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Modernity and Tradition at Sea: Filipino Seafarers and their Superstitious Beliefs

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Abstract

The architectural and technological modernity of contemporary ships belies the prevalence of the multitude of superstitious beliefs which are held and honored by crew members in their daily lives. This article focuses on the superstitious beliefs of Filipino seafarers, in particular, and how these beliefs connect them to their more localized homeland communities, while serving at sea, thereby bridging the divide between workplace modernity and community-based traditions. We explore the ways in which the expression of community-based superstitious beliefs combines with traditional occupational attitudes to connect the localized values of seafarers to the complex shipboard cultures associated with the global shipping industry. The data presented in this article are derived from interviews and fieldnotes associated with voyages made on two cargo ships in 2017 and 2018. These are contextualized with broader fieldwork notes made by the authors on a further 12 shipboard voyages on cargo vessels in the period 1999–2015.

Keywords

locality, merchant ships, modernity, tradition, seafarers, superstitions

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Introduction

A bird's eye view of a ship offers a huge insight into human ingenuity. A vast contemporary cargo vessel inspires little but awe. It seems that a miracle of technology has facilitated an unnatural phenomenon, allowing an enormous heavy metal object filled with cargo to float on cerulean waters, sometimes turbulent and tempestuous, sometimes calm and still, but always filled with risk. The metal coruscates in the sun. The ship might be a container vessel filled with cheaply manufactured goods being transported from South-East Asia to one of Europe's biggest container ports. It might be a tanker taking crude oil across the North Sea from Norway to refineries in Canada, or perhaps it is a fruit ship bringing avocadoes, apples, or pears, from a remote port in Argentina to a major UK transport hub. To manage its safe transit, to complete the loading and unloading of cargoes, and to avoid environmental pollution and harm, such a ship is crewed by skilled seafarers. Most frequently, they are from a variety of countries and hold different passports. Officers may hail from Europe, India, the Philippines, and China, while ratings are mostly from the global south. The Philippines is one of the biggest suppliers of seafarers to the global merchant fleet alongside Russia, Indonesia, China, and India (BIMCO/ICS 2021).

In the Philippines, work as a seafarer is very popular (Amante 2003; Dacanay 2003; Turgo 2020). It offers an opportunity for the country's lower and middle classes to improve their social and economic standing. Furthermore, seafaring also allows members of both urban and rural communities in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao (three island groups in the Philippines) to attain well-paid work that will allow them to support their extended families and to attain a status in the community that is so high that they may be hailed as modern-day heroes (Encinas-Franco 2015; McKay 2007; Turgo 2021). Filipino seafarers are predominantly Roman Catholic. The practice of the Christian faith in the Philippines can be described as syncretic, and it is usually blended with precolonial and localized beliefs (Macaranas 2021; Schumacher 1984; Sison 2009). Some of these syncretic religious practices manifest during special religious events (like the Holy Week and town fiestas) or even in everyday life, where superstitions complement the Christian faith or what academics may call split-level Christianity (Cornelio 2014).

In order to attain work at sea, would-be officers must first attend maritime colleges to attain degrees and sail as cadets for a specified period of time. They can then sit exams to qualify for government-issued licenses. Ratings must also undertake basic certificated training in line with international standards before they can apply for work on board international vessels. In both cases,

work is generally secured after registering with crewing agencies that supply crews to vessel operators whose fleets are generally owned in The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development/OECD countries.

On board a vessel, a seafarer's everyday life follows a predictable rhythm (Sampson 2024). Officers and ratings are likely to undertake split shifts at sea that involve working ten hours a day and often seven days a week. In port, their hours are generally longer as cargoes are loaded and discharged, security watches are maintained, stores and bunkers are loaded, and engine room work that cannot be done at sea is scheduled. At work, they may chisel away rust, keep engine machinery running, navigate using sophisticated equipment, and communicate with people ashore through email and satellite phone. Meanwhile, the realm of home is never far away from a seafarer's mind. When a seafarer opens his cabin door, he may touch a picture of a saint pinned to the back of the door and whisper a short prayer. "Salamat po sa ligtas na maghapon," (Thank you for a safe day). He likely opens his laptop and connects to his family for a chat on Facebook. Perhaps, they have a new house, paid for by his salary at sea, and they are preparing for a housewarming (or house blessing, as Filipinos put it). The seafarer might ask if coins and candies are already prepared in a bowl so that they can be showered upon the people present once the blessing is concluded. They might remind their wife that there should also be a container full of rice. These symbolize abundance. Then, he might ask whether the staircases going to the second floor (in the Philippines, the first floor is the ground floor) do not end in a multiple of three (Oro, Plata, and Mata); M means bad luck. His wife perhaps assures him that the number of steps ends with an O which is gold and means good luck. Before he ends the chat, the seafarer might notice that one of his children is sweeping the floor. It is 8:30 in the evening in the Philippines. He asks his wife to stop the child from what he is doing. Sweeping the floor in the Philippines at night means getting rid of good luck.

Filipino seafarers live between and betwixt tradition and modern lives. While they work in an environment that strictly follows the logic of evidence-based decision making, they frequently embody a world view that is determined by a belief in a range of local superstitions. For example, some Filipino seafarers that we talked to would not cut their fingernails at night for fear of causing sickness, or worse, death in the family. They learnt the practice ashore and continue to enact it at sea. Others might learn not whistle on board for fear that they will invoke a storm, and they continue to heed this superstition even back on dry land. These beliefs and practices do not exist in a vacuum. Many Filipino seafarers lament that working at sea is so risky that they are not assured of coming back alive at the end of every contract. Belief in superstitions provides them with a shield from the dangers at sea.

