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Rhythms of the Earth

Rhythms of Earth: The Choreometrics Films of Alan Lomax and Forrestine Paulay.

Produced by John Bishop:1974-2008. DVD, color, 156 mins. + sundry extras.

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Many anthropologists view dance around the world as part of expressive culture, where dance steps and styles are particular to cultures in which we encounter them. But in the late 1950s anthropologist Alan Lomax (1915-2002) began a cross-cultural study of dance to find out if similar dance movements and styles were more organized than this particularist view of dance might suggest. The result was *Choreometrics*, a systematic analysis of dance movements using film footage from hundreds of cultures around the world.

Using *Choreometrics* as his basic methodology, Lomax released a series of four documentary films over a decade in 16mm format: *Dance and Human History* [1974], [1977], *Step Style* [1977], and *The Longest Trail* [1984]. This DVD contains all four films digitally remastered, together with an intriguing 34-minute conversation between Lomax and the filmmaker Robert Gardner, from 1975. This DVD also contains lots of extras, including interviews with Lomax's co-researcher Forrestine Paulay, and the biostatistician Michael Flory, and clips about the Global Jukebox. The disc also contains 177 pages of written material published by Lomax and his research team in a PDF format, including an obituary of Lomax by the filmmaker John Bishop. It is a breathtaking array of materials that document Lomax's groundbreaking research, including film clips from more than two hundred societies, many of which have been largely inaccessible to students and faculty for over two decades.

In his four films Lomax offers an example of cross-cultural analysis of colorful indigenous dances in dozens upon dozens of cultures, from precisely the sorts of societies that many if not most field researchers have observed during fieldwork. The films use empirical methods to document similarities in dance motions and movements even when the particular dances exhibit few obvious similarities to the ordinary observer. One strength of these films is Lomax's straightforward focus on movement within the dances themselves, breaking down complex movements into more discrete elements. He shows these elements as distinct motions using diverse dances as illustrations. These patterns reinforce key choreometric concepts in each of the films.

The films include a wide variety of dances that span the world, including societies in Third World communities as well as European folk dances and "modern" American dances. Many of these film clips and their filmmakers will be familiar to more senior anthropologists who will have seen them at anthropological film festivals. For students each film presents a stunning sweep of ethnographic film footage that seems destined to

interest some students in seeking out such rich resources held in the Human Studies Film Archives at the Smithsonian Institution and other film archives.

Overall, these films are informative tools for showing how anthropological methods can be used to interpret the significance and development of human behavior. Lomax accepts dance as a human universal. He argues that the differences in dance movements are not just aesthetic forms but embody important cultural features, such as gender roles, typical modes of production, and environmental adaptations. One of the most provocative—and for many, the most controversial—arguments presented by Lomax is his claim that dance movements can trace the culture history of human societies. By mapping the several choreometric elements on world maps, he attempts to show how people and cultures migrated and dispersed as well as interacted. These maps synthesize his findings along several dimensions, as they try to cement his culture history analysis, for example, arguing on the basis of dance styles that Amerindian dances are related to those styles observed in Siberia and central Asia. From these similarities in dances, Lomax argues that American Indians had migrated from Northeast Asia.

Whether one accepts such analyses or not, most anthropologists will find these films and extras found on the DVD to be a rich visual resource in the classroom. As an educational tool, the strength of Lomax's films lies in the fact that students can use them to place the comparative anthropological methods they study in the classroom in a broader cultural context. For an introductory class in anthropology, this is a useful study of comparative methods and a wide range of topics that can be studied by examining dance. For more advanced students, these films and the extras on the DVD offer a compelling glimpse into the history of one particularly field of modern anthropology. Also many talented students may become interested in comparative analysis or research in visual anthropology or expressive culture from viewing these films.

All of Lomax's films are 25 to 35 years old and will feel dated to many students, since they include few of the contemporary American dances familiar to students. Similarly, when watching the conversation between Lomax and Gardner, most students will be irritated by Gardner's chain-smoking throughout the clip. Faculty will need to address the changes in academic if using this clip in class. Nevertheless, despite these reactions, students in introductory courses will find these film clips dazzling, and they are a must-see for more advanced courses in expressive culture, visual anthropology, and any course involving ethnographic film. This wonderful collection of films is one of the best and most impressive collections that students can watch. Professional visual anthropologists should have it in their personal or university libraries.

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