

Philippine Global Seafarers: Ethnicity and Identity in Ships with Multinational Crews

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The Philippines supplies more than a quarter of the highly globalized labor market for seafarers. Filipino seafarers, who come mostly from the Ilonggo- and Bisaya-speaking areas in the Visayas and Mindanao, are a significant group in the Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) economy. Their social values of hierarchy, respect, work ethics, expectations about effort and compensation, and food are defined by upbringing in their local communities, as well as their education and training. On the other hand, “masters” and officers onboard are mostly white Europeans, or other Asians. There are both success and horror stories of the Pinoy seafarer’s work relations onboard ships with crew of other nationalities. The ship maybe owned by Greeks, Japanese or Europeans, but the laws observed on board follow those of the Bahamas, Panama, Liberia or other “flags of convenience”. The standard employment contract incorporates the regulations of the Philippine Overseas Employment Authority (POEA). In this context, how do Philippine seafarers view themselves, in relation to their ethno-linguistic origins, as a Filipino, and in the context of work in global ships with multinational crews? This paper argues that ethnicity and national identity are subordinated to the demands of the global labor market for seafarers, and to the factors “pushing” the Pinoy seafarers into the rough seas: lack of job opportunities, widespread poverty, and an economy facing pressures from trade deficits to pay off the \$50 billion foreign debt. Welfare programs and interest representation of seafarers by seafarer unions and organisations often downplay, if not ignore ethnicity. Socio-cultural sensitivities need to be included in training programs to prepare seafarers, alongside the pursuit of Philippine interests in the highly competitive global labor market.

KEYWORDS: *Filipino seafarers, ethnicity, global labor market, Overseas Filipino Workers, multinational crews*

You could see them anywhere, everywhere there is a global ship or major port — *si kabayan Pinoy seaman*. In most KLM flights from Amsterdam to Manila and back, most of the passengers are Pinoy seafarers. Filipino seafarers continue to be on top of the global labor market. The Philippines is the largest supplier of seafarers — both officers and ratings — with 28.1 percent, or more than a quarter share (SIRC 2003).

This fact is a testimony to the competence and skills of the overseas Filipino worker in the global labor market, even while many seafarers feel that they are just being treated as ‘milking cows’ — *“ginagatasan lang ng pera”* by unscrupulous crewing agents, shipping firms, training centers, maritime schools, and even by more than 14 government agencies and some corrupt, inept officials involved in processing their employment. It is indeed both a bitter and sweet life (*“masarap na mahirap”*) for Filipino seafarers, who work hard from 6 to 9 months at sea, earn an average of \$1,200 monthly, disembark to spend earnings for food and drinks as a “one day millionaire”, pay all debts, then borrow again for expenses for training, or to search within 6 months to a year, for another job at sea.

The Philippines provides more than one quarter of the world’s seafarers employed aboard internationally trading ships, and the country’s position as the world’s leading supplier of ships’ crews seems assured.¹ Between October 2002 and January 2003, separate surveys, under the terms of the Mols Sorenson research fellowship at the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), Cardiff University, the author conducted a survey of seafarers (n=374) with the aim of generating their profile. The survey results were subsequently amplified by a search of available documentation and interviews with crewing managers, senior government and trade union officials. Websites and publications by government agencies, employers and unions, and seafarer organizations provided other data.

¹ While there is no definitive census of the global supply of seafarers, both the 2002 and 2003 results of the Global Seafarer Labour Market crewlist survey of the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), Cardiff University indicate that the Philippines indeed has more than a quarter of the share of the global seafarer labour market.

Filipino Seafarers and the Economy

The entry of Filipino seafarers in the global labour market occurs in the context of the following stark realities:

- Huge foreign debt of about US\$ 50 billion.
- Perennial trade deficits (\$ 322 million in by November 2003).
- Widespread poverty (34 percent of population in 2000)
- Relatively low national income per person (\$1,050 per capita in 2003)
- High unemployment (13.7 percent, April 2004)

The Philippine Labor Market Context

The Philippines' labor surplus economy is often acknowledged as one key 'push' factor behind the growth in the number of seafarers, and the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as well. A population of 84 million, and a relatively high annual population growth rate of 2.3 percent between 1980 - 2000 added a sizeable increment of young job seekers every year, while job creation has not kept pace.

The profile of the Philippine workforce (NSO 2003) shows 22 percent have a college education. Filipino workers are predominantly male (84 percent), with employment concentrated in the rural areas (54 percent). Most are still predominantly employed in agriculture (39 percent) with 23 percent in manufacturing.

