Transnational drifters or hyperspace dwellers: an exploration of the lives of Filipino seafarers aboard and ashore
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Transnational drifters or hyperspace dwellers: an exploration of the lives of Filipino seafarers aboard and ashore

Helen Sampson

Abstract

This article considers seafarers as transnational actors in the global economy. It is based on research undertaken as part of an ESRC/Seafarers International Research Centre [SIRC] funded project. The study utilized onboard participant observation and depth interviews to explore the lives of seafarers sailing on ships with multinational crews. In addition depth interviews were conducted with seafarers who have settled in port cities such as Rotterdam and Hamburg. Here the article investigates the extent to which such seafarers are embedded in their ‘host’ societies and examines the links they maintain with their ‘homes’ by exploring their networks, social relationships, patterns of communication, remittance habits, and investment strategies.

Keywords: Transnational; globalization; seafarers; hyperspace; Filipino; cosmopolitanism.

Defining transnational communities

In the past, the terms ‘home’ and ‘host’ have been used by anthropologists, and others, seeking to conceptualize migration in bi-polar terms. In the 1990s, however, as the idea of transnational corporations became common currency so too was the idea of transnational communities refined and developed. In their ‘purest’ sense transnational communities may be seen as occupational groups operating within an international arena, slipping effortlessly across boundaries, and interacting with colleagues and their associates who operate in similarly transnational environments. Hannerz describes such transnationals as follows:
Transnational cultures today tend to be more or less clearcut occupational cultures (and are often tied to transnational job markets) ... These cultures become transnational both as the individuals involved make quick forays from a home base to many other places – for a few hours or days in a week, for a few weeks here and there in a year – and as they go, they find others who will interact with them in the terms of specialized but collectively held understandings. (Hannerz 1990, pp. 243–4)

Such ‘transnationals’ are not necessarily cosmopolitan in nature. They may never move beyond interaction with their direct associates and colleagues when they are abroad and thus never make any ‘real’ contact with the majority of people occupying the territorial spaces in and out of which they are flitting. However, they frequently have the opportunity to do so and may choose to step out of their transnational ‘bubbles’ to become genuinely cosmopolitan (Hannerz 1990).

The concept of the transnational individual or community can be expanded beyond this narrow definition, however, to incorporate labour migrants who maintain ‘multi-stranded’ relationships with their ‘home’ societies that incorporate ‘familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political’ (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1995, p. 7) links and ties. In the course of this process cultural and social distinctions are said to become blurred (Kearney 1999b) as communities come to span State boundaries utilizing new technology and telecommunications as well as benefiting from the development of free trade laws and a better international infrastructure (Portes 1996). An important aspect of such transnational communities is considered to be the two-way flow of information, cultural values, knowledge, and even capital (Portes 1995), between migrants and their original communities. The operation of remittance economies is well known, but capital can also move in the other direction. For example, in the 1980s, capital flowed into the UK as British-Chinese entrepreneurs obtained financial backing for new ventures from friends and relatives in Hong Kong who were fearful of a recession and the then colony’s more general future prospects (Benton and Gomez 2000). New technology is seen by many to be at the heart of transnationality (Vertovec 1999) and as such transnational communities may be seen as the product of diasporas + technology. In this sense they represent a kind of ‘speeded up’ version of diasporic relations which are already defined by many as incorporating a degree of transnational exchange. In discussing Filipino Americans, for example, Okamura suggests ‘... diasporas should be understood as consisting of transnational linkages between an immigrant/ethnic minority and its homeland (or cultural center) and its counterpart communities in other host societies’ (Okamura 1998, p. 14)

The overlap in current terminology can be problematic here as
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Diasporas and transnational communities while closely related are clearly conceptually different. Diasporas are primarily located in a physical world that is located beyond the borders of their ‘imagined’ homelands. They may maintain some transnational links but these may be irregular and infrequent. In the case of the Filipino diaspora, for example, individuals may return occasionally to the Philippines in person or simply rely on telecommunication and the sending of ‘balikbayan’ boxes packed with gifts for friends and relatives in the Philippines (Okamura 1998). They do not in this sense reside in more than one geo-cultural space, and they may have stronger links with other expatriate nationals than with those who remain ‘at home’. Indeed, Rafael has described how Filipino ‘balikbayans’ are in some senses ‘outsiders’ (he refers to their ‘spectral presences’) in the Philippines, no longer at ‘home’ in their imagined homelands (Rafael 2000). In the Filipino context overseas contract workers come closer to the model of transnational workers proposed by Hannerz and adapted here. Such transnationals regularly shift across boundaries and states neither living within the Philippines nor without. The members of transnational communities may have ‘multiple identities’ and may develop cultural hybridities specific to their contexts (Vertovec 1999). They, like refugees, may also have a significant political (as well as an economic) impact. In discussing the importance of Timorese refugees in highlighting the plight of East Timor and putting it onto the international political agenda Goodman has suggested that:

As globalization accelerates, transnational pressures play an increasingly important role in political culture. Cultural linkages created by migration can be sustained and reproduced, allowing migrant groupings to maintain a role as movers for social change. Such linkages open up possibilities for mutual engagement or dialogue across the external-internal boundaries of nation statehood (Goodman 1997, p. 457).

In these processes the technologies of communiaction are once again of supreme importance. Thus, depending on the conceptualization of transnationalism, research may be focused on the importance of transformations in the broader global economy, or developments in the realms of information and communications technology in fostering transnationalism. Here the emphasis is on transformations in the global economy and specifically the global labour market.

