúnlè* (for women), is a visible demonstration of respect, especially towards elders.

Greetings also establish social hierarchy and maintenance of societal structure. Respect for elders is paramount, and this is often expressed through greetings. In a typical Yoruba household, greetings are the first order of business when the day begins. Children are expected to greet their parents and elders in the household as soon as they wake up. Younger people are expected to initiate greetings when they encounter someone older, and failure to do so is considered a serious breach of etiquette. The greeting is not only a sign of respect but also an acknowledgment of the elder's superior social status. When a younger person greets an elder, they might say *E kúròlè*, (literately translates as well done for being at home), the elder, in turn, might respond with "*O o, Ènlè, E kúojó*," acknowledging the younger person's effort in being out and about. This exchange reinforces the elder's role as a guardian and the younger person's role as an active member of the community.

Greetings also serve as a medium for passing down cultural knowledge and values from one generation to the next. During cultural festivals and ceremonies, greetings take on a more elaborate form. Special greetings are exchanged to mark the significance of the occasion. For instance, during the New Yam Festival, people greet each other with *E kúodún obè* (happy festival of yam). This greeting not only conveys good wishes but also stresses the cultural importance of the festival. Yoruba people have a variety of greetings for different events, expressions and people, which further illustrates the cultural emphasis on recognising and honoring the diverse manifestations of human identity.

However, Titilayo Onadipe-Shalom (2022) critically noted that globalization, the dominance of English, digital communication norms, and elitist attitudes that marginalize indigenous language, are eroding this tradition (see also Akindele 1990; Oluyemi and Olumide 2021). In her study through observations and interviews across ten families, she revealed widespread deficiencies in greetings tied to time, profession and social circumstance. She observed that many children, now fail to distinguish greetings for specific contexts, e.g., mid-morning vs. rainy season or misapply them entirely, such as saying "ẹ kú òkú" instead of "ẹ kú àṣẹ̀yìndè" to the bereaved. She noted further that the influence of digital culture, absentee parenting, and the devaluation of Yoruba language at home exacerbate the decline; and calls for urgent reawakening efforts such as including culturally relevant emojis in digital communicating and revitalizing parental and communal roles to safeguard this vital cultural heritage.

4. Greetings as establishment of the existence of *èniyàn*

Over time, the practice of greeting in Yoruba culture has been reduced to a mere formality, often performed out of compulsion rather than understanding. However, this shift does not diminish the significance of greeting within Yoruba thought. In Yoruba culture, as the art of greeting is deeply intertwined with the spiritual realm. To fully grasp the importance of this practice, it is essential to explore the connection between the human being and the spiritual world in Yoruba metaphysics. Beyond their cultural and social functions, greetings in Yorubaland hold deep symbolic meanings.

They are often linked to spiritual beliefs and practices. As Akintoye rightly notes, "the persistence of traditional greetings in Yoruba culture is a testament to the resilience of the people and their commitment to preserving their heritage (Akintoye 2010, 56)." The Yoruba people believe that words have power, and the way one greets another can influence the outcome of their day and can reinforce their existence in the world. Greeting is a ritual that affirms the interconnectedness of all being within the Yoruba cosmos. It acknowledges not just the individual, but their place within a larger, spiritually-infused universe. This simple, yet profound act, reinforces the essence of *èyàn* — a reminder that to be truly human is to exist in harmony with others and the cosmos. This shows that greetings in Yorubaland are not merely social niceties but are deeply embedded in the metaphysical and cultural fabric of the Yoruba people. The act of greeting transcends simple acknowledgement and serves as a profound recognition of an individual's existence and status within the community, which is why they often feel uncomfortable when someone fails to greet them. Owomoyela highlights a Yoruba proverb which says that, *Bí ẹnikan ò kìnì "Kú-ù-jokòò," kíkí Ọrun-ún ju ti igba èyàn lẹ* (If a person does not extend greetings to you, God's greetings are worth more than those of two hundred people) (Owomoyela 2005, 205), to reinforce the people's belief in greeting as an act of recognising their existence.

