

# Ambiguous entanglements: infrastructure, memory and identity in indigenous Evenki communities along the Baikal–Amur Mainline

The Baikal–Amur Mainline (BAM) project has been the embodiment of (post-)Soviet modernisation with its promises of economic prosperity, mobility and connectivity. It boosted regional development and introduced new forms of mobility, but also accelerated sedentarisation, assimilation and social polarisation among Evenki, an indigenous people who had been living in the region long before the arrival of the megaproject. Complex and often ambiguous entanglements of Evenki with the BAM infrastructure – from participation in construction to the exchange of goods to loss of reindeer and land, shaped indigenous ways of life, memories and identities. The master-narrative of the BAM seems to have been internalised by many Evenki and to have drowned out critical voices and indigenous identities. In this article, I direct attention to ‘hidden transcripts’, thereby giving voice to underrepresented memories and perspectives on the BAM within Evenki communities. Drawing on ethnographic materials and interviews with indigenous leaders, reindeer herders and village residents, who experienced the arrival of the BAM and have been entangled with the railroad in various ways, I seek to contribute to a critical and comprehensive history of the BAM and to explore the construction and articulation of indigenous identities *vis-à-vis* large-scale infrastructure and development projects.

**Key words** infrastructure, indigeneity, Evenki identity, Siberia

## Introduction

The Baikal–Amur Mainline (BAM) was the last Soviet infrastructural megaproject and one of the longest northern railroads, crossing six administrative regions in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. The BAM construction of the 1970–1980s became the embodiment of late Soviet modernity with its promises of economic well-being, education, job opportunities, connectivity and mobility. The official discourse glorified the BAM as ‘the project of the century’ and ‘the path to the future’ that was supposed to ‘bring civilisation’ to the remote region and its ‘backward’ population (Ward 2001, 2009) and raised expectations of a better life. The railroad not only boosted regional socio-economic development and new forms of mobility in the remote areas of Siberia, but also triggered tremendous social and cultural change and immobility among its indigenous population. Thus, it accelerated sedentarisation, assimilation and social polarisation among Evenki people, an indigenous group who had been living in the region long before the arrival of the megaproject. The entanglements of Evenki with the railroad varied from involvement in the construction process to the loss of land and reindeer.

Following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the BAM project was for the first time openly criticised for its high economic and environmental costs. While some Evenki people who were directly or indirectly involved in the construction process had primarily positive experiences with the BAM, others (among them activists as well as reindeer herders) voiced their concerns about the dramatic impacts of the infrastructure project on their traditional culture, land use and nomadic way of life. In 2014, a new programme of railroad technological modernisation, named BAM-2, was launched. While it is much smaller in scale than the Soviet construction project, it has raised expectations as well as concerns among Evenki.

How can we understand the ambiguous perspectives of indigenous residents on the BAM project? Which ideological, social and occupational entanglements of Evenki people with the railroad have been shaping indigenous memories of the BAM? And how are different identities articulated through the experiences of participation in the construction of the BAM, on the one hand, and resistance against modernisation and infrastructural development, on the other? In this paper, I argue that the master narrative and ideology of the (post-)socialist BAM project subsumed indigenous discourses and identities. Focusing on underrepresented Evenki voices, I strive for the reconstruction of a more comprehensive history of interactions of the minority population with the railroad and unpack the process of indigenous identity construction in relation to this large infrastructure project.

My anthropological research with indigenous Evenki of East Siberia affected by the BAM started back in the late 1990s and yielded a book on Post-Soviet transformations in local communities (Povoroznyuk 2011). This article is a result of my follow-up ethnographic enquiries focusing on entanglements of humans and infrastructure in the BAM region. In the period between 2016 and 2018, I continued my research in the indigenous villages of Pervomayskoe and Ust'-Nyukzha in Amurskaya Oblast', Chapo-Ologo in Zabaykal'skiy Kray and Kholodnoe in the Republic of Buryatiya. My data collection methods included biographical interviews and focus groups with the local residents of these villages who had indigenous background and identified themselves as Evenki, as well as research in local archives and libraries. Over 30 interviews with indigenous residents – teachers, librarians, administration specialists, kindergarten nurses, doctors, activists, reindeer herders, hunters, railroad workers and leaders of indigenous enterprises – were analysed. While I tried to cover all age groups of the indigenous population, interviews with representatives of the generation of people who are currently in the age group 40 to 70 years old were especially important for this research.

Thus, this article intends to give a voice to Evenki people, who witnessed or experienced the construction of the BAM in various ways, primarily representatives of the local intelligentsia and indigenous activists, but also reindeer herders and hunters. I will show how these complex and often ambiguous entanglements reconfigured Evenki indigenous identities. Moreover, I will analyse how identities are being constructed and articulated in memory narratives of the Soviet period and attitudes towards the present-day railroad reconstruction. Being part of this special issue on mobilities in the Anthropocene, this case study examines the material and social entanglements, including aspects of (im)mobility, between indigenous communities and transport infrastructures in the environment affected by industrial development (Haraway et al. 2016).

