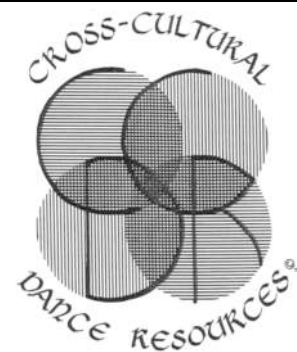


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CCDR Newsletter

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ETIC AND EMIC: AN ESSAY

Joann W. Kealiinohomoku

The 38th CORD Conference hosted by Cross-Cultural Dance Resources and Arizona State University Department of Dance examined the most comprehensive inquiries: scholarly papers, panels, roundtables, workshops, films, and activities that focus on emic and etic views and approaches as they pertain to dance cultures and dance researchers/scholars . . . The who? what? when? where? and why? of dancers and the dance events—explored from the emic point of view; explored from the etic point of view.

Something very important happened in 2006. The 38th annual CORD conference, “Continuing Dance Culture Dialogues: Southwest Borders and Beyond” convened on the ASU campus, Tempe, Arizona, November 2–5, 2006.

But as we remember the conference of 2006, let us remember something important that happened in 1954 also: a humanistic research tool for understanding lives and beliefs of a people from the point of view of the people (“folk”) instead of empirical ideas from outsiders only. This important tool was applied to the study and understanding of a given people, whether a people with whom one identifies or one who may be categorized as the “other.”

This significant event came from redefining the terms “-emic” and “-etic” to become independent words instead of suffixes to linguistic terms. Rethought to apply to all human behavior “-emic” and “-etic” became “emic” and “etic.” This brilliant discovery expanded them from their long-term usage in anthropological linguistics and began a new contemplation about the responsibility of ethnographers. This tool for understanding behavior is commonly described as the insider/outsider approach (emic/etic). Anthropological linguist Kenneth Pike, the person who redefined these words (Pike 1954), is honored today, more than half a century since he explained his valuable insight.

This essay is a look at the beginning of the terms emic and etic as singular words. We discover their use spread to many disciplines and they came to be so important they strongly influence the scholarly world today.

I will begin with a brief personal history.

In the early 1960s, while living in Hawai‘i, I often visited University of Hawai‘i professor of ethnomusicology, Barbara Bernard Smith. I made these treks often because Professor Smith had become an informal mentor to me. One afternoon she told me that “emic” and “etic” had been transformed from being linguistic terms only, to becoming tools for ethnographic studies. This exciting revelation thrilled and inspired me. From that moment to the present, the concepts of “emic” and “etic” have been paramount in my own thinking.



Joann W. Kealiinohomoku
Photo by Jessica Yu

Etic and Emic continued on page 3

Curator's Corner

Christopher A. Miller

I am writing to the membership during an exciting and busy time for the CCDR Collection. The School of Dance at ASU will officially celebrate the opening of our new facility and the re-establishment of public access to the CCDR Collection on April 7, 2010. Therefore, activity within the Collection has picked up, and it is with a great deal of enthusiasm that I report on recent and upcoming events.

I have been working with several of our graduate students here at ASU to prepare the Collection and to organize planned exhibits. Of the two exhibits in preparation, one will be mounted at the School of Dance, and the other will be housed at Hayden Library, ASU Libraries' central facility. Both exhibits will celebrate the lives in dance and scholarly work of our primary contributors. The exhibit at the School of Dance will focus on performance, and the ASU Libraries exhibit will illustrate the intersections of dance ethnology and allied disciplines so strongly represented by the CCDR Collection. Both exhibits are planned for the end of March and will run through the end of the academic semester. Of course, the energy and hard work of our graduate students has greatly enhanced planning on all fronts.

For those among our members who are able to attend, you will be treated to a tour of the new facility and the sounds of ASU's own Mariachi Ensemble, directed by School of Music faculty and CCDR Lifetime member, Professor J. Richard Haefer. We invite you all to share in our opening day celebration.

In a round up of other events, the CCDR Collection happily hosted recent visits from esteemed colleagues, DeWayne Young and Allegra Fuller Snyder. CCDR President Pegge Vissicaro and I are co-teaching a course this semester, Cross-Cultural Dance Studies, which will facilitate direct interaction with the CCDR Collection among fifteen of our undergraduate students. This is in addition to the numerous class visits from among our School of Dance faculty and students. We will also soon welcome into the Collection resources from the library and personal archive of the late Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, with humble appreciation to her husband and John Wilson for their thoughtful gifts.

