A Note on the terms etic and emic

Anthropologists use the terms etic and emic in a number of different ways. The concept is useful in the study of music in its cultural context because it enables us to view music in culture, both from within and from the outside.

Simply stated, emic is the internal, culturally defined use of the idea, while etic, think of synthetic, is a constructed view of that aspect of the culture from an objective point of view. Although it is easy to slip into thinking that etic is the true, or inside view of the culture and emic is the outsiders view, this is not quite correct. Actually, even some anthropologists have been known to avow that etic is the more pure and scientific view of the culture whereas, emic is “what the natives think.” Actually, neither etic nor emic is more right or wrong. They are just different ways of viewing.

To further clarify this let us consider a few examples. In the study of music we find it useful to consider the basic music types, folk, classical or art music and popular. Let’s just say that folk music usually means a body of music that belongs to an entire community and for which the composers are no longer known. It seems to exist as something that belongs to the entire community.

Classical or art music is a little more complicated to define. It is played by professionals, but so is popular music, and even many kinds of folk music. Sometimes the best classical music is played by amateurs, as in Turkey, old Iran and Okinawa. The best definition of art music or what we call in the West, “Classical” music is that it was intentionally composed to be challenging and perhaps, not even completely understood on the first hearing. It is supposed to get better, deeper, more profoundly understood, the more one hears it.

Let’s leave that for the moment and talk about popular music. In some sense, everything is supposed to be popular, that is you or someone is supposed to like it. Why else would the performer or composer bother? But popular music, unlike art or classical music is not usually intended to be popular forever. No one is really against the idea, but its real purpose is to make it big in the short run and hope that it lasts as long as possible, at least until the group or the composer can create another hit to take its place. Economics is behind it. It is a way of making a living. So do the adherents of the other two categories of music, but in the case of popular music, the objective is more short term. Popular music is de-
signed to be broadly disseminated, to use mass media system of communication and distribution and to become popular right away. It is more important to make it big now than to make it big later, like Beethoven or Mozart.

This sort of works as an etic definition of pop music. It has to be popular, to be widely disseminated, to make it economically in order to support the performers and the delivery system, and, very important and because of all the above, the performers and composers associated with this music, have to be known and advertised. That works as an etic definition.

This works fine for In Sync and Madonna, however, what about Tori Amos, Bjork and ATB? Will ATB ever be nominated for a grammy award? Do you think they expect it? Maybe they do and maybe they will get one someday, but it doesn’t look like they are headed in the right direction if that’s what they want to do, does it? What’s going on? Is this pop music? Probably not by the narrow etic definition we have created. But ask yourself, where would the young woman being paid minimum wage at Borders or Wherehouse file it in the record bin? Alternative? Trance? Pop-Rock? In the sense of the way we use this music today it can all be filed under the broad category of pop rock or just pop. It certainly wouldn’t fit next to Beethoven or Mozart, not Nusrat Ali Khan or Compay Segundo. Now here we have an emic definition of pop music. Many groups and artists we consider pop because they “sound” like pop to us even though they may not fit our dictionary, or etic definition of popular music in the strictest sense.

Consider another kind of example. We have an idea about what we consider and recognize as music. If we hear a group of musicians from the island of Bali banging away on bronze gongs and metallophones, we can recognize from the concentration and coordination of the performers that this is music. But they have no particular word for music in their culture. So “etic”ly it is music but emicly, we may have to go a little deeper into the culture to get at the truth.

Take another example. A choir in a Christian church is singing hymns. We hear it as music and they probably think of it as such as well. However, if we go to a Muslim mosque and hear the azan, or call to prayer or a recitation from the Holy Koran, we would recognize this activity as music, but in Islamic culture it is not considered music at all and in fact music of any kind in connection with religious observance is frowned upon. This is another clear case of the usefulness of use etic and emic concepts in considering how music functions in a culture.

We sometimes can learn much about how cultures work by taking an emic concept and testing it across a number of different cultures. The famous Encyclopedia Cinematographica of Göttingen, Germany has thousands of ethnographic and scientific films and has been making them for many, many years. They began this enormous compendium of cinematography by filming the way bread was made in different cultures, primarily in Europe. From this they expanded to the filming of virtu-
ally all human activity.

Looking at a particular human activity, like eating, for example, across many cultures, can tell us much about the culture. In the same way, even considering music, for which not all cultures have their own term is in itself a kind of “etic” activity. More specifically however, we can take “etic” concepts such as the role of music in gender roles in a number of societies to see what it tells us about the larger society. Looking at the manner in which different cultures create and express themselves in love songs, tells much about other cultural attitudes, just the manner in which music is used, or not, at times, in connection with religious observation, tells us much about the culture as a whole. In this manner using both etic and emic views of various aspects of culture can inform us often with great clarity about aspects of the culture that we might otherwise find difficult to observe or isolate. Think of these as points of view and as useful tools for understanding the process of culture.