

Kustaa Vilkuna 1902 – 1980

Finnish ethnology lost a leading figure and *Ethnologia Europaea* an eminent member when Kustaa Vilkuna, professor emeritus at Helsinki University and member of the Academy of Finland, died on April 6, 1980, at the age of 77.

Kustaa Vilkuna's career was spectacular but also in many ways typical of the young generation which was to steer the destiny of the young nation Finland during the first half century of its independence. Vilkuna was born on October 26, 1902, at Nivala, in Pohjanmaa province of the western coast of Finland, the son of a peasant-farmer family which had cultivated the same land for four generations. As such, it would have been natural for him to remain a farmer and continue the family tradition. At first it seemed that this would be his future; he came to the university in Helsinki relatively late, after having spent his first adult years on the farm learning everything that a young man should learn. In retrospect this turned out to be a stroke of luck: in all of his scholarly writing he was able to resort to his own experience and knowledge from the farm, knowledge that is never acquired at a university. When he speaks of folk culture as a functioning system, of the well-adapted technological perfection of tools or of the harmonious interplay of work and feast in rural life, there is a convincing, realistic tone to his almost patriotic commitment to the values of peasant life. His readers begin to see the peasant as a self-reliant and self-sustaining man who cleverly applies the wealth of tradition to changing situations, is capable of inventions and of handling innovations but always strives for harmony with nature and the cycles of social activity. This picture may be slightly idealized, but it works in Vilkuna's writings astonishingly well. It does not derive from stolid theory but from insights, intuitions, and observations which may seem haphazard at first but are in fact organized in a pattern, the writer's own experience of folk life.

Finnish ethnology was strongly biased toward Fenno-Ugrian ethnography during Kustaa Vilkuna's student years. Even the chair was called „Fenno-Ugrian ethnology“. Its first two holders, U.T. Sirelius and Albert Hämäläinen, felt that the extensive and unique materials collected by late 19th and early 20th century explorers and fieldworkers who had visited most Fenno-Ugrian populations in Russia constituted a legacy which had to be taken care of in spite of the closing of the borders after the First World War. Ethnology had a contribution to make to the quest for the origins and roots of national identity. The idea of common cultural elements of Fenno-Ugrian origin beneath layers of more recent loans was a luring analogy drawn from Fenno-Ugrian linguistics.

In addition to ethnology Kustaa Vilkuna studied Finnish linguistics, history, and archaeology at the university, and he was also interested in the geographical-historical method of Finnish folkloristics. He was critical of the teachers, especially of Sirelius' evolutionist typologies of cultural forms. Such typologies, he claimed, could be applied to ornaments and entertaining folklore, i.e. „free“ forms, at the most. Most forms of folk culture, however, from houses and tools to custom and belief, were „bound“, carefully adapted to the environment and larger functional entities. What Vilkuna had in mind was that ecological and functional variation provides no basis whatsoever for constructing developmental sequences of cultural forms. His distaste for Fenno-Ugrian reconstructions on the basis of isolated cultural elements finally culminated in his claim that the designation of the discipline and chair, to be his in 1950, was out of date. Language and culture do not go hand in hand, linguistic boundaries need not coincide with cultural frontiers. It is vastly more important to study the impact of neighbouring cultures and the development of folk culture in historical time than to strive for a highly hypothetical, prehistorical cultural heritage on the basis of linguistic affinity. Proto-languages cannot be paralleled by proto-cultures.

In spite of this position Vilkuna was not at all opposed to linguistic or philological conclusions in ethnology. One of his first academic assignments was as collector and lexicographer at the Dictionary of Finnish Dialects and he developed into a devoted *Wort und Sache* scholar who always wanted to – and often did – convince his reader that the name of the thing opens up an important dimension of interpretation. Colleagues could only admire or envy Vilkuna's operations with linguistic data from not only Fennic but also Germanic, Slavic, and other sources. His ability to decipher any name and provide an explanation of its origin finally made him the leading authority on Finnish first names.

Kustaa Vilkuna's doctoral dissertation (1935) was a survey of the economic folk culture and forms of livelihood in the south-western province called Finland Proper. He put various folk traditions into a cultural historical perspective, combining results from careful analyses of historical sources, archaeological and philological data. He showed the importance of contacts with Sweden and Estonia, but he also paid great attention to the adaptation of borrowed elements to the natural ecology and prevailing socio-economic structure of Finland Proper, and he emphasized the high degree of technological sophistication of various tools and work techniques. There is no need to characterize folk technology backward, on the contrary, it reaches maximal effectiveness in those specific situations for which it has been developed.