In the main body of the article, I situate my research within larger anthropological debates on infrastructure, indigeneity and memory. At the same time, I portray the

late Soviet history of the BAM construction and modernisation project, analyse its main effects on indigenous ways of life and identities, and explore how the memories, experiences and expectations of Evenki people are being rearticulated in relation to the current railroad reconstruction programme, BAM-2. In the conclusion, I briefly address the research questions and discuss the results, emphasising the role of the BAM infrastructure project in the construction of indigenous identities and linking it to the theme of this special issue.

## Infrastructure, indigeneity and memory in Siberia

Anthropology of infrastructure has become a booming field of research in the last decade (Morita et al. 2016; Anand et al. 2018). In many publications, infrastructure figures as the nexus between construction projects and modernisation policies (Harvey and Knox 2012), as terrain for political engagement and neoliberal reforms (Collier 2011) or as an inseparable part of both the natural and the built environment in the times of Anthropocene<sup>1</sup> (Hetherington 2019). Infrastructural megaprojects entail large-scale transformation of landscapes, environmental pollution and destruction, reconfiguration of spaces, and relocation of populations (Gellert and Lynch 2003). Large-scale Soviet infrastructure projects, such as the BAM (Josephson 1995), were a product of hyper-modernism (Scott 1998) with its extreme forms of technological and social engineering and exploitation of natural resources for political purposes. Thus, remote parts of the country, including the North, became the frontlines of industrial and infrastructural development (Schweitzer et al. 2017). Mobility, connectivity and sociality that facilitate movement and circulation of people, goods and information across space (Larkin 2013) are some obvious properties of transport infrastructure. Roads, for example, can be conduits of change (Pandya 2002; Windle 2002) as well as webs of social relations (Argounova-Low 2012). Yet, they do not only forge connections but can also disconnect and entrench violent exclusions of established political and material orders (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012: 460). Railroads that were often at the centre of historical accounts (Marks 1991; White 2011) have only recently been receiving anthropological attention as infrastructure that shapes identities (Bear 2007) and assembles human and non-human actors (Fisch 2018; Swanson 2015). Presently, the Russian North and Siberia are crisscrossed by roads (Kuklina and Holland 2017), while the railroads continue to be the backbone of transportation and regional development, shaping social relations and identities (Povoroznyuk 2019). Infrastructural and technological change in Siberia has been leading to the diversification of means and patterns of travel with roads and railroads (Zuev and Habeck 2019).

Siberia has for centuries been home to a number of indigenous nomadic and seminomadic groups. Similar to other indigenous populations, numerically small peoples of the North and Siberia are characterised by a colonial history of sedentarisation, relocations, political marginalisation, and cultural and ecological destruction, on the one hand (Niezen 2003), and a special connection to the land and its underlying environmental ethics, on the other (Jentoft et al. 2003). Large-scale development projects lead to drastic transformations of indigenous ways of life, often resulting in the loss of political and economic autonomy and culture. Recently, the colonial development

<sup>1</sup> See a critical discussion on the use of the term in anthropology in Haraway et al. (2016).

paradigm, predominant in western modernisation ideas, is being critically revised to embed local histories and indigenous life projects (Blaser et al. 2004).

The Soviet state constructed an image of the so-called 'small peoples of the North' as 'an extreme case of backwardness ... that provided a remote but crucial point of reference for speculations on human and Russian identity' (Slezkine 1994: ix). The popular representations of indigenous peoples of Siberia varied from 'victims of capitalist exploitation' to 'endangered species' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2000). Not surprisingly, the paternalistic policies of the socialist state turned indigenous minorities into subjects of its civilising missions of the 'eradication of illiteracy', 'cultural construction' and collectivisation (Grant 1995). The decades of Soviet colonial assimilation policies have transformed traditional ways of life and nomadism.

The end of the Soviet regime in the 1990s marked the rise of self-determination and the indigenous rights movement in Russia. The indigenous status and associated benefits became a resource contested by minority groups that 'emerged' in public political discourse (Donahoe et al. 2008). This movement helped to carve space for articulations of indigeneity as a process of 'positioning that draws upon ... landscapes or repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle', including resistance to infrastructure projects (Li 2000: 151). While the present legal concepts of indigeneity in Russia are still defined by rather vague criteria and essentialist ideologies (Sokolovskiy 2011), one can trace counter narratives and articulations of indigenous identities at the local level (Varfolomeeva 2019: 273).