Philippine open unemployment remains high, at 10.6 percent in January 2003. In addition, underemployment — officially defined as "those who are employed but still looking for work" changed very slightly from 16.9 percent in January 2000 to 16.1 percent in January 2003 (NSO 2003). It is estimated that between five to eight million mostly in the Middle East. Labor export is therefore of considerable importance to the national economy. In 2002, an average of 2,748 Filipinos left the country every day for overseas employment.²

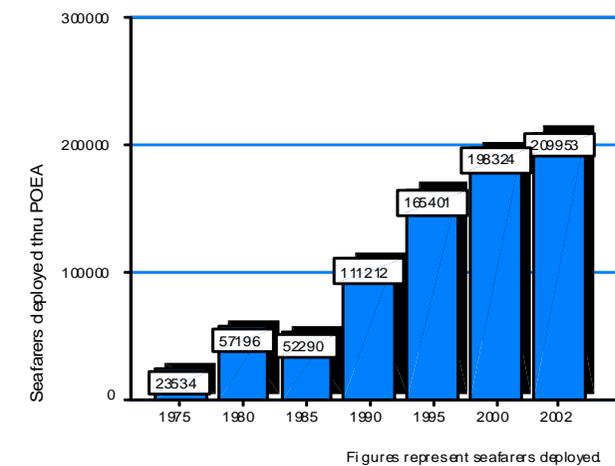
² *Philippine Star*, April 21, 2002, quoting an official of the Philippine DOLE.

Growth of the Philippines' Seafaring Labor Force

The records show that the growth of the Philippines seafaring labor force was stimulated mainly by global demand. Domestic shipping in the Philippine archipelago may also have contributed to its development, but the recruitment of seafarers in the global labor market progressed rapidly in the past two decades. As a result, the requirements of the competitive global shipping industry principally shaped policy for the crewing industry, maritime education institutions and government agencies.

The years from 1986 to 1990 saw a rapid expansion in the Philippine seafaring industry. The number of Filipino seafarers more than doubled, from 52,290 to 111,212. The rate of increase from 1986 to 1990 averaged 16.6 percent every year. Between 1991 and 1995, the number of Philippine seafarers increased but by a slower rate of 8.3 percent. From 1996 to 2000, the number of seafarers still increased, but at a much lower annual rate of 3.7 percent. By 2003, there were 214,691 seafarers deployed through the POEA.

Figure 1 Number of Filipino seafarers: 1975 to 2002

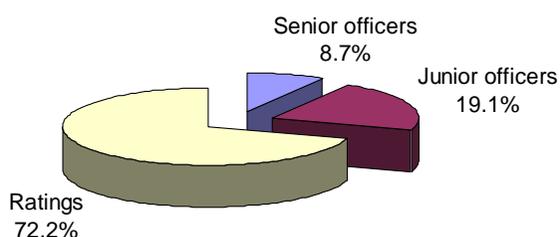


Source of basic data: Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA)

This number does not include seafarers who went “through the back door” in various ports in Europe, Southeast Asia and Northern America. However, these numbers are unlikely to be large. Ever tightening border controls and the relative insignificance of localized port-based labor markets mean that opportunities in the ports of the world are limited and diminishing.

The Philippines continues to be the largest supplier of seafarers — both officers and ratings — with 28.1 percent shown in the SIRC 2003 global crew survey, derived from an annual census based on crew lists. This share is consistent with the findings of the SIRC 2000 survey showing the Philippines as supplying 28.5 percent of the total population of seafarers aboard ships engaged in international trade. In the SIRC 2003 survey, 9 percent of Filipinos were employed as senior officers, 19 percent were employed as junior officers, and 72 percent worked as ratings (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2 Filipino seafarers by rank



Source: Seafarers' International Research Centre (SIRC) Database, 2003

In the SIRC 2003 global crewlist survey, the second major labor supply country after the Philippines is Russia (6.8 percent) and the third, Ukraine (6.3 percent of the sample). However whilst in the Philippines there are 3 officers for every 10 ratings, in Russia there are 6 officers for every 10 ratings, and in the Ukraine there are 5 officers for every 10 ratings.

The other major suppliers of seafarers in the SIRC 2003 survey are: China (6.2 percent); India (5 percent); Indonesia (4 percent); Poland (3.5 percent); Greece (2.8 percent); Turkey (2.5 percent); and Myanmar (2.3 percent) (*Table 1*).

