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 entangled under conditions of remoteness. The 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 economics and political currents has morphed into a new frontier of geopolitics, resource extraction, and identity politics. This component views the BAM as an agent of social change that predetermined the population dynamics, mobility and modes of social movements 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 Buryatia, Zabaikal region, and of the Sakha Republic. 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 brought about urban development, traffic and new professional perspectives. We explore the consequences of infrastructural development as material, ideological, and social processes in the entanglement of human and non-human worlds.

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 (Sigrid Irene Schiesser) - This component uses the BAM as an agent of social change that predetermines the population dynamics, mobility and modes of social movements 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 Buryatia, Zabaikal region, and of the Sakha Republic.

New Railroad Infrastructure: Waiting for the Trains (Sigrid Irene Schiesser) - In this component, we study the village Nizhniy Bestyakh and its adjacent region, which is the current ending point of the BAM’s railroad branch to the Sakha Republic. 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 brought about urban development, traffic and new professional perspectives. We explore the consequences of infrastructural development as material, ideological, and social processes in the entanglement of human and non-human worlds.

Regional context: CoRe is located in North Asia, at the juncture of Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. It calls the area the BAM region because it is defined by the Baykal-Amur Mainline (BAM) railway and its sidetracks. 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.