Some industries have ‘globalized’ faster or more extensively than others but in shipping we have a prime example of a highly global industry. Seafarers are recruited all over the world via both formal and informal mechanisms. The use of crewing agents with a mandate to supply competent and qualified seafarers is widespread among
shipowners. However, it is still possible to access the seafarers labour market informally and especially in large port cities such as Rotterdam and Hamburg. The nature of the informal seafarers labour market has therefore led to the formation of port-based communities of migrant, and immigrant, seafarers seeking new or better jobs at sea (working conditions and salaries vary dramatically from ship to ship). Such communities may be transnational or they may come to form part of the Filipino diaspora. In some cases they may incorporate both transnational and diasporic characteristics. In this context, their position, their national or transnational orientations, and the characteristics of the ‘spaces’ they occupy are of great interest. Similar questions are presented by Filipino seafarers at sea. They may be seen as ‘cosmopolitan’ transnationals in Hannerz’s sense or they can be, more compellingly, conceptualized as occupying, different kinds of locations. Arguably the term ‘hyperspace’ is both helpful and appropriate in conceptualizing such arenas of work and life. Cosmopolitanism can be used to refer to people or communities that are open to strangers/difference (Werbner 1999) while the term ‘hyperspace’ (Kearney 1999a) may be applied to deterritorialized locations such as airports, the offices of multinational corporations, or franchise enterprises. When considered in isolation from their local environments, hyperspaces are characterized by monotonous and universal features. They are in many senses culturally indeterminate reflecting neither one culture nor another. For example, the office of a multi-national shipping company in Manila may closely resemble similar premises in Singapore or Glasgow. Such offices may be staffed with multi-ethnic personnel and the culture of the surrounding environs may only slightly permeate the office ‘shell’ to reach the generally homogenous corporate space. Neither would we expect a hyperspace to reflect the culture of corporate owners, which in any case may be very difficult to establish. Within these terms ships may well qualify as hyperspaces. They share common uniform features regardless of their ownership, management, trading region, or crew complement. On a merchant cargo ship one neither feels in Europe, nor in Asia, nor in the US, nor in any other identifiable world region. A feeling accentuated by ships’ separation from land. These are not precisely cultural vacuums but they may reflect an occupational rather than a recognizable geo-spatial culture.

In the context of a global shipping industry it is therefore useful to explore the extent to which multinational cargo ships can be described as deterritorialized ‘hyperspaces’. In doing so it is helpful to compare seafarer ‘communities’ ashore with those at sea. In terms of their ‘residents’ it is worth considering the kinds of spaces seafarers occupy. We might consider, for example, whether these are cosmopolitan spaces or spaces on the ‘edge’, spaces of oppression or of resistance (hooks 1990)?
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The state and seafaring in the Philippines

It is true to say that in the course of history millions of people have migrated from one place to another in search of better living conditions and/or work. In fact, one of the salient, and now classic, texts of modern sociology *The Polish Peasant* (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958) dealt with this issue as a central feature of contemporary society. Such movements have wrought change not only in the places (villages, towns, countries) which people have chosen to leave, but also in those places where they have resettled (Ballard 1987). Thus, Rotterdam may be said to have been altered as much as Manila, or a village in Cebu, as a result of the influx/outflow of Filipino seafarers into its confines.

The main determinants of the size and timing of migrations have been described as, patterns of economic transformation, and importantly, the actions of individual States (Eades 1987). From time to time states, such as South Africa, have a vested political interest in sustaining migratory work patterns (op cit.). However, in the last twenty to thirty years the importance of remittances to the economies of migrants’ home societies has become increasingly apparent and some states have been motivated by such economic considerations to encourage outward migration and contract work.

In Pakistan in the 1980s, migrants provided 50 per cent of the country’s foreign exchange and fuelled local economic ‘booms’, at least initially, in areas such as Mirpur (Ballard 1987). A similar situation has arisen in the Philippines. In the year 2000, Filipino seafarers alone were estimated to earn $3bn annually in foreign exchange (Almazan 2000). Such large influxes of dollars were recognized by the Marcos administration as essential to the viability of the Philippines’ economy. Marcos himself is credited with introducing the term ‘Balik Bayan’ (literally meaning ‘return country’ or more manageably ‘homecomer’) into the national language. He is said to have used it in a speech imploring Filipinos to visit their home country at least once a year during holidays (Basch, Glick Schiller, Blanc-Szanton 1995). This request was supported with legislation to facilitate their return, and to allow them to bring two boxes of duty free, foreign bought, goods into the country every year. Today such practices have been institutionalized. Providing they can produce a supporting airline ticket, ‘Balik Bayans’ can visit a duty free shop in Manila and purchase goods up to seventy-two hours after their return from overseas employment. While Filipino settlers constituting part of the vast Filipino diaspora have a slightly ambiguous relationship with their countrymen who have remained in the Philippines often being seen as ‘tourists’ (Rafael 2000) overseas contract workers have been characterized as ‘new heroes’. Indeed, in describing overseas contract workers the term ‘Balik Bayan’ should perhaps be replaced by the phrase ‘Balik Bayani’ (literally return hero) such is the status accorded to overseas
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workers in modern day Philippine society. In 1999, for example, 6 May was officially designated ‘Migrant Workers Day’ as E. T. Suarez of the Manila Bulletin explains:

Some four million overseas Filipino workers [OFWs] celebrate today under Republic Act 8042 which hails them as pillars of economic development and government’s partners in shoring up the economy because of their annual foreign exchange remittances amounting to more than $4 billion (Suarez 1999).