So, what are superstitions and how are they different from religions, beliefs in magic and witchcraft, and beliefs in the supernatural world? We have previously explored the role of religious faith in seafarers' lives (Sampson et al. 2020) and the particular beliefs of Filipino seafarers (Smith et al. 2021 who we sailed with in our ESRC study (ref no. ES/N019423/1). While there are many overlaps between religion, magic, witchcraft, and superstition, with none being based upon the principles of scientific rationality, there are some interesting differences too. These could be the subject of a long treatise, but here we make the following observations that inform our article. We consider religious faith to be shaped by institutions and to be associated with long-term social goals many of which concern the afterlife. Magic is seen to be channeled through, or held by, humans or animals lending them power to pursue individual goals in the earthly realm. We consider it to be less concerned with long-term community ideals or notions of the afterlife. The supernatural world is largely concerned with beings and things that are not regarded as natural. As such a God, a ghost, or a poltergeist may all be considered supernatural beings. Meanwhile, a superstitious belief is more concerned with notions of "luck" and "fortune." When practiced, superstitions are not generally associated with a specific source of power (religious or magical) or a specific notion of a religious figure or supernatural being. We have little idea of the origin of a superstition and are usually unconcerned with the source of the promised luck or protection from misfortune.

Often, superstitions are learnt during childhood; however, they also feature in adult experiences, and new practices may be adopted in new circumstances, such as when buying a lottery ticket (selecting "lucky" numbers, see Jiang, Cho, Adaval 2009), sitting an exam (Saenko 2005), or engaging in competitive sport (wearing "lucky" items of clothing or engaging in set pre-competition rituals; Ofori 2013). Superstitions may also change overtime and may be adapted to places and circumstances. As Ng et al. (2010) explained:

> While some old ones have eventually vanished, new ones keep developing, while many others persist. Friday the 13th, black cats, and evil eye, among others, are factors that many consider in their everyday decisions (293).

Superstitions are often described as traditional beliefs (Pelizzo, Turganov, Kuzenbayev 2023). They can be important in how people make sense of randomness and form strategies for dealing with risk (Hirshleifer, Jian, Zhang 2018, 235). Though perceived to be "a wrong idea about external reality" (Beck and Forstmeier 2007, 36), belief in superstitions allows for dangers to be perceived as manageable. Being far from home in most of their working lives, and working and living in high risky and challenging environment,

superstitions provide seafarers with ways of dealing with the unseen and unexpected realities in their lives.

As a country with more than 7,000 islands and 186 languages, different ethno-linguistic groups in the Philippines share similar and also observe particular faith and place-based superstitions. Living and acting in a starkly modern environment while carrying a metaphorical backpack of superstitions, seafarers lead bifurcated lives. This is so, because while occupying the space of the ship, they are also simultaneously attached to another place, their place of origin (Sampson 2013; Turgo 2024). The coming together of the two "worlds," the modern and the traditional, produces a unique context for a seafarers' work: One which is informed not only by the practices and beliefs of their own homelands but is also influenced by superstitions that have become a part of the occupational culture found on board globally trading contemporary cargo vessels. This polymorphous culture has been shaped over several centuries, and seafarers' traditions and superstitions encompass beliefs and practices from disparate communities scattered across the globe. It tells us much about how modern life at sea is constituted and lived on a daily basis. While the merchant ship embodies the might of science and the rationality of the human mind, it also harbors and represents the complexities and imponderabilia of human life.

In this article, the superstitious beliefs of seafarers are viewed in the context of seafarers' need to balance the interests of work and the self in an environment, which requires them to traverse local boundaries and engage with global modernity. We consider "how locality is produced along and against global flows (Appadurai 1996, cited in Guano 2002, 182)." When belief in superstitions is enacted, localities may be reproduced and imagined. These are generally associated with identity (Kadafi and Utami 2021; Siagian 2020). In this article, we consider the imagined reproductions of localities as connections to places. Localities as connections to places in this sense "incarnate people's feelings, experiences, and memories [. . .]" (Tuan 1979, cited in Wang et al. 2023, 2). Superstitions connect Filipino seafarers to their communities, allowing them to anchor themselves to their homelands while making them feel protected from shipboard risks.

In some senses, seafarers epitomize long established tensions between rationalism and romanticism, working in an environment where "objective knowledge," "instinct," and "intuition" (Koch 1993) collide or at the least co-exist. Seafarers navigate the modern world of shipping (with its technology, uniformity, bureaucracy, and economic rationality) while placing value and meaning on the local and traditional ideas of their home communities. There are many international regulations that seafarers are required to uniformly adhere to on board (e.g., international collision avoidance regulations

known as COLREGs/Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea) or safety management system requirements which govern how various work-related procedures are undertaken) but they may nevertheless cling to, and sometimes enact, social beliefs that belie the rationality of the shipboard space. They draw from their locales for traditional beliefs, and through these, they maintain a strong connection to their loved ones ashore. In this sense, they enact their localism in the realm of global modernity—in the context of the ship.