Opportunities for outreach are growing as well, as I have had the opportunity to attend the Institute for Enabling Geospatial Scholarship at the University of Virginia as well as the most recent National Dance Heritage Leadership Forum convened by the Dance Heritage Coalition. As ever, I am energized by the opportunities I have as a steward of the Collection and remain dedicated to its continued growth. Now, more than ever, our holdings and opportunities to serve a new generation of dance scholars and practitioners depend on your legacies and contributions. Please do keep the Collection in mind as you consider your own collection and charitable giving.

Arts Congress 2010

LaShonda L. Williams



On February 1, 2010, I participated in the Arts Congress 2010, a conference of advocacy for the arts held at the State Capitol. As a representative of CCDR, I joined forces with numerous artistic groups and individuals throughout Arizona, supporting The Arizona Arts and Culture Industry and the Arizona Arts Education in this important event.

Meeting upon meeting, we encouraged our district leaders and senators to take a stand in favor of keeping the minimum amount of funding needed to qualify for the federal match of funds. The federal match has been an annual support that fed various art related events, educational programs, and businesses. However, our governor's proposed budget calls for a 7.5% cut this fiscal year, leaving us below the required amount.

Just think, the arts and culture industry contributes to occupations that form the following creative sectors: design, arts and culture, media, software, health, biological sciences and advance technology. In Arizona, more than 100,000 individuals work in at least 150 creative occupations, generating \$5.8 billion in annual wages. Arts and culture alone contributed \$560 million in spending and taxes in Phoenix. A creative economy promotes tourism, encourages spending, adds to the tax base, attracts new businesses, contributes to overall student success in school and teaches life-skills (critical thinking, problem solving) that prepare individuals for the workforce.

This is not a good time to cut more jobs. Contact your local District Representatives; write to your Senators, your voice is needed. This is not just a statewide issue; it will eventually affect everyone.

Returning to its linguistics roots in order to illustrate this point, anthropology students at Northwestern University in the 1950s often used a native Tewa speaker as a language “informant.”¹ He pronounced sounds in the Tewa language that were not found in Standard American English. We students took notes on 3 x 5 cards to record (in the anthropological phonetic alphabet), the sounds and the special movements made by the mouth and other speech articulators in order to produce a given sound. We recorded sound only, and meaning was not part of the exercise. In other words, after weeks of ear training and polishing our experience with the anthropological phonetic alphabet, we students could record and reproduce the many unique sounds of the Tewa language, but we did not know what, or if, those sounds had any meaning. Meaning became clear in further language studies that moved beyond the etic.

The anthropological phonetic alphabet is an example of applied -etics: -etics of a system developed for a specific purpose. The parts of an etic system are compiled from a collection, the standards of which are rigorously determined and agreed upon by scholars who are examining the same phenomena.²

Concert dancers in EuroAmerica and elsewhere are familiar with an important etic system: Labanotation, or Kinetography Laban, as it is called in much of Europe, is an etic system used to record and document bodily movement. The skills are rigorously taught so that students of Labanotation learn to see and notate the “same” way and their efforts can be “read” congruently by all who are trained in these skills. Those who devote themselves to the study of Labanotation can become certified, and their skills are shared with others across the world who are trained to write and read this same etic system. It is the skill that is shared, and not the intimate awareness of the reasons for the movement being notated. A person trained in a formal notation system does not need to know anything about the dance except to observe and record the movements of the unfolding empirical event that is being documented.

Emics, on the other hand, contain information and insights known only to the members of a given group of people or those intimately involved in the group—perhaps the knowledge is esoteric; perhaps it is known only to those who live it and take it for granted. In any case, it cannot be known by observation only. It depends upon a sharing of ideas and world views—it is mental and oral and mutually known to a given group through cognitive insights. ETIC information is objective and universal. EMIC information is subjective and unique to the “folk” of a given society.

The separation of emic and etic from linguistics seemed to burst upon a welcoming world. Not only did it become an important part of the discipline of anthropology, many other disciplines discovered the values of this distinction. It stirred much discourse, also, because exponents of different disciplines have various ways of defining and distinguishing emic and etic, although the one constant is the insider/outsider dichotomy.

A famous disagreement on the use of emic and etic was developed through the years by anthropologist Marvin Harris, and linguist Kenneth Pike. In fact, 34 years after Pike first coined “etic” and “emic” as singular words to describe human behavior, the American Anthropological Association held a debate between these two men at a “triple A” meeting in 1988, and an invited audience of 600 people attended the debate. I urge you to study the proceedings in order to learn the fine and technical ins and outs of their debate (Headland, Pike and Harris 1990). But to oversimplify the main points of their disagreement: Harris, who developed a theoretical approach called “cultural materialism” felt that the etic approach was stable, open to confirmation and consensus; therefore, he argued, the etic approach was more valuable to scholarship than the emic approach. Pike, on the other hand, felt that the etic approach was useful, not for its own sake, but as a way to enter the emic. Pike championed the emic approach because it reflected real human behavior and values.

