

ROADS AND ROADLESSNESS: DRIVING TRUCKS IN SIBERIA

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ABSTRACT

This article relates to the studies of roads and engages with the experience of driving in Sakha (Yakutia), Siberia. The article intends to contribute to the broad corpus of literature on mobility and argues that an alternative perspective on roads and road-users from a geographical area beyond the West might better inform and add another dimension to our understanding of roads and movement along them. The article examines the fluid nature of roads in Siberia and the social significance the roads carry by focusing on truck drivers and their perception of and engagement with the so-called winter roads through their sensory experiences. The article analyses narratives of the truckers who frame their experiences of the road with close reference to time and money and where notions of agency of the road become prominent.

KEYWORDS: roads • roadlessness • truckers • winter roads • Siberia

INTRODUCTION

At the 2011 World Routes workshop in Tartu the discussion of mobility in the North occupied a central place as the participants, among them many with fieldwork experience in the northern regions of Russia, agreed that knowledge about roads and traveling in this part of the world makes an important and valuable contribution to the study of mobility and movement. The process of de-centring the West in the studies of roads and mobility has already been initiated by anthropologists (Aporta 2004; Harvey 2005; High 2009) and this article, initially delivered as a paper at the workshop, engages with the experience of driving in Siberia and contributes to the growing research on roads in the geographical area beyond the West.

With this article I wish to contribute to the broad corpus of literature that shapes our knowledge of mobility and argue that a perspective from other parts of the world might better inform the way we understand movement and shed new light on our understanding of roads in general; I hope to add another dimension to the concept of mobility that currently dominates academic literature on the subject. Such comparisons and additional perspectives will help us to understand our own engagement with roads and other road users, especially through an examination of the fluid and flowing nature of roads and a demonstration of the social connection that they imply.

When I was growing up in Sakha (Yakutia) I often experienced roads with their treacherous conditions and potholes. Every spring melt and every autumn rainfall

would turn the countryside road into an impassable mess and every trip into an epic journey that would entail many colourful descriptions from our family relatives who dared to travel in such conditions to Yakutsk. Even in the city of Yakutsk the tarmac roads were prone to get into disrepair very quickly due to permafrost (and dire road building technology), which would make the surface of the road flex together with the thawing permafrost and break and tear in places.

Much later, in my fieldwork in the last seven years in the region I worked closely with three groups of drivers: private owners of passenger cars, long-distance taxi drivers and long-distance truck drivers. During my intermittent fieldwork periods I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with them. This paper specifically focuses on the experience of long-distance truckers who traverse large distances to get to settlements in remote locations in the North of Sakha along the so-called winter roads (Rus. *zimniki*).

Embarking on this research I had worries about communication issues and the gender aspects of the research, specifically because there are no women among truckers in Sakha, and the only two females on the *zimniki* of whom I was aware were the spouses of truck drivers. This situation might change in time, as the number of female car drivers, some of whom are professional taxi and bus drivers, is growing rapidly, so there is hope that a Siberian Lisa Kelly¹ will eventually leave the prints of her truck on the snow covered expanse.

As a person unfamiliar with the trucking profession and a non-male, I had an excuse to ask finicky if not naïve questions. It proved easy to work with the truckers, most of whom were enthusiastic about sharing their driving experience with me and ready to engage in long unhurried conversations over cups of strong tea and instant Nescafe. When I mentioned my initial reservations over communication with the truckers, influenced by stereotypes of professional drivers (cf. Bolton 1979; Alvarez, Collier 1994), one trucker commented: "There are no shy people among the truckers. It's a disaster if you are shy. You need to find a common footing [Rus. *nakhodit obshchiiy yazyk*] with people and be ready to communicate."

With this acknowledgement of fruitful cooperation, contributions from the truck drivers and my appreciation for their assistance, I begin my account.

TRUCK DRIVING IN SIBERIA

The Soviet automobile industry took off in the 1920s. From that time it was heavily subsidised by the government for an extended period and was centred on industrial and military vehicles. Truck production in the USSR was ever increasing due to many outside economic restrictions during the Cold War. The automobile industry in the Soviet Union had to become reliant on the domestic production of vehicles; the KamAZ model of trucks mentioned in this paper was designed and produced during this period.

The first KamAZ truck that left the conveyor of the Kama Automobile Plant (Rus. *Kamskiy Avtomobilnyi Zavod*) on 16 February 1976 represented a major achievement of the domestic automobile industry (KamAZ). Ivan Ivanovich, a trucker with extensive driving experience, described his first experience of driving a KamAZ truck:

I am the first Sakha who ever drove a KamAZ truck. The drivers in our company moved to KamAZ trucks when they first appeared in Yakutia [in the late 1970s] from old and chunky ZILs.² We were very proud; it felt like being kings of the road. Naturally, we got into engines ourselves. The cold does not ask, right? So we had to do repairs ourselves. We have insulated the truck, insulated the cabin. We have altered the cabins ourselves. They still do exactly the same cabin, thirty years on, their cabin is the same. (Fieldnotes 2009)

Despite the apparent disadvantages of this model Ivan Ivanovich still remains loyal and favours the KamAZ model over many other trucks, including foreign trucks, for the reasons that will be explained later in this article.