Augmenting maritime and migrant studies (Borovnik 2004, Markkula 2021, Sampson 2003, 2013), this article focuses on the superstitious beliefs of Filipino seafarers. We identify seafarers' need to add meaning to their lives and retain elements of their personal biographies and identities in the context of a life at sea which follows a structured, externally determined, rhythm and social hierarchy. The article, therefore, aims to contribute to our understanding of modernities in the contemporary world through the perceptions of Filipino seafarers as they explain and expound on their beliefs on superstitions and how these connect them to life ashore. The article adds further empirical content to what we already know about abstract ideas of modernity and locality. It goes beyond this, however, in extending our appreciation of how modernity and locality can co-exist. In a sense, for Filipino seafarers to experience modernity, both as a workplace context and subjectivity, they also need to imagine local connections to their places of origin. Enactment of domestic superstitions while onboard strengthens the comforting sense of connection to far distant homes and families.

As such, the article intervenes and provides more textured nuances in the debate concerning the entanglements of modernity in locality and the production and reproduction of locality in modernity (Appadurai 1995; Cooke 1990; Gerritsen 2012). (This sentence should come right after the previous sentence ending in ...and families. There should be no gap, and new paragraph here).

Methods

This article is based on specific data gathered from two ship voyages that took place in 2017 (Ship1) and 2018 (Ship2) as part of a study funded by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (grant number ES/N019423/1) and contextual shipboard ethnographic data that were collected in the period 1999 to 2015 (see Sampson 2013; 2024). In the two shipboard voyages that focused specifically on issues of faith (including all aspects of belief), Turgo interacted with and interviewed the crew focusing on their everyday life on board and ashore. In the course of the fieldwork, 55 interviews were conducted with seafarers of varying ethnic backgrounds. This

article specifically concentrates on the accounts of 37 Filipino participants. The majority of the crew from the Philippines were Roman Catholics (see Sampson et al. 2020). Turgo speaks Filipino, the national language of the Philippines. This assisted him in fostering a nuanced rapport with the crew and allowed him to ask personal questions in relation to individual beliefs and superstitions. While sharing ethnic affiliation with research participants has its own fair share of drawbacks (Turgo and Sampson 2021), Turgo considered that he was able to use it to his advantage, exploring issues and areas which might have been more challenging for a non-Filipino researcher. At the very least, he had the requisite background understanding of Filipino traditional beliefs, in witchcraft and superstition, and an understanding of contemporary Catholicism within the Philippines.

Modernity, Superstitions, and Locality

As a concept identified with superiority over the "traditional," modernity is a currency that continues to define the image of the West vis a vis other places (Mitchell 2000). Postcolonial critiques have underlined the colonial origins of the concept of modernity, arguing that colonial encounters produced a binary between modernity and tradition(Dirks 1990, 28, cited in Koch 2010, 771). For instance, the colonial history of many countries is oftentimes predicated on this perceived duality, say, "between 'spiritual' India and the 'modern' West (Haines 2011, 194)." Modernity, in this sense, is quite literally a worldview: a way of imagining both space and people through temporal idioms of progress and backwardness (Pigg 1996, 163).

In recent decades, modernity has been identified as associated with plurality, rather than as a singular construct. The result is what Michael Watts identifies as the "production of new, local modernities" out of the historical experiences and the cultural and symbolic resources available to people in specific settings (Mills 1997, 42). Nowadays, we might speak of modernities rather than modernity, and place value on what is otherwise conceived to be outside of it. Notably, "modernity persists as an imaginary and continuously shifting site of global/local claims, commitments, and knowledge, forged within uneven dialogues about the place of those who move in and out of categories of otherness" (Rofel 1999, 3, cited in Koch 2010, 771).

The contemporary world is frequently encountered as bifurcated with modernity and tradition co-existing in place-based, local contexts. The use of Tupperware in the Mexican village studied by De Vidas (2008), for example, was not interpreted as a subversion of the beliefs and traditions of the local community. Rather, its practical use was acknowledged without the further assignation or adoption of value. As De Vidas (2008) further explained:

> Tupperware containers are desirable in La Esperanza because they fulfil a very useful function in the relations of exchange and mutual assistance. That is where their value lies, not in the fact that in another cultural context these objects are associated with a certain icon arising from another value system (279).

In other instances, the urban landscape in many places is oftentimes sutured and interwoven with re-used and re-purposed old buildings that blend well with modern skycrapers. Modern-day restaurants offer heirloom recipes passed down from generation to generation, but with a modern twist. Global tourism is replete with activities that speak of heritage sojourning, living in the present while experiencing the past. Healthcare provided in highly modern national systems such as the United Kingdom NHS/National Health Service may not be solely based on modern science but interspersed with ancient healing practices such as acupuncture (Lipman, Dale, MacPherson 2003). In modern day China, it is not unusual to hear of license plates ending in number four being shunned by drivers as number four represents death in Chinese (Ng, Chong, Du 2010). It is also reported by Shum, Sun, Ye (2014, 110) that "second-hand apartments located on floors ending with '8' fetch, on average, a 235 renminbi yuan (RMB) higher price (per square meter) than other floors." The age of modernity has not, therefore, stripped us of the vestiges and power of superstitions.

When navigating a global world, the local is what people may continue to hold on to in their everyday life. Local in this sense is not just a geographical territory, or a placement in place, but is also a mental map, and a set of practices coming, and drawn, from a particular place. In global migration studies, migrants may view their lives as both attached to their "new" home (the place to which they have migrated) and also the place where they previously resided (the place which they have left; Portes 1996). In this context, new local lives may emerge imbued with the cultural accoutrements of a new setting. Nevertheless, beliefs and values from their previous communities travel with migrants who need not cut all ties with their places of origin, and who may not forget the local "ways" of their past lives (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1993).