Identities shaped and reformulated in the process of remembering are part of collective memory. Most people 'memorise' rather than 'remember' the past by participating in their group's vision of its past through cognitive learning and emotional acts of identification and commemoration (Assmann 2008: 51–2). Thus, the memories of more powerful and politically dominating entities prevail in textbooks and mainstream representations and discourses. Only by focusing on lacunas, awkward facts and voices of minorities can the researcher arrive at a more comprehensive vision of a history of a particular group or a society. Close to the idea of lacunas is the notion of 'hidden transcripts' that characterises discourses and memories that develop 'offstage', beyond direct observation by powerholders, and marks resistance against the dominant public transcript (Scott 1990).

Ethnographic examples from the Russian North and Siberia also show the roles of regional and local memory for the articulation of indigenous identities. The case study by Cruikshank and Argounova features the struggle for recognition of the aboriginal Sakha (Yakut) people and demonstrates the role of local memory in the deconstruction of the Soviet totalitarian past and authoritative discourse in the 1990s (Cruikshank and Argounova 2000). An article by Simonova discusses relationships between local commemoration practices and national 'memorial regimes', showing how residents of an indigenous Evenki community deliver their version of history to a wider audience (Simonova 2012). An ethnographic paper on the imagined Sami community in Northern Russia analyses the power of discourse in the interpretation and utilisation of memories of the Soviet and pre-Soviet past for ethno-political identity claims. Allemann (2017) explores how nostalgic 'sovkhoist' discourse and the 'activist' need-and-misery discourse are used strategically and are constructed along the overlapping lines of generation, gender and locality. Finally, the ethnography of memory along the Russian Arctic coast argues that memory-making is a socially meaningful process, where technologies of silencing of marginalised memories and alternative views are used by communities to create particular public images of themselves (Stammler et al. 2017).

While literature lists on (transport) infrastructure, indigeneity and memory could be expanded, anthropological studies that bring these discussions together in the context of Siberia are few. Argounova-Low (2012) explores the role of roads as conduits of local and indigenous narratives, memories and identities. A recently published article on rivers and roads shows how transport infrastructure becomes an integral part of nomadic landscapes and perception of space (Istomin 2020). A special issue of the journal *Sibirica* illustrates the complementarity and social agency of a variety of 'traditional' and modern infrastructures in the Russian North (Vakhtin 2017). Finally, a special issue of the journal *Siberian Historical Research* on transport infrastructure in the Circumpolar North brings together ethnographic case studies of sea routes, roads and railways (Povoroznyuk et al. 2020). Yet, the role of railroads in the production of memories and (re)construction and articulation of indigenous identities has been understudied by anthropologists, despite the tremendous effects of these large-scale industrial infrastructures. This paper aims to fill this gap by analysing (re)construction of indigenous memories and identities in relation to the railroad in communities affected by the Baikal–Amur Mainline through the infrastructural lens.

## Soviet modernisation and the BAM

The history of the BAM starts with early construction projects dating back to the 19th century and continues with the first rails laid under the Stalinist regime in the 1950s. However, the majority of the mainline was built between 1974 and 1984 by labour migrants (BAM builders or *bamovtsy*) from across the USSR in order to exploit the untapped resources of the North and to 'bolster collective faith in the administrative-command system' (Ward 2009: 2). The Soviet propaganda created 'the myth of the BAM', promoting values of an ideal socialist society (Ward 2001). The BAM became an iconic symbol of modernity, with its promises of a better life, including socio-economic development, mobility, and new education and employment opportunities.

The promises of the BAM, with its underlying Soviet modernisation myth, raised expectations not only among enthusiastic BAM builders but also among the indigenous population. During the initial stage of the BAM construction, a sociological survey was conducted in selected indigenous communities affected by the railroad. The survey reported that 66% of the respondents expected an improvement in their living conditions and hoped for new jobs and education opportunities, higher levels of income and better supplies. The rest of the respondents expressed concerns about adverse impacts of the railroad on traditional activities, especially on reindeer herding (Boyko 1979: 163).

Evenki are an indigenous minority population dispersed across different regions of East Siberia and the Russian Far East (while some groups also live in China and Mongolia; Figure 1). In the pre-Soviet period most Evenki groups pursued a nomadic life, practising reindeer herding, hunting and fishing in taiga areas. The Soviet policy of 'cultural construction' introduced elementary education and basic medical services among indigenous peoples of the North that stimulated sedentarisation of the nomadic population in the newly built 'ethnic villages' (*natsional'noe selo*).<sup>2</sup> My previous

<sup>2</sup> This term was introduced in the Soviet period in relation to rural settlements with a predominantly indigenous population.



**Figure 1** Evenki herders waiting for the ceremonial arrival of the first train at the BAM settlement Zolotinka, Yakutiya, 1976.

**Source:** Museum of the History of Exploration of Southern Yakutiya, Neryungri

research among Evenki indicates the BAM project significantly accelerated and, in many communities, completed sedentarisation of nomads in remote parts of East Siberia and the Far East (Povoroznyuk 2011).

