

Chapter 4

Swahili Greetings

The Swahili people of East and Central Africa take their greetings seriously. This chapter introduces the most commonly used Swahili greetings. It also discusses expressions that are associated with the Swahili culture.

Section A: Calling out *Hodi*

The Swahili people use the word *Hodi* (May I come in?) when they approach someone's house. When *Hodi* is used in this context, it is the equivalent of ringing the doorbell in the Western world. The visitor continues to call out *Hodi* until he/she gets a response from her/his host. The response to *Hodi* is:

Karibu. – Welcome.

If there is more than one person visiting, the response is:

Karibuni. – Welcome all.

The suffix *-ni* denotes the plural form of *Karibu*. But in other contexts, the suffix *-ni* can mean “in” or “at” (See Chapter 10). If permission to enter someone's premises is denied, the host responds by saying:

Hakuna hodi. – You may not come in.

The word *Hodi* is also used when one approaches a river or a well to request for permission to come nearer to the river or well. Due to the lack of potable water, many people in rural areas in East and Central Africa do laundry or bathe in rivers or use water from wells.

If one wants to pass through a crowd, one may also call out *Hodi*. In this case, the word *Hodi* means “May I pass?” The response to this kind of *Hodi* is also *Karibu*. Sometimes instead of using *Hodi* in asking for permission to pass through a crowd, the word *Samahani* which means “Excuse me” is used. The response to *Samahani* is *Bila Samahani* or “No excuse needed.”

Greeting:

Hodi? – May I come in?

Response:

Karibu. – Welcome.

Greeting:

Hodi? – May I come in?

Response:

Hakuna hodi. – You may not come in.

Greeting:

Samahani. – Excuse me.

Response:

Bila samahani. – No excuse needed.

Practice Exercise A

Fill in the blanks.

1. When a person approaches somebody’s house he/she calls out _____.
2. If the host wants to welcome the visitor, he/she responds by saying _____.
3. If more than one person is visiting, the host responds by saying _____.
4. If the host does not want the visitor to enter the house he/she responds by saying _____.
5. When someone wants to pass through a crowd, the person may say _____ or _____.

Section B: Greetings

After a visitor enters the premises, greetings are exchanged. The most common Swahili greetings are *Jambo* (affair, matter, thing) and *Habari* (the news).

Jambo Greetings

Before discussing *Jambo* Greetings, it is important to recall the negative forms of Personal Subject Prefixes as taught in Chapter 3.

If you want to greet one person, you must combine the Negative Personal Subject Prefix for the Second Person singular, which is *HU-* (You [sing.] not) with *Jambo* to form:

Hujambo? – You do not have a matter?

The other person responds by combining the Negative Personal Subject Prefix of the First Person Singular, which is *Si-* (I not) with *Jambo* to form:

Sijambo. – I am fine. (Literally means “I do not have a matter.”)

If the person being greeted is a woman (*bibi*), one would greet her by saying:

Hujambo bibi? – How are you madam?

If the greeter is a man (*bwana*), the lady would respond by saying:

Sijambo bwana. – I am fine sir.

When greeting more than one person, the greeter would combine the Negative Personal Subject Prefix of Second Person Plural, which is *Ham-* (you [pl.] not) with *Jambo* to form:

Hamjambo? – You (pl.) do not have a matter?

The response to *Hamjambo?* is:

Hatujambo. – We are fine. (Literally means “We do not have a matter.”)

Combining the Negative Personal Subject Prefix of First Person Plural *Hatu-* (we [pl.] not) with the word *Jambo* is how we arrive at the response *Hatujambo*.

If a teacher (*mwalimu*) is greeting his/her students (*wanafunzi*), he/she would say:

Hamjambo wanafunzi? – How are you students?

The students would respond by saying:

Hatujambo mwalimu. – We are fine teacher.

By following the examples above, the *Jambo* greeting can also be used to inquire about a person(s) who are not in the vicinity. When inquiring about a single person who is not present, the greeter would combine the Negative Personal Subject Prefix of Third Person Singular, which is *Ha-* (he/she not) with *Jambo* to form:

Hajambo? – How is he/she? (Literally means “He/She does not have a matter?”)

