

# Mariners' Superstitions and Myths

## West vs East

By Geoff Walker

Since the day I stepped aboard my first ship as a young apprentice, I was quickly made aware of some sailors' superstitions and myths. Mostly they were made in jest but others, well, there was an undertone of truth and belief attached to a body of popular myths or beliefs relating to a particular place, activity, or group of sailors. Of course, not all were folklore or omens predicting an evil future event, or circumstance, some implied good luck and had happy connotations.

Not long after I joined, I can well remember being on bridge watch with the Chief Officer, a middle aged, dour Scot, a humorless fanatic of the lore, an obvious believer, who gave me a lecture on sailors' traditions and legends, after he had reprimanded me for quietly whistling to myself, on the bridge wing. **"Stop whistling for the wind, laddie"** he bawled, followed by a monologue that seemed endless, at the conclusion of which I found myself well versed in the subject of nautical mythology, according to his viewpoint anyway. Hailing from an Asian upbringing, I found that any superstitions I had were more East than West, but the Chief Officer was like God to a young apprentice, so I just kept my mouth shut and listened to the tirade. He never raised the subject again, thereafter.

I must confess, over the next 40 years I spent at sea, at times I wondered as to the logic or justification behind many of traditions and legends of the sea. I personally discarded most, but there were those who were ardent, enthusiastic, or passionate believers. I found Asian, particularly the Chinese folk lore to be more practical which featured on "Good Luck and Fortune" rather than those from the West which focused more on, calamity, woe, and misery. Typical of this is the legend of "Tin Hau", otherwise known as Mazu.



There follows a summary of the more common myths of yore, connected mainly to sailors of the era of sail or former times. In relation to language and cultural practices, such sailors' superstitions are the consequence of folkloric practices or traditions whose meanings were once important, but now are disregarded by most modern sailors and laypersons alike, with the possible exclusion of **"Tin Hau"**.

**Red Sky at Night** – Usually, related to the adage **"Red Sky at night, Sailors delight; Red Sky in the morning, Sailors take warning"**. This saying has some scientific rationality, although it assumes storms will approach from the west and is therefore generally correct only at mid-latitudes where, due to the rotation of the Earth, prevailing winds travel west to east. If the morning skies are red, it is because clear skies over the horizon to the east permit the sun to light the undersides of moisture laden clouds. By contrast, to see red clouds in the evening, sunlight must have a clear path from the west, so therefore the prevailing westerly wind must be bringing clear skies.

**Unlucky Sailing Days** - Friday is thought to be an unlucky day in some cultures, and perhaps the most enduring sailing superstition is that it is unlucky to commence a voyage or 'set sail' on a Friday. This is particularly so amongst fishermen, who in some cases still maintain this myth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, although it is not universally considered.

**Candlemas Day** - In some cultures, it is considered a bad omen to commence a voyage on Candlemas Day. The festival is called Candlemas because this was the day that all the Church's candles for the year were blessed and commemorates the ritual purification of Mary, 40 days after the birth of her son Jesus. Sailors are often reluctant to set sail on Candlemas Day, believing that any voyage begun then will ultimately end in calamity and disaster.

**The Albatross** – Most prevalent in the Southern Ocean. Amongst most mariners it is considered very unlucky to kill an albatross. This elegant bird soars on the air currents, following ships using a method known as “Dynamic Soaring”. These birds can stay at sea for weeks and months without flapping their wings, or landing. Ancient sailors believed an Albatross sighting would be a bad omen as it would mean someone was doomed to die imminently. Regardless of which way a sailor would view the Albatross, the killing of an Albatross was a certain curse, to fall upon the entire ship’s crew.

**Ship’s Launching Ceremony** - During the christening ceremony at the launching of a new ship, it is considered inauspicious if the bottle of champagne fails to break the first time it is swung against ship’s the hull.

