



"Sevillana dancers in town square," FROM THE ALAN LOMAX COLLECTION AT THE AMERICAN FOLKLORE CENTER, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, USED COURTESY OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR CULTURAL EQUITY.

Alan Lomax and the Temple of Movement

Alan Lomax wanted to catalogue all human movement.
Whitney Laemmli explores the high modern utopianism of
the Choreometrics project.

IT WAS 1965: televisions were blaring, and Alan Lomax was worried. As *Gilligan's Island*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Green Acres*, and *Bewitched* capered into tangerine family rooms, the famous American folklorist expressed his horror.¹ TV, he proclaimed, once “promised to be a marvelous telescope that could bring the whole world into our rooms—a periscope through which we could peer, unseen and unabashed, into other lives.” Instead, he continued, “it has erected an electronic curtain, composed of our own prejudices and preconceptions, through which the outside world can only be dimly perceived.”²

This curtain was an intellectual one—it featured news coverage, for example, that neglected the concerns of the distant and the poor—but it was also something more. Lomax had begun to notice eerie changes in the way people across the planet moved their bodies, observing in particular the seeming omnipresence of “the head-back, chest-out, erect posture of the North European elite.” Scholars in the new field of kinesics had found that human beings “respond below the level of awareness to the movement patterns they encounter,”³ and he warned that the global media was in the process of invading humanity’s very bones and sinews. Soon, even the denizens of the world’s most remote forests would be striding like stiff-necked London bankers.

Lomax predicted that the consequences of this transformation would be profound and devastating, ranging from individual emotional pain to the wholesale destruction of embodied cultural knowledge. His solution? A massive archive of movement. Along with dance experts Irmgard Bartenieff and Forestine Paulay, Lomax set out on a mission: to collect, view, code, and catalog filmed samples of dance from every cultural group on the planet. He described his dream of:

*...a great library of the visual arts, where all important cinematic documents would be stored, catalogued, and analyzed. Such a temple of knowledge would cost no more than an atomic submarine, but its influence would far outrun the famed library of Alexandria or, indeed, all the libraries that ever existed, since it would preserve a living, moving record of all human behavior.*⁴

This store, he hoped, would provide the raw material necessary to achieve two related objectives. First, it would provide scientific proof that cultural practices were not mere window-dressing on the human experience, but rather were crucial to human survival. While other animals depended on genetic change to produce new adaptive behaviors, Lomax believed that human beings were “revising and reorganizing” their behavior each and every day, and then passing on their collective wisdom “as parts of symbolic cultural codes, rather than as encoded in the helix of the genes.”⁵ He argued, for example, that the stooped posture and “deep shoulder rotation” characteristic of West African dance likely helped to communicate information about “a principal subsistence act”: the use

1 For more about Lomax’s biography and career, see Szwed (2011).

2 Alan Lomax, unpublished manuscript for *Dance and Human Culture*, Box 4/18-01, The Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, The Library of Congress.

3 Lomax, *Dance and Human Culture*.

4 *ibid.*

5 *ibid.*



of the short-handled grubbing hoe. Eskimo dance, on the other hand, was characterized by rapid changes in intensity, inculcating the principle that “one effective way to generate heat in the extreme cold is to stiffen or clench a part of the body and then strongly apply energy.”⁶

To provide statistical evidence for these correlations, Lomax, Bartenieff, and Paulay spent more than a decade “ransacking the film libraries of the world,”⁷ reaching out to absolutely anyone who might have filmed dance. In the dozens of boxes of letters that now fill the Library of Congress archives, one can find correspondence with anthropologist Margaret Mead and kuru researcher Carleton Gadjusek, but also a retired vascular surgeon, a Russian cultural minister, the Walt Disney Company, and the U.S. military. Ultimately, the Choreometrics team gathered more than 250,000 feet of raw footage, representing 2,000 different communities. Each piece was then logged, coded for dozens of different movement qualities, and

entered into a database for further analysis.

This massive undertaking was undeniably ambitious. Lomax’s second objective, however, was even more so: communicating these findings—and the methodology behind them—to a global audience. In essence, he wanted to teach the world to see dance in the same way that he now did. The process would not be easy, particularly as the qualities Choreometrics coded for were not obvious to the untutored eye, but Lomax remained hopeful. In part, this optimism stemmed from his experience coaching the graduate students who helped analyze the initial collection of dances. The instructions for raters at the beginning of the Choreometric Coding Book included the following caution: “The rater is advised not to attempt to count the frequency of a feature by breaking down the action or scene into similar parts or units and then summing up his impressions in numerical terms.”⁸ This flight from numbers seems, at first, at odds with a project that generally

6 *ibid.*

7 *ibid.*

8 Forrestine Paulay, Irmgard Bartenieff, and Alan Lomax, “The Choreometric Coding System,” Box 4/18-03, The Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, The Library of Congress.

