Stowaway treatment experiences revealed

A Cardiff University PhD thesis on maritime stowaways is helping to turn a spotlight on the experiences of those attempting to gain free passage on ships.

By Kate Jones

A recent thesis by a then-PhD student at Cardiff University in the UK offers new insight into the global governance of maritime stowaways and the consequences for relations between seafarers and stowaways on board vessels.

Amaha Senu’s study, entitled The Global Assemblage of Multi-Centred Stowaway Governance, used data including interviews, stowaway incident reports, legal documents and Conventions to examine worldwide stowaway governance in shipping, ultimately seeking to learn why stowaways are sometimes mistreated and thrown overboard, and the extent of such actions.

Dr Senu, himself a former seafarer but now a research associate at the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) at Cardiff University, conducted his research on the issue between October 2013 and September 2017. His research was supported by a SIRC-Nippon Foundation Maritime Research Network Fellowship.

Dr Senu’s thesis offers in-depth discussion of stowaway experiences, including how stowaways choose vessels on which to travel, how they are treated on board ships and how they are subsequently taken off vessels. In the paper, he argues that there is a shared, dynamic and continuously updated body of knowledge that stowaways use for their journey. Stowaways use this knowledge to help them deal with a wide range of situations, from selecting ships to surviving at sea and maximising their chances of success and also to help them profit from the disembarkation-repatriation process.

Ship selection

Regarding vessel selection by stowaways, the study argues that seafarer nationality and crew composition are “important considerations”, with several nationalities being defined as “good” or “bad” by stowaways, based on shared myths, beliefs and experiences, but also on economic evaluations of the home countries of the seafarers.

Dr Senu notes a pattern of Western European, Filipino, American and Japanese seafarers being seen positively by those choosing to stow away, with Chinese seafarers often being depicted negatively and being greatly feared. Additionally, views regarding Russian and Ukrainian seafarers are mixed, the research found.

With regard to stowaway treatment on board vessels, Dr Senu’s thesis notes that despite Conventions and guidelines that call for enhanced port security, the responsibilities regarding prevention and dealing with stowaways have increasingly shifted towards seafarers, shipowners and insurance companies. However, it also points out that seafarers experience considerable stress in trying to ensure ship security while also having to fulfil their commercial obligations, which are often demanding and time constrained.

Hence, in such contexts, the thesis points out, there are instances where some seafarers feel extremely angry when discovering stowaways at sea.

According to Dr Senu, the initial meeting between seafarers and stowaways on a vessel is often “fraught with fear on both sides”, with stowaways fearful that seafarers might physically assault them or throw them overboard and seafarers worried that the stowaways might be, for example, possible pirates or criminals. Sometimes, certain seafarers respond in a physically violent manner when initially finding stowaways on board due to fear, anger or frustration. Those stowing away therefore use their knowledge-base to mitigate any risk by carefully planning how to make themselves known once at sea.

Grudging acceptance

The paper also argues that despite the existence of detailed guidelines about how to deal with stowaways on board vessels, seafarers follow such guidelines “grudgingly”, and might make mistakes when implementing recommended practices or be limited by the situation on a ship, such as, for example, cabin unavailability. Stowaways can also overpower seafarers and threaten those on board – something which may not necessarily occur out of bad intentions but which is consistent with the stowaways’ calculations about boosting their chances of success. In some instances, however, seafarers have cast stowaways off on oil drums because they felt threatened.

The research examines in detail the practice of disembarking stowaways on to makeshift rafts at sea or even throwing them overboard, and makes an attempt to establish patterns and reasons behind such practices. The reasons identified include: seafarers feeling threatened by the stowaways’ presence; insufficient provisions or victualling on board a vessel; crew composition in relation to where the seafarers are from and the national composition on board; crew agencies’ contributing roles; seafarer anxieties about job security and professional reputation; maltreatment in response to disembarkation refusals by states, and the broader “context of ‘externalisation’ of responsibilities.”

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