Today, most Evenki and other indigenous groups (*aborigeny*) live in ethnic villages, some of which are connected to BAM settlements by roads, others are hardly accessible by motorised vehicle. The majority of Evenki people, especially indigenous intelligentsia who managed to get a good education in the Soviet period, currently work in local administrations, schools, kindergartens, cultural centres and libraries. An increasing number of indigenous individuals work for railroad and extraction companies. Each administrative district where I conducted my fieldwork, including Tyndinskiy Rayon, Kalarskiy Rayon and Severobaykal'skiy Rayon, has only about a dozen so-called 'clan communities' (*obshchina*)<sup>3</sup> that lead a nomadic way of life.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union opened the way for public criticism towards the socialist modernisation myth and the BAM project. Due to its high construction and maintenance costs, in the 1990s the BAM was considered an unprofitable enterprise. Negative environmental impacts and damage to indigenous lands were

<sup>3</sup> Rus. *obshchina* (or 'clan community') of indigenous numerically small peoples of the North is a legally registered entity that usually implies an indigenous nomadic group of relatives, neighbours or friends leading subsistence activities (hunting, reindeer herding, fishing, gathering, small-scale tourism and souvenir production) on designated lands. Clan communities became the most widely spread form of organisation among the indigenous population of the North after the dissolution of *sovkhozes* and *kolkhozes* in the Post-Soviet period. *Obshchinas* can enjoy a number of benefits, including tax alleviation or exemption and financial support.



for the first time publicly recognised. Since the beginning of the economic recovery and reconsideration of resource-extraction projects in the 2000s, the volume of cargo transported by the BAM has been steadily growing. Oil, coal, timber, rare metals and gold are the main resources transported from the region to the Asian markets and to central parts of Russia. The recently launched modernisation programme BAM-2 aims to increase the railroad's cargo capacity and promises new infrastructure and socio-economic development.

## Effects of infrastructure: ways of life and indigeneity in transformation

The BAM became the last Soviet 'project of the century' (Josephson 1995) that transformed the natural and social environment of north Siberia. The arrival of the BAM megaproject had different environmental and socio-economic impacts on Evenki nomads. Transformation of traditional occupations, mobilities and ways of life in the course of interactions with the railroad infrastructure reshaped indigenous identities.

The industrialisation programme of the region, including the BAM construction project, foresaw the recruitment of labour from other parts of the USSR in order to avoid potential labour shortages in local collective farms and other organisations. In line with this labour recruitment pattern, the authorities and planners expected indigenous residents working for collective farms to also procure reindeer meat and agricultural products for the construction organisations. BAM builders, in their turn, were assigned to 'supervise' ethnic villages located in proximity to the BAM. Construction organisations supplied local communities with an assortment of goods and foods imported from the central regions of the country and from abroad. Larger construction organisations were assigned to build houses for villagers and permanent dwellings for reindeer herders in the taiga.

During the BAM construction, the majority of the Evenki population was enrolled in northern *kolkhozes* as reindeer herders, hunters and fishermen. At the same time, ideological propaganda and higher salaries at the railroad construction boosted the popularity of the BAM project among Evenki as well. While many attempted to sign on with a construction organisation, only few managed to work directly for the BAM. One such Evenki family spontaneously set out to the construction site that opened in the vicinity of their village. According to Maria, they were lucky to get jobs at the BAM: her husband was accepted to work as a stone dresser and she worked first as a painter and decorator and then as a kindergarten nurse. Memories and photos from the family archive show that this short but memorable experience was important to them. Maria was among the few Evenki individuals who received the prestigious 'medal for construction of the BAM' – a sign of distinction and recognition that was awarded to outstanding workers of *kolkhozes* and local organisations providing food, goods and services to BAM builders.

While some Evenki benefited from emerging exchange between *kolkhozes* and construction organisation, as well as from participation in the construction, others had to suffer negative environmental, social and cultural costs. The BAM infrastructure transformed traditional ways of life by changing land use practices and year-round nomadism into seasonal migrations. The railroad cut through and polluted pastures

and hunting grounds with noise, abandoned industrial waste and litter thrown out of passenger trains. BAM builders and other newcomers who flew into the region for the railroad construction encroached on Evenki lands. The illegal shooting of domestic reindeer and sale of meat, poaching and forest fires undermined reindeer herding and hunting (Fondahl 1998). The words of the head of an Evenki reindeer herding *obshchina* from the village Kholodnoe indicate that the loosely controlled trade with traditional products had negative effects on the livelihood of the nomadic Evenki population:

They [the authorities] transported sacks full of deer leg skins out [of the region], slaughtered reindeer, including does, and caused the herds to scatter ... The BAM has brought no good to reindeer herders, although one could have organised the slaughtering and selling of meat to builders. (AG, Kholodnoe, 2017)<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the Soviet state perceived nomadism as a 'backward' form of mobility that had to be administratively handled (Davydov 2017). While in many other parts of the Russian North agricultural reforms (for instance, the introduction of the shift method to reindeer herding<sup>5</sup>) happened earlier, it was the BAM project that boosted sedentarisation of nomads and turned Evenki herders into hunters in northern parts of East Siberia (Anderson 1991). In most parts of the region, this employment practice replaced family-based nomadism. In addition, the construction of stick-frame houses in the taiga, introduced as a measure of support to reindeer herders, reconfigured their nomadic patterns and enabled sedentarisation.

