

This article appeared in **Filmmakers Newsletter** (vol. 4 #4) in February 1971 at a time when Alan Lomax was searching with energy and determination for footage of dance and work from around the globe to analyze in his Choreometrics project. The technology and paradigms for shooting color synchronous sound in the most remote locations had made enormous advances in the previous decade. Techniques for parsing and analyzing behavior suggested that a great measure of communication occurred on a kinesic and subconscious level and that film analysis would open rich areas of inquiry. And there was a general perception, one which has proven to be correct, that the world was changing rapidly and that entire ways of life were being transformed. At the American Anthropological Association meetings in San Diego in the Fall of 1970, Lomax and others gave a day long presentation about their work in film analysis, and it seemed that the field of anthropology was set to soar in new directions, and that the making and study of the film record would be a key element. Reading this text again, I still stir to its clarion call to action; a call that went largely unheeded.

John Bishop December 1999

Toward An Ethnographic Film Archive

by ALAN LOMAX

Margaret Mead, in her retiring address as president of the American Anthropological Association in 1960, urged her colleagues to make more use of available data-recording and storing devices—the still camera, the tape-recording machine, and most especially, the movie camera. There were restless stirrings and angry murmurs throughout the hall as these notebook oriented scholars expressed their irritation at this revolutionary suggestion.

Last fall at a Washington meeting, anthropologists and film makers most concerned with ethnographic film established a permanent working committee called the Anthropological Film Research Institute and elected Margaret Mead president. The Institute's first act was to call for and sponsor an Ethno graphic Film Archive in the Smithsonian Institute in Washing ton whose main functions would be to act as a repository for footage, work out a cataloging system, and serve as a base for further research, especially in making films of cultures and

tribes about to disappear. The Archive will become a reality in the next 2 or 3 years, we hopeⁱ.

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One of the great opportunities and urgent tasks of this generation is for the anthropologist to use the sound film to make a complete record of the life ways of the human species. The human race has come to a big turning in the road—to the successful climax of man's long effort to control his physical environment. Many, many ingenious systems of organization and communication have been evolved in this long struggle to maintain the continuity of the species and to satisfy increasingly complex needs. Now most of these cultural types will fast disappear. If action is not taken now, not only will science have lost invaluable data, but much of the human race will have lost its history and its ancestors, as well as a vast treasure of human creativity in adaptive patterns, in communication systems, and in life styles.

Electronic devices now make it easy to record, store, retrieve, and reproduce these patterns. Moreover, it is clear from recent studies of style and culture (such as my own on song and dance) that a great part of this data is still there to be recorded, at least in vestigial form. Furthermore, enough film exists and enough film analysis has been done to convince me that no data is comparable to what we can have from a well-organized sound-film survey of our species. The work of Bateson, Mead, Birdwhistell, and their colleagues shows that the impress of culture and communicative models is captured on film and may be retrieved from it. Good sound films are multi-leveled and almost infinitely rich recordings of multi-layered, clearly structured inter-action patterns, communication patterns, and stylistic controls.

But not only can ethnographic film be a fundamental research tool for the historian and social scientist in the future, it will also serve three other functions:

1. A full and eloquent sound-film record will enable the whole human race to know itself in objective terms, and the use of this material will make for a communication system that represents all culture and all histories, not just our own. The principles of cultural equity will come into function in this better-balanced communicative system. Subordinate to this larger view are the purposes of education within our own culture. If we establish a baseline in planetary self-knowledge, the educational needs of the young people in this culture will also be taken care of.
2. This total human record will be a resource for our less varied future—of body style, behavior pattern, group organization, mind and body skills—all of which can be represented and captured easily in film, almost none of which can be communicated through print, since film records the whole of a process, print only the steps. Thus the achievements in speech, in

rhythm, and in body skill of countless unknown creators can be stored up for the human future.

3. Feedback and cultural renewal. We do not know how much demoralization the loss of culture, language, and tradition bring about, except that it is great and long-lasting. All strong cultures depend upon a matured and crystallized self-image. As things are at present, the simpler economies and nonliterate folk of the planet—in whom our human variety really reposes—struggle vainly to maintain a healthy self-awareness. They need technical help in preserving and adapting their extra-verbal and oral traditions, for there is no time to reduce them all to print. In any case, print leaves out the non-verbal.