Remembering and practicing locality, that is, the locality of prior geographical terrains, may also help migrants confront the challenges of living and working in new places, or indeed, experiencing modernity as they have never known it before. It is for example well documented how Filipino migrants may enact cultural practices like town fiestas and "simbang gabi" (dawn masses) in their new homelands (Balgoa 2017; Tondo 2009). Of course, such practices are not limited to Filipino migrants, and there are many

examples offered in the broader literature. For example, Salih refers to the practices of Moroccan migrants to Italy returning to Morocco, from time to time, in order to celebrate traditional “milestones” for their children (Salih 2002). While Ham (2023) describes how Croatian, Serbian and Slovenian American communities established in Pennsylvania in the late nineteenth century continue with the performance of folk traditions associated with music and dance. Such examples reinforce the idea that the local traditions of former communities can remain an important part of migrant life offering solace, a source of solidarity, and a context for identity.

In the Philippines, seafarers are generally regarded as members of a global and super-modern external world. In rural communities, they may be seen as “progress personified.” “Urban wages, or more particularly what those wages can buy, provide the primary vehicle for most migrants’ aspirations to modernity,” (Mills 1997, 44), and in the case of Filipino seafarers, the wages they earn make them the representation of what a modern Filipino worker aspires to be. They are also considered to be well-travelled and oftentimes abreast of the times. The modernity that Filipino seafarers embody and signify is made even more salient by the state-supported discourse that constructs them as “bagong bayani” (new heroes) (McKay 2007). They support their families back home and contribute to keeping the Philippine economy afloat through their remittances (Sampson 2013). The life of a Filipino seafarer is therefore, in itself, a testament to the value in the Philippines of modernity and of being modern.

On board cargo ships ruled by the rationality of regulations and technology, however, seafarers may resuscitate the value that they place in the traditional aspects of their home communities. On first acquaintance, the seafarers that Turgo interacted with on board did not show any sign of imbuing their lives at sea with superstitious beliefs. It seemed to him that life on board, with constant risks and economic imperatives, did not deal with the realm of chance, but was governed by scientific and bureaucratic rationality—regulations, manuals, company policies, etc. However, his detailed interviews revealed otherwise. This was not that surprising, as seafaring itself is associated with many traditions and superstitions, some of which endure today[1] (Hole 1967; Zarbazoia, Rodinadze, and Bezhanovi 2016). Our fieldwork and interviews over the years have demonstrated that a good number of seafarers continue to believe in superstitions (Sampson 2024). Many of these are associated with seafaring and are passed from one seafarer to another as part of their induction into life at sea and the overall occupational culture on board. However, the beliefs and superstitions of the Filipino seafarers who participated in interviews with Turgo in 2017 and 2018 revealed that they were different. These superstitions sometimes had little relevance on board (and

indeed they were frequently disregarded by seafarers at sea while they nevertheless reminded family members ashore to adhere to them). In many ways, their preservation appeared to play a part in connecting isolated seafarers to their families, to their communities, and to the Philippines. On board, seafarers' privately held beliefs in superstitions represented their chance to remind themselves of their connection to a known and more familiar locality.

Understanding superstition is important in its own right (Hirshleifer et al. 2018, 235). At sea, Filipino seafarers' belief in a variety of superstitions reveals how adherence to traditional beliefs may serve a life that is in constant movement and displacement. By looking into what Filipino seafarers think and enact in private, we have the opportunity to think carefully about how Filipino seafarers manage modernity while simultaneously retaining a part of the traditional, at sea.

Superstitions at Home

Our research revealed that many of our participants believed in superstitions. Many of these were practiced at home and had limited practical application on board given the very different life and context of the ship. One seafarer told us about a practice he engaged in to protect him from being lost, something that would be unnecessary in a confined and technologically advanced vessel. He described how:

> AB2: I have this practise of turning my shirt inside out whenever I walk in the night from our house to the town. You see, our house is far from the town centre and this practice was taught to us by my grandparents so that, according to them, we would not get lost along the way. I still do that as a force of habit when I go home but only when I am in the middle of a thicket or farm lands because according to beliefs these are the places where mischievous spirits reside. (Ship2, AB2, Roman Catholic)

Another example related to bathing something which is indeed necessary after a day's shipboard work. Nonetheless, regardless of the impracticality and unhygienic nature of it all, some Filipino seafarers would still shun bathing on Good Friday (and would just resort to cleaning themselves using wet towel). A seafarer told us:

> M2: On Good Friday, they say that we should not take a bath, and therefore, I also do not take a bath (laughs). That's only for a day anyway. All that I know is that when you take a bath you will turn into stone. (Ship1, Messman2, Roman Catholic)

It is often averred that Filipinos are particularly family-oriented (Medina 2008). Those who migrate overseas to work often attribute this to a desire to provide, financially, for their families. In talking about superstitions, we noted the particular importance of family members in the learning of, and adherence to, superstitious behaviors. One seafarer told us of some superstitions that apply to night-time activities such as avoiding sweeping the floor or lending others money:

> AB3: [. . .] we have some being practised at home. So, in the evening we don't sweep the floor for the fear of getting rid of good luck and then if somebody borrows money, it should not be done at night.
>
> INT: And you practise them?
>
> AB3: Yes, I do. I will have nothing to lose really if I practise them and my parents believe in them, so as my wife so I just follow them. (Ship2, AB3, Roman Catholic)

Even where seafarers said that they did not really believe in traditional superstitions themselves they often followed particular practices just to "go along with" the attitudes of their family and community. One explained that he no longer believed in superstitions but to avoid arguments followed the superstitious instruction of his mother. He explained that:

> M1: When I was still a kid, yes, I believed in superstitions but nowadays, in my age, I don't believe in superstitions anymore. My mother has loads of them and even until now, when I am in the Philippines, she would tell me not to do certain things at certain time of the day like do not sweep the floor at night. I just follow her to avoid argument. (Ship2, Messman1, Roman Catholic)

Another spoke in a similar vein describing how:

> 3M: I don't have any and I don't believe in superstitions but at home, my parents practise a lot; they do have many superstitious beliefs and I just do what they want me to do so that I am at peace with everyone in the house. (Ship2, 3M, Roman Catholic)

Ghosts and other kinds of supernatural beings often haunt the imagination of Filipino seafarers. Those who said that they did not have any superstitious beliefs, as such, nevertheless described believing in ghosts. In an interview, a junior officer shared an account of how on one of his ships the captain died, most probably due to complications in diabetes.[2] He said that even after the

dead body of the captain had been repatriated, he and his colleagues dreaded the prospect of going to the engine room in the middle of the night for the fear of seeing his ghost. In the labyrinthine space of the ship, going to the engine room means going through hallways and places where the deceased captain would have spent time. As a result, being alone in the middle of the night, with only the hum of the engine and the AC unit for "company" can readily be understood as inciting fear and trepidation in such circumstances.

In the rural areas of the Philippines which supply the global labor market with seafarers, a belief in supernatural beings remains relatively commonplace. This is usually manifested in agricultural rituals and healing practices (Jocano 1967, Villanueva 2021). These beliefs appeared to be ingrained in our participants and many of the Filipino seafarers who talked to us described a belief in the spirit world. One, for example, said that he did not believe in superstitions. However, he went on to say that he believed very strongly in spirits.

> AB1: [. . .] there was one time, I was carrying my child and he saw a spirit. He played with a spirit.
>
> INT: Wow.
>
> AB1: Then my son said, daddy, mumu (spirit). Then I told him, it is okay make friends with him.
>
> INT: You said that?
>
> AB1: Yes. You know, there is no harm in making friends with spirits. So, we went to our friend's place and in that place there was a spirit which played with my son. So, I let him play with my son. Then when we left the place, we said good bye to the spirit and then at home, the spirit followed us. Our door in the bedroom would make noises and my son would come to me and say, daddy, mumu (spirit). Then because my son did not want to play with the spirit anymore, he fell ill, he got rashes all over his body. So, the "albularyo" (traditional healers) told me that the spirit must have played on my son. And we had to appease them through a ritual which we did and my son's rashes disappeared the following day. (Ship2, AB1, Roman Catholic)

Witchcraft and a belief in modern-day witches was also strongly characteristic of many Filipino seafarers' beliefs. One explained how:

> W: Yes, sir, I believe [. . .] in witchcraft.
>
> INT: Why do you believe in them?

W: There were events in my places that strengthened my belief in them. My grandfather was a traditional healer and he told me stories of battles against witches, monsters. (Ship2, Wiper, Roman Catholic)

Another described how:

M1: I believe in witchcraft. Somebody from my place had been a victim of witchcraft. That's why I believe in that.

INT: What happened?

M1: A cousin of my wife had a quarrel with somebody. This person apparently belonged to a family of witches. My wife's cousin then had a problem with his stomach. It grew really big. When he was brought to a quack doctor the quack doctor said that it's too late already. My wife's cousin had sought remedy in the first months of his illness from doctors so when the quack doctor had a look at him, apparently, the curse was already well spread in his body. He should have been brought first to a quack doctor for remedy. He soon died. But before he died, he vomited this green substance. That's my wife's story.

[. . .] And then my father, I thought I would not talk about him, he was also a victim of witchcraft. It's only now that I have given thought to this, he could also be a victim of witchcraft.

INT: What happened to your father?

M1: He also had a bloated tummy, similar to the case of my wife's cousin. Then when he died they found several needles planted in his back. I was at sea when he died. (Ship1, Messman1, Roman Catholic)

Aswang (a shape-shifting, vampire like creature) is the most feared mythological creature in rural Philippines. The belief in its existence is so engraved in the memory of Filipinos that during the Huk insurgents in the 1950s (a peasant uprising in Central Luzon), it was used by government operatives to scare Filipino insurgents (Clemente 2015). In the story shared by a seafarer below, he spoke about his own experience with aswang.

AB3: I think I believe in the existence of aswang because I had an experience with it.

INT: Can you tell us the story?