Rank	Country	% of sample
1	Philippines	28.1
2	Russia	6.8
3	Ukraine	6.3
4	China	6.2
5	India	5.0
6	Indonesia	4.0
7	Poland	3.5
8	Greece	2.8
9	Turkey	2.5
10	Myanmar	2.3
	All top 10	67.5

Source: SIRC Global Seafarers Database, 2003.

Filipino seafarers have become a vital component of the Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) economy. Remittances from all OFWs are a major source of US dollar earnings, contribute significantly to stabilizing the balance of payments, prevent foreign exchange instability, and serve as a buffer against drastic devaluations of the peso which could lead to inflation. Politicians refer to OFWs, including seafarers, as the “new heroes” in acknowledgement of their economic role.³

Seafarers in this survey reported an average total “all in” monthly pay of US \$1,225.27 and an average employment contract of 9.7 months. Total average income for the whole contract (excluding other payments like extra overtime) is estimated at about \$11,868, of which at least 80 percent or \$9,494 could have been remitted. It is possible that the 209,953 Philippine seafarers contributed

³ Despite political and security problems, the Philippine's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew by 4.4 percent in the third quarter of 2003, from the 3.8 percent growth last year. Officials recognise the contribution overseas Filipinos, including seafarers — Net Factor Income from Abroad (NFIA) increased robustly by 28.4 percent, pushing the growth of the Gross National Product (GNP) upward to 5.9 percent, from 3.1 percent recorded in the previous year. Source: [WWW] <<http://www.nscb.gov.ph/sna/2003/3qtr-2003/Default.asp>> [27 November 2003]

approximately \$ 1.99 billion to the Philippine economy in 2002. The Central Bank of the Philippines, however reported \$1.12 billion in remittances from the seafarers in 2002, or 44 percent less than what could have been potentially contributed. Monitoring by the banking system is well known to be inadequate, and banks are commonly unfriendly towards remittances from OFWs, charging high fees and imposing requirements for foreign exchange transactions as if remittances were business transactions. Many Filipino seafarers, like other OFWs do not use banks for all their remittances. Informal remittance channels include trusted fellow seafarers, friends and relatives who frequently act as couriers carrying large amounts of cash.

Assuming the survey's estimate is correct, seafarers' remittances amount to approximately \$1.99 billion. This would represent about 31 percent of the \$6.4 billion total remittances from all Filipinos working overseas. Given that exports in 2002 were valued at \$34 billion, overseas workers' earnings represent some 19 percent of all export earnings, and the earnings of seafarers alone are equivalent to 6 percent of the value of the country's exports.

Profile of Filipino seafarers

The author's survey (Amante 2003) reveals that Filipino seafarers were mostly from the poor maritime areas in the Visayas and Mindanao. They came from large families, and their parents were either fishermen, farmers, or self-employed workers. The choice of a seafaring career was a way out of poverty, with the added attraction of "earning dollars and seeing the world for free", proclaimed by gleeful maritime school brochures. Parents sacrificed their incomes to pay the \$5,000 tuition and other schooling costs needed for a 4-year program, and even brothers, sisters and other relatives were enlisted financially for help. The cost to complete an officer-level maritime course was about 5 times the average per capita income in the Philippines.

The Philippines has the world's largest number of maritime education and training institutions (76 universities and colleges with maritime

courses, and 41 training centres) which complied with the IMO STCW'95 standards. It is estimated that these schools had a total of 108,000 maritime students, but CHED records show there were only 8,961 officer-graduates in 2001; there are no statistics for the number of ratings-graduates. POEA reports that between 2001 and 2002 there were 5,004 new seafarers deployed. This means that for every 100 students, there were only 5 new seafarer jobs available in 2002. Many students are unable to finish a maritime college course, due to among others, limited placements for cadetship, and the relatively high costs of maritime education. There is simply an oversupply of maritime graduates in the Philippines, compared to the demand by the seafaring industry to employ them.

Most seafarers in the sample came from the Bisaya - speaking islands of Cebu, Davao and Bohol (30 percent), the Ilonggo-speaking islands of Panay and Negros (28 percent) and 23 percent from Mindanao, where both Bisaya and Ilonggo are used. These are among the poorest regions of the Philippines. All seafarers said they could speak and understand English, and more than 50 percent said they could read or write it.

The average length of employment contracts for senior and junior officers were 9 months. Ratings contracts averaged 10 months. The length of job search is about 7.2 months, which includes the time spent applying, and processing papers for a new employment contract, and the waiting time to board the ship.

Box 1 provides a summary of the profile of Filipino seafarers in the global labor market.⁴

⁴ A complete profile is provided in the full research report, *Philippine Global Seafarers: a Profile* (Amante 2003).