Even more urgent is the matter of feedback—the voices and the images of the underprivileged are, unlike ours, seldom or never amplified and repeated by the big communication systems. Quite naturally then, these people fall into despair—their enforced silence convinces them that they have nothing to contribute. But broadcasting sound and film, especially song, dance, drama, narrative, ritual, and the like, can put the human race on terms of parity, communication wise, for all aesthetic systems carry their own message of perfection. For example, the vitality of folkways, given parity, is evidenced by their comeback in India and the Balkans. We have seen in the U.S. how the expressive styles of the backward Southern Appalachian and Southern Black communities have thrived and developed (even though subject to a corrupt commercial influence) simply because they had communication space on records and radio. If we film now with the purpose of feeding back to the carriers of all human traditions, we will learn, as we work, about how to foster all culture and all expressive models. We will have gained time and somewhat postponed the otherwise inevitable cultural grey-out.

It is only within such a broad perspective that the plans for a national ethnographic film program ought to be conceived. In what follows I shall not address myself to detailed matters concerning the establishment of the National Film Archive, its location, and its techniques for preservation, for others have been at work on this and have made excellent suggestions. One point, however, should be obvious. There is in no one country the finances or the housing to take care of this gigantic enterprise. The U.S. Ethnographic Film Archive should have the responsibility of looking after only a certain portion of the footage and the task, but beyond this it must collaborate and work out standards of indexing, filming, and preservation with other centers in this country and abroad. Therefore, it is of primary importance to establish the ethnographic film enterprise on an international basis. Americans were slow to begin making ethnographic films, and even now our performance is not equal to that of the French, the Italians, the Germans, the Canadians, and the British. The job cannot be done without the Musee de L'Homme, Gosfilmofund, BBC, the Canadian Film Board, the German

Encyclopedia Cinematographica, and other foreign groups. Therefore, a major and primary task is to establish these working relationships, and for this we need a minimal plan that all can agree upon. The following offers some ideas for this plan.

A Filmed Ethnographic Sample

Our first obligation as scientists is to make sure that, minimally, we have a filmed record of all the main families of human culture. G. P. Murdock and his center have developed a Standard Cultural Sample of reasonable size. My own recent factor analysis of the Murdock sample indicates that a minimum of about sixty culture styles could represent the full range of human social and expressive structures. Within some such frame we can begin work on the Standard Filmed Sample—in terms of the following steps:

1. Study the extent of ethnographic footage and determine which members of the World Sample have been filmed with reasonable adequacy (as have the Netsilik, the Kung, and the Miao, for example).
2. Promulgation of a listing (or preferably a basic library) of this Preliminary Film Sample so that ethnologists and kineseologists here and abroad can begin to use it and to prepare recommendations for further filming that will represent the range of culture patterns.
3. Plans for films to complete the sample. Our prime goal here is a standard library of human culture to be used by all social scientists—a universally shared body of data to serve as a source for illustration and a base for discussion. Thus the whole human species will become known for the first time.
4. Establishment of standards. A commission on ethnographic film should be convened in order to make preliminary recommendations for: a) minimal standards for filming; b) an outline of activities and topics so that future film documents will be more comparable; c) plans to meet the requirements of film analysts; d) editorial and indexing procedures that will protect the data.
5. An International Commission. Since the cooperation of museums, television networks, and governments will be necessary to finance this task, one necessary step is to establish a working commission concerned with the question. This group should be small and should bring together the best of film administrators whose job is to carry out the suggestions of the ethnographic planning group.

Urgent Anthropology

Film is the most flexible and most honest medium to represent the cultures which are partially extinct or on the edge of disappearing. This enterprise, since it is so extensive, cannot be subject to the level of scientific control applied to the Standard Cultural Sample. Again, however, the same approach may be helpful.