A significant proportion of the $4billion was remitted by seafarers. However, as is well documented, there are also many Filipinos and Filipinas working in Europe and the Gulf States in a variety of jobs. To further honour seafarers, as well as these workers, ‘Overseas Workers Day’ was shortly followed by the declaration of the year 2000 as ‘Year of the Overseas Worker’. In reporting the declaration of the event the Manila Bulletin (01/03/2000) described how:

In Proclamation No. 243 issued before he left for Mindanao for a weeklong visit, President Estrada hailed OFWs as the country’s modern-day “heroes” because of their exemplary qualities of hard-work, determination, and self-reliance’ [my emphasis] (Suarez 2000).

The declaration of such national ‘events’, and other assorted government proclamations, serves to highlight the significance of overseas workers to the Philippines. As well as encouraging Filipinos, and Filipinas, to migrate in search of lucrative work the government has also sought to regulate such migration and maximize the benefits which can be accrued by the Philippines’ Economy. Seafarers’ employment is thus regulated (along with that of other overseas workers) by the Philippines Overseas Employment Agency [POEA] and all seafarers are required to remit a minimum of 80 per cent of their basic earnings aboard foreign vessels to a Philippines bank account. The POEA also exercises more general control over seafarers’ employment terms and conditions.

That the Philippines encourages seafarers to work overseas is undeniable and their success ensures that Filipino seafarers are one of the major groups constituting the contemporary ‘ethnoscape’ as envisaged by Appadurai (1990). What is less clear, however, is how Filipino seafarers access the international labour market and what impact living and working abroad, and aboard, has on them, their families, and on the communities they bisect. Are they located on the ‘edges’ or ‘margins’ of societies and are the spaces they occupy spaces of oppression, resistance, or harmony (hooks 1990)? What are the links between the societies they
span, and where do such seafarers feel they ‘belong’? Does their identity as Filipinos remain constant or is it subject to a process of transformation over time?

The deregulation of the seafarers labour market and the creation of multi-ethnic hyperspaces

There are approximately 250,000 Filipino seafarers working on international merchant vessels, constituting almost a third of the international seafaring labour force. Despite their current domination of the labour market, however, Filipino seafarers have not always been employed in such numbers. In the last thirty years the shipping industry has undergone massive deregulation as owners have increasingly registered their vessels with newly created ‘flags’, so-called ‘flags of convenience’, in order to avoid the regulatory frameworks imposed by traditional maritime nations. In doing this, they have freed themselves from constraints applying to crewing and have thus gone ‘global’ in their search for cheaper and cheaper labour. Today’s ocean-going cargo ships are frequently staffed with personnel from a variety of countries and have become increasingly multi-ethnic in complexion. As Lane explains this is a direct consequence of the ‘flagging out’ of vessels and the creation by OECD states of ‘second registries’ which also allow for the recruitment of multinational crews:

It is taken for granted and therefore passes unremarked that in the world’s larger flag fleets – Panama, Bahamas, Liberia, Cyprus, and Malta – nationals of these flag states do not feature in any known collections of manpower statistics. Furthermore, the second register fleets and increasingly the first register fleets in most OECD countries as well as the Hong Kong and Singapore fleets, all have ships where dwindling numbers of crew members are nationals. These well-known and simple facts all signify enormous changes in the labour market for seafarers. [Lane 2000, p. 5]

A looming crisis in the availability of suitably qualified officers is likely to further exacerbate the tendency to sail with multinational crews, and there is little doubt that while the ethnic composition of crews may vary, such crewing practices are here to stay.

In this sense, modern ships and the contemporary shipping industry can be seen as one of the most dramatic and extended examples of the potential developments of the processes of globalization. Today’s ships that are built in one country, owned in another, managed from another, staffed with multinational crews, and operated in ‘international’ waters, could perhaps be described as archetypal ‘hyperspaces’ (See Fig. 1).
Furthermore as part of the process of deregulation these ships are, more often than not, flagged by registries based in countries which do not produce or train seafarers and may not have a coastline (e.g. Bolivia, Luxembourg) let alone an indigenous shipping industry. As a result of these structural changes in the shipping industry, there are, at any one time, approximately one million seafarers aboard ships, operating in international ports and waters, who live and work in communities which are multinational and which exist beyond national boundaries. In addition, there are a number of seafarers who have ‘gone ashore’ in various large ports in search of work either aboard ships operating from such ports or in maritime-related industries. The question arises, do serving seafarers have the same experiences aboard ships as their countrymen ashore? Are the spaces they occupy qualitatively different from those inhabited by their shore-based counterparts? What connections do they maintain with the Philippines, and what kinds of identities do they possess?

Given the current interest in transnational capital and transnational communities, it is worth examining the extent to which seafarers ashore in countries such as Holland, and afloat aboard internationally flagged ships, occupy hyperspaces and/or constitute ‘deterritorialized’, ‘transnational’, or ‘cosmopolitan’ communities (Kearney 1995; Werbner 1999). Hannerz suggests that migrant workers are typically not cosmopolitan in nature:

Most ordinary labour migrants do not become cosmopolitans either. For them going away may be, ideally, home plus higher income; often the involvement with another culture is not a fringe benefit but a
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necessary cost, to be kept as low as possible. A surrogate home is again created with the help of compatriots, in whose circle one becomes encapsulated. (Hannerz 1990, p. 243)

However the multinational communities of seafarers who live and work aboard international cargo ships are comprehensively deterritorialized in ways in which few other communities could be (at this time). They are required to be cosmopolitan in nature and can be conceived as existing within hyperspace. This article will therefore argue that land-based Filipino seafarers in Holland may be characterized as constituting ‘transnational’ communities that are similar to those of the migrant workers described by Hannerz. It will suggest, however, that seafarers at sea form altogether different ‘societies’ which would be more aptly termed ‘global’ or ‘supra-national’ and which are not ‘encapsulated’ in the way in which Hannerz describes.

