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EMIC, ETIC AND ETHICS

Some remarks on studying a "foreign" religion*

1. Introduction

In this article I have chosen to deal with three concepts which involve dilemmas in field work on the one hand, and the methodological problems endemic to such work on the other, namely emic, etic and ethics.

There has been increasing interest in field work, particularly during the last two decades (the 1960's and 1970's), in Finland as well as in other Scandinavian countries. Some scholars of comparative religion have chosen to study religious groups and phenomena within their own native cultures. In such cases, one of the main problems for the scholar in field work has been to discover a point of view which provides him with a sufficiently detached yet respectful standpoint, a position from which a scholarly study can be made of the religious group and its religion, which in one way or another represents part of his native cultural inheritance. This has proved especially difficult in cases where the scholar studies a group which he has been, or still is, a member of, or in some other way feels attached to 1.

Other scholars, on the other hand, have travelled to remote cultures to study religions which differ both in manifestation and content from those practices and principles familiar to the scholars concerned. The difficulty in this case has been to discover a point of view which provides the scholar with a sufficiently *involved* yet respectful and penetrating standpoint, a position from which he can study the originally foreign religious group and its religion².

As we can see, the problematics involved in the two research situations are opposites by their very nature, and neither of the starting-points provides an appropriate approach per se. The basic question which every

scholar doing field work, irrespective of the choice of region and the approach of the research, has to face can therefore be formulated, for example, as follows: What standpoint and what degree of detachment as regards the religious group and its religion is appropriate to my own temperament, personality and cultural frame of reference, and what standpoint contributes to a relevant, constructive and perceptive knowledge and understanding of the phenomena in this particular case? In this respect all research is unique and its possible and potential success is to be seen in its quality, which depends to a great extent on the quality of the self-analysis carried out.

The aim of this paper is to consider the emic and etic standpoints as presented in recent anthropological studies and articles, and to view them in relation to my own field work among Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka carried out during the winter of 1974-1975. Some remarks will be made as regards my standpoint and degree of detachment when studying one particular Theravada Buddhist monastery, and the way this framed both the field work and my insight into the social relations of the monks. Finally some comments are made as regards the ethics involved in this kind of research.

- 2. Emic and etic: two different viewpoints of observation
- 2.1. The origin of the terms emic and etic.

The terms emic and etic were originally coined by the American linguist Kenneth Pike in the middle of the 1950's 4. Pike's basic idea was to examine foreign languages and cultures (especially as regards their nonlinguistic behaviour) analogously to the phonemic and phonetic systems 5 of linguistic theory - hence emic and etic. Simplifying it somewhat, one can say that the emic standpoint represents the view from within the foreign system (language or culture) i.e. an intracultural understanding, while the etic represents the view from outside i.e. an intercultural understanding 6. Although Pike makes a distinction between two different ways of approaching and analysing a language and/or a culture, he points out explicitly that the viewpoints are not to be regarded as a dichotomy. On the contrary, the main idea is that the scholar should learn to shift his viewpoint of observation and analysis

and learn to swing as far as possible within the continuum. As soon as one begins to view one emic system in relation to or comparison with another emic system, the approach becomes an etic one. It is a question of viewing one and the same subject of research from a twofold analytical distance.

2.2. The viewpoints of Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski

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Franz Boas appears to have been one of the first anthropologists to pay attention to two (i.e. emic and etic) similar viewpoints when studying a foreign culture. His studies manifest an implicit model consisting of the viewpoints of the natives, on the one hand, and of the western scholars, on the other. One of the main aims of Boas' ethnological method, which came to form the very basis of his historico-regional approach, was to collect material in the form of verbatim texts from native informants in order to preserve the original (i.e. native) meaning of the information⁸.