1. From the findings of the Committee on Urgent Anthropology and elsewhere, establish a list of those cultures that ought to be filmed immediately.
2. Research the extant footage of these cultures.
3. Establish a Committee for Urgent Ethnographic Film to commission low-budget films of the cultures that urgently require documentation.
4. Set up a plan and develop a handbook so as to involve all interested agencies and individuals in shooting high-quality footage of these cultures. Here the use of 8mm film should be encouraged.
5. Feedback. This film should, of course, be archived. But perhaps the most important function is *in situ* and in the culture territories it represents. Our most important job is to make sure that culture members see their own films, understand them, and offer suggestions for their improvement. I therefore recommend that careful experimental work in feedback be initiated immediately. Moreover, the United Nations and other agencies should be brought into the picture to initiate feedback in all world areas.
6. Example: North America. Although the cultures of North America have probably been studied more thoroughly by linguists and ethnologists than those of any other continent, this came early; and the amount of available modern film of Indian behavior is paltry compared to other world regions (such as Australia, for instance). The full cooperation of the tribes is essential to this work, and this is a problem, since American Indians have good reason to feel that our science has made little contribution to their welfare. It may be possible to enlist the help as well as the financial interest of the tribes in making these films, provided they are convinced of their importance for the Indian. In our work
 - a. Thus far in our work with Choreometrics we have been able to find behavior that clearly establish the antiquity, the staying-power, and the aesthetic validity of Amerindian continental and area culture styles. Such evidence can win Indian cooperation in creating an Amerindian film record to match those of other continents. This enterprise is "urgent anthropology" so far as the American anthropologists are concerned, and so it seems to me, too.
7. The number of subjects that come under the heading of urgent ethnographic films is very large, but so also are the number of 8 and 16mm filmmakers who want to help. The Commission on Urgent Anthropology must set up and continually improve standards for the non-specialist filmmaker or field worker who, in the past, shot so much of the best documentary film. If we provide a handbook to guide the amateur and training programs for the field cameramen, we can hope to put all the cultures and unique life ways of mankind in the film record before modern technology and communications have obliterated them.

Film Research

The total corpus of film of human beings shot and stored since the invention of the movie camera is the richest data bank of human behavior we have. One of the ironies of this era is that the American motion picture industry has not built up a Motion Picture Museum—an International Archive of Sound and Vision—as a monument to Hollywood and the art that all the world regards as so American. But perhaps the Ethnographic Film Archive must come first, to prove what a fabulously interesting and useful place such an electronic museum could be. At this writing, of course, the cinema corpus is virtually unused by the human sciences, both because the stuff is so hard to get at and so expensive, and because film analysis techniques are new and unfamiliar. Only in the past two decades have techniques for the study of human behavior on film—such as kinesics and its offshoots—begun to develop. Only quite recently have social scientists begun to turn to filmmaking, and then too frequently it's as if they were or wished to become great artists in the medium. Indeed, most ethnographic film conferences consist of a display of the art of cinema, in terms of films, most of which are simply bad, rather than in discussion of the complex and pertinent questions of what is in the films, how film can be used as data, and so on. Today there is a rush toward the field, but all too often as a means of personal expression and with little consideration, in many cases, of the scientific interests which should be paramount in anthropology. Without, therefore, gainsaying the importance of additions that filmmakers now wish to make to the cinematic corpus, the anthropologist is obliged, it strikes me, to find, evaluate, and learn to utilize the relevant footage that already exists.

I am impatient with colleagues who demand that before they begin to work they must have footage that meets all their research requirements. For me this is a technique for postponement. In the first place, many of the cultures and much of the behavioral patterns in this footage can never be filmed again—the cultures are gone and the life ways have changed. Second, these documents give our fledgling science the time-depth it needs—provided we are willing to do what every historian does: learn to evaluate the evidence he has. In other words, since motion pictures of human behavior are layer cakes of structured communication patterns, there is ethnographic data of some sort in all documentary footage (which hasn't been chopped absolutely to pieces), if not at a fine-grained level, then at a grosser one. This is not to say that we should not have data standards and that they should not improve, but rather that our fledgling science should learn to use what is already in the record. A primary problem is, then, to find and preserve the extant footage.

Finding the Footage

Ted Carpenter and many others have discovered that there is a world of invaluable ethnographic film in the hands of amateur enthusiasts, government bureaus, and movie and TV companies. One learns with shock that it is a regular practice of business to destroy old footage in order to save storage bills, and one knows (from experiences with the recording industry) that the documentary, the

everyday, the folk, the primitive is always the first to go, while all prints of Pola Negri and Rudolph Valentino are preserved forever. It should become our business to change those attitudes. An initial display of research interest and enthusiasm about what the industry has done would certainly slow this process down (that, too, we found with the recording industry). We could then face the problem of paying storage until we can store this footage, electronically or otherwise. Stimulating examples of using this footage as scientific evidence, either in compiled films or in writing about human history, would also tend to slow this process of destroying data.