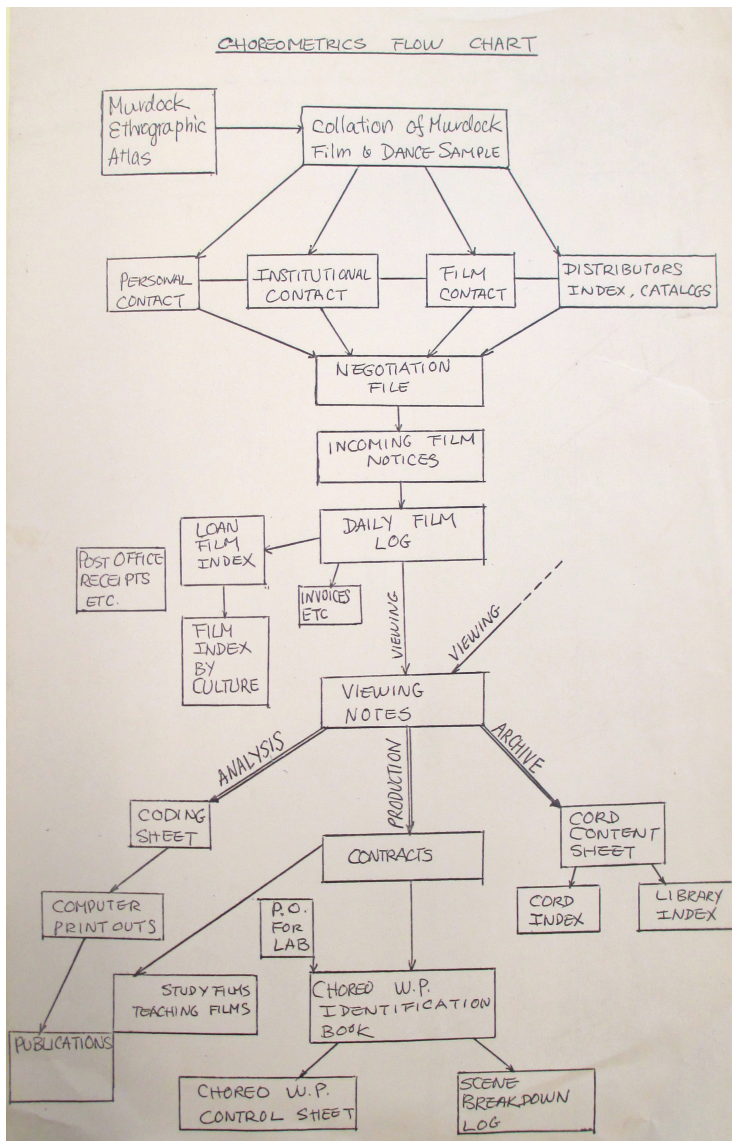
emphasized its quantitative, scientific credentials.

An integral part of Lomax's methodological theory, however, was that the system itself would ultimately render numerical measures unnecessary. As a rater viewed more and more films, coding sheets in hand, he or she would gradually absorb the schema until it became second nature. "Training in Choreometrics," Lomax contended, "consists, fundamentally, of the recalibration of the observer's standards of tempo, etc., to the full human range."⁹

Lomax hoped that such training could be extended to the audience at large, and his plans for publication reflected this radical sensibility. Though he did use the Choreometrics data to venture scholarly arguments about the relationships between dance patterns, work, culture, and physical environment, he never planned to produce an academic monograph. Instead, he envisioned a strange chimera of coffee-table book and scholarly tome. Not only would the book feature significant excerpts from the raw data, it would include coding instructions and blank versions of the coding sheets: an invitation to a DIY education in movement observation. In addition, Lomax hoped to make the films he drew upon widely available, whether broadcast on American public television—as he did with *Dance And Human History* (1975) and *Palm Play* (1977)—or screened privately to the far-flung communities they depicted. More than earlier salvage projects—which aimed to capture a past that would inevitably vanish—Choreometrics was future-oriented, dedicated to the active propagation of diversity and open-mindedness.¹⁰

By enlisting readers and viewers in his archival project, Lomax hoped to alter their day-to-day experience of human movement, new scientific understandings demolishing old prejudices. No longer would the "shuffling" movements of African Americans connote laziness; instead, they would tell a story about climatic adaptation, agricultural technologies, and dogged persistence. Indeed, as Choreometrics-trained observers moved through a city, they would encounter hard evidence about the long course of human history and human diversity in the body of every person they passed. A trip to the grocery store might teach as much as an afternoon at a natural history museum. Each moment would be like "looking through a microscope or underwater for the first time."

"All authors," Lomax wrote, "have their dreams. Mine runs this way: a folk dancer, an aboriginal choreographer, a student from some place away from the overwhelming mainstream picks up this book, looks through this atlas for his or her culture area and finds a pattern that is quite familiar—coming from his home or at least from his home ground." Though, until this point, he may have been suffocated by the barrage of Western cultural media, "now he discovers that there are many other aesthetic alternatives created far away from the urban art and pop market-places, including one by his own ancestors. This style he can feel in his joints and muscles belongs to him or is akin



Choreometric Flow Chart. FROM THE ALAN LOMAX COLLECTION AT THE AMERICAN FOLKLIKE CENTER, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. USED COURTESY OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR CULTURAL EQUITY.

to the one he knows." He begins to "look at himself and his people with renewed esteem and begins to think, if he is a dancer, about what he can do with what he really knows. He has discovered that his own movement style is there, that it is composed of a special and fitting rearrangement of the same elements found in all human activity, but handled in an original style."¹¹ The natural body would return, triumphant, one more.