Research findings

The findings presented here constitute a small part of the preliminary findings of a research project funded by the ESRC (L214252036) and the Seafarers International Research Centre [SIRC] and completed in 2002. The project explored the lives of merchant seafarers and their families, and the impact of living and working in transnational communities on them and their associated societies. It involved participant observation aboard ships as well as fieldwork ashore with seafarers, in Holland and Germany, and seafarers’ families in India and the Philippines.

This article was prepared in the early stages of data analysis and is consequently focused on a small part of the fieldwork. In total, fourteen voyages were undertaken on ships of various types and with crews of different ethnic compositions (see Table 1). However this article incorporates the findings from interviews with fifty-three Filipino seafarers working aboard only four of these merchant vessels (Black Star, Eclipse, Singapore Orchid, Santos Sunset) as well as thirty Filipino seafarers currently living in Holland.

Seafarers’ links across societies

In considering ‘transnationality’, it is important to examine the extent to which individuals and groups of migrants are embedded in specific societies as well as considering the links which they maintain across societies. In the case of seafarers such links may take a variety of forms, incorporating social relationships, direct communication, and financial and economic ties. These can be explored in a variety of ways and to this end we asked seafarers directly about patterns of communication, personal and social relationships, remittances,
### Table 1. Ships included in the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Ship type</th>
<th>Ship size (dwt)</th>
<th>Crew size</th>
<th>Nationalities aboard</th>
<th>Days aboard</th>
<th>Route</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fast Trader</td>
<td>Ro-Ro</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>German/Polish/Maltese/Filipino</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Liverpool – Mediterranean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Star</td>
<td>Ro-Ro</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>British/French/Filipino/Ghanaian</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Le Harve – West Africa – Rotterdam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eclipse</td>
<td>Refrigerated Cargo</td>
<td>15,200</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Filipino/Ghanaian</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Sheerness – Bibao – Setubal – Argentina – Sheerness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonto</td>
<td>Oil Tanker</td>
<td>1,590</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>British/Polish/Tanzanian/Filipino</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Gulf – Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan B</td>
<td>Bulk Carrier</td>
<td>71,593</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>British/Filipino/Japanese/Australian</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Gulf – Japan – Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santos Sunset</td>
<td>Bulk Carrier</td>
<td>31,241</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Indian/Philippines</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Santos (Brazil) – Sheerness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biscay Trader</td>
<td>Car Carrier</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Indian/Philippines</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Antwerp-Southampton-Setubal – Santander – Southampton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian Imp</td>
<td>Oil Tanker</td>
<td>98,629</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>German/Croatian/Canadian/Philippines</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Mongstad (Norway) – Halifax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea Fortress</td>
<td>Oil Tanker</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Indian/Pakistani/Bangladesh/British</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Kuwait to Vishakapatnam (India)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qui Aura</td>
<td>Reefer</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>German, Peruvian, Spanish, Chilean</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Western Europe – S. America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captain Flint</td>
<td>Bulk Carrier</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>British, Romanian, Qatari, Polish, Cape Verdean</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Western Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rainbow</td>
<td>General Cargo</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Dutch, Egyptian, Polish, German, Latvian, Indonesian, Filipino, Indian, Sierra Leonian, Ghanaian, Sri Lankan, Maldivian, Turkish, Croatian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>India – Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calmex</td>
<td>Product Tanker</td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Croatian, Pakistani, Turkish, Filipino</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>North America – Central America</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB Names of ships have been changed to protect confidentiality.
investments, and the networks they utilized in accessing information and finding work.

Land-based seafarers’ social relationships

The Filipinos interviewed in Holland had lived there for an average of eight years. In Rotterdam they lived in run-down areas occupied by a mixture of ethnic minority groups, including Moroccans, Turks and Cape Verdians. Often they occupied rooms rented to them by other Filipino seafarers or off-shore oil workers who had vacated the premises for the period of their contracts, or rarely, by Filipina women, who had one or more spare rooms in their own houses. The streets in which they lived had a variety of small shops run by ethnic minority groups and a range of food from Indonesia, Asia, Turkey and the Middle East was on sale in local ‘takeaways’. Telephone call centres were a pronounced feature of the locale as were remittance centres and sex shops of various types. A Filipino assistance programme had been organized by resident Filipinos in 1981 [The PSAP] to provide help to Filipinos requiring visas, accommodation and even employment. While all but one of the interview participants had been seafarers at some stage in their careers most were now employed on offshore oil rigs or in local shipyards (Table 2).

Table 2. Filipino seafarers in Holland: occupation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Off shore (oil platform)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seafarer</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shipyard</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office work</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the fact that many of them had lived and worked there for some time, few of the Filipinos based in Holland were able to speak Dutch. This clearly impaired their ability to make friends with Dutch people and encouraged them to rely on other Filipinos for social support and friendship. One respondent explained: ‘... Only thing is the language because it is very hard to communicate with them. So we are not too much with them. So we are only making friends with our own, Filipinos like these’ [Respondent 18].
Others described how lack of communication skills led to them feeling separate from Dutch society:

Respondent: I don’t think I am part of the … Netherlands society, or Dutch society.
Interviewer: Why not?
Respondent: Because as I told you I cannot communicate with them. I know some Dutch families but not as a … not as a …… They hire me because I want to clean their house, as a part-time, but to contribute on their community. – No. [Respondent 15]

I didn’t know, up till now, I didn’t know how to speak their own language. That is, that is one reason I’m, I’m feeling apart from them because I didn’t speak their language [Respondent 20].