It is worthy to note that although the proverb above emphasizes the supreme value of divine recognition, it does not suggest that social recognition is unimportant. On the contrary, while divine acknowledgment affirms an individual's inherent worth and dignity, it does not replace the vital role of communal interaction in the development of personhood. This is because in Yoruba thought, *èyàn* is not simply a status granted at birth, nor is it fully secured by divine approval alone. Rather, it is something cultivated and confirmed through one's relationships with others in the community. As Menkiti (1984) argues and further strengthened by Odeyemi (2024), in the African philosophical context, personhood is earned through ethical behaviour and social participation. The act of greeting is far from being a mere formality. It is a powerful expression of this recognition. It communicates respect, presence and mutual belonging within a moral community. If God's greeting were sufficient on its own, there would be little need for the Yoruba emphasis on greeting rituals, which are taught from early childhood and inherently embedded in everyday life. The persistence of these practices supports the belief that being acknowledged by one's community is central to one's humanity. When someone fails to greet or acknowledge another, it can be experienced as a denial of their being, a disruption in the shared space where personhood is affirmed. Therefore, the Yoruba worldview maintains a careful balance, while divine recognition offers existential reassurance, communal affirmation through greeting is essential to becoming a full *èyàn*. The saying about God's greeting, then, is not a dismissal of social recognition but a consolation in its absence, reaffirming both the individual's worth and the importance of human interconnectedness.

When Yoruba people meet in public spaces, such as markets or community gatherings, greetings are exchanged (Owomoyela 2005, 326) to acknowledge each other's presence and establish a sense of community. A common greeting in such settings is *E kúulé* or *E kúújókó* used to acknowledge someone's presence at home or a place where they feel at ease. This greeting fosters a sense of existence, of belonging and of communal identity.

The culture of greetings in Yorubaland is a valuable aspect of the Yoruba ethnography of communication. According to a descriptive study, Yoruba greetings serve numerous pragmatic functions, including facilitating and regulating interpersonal relationships, guiding cooperative and polite behaviour, promoting reciprocal respect and amity, and exemplifying cultural identity (Segun, 2018). These greetings are not only a means of communication but also a way to promote integration and unity within the community. Different types of greetings have been identified, such as seasonal or periodic, occupation-related, and event or festival greetings, each serving a specific purpose and context (Segun, 2018).

Moreover, the socio-linguistic aspects of Yoruba greetings reveal their appropriateness con-

cerning time, event, condition, occupation and context (Schleicher, 2010). Greetings are seen as a discourse between two parties capable of exchanging pleasantries. However, an interesting dimension is the concept of intermediation in greeting discourse, where a third party responds on behalf of individuals who are unable to reply, such as toddlers, extremely sick persons, kings and the bereaved (Opoola and Adeoye 2019). This shows that greetings in Yoruba culture are means of establishing the existence of such individuals; a practice that underscores the sacrosanct nature of greetings where the reply is obligatory regardless of the state or status of the person being (Opoola and Adeoye 2019). Intermediation can be for reasons of politeness, incapacitation, authority or educating the young ones, thereby highlighting the cultural and situational constraints that shape greeting practices (Opoola and Adeoye 2019). Adegbija identifies greetings as a fundamental expression of positive politeness within Yorùbá culture, which underscores the attributes of an *Ọmọlúàbí*. He observes that greetings serve as a deliberate strategy among the Yorùbá to engage a co-interlocutor and foster harmonious interactions. It is expected that the younger individual initiates greetings, particularly when addressing elders. First encounters or reunions are often marked by elaborate greeting rituals. Furthermore, close interlocutors frequently extend greetings to absent relatives and associates as a gesture of respect, communal bonding and to express their acknowledgement of the people's existence. An *Ọmọlúàbí* is therefore expected to be attuned to these various dimensions and forms of greetings that embody the cultural ethos in every interaction (Adegbija 1989).