It is even more shocking to learn that most editors, including very many ethnographic filmmakers, cut up the original negs in the process of editing their display film, so that much valuable field data is destroyed.ⁱⁱ No ethnographic documentaries should be financed, sponsored, or shot unless there is a budget to keep one or two complete prints of all footage with a complete shot list. An International Film Commission or other appointed body should take the following steps:

1. Through the United Nations, or by other means, address an appeal to all the government agencies that make film—especially the TV corporations such as BBC, RAI, and others—briefing them and asking for their cooperation in preserving and making their footage available. Some film ethnographer in each country can then, hopefully, be commissioned to examine and report on collections of the ethnographic film there.
2. Ask Margaret Mead and Ted Carpenter, as a committee of two, to go after the participation of the American film industry. Also, we should find Senators who are interested in sponsoring the legislation that will show the government concern.
3. Commission two full-time researchers—in the U.S. and Europe—to look over the field. Eventually the International Commission on Ethnographic Film should have several full-time researchers—in North America, Europe, South America, the Soviet Union, the Mid-East, Near East, India, and the Far East. Here again, of course, the Europeans are far ahead of the Americans and should lead—Jean Rouché and his Ethnographic Film Center, the people at the Encyclopedia Cinematographica in Germany.
4. Establish a program of graduate degrees in film research, both here and abroad.
5. Before systematic viewing and indexing begins, a computerizable system for film subject and sequence indexing should be devised for all researchers to use.
6. Initiate the development of an international system of electronic storage and retrieval of sound-on-film and videotape.

Studying the Footage

Few film professionals are yet trained in the techniques for seeing the structure in behavior.ⁱⁱⁱ This training in observation can bring rigor into the human

sciences and an undreamed-of sensitivity to the ethnographic filmmakers. The savants in the field—scholars like Gregory Bateson, Haxey Smith, Margaret Mead, Paul Byers, William Condon, Albert Schefflen, and especially Raymond Birdwhistell—should be aided in setting up orientation and training programs.

Several methods exist, each useful for working at a different depth in the visible stream. Among them are: Micro-analysis of inter-personal synchrony (William Condon)~ the kinesics-linguistic level (Ray Birdwhistell); and the Choreometric cross-cultural rating.

Each of these ways-in will contribute to an emerging science of human ethology. An important step, still to be taken, is to develop the concepts and the methods by means of which the social science filmmaker can record the gross visible patterns of familial, community, economic, and political systems at work.

Standards

It would be possible to hedge this beautiful field about with such a thicket of rules and caveats that it would lose the independent and creative souls, like Flaherty, who have shot so much of the best ethnographic footage. This would be disastrous, for in order to reach and move the mass audience, ethnography wants all the art, all the cinematic skill it can enlist. The field will continue to need big, beautiful films, as well as straightforward data, and both needs can be met. The documentary artist can, as a side-line, shoot some of the footage science requires, so long as its specifications are kept reasonably simple and clear. To help the professional (with his commitment to the mass media) avoid perpetuating visual and cultural stereotypes is a subtler problem. Here visual anthropology can make a major contribution as it learns more about how culture pattern is symbolized in visible behavior. First there are other, more obvious problems created by amateurs playing Flaherty, by professionals using a shooting and editing style suitable for gangster films, but especially by those who make footage that is technically bad and painfully dehumanizing. Incompetent and insensitive cameramen are simply belittling the underprivileged people of the world in the name of truth and documentary filming. There is an ocean of ethnographic footage faulted by wrong exposures and focus, demeaning angles, unkind lighting, follow-shots that miss, and endless scenes in which the cameraman's awkwardness is reflected in the bodies of his victims. One frequent and maddening practice is to pose a village group like a police line-up and shoot along the row of nervous faces from slightly above. Such inexpert and unsympathetic camerawork and lighting is not to be condoned and should not be supported, since the footage is likely to be the principal surviving record of the ancestors of many human groups.