It may not be mere politeness, when Kustaa Vilkuna in his short paper *Das Kerngebiet der ethnologischen Forschung* in the memoriam volume of

Ethnologia Europaea for Sigurd Erixon (IV, 1970) mentions Erixon as „a great teacher“. After having decided to revolutionize Fenno-Ugrian ethnology, he would have been rather alone had it not been for people like Erixon and later Richard Weiss, whose thinking brought support from abroad for his own vision. He was also able to accept Erixon's general theory of folk culture, because he never intended to compete internationally on the level of abstract theorizing. It may be appropriate to stress that even as a young scholar he was much more attracted to the grass-roots activities of cultural work in the countryside. All his life he frequently visited various local cultural societies and other associations making speeches and giving lectures. For many decades, 1934-1945 and from 1961 until his death, he was the editor-in-chief of *Kotiseutu* („native place“), the journal of the union of local cultural societies. As a scholar he encouraged numerous people, including those without academic education, to collect and study folk traditions. Collection excursions by student unions at the university became as famous as more academically structured village-studies in which representatives of many disciplines participated. Contemporaries tell us that Vilkuna's ability to point out problems and their possible solutions during teamwork inspired many of the younger participants to pursue their studies, even as far as a doctorate.

Kustaa Vilkuna's temperament and intellectual capacity led to quick insights into essential problems. He was more of a sprinter than a marathon man. This quality often caused return to the same subject; the reason might be a new piece of evidence, a widening perspective or a better formulation of the key problem. His inventive and explorative touch dispelled all suspicion of self-repetition. He wrote very few books on a totally new theme; every book was preceded by numerous small articles, conference papers, and rather journalistic articles of the topic. This is why the number of his publications is astronomical; estimates range between 1000 and 1500 depending on whether short anonymous pieces in the press and essays and memoirs of a political or historical nature are included or not.

Kustaa Vilkuna never lived in isolation from the pulsating political and social life of his home country. During World War II he became head of the State Information Centre and skilfully handled delicate relations with the foreign press. He also gathered a wealth of knowledge of secret documents and inside decision-making in the administration. From those days dated his many contacts with politicians, and especially his friendship with Urho Kekkonen was well known and attested. He worked for Kekkonen's presidency as early as 1950, and even after the success of 1956 continued to help Kekkonen *mit Rat und Tat*. For example, he edited volumes of Kekkonen's speeches for publication in Russian. He was one of the founders of the Paasi-kivi Society, a symbol of the new line of Finnish foreign policy after the se-

cond world war. In 1958 he was Minister of Education in a non-political cabinet. But he never really went into politics. He remained backstage. And above all he remained a scholar.

As a scholar Kustaa Vilkuna opened many new paths for international research cooperation. The most important partners he found in the Soviet Union, Hungary and the Scandinavian countries. He helped to draw up the Finnish-Soviet agreement on scientific and technical cooperation of 1955, which enabled hundreds of Finnish scholars to enter scientific institutions in Finland's neighbouring country and to do fieldwork in its territory. The latter especially meant much to Finnish ethnographers, linguists, folklorists, etc., who were eager to continue collecting materials among Balto-Finnic and other related populations in areas which had been closed to Finns since 1914 (with the exception of some collecting during World War II). During 1960-1974 Vilkuna chaired the Finnish-Soviet Committee on Scientific and Technical Cooperation. He was chairman of the Finnish-Hungarian Cultural Committee in 1964-1967 and member of the Nordic Cultural Commission in 1954-1957. From 1958 he was member of the Standing International Atlas Commission. Of his numerous chairmanships in scholarly societies I mention only his longtime service in the Finnish Literature Society (in various functions since 1935, finally chairman of the board 1971-72 and president of the delegation 1972-75), and his presidency of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1973-75. He was co-editor of numerous scholarly journals and received honorary doctorates from the universities of Greifswald, Oulu, Leningrad, and Budapest.

After only nine years (1950-59) as professor of Fenno-Ugrian ethnology at Helsinki University, Kustaa Vilkuna was nominated Member of the Academy of Finland. In this position he was — at last — free to fulfil his larger plans of research. The result was an impressive flow not only of articles but of solid books offered mostly in German translations for international scholarship. Suffice it to mention the following: *Volkstümliche Arbeitsfeste in Finnland* (FFC 191, 1963), *Studien über alte finnische Gemeinschaftsformen* (FUF 36, 1965), *Zur Geschichte des finnischen Pferdes* (SF 13, 1967), *Finnisches Brauchtum im Jahreslauf* (FFC 206, 1969), *Die Pfluggeräte Finnlands* (SF 16, 1971), and his monumental *Unternehmen Lachsfang* (SF 19, 1975) which together with his last work, an excellent commentary on an illustrated medieval manuscript *Codex Aboensis I-II* (1977, available in Finnish, Swedish and English) has been considered as his *magnum opus*. His numerous articles in the *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder* round off an impressive contribution to European ethnology.

We may be grateful that Kustaa Vilkuna did not remain behind the worst single obstacle to scholarship in a small and linguistically isolated country,

the language barrier. Now he speaks to us in the balanced voice of a mature academician and lets us share his vision of folk life as he saw and experienced it. His voice will be heard by those who wish to understand the nature and forms of folk culture in northernmost Europe from a solid historical-geographical and functional perspective.

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