Currently, there are a few legally registered indigenous groups, as well as individual herders and hunters, who continue a nomadic way of life. Altogether though, nomads constitute only a small percentage of the total indigenous population in these areas. One of the main reasons for this is the alienation of lands and competition for resources. The pressing issue of land rights over traditional territories repeatedly comes to the fore when Evenki herders and hunters are pushed out of their lands.

The BAM construction changed mobility practices not only in the taiga, but also in indigenous villages. On-ground transportation with buses and private cars was boosted by the construction of roads and bridges that came along with the BAM. Many informants indicate that the BAM facilitated communication between relatives living in different indigenous villages. At the same time, such connectivity also had negative effects on the local population. For example, while the selling and consumption of alcohol in ethnic villages was most of the time strictly regulated, this went out of administrative control once the local communities along the BAM became more accessible to illegal traders.

With time, the railroad became deeply integrated into the everyday mobilities of indigenous villagers and town residents. Currently, the BAM serves the supply of local communities with goods and food, but only to a limited degree. The prices for container transport are too high for small and medium enterprises to easily afford them. In cases when products are delivered by railroad, they usually arrive from Moscow or from the big Siberian cities of Krasnoyarsk and Novosibirsk. Smaller freight is

<sup>4</sup> The interviews were initially conducted in Russian and translated by the author into English.

<sup>5</sup> The introduction of shift work in reindeer herding meant the creation of rotational male-dominated brigades who spent half of their time in the taiga and the other half in the village. The proliferation of this method in the Soviet *kolkhoz* economy has radically transformed indigenous subsistence activities, ways of life and gendered division of labour and mobility in the North.



informally delivered by train and handed by a train conductor to the addressee. Local residents use the train to transport agricultural products such as reindeer meat, fish and berries to their relatives and friends.

Thus, following the Soviet modernisation policies, the BAM ideologists and administrators treated indigenous peoples as 'a case of backwardness' (Slezkine 1994) to be handled through administrative measures and a 'cultural construction' policy (Grant 1995). While interaction with the migrants reconfigured indigenous identities (e.g. leading to the emergence of *deti BAMa*, explained in the subsection below), involvement of Evenki in the railroad construction and servicing also shaped new identities (e.g. that of a BAM builder or *bamovtsy*). At the same time, the aboriginal identity *aborigeny* persisted, especially among the people leading a nomadic way of life. Indigeneity was politically defined and articulated (Li 2000) on the wave of the indigenous rights movement and cultural self-determination (Pika and Grant 1999) that followed the end of the BAM construction and the dissolution of the USSR in the 1990s.

From the beginning of the BAM construction, Evenki people had to adapt to rapid demographic change and intensive cultural contact with migrants of different ethnic and social backgrounds. These interactions as well as participation in the BAM project have transformed indigenous people's identities: new mixed and multiple ethnic identities appeared, as well as the adoption of the Soviet identity of the 'BAM builder' in some cases. Today, the 'traditional way of life' based on a special connection to the land continues to play a decisive role in articulations of indigeneity *vis-à-vis* the BAM infrastructure and resource extraction projects in East Siberia.

While the BAM builders who arrived in big numbers at the railroad construction settled primarily in the towns and cities that they were building, they visited indigenous Evenki villages on different festive and other occasions. The interactions between *bamovtsy* and *aborigeny* could result in life-long friendships or mixed marriages. This is how an Evenki woman remembers encounters between indigenous villagers and *bamovtsy* during the construction period:

Well, earlier they [BAM builders] came to buy food; the youth did not have their own club, so they visited ours. It was young people who arrived. They, the pioneers who didn't leave, now have families and still live here. (GA, Ust'-Nyukzha, 2017)