Box1. Profile of Filipino seafarers

Basic socio-economic characteristics

- Philippine seafarers in this survey were, on average aged 37 years.
- A Bs were aged 34 years,
- Junior officers, 40 years and
- Senior officers, 44 years old.

Age started work at sea and work experience

- The average age of seafarers on their first voyage was 24 years.
- Senior and junior officers first went to sea at 23 years, ratings when 25.
- As one would expect, senior officers had most work experience (17 years), junior officers had 15 years experience, while ratings had nine years experience of working at sea.

Siblings, children and dependents

- Filipino seafarers come from large families, eight persons on average (six siblings, two parents).
- Most are married (73 percent). Those with two children constitute 30 percent of the sample, and those with three children, 25 percent of the sample.
- Seafarers support an average of five dependents, including parents, brothers or sisters, and their children.
- Fifty percent support three to five dependents, while 33 percent support six or more dependents.

Education profile of seafarers

- Most seafarer survey respondents had a college degree (55 percent), and 47 percent of them had completed a maritime course — either BS Marine Transport (39.8 percent) or BS Marine Engineering program (7.5 percent).

- Those who finished an associate level (non-graduate college level) in maritime education were 31.8 percent of the sample.

Retirement age

- Respondents reported their intention of giving up their sea careers on reaching the age of 50. The differences between the ranks were not great: senior officers intended to stop at an average of 52 years, while junior officers declared to stop at 53 years of age. Ratings intended to finish earlier, at 49 years old.
- The expected work life span at sea for the sample Filipino seafarers was 26 years on average.
- Senior and junior officers had the longest expected work life span at sea, at 30 years.

Source: Amante 2003.

Respondents were asked to provide information on basic pay, total 'all in' pay and allotments sent to their family or designated beneficiary, and savings in their last voyage. On the average, senior officers receive \$2,086, while junior officers receive \$1,714. Able Body (AB) seafarers reported an average pay of \$1,000 per month. In most seafarer employment contracts, 'all in' pay includes variable payments for guaranteed overtime, leave and other items which depend upon the type of ship and the ship-owner manager. Basic pay as a proportion of total pay averaged at 50 percent. It varied with rank but not by a large margin. Chief Officers reported basic pay as 60 percent of the total, OS as 50 percent of the total. A Bs reported an average monthly pay of \$1,000. All ratings reported an average monthly pay of \$995.⁵

Filipino seafarers and multinational crews

Seafarers are confined to their ships and locked into patterns of interaction with whoever is on board, based on both explicit and implicit

⁵ All currency is at US\$ 1 = PhPesos 53, as of January 15, 2003 which was the end of the survey for Philippine seafarers.

hierarchies. They have little choice about the people they live with onboard the ship. The master, the officers, and the ratings tend to occupy different spaces, with different communal, working and recreation areas. Sampson (2003) observed that with different nationalities on board, boundaries and spaces between officers and ratings were adjusted in order to separate the nationalities and their living, eating and socializing areas. It is thus possible that a Filipino officer is assigned the status of a rating in terms of where he is expected, or chooses to eat, relax and socialize.

The POEA website (www.poea.gov.ph) shows an accredited list of 417 crewing agencies, involved in recruitment, processing and deployment of seafarers. A sample list of crewing agencies given presidential recognition awards in 2001, many of which serve European shipping, is shown in *Box 2*.

Box 2. Philippine Government Honors for Crewing Agencies

In 2002, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo gave recognition to foreign shipping employers of Filipino seafarers, along with employers of other overseas Filipino workers. Some of the foreign employers were also cited for their “exemplary terms and conditions of work, which contributed to the workers productivity and quality performance”.

Awards for excellence: Crewing/manning agencies	
Arpaphil Shipping Corp.	New Filipino Maritime Agencies, Inc.
Bahia Shipping Svcs. Inc.	North Sea Marine Services Corp
Bergesen DY Phils. Inc.	Orient Ship Management Phils. Inc.
Blue Manila, Inc.	Sealanes Marine Services, Inc.
Bright Maritime Corp.	Southfield Agencies, Inc.
Crewserve, Inc.	Swedish Crewing Management, Inc.
KGJS Fleet Management Manila, Inc.	Task Agencies, Inc.
Leonis Navigation Company, Inc.	Teekay Shipping Phils. Inc.
Maersk-Filipinas Crewing Inc.	TSM Shipping (Phils.) Inc.
Magsaysay Mitsui O.S.K. Marine, Inc.	Ventis Maritime Corp.

