EMICS AND ETICS RE-EXAMINED, PART 1

EMICS AND ETICS: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

by

Gerhard Kubik

Emics/etics as a theoretical model in cultural anthropology is a familiar topic in discussions. Recently it surged up again through the publication of *Emics and etics: the insider/outsider debate*, edited by Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike and Marvin Harris (1990). Soon thereafter the International Institute for Traditional Music in Berlin devoted a full volume of its journal *The world of music* (1/1993) to the topic. This coincided with the holding of the I.C.T.M. World Conference in June 1993, at which we three authors participated in a panel on the same subject organised by Max-Peter Baumann, Director of the Institute.

For about thirty years, particularly at round-table conferences, I have had repeated experience of the sudden and sometimes abrupt appearance of emics and etics in discussions with colleagues. My earliest encounter dates back to the mid-60s in anthropological seminars in Europe, when we discussed the subject rather heatedly, as well as some lesser known theoretical concepts by Kenneth Pike, William Sturtevant, Charles Frake and others.

In my own work there are many direct, and many more indirect references to the concept, illustrated with typical examples for one or the other standpoint assumed alternately by the *same* researcher. I could say, therefore, that I have not only talked about but lived through emics and etics. It was a focus in a paper I presented on the 22nd March 1990 at the international symposium "A century of field recording" organised by Ruth Stone at the Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, Bloomington. The paper was on "Field recording in Africa: the making of *emically meaningful documents*".

At the Bloomington conference there was a voice that demanded that participants exercise restraint. Michael Hertsfeld declared that the emic/etic discussion was obsolete and that it was a simplistic model nowadays mostly used by people who are weak in anthropological theory.

In January 1992, at the Miami conference on 'ethnicity' organised by Gerard Béhague, emics and etics reappeared, pricking some participants in the plenum to recommend to musicologists to familiarise themselves with the *current* literature in the social sciences. Although, as a cultural anthropologist, I could have remained neutral in this discussion, I felt obliged for the sake of some of our colleagues in

(pure) musicology to say that I for one did not subscribe to all of this criticism. In fact it is not true to say that Pike's theories had so little effect upon musicologists in the past that they are only discovering them now. My own very first fieldwork in Uganda in 1959/60, which was musicological, was deeply rooted in an emic approach. Emics/etics also figured prominently in courses given at UCLA in the days of Mantle Hood and Klaus Wachsmann. As a result of these teachings there appeared in 1969 an article by Paul van Thiel, presenting a taxonomy of musical instruments in Runyankore (the language spoken in Nkore, western Uganda), proceeding from the terms for 'agitating' a musical instrument (or 'playing' as one would say in English). In 1979 Artur Simon published (in the *Jahrbuch für Musikalische Volks- und Völkerkunde*) a detailed theoretical account of the state of methodology in ethnomusicology with a discussion of the emics/etics model, quoting from Pike and others. Here Simon coined the term "idiocultural", which has a variety of possible applications.

There is indeed plenty of evidence that musicologists have been aware of the emics/etics model and related theoretical issues inherited from anthropology and linguistics *all along* since the 1950s, and that they have discussed them, if sometimes only indirectly or in the context of factual field reports. On many occasions emics was also discussed under other names. For example, from the early 1970s on I have used the term "intracultural approach" to describe one avenue within my own methodology. There was a purpose in it. By saying "intracultural" rather than "emic" I wanted to dismantle the rigid oppositional implications of Pike's model. I reflected my general reservations regarding the sort of black-white painting, or 'thinking in opposites', so characteristic of Western intellectual inclinations. Simon's term "idiocultural" then offered itself as a third shade to the emic and etic standpoints.

A glance at the new book discussing emics/etics reveals little progress in finding a cure for what might be the West's most stubborn neurosis: the persistent creation and recreation of bipolar oppositional constructs: simple/complex, insider/outsider, black/white, etc. My impression of this volume: *Emics and etics: the insider/outsider debate*, is that it disproportionately widened, if not inflated, and thereby blurred the topic. What the back cover says, that there is a "confusion surrounding the use of these concepts", is therefore all too correct. As I understand K. Pike's early ideas published in the 1950s, the emic/etic dichotomy was a simple concept, useful in its very simplicity. Its usefulness was to increase consciousness in cultural researchers about their own theoretical viewpoints relating to their subjects of study. The basic idea of the concept, as I understood Pike, was to extrapolate a cognitional experience in linguistic studies, namely the basic distinction between phonemics and phonetics to the wider field of cultural research. Emics and etics is merely phonemics and phonetics with the 'phon' cut off. Someone doing emic studies in culture works like a linguist trying to discover the phonemics of the sounds in a language. He tries to

discover the intra-language significance of variations in the sound spectrum. For example, take the two German words 'Ich' and 'Nacht'. What we write with the letters /ch/ is in fact two different sounds. In 'Ich' the /ch/ is phonetically [ç], while in 'Nacht' it is [x]. For German speakers this difference is insignificant, because you could exchange these two sounds with each other in these two words without altering their meaning. Therefore we say that [ç] and [x] are one and the same phoneme in German. Phonology or phonemics are concerned with the discovery of phonemes.