The awareness of a factual distinction between a native's or insider's point of view and the scholar's or outsider's point of view became even more explicit and precise through the writings of Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski focused his attention mainly upon the functions and interrelations of the various elements in one particular cultural and social setting. For him, the anthropological field work implied three things, namely (1) the anthropologist should live in the native community and thereby gradually absorb the day-to-day life of the natives, (2) he should learn the native language and thereby make efforts to view the world as a native does and (3) he should adopt the method known as participant observation and in this way first stand sufficiently close and later sufficiently distant in order to first live and then analyze the everyday life and experience of the culture in question and in the standard of the culture in question and in the sufficience of the culture in question and in the standard of the culture in question and in the standard of the culture in question and in the standard of the culture in question and in the standard of the culture in question and in the standard of the culture in question and the culture in question

The aim of this kind of prolonged and exhaustive field work was to "listen to the natives", the golden rule of functionalism which regarded the natives' own intentions, purposes, motives, goals, attitudes, thoughts, feelings, i.e. the natives' perspective, as essential for an appropriate understanding of a foreign culture.

2.3. Marvin Harris' interpretation of the terms emic and etic

Marvin Harris appears to be one of the first anthropologists to have discussed the emic/etic distinction at length. His use and interpretation of the terms, however, differ to some extent from Pike's use of the terms. According to Harris, the standpoints represent a dichotomy, an interpretation which Pike has emphatically rejected and warned against 10. According to Harris' interpretation, the emic standpoint nevertheless represents a view regarded as appropriate by the actors themselves, i.e. the natives, while the etic refers to the view regarded as appropriate by the community of scientific observers. Consequently, Harris makes a contrast of the terms, thus introducing the dichotomies native versus scientific knowledge, native versus scientific explanation, etc. 11. In this way, the two viewpoints of observation are given different values as regards their intersubjectivity. Harris criticizes the emic standpoint as used in connection with the New Ethnographic Method 12 as being less scientific, and considers it to be extremely difficult although not completely impossible to transform the concepts and results arrived at in this way into an intersubjective standard 13. As an example, he mentions psychoanalytical research and practice, where the actor (i.e. patient) has proved a poor observer as regards his or her own inner state. It is usually only the analyst who is able to penetrate behind the façade to the unconscious feelings and thoughts of which the actor is unaware 14.

2.4. Trends in the recent debate

Harris' comprehensive criticism of the New Ethnographic approach and his interpretation and use of Pike's terms emic and etic has been thoroughly debated in recent anthropological articles 15. Ronald Cohen has pointed out a paradox in Harris' thinking 16:

[&]quot;'Etic/emic' distinctions are false because all knowledge is ultimately 'emic'. Science is an emergent mode of culture in which knowledge-seeking itself has become one of the basic objectives of the game. Thus science is devoted to a continually renewable vision of reality created by the scientist to cope with what he believes underlies appearances. Harris' 'etic' is at best the 'emic' of the historian of science" (my italics).

Lawrence E. Fisher and Oswald Werner have quite recently published an article which deals entirely with emic/etic distinctions. Their main objection to Harris's thinking concerns his dualist view of the anthropological world, on the one hand, and his over-estimation of the etic perspective, on the other 17. Questions which cannot be answered from the etic point of view Harris implicitly advises us to ignore: "From an etic point of view, the universe of meaning, purpose, goals, etc., is thus unapproachable" 18.

Gerald D. Berreman has expressed the dilemma in this connection quite perspicaciously, pointing out that the problem is "how to be scientific and at the same time retain the humanistic insights - the human relevance - without which no account of human beings makes sense" 19. He calls for a methodology which combines rigor and insight, verification and discovery, accuracy and empathy, replicability and human relevance 20.