The truck drivers are often referred to as *dalnoboishchik*. This designation comes from the phrase meaning 'long-distance range' and is now applied to any long-distance driver who either owns or uses his company's truck to carry cargo to remote places. The truckers I interviewed were men residing in the city of Yakutsk, people with experience, seasoned drivers who had previously worked as drivers for large state companies like *YakutAvtoDor* (Yakut Automobile Roads) and *AlmazDorTrans* (Diamond Roads and Transportation). Like many state companies operating in a centralised Soviet regime, they provided their employees with a wide range of services including insurance and health checks, motels for drivers, canteens and technical assistance points. These services no longer exist and in the current climate drivers have to procure all eventualities themselves. "You can rely only on yourself these days", truckers confirm.

In the past nobody ever dreamt of owning a truck, but the introduction of privatisation laws and the opening of the country from the late 1990s following major political and economic transformations have dramatically changed the automobile culture in Russia. Many *dalnoboishchiki* are now independent and own one or several vehicles. They prefer working on private contracts, with some truckers operating only in the winter months, roaming along winter and ice roads far and wide. I will dwell on the notion of winter roads, but first of all I need to clarify what we understand by roads themselves.

ROADS

The broad corpus of literature on mobility has so far been dominated by research conducted by sociologists and human geographers, most notably by John Urry (2000; 2007), Tim Cresswell (2006), and Peter Merriman (2007). Gradually growing anthropological literature has helped to expand this expertise to various geographical locations, thus enriching the existing knowledge and adding a comparative element to the studies of roads and movement along them.

What are the roads in the first place? How are they different from trails or tracks? This question has interested many, as a number of works that raise this issue reveal (Earle 1991; Trombold 1991; Wilson 2004). This definition is important, as after all we need to know what phenomenon we are dealing with. "Clearly, a distinction needs to be drawn between tracks and trails on the one hand, and roads that allow more rapid transit whether of armies on the march or wheeled and motor vehicles on the other" (Wilson 2004: 526).

In his earlier work Charles D. Trombold (1991: 3) proposed a definition of formal and informal routes. According to him, roads belong to formal routes as they need to be planned and maintained, whereas informal routes require minimal or no labour application and can fluctuate. Fiona Wilson (2004: 526) states that roads require engineering and high levels of investment and organisation.

Although these definitions are appropriate, they imply a certain degree of prescription and fixity, as most definitions tend to. Indeed, what I want to demonstrate in this article is that some roads are fluid and fluctuate all the time and this aspect needs to be integrated into a definition that requires a less predetermined understanding of what roads and driving along them might imply.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the definition of roads based on their technical characteristics, such as type of surfacing, width, quality, etc. might not be appropriate in some situations and therefore would not fully describe the phenomenon. Technical characteristics are all important as they affect our travel, but I argue that a definition based on the social significance and importance of the roads is more accurate and accommodating (Argounova-Low 2012). This definition does not prejudice other non-Western societies that might not have the same level of economic progress and it avoids the evolutionary approach built in the distinction into formal and informal routes. In Yessei, a small indigenous community in Krasnoyarsk Krai, Siberia, the hierarchy of roads is understood in connection with the economic or social significance that a particular road carries. For example, a road to a pasture will be less important than a road to a market that presents multiple economic opportunities. Despite the fact that both are not hard-surfaced, one of them will be more important than the other and one therefore will be designated as a big road (Sakha *aian suola*), whereas the other may be referred to simply as a path (Sakha *ylylyk*). Thus, the notion of a road is based on the role it plays within a community.

Such a seemingly blurred distinction between roads and non-roads does not mean that wherever a truck driver in Siberia has to go on an errand will constitute a road. Truckers, as people with great experience of moving both on all-year (Rus. *trassa*) and winter roads (*zimniki*), operate within clear categories; more than anybody they are concerned with road surfacing and road categories. The Building Norms and Rules (SNiP 1997), a corpus of normative acts used by administrative authorities and agencies, distinguishes five basic categories of roads in Russia.³ However, truckers, informally and between themselves, distinguish three main categories of roads: 1) hard surface roads; 2) gravel roads; and 3) roads with no artificial surfacing. (Photo 1)

Automobile winter roads will be included in category 3 as they are used only during cold periods, are not traversable in summer, and are carved out of snow and ice with the help of graders and tractors. Ice roads or winter river crossings also belong to category 3 and are built by spraying water on to the frozen river to make an even surface for passing vehicles.