"Top Performers" -- Highest Number of Seafarers Deployed Overseas	
Arpaphil Shipping Corp. Bahia Shipping Svcs. Inc. Bergesen DY Phils. Inc. Blue Manila, Inc. Bright Maritime Corp. Crewserve, Inc. KGJS Fleet Management Manila, Inc. Leonis Navigation Company, Inc. Maersk-Filipinas Crewing Inc. Magsaysay Mitsui O.S.K. Marine, Inc.	New Filipino Maritime Agencies, Inc. North Sea Marine Services Corp Orient Ship Management Phils. Inc. Sealanes Marine Svcs. Inc. Southfield Agencies, Inc. Swedish Crewing Management, Inc. Task Agencies, Inc. Teekay Shipping Phils. Inc. TSM Shipping (Phils.) Inc Ventis Maritime Corp.
Exemplary Welfare Programs and Services	
Moral and Spiritual Values: OSM Shipping Philippines, Inc. JM International, Inc. Sea Power Shipping Enterprises, Inc	Family Services: NYK Filship Management, Inc. Oriental Shipmanagement Co., Inc Manpower Resources of Asia, Inc.
Human Resource Development: Singo Ship Management Phils., Inc. Jebsens Maritime, Inc Career Philippines Shipmanagement	Socio-Economic Reintegration: United Philippine Lines, Inc. Magsaysay Maritime Corporation
Employee Relations: Dolphin Shipmanagement, Inc.	

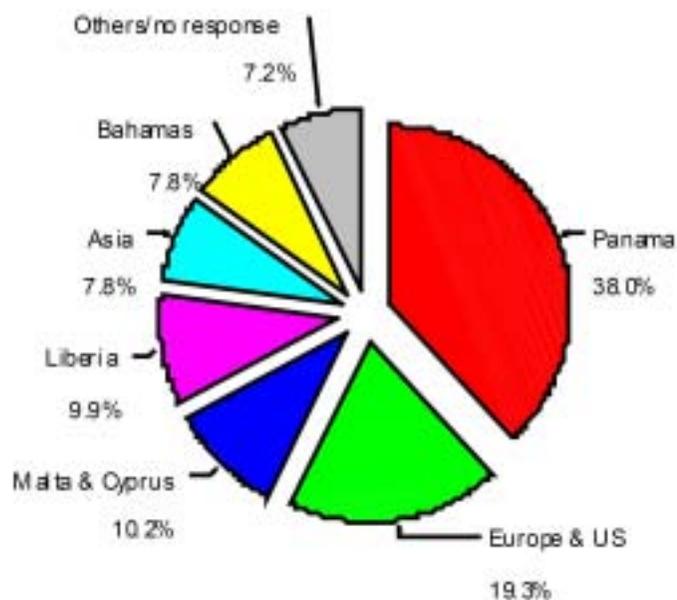
Seafarers formally enter the labor market through crewing agencies, many of which are foreign owned. Where shipping company-owned agencies are almost invariably dedicated to crews for their own ships, the great majority of agencies, including the very largest, serve many ‘owners and managers’. Sources of labor market information on vacancies or new opportunities include relatives, friends, classmates, school officials, and former fellow crew.

Flag, Route, Multinational Crew and Officers

Many Filipino seafarers work in ships identified by the International Transport Federation (ITF) as flags of convenience. Filipino seafarers said they work mostly in vessels with the following flags: Panama (38 percent); Liberia (10 percent); Bahamas (8 percent); Norway, Denmark

and Sweden (6 percent); and Malta (6 percent). Most of the ships they work on travel world-wide (50 percent); or in the Asia –Pacific route (22 percent); and in Europe (11 percent).