Finally Clifford Geertz has given a new turn to the discussion by introducing the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's distinction "experience-near"/
"experience-distant" as referring to emic/etic, respectively. Here attention is no longer paid to two absolute standpoints, but to two standpoints in relation to each other. The main difference between them is to be found in the viewpoint and degree of detachment, which varies as regards the patient or in our case the informant, on the one hand, and the various types of specialists, an analyst or ethnographer or anthropologist, on the other ²¹. From the point of view of human relevance, we may therefore summarize the discussion by saying - as Berreman says - that it should not be a question of either emic or etic, but an attempt should be made to combine these two and discover the *bridge* that brings relevance to both parts, the specialist or scholar and the amateur or informant ²².

- 3. The case of the Buddhist monastery
- 3.1. Presentation of my research

In the following excursus some remarks will be made as regards the emic/etic distinction in relation to my own field work among Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. The field work was carried out during the winter of 1974-1975. It represented an intensive period of research, which lasted for six months. The subject of the research was one particular Theravada

Buddhist monastery, which was approached not per se, but in relation to the cultural and social region and environment of which it formed a major part.

The problem of research concerned the social relations both within and outside the monastery, the life histories of the monks and their values, attitudes and norms viewed in relation to their specific situation in life. The material was collected by means of interviews and participant observation, photographs and films. Most of the interviews were carried out in Sinhalese²³.

3.2. The practical aspects of the field work

There were two social contacts in particular that facilitated my entry into the monastery. The first was a Sinhalese widow, whom I came into contact with through a friend of mine in Finland and at whose house I lived during my field work period. She was related to one of the chief monks in one of the larger monasteries nearby and it was she who introduced me to this monk. It was this circumstance (among other considerations) that impelled me to choose that particular monastery as a subject for my research, especially as the chief monk granted his permission for the interviews and the study.

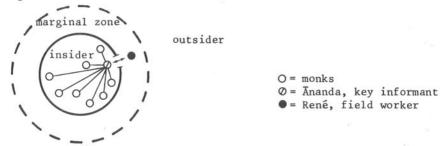
The second important contact was the senior pupil of the chief monk at the monastery in question. He was fluent in both English and Sinhalese, being a Bachelor of Philosophy and Arts at the University of Colombo, and 24 years old, the same age as I was at that time. He was also planning to continue his studies in Colombo. Thus, there were several factors that gradually turned our relationship into one of friendship. In my study, I have given him the fictitious name of \overline{A} nanda in order to ensure his anonymity \overline{A} .

3.3. My standpoint and degree of detachment in the field

I arrived in the field as a foreigner, an outsider and a stranger, who gradually became a friend of the monk Ananda. Consequently, I was neither an outsider nor an insider. My standpoint can perhaps best be characterized as fluctuating in between, somewhere in the marginal zone. In some sense I was what Morris Freilich has called a "privileged stranger", with rights to question extensively the monks living in the monastery, and to record the interviews and my observations 25. The

marginal role was characterized by the fact that the monks regarded me as Ananda's friend, i.e. a friend of their friend.

My viewpoint and degree of detachment was, therefore, to a large extent centred on Ānanda's room, where I spent most of my time when visiting the monastery. Nearly every interview session at the various houses in the monastic area started from that room. As a key-informant 26, Ānanda introduced me to the various monks and asked for their co-operation and participation in the interview. After two or three interviews, which lasted for about three hours altogether, we always adjourned to Ānanda's room for tea and jaggory. My entry into the monastery and the viewpoint and degree of detachment can be illustrated as follows.



Reflecting upon my role in the wisdom gained from the field work, I may conclude that it was in practice not I who chose the role (apart from my role as a Finnish scholar), but rather it was the circumstances mentioned earlier that more or less forced upon me the role of being a friend of their friend.

3.4. Emic and etic in the light of the analysis of the social relations within the monastery

The analysis of the social relations within the monastery was to some extent framed by the conditions provided by my marginal position. I was not allowed actually to live in the monastery. Therefore, the material had to be collected by means of interview schedules and systematic observation as well as by as high a degree of participant observation as possible. Naturally, material which could have been collected simply by means of being constantly present was not available to me. Partly because of this fact and partly because of my own tendency to view things in structures, I decided to study the social relations by using the social network theory.

