

# The life of a european sailor history essay



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There has always existed a form of social marginality in any society since the concept of a “ social group” such as a nation, state, or tribe has been introduced. This has been passed on generation after generation, surviving despite many social restructurings by changing its appearance to adapt to the changing times. Society cannot function without these people, because they are vital to development as they tend to venture, to explore, and to take risks more compared to those who have experienced the luxuries of society. The sailors of the Age of Exploration constitute, for the majority of them, the socially marginalized people who have been rejected from society. They are therefore subject to extreme difficulties, driven by the hope that they will soon rise in class - much like any social outcast since the dawn of class hierarchy.

The Age of Exploration, the period of increased maritime exploration from the 15th to the early 17th century, was pioneered by the Portuguese and Spanish as they were motivated by “ the long heroic struggle to find a sea route around Africa...[and] Portugal’s desire to establish a trading link with the Orient which would be independent-and so less expensive-than the traditional Moslem-ruled routes”. Prominent navigators include Henry the Navigator, Bartholomew Dias, Vasco De Gama, Christopher Columbus, and Ferdinand Magellan who, motivated by satisfying curiosity, thwarting Muslims, searching for gold, or a mixture of these, patronized maritime exploration. Furthermore, a popular motive for these patrons, navigators and captains is the establishment of the Christian empire, looking for Christian allies, resisting infidels (Moors), and converting pagans to their faith -

motives shared by many famous navigators, including Henry the Navigator and Ferdinand Magellan.

We do disservice to the hundreds of crewmen who went along with these voyages if we assume that it is all about the glory for God and country. Most accounts and journals that focus on the prominent figures of navigation do not reflect the experiences of the common European sailors during this time. These men may be misinterpreted as sharing the glorious visions of their leaders, though primary accounts will prove that this is not the case.

Generally, there are two types of sailors: the ones who do not have a choice because of their current occupations as fishermen or residence near the seas and the ones who are naturally curious of the unpredictability of the seas. The former are likely to perceive the travelling as danger while the latter see it as an expression of freedom. These men were usually recruited by a crier in the waterfront and in the town square, although difficulties may arise due to low wages, or refusal of sailors to listen to commanders they do not respect. In Magellan's case, his lack of recruits was caused by his Portuguese nationality. In general, the seamen composed of many nationalities, as most captains only required competency. These nationalities include but are not limited to Portuguese, Spaniards, French, British, Flemings, Germans, Negroes, Italians, and Greeks.

Motivating crewmen to enlist in the voyage was not a simple task to do, as most are well aware of what dangers and risks lie in the unknown and uncharted seas. Some kings like King Charles of Spain gave benefits to sailors like paying the rent of their lodgings and promising the security of

their possessions, along with salaries to be given upon the end of their voyage . As mentioned, most sailors tend to be those of the socially marginalized, the kinds that no longer have any opportunities ashore, and so choose to find a new life, an outlet in the sea. Some exceptions to these are naturalists, artists, astronomers, and other necessary professionals that the ship needs in order to navigate, chart and function.

Preparation of the ships for departure took months to prepare, and it becomes one of the trials any crew member must face before setting sail. This, in a way, serves as a challenge for them, and they can still quit anytime they want as long as they are still on shore. Some expeditions, like Magellan's, took a year and a half to complete preparation because of the amount of bureaucratic red tape involved. A lot has to be spent in making sure the ships are completely stocked and equipped for sailing. Food stocks include dry pork, chicken peas or garbanzos, biscuits, and wine casks; sea-store items like anchors, hardware like charts and nautical instruments, and items for trade like cloth, bracelets, crystals, bells, combs, looking glasses, and other things assumed attractive to the natives they will meet. Building ships, and loading guns, are also part of the preparation, which all contributes to the expensive amount of funding any expedition will entail.

Aside from the stocks, a much more difficult part of preparation is finding fellow crewmen knowledgeable in geography and astronomy in order to chart the navigation. Charts used during this time are called portolan charts, whose data is based on experience through real navigation instead of any real science. One can imagine the difficulty these sailors will face when

sailing out to the sea using these early navigational charts, as you are essentially unable to navigate once you lose sight of land.

In the expedition, these crewmen are all assigned rankings according to their experience out in the sea, individual ability, and overall competence.