The typical pattern of partnerships and marriages involved local indigenous women and single male BAM builders (*bamovtsy*). Such mixed marriages soon became a widespread phenomenon, especially in the villages lying in close proximity to the BAM, such as Pervomayskoe (Turaev 2004: 45). The new identity of the 'children of the BAM' (*deti BAMa*) emerged as a reference and a self-reference in relation to the children born and raised in mixed marriages. Most of these children are still officially registered as Evenki, which enables access under the Russian legislation on indigenous numerically small peoples to a number of benefits. Evenki often use the concept of *deti BAMa* in conversations about assimilation, language loss and identity shift. An Evenki school teacher and activist originally coming from the indigenous village Ust'-Nyukzha talked about the language loss and *deti BAMa* in the 1980s, in the context of the BAM project and the present cultural revitalisation movement, in the following way:

I once counted the number of metis children or half-Evenki. It was interesting to correlate this number with language loss. Because of mixed marriages, many settled in villages. Now their ethnicity has reawakened. Earlier they never used or wanted to learn their language. The current policy aimed at the preservation of Evenki people, rituals, etc. has raised their interest in their own life, the life of their people and in the language. (KA, Tynda, 2016)

A *bamovtsy* identity was also adopted by Evenki who in one way or another participated in the BAM project. Not only participation in the construction process, but also selling traditional products in *kolkhoz* shops or providing educational, cultural and other services to *bamovtsy* qualified as 'work at the BAM'. Successful Evenki employees who worked in these spheres could be awarded the 'medal for construction of the BAM'. This distinction, as well as cooperation and friendships with *bamovtsy*, prompted some Evenki to take on a *bamovtsy* identity as well. According to my observations, in the case of Evenki this is a situational identity that pops up in conversations about the BAM. While currently being an indigenous leader striving for the revitalisation of Evenki culture and traditional activities, my interlocutor Maria proudly refers to herself as *bamovka* (a female BAM builder):

Although I am *bamovka*, I was invited to work as a specialist on the issues of indigenous numerically small peoples at the administration. It was in 1990 to 1992. I used to fly over the reindeer herds on a helicopter since I had to register them all. (MG, Novaya Chara, 2016)

Participation in the BAM project gave Evenki BAM builders and *kolkhoz* administration workers a number of privileges, including access to new housing and BAM shops with their wide assortment of goods, as well as monetary rewards. This caused polarisation within Evenki communities.

The difference in social prestige and economic remuneration between the occupations of BAM builders and *kolkhoz* workers reinforced social tensions and a growing gap in living conditions between migrants and locals. An Evenki woman working as the head of the municipality in a BAM town critically assessed the divide that emerged between the two groups during the construction:

One can draw a line between the migrants who came and those who have been living here for a longer time. Living standards of the local population remain low – nothing has changed. And those [migrants] received cars and northern subsidies and managed to earn money and get apartments, while our lives have not changed ... The benefits [of the BAM] have mostly bypassed us. (SK, Chapo-Ologo, 2016)

## Memories, experiences and expectations

At the moment, the BAM is the main job provider sustaining local communities. As a transport infrastructure, it serves primarily the transportation of cargo and the extractive industries, as was foreseen back in the Soviet period. Although the social effects of the BAM are different from what they were in the construction period, it is

still filled with promises and discourses of development and economic prosperity for the region and its population.

The visions of today's role of the BAM and its modernisation programme seem to be shaped by the memories of the socialist project, and experiences of participation in or resistance to the construction of the railroad. While the state discourses glorifying the BAM predominate, underrepresented voices within the Evenki minority help to arrive at a more comprehensive picture (Assmann 2008) of the effects of the infrastructure on the indigenous population. The carriers of hidden transcripts and dissenting views about BAM are the less empowered groups within the indigenous population (Scott 1990) – herders and hunters who suffered losses due to the construction. The discourses and memories of Evenki communities along the BAM, similar to the Sami case referred to above (Allemann 2017), are thus divided by generation, as well as occupation, way of life and type of interaction with the BAM.

As such, Evenki who participated in the BAM construction and adopted the *bam-ovtsy* identity ‘domesticated’ the railroad in their memory discourses. They also tend to justify the environmental and other costs of the construction and have a positive assessment of the BAM. While talking about the role of the railroad, Evenki BAM-builder Maria distances herself from Evenki elders:

Of course, the machinery has damaged pastures, but they can still herd deer there. Of course, the railroad has cut across paths and sledge routes, but that is life. Thanks to it they have a railroad and can travel wherever they want, even to their pastures. It's convenient. Everybody is happy. Although the elders were especially unhappy about it, one can now see its benefits. (MG, Novaya Chara, 2016)

The younger Evenki generation also tend to see the BAM in a positive light. One of the reasons for that is the increasing number of indigenous residents employed by the railroad company. Attracted by its stability and the relatively high salaries offered by the RZhD railway company, Evenki youngsters from Chapo-Ologo, Ust'-Nyukzha and other villages work ‘on the rails’ as track workers, mechanics, train attendants or guards accompanying cargo trains. Some indigenous youth successfully combine employment on the railroad with subsistence activities, while others are challenged by the high demands and strict schedules and shortly switch to other jobs in the extractive industries, public organisations or *obshchinas*.