In the analysis of the constellations (structure) of the social relations within the monastery, the marginal standpoint between the zone of the insider and that of the outsider proved to be situated at a junction in many respects. Following systematically in the footsteps of Ananda I gradually became acquainted with his social contacts within the monastery and to some extent also outside the monastery. Thus, Ananda provided me with a door leading into the corridors of actual social relations. By means of the social network theory the became evident that these unofficial social relations differed to a great extent from the official hierarchical ones. The result of the analysis appeared in a constructed social network, which was created on the basis of the actual social relations at the time of research. The social relations within the monastery were described and analyzed as forming a structural constellation, a social network.

According to Harris, the statements concerning the social network should be considered etic ones. As I see it, this should not, however, mean that etic statements are in principle the same as outsider's statements. The social network theory implies that anyone who uses the same method of research should (at least in principle) arrive at the same result. This means that the units of analysis as regards the social network of the monastery are not to be found within the continuum emic/etic as interpreted by Harris. The process of research is much more concerned with the procedure of discovering units concealed in hidden likenesses 28, a process which can be carried out both by a native or insider and a foreigner or outsider, on the assumption that both use the same method of research.

In the analysis of the content of the social relations, the relationship between Ananda and René proved to be vital. The aim of the inquiry was to study what subjective significances and meanings Ananda and the other monks attached to the various social relations of which they formed a part and which provided them with the social conditions of their situation in life.

According to Harris, this inquiry implies (if I have understood Harris correctly) an emic standpoint. If, on the other hand, we consider the point of view of Geertz, we say that Ananda "experienced" the monastic

life "nearer" than René, who "experienced" it more from a "distance". The crucial question in this connection can therefore be formulated as follows: what insight into the life situation of Ananda can René acquire from his marginal position?

My insight into the life situation of Ānanda can be illustrated here briefly in two ways. Firstly, there was a certain kind of analogy between the life situation of Ānanda and that of René. Ānanda was a monk living in a monastic institution and was the senior pupil of a chief monk. René, on the other hand, was connected with a university institution and was at that time collecting material for a doctoral thesis under the supervision of his teacher, a professor. Thus, both were in a somewhat similar position in the sense of being involved in the process of rites-de-passage Passage. Ānanda was on his way up towards the position of chief monk, while René, on the other hand, was working for his academic competence. Further similarities were to be found. Both were of the same age, 24 at that time, and while Ānanda had had a Buddhological education, René had had a theological education with comparative religion as his special field. The greatest difference was that René was married and therefore a layman, while Ānanda was a monk living in celibacy.

Secondly, Ananda was not only viewed per se. Apart from noting his social relations, an analysis was also made of his life history and his position in the life cycle, his life situation as well as his religious and secular ideas at the time of the research. The insight into the content of Ananda's social relations was, therefore, acquired partly by following very closely Ananda's mode of life, on the one hand, and by listening carefully to what he told me and how he answered the questions put to him, on the other.

The statements of Ananda and the other monks are naturally emic data, but the analysis itself cannot be considered as either emic or etic. Here again it is much more a question of discovering units concealed in hidden likenesses, a process which can be carried out in principle both by a native and a foreigner. To me it seems that the marginal position is quite advantageous, as one is neither too involved in nor too detached from the subject of the research. It also seems quite useful to distinguish between an "experience near" and an "experience distant" standpoint, as suggested by Geertz, because in this way the scholar himself becomes an explicandum, and the means by which the material of research

has been collected and analyzed can be controlled and scrutinized more thoroughly.

The emic and etic standpoints are, however, more useful when one studies, for example, the Buddhist symbols and their function. To the native or believer (emic) the symbols provide an intermediary link with the other sphere of reality experienced as religious and usually as ultimate truth, while the same symbol for an anthropologist (etic) or a foreigner also constitutes a token with specific religio-sociological significances 30.