Rankings include: lieutenant, master, boatswain, carpenter, sail maker, quarter master, cook, surgeon, gunner, and captains; other crew members were servants or mates of these ranked individuals. These sailors are not limited to the tasks that these ranks entail, each sailor has basic tasks required if the ships are to sail as smoothly as possible. Crew members had to engage in trading, hunting in islands, fishing in rivers, foraging for food, and salvaging for useful metal in the event of shipwrecks. Aside from food-based jobs, these sailors had to adhere to a strict schedule of night watches, where they are split into divisions and assigned to guard the ship while everyone else was sleeping. Although not all are trained soldiers, they are also required to defend themselves from thieves and hostile natives whenever necessary. Failure to do these tasks may compromise the entire voyage, either through facing starvation or meeting a violent death.

More capable captains like Magellan or Cook assigned operational orders to ensure the health, safety, and unity of the crew. Shipboard behavior included the prohibition of gambling, swearing and cursing, ordering officers to treat the crew with kindness, tasting the rations of the crew before serving, and respecting people from other lands by not molesting their women . Such rules were not always followed however, and the effectiveness of the crew to carry out these orders was always based on their respect and loyalty to the captain in command. It is important to note that these men who joined the

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expeditions were not necessarily the most principled of men, otherwise they would not be taking their chances in the uncertain oceans. It is common for loyalties to shift, sometimes based on family ties or on increased chances of survival in the hands of a more capable captain. Security was uncommon during these times, as “ strict food rationing, cold winter storms, unrelieved routine and monotonous scenery brought the crews to the brink of mutiny”. Captains had to resort to punishment and overpowering the mutineers in order to keep the crew quiet.

Most ordinary Europeans would not choose to become sailors unless they had nothing to lose by staying on shore. We are able to discover just how bottom in society the statuses of these crewmen were by looking at the living conditions which they voluntarily subscribed to. There was rarely enough food to go around that the sailors had to trade, fish, and gather whenever and wherever they can. They stopped over at ports whenever the weather permits them, and natives would bring fresh food and load it in the ship; and they also hunted and ate sea lions, “ ducks without feathers”, and whatever else they could get their hands on. They did not hesitate to eat unfamiliar animals like “ bats as large as eagles...[which] tastes like chicken” and “ black birds with long tails as large as domestic chickens”. Their large stocks of meat are dependent on salt, the primary method of food preservation at that time, and the absence of this meant that one can only eat rice and water, not exactly a very sustaining diet.

These conditions were of course, the ideal and favorable conditions for these European sailors, but they often faced far worse conditions at sea. Pigafetta records their plight regarding their voyage: “...Three months and twenty

days without fresh food...Ate biscuit, which is no longer biscuit, but powder of biscuits swarming with worms, for they had eaten the food. It stank strongly of the urine of rats. We drank yellow water that had been putrid for many days. We also ate some ox hides that covered the top of the main yard to prevent the yard from chafing the shrouds, and which had become exceedingly hard because of sun, rain, and wind. We left them in the sea for four or five days, and then placed them for a few moments on top of the embers, and so ate them and often we ate sawdust from the boards. Rats were sold for half a ducat apiece, and even then we could not get them”.

Sanitation was not a very popular notion for the European sailors during these times, given that fresh water was always in a limited supply. Living conditions were not only unsanitary, but were also very crowded, with all the crewmen simply cramped under the decks. The lack of cleanliness of the sailors, clothes, and bedding made ships breeding grounds for diseases. With these dietary, sanitary, and living conditions, one can imagine the impact on the health of these sailors.

Unsurprisingly, European sailors often got sick during these voyages, which often come in the form of the swelling of both the lower and upper lips, also known as beri-beri. This is a symptom of the prevalent disease known as scurvy, and sailors who contracted this disease were unable to eat, and therefore died. Scurvy is due to an inadequacy of Vitamin C. With only fish, pork, beef, beans, and the absence of fresh fruits and vegetables which are major sources of Vitamin C on the trip, it is not surprising that this disease is a common occurrence. In one instance of an outbreak of scurvy, Pigafetta

records the death of nineteen men and the illness of another twenty to thirty crew members.

There are some captains, notably the famed Captain Cook, who took measures to prevent scurvy from infecting his crewmen. These included setting an allowance for the consumption of meat, avoiding mixing butter and cheese, avoiding salt beef and flour, and the use of various ingredients believed to have Vitamin C like raisins, worts, and celery. Meanwhile, in Britain during the end of the 18th century, sailors drink lime juice with grog.