AB3: I was then alone in our house. I am quite used to being alone even at night even when I was still a kid. But on my last vacation, telling the story makes me

> shiver (laughs), something happened. The roof of our house did not have a ceiling; it was a normal roof, the corrugated iron type, then suddenly I heard the sound of a scurrying cat. There was a cat and there it was making noise, ngyawww. As you know cats usually mimic the cries of tiyanak,[3] but I did not pay much attention to it. Then suddenly the ceiling seemed like going to collapse; there was a part that became so low, seemed like something so heavy on the roof was weighing it down. I told myself not even throwing a cat and hitting the roof would not have the same impact.
>
> INT: You really saw what's happening there?
>
> AB3: I really saw what happening because a part of the ceiling became so low like it was being pushed down from above.
>
> INT: Really low.
>
> AB3: The sudden depression of that part of our ceiling was staggering. You can't make it happen even if you ask someone to jump on the roof. I was really shocked. I got goosebumps. Then after sometime it returned to normal. Then I heard nothing after that, no more noise. My room was in the middle of the house and if there was something or someone on the roof causing the ceiling to be that low, it or he should be creating some noise because it/he would have to move around. I got a stick and tried to reach for the ceiling, poking around. I tried making a noise, huy, huy, because I thought it must be a person, someone, could be a thief. At that time, I was alone in the house. Or it could be an intruder, so I cried out, huy, huy, it's like telling myself, it's not a ghost, no. Then I looked for a flashlight. I climbed up the roof to check who was there. I saw no one. After that I hastily went to our neighbor's house. I told the people there that I think someone is on our roof. They had a look and just the same they saw nothing. Because of that experience I somehow believe that indeed aswang exist. (Ship1, AB, Jesus is Lord)

Belief in shore-based superstitions and the supernatural does not manifest in the everyday life of Filipino seafarers unless they are asked about them. They do not hold currency in relation to how affairs and operational activities are conducted on board. Seafarers know that in relation to operational matters on board, they should only rely on what they have learned from years of attendance in maritime academies. In this sense, the rationalities of modernity take precedence over everything else. However, the continued belief in superstitions and the supernatural also attests to the continued value that seafarers ascribe to their connection to a private and personal life ashore. The private and the personal sphere affords them with a narrative and stories to share with

others to express their constant and unbroken connection to a familiar and known locality.

Superstitions on Board

Sometimes seafarers recognized that the superstitious behaviors they practiced at home had no relevance to the ship. This was partly due to the different environment and context of the vessel, but it also related to the absence of others who endorsed and reinforced the need and desire to conform with superstitious beliefs. One seafarer explained that:

> E: My wife is a crucial agent in many ways as she is the one who reminds me not to do certain things because they bring bad luck. So I am reminded not to do certain things and to follow certain practices. But on board, it is different as no one really cares, no one will tell me not to do this and that. (S2, Electrician, Iglesia Filipina Independiente)

However, there were participants who described an overlap between their beliefs and practices ashore and those they adhered to onboard. One seafarer, for example, explained that even though he did not strongly believe the superstitions that his parents taught him, he nevertheless continued to observe them on board. He explained how:

> OS2: Actually, I don't know why I believe in some of them. But I just follow what my parents told me. So, for example, I don't cut my fingernails at night. Or I don't sweep the floor at night. Here on board, I don't clean my cabin at night. I just follow them because I just thought that I would not lose anything anyway if I follow them. (S2, OS2, Roman Catholic).

Superstitious beliefs which are ship-based are often learned from working with others on board. These people may be other Filipinos or they could hold a different nationality. One seafarer was convinced by friends that a sister ship was haunted after a seafarer died on board. He explained that:

> OS2: You know, there is a ship in the company called (name of the ship). It is similar to this ship as it is also a LNG, same specs. I heard stories that somebody died there and that his ghost was haunting the ship. But I have never had an experience with ghosts even ashore. But because of the stories that I usually hear from seafarers then I get really scared sometimes especially when I do inspection on my own on the deck. (S2, OS2, Roman Catholic)

Given the dangers associated with being caught in storms and high seas, it is unsurprising to discover that many, ship-based belief in superstitions revolve around meteorological phenomena. Weather-based superstitions held considerable sway over seafarers who were keen not to court disaster. One explained that:

> CC: I don't whistle because they say that if you whistle you are attracting ill wind. I heard that also from a Spanish captain because he once reprimanded one of our messmen for whistling. He told the messman: Do you want the weather to go sour? They also say that it is not good to bring an umbrella on board. The meaning is also the same. There are captains who get angry when they see seafarers carrying an umbrella. So, all these things I try to avoid doing. I will not lose anything if I observe them anyway. (S2, Chief Cook, Roman Catholic).

Another gave an account of how:

> M2: [. . .] I remember, one time, one of the crew trapped a bird and put it in a cage. You know what, some hours later, the sea went rough so one of crew asked that the bird be freed so that the sea would calm down. And you won't believe it, later on, gradually, the weather changed and the sea was like one vast expanse of mirror as if nothing happened. I could not believe it. So that made me believe in the admonition that it is not good to catch birds at sea. (S2, Messman2, Roman Catholic)

Belief in superstitions on board was associated with the hazardous shipboard environment and a heightened awareness of risk and danger that was also brought home in management systems that stressed the need to cultivate and maintain a safety culture. This led seafarers to imagine or reimagine a variety of ways they could keep safe relying, in part, on following superstitious edicts. In one instance, a seafarer told us he took particular care not to have an accident on a Good Friday as this would be unlucky and would be slow in healing. He described how:

> M2: I take good care of myself on Good Friday. In our place we have this belief that you should not suffer from injury on Good Friday because the healing takes time. I really believe in that because my parents were a firm believer of that. (S2, Messman2, Roman Catholic)

