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Unity and diversity at sea

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samples life with a crew of 27 nationalities

One striking feature of cruiseships today is that they are getting larger and can carry more and more passengers. On board, the "society" or "community" consists primarily of two groups: the passengers and the seafarers. While the former are largely from the developed world, in particular the US and western Europe, the latter have become incredibly diversified. Such diversity is a result of the globalisation of the seafarers' labour market in the past two decades. Although most senior officers and managers remain male and are from traditional maritime nations, seafarers in subordinate positions are increasingly recruited from Asia and eastern Europe. Women, as SIRC's global labour market database has found, make up about 20 per cent of the work force on cruiseships, although the figure varies on individual ships.

This spring, I had a voyage on a not-very-modern cruise ship in the Atlantic. This nine-decked ship carried more than 1,200 passengers who were served by about 440 seafarers. All the passengers were from one western European nation, but the seafarers were from 27 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and America – in fact from all parts of the world.

Only two men had four-stripes on their shoulders – the Greek captain and the Indian hotel manager. The heads of the 11 departments were from seven countries: Britain, Bulgaria, Canada, Indonesia, the Philippines, Poland, and St Lucia. Sixty-seven seafarers of 12 different nationalities served in the ship's three restaurants, including the newly promoted Bulgarian restaurant manager, the two extremely popular Thai head waiters and the five new seafarers from four different countries used as "buffet runners".

At the bottom of the ship, as well as at the bottom of the ship's hierarchy, is the laundry, where a single nationality is most likely to be found, in most cases Chinese, Filipinos, or Indonesians. Nine young men, all Asians but from three different countries, were employed in this ship, washing, drying, ironing and folding thousands of sheets, towels, table cloths and all the linens used during the voyage, plus passengers clothes and seafarers' uniforms.

Women comprised 21 percent of the total crew aboard and they were in all the departments except the deck, engine and galley.

Seafarers prefer to work and live in such a diversified environment, or "miniature UN", as some of them refer to it. Most told me that they prefer to work on multi-nationally-crewed ships because "we can meet people and cultures from all over the world", or because "men and women are working side by side which is more normal compared with most ships". For seafarers from developing countries, it also means a relatively high wage package, although it also means longer separation from families and a challenge to their English language competence.

A MIXED-nationality group in the galley (Photo: SIRC photographic archive)

Some seafarers, of course, have other reasons for their preference. The Indian hotel manager, for example, said: "I prefer a multi-national ship because it is easier to keep the ship's hierarchy, which is necessary to make the ship operate efficiently. In an Indian-only context it's difficult for me to distinguish my public role from my private role."

Clearly, seafarers have different reasons for preferring to work in such a mixed-crew. One thing, however, seems certain: this highly mixed crew functions as well as, if not better than, a ship crewed by a single nationality. This is certainly true when seafarers are working. When the ship was at sea I dropped in on several departments and observed the interactions of seafarers during their duty hours. In the hotel manager's office the Greek captain was discussing the guests for the captain's table with the Indian hotel manager. In the galley, the sous chef from Barbados was teaching the Indian chef de partie and two of his assistant cooks, one from Indonesia the other from Bulgaria, to cook some special dishes. In the passengers' cabin area, the Polish housekeeper, a small but tough woman in her late forties, was inspecting the cabins with her Indian deputy, stopping now and then to talk to the stewards or stewardesses from Bulgaria, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, India, Indonesia and the Philippines. On the sundeck, two seafarers, a Filipino and an Indonesian, were chipping paint and chatting.

For seafarers, cruiseships are not, of course, the ideal world dreamed of by Marx, or depicted by different religions, where differences between social groups, cultures and nationalities vanish and everyone lives happily together. Differences, politics, clashes and conflicts almost certainly exist aboard as they do ashore in the larger human society. At least, however, during duty hours, the shared goal of the ship's safe operation temporarily transcends the boundaries between cultures, ethnicity and nationalities.