The response would be:

Hajambo. – He/She is fine. (Literally means “He/She does not have a matter.”)

If one is enquiring about Third Person Plural, one would ask:

Hawajambo? – How are they? (Literally means “They do not have a matter?”)

The response would be:

Hawajambo. – They are fine. (Literally means “They do not have a matter.”)

As you can see from the Third Person examples above, when a Third Person is inquired about, whether singular or plural, the answer stays in the Third Person.

The *Jambo* greeting is the only form of greeting which may be preceded by the word *Je* which is designed to alert the person or persons being greeted that a question is about to be asked (You will learn more about *Je* in Chapter 16 on Question Words). For example, instead of just saying:

Watoto hawajambo? – How are the children?

One would begin by saying:

Je, watoto hawajambo? – How are the children?

The response would still be:

Watoto hawajambo. – The children are fine.

Please note that the *jambo* greeting and the response to the *jambo* greeting allows for the word order to be reversed. Therefore, the example above can be posed as:

Hawajambo watoto? – How are the children?

The response would be:

Hawajambo watoto. – The children are fine.

Practice Exercise B

Translate into Swahili.

6. Dad and mom are fine.
7. The children are fine.
8. Teacher is fine.
9. The youth is fine.
10. Grandfather is fine.
11. Is the lady fine?
12. Are you (pl.) fine?
13. You (sing.) are fine.
14. We are fine.
15. How is Joanna?

Choose the correct response to the *Jambo* Greetings from the two responses found in the bracket.

16. *Peter and Anna* (*hajambo, hawajambo*).
17. *Walimu* (*hujambo, hawajambo*).
18. *Mkulima* (*hajambo, hatujambo*).
19. *Polisi (pl.)* (*sijambo, hawajambo*).
20. *Mtoto* (*hawajambo, hajambo*).
21. *Mfanyakazi* (*hujambo, hajambo*).
22. *Wapishi* (*hujambo, hawajambo*).
23. *Wanafunzi* (*hawajambo, hajambo*).
24. *Madaktari* (*hajambo, hawajambo*).
25. *Mimi na John* (*hawajambo, hatujambo*).

Section C: *Habari* Greetings

As stated previously, the word *Habari* means “The News.” When greeting another person, the greeter says:

Habari? – What is your (sing.) news?

When greeting more than one person, the greeter says:

Habarini? – What is your (pl.) news?

As stated earlier in this Chapter, the suffix *-ni* denotes the plural form of *Habari*.

With this type of greeting one can ask about “The News” of anything after the initial greetings have been exchanged.

Examples:

Habari za leo? – The news of today?

Habari za watoto? – The news about the children?

Habari za asubuhi? – The news of the morning?

Habari za kazi? – The news about work?

The response to the *Habari* Greeting always contains the word *Nzuri* meaning “Good” or “Fine.” If something is wrong, the respondent is expected to say *Nzuri* first and then provides an explanation afterwards

about what is amiss by using the word *lakini* which means “but.” Upon hearing the sad news, the greeter is expected to express sorrow by saying either *Pole sana* meaning “I feel very sorry for you (sing.)” or *Poleni sana* “I feel very sorry for you (pl.).” The response to *Pole* or *Poleni* is one of the following: *Nimeshapoa*. meaning “I have already recovered.” *Tumeshapoa*. meaning “We have already recovered.” *Ameshapoa*. meaning “He/She has already recovered.” or *Wameshapoa*. meaning “They have already recovered.” depending on who is being referred to. This response is followed by *Asante sana* meaning “Thank you very much.” or *Asanteni* if more than one person is being thanked.

Example:

Kojo:

Hujambo Christine? – How are you Christine?

Christine:

Sijambo Kojo. Habari za kazi? – I am fine Kojo. What is the news about work?

Kojo:

Nzuri sana. Watoto hawajambo? – Very good. How are the children?

Christine:

Hawajambo, lakini Alexi ni mgonjwa. – They are fine, but Alex is sick.