Figure 3. Flag of last ship of Filipino seafarers

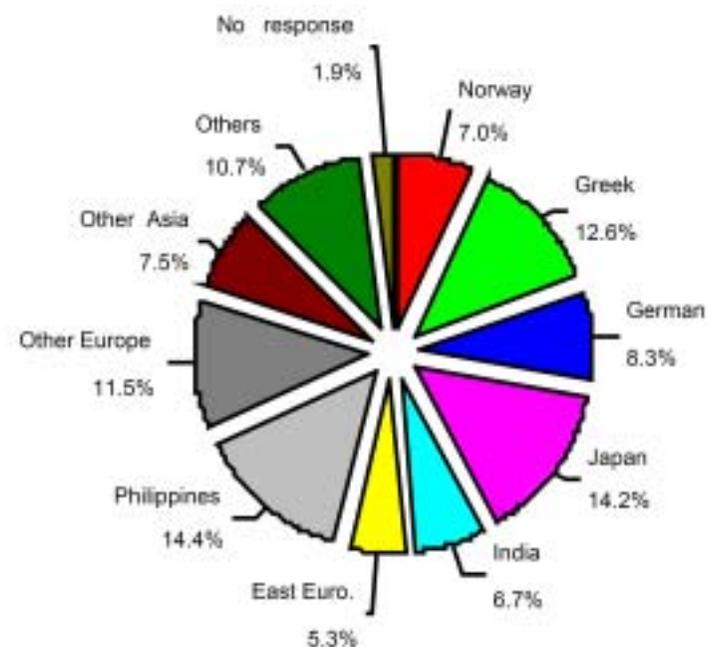


Experience with Mixed Nationality Crews

- Seafarers in the survey said that they work in ships with multinational crews, but mostly with many Filipinos aboard. A few said that full Filipino crews are common in the Asian routes.
- Filipino seafarers said they work mostly with vessels commanded by captains or masters from Europe (27 percent); Japan (14 percent) or the Philippines (14 percent); and Greece (13 percent)
- Chief mates and chief engineers were reported mostly from the Philippines (22 percent); Western Europe (17 percent); Eastern Europe (Croatia, Ukraine, Poland, Russia), 9 percent; Japan (9 percent).
- Junior officers were reported to be mostly from the Philippines (72 percent), India (5.5 percent); Baltic states (4.6 percent).

- Seafarers also said that the principal nationality of ratings in their last ship were Filipinos (88 percent). Seafarers also work with ratings that were of Asian nationality (2 percent — from India, Pakistan, China, and Korea).

Figure 4. Nationality of masters in last ship



Box 3. Bow Eagle Case Study: Communication Problems Between Filipino Seafarers and Norwegian Officers in a Tanker

The influential shipping newspaper *Lloyds List* featured daily (from August 28 to September 4, 2002) the case of Filipino seafarers involved in the collision of the *Bow Eagle*, a chemical tanker of the Norwegian-company Odjfell, with the French trawler *Cistude*. The nighttime collision killed three anglers instantly and left a fourth to die of exhaustion. Three others survived.

The collision happened on August 26 (Monday), but the Filipino seafarers did not communicate the incident to their senior Norwegian officers, for some reasons. The tanker was bound for Rotterdam from Brazil. It did not become apparent that the tanker was involved until two days later, when French navy investigators boarded the *Bow Eagle* by helicopter after the vessel reported it was leaking ethyl acetate.

The Filipino seafarer on watchkeeping duty, Mr. Antonio Andres did not report the incident after alleged pressure from second officer Mr. Ronnie Zape, the only other person on the bridge that night. Mr. Andres who felt the need to tell the captain, urged Mr. Zape to call the master but he was told to “just wait”. Mr. Andres kept quiet because Mr. Zape thought the vessel was still all right, and as an ordinary seaman, he felt that he could not bypass the second officer. Mr. Zape and Mr. Andres in their additional statements, confessed to the captain that they had been aware of the collision.

In his earlier testimony, Mr. Zape said he was around half way through a four hour shift when he saw a light on the port side around four miles away. Checking with binoculars, he saw the trawler still approaching and had not changed course or speed, and it became apparent the two vessels were on collision course. Mr. Zape expected the trawler to change course, in accordance with maritime procedure. When nothing changed, he switched from automatic steering to manual, to go “hard starboard”. He kept swinging starboard and when he thought the vessel had gone past, he swung the tanker back on to its original course. Afterwards, he could still see a mask light. Checking on the radar, he could see the trawler still had speed. The collision had “been a light touch”, and Mr. Zape thought everything was okay. There was then a surge of radio traffic on the emergency channel, and both men heard “Pan, Pan” – a distress signal, but not a Mayday. Both men did not understand French. Mr. Zape said that the radio calls were not directed at him. Mr. Andres, unable to eat and sleep after the incident, revealed what happened to the ship's second in command, who then told the master. French authorities have filed criminal charges

on accidental homicide, non-assistance to persons in danger, and flight from scene of accident.

Sources: “Bow Eagle officer ‘hushed up’ fatal collision”, *Lloyd's List*, September 2, 2002; “World Watch”, Sept. 3 (p. 7).
 “Bow Eagle crew admit collision cover-up”, *Lloyd's List*, August 29, 2002 (p.1)

Maintaining Identity in the Global Ship

While working on board the global ship, and in interaction with other crew during off hours, the Filipino seafarer struggles hard to maintain a sense of identity. Filipino seafarers struggle to maintain their ethnicity, and identity by influencing the ship's food menu, socialization with other crew, and leisure activities.

