
Asko Vilkuna 1929–2014

Asko Vilkuna, a renowned professor of ethnology died on 13 December 2014. He left a lasting impact on the University of Jyväskylä as the initiator and developer of the study of ethnology and as the person in charge of renewing the constructed environment of university campuses. He was born on 17 November 1929 in Nivala, Ostrobothnia, where the family lived temporarily on the father Kustaa Vilkuna's family farm. According to Asko Vilkuna himself, his birthplace and peasant family background were especially significant to him. He has reminisced about how, during his childhood in Nivala, the children were taken along for work in the forest and around the farm, each according to his or her own capabilities.

Kustaa Vilkuna, both a professor and a member of the Academy of Finland, was the most formidable Finnish ethnologist of his time and a prominent figure in Finnish cultural policy and political life. Asko Vilkuna's childhood home was a hospitable place, and contemporary Finnish scholars as well as foreign scholars and prominent academic persons became familiar to him in his youth when they visited the home. He himself has emphasised how much he absorbed cultural and other types of knowledge during these visits when listening to the discussions between his parents and the visitors. Both his knowledge of rural peasant culture and the scientific discussions later influenced his direction in life and especially his activities as a university professor.

Asko Vilkuna started his academic career as a student at the University of Helsinki majoring in the Finnish language; he received his master's degree in 1953. After graduation, he continued his studies and research in Austria during the years

1953–1954, later in Scandinavia during the years 1955–1964 and in Hungary in 1961. He worked as a lecturer in the Finnish language at the University of Lund between 1955 and 1962. His master's thesis was on the Finnish word *väkipala* (the first or last piece of bread, associated with special power and significance), and it served as the basis for his doctoral dissertation, *Das Verhalten der Finnen in 'heiligen' situationen*. He completed the dissertation in 1956, and Asko Vilkuna was 26 years old at the time of his defence. His studies in the 1950s and 1960s characterised his interest in the history of customs and traditions as well as the beliefs behind them. His central approach

was the religious-folkloristic point of view, and he focused on the human life cycle, birth and death. In 1958, he published *Das Begräbnistier*, in 1959 the studies *Die Ausrüstung des Menschen für seinen Lebenswelt* and *Ihminen ja hänen vastapuolensa* (Man and his Counterpart), and in 1960 *Valkoinen liina, vainajan liina* (The White Shawl – the Shawl of the Deceased). All of these were published in Finnish in 1989 in the book *Tavan takaa. Kansatieteellisiä tutkimuksia tapojemme historiasta* (Behind the customs: ethnological studies of Finnish customs and beliefs).

Asko Vilkuna was appointed docent of Finno-Ugric Ethnology for the years 1961–1969 at the University of Helsinki. The prospect of applying for new professorships (Turku and Jyväskylä) prompted him to do more research and publications on material culture. In the foreword of *Suomalaisen karjasuojan vaiheita* (Zur Geschichte des Finnischen Viehstalls), published in 1960, he acknowledged his father for encouraging him to leave behind the archives and orientate himself towards field studies. The study is based on a respectable number of interviews and extensive field studies carried out all over Finland. During the trips into the field, his wife Irma Vilkuna collected material for her own research while at the same time helping him by collecting archive materials for a study on cattle sheds. Methodologically, the study employs a geographic-historical method as well as research of innovations, and it demonstrates his interest in linguistics and cultural geography. The cattle husbandry theme was continued in the study *Karjan kesäsuojista ja laiduntamisesta Pohjanmaalla* (Sommerkuhställe und Weidegangsitten in Ostertottien), published in 1961. His continuous interest in linguistics comes across well in, e.g. the linguistic-cultural historical study *Kalannimet kulttuurintutkimuksen lähteenä* (Fish names as a source for cultural studies), published in 1965.

The Professorship of Finnish and Comparative Folk Life (since 1973 Professorship of Ethnology) was established in Jyväskylä in 1964. Asko Vilkuna started began his work there as acting professor in 1964 and was appointed full-time professor in 1966. He had the foresight to develop the Department of Ethnology, and the professorship at the University of Jyväskylä was exceptional at

the time compared to the disciplinary divisions at other universities in Finland. It included two disciplines, ethnology and folklore studies; in 1973, cultural anthropology was added to the assortment of disciplines. This created a foundation for the present-day multidisciplinary teaching of and research on ethnology at the University of Jyväskylä. The research projects developed and carried out under the supervision of Asko Vilkuna featured such questions and themes as changes in the countryside of Central Finland, innovations and interactive situations, the environment's significance for humans, and ethnological urban studies, all of which are still topical subjects.

Asko Vilkuna was the dean and vice dean of the Faculty of Humanities from 1970 to 1974. He had a great impact on the direction of our country's higher education policy between the years 1973 and 1983, when he worked as the President of the University Council, which operates under the Ministry of Education. He became a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1973. He also became a member of Vetenskaps-societen i Lund in 1969, Kungliga Gustav Adolfs Akademien in 1986 and The Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in 1987.

One of his first actions as Professor of Ethnology was the renovation of the building that was later named Villa Rana, built in the national romantic style and now soon-to-be demolished, which he converted into his own department building. He was the President of the University Construction Advisory Board during the years 1969–1992. The present main campus of the University of Jyväskylä on Seminaarinmäki as well as its expansion to Mattilanniemi and the area behind Lake Jyväsjärvi came about mostly during his presidency.

Asko Vilkuna was an excellent raconteur with extensive knowledge as well as ample stories and anecdotes about past and contemporary events. I remember him as a jovial teacher, colleague and director of the department. After his retirement in 1993, we often spoke on the phone and reminisced about the past, reflecting on topical questions pertaining to the university as an institution as well as ethnological research in general.

Pirjo Korkiakangas