ETHNOMATHEMATICS IN THE GLOBAL EPISTEME: QUO VADIS?

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Abstract: This chapter discusses scholarly work in the field of ethnomathematics from three perspectives that seem to encompass much of the current work in the field: challenging Eurocentrism in mathematics; ethnomathematics praxis in the curriculum; and ethnomathematics as a field of research. We identify what we perceive to be strengths and weaknesses of these three perspectives for today’s learners who are faced with forces of a global nature. We propose a less traditional view of ethnomathematics that is compatible with postnational, global identities, and exemplify this approach through a professional development program in California. Finally, we raise several issues for future discussions relative to ethnomathematical theory and practice.

Keywords: ethnomathematics

According to Habermas (2001), globalisation is still in its emergent state. Currently, we witness various physical and nonmaterial changes in our societies as a consequence of “the increasing scope and intensity of commercial, communicative, and exchange relations beyond national borders” (Habermas, 2001, p. 66). Giddens (1999) also makes sense when he insists that no one group can claim ownership to all the various global forces that are currently influencing the emerging social landscape. As a matter of fact, control takes place at the level of networks that enable globalisation to maintain its multidimensional character. Our intent in this chapter is to confront conceptual and practical difficulties with ethnomathematics and its nuances (herein collectively referred to as “the ethnomathematics program”) so that their strengths are articulated and their limitations are surfaced and overcome. Today’s learners, irrespective of community and affiliation, are living out the tensions brought about by the reality of globalisation. This social condition implies that various operations, transactions, and interactions that are currently taking place employ disciplinary relations that are not state-specific in the classical sense. They
are increasingly performed within a distinctively post-state perspective that has been forged by cosmopolitan solidarity (Habermas, 1998). It is a solidarity that seems to have traversed particular cultures and social filiations or groups and, at the same time, has successfully reconciled the specificity of cultural practices with the generality and universality of lived relations across cultures.

As social theorists of difference, we see some ironies and contradictions that are developing between global and multicultural societies insofar as cultural identities matter. At the local stage, immigration has tremendously changed the landscape of nation-states. All prosperous nations that deal with migrants in large numbers experience unanticipated transformations in their societies. Habermas (2001) points out that the “path toward a multicultural society” is a challenge for these nation-states that are confronted with the plurality of lived relationships. A significant issue in education in these multicultural contexts is how to develop good practices of inclusion. Here we note that if by inclusion we mean “a collective political existence [that] keeps itself open for the inclusion of citizens of every background, without enclosing these others into the uniformity of a homogenous community” (ibid, p. 73), what remains unresolved to this day deals with processes and mechanisms that can be effectively institutionalised in schools and in the wider communities so that a more meaningful, harmonious, and productive political integration of different relationships is achieved. According to Habermas,

(m)ulticultural societies require a “politics of recognition” because the identity of each individual citizen is woven together with collective identities, and must be stabilized in a network of mutual recognition. (Habermas, 2001, p. 74)

Thus, inclusive practices must take into account ways in which different cultural communities with their particular shared traditions and practices can be made to co-exist so that the practices do not produce difficult situations of subcultural formation and marginalisation.

At the global stage, people from around the world develop a shared need or a mass culture for goods, fashion, films, programs, music, books, and other forms of aesthetic expression. The Western influence seems to have produced, Habermas writes,

[a] “commodified, homogenous culture [that] doesn’t just impose itself on distant lands, of course; in the West, too, it levels out even the strongest national differences, and weakens even the strongest local traditions. (Habermas, 2001, p. 75)

Thus, while some critical commentators have pointed out how global forces are driving indigenous cultures to states of moribundity, irrelevance, and homogenisation, they are, as a matter of fact, producing new constellations, new differences, new worldviews, or cosmopolitan identities that celebrate “a new multiplicity of hybridised forms” (ibid, p. 75). In effect, hybridity promotes “new modes of