Kojo:

Pole sana. – I am very sorry for you (sing.)/I am sorry to hear that.

Christine:

Ameshapoa. Asante sana. – He has already recovered. Thank you very much.

Practice Exercise C

Translate into English.

26. *Habari za masomo?*
27. *Habari za asubuhi?*
28. *Habari za babu?*
29. *Habari za safari?*
30. *Habari za mwalimu?*
31. *Habari za mkulima?*

32. *Habari za wasichana?*
33. *Habari za kazi?*
34. *Habari za madaktari?*
35. *Habari za Kanada?*

Section D: Other forms of Swahili Greetings

Apart from *Habari* and *Jambo* Greetings, there are other forms of greetings which the student of Swahili should be familiar with. These are: *Shikamoo*, *Salama*, *Hali gani*, *Mambo* and Arabic Greetings.

Shikamoo Greetings

This type of greeting is meant to show respect and is reserved for people such as parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, older siblings, teachers as well as people in authority.

The word *Shikamoo* means “Hello” or “Accept my respect.” During the era of the slave trade on the East African Coast and Zanzibar, slaves used to greet their masters using this form of greeting. The response to *Shikamoo* is *Marahaba* meaning “Hello” or “Delightful.” When greeting more than one person one could say, *Shikamooni*. Again, the suffix -*ni* denotes the plural form. However, the response to *Shikamooni* is still *Marahaba*.

Salama Greetings

The word *Salama* means peaceful. One can greet another person by just saying:

Salama? – Is it peaceful?

The other person responds by saying:

Salama sana. – Very peaceful.

There is no plural form for this type of greeting. Thus, when greeting more than one person, one should still say:

Salama? – Is it peaceful?

Hali gani Greetings

The word *Hali* means “Condition” and *gani?* means “what?” When greeting someone, the greeter could say:

Hali gani? – What is your condition?

The response is:

Njema. – I am fine.

If more than one person is being greeted, the same greeting and response would apply.

Mambo Greetings

The word *Mambo* is the plural of *Jambo*, which means “things, matters, and affairs.” This is a recent form of greeting used mostly by young people. The person using this form of greeting would just ask:

Mambo? – What’s up?

The other responds by saying:

Poa. – Cool.

Arabic Greetings

It is common on the East African Coast for Swahili speakers to greet each other in Arabic. It is a sign of being educated if someone greets others using a foreign language! Swahili speakers commonly use the following Arabic greetings:

Salam alekum? – How are you? Literally means “Peace be upon you all.”

The other person would respond by saying:

Alekum salam. – I am well. Literally means “Upon you all be peace.”

Another form of Arabic greeting is *Sabalkheri*. One person would greet another by saying:

Sabalkheri. – Good morning.

The response to *Sabalkheri* is the same, which is *Sabalkheri*.

Masalkheri is yet another form of Arabic greeting which means “Good Evening,” and the response is *Masalkheri*.

Handshakes

A handshake constitutes part of Swahili greetings. When greeting each other, the Swahili people always shake hands. For reasons already explained (See Chapter 1), the right hand rather than the left is used for greetings, and foreigners are expected to do likewise. Greeting someone without offering or returning a handshake is considered disrespectful. Also, while relatives and acquaintances of both genders may shake hands while greeting each other, it is considered inappropriate behaviour for a man to shake a lady’s hand especially if she is someone’s wife unless she offers her hand to the person greeting her.

Kwa heri

After greetings are exchanged, the Swahili people, like others, say goodbye to each other at the end of the conversation by saying:

Kwa heri. – Goodbye.

The other person responds by saying:

Kwa heri ya kuonana. – Goodbye till we meet each other again.

An alternative response to *Kwa heri* is:

Karibu tena. – Come again.

When saying “Goodbye” to more than one person, the phrase *Kwa herini* is used, again, the suffix *-ni* denoting the plural form.

Practice Exercise D

Provide appropriate responses to the following greetings.