Another besetting sin is the eternal use of the close-up and the endless zooming-in to shoot faces and hands. This is a bad but understandable practice in the West where the hands and face are the only uncovered body parts, but makes no sense at all when simpler, undraped peoples are being photographed. It reflects

the cameraman's nervous search for something he can like and understand, but distorts the event. Constant change of distance and angle and dramatic editing that makes hash of the continuity of interaction destroys the value of the filmed data by imposing the conventions of the Western art film on non-Western behavior. Mead and Birdwhistell long ago observed that when a cameraman changed shots it was because he couldn't bear to look any longer, and they advocate the use of fixed, automatic cameras in gathering data. Sandor Kirsch has found that the European film editor cuts his film to a tempo of 5 to 8 seconds per edit—about breath rate. In the Choreometric survey we found that even the best of filmmakers shot and chopped their footage to fit the dimensions of Western movement form, no matter what its source or phrase organization happened to be. There can be no question that documentary film will be more truthful when filmmakers learn how to shoot and edit within the conventions of the visible communication system employed by those being filmed. Basic elements such as the use of space, energy, timing, and body parts emphasized, along with the subtler interaction and communication patterns, change drastically from one culture region to another. Documentaries filmed with these considerations in mind should not only be more truthful but more beautiful as well. Therefore, since the means now exist for discovering these visual and behavioral conventions, the collaboration of visual anthropologists and filmmakers will certainly be productive of better films. A set of minimum standards, including some of the following suggestions, would help immediately.

1. No one should be backed or encouraged to film in the field unless he is not only a competent but also an empathetic cameraman. Grant committees should have expert review boards to sift out the culls.
2. Practicing filmmaking on primitive or folk groups should be frowned upon. They are unlikely to be filmed twice. Thus this footage may be the only record many groups will ever have of their forebears.
3. A certain proportion of all ethnographic film footage should consist of uninterrupted long and midshots of whole groups in which the observer can study the interaction of all present, in context. A kinesic committee should set up the ground rules for this footage.
4. Filmmakers should be trained to observe and adapt their shooting style to the main behavioral patterns of the culture.
5. A minimal list of situations and behaviors should be photographed in each culture—main productive cycle, child rearing, family meals, dancing, free interaction, etc., etc.—This list should also be standardized.
6. Wherever possible, shooting should be done in synchronous sound or with lavish use of wild-track sound. All sound and music in the finished film (narration excluded) should be from the place.
7. The negative or one inter-neg copy of all field footage should be labeled and stored.
8. Editing should, so far as possible, reflect the non-verbal conventions of the culture from which the picture comes, not those of the editor.

9. Finally and most important—the ethnographic film, wherever possible, should be shot, supervised, or at least planned in collaboration with the most knowledgeable ethnologist, folklorist, or social scientist available.

The Audience

There are at least five audiences for ethnographic film, all with different requirements.

1. The people and the culture who figure in the films should get to see this footage whenever possible, both in local screenings and over local TV. The ethnologist has a strong motivation to give these showings, for at them he can learn more about how the people see their own culture. This is the place where field use of videotape machines should make for great progress in anthropology. Even so, the healthy effect of feedback should be the principal goal. Indeed, the social function of these showings, per culture or culture area, would be the same as our daytime serials, women's hours, sports shows, newscasts, interview shows, etc—the reinforcement of culture pattern.
2. For the people in the surrounding nation or culture, the needs, situation, and potential of the group need to be better understood in the group. Tactful, regional, big-media use of the footage should be part of any overall film plan, wherever possible. Emphasis might fall on the interdependency of groups in an ecological territory.
3. Scientific analysts will want all or part of the unedited footage. Split screen, slow motion and speech stretching, close-ups, and rapidly iterating film loops—every laboratory optical trick in the business can serve the purpose of scientific illustration. Our national archive should have a large special effects department to serve the profession. At any rate, scientific editing of footage will often differ from that used for other types of audiences.
4. Students. There are at least two audiences—children and young adults—and at least three new sophisticated teaching approaches in various stages of development:
 - a. The cultural episode, as developed by Tim Asch and John Marshall, with its multi-dimensional, in-depth treatment of cultural motifs that give the “feel” of character and motivation;
 - b. The stylistic comparative approach where the student gains a world perspective by applying a set of qualitative measures cross-culturally;
 - c. The total experience, in which the student views then studies a whole way of life.