**Bananas on Ships** - Having bananas on a ship, especially on a fishing boat or yacht, is considered bad luck. This myth can be pinpointed to the 1700s when the trend of ships carrying bananas sinking was initially observed. As the Bananas ripen, they release ethylene gas responsible for the rapid maturing of the fruit. This ripening effect would hasten the deterioration of the ships wooden planking, resulting in the formation of leaks and holes, and eventual sinking of the ship, explaining the increased number of wooden ships lost.

**Jonah** - A "Jonah" is a long-established expression among sailors, meaning a person (either a sailor or a passenger) who is bad luck, which is based on the Biblical prophet Jonah. Clergymen are considered bad luck, as they are all of Jonah's persuasion. The myth also claims Redheads and women are also to be avoided as passengers.

**Whistling aboard Ship** - Whistling is usually considered to be bad luck, with the possible exception of the sources mentioned below. It is said that to whistle is to challenge the wind itself, and that to do so will bring about a storm. On ships of old, whistling was taboo as it was associated with coded communications between mutineers. The cook was usually excused, because as long as he was whistling, he was not eating the crew’s rations.

**Sirens and Scylla** – Mythological, often dangerous, and beautiful, creatures, portrayed as beautiful women who lured nearby sailors with their seductive music and voices to shipwreck on the rocky coast of their island. Sirens were sometimes referred to as “lethal woman”. Another mythological creature, the Scylla, is a similar female sea demon that is both dangerous yet beautiful. Sirens supposedly lured mariners to their deaths with their melodious, enchanting songs.

**Cats** - While in many western cultures, a black cat is considered unlucky, British, and Irish sailors considered adopting a black "ship's cat" because they believed it would bring good luck. There is some logic to this belief; cats eat (or at least kill) rodents, which can damage ropes and stores of grain on board, as well as carrying disease. Cats are intelligent animals, so a high level of care was always directed toward them to keep them happy and content, research has backed up this superstition. Cats were believed to have miraculous powers that could protect ships from dangerous weather. Another popular belief was that cats could start storms through magic stored in their tails. If a ship's cat fell or was thrown overboard, it was thought that it would summon a terrible storm, sinking the ship, and that if the ship did survive, it would be cursed with nine years of bad luck. Other beliefs include; if a cat licks its fur against the grain, it means a hailstorm was coming; if it sneezes it means rain; and if it is frisky it means wind.

**Cormorants** - In some Scandinavian countries Cormorants, are considered a good omen; in particular, in Norwegian tradition spirits of those lost at sea come to visit their loved ones disguised as cormorants.

**Touching of a sailor's collar** – It is claimed by many that touching a sailor's tunic collar brings good luck.

**Mermaids** - Mermaids usually are considered lucky, but not necessarily universally. Mermaids appear in British folklore as unlucky omens, both foretelling disaster and provoking it, some depict a mermaid speaking to doomed ships. Mermaids can also be a sign of approaching rough weather, and some have been described by ancient mariners as monstrous in size, up to 2,000 feet. Reputedly, sailors of old would scour beaches and the shoreline looking for mermaid's purses on the sand and rocks, as signs of mermaids in the area.

**Davy Jones' Locker** – Davy Jones is a popular character in sailor's yore. Davy Jones' Locker is an idiom used to describe the bottom of the sea or seabed. It is used as a euphemism for death or burial at sea. Upon death, a wicked sailor's body supposedly went to Davy Jones' locker (a chest, as lockers were known in those times), but a devoutly religious or charitable sailor's soul went to "Fiddler's Green". "Fiddler's Green" is an after-life where there is perpetual gaiety or jollity, a fiddle that never stops playing, and dancers who never tire. In 19th-century English maritime folklore, it was a kind of after-life for sailors who had served at least fifty years at sea.

**Sailor's Tattoos** - Sailor tattoos refer to a type of tattoo traditionally favored by sailors and the traditions that accompany these tattoos. "Old school" tattoos were common among sailors, depicting images like swallows on either side of the chest, girls in sailor hats, and pairs of dice. After falling out of style for several decades, these stylized tattoos are now regaining popularity among young people, both sailors and non-sailors. They are particularly favored among tattoo artists themselves. This returning trend is also seen in the increasing popularity of traditional Sailor designs, nautical tattoos and with stylized sailor tattoo images. Much has been written, on the subject of sailor's tattoos. An anchor is commonly used in sailor tattoos, which were supposed to prevent a sailor from drifting away from the ship, should he fall overboard. The words 'HOLD FAST' tattooed on the knuckles would prevent a sailor from falling when aloft. But, on the whole sailors designed mariner motifs of their own, according to

their travel experiences sailing the oceans. It goes without saying, women featured prominently amongst the most favored sailor's tattoo designs.

