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 infrastructure are entangled 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 sociality of remoteness and infrastructure: The Arctic and Subarctic have gained a surprising amount of attention in recent years. What used to be the “remote” backwaters of global economic and political currents has morphed into a new frontier of geopolitics, resource extraction, and developmental designs. New transportation infrastructure often plays a critical role in these transformations. But its effects – accessibility, the promotion of infrastructural infrastructure – are not uncontested. Those for whom ‘remoteness’ has been an aspect of their daily lives, or man lives. Our case study is situated in Eastern Siberia. The Baykal-Amur Mainline (BAM) Region defines our broader study area.

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

Living along the BAM: Social Dynamics and Identity Politics (Sigrid Irene Schiesser)

This component explores the BAM as an agent of social change that mediates the social dynamics and identity politics of the communities in the Soviet and Post-Soviet periods. Relying on the concepts of identity politics and social memory, we analyse how ethnic identities, group boundaries, and social networks have been (re-)configured in the process 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 the BAM Region of the Republic of Buryatyia, Zalinsky rayon, and Amurskoye oblast.

The View from Above: Patterns of Sociality and Mobility (Alexis Sancho Reinoso)

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 in-depth interviews, is augmented by “grounded visualization”. Maps are another means of understanding the workforce and communities involved in the construction and management of the BAM. These maps are created in collaboration with indigenous Evenki people and workers, as well as cartographers. In this way, we are able to explore the social and cultural dynamics of the BAM Region.

New Railroad Infrastructure: Waiting for the Trains (Sigrid Irene Schiesser)

In this component, we study the village of Nizhnyaya Baykal and its adjacent region, which is the current ending point of the BAM, as well as the adjacent regions of the BAM. We explore the social and cultural dynamics of the BAM Region by understanding the work processes, roles, and meanings assigned to the BAM. Our research is based on interviews with workers, indigenous people, and other stakeholders involved in the construction and management of the BAM.

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Regional context

CoRe is located in North 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 sidetracks. In that region there are pockets 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 revitalize, improve and extend the railway network serve as the backdrop for our project.