It is particularly when we focus our attention upon the religious symbols and the level of subjective significances and meanings that the emic and etic standpoints become useful tools of research.

4. Ethical considerations

Field work always consists of an interaction between two or more persons. It is important, therefore, to remember that we study people who do not differ too much from ourselves either biologically or psychologically. The greatest differences are perhaps to be found on the cultural level and particularly on the level of its dynamic aspect, religion or the world-view system. The most characteristic feature of religion is that it represents the ultimate values of man. Therefore, we should be aware of the fact that when we study a religious group and its religion, we are dealing with the most vital systems of belief, values, norms and attitudes in accordance with which the believer organizes his life and experiences his existence. This means that the scholar has to be very discrete both in field work and in publication in order to maintain the confidence of the informant. This is of particular importance to an anthropologist, since it is the informant who provides him with the immediate conditions and pre-requisites for field work and research.

The problem is much the same whether we study a religious group within our own native culture or whether we study a religious group in a foreign culture. In the first case there is a risk that the scholar is accused of being a recusant, while in the second case he can be accused of being a spy 31 . The ethical considerations are therefore quite essential in both cases, irrespective of whether the research presupposes a sufficiently detached or involved standpoint towards the subject of the research.

As I have discussed these questions in a recent article in greater detail, I shall here concentrate on two points only ³². In the first place, the paramount responsibility of each field worker is to make sure that every informant remains anonymous. On the other hand, the field worker also has a responsibility to speak out publicly on what he has come to know and believe as a result of the professional expertise he has acquired in the study of human beings ³³. It seems, then, that the crucial dilemma of every field worker is to learn to discover a balance between these conflicting demands.

Notes

*) A preliminary version of this paper was read by and discussed with Kirsti Suolinna, who for several years has herself periodically carried out field work in the north-western parts of Finland, especially among peasants born into a movement known as Laestadianism. I am very much indebted for her constructive criticism as well as for her experience in analysing both field work procedure and the scholar's position in field situations.

1) This problem has recently been discussed by Suojanen (1979). See

also Suolinna & Sinikara 1979.

2) The standpoints are here characterized as detached and involved respectively instead of the classical distinction between an objective and a subjective point of view. This has been done in order to indicate that it is not a question of an absolute dichotomy, but much rather a matter of a relative continuum.

3) The idea of an "appropriate distance" as regards the subject of research does not here refer to a geographical, cultural or social distance, but to a (mental) process of reflexion according to which the aim of each scholar is to become aware of his own prejudices, his internalized patterns of thinking and of forming theories and categories, as well as his tendencies to grasp what is observed in his own idiosyncratic way.

Pike 1954. An enlarged and revised edition appeared in 1967. See

also Pelto 1970, pp. 67-68.

Phonemics refer to a classification of sounds according to their internal function in language, phonetics classifying them according

to their acoustic properties as such.

6) Pike has defined the two standpoints as follows: "In contrast to the Etic approach, an Emic one is in essence valid for only one language (or one culture) at a time... It is an attempt to discover and to describe the pattern of that particular language or culture in reference to the way in which the various elements of that culture are related to each other in the functioning of the particular pattern, rather than an attempt to describe them in reference to a generalized classification derived in advance of the study of that culture... An etic analytical standpoint ... might be called 'external' or 'alien', since for etic purposes the analyst stands 'far enough away' from or 'outside' of a particular culture to see its separate events, primarily in relation to their similarities and their differences, as compared to events in other cultures, rather than in reference to the sequences of classes of events within that one particular culture". Pike 1954, pp. 8-11.

7) Pike has explained the twofold approach as follows: "Etic and emic data do not constitute a rigid dichotomy of bits of data, but often represent the same data from two points of view. Specifically, for example, the emic units of a language, once discovered by emic procedures, may be listed for comparative purposes with similar emic units from other languages so studied. The moment this has been done, however, the emic units have changed into etic units, since they are divorced from the context of the structure of the language from which they have come..." (my italics). Pike 1967, p. 41.