By contrast phonetics delineates and studies comparatively all the sounds that exist in any language spoken in the world. A phonemic approach will therefore aim at isolating the meaningful sound repertoire within a singular linguistic system: a language. A phonetic approach will aim at discovering the measurable sound repertoire within a single or within multiple linguistic systems, i.e. languages. By analogy someone studying culture from an emic standpoint will aim at discovering meaningful units within that culture as a closed system; someone studying cultures from an etic standpoint will try to discover units (traits, etc) with reference to a framework of analysis constructed by the researcher, a framework that can be projected upon any culture. To study from an emic standpoint therefore means to analyse a system according to its own meaningful components. To study from an etic standpoint on the other hand means to analyse one or more systems comparatively with reference to an analytical framework of concepts created by the researcher and projected upon those systems.

Unfortunately these clear, basic distinctions have been so over-interpreted by others that the result has been confusion and the rise of an inflationary vocabulary of ill-defined conceptual derivatives, to the extent that even Kenneth Pike, now Emeritus Professor of Linguistics, has been drawn into the intellectual quagmire, as clearly testified by the discussions published in the 1990 book.

I would recommend for the future that we deflate our blown-up vocabulary and try to reduce the discussion to the clarity of the original concepts, which I have tried to summarise. In particular it seems necessary to dissociate the emics/etics dichotomy from the insider/outsider debate, which is only indirectly related to it.

I do not mean with this to block theoretical development of the emics/etics concept. On the contrary, I have tried repeatedly to develop it according to the results of my own field experience. For example, one thorny issue is etics' implicit claim of the universal validity and applicability of comparative scientific models. In reality, much of what researchers have regularly declared as work carried out from an *etic standpoint* more precisely exemplifies *idiocultural standpoints* — using Artur Simon's term — whereby observers project their own culture-specific concepts and categories upon a culture alien to them, rather than applying 'universal' parameters.

Here I felt that the emics/etics binary model might need an amendment with

something that would take account of this fact, without claiming a 'yes' or 'no' answer to the 'thorny issue'. What I had in mind resulted in a *ternary model*:

a) work from an *emic* or *intracultural standpoint*, i.e. from a standpoint within the cognitive system of the culture to be researched;

b) work from an *etic standpoint*, i.e. from a framework of reference created by the researcher with the aim of cross-cultural comparison and then projected upon many cultures for that purpose.

c) work from an *idiocultural standpoint* adopted by the foreign researcher, who believes that existing concepts and categories in his own language have universal validity. This is the most frequently encountered approach, if not the 'normal' one! He then projects these (quite often unconscious) premises upon the material in the culture he wants to analyse.

There is one intrinsic weakness in the binary emic/etic model as a framework for the study of human behaviour. (I am not now discussing its specific applications in linguistics.) Having identified what is in fact the most common standpoint, i.e. an observer's idiocultural standpoint, the question arises whether an *etic* standpoint is at all feasible: Can there be any standpoint that is so culturally neutral and devoid of idiocultural concepts that it could be accepted as universally valid? Is it at all possible to create a culturally neutral system of references for the study of human behaviour?

I cannot answer this question and I expect that no one would try to deceive themselves by claiming that they can. But ultimately it is actually unimportant to answer it. The result of our enquiry is simply that if anything like an etic standpoint is really possible, then our model had better be transformed into a ternary one, as outlined above. If, on the other hand an etic standpoint presents a contradiction in terms, because a standpoint from outside any system would logically be non-systemic (which is absurd), then we are back to a binary model. But in this case the oppositional categories would be expressed as a dichotomy between a standpoint from within the culture under study and a standpoint from within another, different culture, in both cases from *within* something.

Under no circumstances, however, is it justified to personify the emics/etics dichotomy and reduce it to an 'insider/outsider' opposition. Unfortunately, this is precisely what has so often happened in discussion recently, only adding to the confusion about emics and etics. The difference between these two dichotomies — emics/etics and insider/outsider — is in the referent. The insider/outsider distinction focuses upon the *person* of the observer or researcher and his share in the culture to be studied. The emic/etic distinction focuses upon *standpoints*, regardless of the kind of person involved. It is thus much more abstract than the first. This is perhaps why people have difficulty with it. Emics/etics solely describes the angle from which an

observer (*any* observer) operates in his or her studies at some juncture.

The insider/outsider dichotomy, so often discussed by ethnomusicologists these days, can easily degenerate into racism, because it promotes a silent stereotypical assumption that was not originally part of Pike's theory, namely that of 'cultural membership'. John Blacking used to warn students against that notion, and I often heard him say that no one can ever be a *member* of a culture. More recently I have stressed in some of my own work that no individual is necessarily nailed down to one culture from birth to death, and I introduced the term "inner cultural reconfiguration" for describing what seems to be a constant process during an individual's life-span. Inner cultural reconfiguration is a holistic concept, quite different from binary concepts such as biculturalism or bimusicality, postulated and much used by some during the 1960s and 1970s.