Truckers repeat the same phrase over and over again: “there are no roads in the North, only directions” (Rus. *na severe net dorog, odni napravleniya*) (cf. Siegelbaum 2008a: 136). We can quickly agree with the truckers, as by this statement they describe their driving conditions in the North as obviously rough, demanding and indeed dangerous. Nevertheless, as I have discovered, this statement goes a bit further than it offers on the surface, as I will demonstrate in this article.



Photo 1. KamAZ truck on a winter road. Hand-made signpost indicates directions to Zyrianka and Khonu. Photo by Yuri Bylkov.

To find out more about directions and roads I interviewed truckers who use winter roads to reach remote northern communities. Unlike *trassa*, which offers the opportunity for movement all year round (the road from Yakutsk to Magadan, for example), *zimniki* or winter roads exist only for a certain period from December to April. Remote areas still depend on deliveries by trucks as air transportation is expensive and deliveries by water are restricted to a short summer season. Some remote settlements critically depend on truck deliveries; up to 90 per cent of goods are brought in by the trucks within few winter months.

When the season opens in winter, the administration in remote villages provides labour and equipment, usually tractors and snow ploughs, to 'give direction' (Rus. *davat napravleniye*). "Drivers from Kolyma give us direction. We then beat the road." (Field-notes 2009) Beating the road implies making a heavy and deep imprint in the snow. The driver who leads the process of beating the road is usually one with experience driving on this route and one who has the heaviest truck to make a durable imprint on the snow. The tyres of his truck are slightly deflated to make a wider impression for the trucks that follow. Thus, a road is built by slow movement of a vehicle on the snow and ice, gradually transforming directions into roads. The road emerges from under the tyres of a heavily loaded vehicle that presses the snow hard to leave an imprint on the surface. It follows that truckers always deal with directions and work on marking and building roads all the time. The road is then the result of physical contact and the presence of a trucker and his truck.

However, even after a convoy of trucks has used this road, the road remains very fluid due to severe weather conditions, as Arkadiy states:

A winter road is never the same, it is never exactly the same and even in one season it will change. Say, there were blizzards overnight and then you have a different road. Or for instance, some mining guys [Rus. *promyshlenniki*] spilled their chemicals on the road, I have to go along a different route, this spilled water will not freeze. It's a different road again. (Fieldnotes 2009)

Blowing winds and blizzards can easily wipe the tracks off the surface leaving only the directions that need to be transformed and built into roads again.

Because roads digress and transform into directions all the time in the North, the nature of roads in Siberia is fluid. Winter roads, carved out of snow and ice, are not fixed into the land; they are not a permanent feature on the landscape in Siberia, but appear and disappear all the time. Moreover, these roads are constantly created and re-created, materialised and come into existence through human and vehicle imprints on the surface and through movement of goods along the road. The road emerges from the snow-covered surface through a trucker's movement and his physical contact with the surface and the social relations that these roads reify.

ROADLESSNESS

This in turn leads us to another concept for consideration. Roadlessness (Rus. *bez-dorozhye*) is a familiar concept for people in Russia, and in Siberia in particular. People often refer to roads affected by rainwater or the spring melt as a state of roadlessness; the overall paucity of roads is often also described as roadlessness (Siegelbaum 2008b).

Weather often plays a role in the durability of tracks and the existence of roads, since blowing winds and blizzards can bury tracks, as has been stated, so next time the tracks have to be laid anew. Again, an obstacle might appear, for example water seeping from under the ice, and the next truck driver would need to divert and lay an alternative route. So the statement 'no roads, only directions' does not deny the existence of the roads altogether, neither does it diminish the roads' importance or significance. By this statement the truckers emphasise that roads lack permanence, and the fact that the roads are always in the making.

Technical enquiry into the notion of 'beating the road' helps to extend this awareness to recognition that roads and roadlessness are two conditions that always interchange. Roadlessness thus presents the inability to travel; it is the lack of the physical possibility or opportunity to pass and progress on the route. Thus, roadlessness is lack of movement. If a road promotes communication and establishes live links, roadlessness implies the lack of such connection and communication. It can be argued then that roadlessness is a lack of opportunities or reduced opportunities to physically pass, to establish contact, to get in touch, or to reach the desired target. This reading of roadlessness steps out from a circumscribed geographical zone, it stops being a specific Siberian phenomenon and becomes easily applicable anywhere else, whether in the Arctic tundra or African desert.

Roadlessness is a fluid notion as well, because what is roadlessness for some is not a state of roadlessness for others. "When tundra travel is considered from a reindeer-draft

vantage point, the issue of roadlessness does not exist" (Konstantinov 2009: 35). Similarly, what is roadlessness for one kind of vehicle does not present the same state for others. This particular statement can be exemplified by the preference of many people in the city of Yakutsk to have a four-wheel drive passenger car that can cope with poor quality roads exceptionally well. The Toyota Land Cruiser, due to the proximity of the Japanese second-hand car market and availability of this model in the eastern part of Russia, is currently at the top of the list of desired vehicles among car users in Yakutsk. Indeed, the concentration of this particular model in Yakutsk is such that the Toyota Land Cruiser is jokingly referred to in Russian as *yakutskiy narodnyi avtomobil* (the Yakut national car) making it similar to Volkswagen in its popularity (Fieldnotes 2009).