When seafarers are off duty they begin to highlight, unintentionally, their ethnic or national and other identities. At this point, unity gives away to diversity, globality to locality. A 49-year-old Bulgarian professor of philosophy who cleaned the public area near the gangway and greeted the passing passengers and talked with his Polish and Indonesian colleagues in English during the day, would regularly give lecturers in Bulgarian to his "disciples",10-12 young Bulgarian seafarers, in a small space in an alley in the evenings. The Thai seafarers, including the deckhands and the engine-hands, would meet in the 29-year-old Thai head waiter's cabin, to "worship together, sing, talk in our own language about our country, our families and things we have grown up with which we miss so much". The head waiter had one stripe on his shoulder and was therefore entitled to live in the officers' area. But he told me he chose to live in a crew cabin to be close to his countrymen.

During the informal hours, even the Indian hotel manager, who clearly felt proud of his high position, and who intentionally attempted to maintain his "professional" image and hierarchical status by avoiding rubbing shoulders with people of his own nationality in both formal and informal situations, would regularly come down to the B-deck and to have meals in the Indian mess, even though he had the right to share the same table with the captain at every meal.

The ship had five messes for the crew: the officers' mess, the staff mess, the crew mess, the Asian mess, and the Indian mess. The location of these corresponded with seafarers' status in the ship hierarchy and they were stratified by seafarers' nationality and gender. The officers' mess was on the top deck. Theoretically, all officers and staff with three or more stripes could have their meals there. In reality, only the Greek officers always dined there. The four-stripe Indian hotel manager, for example, quit because he preferred to have Indian food, and the three-stripe British chief purser had her meals in the staff mess because "in the officers' mess, you only have Greeks and they are all men". Both the staff and the crew messes were side by side in the crew area on deck four where the entertainers, the casino staff, the representatives of the travel agents etc had their cabins.

The staff mess was mostly used by the managers, supervisors or other personnel, such as the receptionists, who had officer status. The crew mess, despite its name, was actually only for seafarers from Europe and European food was served there. It was therefore sometimes referred to as the European mess. Down on deck 3, the B-deck, were the Asian and Indian messes. Generally, lower-ranked seafarers of the same region or nationality would dine in the same mess, although I was told that the east Europeans would always pick up food from the Asian or Indian messes. It is interesting this didn't happen in reverse – Asian seafarers never went up to pick up food from the European mess.

What, then, is the bond that holds multinational crews together and makes them function so well as a unit, despite their ethnic or national diversity? The reason is, I believe, that seafarers have a clearly shared goal: their financial needs and their profound love for their families. This is true regardless of seafarers' gender, nationality and position on the ship.

The Bulgarian professor took the cleaning job because he found his previous $90 monthly salary wasn't enough to support his daughter and son, both university students. Louise, my cabin stewardess, had left her research job in a laboratory in Odessa and left her 10-year-old boy with her mother, so she could earn enough for the family to move into their own flat.

The captain almost certainly is not as desperate for money as many of his crew, especially those from developing countries. But his love for his family is just as profound. During my interview with him he dwelt on how cute his five-year-old son was and of the life he would like to live in his house in Barbados.

Seafarers extend their love beyond their families. Their shared goals and experiences at sea nurture love and solidarity among seafarers themselves. No matter which countries they come from, what kind of ships they sail, or in which part of the world they meet, they feel a sense of kinship as soon as they learn from each other that they are seafarers. In Agadir, I came across a large fleet of Chinese fishing ships and lunched with a captain and his men who were all from Shanghai and had been away for nearly two years. The 51-year-old captain told me that the work and life on fishing ships were even harder than on merchant vessels. He "chose" to do the job because he wanted to buy a taxi for his unemployed son and to support his second son through university.

Back on "my ship", I mentioned this to the captain. He didn't say much, but quietly prepared a large gift bag full of cigarettes and bottles of brandy and whisky and urged me to give it to the Chinese captain and his men. An hour later, the Chinese captain saw me to the cruise ship and handed me a dragon-patterned gift bag and asked me to deliver it to "your captain". Inside were a carton of *Da Zhonghua* (Great China) and a packet of Shanghai jasmine green tea leaves. The two had never met. They live on different sides of the globe, they speak different languages, eat different foods and sing different folk songs. But their hearts are linked as they share the same seas and oceans.