

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-11754-8 - Tales of Hi and Bye: Greeting and Parting Rituals  
Around the World  
Torbjorn Lundmark  
Excerpt  
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## INTRODUCTION

‘Good morning,’ the doctor says as you enter the surgery, ‘let me just go and get your file – won’t be a moment.’

The doctor returns with your papers. ‘Good morning.’ Then, ‘Oops, I forgot my stethoscope. I’ll be right back.’

The doctor comes back from the next room and sits down behind the desk. ‘Good morning.’

For a moment you start to think there’s something strange about your doctor. Something almost Monty Pythonesque. But what?

There are many unwritten rules when it comes to saying ‘hi’ and saying ‘bye’. Why do you sound awkward if you greet someone more than once, while it is perfectly fine to say goodbye many times over?

Greeting customs is one of the ‘human universals’, as anthropologists call them. Perhaps farewelling customs is one too. This means that, among such things as jealousy and gift-giving and fear of death, there is no known human culture on earth that does not have rules about how to say hi and, perhaps, how to say bye.

People bow, rub noses, shake hands and kiss. Most raise their eyebrows. Polynesians rub each other’s backs or sniff each other’s breath; East Africans might spit on the ground in a greeting; Tibetans stick out their tongues. Some New

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## TALES OF HI AND BYE

Guinean tribesmen pat each other on the rump. Not long ago, Chinese people kowtowed nine times and Westerners learnt elaborate ways of removing their hats with a flourish or even threw themselves face-down on the ground in front of their superiors. There is hugging of heads, clasping of knees, kissing of feet, touching of shoulders – even today.

It might seem easy to say hi and to say bye. Yet the matter of meeting and leaving tends to be a complicated act. The rituals of approach and departure seem infused with etiquette and custom, no matter what culture you belong to. By getting it wrong you might end up in trouble or embarrassed.

Why do some cultures shake hands? And why with the right hand? When is cheek-kissing appropriate? What is mwah-mwah? Why do the Japanese wave at each other when they are standing only one pace apart? Do Maoris and Inuit really rub noses? What do the Chinese say when they meet?

Many of the rituals and rules go unnoticed. It is such a natural thing. But there are many mysteries in the trivial act of saying hello and goodbye – in a Western or any other culture.

What seems entirely natural in one place can be strange behaviour in another. Take bidding farewell to your guests. In Australia, for instance, it is customary to follow the visitors all the way out to their car. The driver

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then invariably beeps the horn as the guests drive away. Everybody waves, and the host family stays on the kerb-side, watching the car drive away for however long it takes until there is no sign of it. Compare this with Scandinavia, where people say goodbye inside, well before putting coats and shoes on. The door slams shut behind the visitors and they make their own way to the car and drive away without so much as looking back once.

How do you knock on the ‘door’ of an igloo? Where did Hitler’s Nazi salute come from? Why do people bow? Why are Swedes reluctant to use each other’s names and even avoid using the word ‘you’? What is the function of the Masonic handshake?

All these and more mysteries are explained in this book about how we say hi, how we say bye, and how we refer to each other between the two.

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## *Gestures & Signals*



*Gestures & Signals*

TAKE A BOW:

*bending at the neck or waist*

**B**owing is part of many greeting rituals. A bow can be as quick and easy as a slight nod of the head, or as long and complex as a Chinese kowtow. In some countries, bowing is a veritable science in itself.

The bow, as with so many other greetings, is a show of humility, in that you lower your own body before the other person. The most extreme form of bowing is the full prostration, where you throw yourself on the ground, face down. This gesture happens in the Bible, for instance, where it is performed by both men and women.

In the Orient and elsewhere, bowing is done by both sexes. In Western cultures, however, bowing is normally done by men. Women, on the other hand, traditionally used to curtsey, and sometimes still do, especially before royalty. Nevertheless, curtseying can probably be said to be, almost literally, a sinking tradition.

But let us return to bowing. Like the handshake, the bow might also have to do with showing trust in another person. By bowing we purposely break two of the golden rules of hand-to-hand combat: we take our eyes off the opponent, and we show the most vulnerable part of our

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body, namely the head – the place where most people have their brains. In another form of non-verbal greeting, men show their faith even further in the other person by taking off their hat (or helmet) to present their unprotected pate.

In other words, by bowing you're giving the other guy the chance to raise a club and whack your brains out – but at the same time your demeanour is saying 'I trust you not to do that.'

Nowadays we take bowing quite casually. But in bygone days, when everyone was carrying a weapon that could either crack your skull in two or chop your head off, bowing would have been a big deal.