8) Boas has expressed this as follows: "As long as we do not overstep the limits of one culture we are able to classify its features in a clear and definite terminology. We know what we mean by the terms family, state, government, etc. As soon as we overstep the limits of one culture we do not know in how far these may correspond to equivalent concepts. If we choose to apply our classification to alien cultures we may combine forms that do not belong together. The very rigidity of definition may lead to a misunderstanding of the essential problems involved... If it is our serious purpose to understand the thoughts of a people the whole analysis of experience must be based on their concepts, not ours" (my italics). Boas 1943, p.314. Cf. Pelto 1970, pp. 68-69.

See, for example, Malinowski 1922, pp. 6 ff. and 24-25. See also Friedl 1976, pp. 118 ff.

10) Harris 1968, pp. 568-569. See Pike 1967, pp. 41 ff.

11) Harris defines emic and etic as follows: "Emic statements refer to logico-empirical systems whose phenomenal distinctions or 'things' are built up out of contrasts and discriminations significant, meaningful, real, accurate, or in some other fashion regarded as appropriate by the actors themselves. An emic statement can be falsified if it can be shown that it contradicts the cognitive calculus by which relevant actors judge that entities are similar or different, real, meaningful, significant, or in some other sense 'appropriate' or 'acceptable'..." (my italics). Harris 1968, p. 571.

"Etic statements depend upon phenomenal distinctions judged appropriate by the community of scientific observers. Etic statements cannot be falsified if they do not conform to the actor's notion of what is significant, real, meaningful, or appropriate. Etic statements are verified when independent observers using similar operations agree that a given event has occured..." (my italics). Harris 1968, p. 575.

- 12) The New Ethnography refers to a minority of American anthropologists, who by means of a rigorous methodology aim at a description of the meanings of other cultures. The analytical model has mainly been adapted from the practitioners of descriptive linguistics, who were quite successful in the 1940's and 1950's. See Pelto 1970, pp. 67-76.
- 13) Harris 1968, pp. 576 ff.
- 14) Harris 1968, p. 575.
- 15) See, for example, the discussions in Current Anthropology 9:5, 1968, pp. 519-533 and Current Anthropology 11:1, 1970, pp. 65-67.
- 16) Cohen (pers.comm.) quoted in Fisher & Werner 1978, p. 198.
- 17) Fisher & Werner 1978, pp. 194 ff.
- 18) Harris 1968, p. 579. Cf. Fisher & Werner 1978, p. 203.
- 19) Berreman 1966, pp. 346 ff.
- 20) Berreman 1966, pp. 350 ff.
- 21) Geertz 1975, pp. 47-48.
- 22) Berreman 1966, pp. 352-353.

- 23) The field material has been analyzed over a period of more than five years, and at the moment I am preparing the final manuscript of my doctoral thesis.
- 24) For the ethical considerations in connection with field work, see Gothóni 1977.
- 25) For one of the more useful and valuable introductions to field work procedure in its various practical and self-analytical aspects, see Freilich (ed.) 1977, pp. 1-37.
- 26) For the concept key informant, see Pelto 1970, pp. 95-98.
- 27) For the social network theory, see, for example, Boissevain & Mitchell (ed.) 1973. See also Boissevain 1974. The network analysis will be discussed in detail in my doctoral thesis.
- 28) For this line of thought, see Bronowski 1956, p. 23, and Lévi-Strauss 1973, pp. 18 ff.
- 29) For this expression, see Freilich (ed.) 1977, pp. V-X.
- 30) For the emic and etic standpoints in connection with research into Buddhist symbols, see Gothóni, in press.
- 31) See, for example, Boas 1919, p. 797.
- 32) Gothóni 1977.
- 33) Gothóni 1977, pp. 77 ff.

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