For the Yoruba, the essence of being human is not automatically realised but is a potentiality that must be actualised through responsible actions and social participation. A significant aspect of fulfilling this essence is seen in the cultural practice of greeting, which transcends mere politeness, to become an acknowledgement of another's existence. Greeting in the Yoruba context is an affirmation of mutual recognition and respect and it reflects a deeper metaphysical connection between individuals. When a Yoruba person asks, "*Şe o ò lè kí èniyàn ni?*" (Can you not greet?), they are not simply questioning a social norm, rather, they are invoking a fundamental aspect of what it means to be truly human in the Yoruba tradition. The question touches on the ideal conception of *èniyàn* — a being whose existence is validated not just through physical presence, but through the recognition and affirmation of others in the community.

Yoruba greetings capture the transient nature of physical existence and the enduring significance of spiritual identity. This understanding of life and individuality serves as the underpinning of the Yoruba conception of identity, where existence is recognised not merely in physical terms but through the acknowledgment of one's spiritual essence. In this context, the act of greeting assumes a metaphysical dimension. The Yoruba people place immense importance on greeting, seeing it not merely as a social convention but as an acknowledgment of the existence, individuality and autonomy of each person. This practice reflects a deep respect for the interconnectedness of life, where each individual is recognised as a unique embodiment of both physical and spiritual elements.

To strengthen this view, Benson Igboin (2012), assessed the importance of greetings as a vital act of recognition that affirms the presence and personhood, *èniyàn*, of the other within the moral and communal universe. For instance, he averred that early morning greeting, especially, is imbued with a sacred rhythm that reawakens the bonds of mutual obligation and shared humanity. To neglect or ignore it is not merely to breach decorum but to signal an unspoken suggestion of hostility, emotional withdrawal, disconnection, erosion of mutual respect, or even latent malevolence. Such omission undermines the deeply embedded ethos of *we-feeling* àwa, weakening the threads that sustain communal vitality and existential harmony. Yet it is not only the act of greeting that matters, but the tone, cadence, emotional resonance and situational appropriateness with which it is delivered. In this way, greeting becomes an enactive expression of moral duty; a linguistic and tonal affirmation of belonging; an essential ritual through which individuals renew their place in the social world; a silent invocation of communal harmony; a reaffirmation of shared memory, an expression respect; a transmission of cultural continuity and an establishment of an individual's existence.

As Western values and urban life displace traditional structures, the decline in greeting culture among Yoruba youth signals not merely cultural loss but a quiet erasure of the self, *èniyàn*. In a worldview where personhood is not assumed but earned and sustained through moral actions, failing to greet is a refusal to acknowledge or be acknowledged as fully human. Yoruba epistemology, which is rooted in orality, intersubjectivity, reverence, communal memory, and moral performance, weakens when the everyday rituals that transmit and affirm knowledge are abandoned. Without greeting, the mechanisms through which values are expressed begin to collapse. This is not just a linguistic shift but an ontological crisis. To lose greeting is to risk raising a generation detached from the values that define Yoruba worldview. As suggested by Akindele 1990; Molefe 2020; Oluyemi and Olumide 2021; Onadipe-Shalom 2022, protecting this heritage is therefore urgent, not for nostalgia, but for the survival of a cultural vision where to greet is to grant and be granted the status of *èniyàn*.

5. Conclusion

In a rapidly changing world, where traditional practices are often challenged by modernity, the Yoruba greeting remains a vital part of the community's identity. Greeting is far more than a gesture of respect; it is a fundamental expression of the Yoruba worldview, where acknowledging the presence of another is a recognition of their spiritual essence, existence and a validation of their individuality. Thus, greeting remains a vital aspect of Yoruba identity that embody a deep philosophical and cultural understanding of what it means to be truly human. In light of the analyses above, it is the conclusion of this paper that greetings serve as means of establishing and acknowledging the existence of *èniyàn*

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