This was Lomax's holy grail. Numbers and figures, maps and diagrams, would awaken in even the casual

9 Paulay et al., "The Choreometric Coding System."

10 For more on similar midcentury efforts to inculcate open-mindedness and diversity, see Turner (2013) and Cohen-Cole (2014).

11 Alan Lomax, "An Atlas of Dance Styles," Box 4/18-04, The Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, The Library of Congress.

CHOREOMETRICS - USE OF BODY

Body Parts Used:

Tr	Ch	Be	Pl	Sh	Br	WL	UL	LL	Fo	To	WA	UA	FA	FH	Ha	Fu	Fi	Th	He	Mo	Ey	127)
1 MOVING:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	12/12
132) 2 POSED:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	M F

Body Attitude: 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 19 20 21 22 23 24 129) M F

161) Torso--Incline	Held	Minor	Punc	Sect	Alt	Pat	Multi	223) Relation to Vert	E	C	(/	^	225) Stance	M	W	VW	S	
163) Torso--Level	Held	Minor	Punc	Sect	Alt	Pat	Multi	227) Type of Unit	R	M/a	V	U	S	S/	Ma	229) Sh: f sh	Ch: f sh	BE: f sh	PL: f sh
Primary				Secondary															

241) Trunk as Two Units 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

242) At the Periphery 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 311) Hand Foot Ext-arm-hand

243) Simultaneity 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 315) one multi-focal

244) Successiveness 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 319) Arm #13 FO-HA HA-FH

245) Central Impulse 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

246) Trembling 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 326) Fingers

247) Isolation 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 336) HEAD FINGER NAIL

248) Opposition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 342) -- -- --

249) Multisystem 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

250) Simple Reversal 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

251) Precision in Space 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

252) Small Range 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 354) FEET HANDS FINGERS

253) Large Range 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 360) Trunk Arm Leg Tr-Arm TrLeg

254) Linear, 1-Dimensional 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 366) Upper 1 1-2 2-3 3

255) Curved, 2-Dimensional 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 368) Lower 1 1-2 2 2-3 3

256) Spiral, 3-Dimensional 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 370) Hands 1 1-2 2 2-3 3

257) Sharp Transition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 323) 1) 2) 3) 4)

258) Gradual Transition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 5) 6) 7) 8) 9) Multi

259) Activity Structure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1) vague 2) 2-phase 3) asym. 2-pha 4) cyclic 5) asym. cyclic 6) serial 7) multi-phase

261) Level of Stress 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 317) Stress type: 1) Vague 2) Emphatic 3) Explosive 4) Shifting 5) Pulsating 6) Rebound 7) Follow-thru 8) Sustained

262) Strength 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

263) Heavy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

264) Light 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

265) Slow-Fast 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

267) Acceleration 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

268) Fluidity 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

270) Jerky-Smooth 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

272) Variation 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Shelf List # 3-6 Culture JAPA (115)

Location

Cp # Area Spt 8pt

(111) 73-75 76-77 78-79

Film Name VIVO OBSERVATION

Source UN. OF HAWAII IAR. SUBILA

D W Other 9 Cord Date



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television, it is unlikely that they ever made it back to their communities of origin. Though Lomax saw Choreometrics as an interactive medium, a cybernetic system in a world of unidirectional broadcast TV, the final product ended up far more conventional.

With a characteristically modern idealism, Lomax believed in the power of vast accumulations to remake the world. In the end, however, it was not this transformational vision that determined Choreometrics' fate, but rather the far more mundane realities of budgets, page limits, and distribution contracts. Thus, just as much as Lomax's lofty idealism suggests that modern-day data-gathering projects might hold more radical potential than we have given them credit for, it is also a cautionary tale. In a world of seemingly frictionless exchange, it is easy to forget how profoundly dependent such projects are on the existence of robust technological, political, and social infrastructures. No matter one's intent, ideals without materials do not utopias create. ■

Choreometric coding sheets. FROM THE ALAN LOMAX COLLECTION AT THE AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. USED COURTESY OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR CULTURAL EQUITY.

reader a new sense of culture, of history, and even of his or her own body. "Members of all the varied human traditions, whether they be viewers or program makers, film-makers or film goers" could "no longer easily be shamed or enticed out of their birthright."¹²

Unfortunately, Lomax's ideals fell short of his achievements. Crushed under the weight of its own ambition—and more than a thousand pages of data, photographs, and coding sheets—Lomax's book was never published. And while his films were broadcast on American public

12 Lomax, *Dance and Human Culture*.

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