Roadlessness is often a brief state overcome by the efforts of the driver and his helpers to lay or build a road. On many occasions, especially travelling in rural areas, truck drivers, as well as private car drivers, have had to improvise on the spot by chopping down trees, putting stones in potholes, matting a road washed away by rain or otherwise ruined with available debris and sand to reach a passable state. The drivers would normally carry all necessary tools for such occasions; a spade, an axe and a good knife are kept in the car boot or the cabin. Some drivers carry a sack of grit and gravel to assist them in climbing slippery slopes on the roads. The state of roadlessness is often fixed and overcome; even if in the end it is not completely overcome, an attempt is almost always made.

Thus roadlessness is not a fixed state but a fluctuating one that can shift between the impossibility to progress along the route and a sought-for possibility for movement, between the halting or arresting of movement on one hand and the efforts made towards building a road on the other.

SENSORY PERCEPTION OF ROADS

The fact that the roads often fluctuate, especially depending on weather conditions, implies that the drivers are open-minded about the state of the road; they expect obstacles and are prepared to overcome roadlessness. It is still important, if not intriguing, to find out what, in the absence of year-round roads (*trassa*), constitutes a good road for long-distance drivers in Siberia. How do the drivers describe their experience of driving on a good road? Arkadiy explains:

We have our own criteria about the quality of roads. First of all, we will ask whether it is possible to drive at all. Secondly, whether it is possible to pass with a trailer. Or if a driver says that he drove at a certain speed and did not change gears for a certain distance, that certainly means a very good road then. (Fieldnotes 2009)

In brief, many drivers referred to a good quality of road as the ability to maintain the same speed for distance of a few kilometres. Some drivers refer to a good road as one where you rarely have to change gears. In other words, for the drivers, a road that does not cause many adjustments and alterations to the mode of driving (driving in the same gear, at the same speed) would constitute good, unproblematic driving and therefore, a good road. If, however, the road requires frequent changing of driving modes, switching gears back and forth or altering speed, this road requires careful attention and concentration and will probably be referred to as a bad road.

This is very different from the experience in the West where driving is sometimes perceived as an almost mechanical, autopilot type of activity. For example, a learner is prompted by a driving instructor to achieve an automatic reaction when changing gear to adjust to the speed, almost without thinking. A good road, one without any hindrances, tends to allow people to engage in various side activities (for example, see Laurier 2004). However, when the road is less predictable, then the driver's attention is focused on the road and much depends on his ability to predict the quality of the next stretch. In such conditions, drivers are required to engage the full range of their senses, which are otherwise at the periphery of their perception (Classen 1993: 58; Ingold 2000: 243–287). Driving in such conditions requires the driver's sensory perception to be actively engaged in order to read the road ahead.

It is apparent that sight is the most important sense of perception and visual engagement is central to navigating along the road. In a situation where the quality of road fluctuates, a driver stays alert to the possible changes in the state of the road. He uses his vision to be aware of possible obstacles, like water seeping from under the ice, visible cracks and potholes. Furthermore, many drivers rely on an elaborate way of visually signalling to each other to communicate. This might include the use of indicators, flashing with headlights, and silent gesturing. In narrow places a truck driver leading a convoy usually silently gestures with his fingers to an oncoming vehicle to indicate the number of cars that follow. That gives an opportunity for the waiting vehicle to avoid an awkward squeeze or a clash while traversing narrow passages.

According to Ivan Ivanovich, the driver is watchful of signs and prints left by preceding drivers and trucks.

Drivers inform each other by leaving reflectors, spare parts. This is a sign for other truckers. That means that there is something not right about this part of the road. One needs to drive with care. There is a catch somewhere there. (Fieldnotes 2009)

It is not only the immediate visual appreciation and evaluation of the quality of road that plays an important role. Oskar Juhlin (2011) and Fiona Magowan (2011), among other scholars, have commented on the significance of other senses when driving. For example, listening is another sense essential for truckers. Drivers' communication on the road revolves mainly around the condition of the road and the route, other road users, and weather conditions. Many drivers now rely on long-distance radios installed in their vehicles and therefore much of this information can be passed verbally over the radio. Still, many truckers commented on the importance of live communication with others on the road.

Trucks on this road are rare. If you see one, of course, you would stop to have a chat. He tells you what lies ahead. That's very important. You tell him, to warn him about something you have experienced. And then you drive off encouraged [Rus. *smelo*] with your eyes wide open. (Fieldnotes 2010)

So, vision might not provide the full information necessary for the trucker, but combined with information received orally through live communication, the trucker feels that his eyes can see better.