Due to the universal learnability of culture any so-called outsider to any culture can eventually become an insider. Likewise an original insider might well cross cultural borders that first separated his small world from the larger outside world, until he or she eventually becomes an outsider to the culture into which he or she was first enculturated. In practice nobody is ever a 100% insider, and nobody is ever a 100% outsider to anything that exists. Transitions and shades persist in the real world while the desk-top world prefers to perceive sharp contrasts and rigid distinctions.

The insider/outsider debate should therefore not be confounded with the emic/etic distinction. The latter is concerned with the cognitional realm, it is a basic concept in cognitive anthropology (or at least was so). And since a culture's cognitive dimension is the focus in all studies from emic standpoints (i.e. standpoints within the system of thought under investigation), anybody who places himself within a closed communication system can do an emic study. There is also no allegiance, you can shift any time. You work emically from the moment you use exclusively intracultural references in your descriptions and analyses of the phenomena you encounter, dispensing with all reference schemes external to the system.

Emics/etics has nothing to do with somebody's birth place, first language, or physical appearance. Anyone can alternately assume emic or etic standpoints in their studies. The moment someone has mastered just one foreign language he begins to operate from a system-internal standpoint generated by the use of that language, i. e. from an emic standpoint. And he can switch to another system, if he or she is multilingual; call it a kind of code-switching if you wish.

It has also been said, time and again, that comparative studies are necessarily *etic*. But on what grounds should it be impossible to compare two or three emic systems directly? It is perfectly possible to do so, as long as one is able to discover a *cognitive bridge*, i.e. one or more categories that are identical in their semantic fields across the languages compared. For example in West Africa, with the help of Danhin

Amagbenyõ Kofi, I was able to study the concepts of *vodu* (in Fõ) and *orisa* (in Yoruba) through a direct comparison of their semantic fields, based on data compiled in southwestern Nigeria, the Republic of Benin and Togo. The results were then compared with related concepts in the New World, particularly in Brazil. One could describe this approach as *comparative emics*, and it does not seem to be a contradiction in terms. In classical emic studies, since Kenneth Pike's formulation of the concept, you would elicit taxonomies and define the semantic field of terms within *one* particular language, or respectively within one culture. Then you would slot your results into the framework of scholarly terminology in a European language. In studies from an *etic* standpoint you would even proceed entirely from constructs and models conceptualised in a European language. What I have repeatedly attempted to do is quite different. I have tended directly to compare the emics of one thought system (for example Yoruba) with that of a neighbouring thought system (for example Fõ), without using concepts in European languages as a reference framework.

Ultimately it is of limited scientific importance whether *orisa* for example is described in English as 'deity', 'God', 'spirit', 'Saint', transcendental being' etc. It does not add much to the universal knowledge of cultures if speakers of European languages spend most of their time arguing about what terms they should use to describe such and such observation in *their* languages. In many university-level anthropological seminars the impression can be gathered easily that this is what cultural anthropology is all about. The obsessive search for new terms and models to analyse 'phenomena' or 'systems' etc. can be useful for career promotion, but very often it is just a reshelving process. Worse, it connives towards what is essentially fabrication. 'Ethnocentrism' and 'Eurocentric viewpoints' have been stigmatised regularly, and the most formidable 'ethnocentrism' concerns language. It is the confidence in many European speakers that every observation can be crystallised into some verbal expression in their languages.

In those areas of Africa where I am fluent in the languages spoken, I abandoned European languages long ago as an exclusive analytical framework of reference. Associates who work in my research team and I normally discuss our field material in the respective African language without the crutch of approximate translations into English, French, Portuguese etc. We also tend to write down our field-notes in the same way. This is not because of feelings of protest against 'European language imperialism' or suchlike, but following scientific considerations. Under no circumstances can we subscribe to the claim of any European language (or *any language* for that matter) to be the 'universal language of science'.

After thirty years of continuous fieldwork in African societies, as a speaker of two African languages and a successful marriage in an African country, my standpoint is predominantly from the inside in at least one, perhaps two African

cultures of the south-central zone. Until her death in 1989, my wife, Lidiya Malamusi and I never communicated in any language other than Cinyanja/Chicheŵa, the language of her birthplace, whether the subject was our joint research or private life. Within our communication there were also personal codes and expressions and symbolisms, sometimes difficult to translate into other languages. My wife's brother, my nephews and nieces and I feel between us a cultural identity; the children would never conceive of anyone in our midst as belonging to a 'different' culture. This becomes obvious when some real 'outsiders' from Europe or elsewhere visit us. Then there is suddenly tension which is not there when we are among ourselves. Within our community there are variations of interest, knowledge, temperament etc, but these are individual rather than cultural, reflecting personal life histories and talents. In 1967 when I first arrived there, cultural boundaries did exist, of course — I knew nothing of the language — but they have long since been removed.

Many case studies demonstrate the need for abandoning the idea of cradle-to-grave cultural membership, as if individuals were born with their names stuck on a ticket, and their seat reservations never to be changed. Individual life is not only a personal process of constant learning and relearning, but it is also a process of continuous cultural adjustment. Depending on circumstance and opportunity, as well as intellectual adaptability, it occurs in some of us more, in some less.

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