If scurvy did not kill them, hunger most probably will. If left without a choice, a ship could sail for months without fresh water and fresh food, and the harsh conditions will cause the death of many. These explorers face many dangers as they went into climates which they had not adapted to (usually the humid Southeast Asian climate), and found diseases at a time when many of the vaccinations and cures have not yet been discovered. To give an idea of the death toll and risk these sailors are facing, the ninety-four sailors who left on the HMS Endeavour returned with only fifty-four. In the worst cases, Pigafetta records that on Magellan's voyage around the world, only twenty-two men returned on the Victoria from the two hundred seventy men that left, around less than fifteen percent survival rate.

Because they faced and braved unknown territory, these sailors were usually religious and superstitious when encountering unfamiliar creatures or life-or-death situations. In the presence of storms and other looming calamities, the sailors believed that God and other holy bodies protected their ships.

Pigafetta has stated in his account that " St. Elmo appeared during storms to



shine with the brightness of a blazing torch. These sailors also have religious obligations not to touch married native women, confessing before leaving for a voyage, and going to mass on the various islands.

Most sailors who embark on these long journeys believe the existence of superstitious creatures like mermaids, mermen, and sirens as most literary pieces suggest. Mermaids are described as “ voluptuously naked from waist up, fish-scaled and fish-tailed from waist down, forever combing her tresses on some sea-rock” while sirens are “ half-women, half-bird creatures...[who] bewitch men with the sweetness of their song that the listeners forgot everything else and died of hunger”. In a travel to India, European sailors were not able to see these expected creatures; however, a few explorers from England, Holland, and Portugal attest to their existence by carefully examining their parts through dissection. This belief of mermaids stemmed from being out at sea far too long, and may simply be the sailors’ way of coping with their lack of female company. Now, it is believed that these mermaids and sirens are in fact dugongs, seals, and manatees. Apart from these, the existence of sea monsters and sea serpents were very popular, as the horror stories of shipwrecks were prevalent during these times, while wraiths or ghost ships also terrified much of the sailors. Much of our beliefs today about these creatures can thus be attributed to speculations of the sailors.

Apart from these strange creatures whose validity can easily be challenged, these European sailors also discovered something completely unheard of to them, especially for people in their times - a more or less equal standing when it comes to gender. There are cases when a matriarchal society is

evident, as women in some of these foreign islands are the ones who cultivate the fields and provide the sustenance for the family, while the men simply carry bows and arrows, and who are said to be “jealous of their wives”. This is in direct contrast with the notion of women having secondary roles in European society, and being seen as objects of temptation, thus disallowing their presence on voyages.

To the extent that they had items for trade, the sailors usually had an imbalanced trade with the natives they met. Spice trade and eastern trade goods are the most common items that would be able to yield tremendous profits at the tremendous costs of a voyage, but the sailors also traded for their basic sustenance. Sailors could trade “a fishhook or a knife for five to six chickens; a comb for a brace of geese; a mirror or a pair of scissors for fish good enough to feed ten men; a bell or leather lace for a basketful of potatoes, a king of diamond for six fowls”. What encouraged this practice is that the natives thought they were the ones getting the better deal out of it.

Compared to the Europeans, these natives were always seen as strange due to their physical build or their habits. On Magellan’s voyage, there have been reports of giants who double the size of the Europeans, a “creature” Magellan attempted to capture to bring back to Europe. Flesh-eating men were also spotted as they sailed, which would have undoubtedly terrified some of the crewmen.

Because they will eventually face some resistance, these sailors also needed to be soldiers (whether they were trained or not was another matter).

Thieves would attempt to steal the small boats of the ships, and had to be

chased away with brute force, and they did not even hesitate to burn houses of the natives when necessary.

As the journey neared its end, sailors at this point would have little to trade with, and this is when hunger sets in. The hunger of the crewmen was such a large problem that they were forced to kidnap chiefs in order to ransom them for buffaloes, goats, and swine. They would also befriend chieftains from various islands and form friendships and alliances with them through gifts, which include " velvet, scarlet cloth, linen, copper, quicksilver, and many other merchandise". Another option would be to ask for food from the natives, but one is not always lucky to find generous and willing villagers who wanted to share their produce with strangers.

Almost at the same time with the Age of Discovery, Europe was experiencing the Commercial Revolution, an economic expansion that brought private banking, the use of money, trading organizations, and towns along with it, as well as the adoption of mercantilism. The increasing popularity of voyages helped support this economic expansion through the gold and silver being brought in, moving the European countries towards a more capitalistic society. The contributions of these voyages to the European economy were tremendous.