However, beyond these positive assessments of the railroad in the past and the present, there are a variety of critical indigenous voices and perspectives. Such voices come from those bearing the environmental and socio-economic costs of the railroad's construction and functioning. An interview with an Evenki activist and retired school teacher, who was born to a family of reindeer herders and who remembers the construction, reflects a critical opinion of the BAM project:

We don't see any good come from the railroad ... Earlier they said that they would pay us rent for our lands and pastures. But that was a deceit. The railroad traversed our villages and the lands where our parents kept deer and nomadised – it crossed them all. And now the railroad doesn't pay itself off. (KA, Tynda, 2016)

Currently, the BAM infrastructure disturbs traditional land use: herders cannot cross the railroad with reindeer (no special crossings have ever been constructed) and the litter thrown out of train windows attracts wolves that kill domestic deer. In conversations about infrastructure projects, including the BAM and extractive industries, the burning issue of indigenous rights to lands and fisheries pops up. In this context, the BAM is usually a starting point leading to discussions about the railroad's long-term, far-reaching and indirect impacts caused by resource extraction, logging, illegal hunting and tourism in the region. Unresolved land rights come to the fore when Evenki herders and hunters are pushed off their lands by non-local users or industrial companies or where these parties pollute the lands. However, the law defining the use of traditional lands remains the subject of immense political debate, especially regarding its implementation on the regional level. In this context, indigeneity as belonging to the legal category of 'indigenous numerically small peoples of the North' that entitles special land rights is contested locally in terms of cultural authenticity and ethnic purity, as far as the words of an Evenki *obshchina* leader from the Republic of Buryatiya go:

The government seems to ignore Evenkis who are involved in traditional activities. Why didn't they implement the law on [traditional] territories? K. [The Head of the Republic of Buryatiya] should have allocated traditional territories a long time ago to protect reindeer herders and hunters. And the Buryats instead of protecting real Evenkis only look at those who dance for tourists. If you ask for a list of *obshchinas*, you will see there are individuals who were recognised as Evenki by court decision! (AG, Kholodnoe, 2017)

While the railroad remains relevant for visiting family and friends and for the transportation of small cargos and agricultural products to other parts of the region, it does not play a central role in local passenger transport, especially for short- and medium-distance travel. It is mostly due to the state subsidy for long-distance train journeys, allocated once in two years to local residents working for public organisations, that passengers continue to use the BAM for getting to places of study or for a holiday in other parts of Russia. Otherwise, the inconvenient passenger train schedules and high ticket prices decrease the popularity of the railroad.

Many Evenki today have a rather reserved opinion on BAM-2, in contrast to *bam-ovtsy* who often hope that it will be the long-awaited completion of the Soviet construction plans. Moreover, indigenous leaders are concerned about the future of their communities. These concerns are rooted in uncertainty about the status of traditional lands, competition with newcomers over resources in the taiga and environmental degradation resulting from resource extraction facilitated by the BAM. In this context, some communities and individuals see remoteness from the railroad infrastructure and the state's development programmes as an advantage and a resource helping to sustain indigenous culture and identity (Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk 2019).

## Conclusion

The BAM has been an agent of major social change and a (post-)socialist infrastructure filled with the promises of Soviet modernity – social equality, economic prosperity, connectivity and mobility. Yet, the project accelerated and completed the sedentarisation

and cultural assimilation of indigenous nomadic people living in remote areas of East Siberia traversed by the railroad. In this article I illustrated diverse and often ambiguous entanglements with the railroad infrastructure that informed indigenous ways of life, memories and identities. This ambiguity is reflected in two contrasting citations from interviews with two Evenki female activists, who were both born into nomadic families but experienced the arrival and effects of the megaproject in different ways.

Maria, who was a Komsomol member inspired by communist ideas and participated together with her husband in the construction process, fondly remembers the socialist BAM:

We were real pioneers of the BAM! The only Evenki family that was integrated into a Belorussian construction team ... It was like living in paradise because 'everything was for the BAM', as Brezhnev declared, and we loved Brezhnev ... The BAM changed us, changed our worldview. Life was full of joy, we had opportunities to communicate with builders from different republics, we became more open. (MG, Novaya Chara, 2016)

This can be compared to the view of Klavdia, a teacher of the Evenki language who witnessed the assimilatory impacts of the BAM while living and working in her native village affected by the railroad:

When they were building the railroad, they promised to pay us rent for the lands that they used. But that was a deception. The railroad crossed our villages and the lands where our parents nomadised and herded their deer, but no one got anything from it ... It didn't fulfil expectations. Our parents were against the construction, but they also saw possibilities for us, their children ... And now I am not sure, I am personally disappointed because I hoped for a different future for my people. (KA, Tynda, 2016)