However, listening to the truck engine is just as important as listening to other truckers. Igor responded with indignation to my naïve question regarding his preference

of radio stations and types of music he enjoys: "I listen to the engine", he replied and explained that even a minute change in the humming noise of the engine might signal its oncoming failure and can make him aware of a potential problem. Yet, for some, listening to a great selection of driver's chansons, a particular genre of music revolving around the romantic yet heroic notion of driving and drivers on the road, makes an extended and lonely journey more pleasant.

However, the road is as much felt as it is seen and heard. The whole body of the trucker is engaged in the appreciation of the quality of the road; his back, legs and arms are moving all the time and working hard. But most of all, a driver's backside is engaged in driving. "A driver's buttocks are the best indicator of the quality of the road. We watch and listen but we also feel the road with our backside", one informant reports.

The combination of the driver's various senses helps him in his ability to predict the weather. At some places the Magadan highway goes over mountain ridges where getting over the pass in a timely fashion and in good weather is crucial. A blizzard might last for days and could completely cover the road, which would then require 'beating' again, and might seriously delay movement. For truckers, weather is a crucial factor and feeling, knowing and predicting changes in the weather are important skills to possess. This is how Igor describes it:

And you feel the weather changing, you smell it in the air, and then you race and race for very long time. You push yourself and you push just to make it in time to get over the mountain pass. (Fieldnotes 2009)

The physical condition of the driver and his state of mind are crucial for steady progression along the road. 'A tired driver is a bad driver'; many informants commented on the importance of having a rest at the right time. A healthy routine (Rus. *zdorovyi rezhim*) is at the core of their work, truckers note, and compare their activity with any other regular job where rests at the right intervals are essential. A healthy working regime entails eight or ten hours of continuous driving, but truckers are sometimes presented with situations when this regime has to be abandoned.

When you push too hard and drive like mad without your usual regime for a few days, you get exhausted and start hallucinating. Naked women suddenly start running in front of the car, a heap of sand grows out of the road in front of you, or white sheets on a washing line stretch across the road. You then break and it all disappears suddenly. And then you know that you must have a sleep. (Ibid.)

Roads in the North call for coordination of sensory perception, contrary to the assumption that driving constitutes an autopilot activity and heavily relies on sight. Due to this engagement with roads that are less predictable and require attention, often one hears how truckers 'respect' such roads.

AGENCY OF THE ROAD AND RESPECTFUL TRUCKERS

Roads in the stories of the truckers live their own lives. Every journey north depends on the road, as bad and difficult roads can turn everything upside down: the vehicle halts,

tyres explode and a slippery road can send the vehicle off into a ditch or a ravine. Roads have their own temper and will.

The road to Magadan [*trassa*] is easy, you just drive and drive. Not interesting. But the road to Chukotka – that’s a different story – it has all types of obstacles: slopes, mountain passes, serpentine roads, hillsides, narrow passes, sand, dry stones, taiga, and tussocks. You name it, it has it all. You respect a road like this. One has to be very skilful on difficult roads. There are situations when you only concentrate on manoeuvring. No fear. That comes afterwards. Once you get through, only then your knees start shaking. In such situations one has to be very careful, because of the others in the convoy following you. One cannot let the whole convoy stand because of your mistake. Yes, it is difficult sometimes, that’s why I have plenty of grey hair. [Ivan Ivanovich laughs, stroking his hair.] (Fieldnotes 2011)

Roads like these demand the full attention and concentration of the driver and have power over him. They command certain rules and prescribe the application of skill, knowledge and expertise. A difficult road calls for stamina; it calls for endurance.

To ensure that the journey along a difficult road is uneventful and free of accidents, truckers stick to certain moral norms and fulfil rituals. A trucker stops at certain places along the road to make an offering; this is usually whatever is in his pockets, such as cigarettes, small change and sweets. Superstition does not allow anyone to pick up objects found on the road. The truckers operate with their own system of omens (Rus. *primeta*): picking up keys might cause the truck to break; picking up a bucket found on the road would lead to a leaking radiator. Certain norms of moral behaviour, such as “we do not scatter litter and we do not spill fuel” are often explained by the phrase “the road is not forgiving”.

A female blogger travelling with her *dalnoboishchik* husband wrote in an Internet forum:

We forget that our communication [with nature] echoes back, it comes back to us. Once we drove along the road and some trucker in front of us was shooting crows and road signs. On the road we could see dead birds here and there. Other truckers at a *piket*⁴ were furious: “He will not get to the destination, remember my word.” Next day the gunman’s KamAZ was lying across the road. (S[ysoyeva] 2010)

In such environments of uncertainty, with little control over the circumstances and a high eventuality of accidents, the truckers’ moral values and beliefs help them cope with the anxieties associated with their dangerous job. In the trucking job, relations with other truckers come to the fore and involve respect for other road users, a shared camaraderie in acknowledgment of these difficulties and heavy reliance on others in precarious situations:

We were suddenly overtaken by three vehicles. Good to know that we are not on our own. We moved ahead slowly. In 40 kilometres we hit the *naled*,⁵ where the road completely disappeared under the ice. A trucker was waiting for us, cursing: “Where have you been? I have been waiting for you for three hours. Follow me, if you fall through the ice, there is nobody to take you out”. He led us through the frozen river, sounded his horn and disappeared into the distance. Who were we

to him? Absolute strangers, just passers-by. We still recall him warmly. Let everything be good in his life. (Ibid.)