Apart from being the faceless sailors who sailed with the mission of their captains, these European sailors actually contributed much to the cultural diversity of the world. After enduring a long voyage filled with hunger and death, some sailors would opt to stay in the shore of some island with villagers and make a life for themselves there. Spanish blood is still

prevalent in Filipinos even until today, and parts of the Ceylon population have plenty of European heritages in them due to intermarriages, forming the Burghers (Bosma, 82).

The sailors, whether voluntarily or left without a choice, all contributed to the foundations of modern navigation. A ship cannot sail without a crew of course, and if these brave or desperate sailors did not choose to take the risk, what would the state of the world be in now? The New World might not have been reached without an obedient crew, nor would colonies be formed, sea charts be made, and navigation made easier. Indeed, the face of the world would have been very much different without these men who connected the entire world.

If we were not aware of the ocean routes, we would never have this globalizing society we are experiencing today, and modern travel would have been much different. Back in the Age of Exploration, Trans-oceanic voyages took years and the risks of losing your life were great. It was not exactly a popular activity unless one had nothing to lose, or the rewards were greater than the tremendous risks; as the proverb goes, "Those who would go to sea for pleasure would go to hell for pastime".

Today's generation no longer sees the ocean as a cruel mistress, but as an outlet for leisure, a view totally unheard of back in the early days of seafaring. The rich have their boats they use during vacation; cruises are becoming more and more popular among those who can afford it. Even for domestic travel, popular cruise lines are being used by the masses as a more affordable form of travelling. People are no longer confined inside stuffed

quarter with limited food to eat, modern technology like refrigerators make it easier to transport fresh food; and buffets are even common in the more luxurious forms of sea travel.

Faster engines eliminate the need for years of voyage, as one can reach their destinations in weeks at most. The early methods of using landmarks, celestial navigation, and dead reckoning (depending solely on the compass and calculating one's speed) were replaced by ground-based radio navigation systems, which became an early form of wireless communication, until it became a satellite navigation system like the GPS. We now have complete and accurate maps of the world, with enough knowledge on circumnavigation thanks to Magellan's contribution. All of these cumulative efforts cannot just be credited to the wise captains, but those who followed under him.

One can immediately see how the development of navigational tools helped lessen the risks of going out to sea, but these were only developed out of the need to find better and more efficient methods of sea travel. If no one dared to be curious on what lies on the the horizon, we might have never found ways to explore, and travelling would not be as developed as it is today. These sailors might not be renowned by history, but their courage deserves our admiration.

With the onset of the modern age, sailors today are no longer the band of social outcasts they once were, most of them are either in the shipping industry, tourism, or in the military. They are merely a shadow from the poor image held against them, and some even dream of being a sailor, partly due

to the positive portrayal in popular culture. But as one class rises, there must be another class to replace these European sailors as the socially marginalized of society, and we can in fact see this trend continuing in society, with similar characteristics.

In the Philippine context, we can liken the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) to these European sailors. Though not necessarily the socially marginalized in the country (they are in fact bright minds), they possess similar characteristics to those of the sailors in the Age of Exploration. The very reason why they go abroad to work is because they find better opportunities outside the country, and though they might also find employment in the Philippines, they believe their future will be better assured in other nations.

Modern conveniences have raised the standards of living of the majority of the global population, especially those of industrialized nations. Thus, it is not a fair to make a comparison of the living conditions back then to that of the OFWs. However, we do see that they are most likely living in “worse” conditions abroad, as they cannot afford luxuries if they plan on sending money back to their families. Even the purpose of the trip is similar to the spice-seeking sailors, only this time they come in the form of dollars, euros, or other international currencies.

Finally, the major parallelism of the OFWs and the European sailors is their courage to venture out into the unknown. Even with all the knowledge we can learn through books, media, and the internet, there is still that feeling of alienation once someone steps onto foreign soil, much more if one enters alone. Social status will no doubt change when one works abroad, OFWs will

be classified as a minority and will be subject to the risks and dangers of living without the protection of family or national government.

We nevertheless see the sacrifices the OFWs make towards the development of our country's economy. Despite many criticisms that they have simply abandoned the country and jumped ship, and being outcast as deserters, we must learn to see the bravery, the selflessness behind their motives for working abroad. We must see that sometimes they have no choice, and look behind the motivations for their individual choices. Furthermore, they are slowly and sometimes unknowingly contributing a great deal to the improvement of our economic welfare, and saving our country from going into complete crisis.

These are the fruits of those who venture out into the unknown. The uncharted seas, the foreign territories - they all hold much promise and reward for us, but they also bear the risks and fears any leap of faith will entail.