Seafarers in the survey identified the various ways of spending leisure hours. The list provides a hint on how the Filipino seafarer identifies himself, in relation to others while working on board. Pool or miniature billiards, pingpong tables, small basketball courts, guitars, loud videoke singing combined with beer drinking for many are some of the outlets for spending time. If not, it is rest and sleep most of the time, after a hard days' work of watchkeeping, cleaning, painting, repainting, renovating, or moving heavy equipment. Celebration of birthdays is an important event to which a Filipino seafarer prepares, and spends as much as possible if on board. Guitar-playing seafarers are most especially appreciated by others, in bringing gaiety to otherwise dreary hours on board. Seafarer hobbies include collections of coins, assorted souvenirs, and curios in their port stops all over the world. Videos of movies, most especially those about action and adventure are standard fare. If there is space in the cabin, Filipino seafarers buy and provide their own CD and video players.

How do seafarers practice their faith? Some seafarers said they pray individually. They observe their faith during religious holidays and other occasions. They pray especially hard when they encounter

very rough seas in a stormy weather. When in port during Sundays or Christian holidays, they attempt to find a church but only if they have enough time. Some seafarers allowed the researcher to see their wallets, which has religious images of Jesus Christ and Mary, alongside pictures of their family. Very few seafarers have a crucifix or a rosary, but many of the “born again” Christians bring along a copy of the Holy Bible.

The stereotype of a Filipino seafarer is one that is a virile, macho lover with “a girl in every port”. Eroticism through nude posters, pornographic magazines, and triple x-rated videos are all part of the seafarers’ life on board. Many seafarers have cell phones, cigarette lighters, and playing cards, which portray nude women.

Good-natured bantering and exchange of jokes are abundant among the Filipino seafarers: “one day millionaire, one year sustener”, “seamanloloko”, and the like. Jokes and humor are outlets to let go of a stressful situation. A strange or difficult occasion would elicit a joke, a laugh and a smile with a Filipino seafarer. Some labels which Pinoy seafarers use among themselves (Pinoy is “pogi”) for crew belonging to other nationalities border on racism:

“Egoy” for Black-Africans

“Uwak” for dark skinned Indian seafarers

“Bitoy” for British officers

“Goryo” for Greeks

“Tuko” for Turks

“Jakang” for Japanese

“Kurikong” or “kimchi” for Koreans

The Rizal Park Labor Market

Philippine seafarers converge in Rizal Park, along Kalaw Street, which is in front of the largest crewing agency, Magsaysay Maritime Corporation. It is also within walking distance of the offices of many other crewing agencies, the Department of Labor and Employment, the seafarer union AMOSUP, and the government agency in charge of seafarer registration (MARINA).

On any weekday about a thousand seafarers gather in Rizal Park for an exchange of the latest information on job prospects. Some have recently disembarked, but many are unemployed. Crewing agents with urgent demands from shipping companies with difficult-to-find skills and competencies compete with each other in attracting qualified officers and ratings. Some seafarers with existing job contracts and waiting to board their ships are on the lookout for better prospects, signing in with new agents who offer better pay and working conditions.

‘Runners’ of crewing agents — mostly young cadet ratings on apprenticeship duty with the recruitment outfit — go around Rizal Park among the seafarers, with small posters on the latest urgent demands for crewing from shipping companies all over the world. Maritime students — some finishing their college studies, some just graduated — said that many of them serve in crewing agencies, work just like other staff but are unpaid. The young runners compete with each other in inviting prospective seafarer applicants to sign up for an application form and possibly, a call for an interview. Runners said they are required to have a good number (at least five or more) of applicants per job position before reporting back to the office.

Most of the seafarers in Rizal Park are from central and southern Philippines — Ilonggo speaking seafarers from Iloilo and Negros islands, Cebuano speaking seafarers from Cebu and Bohol islands, and both Ilonggo and Bisaya speakers from Mindanao island. Seafarers gather and exchange information with each other by speaking in their own ethnic language.