This lack of integration into Dutch society and a tendency to socialize with other Filipinos or Filipinas was marked and few respondents had developed friendships with Dutch people or indeed with people of other nationalities residing in Holland. Where such friendships had been established they appeared to have been with Dutch people who were married to Filipinas. It was suggested that: ‘Nowadays have also plenty Philippine girl married to Dutch people, so the Dutch man go also with us … No Dutch girl married to Filipino guy’ [Respondent 14].

Dutch people married to Filipinas or Filipinos seemed to acquire quasi-Filipino status as they were recognized as having a better understanding of Filipino culture than their countrymen. One respondent explained:

Respondent: Sometimes the wife of our friends or the husband of our friends is Dutch. But the Dutch, the Dutch that I experience when they have married to the Filipino, they are going to the, they are using the, flow of Filipino way.
Interviewer: So they adapt to you?
Respondent: Yeah but we are also adjusting to them, adjust to them, that sometimes for example, this, when we are some story that cannot avoid speaking Tagalog, we say sorry to Dutch. [Respondent 24]

Where they existed, links with nationalities other than the Dutch also tended to be a result of marriage:

Interviewer: Do you have any Belgian Friends?
Respondent: Yeah I have a lot of Belgian friends. They are good also because they married a Filipino woman. Yeah. [Respondent 12]
Interviewer: Do your family and yourself, do you have any contact with Dutch people?
Respondent: In Europe, yes. I have contact with Dutch people. My brother-in-laws, they are Dutch, then one of my friends who is sleeping here, she living also with a Dutch guy.

Interviewer: So through marriage, but without marriage you haven’t got any contact?
Respondent: No. No.
Interviewer: So all your friends, then, are Filipinos? Your social life is with Filipinos normally?
Respondent: Yes.
Interviewer: Are there other nationalities apart from Filipino and Dutch?
Respondent: Sometimes there are other nationalities but they are also married to Filipino women. [Respondent 4]

The explanations given for the social distance between the Filipinos and their Dutch neighbours were primarily centred on poor communication and a lack of commonly held values and shared understandings. People described being more relaxed in the company of their countrymen than they were with other nationalities and sometimes said that they really needed to be able to relax and share a joke with other Filipinos:

Respondent: I am much more comfortable with the Philippines
Interviewer: Why?
Respondent: Just because we are talking about our own, yes we can speak our own language and sometimes we are talking about our life in the Philippines and if you compare it to the Dutch people they don’t know what the life in the Philippines. [Respondent 1]
Sometimes you need to see your countrymen just to talk your own language. Talk about the Philippines, something like that. [Respondent 2]

When we are together with our own nationality, we are very happy. Sometimes my landlady, she visits ships just to talk with the Filipino guy [Respondent 7].

Links with people across Europe, where they existed, also tended to be limited to other Filipinos. One respondent explaining his links with ‘wider society’ described how:

Respondent: I have connections, friends, I have also in Germany. Yes sometimes I call there….
Interviewer: Are they all Filipinos?
Respondent: Yes [Respondent 9]

Sea-based seafarers’ social relationships

Seafarers interviewed at sea tended to work on contracts of between eight and ten months and had worked at sea for an average of twelve years. The social context of seafarers is different from that of their shore-based contemporaries in a number of critical ways. Most importantly they are confined to their ships and locked into patterns of interaction with whoever is on board, for periods of up to twelve months. To this extent therefore they have little choice about the people they live with. However, ships are hierarchically organized and as a result officers and ratings tend to occupy different spaces and have separate communal, working, and, sometimes, recreational areas. Furthermore officers and ratings are frequently recruited from different countries. Ratings are normally drawn from a single country while officers may be recruited from a variety of places such as Poland, Britain, Germany, Norway, India, Australia, Canada, and the Philippines. On ships with only two or three nationalities aboard occupational status was sometimes re-interpreted in ways in which it became linked to nationality. Thus where the boundary between nationalities did not conveniently match traditional boundaries between ‘officers’ and ‘ratings’ we noted that it was sometimes adjusted in order to separate the nationalities and their living, eating, and socializing spaces. A Filipino officer might thus be assigned the status of a rating in terms of where he was expected, and to some extent chose, to eat, relax, and socialize. It would therefore be possible (in this situation) for a Filipino to avoid all social contact with other nationalities aboard except when actually working, should he wish to.

Other important differences between serving seafarers and their shore-based counterparts include the fact that seafarers working in mixed nationality crews are generally expected to use English as a common language. This practice alleviates communication difficulties to some extent. It also means that, to a limited extent, workers of different nationalities on board ships share an occupational culture that diminishes social distance between them. However, relationships between seafarers are generally of short duration as people join and leave ships at different times and because, as a seafaring cliché would have it, ‘friendship ends at the gangway’.

Despite the very different circumstances of the sea and Holland-based Filipinos there were some striking similarities in the ways in which they related to the people with and around them. Just as respondents in Holland had expressed a preference for Filipino company, so too did a number of Filipino seafarers, and on similar grounds. Thus, the ability to
communicate freely, joke, and talk about ‘home’, were all identified as advantages in socializing with Filipinos aboard ships:

I try to be serious when I’m with other nationalities. Maybe what I did was offensive to them. When we are all together with Filipinos, we make jokes, like this. Whenever I’m with other nationalities I don’t do that. [Filipino deck rating Santos Sunset]

If you are a full crew, all Filipino, you can speak all your problems. They understand your problem because they are Filipino. [Filipino engine fitter Eclipse]