However, for many drivers being independent and self-sufficient on the road is equally important and constitutes certain rules. Seasoned drivers often criticise young truckers for their lack of knowledge of moral behaviour and their reliance on other truckers. They reproach the youngsters for being ill prepared for a trip and underestimating the severity of the journey. "And he is standing on the road in his light jacket, trainers, begging for help. What an idiot! Of course I will help, I have to. But why should I look after him, wasting my time, my money?" (Fieldnotes 2010). The same ideas of independence among other road users circulated when discussing the issue of taking passengers on board. People from remote northern communities usually travel to Yakutsk by plane, despite the expense and irregularity of flights. Only an occasional passenger gets a ride with a trucker. Truckers, I was told, do not like passengers, not even for a good fare:

So much hassle with them, you know. Stop here, stop there. I always tell my colleagues not to take any passengers. When you take them you are responsible for them. They drink, they fall, they break legs. And I am responsible for their injuries. And, you know, for some reason passengers never have a mug, a spoon or food with them. Give them this, give them that. Why should I share my spoon and mug with him? What if he has TB or dysentery? Can you imagine a trucker with an upset stomach? What a nightmare. No, thank you, I'd better be on my own. (Ibid.)

Help on the roads is unequivocally available in critical situations, but the truckers' motto is independence, which implies not only one's independent travelling along the road but also respect for other truckers' independence. Truckers have an acute sense of the road being a collective environment shared by many, so one's driving should have no effect on other road users. There is also a clear understanding and acknowledgement of the fact that although roads are collective entities, they are about individual time and individual money.

TIME, MONEY AND TINKERING

Truckers talk about money and time a lot. Their conversations often revolve around their contractual pay for deliveries, cost of loads, unpaid contracts, debts, losses, fines, the cost of emergency repair works and cost of petrol and spare parts. "In a highly monetarized economy, money penetrates and participates in almost every economic exchange" (Carruthers, Espeland 1998: 1387). Similarly, talking about time is also a highly topical theme for truckers.

Research done by anthropologists on roads indicates the presence or lack of state power and its financial ability to carry out such large projects. Holly High (2009) in her study of roads in Laos demonstrates how roads are related to access to funds. Penelope Harvey (2005) in her research concludes that the quality of roads in Peru is indicative of state presence, as the construction of roads according to contemporary standards is impossible without large financial investment. Money and goods travel along the roads (Ventsel 2011), so roads are inextricably related to money; in fact, they are about money.

Scholars who write about money often mark its fluid nature (Zelizer 1998; Ho 2005; Rogers 2005). Money circulates and flows, which is its “universal potential” (Carruthers, Espeland 1998: 1389). Truckers often talk about handling money from the employers, and they refer to payments they make to servicemen and salespersons. Money in their stories is always shifting, changing hands and turning from cash into an asset or a product. Money always moves back and forth, fluctuates, is earned, spent and lost. The truckers, like many of us, talk about money because “modern money [...] provides a universal yardstick against which to measure and evaluate the universe of objects, relations, services, and persons” (Maurer 2006: 16).

Occasionally the truckers oppose the realm of money to the realm of moral and ethical norms. This tends to happen specifically when they comment on situations where others are not willing to help: “In the North truckers always help each other, not like down here where everyone thinks only about money.” Although romantic appeal in a trucker’s job is certainly present, cash remains the most prominent aspect of their activity (cf. Osella, Osella 2000: 120). Cash remains the most important, if not the sole reason, for truckers to do their job. Truckers sell their labour of delivering the cargo to the destination within a certain time limit. The truckers’ business is thus a highly monetised economic activity: loads and journeys are measured and expressed in roubles, the prices are announced in roubles per kilometre of the road, and the distances and working hours are converted into roubles. “The tariff I will charge depends on these factors: distance, fuel consumption, how much extra fuel I need to carry with me,⁶ and the amount of food I need” (Fieldnotes 2011). The truckers are accustomed to deal and express the notions related to their job in roubles and, to my mind, this aspect adds to a false image of the trucker who is laden with money, one who always has cash in his pockets. There are certainly such characters and in my field I have come across some who could easily part with their hard-earned money by gambling, drinking or spending it on girls (cf. Hammer 2002: 103-109; S[ysoyeva] 2010). However, in reality, the relationship that the trucker has with money is not that straightforward.