Rizal Park serves mostly the lower segments of the global labor market for seafarers, and is a good source of applicants to ensure choice of seafarers for emergency crewing. Agents from the top crewing industries are seen sometimes. Crewing managers said they do send their agents to the Park in case there is difficulty in recruiting a seafarer for a particularly

urgent demand. Many officers who get recruited in Rizal Park are those sought by shipping managers whose specifications for experience are urgent, but are not easily available in agencies' reserve crew lists. This is especially true for gas or chemical tanker engineers, whose specifications for required experience are not easily available. Some crewing agencies prepare a list of available seafarers to respond to urgent demands from shipping employers. This practice is known as "manpower pooling", but some crewing agencies charge fees from seafarers for their names to be included in the list. Many agencies recruit in Rizal Park for chemical or gas carriers — which seafarers say are dangerous ships, which they prefer to avoid.

Due to the Park's open and informal nature, unscrupulous crewing agents and impostors cheat seafarers desperate for jobs. There are "fixers" — people who offer "assistance" (in return for payment), for seafarers to comply with the requirements for certificates of competency — in effect, an offer for a fraudulent certificate. They usually connive with low-paid processing clerks and staff in government agencies involved in producing employment papers for seafarers, complete with signatures. Fixers offer convenience, with no need for time consuming paper processing and follow up, including attendance in the training sessions.

Most Rizal Park seafarers are doubtful of their chances of finding employment there. Many seafarers who converge in Rizal Park are unable to find employment with a crewing agency due to the following problems: age limit (41 percent); lacking a competency certificate (6 percent); ship mismatch with their job and skills (6 percent); watch listed for ITF involvement (4 percent).

Conclusions

The Philippines continues to be a significant supplier of seafarers in the global labor market — any ship in international waters would

have a Pinoy seafarer on board. Filipino seafarers however must work with multinational crews, as seafarers onboard global ships come from diverse countries. Given their dominance in the global labor market, a Filipino seafarer would have greater chance to be involved in any maritime accident or disaster, such as the Bow Eagle case in 2002 (*see Box 3*).

What is the identity of Filipino seafarers in global ships? The dominant pattern of crew work hierarchy in global ships reveals a form of colonialism — white European 'masters' (captains) and senior officers, over non-white, mostly Asian and Filipino junior officers ratings as subordinates.

Fabienne Knudsen (2004) joined Danish and Filipino seafarers in some of their voyages, and observed their interactions in the mess hall, socials, and leisure activities. She points out that discrimination against foreign seafarers may occur at several levels of the organization, including pay and terms of employment. Many seafarers may not be aware or even may not be conscious of it, but interpersonal relations onboard are split by culture, rank and leisure activities. There is an interaction between cultural and structural factors that when ignored, may lead to a crisis onboard. There is a vicious cycle involved: as Knudsen observed, foreign officers complain that Filipinos do not admit mistakes, and lack initiative and response. Filipinos on the other hand counter that no one listens to them when they speak, and that their suggestions are ignored.

Researchers have explored the theme of ethnicity among seafarers, and identified some gaps which need to be filled. Sampson (2003) explored the theme of a Filipino seafarers onboard global ships as transnational communities, with "hyperspace dwellers." The presence of Filipinos in the global "ethnoscape" however raises the following interesting questions: what is the impact of living and working abroad, upon their own consciousness and self-identity, as well as that of their families, especially children and their communities?

Are the hyperspaces one characterized by quality of life, or of segmentation, resistance, or oppression?

Lamvik (2002) observed the consumption behaviour of Filipino seafarers. He cites the Filipino seafarer's "admirable ability and willingness to endure hardship or make sacrifices in the name of the family", and argues that this is the most fundamental and meaningful inducement in the choice of a maritime career. Through remittances, phone calls, and by always buying *pasalubong* for their families and friends back home, Filipino seafarers are able to bridge the geographical gap between themselves and their loved ones, and remind himself that he is out at sea for his family.

Socio-cultural considerations arising from diverse ethnicities and identities are subordinate to the key government policy "to ensure qualified, competent and globally competitive Philippine seafarers"⁶. At the same time, Philippine labor laws reflect the tensions faced by the State in exploiting the global demand for Filipino labor, and the need to protect workers from abuse and exploitation. The quality of maritime education and training directly affects the seafarers' competencies and skills, which in turn reflects on the performance of their job assignments, pay and working conditions in the global labor market.

Philippine industry leaders and officials continually express the hope that the country maintain its top position, or even further enlarge its share of the global labor market. The conclusions derived from this profile of Philippine global seafarers point to the need to consider socio-cultural sensitivities in their education, training and employment. Such sensitivity is crucial for the global seafaring industry to achieve work that is more decent for the seafarers.

⁶ Republic Act 8544 of 1998, "An Act Regulating the Practice of the Merchant Marine Profession in the Philippines.

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