But what is an emic study of a dance? Emic studies include the meaning of a dance, its story, its history, its cultural context, and not the dry features only. Digging deeper, an emic study of a dance includes the values embedded in the tradition, emotions evoked by the dance and the dancer, the various people who are involved with the dance, the cultural context of the entire dance event, the reasons for changes in time past and present,

and much more. Those items can be known only if insights are revealed by persons who are somehow deeply involved with the dance tradition. As in linguistics, the emic is only known when meaning is revealed by a human agent.

And what about the aesthetic of a dance? Aesthetic! Aha! There is that descriptor “etic” again. If the descriptor is changed to “emic” the word becomes “aesthemics.” Yes! (For a discussion of aesthemic, see Kealiinohomoku 1976 and 2001).³

The idea of “emic” and “etic” as descriptors opened vast fields for exploration for me. A western aesthetic of dance reveals the perfection of training and performance according to a western classic canon. It does not tell us why a successful Kaluli dancer in the New Guinea Highlands provokes the observers to be so overcome with emotion that the correct response is to burn the dancer with a fagot pulled out of the fire in the middle of the dance space (Kealiinohomoku 1977).

An aesthetic implies evaluation. In the western world an aesthetic is usually involved with concepts of beauty. But what are concepts of beauty? Ideas of beauty may not be universal. A student of mine from East Africa (I do not remember her tribe) disagreed with another student who showed a slide of a colorful sunset as an example of beauty. “Our People would not call that sunset beautiful. We would say ‘tomorrow it is going to rain.’”

On another occasion an Apache Indian student told us he would only use the word beauty or beautiful to describe something that was made by humans. A comely woman would not be called “beautiful” because nature made her. A piece of jewelry, a garment—those are the kinds of items that can be called beautiful in this man’s world view. In considering Apache dances they must be ritually correct, performed perfectly. No matter what an outsider might call them it is inappropriate to call them “beautiful.”

In his studies of Navajo medicine men, also known as “Singers,” the evaluation of the singing by Navajo listeners and participants has nothing to do with the tone quality or the excellence of the composition. After having studied Navajo performances at length, ethnomusicologist David McAllester coined the phrase “functional aesthetics” because the song was deemed to be good only if it produced the desired effect (usually this means healing). Similarly a Hopi Indian Katsina song must produce rain within a few days or it is a failure. What David McAllester called “functional aesthetics” I prefer to label “aesthemics.”

To give another example of an aesthemic, Jennie Wilson, the last of the dancers who performed in the court of Kalakáua, the last king of Hawai‘i (reigned 1874–1891), in responding to my question about what made a wonderful looking dancer, replied “thick ankles.” Anklets of some sort were fastened around the dancer’s ankles, not as decoration, but to hide the “ugly” inward curving ankle bone.⁴

A heavysset and mature hula dancer was (and with the older more conservative dancers still is) considered to be superior to a slender or young dancer; the standards of a beautiful woman as they came out of Hollywood created a sham with the “folk” tradition. Certainly the outside influences created a grand example of culture change in the emics of the modern Hawaiian people (Kealiinohomoku 1976).

Only an emic approach would resolve the insights involved in these examples.

AN EMIC GONE AWRY: a case study

Harris was cautious about the emic approach and put less credence on it: the fact that the emic is transmitted both mentally and orally rather than being fixed and standard. The emic is not scientific and therefore subject to human error; many problems arise with an emic understanding either by accident or by deliberate misrepresentation. Harris championed the etic approach because it is objective and not so easily misunderstood because it has universal oversight.

Certainly I have had a lesson in this misunderstanding because of the words “ethnic dance” that I will explore in the following case study.

First, I quote myself from the 1969 talk that I gave on the assigned topic of “Ethnic historical study” the second CORD conference dedicated to “Dance history research: perspectives from related arts and disciplines” with proceedings published in 1970, and words, now considered to be potent, were repeated in print, with no evidence that the readers paid attention to my full statement in print any more than the live audience heard, when they listened:

All dance traditions are of interest to the anthropologist of dance, and all dance traditions, insofar as they reflect a particular cultural background, are ethnic dance. Thus it may surprise you, but I hope it will make sense to you, that I consider classical ballet as an ethnic form (Kealiinohomoku 1970:89).