The desire to be with their own countrymen explains, to some extent, the support given to the ‘re-interpretation’ of occupational status that was sometimes observed aboard. However, despite such superficial ‘divisions’ there were significant numbers of Filipinos who did have close relationships with members of other ethnic groups aboard ship. The many examples included the following: Aboard the Santos Sunset a Filipino deck rating described the Indian Electrical officer as a ‘very good guy’ with whom he shared discussions on literature and philosophy and from whom he was in the habit of borrowing books. On the Eclipse the Filipino third officer had got on so well with a Norwegian Master he had sailed with on a previous ship that he had named his son ‘John Eric’ after him. Furthermore the new and very young Filipino wiper on the Eclipse had an extremely close, but somewhat tempestuous, relationship with a Swedish engine cadet of about his age. He described the things that he had learned about, and from, his friend explaining that the Swedes dress differently to Filipinos, that they eat different kinds of food and in different ways. The Swedes, he suggested, were very weight conscious and, as he saw it, critical of the appetites of the Filipinos who eat much more frequently and are less concerned, in general, with body image. He noted that the Swedes often lived alone rather than with their families. This was an aspect of European life that the Filipinos in general frequently commented on and seemed intrigued and bemused by. While on board researchers were also privy to many cross-nationality conversations relating to traditions around love and marriage, sex and family life. These tended to take the form of exchanges of information as seafarers were careful to avoid making public judgements about others’ cultural practices. Conversations could last well into the night and might or might not be ‘fuelled’ by alcohol and snacks.

Of course, there was variation in behaviour. Crew on the Singapore Orchid did not have an opportunity to take shore-leave. However, on the Santos Sunset groups of Filipino ratings and Indian/Bangladeshi officers were often observed ashore together. It was the same on the Eclipse where Filipinos also mixed ashore with the younger, and more
junior, Swedish officers. Some seafarers visited colleagues or ex-
shipmates while on vacation in their countries and some kept in
sporadic contact once ashore. On the *Black Star* Filipinos were not
observed to mix with other nationalities ashore and also mixed very
little on board. Overall, however, the evidence suggests that land-based
seafarers in Holland generally conform to Hannerz’s depiction of
labour migrants ‘encapsulated’ in their own groups within the societies
they inhabit. While sea-based seafarers appear more ‘cosmopolitan’ in
nature, often *choosing* to socially interact with, and forge friendships
with, seafarers of other nationalities aboard, both learning about and
from them in the process.

*Networks across societies*

Despite being shore-based (and therefore having much easier access to
communication systems) Filipinos in Holland seemed to contact their
families in the Philippines no more often than Filipinos aboard ship.
Generally they tended to telephone the Philippines twice a month.
However, it seemed that Filipinos at sea were a little more likely to write
letters than their shore-based countrymen. Certainly they emphasized
more openly their sense of loneliness and stressed the importance of
receiving mail on board. They valued mail despite the fact that it could
often take well over a month to get to them and as a result ‘the news is
already old’. It thus had a significance beyond its contents representing
perhaps a tangible connection with family and friends, or even the pack-
aging and sending of love and affection. Filipinos ashore had better
access to Filipino news than those at sea and one mentioned the internet
as a good source of information about day to day events in the Philip-
ippines.

Seafarers invariably returned to the Philippines after their tour of
duty. Contracts tended to be of nine to ten months’ duration so conse-
quently even those seafarers who were able to extend their sea-time
generally returned to the Philippines once a year. The situation was, of
course, quite different for seafarers working in, or from, Holland. While
some visited the Philippines regularly, others had been there just once in
nine or ten years (see Table 3).

Some respondents could not afford to return to the Philippines on a
regular basis, or indeed at all, while others mentioned marriage in The
Netherlands and the health of partners as explanatory factors in terms of
the infrequency of their visits.

*Economic links between societies*

Remittances from shore-based Filipinos in Holland to their families in
the Philippines appeared to be more haphazard in terms of their
regularity and size than those sent by active seafarers. Serving seafarers are forced by regulations in the Philippines to remit 80 per cent of their basic wage to a Philippines bank account every month. However, many seafarers chose to have 100 per cent of their basic wage remitted and would also save their overtime pay and send it home with returning seafarers who had completed their tour of duty.

Table 3. Frequency of trips to the Philippines by Holland-based Filipinos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At least once a year</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once every two to three years</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once every four to six years</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once in seven to nine years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once in ten or more years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregularly – cannot say</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never been back</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both groups were subject to occasional requests/demands from family members or friends in the Philippines and gave accounts of ‘helping out’ where they could. They also described shouldering unexpected financial demands such as payments for hospital care or funeral arrangements:

**Interviewer:** Do you support anyone else in the Philippines?

**Respondent:** Sometimes if they ask me, like a few months ago my brother died so I shoulder everything. But not always. Not always. [Shore-based **Respondent 13**]

They only ask me if it’s very important so I send them $200 if it is for hospitalization you cannot expect … if … it depends how, how the situation of hospitalization, maybe operation or something just like mild something maybe $400, $500. [Filipino 4th Engineer Black Star]

Filipinos at sea and ashore also frequently described sending money home for the education of various family members. For shore-based Filipinos these tended to be their children; however, sea-going Filipinos also described sending money for the education of their siblings and occasionally nieces and nephews:

**Respondent:** You mean like give money? Ah yeah, my sister is a ... my sister has three children and because she is only an office worker, a government employee, because government is very low in the...
Interviewer: Very low pay?
Respondent: Yeah. Then she has three children which are now in college ... so I am helping them, giving some money for their fare.... [Filipino deck rating *Singapore Orchid*]

One of my nephews is now studying college and I help ... I try to help ... with money because when we are in schooling we need money. So I give them some money. [Filipino Oiler *Singapore Orchid*]

Investments

Most shore-based Filipinos had invested money in the Philippines in some form or other but few had investments, other than savings, in Holland (see Table 4). Most of their savings were invested in land and housing in the Philippines:

Respondent: I have no savings here in Holland. We always – when we have the salary we have always sent it to the Philippines and we have savings in the Philippines ... I buy a lot [of land], that is why this March when I went back to the Philippines for vacation I bought a lot there ... three hundred and sixty-three square metre.... [The respondent then described the other two lots he already owned] [Respondent 15]

However, some respondents described investing in ‘business ventures’ such as car hire and poultry:

Table 4. Investments of sea and shore-based Filipino seafarers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of investment</th>
<th>Holland-based seafarers</th>
<th>Sea-based seafarers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home (own house) in Philippines</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land for commercial housing in Philippines</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land for agriculture in Philippines</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business venture/shares in Philippines</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savings in Philippines</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment/insurance plan for education in Philippines</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House in Holland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business venture/shares in Holland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savings in Holland</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance/investment plan in Holland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Well, I have an investment in the Philippines. Before I told you, it’s racing poultry and poultry racing games in the Philippines. The money I’m risk losing them also came from here, my salary, my job, my savings, extra savings I sent back to the Philippines, the bank and then to the business. [Respondent 20]

A car, a van. That can survive or can replace the expenses while we are staying there because rather than a jeep, because this is connected to a funeral parlour you know ... so I bring this car while I’m away and have one guy working [as a driver] on that funeral parlour. [Respondent 13]

Sea-based participants followed very predictable patterns of investment which differed in some ways to those of land-based Filipinos in Rotterdam. While only two land-based Filipinos had spent money building or acquiring a home in the Philippines, sea-based Filipinos’ first priority tended to be the construction of a house that they would then use as the family home. Once this had been completed they diversified into a range of activities with some investing in land for building, some buying agricultural land, and some becoming involved in setting up businesses (frequently in partnership with friends or relatives). The following examples are illustrative:

Investments. I already have my home and now I build this three ... apartment.... Three families, one floor down, two floors up.... If I have enough money after this one, I plan with my wife to buy a farm. Cattle. Because my wife is experienced in farming. [Deck rating Santos Sunset]

I have bought land in another province in another island. I bought 1,000 square metres of land for coconut plantation.... There is one who takes care, a relative. [2nd Engineer Eclipse]

I finished already my house. I plan to make a small business, a small shop. [Engine fitter Eclipse]

I bought land, built a five storey apartment so that when my wife stop her job she still have income. [Filipino deck rating Singapore Orchid]

Networks

The vast majority of shore-based respondents had help in coming to, or getting a job in, Holland (Table 5).
Table 5. Help getting a job in Holland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Myself</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino Friends and relatives</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino friends</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino relatives</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some had to rely on the help of both family and friends. One man who had spent five years unemployed in the Philippines trying to join a ship described his route into a job at sea from Holland:

I tried every company but I cannot get it so I write to my sister and she ask me to come here [Holland]. So I come here to look for company because here is very open you know…. My sister she has a friend, a Filipino guy, also working in the company, and the guy said to my sister just bring him to this company and tell him that he is my friend. [Respondent 2]

Ironically after waiting for such a long time for a job at sea this man found that he was ‘not prepared at all’ for the ‘rolling in the sea’ and commented ‘I didn’t like it anyway’. At the time of the interview he was working in a shipyard. This job also came through friends as he described:

He is also Filipino. I ask him if they still have vacancies and they once said to me to go to office and ask. So I ask them if they have vacancy and lucky that they had. So that right time to start working there. [Respondent 2]

Sea-based participants did not rely on networks to the same extent in accessing the seafarer labour market. However, they were important in a significant number of cases (see Table 6) not least in helping seafarers to avoid the apparently common practice of working for minimal, or no, wages for unscrupulous agencies in order to ‘earn’ the reward of a place aboard a ship.

Identity, discrimination, and attitudes to, working and living in multi-ethnic communities

The vast majority of those involved in the research were living and working outside the Philippines for purely financial reasons. Most of the Holland-based participants (70 per cent) had the intention of returning and continued to strongly identify the Philippines as ‘home’. Similarly,
most ship-based seafarers identified themselves as ‘belonging’ in the Philippines rather than on a ship, although more used this latter identification than might have been expected (see Table 7).

Table 6. Help getting first job at sea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Help</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help of relative/godparent</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help of friend</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working unpaid or on minimal pay for agency or agency staff</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying a fee (bribe)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal application procedures including examinations</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Where sea-based seafarers feel they belong

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where they belong</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ship</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50: 50 Ship/Philippines</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seafarers based in Holland frequently mentioned facing discrimination as one of the disadvantages of living and working outside the Philippines. Racist abuse and attitudes were highlighted, as was discrimination at work. In one case problems with the Dutch police and assumptions of criminality were mentioned, and in an extreme example reference was made to rape [male victim]. One Filipino described why he didn’t like working in Holland but had to for the sake of his family:

They, you need to follow what they want, even like er, even like treating like some other Filipinos they treating like a shit here, and er, but you need to live here. Like you have your own family so all you can do is keep your ear close or listen with one ear and let it go from the other. [Respondent 22]

Despite the problems recognized by the Holland-based Filipinos many were also able to identify advantages in living in multi-ethnic communities. They tended to emphasize the value of learning different languages, or cultural values, and even the potential use this knowledge might eventually be put to back in the Philippines.

Seafarers interviewed at sea had a much more positive attitude towards working in multi-ethnic groups. A small number mentioned discrimination that they had encountered intermittently in the course of their careers: ‘Before my ship is good. All brothers only shout not fight.'
Other people speak with big voices but no fighting. Same here, only happy, but Greek ship, no happiness. Only work. Captain is Greek, didn’t like Filipino' [Messman Santos Sunset].