## BENDING: THE RULES IN JAPAN

The bow has a life of its own in Japan. Perhaps nowhere else is bowing so important, varied and socially anchored – not to mention complicated. There is a whole vocabulary of bowing, with descriptions of all the components of different kinds of bows.

There are at least 12 basic types of Japanese bow; nine 'sitting or kneeling' bows and three 'standing' ones.

If you watch Japanese people carefully, you will notice a few characteristics of bowing. For starters, both men and women bow. And each gender follows different styles. Men bow from the waist, with their back straight as a ramrod,

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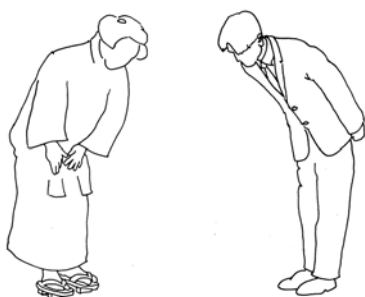
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and with their arms stretched along their torso; they look a bit like oil derricks. Women make a softer bow and place their hands in front of them, either clasped or overlapping.



When making a particularly deep bow, both men and women place their hands on their thighs to prop themselves up in order not to topple over.

Bowing is so ingrained in Japanese people that they even bow when speaking on the telephone. Moreover, the bow is often inextricably linked to a word or phrase. For example, to say *arigatō gozaimasu* ('thank you') without bowing would seem very strange, if not unthinkable, to a Japanese person.

Another instance where the bowing is done out of sight of the person being bowed to, is the not uncommon practice of bowing repeatedly behind the back of a departing superior.

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#### TALES OF HI AND BYE

In Japan, bowing is done not only in business and social settings, but also in religious, sport, traditional arts, school and many other situations. The bow is also an essential part of the Japanese tea ceremony.

Different bows convey different emotions, and there are bows to show respect, gratitude, deference, remorse, sincerity, humility and other feelings.

Even if you have never been to Japan you may have come across one particular style of bowing on the television news: the apologetic bow. This is an embarrassing and humiliating event, for instance when a business manager is forced to take the blame for a serious mistake – perhaps the death of a worker. The manager stands behind a table, touches the tabletop with the fingertips of both hands, and bends until the forehead almost hits the surface.

#### Now, how bow?

So there you are, standing face to face with your boss, colleague, or underling, ready to fold at your waist. Before you even start any human origami, there are a number of decisions to make.

#### *Which style?*

Should I do just an *eshaku* or go to the trouble of performing a *gasshou*, or perhaps even a *saikeirei* or some other form of



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### *Gestures & Signals*

*ojigi?* It's a delicate question of appropriate choice – much like deciding what grip to use next in a wrestling match. It's all got to do with your relationship to the person you are bowing to.

#### *How low to go?*

The simple answer is not surprising: lower than a superior; as low as an equal; and not as low as a subordinate. Choose between a 15 degree casual bend or go the whole hog with a 45 degree whopper of a backbreaker. If you're Japanese you will have practiced the precise angle thousands of times. However, there's a catch: bending *too* deep is risky business; either you're a crawler or you're being flippant.

Judging one's bending ratio can be a tricky thing, for the simple reason of human physiology. You don't have eyes at the top of your head, so during the bow, the other person is in a blind spot. You never know to which depths they are stooping.

#### *How long?*

Should you count to two, three, or five? How long you should bend over staring at your toes depends entirely on the status of the person in front of you. If it is your superior, you mustn't straighten up until after he or she does. Same dilemma: you can't see what the other person is doing, so it's all a matter of conjecture.

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### *How to bow out of it?*

If you straighten up too soon, and you find yourself looking down on your still bowing boss's bald spot, there's only one thing to do. You rapidly bend down again, but not quite as low. And so does your counterpart in return. In the end, two Japanese people can stand there, ducking over and over again, bending a little less each time.

### *Putting our heads together*

Japan's increasing contact with foreign nations has created one peculiar problem with bowing: the risk of serious head injury. When dealing with foreigners, the Japanese have adopted handshaking – but not at the expense of bowing. This means that the handshake is accompanied with a proper bow.

And there's the rub. While normal bowing is done at a safe distance, shaking hands is necessarily a close encounter and bowing vigorously at the same time could end up in severe head-bumping. The general idea is to shake, bow and twist – usually to the left, but you never know!

## HIT THE FLOOR!

The Chinese were good at bowing, too. Until the early 1900s, they almost bent over backwards when it came to bowing. In front of emperors and magistrates