36. *Salam alekum?*
37. *Salbakheri.*
38. *Masalkheri.*
39. *Shikamoo?*
40. *Kwa heri.*
41. *Salama?*
42. *U hali gani?*
43. *Mambo?*
44. *Pole.*
45. *Poleni.*

Indicate whether or not the following statements are True or False by writing the letters T or F at the end of the statement.

46. A handshake is part of Swahili greeting.
47. The right hand is always offered for a handshake.

New Vocabulary

- alekum salam:* I am well
ameshapoa: He/She has already recovered
asante: thank you
asubuhi: morning(s)
bibi: lady(ies), grandmother(s)
bila samahani: No excuse needed
daktari/ma-: doctor(s)
gani?: what?, which?, how?
habari: news, what news?
habarini?: What is your (pl.) news?
hakuna: there is nothing
hajambo?: how is he/she?
hamjambo?: you (pl.) are fine?
hatujambo: we are fine
hawajambo?: how are they?
hodi?: may I come in?
hujambo?: you (sing.) are fine?

jambo/mambo: thing(s), matter(s), affair(s)

je?: well, how about?

Kanada: Canada

karibu: near, nearby, nearly, close, welcome (sing.)

karibuni: welcome (pl.)

kazi: work, job(s)

kijana/vi-: youth(s), young person(s)

kuonana: meet each other

kwa heri: goodbye (sing.)

kwa herini: goodbye (pl.)

lakini: but, nevertheless

leo: today

marhaba: hello, delightful

masalkheri: good evening

mfanyakazi/wa-: worker(s)

mgonjwa/wa-: sick person(s), patient(s)

mkulima/wa-: farmer(s)

mpishi/wa-: cook(s), chef(s)

msichana/wa-: girl(s)

mtoto/wa-: child(ren)

mwanafunzi/wa-: student(s)

ni: is/are

-ni: denotes plural form

nimeshapoa: I have already recovered

njema: fine

nzuri: good

poa: cool, calm, peaceful, feel better

pole: sorry (sing.)

poleni: sorry (pl.)

polisi: police

sabalkheri: good morning

safari: journey(s), safari trip(s)

salam alekum: How are you?

salama: peaceful, safe

samahani: excuse me, sorry

sana: very

shikamoo: Hello (said to an elder)

shikamooni: Hello (pl.) (said to elders)

sijambo: I am fine

somo/ma-: academic subject(s)
tena: again, furthermore, besides
tumeshapoa: We have already recovered
wameshapoa: They have already recovered
ya: of
za: of

Key to Exercises

Answers to Practice Exercise A

1. *Hodi.*
2. *Karibu.*
3. *Karibuni.*
4. *Hakuna hodi.*
5. *Hodi or Samahani.*

Answers to Practice Exercise B

6. *Baba na mama hawajambo.*
7. *Watoto hawajambo.*
8. *Mwalimu hajambo.*
9. *Kijana hajambo.*
10. *Babu hajambo.*
11. *Je, bibi hajambo?*
12. *Hamjambo?*
13. *Hujambo.*
14. *Hatujambo.*
15. *Je, Joanna hajambo?*
16. *Hawajambo.*
17. *Hawajambo.*
18. *Hajambo.*
19. *Hawajambo.*
20. *Hajambo.*
21. *Hajambo.*
22. *Hawajambo.*
23. *Hawajambo.*
24. *Hawajambo.*
25. *Hatujambo.*

Answers to Practice Exercise C

26. What is the news about studying?
27. What is the morning's news?
28. What is the news about grandfather?
29. What is the news about the journey?
30. What is the news about the teacher?
31. What is the news about the farmer?
32. What is the news about the girls?
33. What is the news about work?
34. What is the news about the doctors?
35. What is the news about Canada?

Answers to Practice Exercise D

36. *Aleykum salam.*
37. *Salbakheri.*
38. *Masalkheri.*
39. *Marahaba.*
40. *Kwa heri ya kuonana/Karibu tena.*
41. *Salama.*
42. *Njema.*
43. *Poa.*
44. *Nimeshapoa or Ameshapoa.*
45. *Tumeshapoa or Wameshapoa.*
46. True.
47. True.