And some appeared to hold racist attitudes themselves (e.g. about Indian and West African colleagues). However many seafarers described a preference for working on multi-ethnic ships rather than ships crewed entirely by Filipinos. This was largely because ships crewed by Filipinos alone were described as being rife with favouritism, often based on regionalism:

In my case, in my experience, I prefer a mixed [nationality] one. But I definitely don’t like a full crew of Filipino. There is a lot of favouritism, very strong. It is something I don’t like [Bosun Santos Sunset].

It is difficult, full crew Filipino. Sometimes there is jealousy. If you have Swedish officers you don’t get that. [Chief cook Eclipse]

The preference for multinational crews was not only based on a dislike of single nationality ships, however. Importantly many seafarers highlighted an interest in meeting people from other countries and learning about their cultural values and habits: ‘You develop your self-confidence, your own self esteem. And you can also learn traditions and some words’ [Deck rating Eclipse].

Conclusions: Transnational or global communities?

The similarities and differences between Filipinos based in Holland and active Filipino seafarers are revealing. Land-based seafarers had lived in Holland for an average of eight years, and six seafarers had successfully applied for Dutch citizenship. Despite these facts few of them could be described as embedded into Dutch society. They were generally unable to speak Dutch, had few Dutch friendships, and relied primarily on other Filipinos for company, support and succour. In contrast, active Filipino seafarers described a number of close current, and past, relationships with seafarers of other nationalities. Many things militate against the formation of such relationships on board ships (hierarchy, crew turnover etc.), but they existed nonetheless. It seemed that there was a lack of ethnic identity attached to ships, as places, which allowed people to occupy them without being culturally dominated or oppressed. As a result, active seafarers were not conscious of feeling like outsiders in the ways described by their Holland-based counterparts. This seemed to result in their having less need to seek the ‘shelter’ of their own countrymen and being more prepared to get to know people from other countries. Certainly, despite the occupationally segregated spaces that could be identified aboard ships, they tended to give the appearance of
being inhabited by single recognizable ‘communities’ rather than by numbers of separate ‘enclave’ groups. While Holland-based seafarers did not appear to be strongly embedded in Dutch society therefore active seafarers did appear to be firmly established in the ‘communities’ aboard their ships.

In terms of linkages with their ‘home’ societies there was little difference between Holland-based seafarers and active seafarers in the frequency of their communication with families and friends in the Philippines. If anything active seafarers appeared to maintain more regular contact with their ‘home’, than seafarers residing ashore, despite their limited access to affordable telephones and postal services. They also returned to the Philippines far more regularly than Filipinos living in Holland, although this was facilitated by the terms and conditions of their employment and may not be a significant difference.

Economic linkages with the Philippines appeared to be stronger among active seafarers than those based in Holland. Once again this may simply be a result of their employment terms and conditions. They incur fewer expenses aboard than their shore-based counterparts, are forced by government regulation to send money to the Philippines, and are regularly flown back to the Philippines at their company’s expense. They may therefore have more money available for investment, as well as more opportunity to decide where to place it.

The evidence suggests therefore that Filipino seafarers based in Holland can be seen as forming part of a transnational community in the following ways: They have retained their Filipino identity (and in many cases nationality) and the majority intend to return to the Philippines and settle there at some point in the future. They retain links with their families and friends in the Philippines and may assist them financially and practically in gaining access to Holland, or to the Dutch labour market. They are also likely to assist friends and family members financially either on a regular or an emergency basis. They maintain links with communities in the Philippines and telephone resident family and friends there at regular, if not frequent, intervals. A number of them visit the Philippines on a regular basis and have wives and children, who they support, living there. While many have savings accounts in Holland, few have invested in Dutch businesses, land, or housing. However, a number have invested in businesses or land in the Philippines. In these senses they maintain ‘multi stranded’ networks and live physically, mentally, and emotionally, in or across two separate States. The racism and exclusion described by some Holland-based seafarers tends to suggest, however, that they live on the ‘edges’ of both Dutch and Filipino society. It implies that their transnational status has curiously diminished rather than increased the ‘space’ available to them in terms of both possibilities and the potential for resistance (hooks 1990).

By contrast it seems, however, that active seafarers working on ships
Helen Sampson

with multinational crews live in rather different environments. They do not live and work in societies with a specific ethnic identity and, as seafarers, are not ‘outsiders’ but are automatically members of the ‘communities’ formed aboard ships. They appear to be more ‘cosmopolitan’ in nature than their land-based compatriots, seeking and maintaining friendships with other seafarers of different nationalities and highlighting the benefits of exposure to other cultures. The nature of the ships they work aboard may also impact on seafarers in important ways. Such ships operate in international waters and travel from one part of the world to another. They are not influenced by the nationality of their owners or the States in which they are registered and all international cargo ships have a form and structure which is more predictable and monotonous than that to be found in any airport or franchise store. These can be seen as spaces without nationality and they move between, and operate beyond, national borders. They are truly ‘hyperspaces’ and the seafarers who occupy them form distinct, if miniature, ‘global communities’. Such communities and hyperspaces are substantially different from transnational or diasporic spaces, networks and relationships. It is interesting to consider the extent to which they may flourish in other contexts and as a result of other industrial developments and transformations.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Erol Kahveci and Michelle Thomas for their help with data collection, and Huw Beynon and Peter Fairbrother for their comments on an early draft of this paper.

Notes

1. Fieldwork in Rotterdam was carried out exclusively by Kahveci, E. Fieldwork aboard the ships referred to in this paper was carried out by Kahveci, E., Sampson, H. and Thomas, M.
2. The extent to which workers aboard ships can be said to constitute ‘communities’ will be considered in future publications.

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