Entanglements of Humans and Transportation Infrastructure in the Baykal-Amur Mainline (BAM) Region

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The project is designed to address the ways in which humans and infrastructures are interconnected under conditions of remoteness. Our starting assumption is that changes in transportation networks under “northern” conditions – that is, physical remoteness, a harsh climate, low population density, paucity of tracks – have tremendous consequences for human lives. Our case study is situated in Eastern Siberia. The Baykal-Amur Mainline (BAM) and the Amur-Yakutsk Mainline (AYaM) define our broader study area.

Our research team consists of Austrian and Russian scholars from anthropology and geography and uses a mixed methods array encompassing qualitative and quantitative components, including GIS and cartography

The sociology of remoteness and infrastructure: The Arctic and Subarctic have gained a surprising amount of attention in recent years. What used to be the ‘remote’ bastion of global economies and political currents has morphed into a new frontier of geopolitics, resource extraction, and identity politics and infrastructure, we analyse how ethnic identities, group boundaries, and social networks have been (re)configured in the processes of the railroad construction and modernization and competition for resources. Our ethnographic materials, including interviews with indigenous Evenki people, BAM builders, local authorities, companies and other stakeholders are collected in several railroad towns and ‘ethnic villages’ along the BAM in the Republic of Buryatiya, Zabaykalskiy Kray and Amurskaya Oblast’.

Living along the BAM: Social Dynamics and Identity Politics

This component views the BAM as an agent of social change that predetermined the population dynamics, mobility and social patterns of local communities in the Soviet and Post-Soviet periods. Relying on the concepts of identity politics and infrastructure, we analyse how ethnic identities, group boundaries, and social networks have been (re)configured in the processes of the railroad construction and modernization and competition for resources. Our ethnographic materials, including interviews with indigenous Evenki people, BAM builders, local authorities, companies and other stakeholders are collected in several railroad towns and ‘ethnic villages’ along the BAM in the Republic of Buryatiya, Zabaykalskiy Kray and Amurskaya Oblast’.

Main research question: Given the techno-social entanglement of people and infrastructure, how do changes in remote transportation systems affect human sociality and mobility?

The View from Above: Patterns of Sociality and Mobility

The view from above – a bird’s-eye perspective – contributes to our anthropological endeavor (the view from below). In this way, ethnographic qualitative research, based on narrative accounts, is augmented by “grounded visualisation”. Maps are used for analysis and research methods which will build on cartographic storytelling. Additionally, a questionnaire-based survey on different mobiles and their impacts on social configurations is carried out alongside the ethnographic research.

New Railroad Infrastructure: Waiting for the Trains

In this component, we study the village Noviy Bestyakh and its adjacent region, which is the current end point of the BAM’s railroad branch to the Sakhalin peninsula. So far, the connection is open only for cargo trains. Historically, the region’s economy was based on agriculture and forestry. However, the railroad development brings about urban development, traffic, and new professional perspectives. We explore the consequences of infrastructural development as well as the villagers’ engagement in a rapidly changing material and social environment.

Regional context

Colla is located in North-East Asia, at the junction of Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. We call the area the BAM region because it is defined by the Baykal-Amur Mainline (BAM) railroad and its side tracks. In that region there are policies with a long history of industrial development and resource extraction, while many parts of the area have been little affected by Soviet and post-Soviet modernization efforts. Current attempts to revitalise, improve and extend the railway network serve as the backdrop for our project.

CoRe - Configurations of Remoteness

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