In this classroom slot there are many approaches and scores of films, and perhaps a certain lack of sophistication. It is my feeling that if more emphasis were put on field technique and scientific analysis of the footage, the effectiveness of films in the classroom would quickly improve. The problem is

not how to teach anthropology, but how anthropology can use film to illumine the human destiny. Without any method to work through to the structures of visible human events, teachers and students often have very little to talk about after a film viewing.

5. The General Audience. This is the audience that too many ethnographic filmmakers aim to capture, without the means or the money or the know-how. We are all so caught up in the Hollywood success pattern that we feel that if a film doesn't make it on American TV or in general theatrical distribution, it is somehow a failure in the medium. One tends to forget the enormous 16mm and foreign audiences of today, the huge 8mm and cartridge audiences just around the corner, as well as the scientific and humane uses, referred to above, which should be the central concerns of the anthropologist. Even so, the splendid success of the Netsilik film on CBS last spring was wonderful news. It shows us that the very best field film can win the great mass audience for the people and the ideas we cherish, if ethnographers have the money, time, and the right collaboration. Yet it is important to remember that the Netsilik was a one-shot affair, instantly swamped in the tide of ordinary TV, and that, even in Europe, where ethnographic film is regularly programmed, it is a drop in the bucket and without very notable effect on public attitudes. One reason, I suspect, is that the members of our practical Western culture do not like to look at their victims. But another is that anthropologists have not been able to make quite clear what their films were saying. If films about the animal world outsell our views of culture pattern, this is because we do not motivate our audiences to look at—nor teach them to see—what we see in the footage, as the natural sciences have. The public has a great interest in the natural environment and the fate of threatened animal species, but shows little concern about the disappearance of cultures.

A far greater intellectual and emotional feedback can come from ethnographic film when we learn how to look at it. Here is the real educational problem, here is a genuine goal for a scientific discipline—to teach man how to see and understand the structures of human behavior in their visible manifestations. That is what the study of body language, movement style, and the total context of communication has to offer. With the teaching of Birdwhistell, Mead, Schefflen, or Bartenieff, the most prosaic footage of the most ordinary human event becomes endlessly fascinating. The public will find it so as well when they discover that sensitive filming and sophisticated viewing will bring enriched understanding of the big human problems—communication, personal development, mating, child-rearing, work, illness, and peace.

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ⁱ This did happen, and for a short period the center undertook some filming under the leadership of E. Richard Sorenson. The most notable thing to come out of that effort is Barbara Johnson's film on the birth of a child in a Newari family in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. What remains institutionally is the Human Studies Film Archives, a major repository and research collection of film of anthropological interest. They are extremely helpful to people doing research on their collections. <http://nmnhwww.si.edu/gopher-menu/HumanStudiesFilmArchives.html> is the web link.

ⁱⁱ This is a thorny problem. Most ethnographic films are not well funded, and the effort is undertaken to make a film, not to amass an archive. Film images degrade with each generation, so that it is unreasonable to expect filmmakers not to cut the negative to make the reel from which the printing master will be struck. While I have tried to be sensitive to this issue in my own work, the practicalities of production require cutting the negative. Even so, most of my films have not left much of value on the cutting room floor. In **New England Fiddles**, I made an assembly of out takes to supplement the cut film. **The Land Where the Blues Began** was shot on video, and so the original remains intact since video mastering is non-destructive. And when **Himalayan Herders** was shot, the negative and synched sound was telecined to videotape by the Human Studies Film Archives before I cut the work print and negative; thereby preserving a complete record of the shoot. At this time, when so much is being shot on DV digital video, it is inexpensive and cost-effective to make digital clones of original footage for archiving in different places.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is paradoxical that while great riches accumulate in archives, there is relatively little use made of them. Nobody has come close to Lomax's Choreometric project in breadth or depth of archive based research. Joe Wilson and I were talking about doing some programs based on his work with traditional artists and he leaned back and said, "John, the problem is more people are called to make documentary films than are called to watch them." That seems even more true of ethnographic footage archives.