He was not alone in this practice. For many Roman Catholic Filipinos, Easter is the holiest season of the year, and a number of Filipino seafarers held the belief that during this period, especially on Good Friday, people were more susceptible to accidents because Christ is "dead." One explained how:

> F: [. . .] On Good Friday we don't do any work as God is dead and we don't want involve in any accident as this would be fatal. In my case, I try to be safe always on Good Friday especially when we have work. I really take extra precaution. (S2, Fitter, Roman Catholic)

There were also specific myths and beliefs pertaining to women on board. One seafarer described how he had encountered colleagues who persisted with a belief that it was unlucky to have women present on board a vessel at sea. He told us:

> E: I remember one of our officers on my previous ship. He did not like women officers. He was a Filipino. According to him women, because they menstruate, make ship prone to accidents. He said that he once had a woman third engineer and they always suffered from blackout. (S1, Electrician, Roman Catholic)

Another seafarer thought it was unlucky to talk about women during sensitive operations as this could jeopardize their safe completion. He explained that he shared some of these beliefs with Norwegian seafarers he had sailed with:

> CM2: [. . .] I forbid the crew to talk about women when we are in an operation. It is bad luck. That could result in accident. So those who had worked with me on other vessels, they know what I don't like during operations. It is a jinx to talk about women during operations, that's what I believe in. You see, Norwegians are also full of superstitions. They won't just tell you. So, the ship is a woman and when there is a woman on board, there will always be bad weather wherever the ship goes. (S2, Chief Mate2, Potter's House)

Inevitably among our participants we also found seafarers who did not believe in superstitions at all. A good number of them said that in their younger days, they used to practice a slew of superstitious beliefs. However, as they grew older, they realized that these beliefs were not rational. However, these seafarers also frequently said that in most cases would follow their old ways, in any case, because they thought that this would not cost them anything. One described how:

> 3E: [. . .] I don't believe in any of them. I have not seen any yet, so what to believe? You see, they are only real in movies, in tv shows. Though, there is this belief that your front door should face the east, where the sun rises, and that's what we did when we built our new house. I thought, why not, I would not lose anything if I believe in it. (S2, Third Engineer, Roman Catholic)

Along similar lines, seafarers who were not superstitious said that they would respect the belief of others. One suggested that:

> F: I don't have any personal experience. But I heard that it's true. But I have not seen it with my own eyes yet. And I think there is nothing wrong if you believe in it, you will lose nothing. (S1, Fitter, Roman Catholic)

Another described how:

> 3M: I don't have any. If people have and they do them on board, I don't say a thing, I just respect them.
>
> INT: Like what?
>
> 3M: Like I remember a Filipino chief mate told me that I should not be saying anything when the weather is fine because that would change the weather for the worse. I did not argue with him. So in his presence I would not say anything about the weather. I found it funny but then I just have to live with what other people think and believe in. The ship is one small community and I need to always be mindful of other people's beliefs. (S2, Third Mate, Roman Catholic)

Life on board is characterized by repetitive tasks, and a hierarchical chain of command. Seafarers are known not by their names but by their rank. Life-long friendships are hard to come by. Belief and the practice of superstitions, both learned from home and at sea, reconnect seafarers to a more personal and familiar world that they know. They remain their wives' husbands and their parents' children. As long as their superstitions do not jeopardize health and safety on board, belief in superstitions is beyond the reach and policing of officers and company officials—beyond the impersonal and rational world of the ship.

Filipino seafarers transcend two worlds: the global world traversed by the ship and the local domains of community life. In doing so, they shift between the paraphernalia of modernity and the symbolic and material trappings of locality. Where held, it seems that seafarers' superstitious beliefs are nourished by the helplessness that can arise on board when circumstances are beyond their control as well as the fears they have for family members who are separated from them and temporarily reside beyond the mantle of their protection. Tolerance of superstitious beliefs seems to be a key feature of the understandings of Filipino seafarers whether this pertains to local beliefs held by others in their families and local communities (and not shared by themselves) or to the differing beliefs of seafarers of different cultures. It is interesting that several seafarers observed superstitious practices on a "just in case" basis, seeing them as a very low, or no, cost insurance policy militating against ill-fate.

Discussion and Conclusion

Setting aside any discussion of the likelihood that superstitious practices offer any kind of direct practical benefits to individuals, it is nevertheless apparent that superstitions offer two distinct kinds of emotional support to seafarers. Retaining a belief in the traditional superstitious practices of their homelands allows seafarers to sustain strongly felt connections to their localities and, in effect, to their families. Superstitions serve to cushion seafarers from the impact of the impersonal, rational, and bureaucratic regime of the ship. Superstitious practices and folk tales link seafarers to their homelands, forming a significant thread in the fabric that weaves them into local communities even as they remain physically separated from them. Belief in superstitions anchor Filipino seafarers to a familiar shore, which provides them with a sense of stability and security amid the persistent feelings of precarity at sea. Beyond this, superstitions also increase seafarers' sense of security on board.

Seafaring is considered to be a dangerous occupation (Roberts 2002; Sampson 2013). Assessing occupation stressors, risks, and health among seafarers, Slišković and Penezic (2015, 29) wrote:

> Studies of seafarers' mortality indicate that this population is still characterized by a high risk of fatal accident, diseases that are the results of an unhealthy lifestyle, and also by the high level of suicides in the seafaring population, which could be seen as a reflection of impaired mental health.

