

IN MEMORIAM

Kristin Kuutma

11. VII 1959 – 16. V 2025



Kristin Kuutma, Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Tartu and Head of the UNESCO Chair on Applied Studies of Intangible Cultural Heritage, has passed away. A distinguished anthropologist, ethnologist and folklorist, she was a deeply influential voice in shaping the understanding of cultural heritage.

Kristin Kuutma was born in Tallinn into a culturally inclined family. Her roots were firmly grounded in the childhood and youth she spent in Northern Tallinn and the coastal villages of the Viimsi peninsula, where her grandparents once met. After graduating from Tallinn Secondary School No. 7, now Tallinn English College, she began her studies in English language and literature at Tartu State University in 1977, drawn to the field as one less burdened

by ideological constraints. After completing her degree in 1982, she worked as a proofreader at the publishing house Eesti Raamat, then moved on to become an editor at the Folk Culture Development Centre (today the Estonian Centre of Folk Culture). One of her most memorable assignments from that period was translating traditional runic ballads into English. She actively participated in the folk ensembles Leegajus and Hellero, and later described “these eye-opening and educational experiences as a living laboratory of development in the fields of ethnology and folkloristics, which also provided valuable insights into the organisational aspects of the folk culture field.”

Kristin Kuutma was a founding member of the Estonian Folklore Society – the predecessor of the Estonian Folklore Council – established in 1988 as the first voluntary organisation of its kind in the Baltic States. She played a key role in shaping the foundations of the folklore movement, many of which remain in place today. In recognition of her contributions, she was named an honorary member of the Estonian Folklore Council in 2024.

With the arrival of a new era came new opportunities, which Kristin Kuutma embraced without hesitation. From 1994 to 2000, she worked as a translator and editor in the Department of Folkloristics at the Institute of the Estonian Language. After earning a master’s degree in Estonian and comparative folklore at the University of Tartu in 1998, focusing on folklore festivals as contemporary traditions, she pursued further studies in the United States at the University of Washington, earning a second master’s degree in Scandinavian studies in 1999 and a doctoral degree in 2002. Her doctoral dissertation, which explored the making of the Seto epic Peko and the ethnography of the Sámi, formed the basis for her 2005 Estonian-language monograph (Kuutma 2005) and her 2006 English-language book published in the prestigious Folklore Fellows’ Communications series in Finland (Kuutma 2006).

After completing her doctorate, Kristin Kuutma returned to Estonia, where she worked as a researcher at the Estonian Literary Museum and taught at the University of Tartu. In 2007, she was appointed Professor *extraordinaria* of Cultural Studies and became Professor *ordinaria* in 2010. That same decade, she was also invited as a visiting professor at the University of St. Andrews. Kristin Kuutma was closely involved with the Estonian Doctoral School in Humanities and Arts, launched in 2009. As the organiser of the Tartu Winter School for doctoral students, she placed great importance on the development of new ideas and on fostering interdisciplinary and inter-university dialogue, shaping the landscape of contemporary humanities in Estonia.

Through her theoretical courses and supervision, she influenced generations of researchers’ understanding of ethnography as cultural description and of the cultural scholar as both observer and creator of representations. Her research interests centred on the social applications of traditional culture and its transformation into heritage, the interplay between heritage and identity,

and heritage policy. She published extensively on the history of folkloristics and ethnology and was about to embark on an international research project with Scandinavian and Baltic colleagues on the topic of communal singing – a subject dear to her heart.

As a teacher, Kristin Kuutma was both compassionate and supportive, yet also demanding and consistent. With the keen eye of a cultural scholar, she observed the world from a thoughtful distance, trusting her instincts and stepping in when asked. Her family and loved ones meant a great deal to her. In addition to her academic work, she held numerous organisational and administrative roles in both Estonia and international forums. For several years, she represented Estonia in the Standing Committee for the Humanities of the European Science Foundation.

Kristin Kuutma's life's work can be seen in the introduction and critical analysis of the concept of intangible cultural heritage, as well as in elucidating UNESCO's role and opportunities in both academic and public contexts, in Estonia and internationally. From 2008 to 2022, she served as Chair of the Council of the Estonian National Commission for UNESCO, and later as a member of the Expert Committee and Head of the Executive Board when the Commission was merged with the Ministry of Culture. She was a reliable advisor and advocate whenever matters related to UNESCO and intangible heritage arose.

In 2003, she received the annual award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia for her scholarly analysis and report on the song and dance festivals of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as the cultural space of Kihnu – a contribution that led to their inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. From 2006 to 2010, Professor Kuutma represented Estonia on UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. During this mandate, she was elected Vice-Chair of the Committee and, from 2009 to 2010, chaired the subcommittee that evaluated nominations to the Representative List. Her close collaboration with the UNESCO Secretariat continued in subsequent years, during which she was invited to advise South Africa and Eritrea on implementing the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. She participated in countless UNESCO conferences and expert meetings, contributing actively to shaping global heritage policy.

Domestically, she promoted the development of the intangible heritage field in Estonia in line with UNESCO frameworks and was a member of the advisory council for intangible cultural heritage under the Ministry of Culture. Under her leadership, the University of Tartu launched the UNESCO Chair on Applied Studies of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2019.

Kristin Kuutma had a broad worldview. She often emphasised that being a member of UNESCO obliges us to think beyond an Estonian or European focus – to see the world as a whole and to understand its challenges. For her, it

was vital that Estonia act as an engaged and respected contributor on the global stage, rather than a passive observer. Through her determined and thoughtful participation as a UNESCO expert, she advanced this vision.

Kristin Kuutma has been honoured with the University of Tartu Badge of Distinction (2014) and Medal (2019), a Certificate of Appreciation from the Estonian Research Council (2014) and several other awards.

Institute for Cultural Research, University of Tartu

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