Most truckers who work independently earn their living in these short few months of active trucking. Moreover, although the sums of money they receive for their job are comparatively large, they need to make this money stretch for the rest of the year. Many truckers complain that much of the earned money is spent on petrol, repairs and spare parts. Up to 40 per cent of their income covers expenses necessary for the trucking job (Fieldnotes 2011). My informants report that their wives complain that despite all the driving, they do not see the money, thus stressing the volatility and insecurity of money and that having cash in their pockets depends on many other factors.

Ideally, the trucker exchanges his load of delivered goods for money, and the sooner it happens the better. Indeed, many truckers expect cash to be paid instantly upon delivery. However, truckers often live in an uncertain world of money payments. The contracts are occasionally not fulfilled and the truckers “get dumped” (Rus. *kinuli*). Stories like that often circulate on the Internet forums where the truckers share their stories (cf. Forum). When the promised payment is not received and the exchange of goods for money does not take place, the flow of money breaks. The load is delivered, the trucker is presented with some feeble story and after some shouting and swearing he leaves the site without money. In the future his choice of clientele will always depend on the trustworthiness of the client; private companies and large state companies and indus-

tries will be preferred as contractors, not for higher pay but for the security of payment. The contract with such a company guarantees that money will flow along the road. In the case of damaged, spoilt or stolen goods, all responsibility remains with the driver. A number of truckers experienced debts due to theft or damage of goods in an accident (ibid.). Expensive cargos are rarely insured, such practices are still uncommon among independent truckers in Siberia. Debt is something that truckers are afraid of most of all, because “debt is personal and cannot be shifted to others” (Carruthers, Espeland 1998: 1395).

However, the main expense in a trucker’s job is maintenance of the vehicle. All summer and autumn drivers prepare the vehicle for the work in winter. Partly following the tradition from Soviet times when repair and service shops were almost non-existent, and partly to reduce the costs on repairs, the drivers continue to maintain the vehicles themselves. The dialogue between my informants highlights the issue of costs associated with repair.

Ivan Ivanovich: This year the government awarded me the title of Honorary Driver of the Sakha Republic. I have a badge but have not worn it yet.

Sasha: You wish they paid you in KamAZ spare parts instead!

Ivan Ivanovich: Or half-price petrol [both laugh]. But seriously, so many expenses with repairing the truck! This season I had two burst tyres. Each tyre costs 17 thousand roubles. Fixing a KamAZ-*vezdekhod* [all terrain] costs 60 thousand. See, that’s why I am not going to the Canary Islands this summer. [We all join him laughing at his joke.] (Fieldnotes 2011)

However, even with new cars some element of tinkering is necessary (Franz 2005). Tinkering involves the adjustment of the vehicle to the driver’s personal desires and needs. New cars are not manufactured for specific conditions, so the truckers in Siberia first of all insulate the car to make it more comfortable for long journeys in winter:

There are many people coming here from abroad for a drive and experiences of *ekstrim* [extreme conditions]. Last winter a group of Polish drivers passed through on their route from Lisbon to Chukotka. They were dressed very lightly... in January [chuckles]. I tell them: “Why are you dressed like that?” They say: “We thought...” They thought [he laughs and speaks with slight disdain, shaking his head]. We dressed their cars, insulated insides, installed double glazed windows and wrapped the cabin in *voilok* [felt]. It became so warm in the cabin, one could almost travel in a shirt. (Fieldnotes 2011)

Tinkering is an important activity and the ability to diagnose and fix a problem is a skill that all *dalnoboishchiki* truckers possess. Some truckers are able to build cars from scrap; by salvaging spare parts and putting them together they obtain a truck for a fraction of the price of a new one. Igor’s yard is full of the remains of cars, with cabins and tyres spilling beyond his territory on to the driveway and suburban road passing his house. In his heated garage adjoining the house he builds and repairs trucks all year round. The beyond-repair cabins are decorating the top of his workshop (Photo 2). The cost and availability of spare parts defines the choice of cars. There are recently more foreign vehicles (Rus. *inostrantsy*), like second-hand Volvo, Scania, MAN and Iveco, as well as Chinese manufactured Mercedes trucks, running on the roads in



Photo 2. Remains of cars adorn the roof of Igor's workshop. Photo by Tatiana Argounova-Low.

Sakha. Truckers from the Siberian town of Omsk shift-working on road construction site near the city of Yakutsk, for example, preferred foreign trucks, as nothing goes wrong with them (Rus. *nichego s nim ne sluchaetsya*). Truckers in Yakutsk, whose main experience is *zimmiki*, prefer Russian-made KamAZ and Ural models for their straightforward reliability. They agree that the foreign-made cars are more comfortable, fuel efficient and powerful ("I am hardly pulling up the hill and this foreigner [*inostranets*] is going past me on third or fourth gear"). Yet, they fear that the delicate foreign electronic equipment cannot sustain low temperatures and will turn the breakdown of the vehicle somewhere in the taiga into a disaster. "If a foreigner breaks down he will stand there for a hundred years but if I break down any passing driver will be able to help me to fix my car." Repairing less delicate KamAZ trucks can be done right on the spot with "a hammer and a blow torch". In addition, spare parts for Russian made vehicles are more common, easy to find and much cheaper, whereas finding the right part for a Volvo would mean ordering the piece from abroad, bringing the cost up significantly and resulting in lost time (Rus. *prostoi*).