As danger and precarity, both real and imagined, dominate seafarer's everyday life on board, it is not surprising that many of the superstitious beliefs that they practice are about warding off bad luck. Prohibiting whistling, for example, for fear of invoking bad weather indicates a mindset that is preoccupied with the fragilities and uncertainties of life. Though the preservation of life at sea is very much dependent on following the rigors of evidence and science-based operational manuals, belief in superstition helps seafarers to feel further protected. In the same vein, seafarers' prolonged absences heighten their fears for their families. The seafarer who admonishes his child for sweeping the floor feels he is playing an important role in family affairs, making his presence felt even in his absence. Superstitions localize threats, rendering them manageable, in the fearful context of a ship on the high seas.

At sea, many seafarers have little control over their own fate. Decisions that impact on the safety of a vessel mainly lie in the hands of shore staff (Sampson et al. 2019) or seniors on board (largely the hands of the captain) imbuing life at sea with an ever-present sense of risk. In this context, shipbound superstitions and those which have specific local origins (like avoiding

cutting nails at night) provide some comfort to seafarers, who frequently face fear, in isolation at sea. They invoke the traditional to guard against the logics of the dispassionate, economically rational, modernity of the global shipping industry. In this seemingly uneven contest, superstitions may be regarded as offering scant physical protection to seafarers, but this would be to disregard the significance of the human mental and emotional experience: To succumb to our own rationalist, modernist tendencies as social scientists.

On board the ship, safe working practices and procedures are laid down in rules and regulations formulated by manufacturers, global and local regulators, and company officials. Day-to-day decisions are anchored in the cache of experience collectively produced by a multitude of seafarers, both living and deceased. In many respects, the autonomy of traditional seafarers, forging their reputations on “seamanship,” has been replaced by a “collective mind” (Turgo 2024a, see also Weick and Roberts 1993) distilled into bureaucracies and manuals. The ship as the embodiment of modernity has a tendency to thereby dissolve a seafarer’s personal history along with their individuality and the roots to their locality. Modernity is homogenizing in many senses. In this context, many seafarers have a strong need to connect to a place where they feel they exist as something more than a replaceable cog in a wheel. To anchor to something familiar, some seafarers practice their religion (Smith et al. 2021) or homemaking routines (Turgo 2024b), and as we have seen here, some engage with the superstitious and the supernatural. In doing this, seafarers are skilled in walking a line that does not cause them to fall foul of the rational and modern imperatives of their tasks on board.

Seafarers’ task-related decisions remain based on evidence, science, and engineering, while their heartfelt spiritual beliefs assist them in feeling safer and more secure than the bureaucracies of modern life, alone, can manage. Many seafarers speak of their belief in superstitions and the supernatural as rooted in their experiences of childhood and growing up. They frequently learn to practice superstitions from their parents and extended family. Upon marriage, their repertoire of beliefs may expand as wives introduce their own practices into daily routines and ways of life. In this way, superstitious practices not only evoke the traditional, but for many seafarers, they also provide enduring links back to people, and memories, of significance in their lives. On board the deeply impersonal modern cargo vessel, such links may be considered to be invaluable.

Harmonious sociality is a significant imperative on board. In this context, seafarers have learned to demonstrate tolerance and respect for the differing views of others on board. This has already been demonstrated with regard to differing faith beliefs held by crewmembers of with different religious affiliations and none (Sampson et al. 2020). Here, we have identified the same tendencies with regard

to superstitions and the supernatural. A notable finding has been the extent to which seafarers accept and do not ridicule or diminish the superstitions of their colleagues. Nevertheless, and in common with religious observance, belief in superstitions and the supernatural is generally unspoken, and where practices are observed in public, seafarers tend to pay them little attention.

In the context of the modern cargo ship, seafarers' beliefs in superstitions are a potent reminder that there is no unitary experience or conceptualization of modernity. Rather we should consider modernities and how two or more colliding "worlds" can co-exist, perhaps complementing each other, and helping to fashion worldviews that value science and tradition alongside both global and local connections. Being part of the ship, being a seafarer is to be governed by rules, in the name of safety and in thrall to the imperatives of economics. Meanwhile, the belief or non-belief in superstitions endows a seafarer with an individuality and a place-based identity salvaged from the rational realm of the sea. The article in this sense conceives superstition as an expression and experience of connection to places.

While the focus of this article is on the superstitious beliefs of Filipino seafarers, it is also worth noting that the authors also sailed with non-Filipino seafarers and in the process got to know some of their superstitious beliefs. For instance, Turgo was surprised to find out from a Sri Lankan chief engineer that sweeping the floor after sundown was also perceived as bad luck in his home country. When Filipinos would sometimes consult a fortune teller to divine their future (or prospects for promotion), Sri Lankans would consult with astrologers for their career decisions. Through this, they also brought their own connections to localities on board.

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Notes

1. Sampson (2024) describes how a Filipino chief officer laughs as he tells her about a European captain who used to get very angry if he caught him whistling, as he believed in the seafarers' superstition that whistling on board conjures up a storm.
2. The ship's arrival had been delayed by several days due to a typhoon, and as a consequence, the captain ran out of medicine for his diabetes.
3. A vampire creature taking on the form of a baby. In Philippine popular culture, it is most commonly associated with the image of "anak ni Janice" (child of Janice) from the movie "Tiyanak" (1988) where the lead actress Janice de Belen adopted a baby which happened to be a tiyanak.

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