Clearly, the audience heard only half of my statement. The critical part that was missing was “all dance traditions, insofar as they reflect a particular cultural background, are ethnic dance.” When I gave my talk the audience courteously permitted me to finish my talk, but when the session was opened for questions and comments, a furor broke loose. One man challenged “How DARE you call ballet a form of ethnic dance” and the whole audience joined in protest. A few days later, Marian VanTuyt, editor of IMPULSE magazine, asked me to write an article about my position since it had caused such an uproar. Little could I realize that more than thirty years later the article would still be controversial, and that my point that all dance traditions are ethnic is totally lost.

Recently I realized that many people are not correctly quoting the title of my article. Here are two renderings of the title, of which only one is correct.

CORRECT: An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance.

WRONG: An anthropologist looks at ballet as an ethnic form of dance.

As you think about these two renditions it becomes clear that the incorrect one singles out ballet as being part of a special form that does not include every dance form and therefore becomes a “slam” against ballet, (to say nothing about what it means for all other “ethnic dance” forms). The correct title makes it clear that ballet is not unique as an ethnic form; it is ethnic along with ALL other dance forms.

There are people who continue to write the title incorrectly even after I have called it to their attention. That perplexes me. What are they trying to say? Or are they just careless?

Although I am unable to answer those questions, it seems clear that an emic interpretation can be wrong. The persons expressing an emic can be confused, misinformed, or so deeply entrenched in their opinions that they cannot entertain an opposing idea, such as people whose aesthetic does not permit them to associate ballet with ethnic dance. One must question what is in their world view that prompts them to find the term “ethnic dance” to be so terrible that it cannot appear in the same sentence as ballet?

In my writings I tried to take the sting from the words “ethnic dance,” but apparently I have failed. Today there are still some who refer to my article with anger, just as there are some who find the article to bring joy and inspiration (thank goodness!). Why does their aesthetic preclude them from listening or, even being aware of, the entire argument? The participants in this controversy almost convince me to agree with Harris that the emic is an unreliable approach.

However, I also believe that my personal emic view promotes the humanistic: an approach that the understanding and expression of an aesthetic should be reflective of real human beings and not a etic automaton. For me, the emic approach is the ethical and, ultimately, justifiable one.

What is the lesson from all this as I see it? First, scholars who use an emic approach should be aware of the pitfalls that they may encounter. Second, they should choose the emic path because of a deep belief in the correctness and ultimate value of this humanistic understanding.

CONCLUSION:

The conference for the 2006 CORD Conference called on scholars to define and investigate emic and etic approaches. Undoubtedly those of you who chose the emic path have discovered many inferences and insights that came from your experience with the emic.

I hope the experience has been rewarding and that you all feel enriched because of it. I also urge you to try using the word “aesthemics.” You may find it to be a useful thought tool.

And, who knows? It might lead you to a thirty-plus year adventure as I have had with the misunderstood words, “ethnic dance.”

ENDNOTES

1. In the mid-1950s Dr. Edward Dozier from San Juan Pueblo in New Mexico, was our informant as well as our anthropology and linguistics professor at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.
2. Actually there are many acknowledged phonetic alphabets—including the one mentioned above used by anthropological linguists and folklore scholars.
3. After I coined the word “aesthemic” in the 1960s, I have seen that word used in only two other places. Not surprisingly, their implied definitions do not match mine. The first suggests that a single piece of art (such as a statue) is evaluated by an aesthetic, but that a category of art (all statues) is evaluated by an aesthemic (Armstrong, Robert Plant 1971:47). The second appeared recently in a Google search “It might perhaps be helpful for the anthropology of art to coin a term to show that aesthetics is being challenged; it could be that *aesthemics* might do that.” F. Hughes-Freeland, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, “Art and politics from Javanese court dance to Indonesian art” (1997: 491).
4. Interviews July 1962 with Jennie Wilson (Jennie Kapahukulaokamamalu 1872–1962), Honolulu, Hawaii.

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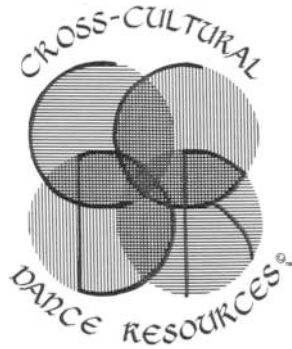
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*Drawing reprinted from CCDR
Newsletter Number 6
(Summer 1988, page 2)*



*Brush and ink drawing by Eleanor King 1960
(Plett 1988, page 35) Line dancers of Sado, The
Dance of Exile "In their sorrow they never lift
their faces when they dance."*



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