The two contrasting Evenki views quoted above mark a continuum of multiple perspectives, where pro-BAM opinions prevail, while anti-BAM voices that reveal 'hidden transcripts' (Scott 1990) of the BAM construction remain underrepresented or ignored. In general, there seems to be a correlation between how the railroad infrastructure affected a particular group of the indigenous population and how they remember the BAM. For example, indigenous BAM builders, members of the intelligentsia and *kolkhoz* workers who were involved in the construction process or in the exchange of goods and products with *bamovtsy* tend to reproduce the internalised glorifying master narrative of the BAM. On the other end of the spectrum are interlocutors who were leading a nomadic life in *kolkhozes*, which was massively disrupted by the railroad construction. Their alternative discourses reveal memories of veiled criticism of the megaproject. The generational divide also plays an important role in understanding perceptions of the BAM. The older generation of Evenki, who were mostly leading a nomadic life at the time of the railroad construction and were negatively affected by the megaproject, see the BAM in a more critical light than the middle and the younger generations who could enjoy some of its benefits.

These varying and often ambiguous entanglements with and memories of the BAM shaped corresponding indigenous identities. Different types and degrees of involvement with the BAM depending on the occupation (from BAM builder to reindeer herder) and the way of life (from sedentary to nomadic) (re)configured indigenous

identities. While Evenki participating in the construction process or providing services for the BAM assumed a *bamovtsy* identity (as did Maria cited above), those who (like Klavdia) were criticising and resisting the negative effects of BAM have retained and rearticulated their 'aboriginal' identity *aborigeny*. Beyond these two opposing identities, the new mixed identity of 'children of BAM' *deti BAMa* that emerged in the process of interactions between migrant and indigenous populations has been spreading. Present official discourses drawing on idealised memories of the socialist BAM and surrounding the BAM-2 may find support among those members of Evenki communities who experience or experienced some positive effects of the railroad (employment, mobility and connectivity). At the same time, those Evenki who had to bear the environmental and social costs of the project are struggling to articulate indigeneity and associated legal rights to land and culture, or at least to publicly voice their environmental and social concerns *vis-à-vis* the reconstruction programme BAM-2 as a conduit of the sweeping modernisation and resource extraction.

Overall, I showed that Evenki memories of and attitudes to the BAM stretch from support and acceptance of the infrastructure project to critical voices against its construction. While many indigenous interlocutors who participated in the construction and/or internalised the master narrative recognise the BAM as an achievement of Soviet development and industrialisation, the 'hidden transcripts' of the BAM include silenced memories of environmental degradation and the transformation of traditional activities, mobility, ways of life and cultural assimilation. Parallel to the memories of the socialist BAM, indigenous identities are being (re)shaped, (re)constructed and (re)articulated. Attention to critical indigenous voices and to the articulation of indigenous identities *vis-à-vis* the BAM helps to reconstruct a more comprehensive history of this large-scale infrastructure project. Finally, this case study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of past, present and potential future effects of transport infrastructures on indigenous communities. This includes attention to competing forms of mobility (nomadism, locomobility and, more recently, automobility) in the broader context of interactions between humans, infrastructures and environments in the Anthropocene.

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## Enchevêtrements ambigus: infrastructure, mémoire et identité dans les communautés indigènes Evenki le long de la ligne principale Baïkal–Amour

Le projet de ligne principale Baïkal–Amour (BAM) a été l'incarnation de la modernisation (post-) soviétique avec ses promesses de prospérité économique, de mobilité et de connectivité. Il a stimulé le développement régional et introduit de nouvelles formes de mobilité, mais a également accéléré la sédentarisation, l'assimilation et la polarisation sociale des Evenki, un peuple indigène qui vivait dans la région bien avant l'arrivée du mégaprojet. Les enchevêtrements complexes et souvent ambigus des Evenki avec l'infrastructure du BAM – de la participation à la construction à l'échange de biens en passant par la perte de rennes et de terres – ont façonné les modes de vie, les souvenirs et les identités des autochtones. Le récit principal du BAM semble avoir été intériorisé par de nombreux Evenki et avoir étouffé les voix critiques et les identités indigènes. Dans cet article, j'attire l'attention sur les « transcriptions cachées », donnant ainsi la parole aux souvenirs et aux points de vue sous-représentés sur le BAM au sein des communautés Evenki. En m'appuyant sur des matériaux ethnographiques et des entretiens avec des leaders indigènes, des éleveurs de rennes et des résidents de villages, qui ont vécu l'arrivée du BAM et ont été mêlés au chemin de fer de diverses manières, je cherche à contribuer à une histoire critique et complète du BAM et à explorer la construction et l'articulation des identités indigènes *vis-à-vis* des projets d'infrastructure et de développement à grande échelle.

**Mots-clés** infrastructure, indigénat, identité evenki, Sibérie