Time, like money, is used for estimates and serves as a universal unit for measurement and evaluation, as Arkadiy appropriately commented: "Distance in kilometres is a very relative notion, you see. It will change and stretch. Looking at the map is one distance, in reality it is different." Indeed, time is a more precise estimate of the length of the journey than the distance, as the quality of road might affect the distance significantly: "There are some winter roads, for example, on the Kolyma and Yana rivers

where you can travel easily in one go. But then again, on some roads you will be traveling seven kilometres all day.” (Fieldnotes 2011)

Time is expensive, for lost time converts to lost money. *Prostoi*, a word that literally means ‘standing’, also implies idle time, or time spent not working, and is a powerful word in the truckers’ vocabulary. *Prostoi* implies that the time in which the trucker was moving, as it were, had run ahead of the trucker, and he needs to do some serious catching up to get back onto his schedule. *Prostoi* also implies lost money.

Everything results in time. You bring goods [to a village] and they start unloading with a horse and cart. And you sit and wait, again time, again *prostoi*. Sometimes they need to make wooden footbridges for unloading. It is all very complicated. There are, of course, places where you go with pleasure. They prepare access and make sure there are labourers for unloading; they understand that you are in a hurry. Some will treat you to a steaming sauna and a dinner. The contract specifies that a contractor should provide everything. And my responsibility is not to lose a single jar or box. I know that there are people who are desperate to get these goods, children waiting for their presents for the New Year and so on. (Fieldnotes 2011)

Truckers are forever catching up with time, forever trying to run ahead of the schedule, forever trying to save time. They have a very acute sense and feeling of time because “labour becomes a commodity measured out in units of time, goods become commodities measured out in units of money; since labour produces goods, so much time yields so much money, and time spent in idleness is equivalent to so much money lost” (Ingold 2000: 328).

CONCLUSION

I have presented the ethnography of trucking in Sakha as an experience from a region where driving along roads differs from the conventionally accepted practice and idea. With this study I wish to contribute to the broad and expanding corpus of literature on mobility and movement and introduce the concept of roads that are different from our perception of roads in the West.

This case study suggests that the concept of road in Siberia is highly variable and often is juxtaposed to another common concept, roadlessness, which is often surmounted by the trucker in order to progress in his movement. Roads and roadlessness are two interchangeable states, like two sides of a coin. Truckers in their jobs deal with both notions and constantly build and make roads, as the analysis of the notion of ‘beating the road’ reveals. Therefore, the trucker’s perception skills are important when driving along winter roads. His multisensory appreciation of the road helps him predict and cope with what lies ahead. His whole body becomes engaged in the process of driving and his full range of senses, not only vision, plays a crucial role and stays switched on in difficult conditions.

The understanding of road is complemented and emphasised by focusing on two characteristic aspects of the trucker’s job – time and money – that flow along the road. The article has considered how these two elements create the core of a trucker’s job.

From this perspective it becomes possible to argue for expansion of our knowledge about roads, as a concept and phenomenon that is not fixed or engraved in the land-

scape, but one that is always changing and transforming. Roads thus always have a flow and roads are always in the making. Tim Ingold's statement on the importance and result of these interactions that carry "transformative potential" is very suitable here and pinpoints the process in which "beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence" (Ingold 2011: 68). It is the relation between roadlessness, the snow covered surface and the trucker that makes a road. Without actions on the driver's part or the conditions that roadlessness presents a road would not happen and would not emerge. Likewise, through this very experience or coping with difficult roads and states of roadlessness a novice learns skills and becomes a driver, and an experienced *dalnoboishchik* sharpens his skills. "One is not born a driver, one becomes a driver"; the often heard phrase succinctly underlines the transformative effect of roadlessness and roads on drivers.

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NOTES

1 Lisa Kelly is an American trucker featured in reality television series *Ice Road Truckers* shown on History Channel. Kelly was the first female trucker who appeared in this programme.

2 *Zavod imeni Likhacheva* (Automobile Plant named after Likhachev).

3 Category Ia refers to motorways of federal significance (including international connections) with up to 7,000 vehicles per day; categories Ib and II refer to motorways of federal, republic and district significance with capacity between 3,000–7,000 vehicles per day; category III includes roads of district and local significance with capacity 1,000–3,000 vehicles per day; category IV are roads of district and local use with 100–1,000 cars per day; and category V includes roads of local use with 100–200 cars per day (SNiP 1997).

4 A stop where drivers can eat and rest.

5 A *naled* happens when cracks in the river or lake ice allow water to seep through. The water then freezes, completely covering previous traces of movement as well as hiding the cracks. This creates a rather dangerous situation for the drivers.

6 There are no service or petrol stations along winter roads.

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