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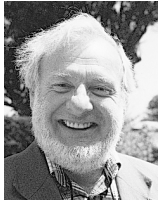
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## The SIRC column

# Study looks at mixed nationality crews

**Professor Tony Lane, director of the Seafarers' International Research Centre, looks at some of the results of research into crewing patterns**



FIFTEEN or so years ago, in the first half of the 1980s, a lot of ships began to acquire what were often called "exotic" crews. Seized by an economic crisis where there were too many ships chasing dwindling volumes of cargo, shipowners went in search of cheaper running costs. The first step was flagging out and the second was recruiting seafarers from countries where employment costs were relatively low. Most of the world's ships continued to be owned in Europe and Japan but European and Japanese crews were replaced by seafarers recruited in S and SE Asia. By the 1990s, Eastern European crews joined the stream of new entrants, and in the 2000s it is the turn of Chinese and Latin Americans.

The word "exotic" was not normally used to describe crews from countries and regions who were new to employment in "western" ships but was reserved for crews assembled from a wide range of different nationalities. Like the crew of the Liberian-flagged, Good Faith, a 9,000-ton general cargo ship which in 1993 had twelve nationalities. The master was Dutch, the chief engineer Filipino. The other officers were from Croatia, Poland, India and Ghana. Ratings and petty officers were three Cape Verdeans, three Chileans, four Filipinos, two Portuguese, and one each from Croatia, Ecuador, Germany and Togo.

The Good Faith was one of the 1,078 ships' crews in the first systematic survey of crewing patterns which was carried out in 1993 and reported by SIRC in 1996. If we define exotic crews as those with five or more nationalities, then the survey did not find so very many. Multinational crews were mainly found on flag of convenience ships, and in 1993 the three largest FOCs were: Cyprus, where we found eight out of 70 ships with crews of five or more nationalities; Liberia, where four out of 37 ships had five or more nationalities; Panama, where 11 out of 61 crews had five or more nationalities. In short, we could say that one in six ships flying flags of convenience had an "exotic" crew. The latest SIRC study,

conducted in 1999 and examining the crews of a much bigger sample (approx. 20,000 ships), is producing similar results. Mixed nationality crews have become "normal" but multinational or "exotic" crews, though common, are a long way from being typical.

It is often pointed out that ships' crews have frequently been formed in the past out of peoples drawn from a wide variety of world regions. In his wonderful book, *Spain's Men of the Sea*, the historian P E Perez-Mallaina notes that Spanish ships in the 16th century usually had half their crews made up of Italians, French, Dutch and Portuguese. In his book on English ships in the 17th and 18th centuries, Peter Earle notes that "Swedes and Danes, Germans and Dutchmen, Italians, Greeks and Portuguese, Hungarians and Poles, Cypriots and Maltese" were commonly employed to make good the shortages of British seamen brought about by the British navy's practice of forcibly stealing men from merchant ships. The same practices later in the century often stripped British crews out of East Indiamen when lying in Calcutta. The only way for these ships to get home was by recruiting local labour. It was the Napoleonic wars that saw the development of an organised labour market for Indian seamen on European ships.

Ever since the beginning of long-distance seaborne trade, mixed-nationality crews have been common, and for pretty prosaic reasons. Deaths from accidents, violent encounters with indigenous peoples and other piratical adventurers, malnutrition and disease meant that the ships of da Gama, Magellan and Drake, for example, could only return home by finding local replacements. Later, and especially from the 18th century when world trade became more and more organised, the larger ports of Europe and N America developed "sailortowns" made up of seafarers from around the world who were between ships. The catch-as-catch-can method of recruiting crews from the ever-shifting sailortown populations virtually guaranteed that crews of

British ships were multinational. By the second half of the 19th century and through into the pre-WW1 decades, British sailing ships' fo'c'sles might have housed West Indians, Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, French, Filipinos, Italians, Afro-Americans, Japanese, Chinese, Cape Verdeans, Chileans etc. In short, though the word was not then used, "exotic" crews.

It may be tempting because of the obvious similarities, but it is nevertheless a mistake, to suppose that during the closing decades of the 20th century we have simply seen history repeating itself in respect of crewing practices. The multinational crews of the 19th century British sailing ships were not chosen by shipowners and their agents on the basis of rational calculation of cost (because everyone, regardless of nationality, had the same wage) nor were nationalities mixed as a result of perceptions of who mixed best with whom. Crews were assembled from among those who presented themselves to the ship. The modern seafarers' labour market is highly organised. Shipowners and shipmanagers have crewing policies which are continuously reviewed as new information arrives, and whole crews are assembled by phone, fax and email and flown around the world. This organisation, furthermore, is reinforced and its reach extended when large employers regularly travel the world to check the existing supply chain and take the measure of potential new sources of labour. Organisation of this kind leads employers into concentrating their supply chains in a relatively small number of countries at any one time. It also encourages them to develop definite policies regarding how far particular nationalities are best kept in single nationality crews or can effectively be mixed with other nationalities. To the extent that there is a widely held view on the optimal use of a mixed nationality workforce, the consensus is that, while it may often be safe and productive to have a mixed nationality officer corps, the rating complement is best when all members have the same nationality. There is another view which has it that the best crew has as many nationalities as it has members because in that way there can never be a majority or a minority. This is an attractive policy. It promotes the idea that unity is best built out of diversity.

As soon as a ship has a

crew it has a "society" or, if you prefer, a "community" – a group of people living together through tacit observance of a set of rules and customs which are flexible enough to accommodate some difference but tight enough to maintain cohesion. The obvious question where crews consist of different nationalities is how far crews of this sort are able to function cohesively. One of SIRC's research projects has been looking at this question.

Over the past two years we have been sailing aboard ships of different sizes and working in different trades, with a view to discovering what sort of impact mixed nationality crews have upon shipboard society. We have made voyages on mini-bulkers, a reefer, a car carrier, a large container ship, a deep-sea ro-ro, several tankers, a gas carrier and a long haul bulker. Of these, only two have had the same combination of nationalities. Where individual nationalities are concerned, we have sailed with Filipinos, Bangladeshis, Indians, Pakistanis, Ghanaians, Cape Verdeans, Britons, Poles, Germans, Swedes, Croatians. While we have still to complete several more voyages to round off our programme, we are fairly confident that these are unlikely to disturb our conclusion: that mixed nationality crews work extremely well, and that generally there is no reason to suppose that they are in any way inferior to single nationality crews.

They work best, of course, where employers have a strong anti-racial discrimination policy and provide training in language communication. Not only have we found no evidence whatever that nationality is a barrier to forming a cohesive shipboard society, but we have also found many seafarers who actually prefer mixed nationality crews. After all, a single nationality crew will inevitably be some sort of microcosm of the society from which it is drawn and might therefore carry within it the conflicts of that society. Better, therefore, if one is to be cooped up with small numbers of people for a long period, to have with familiar who are also strangers? Seafarers have often prided themselves on their internationalism. Modern crewing practices undoubtedly provide them with many opportunities to test and develop internationalist credentials. Perhaps, even, the contemporary seafarer is a prototype global citizen? I would like to think so.