

(Ostjak **jaj** "older brother," "father's younger brother," "son of the father's older brother," and even "stepfather"). Steinitz, who lived among the Ostjaks for some time, has--after Karjalainen, Harva and others had failed--discovered the basis for this system. He shows that each kinship term in Ostjak applies to a clearly defined group of relatives who are classified as opposites: male/female, older/younger, related/not related by procreation, and directly/indirectly related by marriage. His conclusion is that "a kinship term is a social designation which combines the biological factors in the order typical for a given society and thus represents a social unit."

Mention could also be made of some other, though brief articles in Steinitz's collection--of the note about hunters' taboo language, which belongs to the border area between folklore and linguistics; a popular discussion of the old and new folksongs; and the publication of a tale from Castrén's manuscript collection (AT 1535).

**Russian Minstrels: A Study of the Skomorokhi.** By Russell Zguta. Pp. 160, introduction, illustrations, notes, index. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978. \$16.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Donald Kennedy

In ancient and medieval Russia one of the smaller social classes, though probably not the least significant, was that of the **skomorokhi** (loosely translated as "minstrels" or "buffoons"). These were traveling entertainers who played musical instruments, sang songs ranging from the epic to the bawdy, juggled, performed with trained bears and dogs, did acrobatics, and staged puppet shows. For centuries they frequented festivals, weddings, and other major secular celebrations of Russian peasant life.

In his book, **Russian Minstrels: A History of the Skomorokhi**, Russell Zguta assembles a respectably large body of information on the **skomorokhi**, about whom relatively little is known with certainty. Zguta succeeds in bringing them to life for us and in revealing a fascinating

side of Russian culture and history that usually goes unnoticed. Besides describing who the **skomorokhi** were and what social role they played, he documents what were probably the key turning points in their history, the major influences that underlay their popularity, and the causes of their eventual decline and extinction. The book contains a number of illustrations, which notably enhance its value.

On the basis of the material he has assembled--and he seems to have made an extensive search through what historical records survive from medieval Russia--Zguta advances his central thesis. His contention is that the **skomorokhi**, though reduced to the status of entertainers in later times, were originally the group that most nearly fulfilled the functions of a priesthood in the pre-Christian pagan religion of Russia. As evidence he points to numerous written references to **skomorokhi** casting spells, healing, and performing auguries. He notes also the strong magical powers thought to be inherent in music in ancient Russia. And, he argues, since those most clearly identified with music were the minstrels, they must have been regarded as having magical powers.

According to Zguta, the main evidence for their "priestly" function is their role in weddings and as leaders of the music and dancing at the seasonal festivals that date from pagan times--especially the **Rusalia** and the **Kolyada**, the midsummer and midwinter festivals. There appears to be evidence that a **skomorokh** often served as master of ceremonies, or "best man," at weddings--a role that entails the very serious magical functions of warding off evil and assuring prosperity and fertility to the bridal pair.

Zguta sees the attitude of the Orthodox church toward the **skomorokhi** as supporting evidence of their religious nature. From at least the early Christian era (Kievan Rus' was converted in the late tenth century), the Church was extremely hostile to the minstrels. Believers were forbidden to listen to their entertainments, and wherever it was able, the Church barred the minstrels from the villages and had them beaten when they appeared. Secular laws often reflected church doctrine. When the pious Alexei Romanov ascended the throne, he undertook to stamp

out the **skomorokhi** altogether, and in 1648 he outlawed them, ordered them exiled, and had their musical instruments smashed. Zguta finds such hostility inexplicable unless seen as a reaction against a competing ideology.

Also noteworthy is Zguta's theory that it was the **skomorokhi** who were responsible for the preservation and spread of Russia's epic songs, the **byliny**. Zguta agrees with those who attribute these songs to the court minstrels (a different class and probably aristocratic themselves), who sang for the princes and their retinues, but he finds evidence in the songs themselves that suggests they later became the property of the wandering **skomorokhi**. In this manner he explains how it is that the **byliny**, most of which refer to the court of Prince Vladimir at Kiev (that is, far to the south) were discovered by nineteenth-century scholars almost nowhere except in northern Russia. Zguta sees indications that the **skomorokhi** left Kiev for the north in the twelfth century, possibly because of an economic decline and religious persecution. Novgorod, in the far northwest, apparently became home to many of them. Hence, although he lacks direct proof, Zguta sees the **skomorokhi** as the obvious means for transmitting the epic songs about Kiev to the north. In turn, this wholesale migration would also explain the disappearance of the **byliny** in the south, if Zguta is right.

Zguta's chapters on the contributions of the minstrels to the arts in Russia make interesting reading. Some of his findings, such as that the **skomorokhi** originated the now world-famous Russian circus bears, seem well established. Others, such as the influence he feels they had on Russian drama and dance, are more speculative. Since relatively little is known for certain about the history of the minstrels, Zguta's opinions of their broader cultural significance are bound to remain controversial for some time.

The central axis of the book--Zguta's contention that the **skomorokhi** were the main repository of pre-Christian religious traditions after the coming of Christianity--is an appealing hypothesis, and **Russian Minstrels** makes a strong case for it. It is a major contribution to the study of the **skomorokhi**.