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

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 core.univie.ac.at & lifeofbam.com

The project is designed to address the ways in which humans and infrastructure 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 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 shrinking of social and physical distance, and increased speed of connection – are not uncontested. Those for whom ‘remoteness’ has been an asset, are often among the opponents of such developments. New transportation infrastructures are often not built to make the lives of local residents easier but to move cargo from point A to point B. Thus, there are ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of such infrastructural developments.

CoRe - Configurations of Remoteness

Living along the BAM: Social Dynamics and Identity Politics

(Olga Povoroznyuk)

This component views the BAM as an agent of social change that predetermined the population dynamics, sociality and mobility 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

(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 narrative accounts, is augmented by “grounded visualization”. Maps are used for analysis and outreach which will build on cartographic storytelling. Additionally, a questionnaire-based survey on different mobilities and their impacts on social configurations is carried out alongside the ethnographic research.

Mobilities off the BAM under Conditions of Oil Extraction

(Gertrude Saxinger, Gertraud Illmeier)

Transport infrastructures are key conditions for mobility. In this component we study settlements located off the BAM; namely the small villages Tokma and the small town Verkhne-markovo in the Irkutskaya Oblast. Roads, ice roads, cut lines, helicopter routes, and the missing railroad are the reference points for our understanding of ways of moving as oil workers, as hunters or in general as inhabitants of remote places. Remoteness in this region surely brings about out-migration for jobs but at the same time the attribute remote is also attractive for pursuing a lifestyle off from urban rhythms and fosters a sense of place. This component tries to understand what impact CSR programs of the major oil company in the region have on the wellbeing and lifestyle of people in the context of mobility.

New Railroad Infrastructure: Waiting for the Trains

(Sigrđ 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 brings about urban development, traffic and new professional perspectives. We explore the consequences of infrastructural development as well as human engagement with a rapidly changing material and social environment.

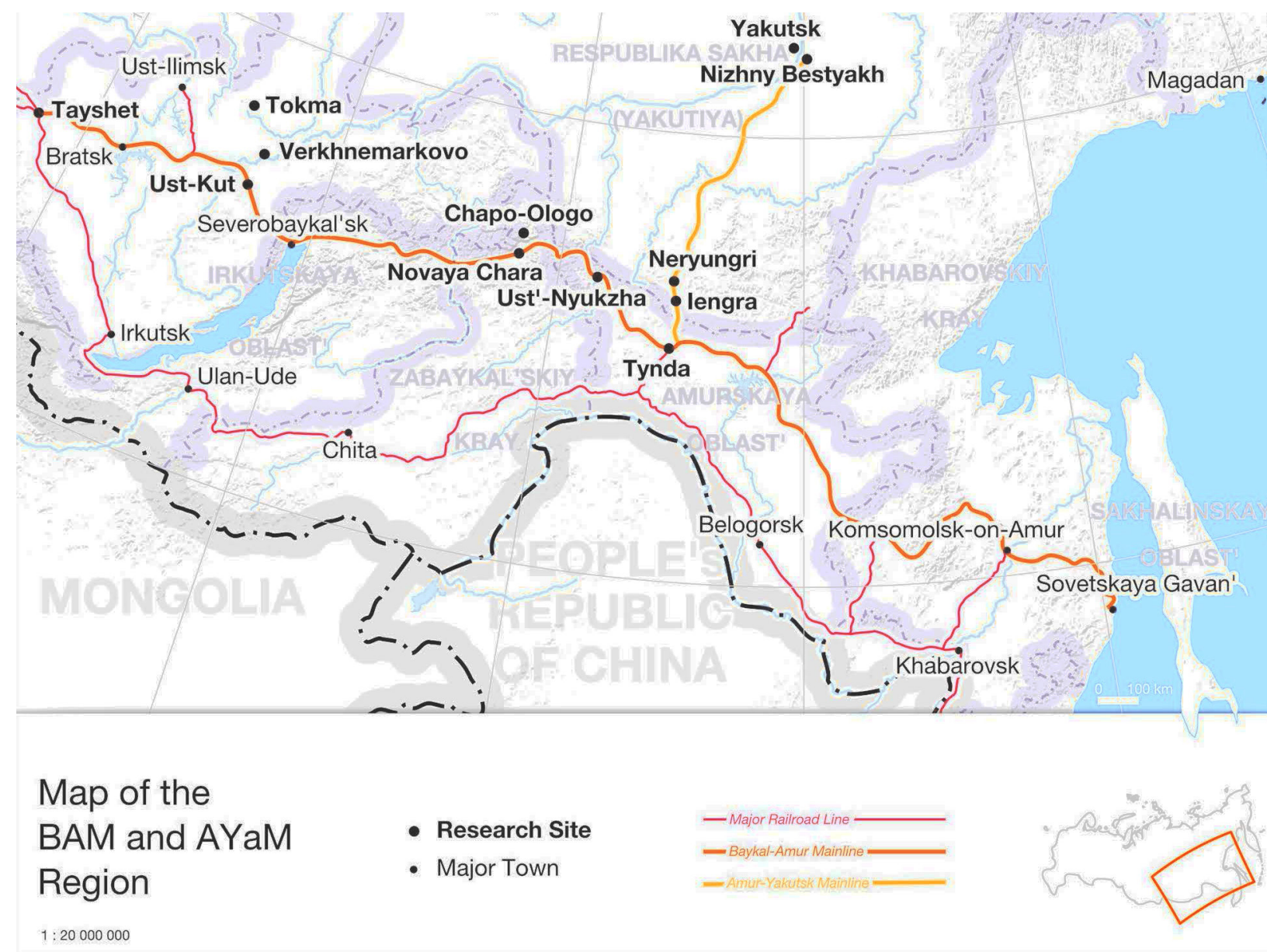


Life of BAM – the Webportal for Ethnographic and Cartographic Story Telling

<http://lifeofbam.com> is the web based platform for outreach and transfer of knowledge in Russian and English language. In various episodes we talk to the broader public about the BAM and its people located on and off the railroad. The scientific results are in this way also transferred back to the communities under study.



photos: ross.michor, ross.michor@gmail.com, cargo.collective.com/likiskolktiv



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.