**A Sailor's first Crossing of the Equator** – Commonly known as "Crossing the Line". Its practices impose good luck on the novice sailor. The ceremony of Crossing the Line is an initiation rite and is generally a universal ceremony. Sailors who have already crossed the Equator are nicknamed Shellbacks, often referred to as Sons of Neptune; those who have not are nicknamed Pollywogs. It has been a long nautical tradition to initiate pollywogs, sailors who have never crossed the Equator, into the Kingdom of Neptune upon their first crossing of the Equator. The term pollywog originated in the 1800s and is longer used and is out of fashion and political correctness.

**Between the Devil and Deep Blue Sea** – "Between the devil and the deep blue sea" is a sailor's idiom meaning a dilemma. The phrase itself is of nautical origin. The devil, in this case, is the lowermost seam in the hull of a wooden ship (strictly, there are two 'devils' one on each side of the keel). These seams get their name from the fact that they are the most difficult to get at, whether from inside or outside the ship. It is a fact that there is 'nothing between the devil and the deep sea'. It is sometimes interpreted as being caught "between the Gunwale and the Deep Blue sea", which holds the same literal fact, of nothing but the rail between you and the sea.

**Over a Barrel** – Commonly explained as meaning to be in a dilemma or in "a weak, confused or difficult position". It may come instead from the custom of punishing a prisoner by flogging or paddling him while he is strapped to a barrel. Either way, the image created in the mind is that of total helplessness and loss of control which is a common anxiety of sailors in fear of corporal punishment. It may alternatively refer to the practice amongst sailors of placing a drowning victim's head over a barrel, and rolling his body over it, in an attempt, to eliminate sea water from the person's lungs.

**Sailors Wearing Earrings** - Sailors proudly wore earrings as a mark of their travels and voyages. Earrings were given to young sailors to commemorate their first crossing of the Equator, or when they rounded the treacherous and notorious waters of Cape Horn.

Earrings were also worn for superstitious reasons. Some sailors were convinced that wearing an earring would improve or even cure bad eyesight, as they believed that the precious metals in an earring possessed magical healing powers. Another tale was that pierced ears would prevent seasickness. Others believed that a gold earring served as a protective amulet and that a man wearing an earring would never drown at sea.

Of course, often these beliefs proved to be false, but earrings made of silver or gold were worth enough to pay for a sailor's funeral if his body was washed ashore. Some sailors even engraved their name and home port on the inside of the earring so that their bodies could be sent to their families for a proper burial. If a man died on a ship, the earrings helped to cover the cost of transporting his body home so that he would not be buried at sea or in foreign lands.

However, wearing loop earrings, did serve one truly beneficial purpose for living sailors, especially those who fired ships' cannons during close encounters with the enemy, they dangled wads of wax from their earrings to use as earplugs against the noise.



**The Devil's Triangle** - Also known as the "**Bermuda Triangle**", is a loosely defined region in the western part of the North Atlantic Ocean, where a number of ships, are said to have disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Some sailors view these waters as being particularly lethal and surrounded with the paranormal which is beyond the scope of their normal scientific understanding.

The "Triangle" is roughly bounded by Miami, Bermuda, and Puerto Rico, but most modern theorists dismiss the idea, that there is any mystery connected with the myth. However, there are unexplained circumstances that surround many of the incidents, and a pattern allegedly began forming in which vessels traversing the Devil's Triangle would either disappear or be found abandoned.

One of the most infamous incidents is that of the "**Mary Celeste**" which was found adrift in the Atlantic Ocean, the connection to the Bermuda triangle had been somehow cited to find an answer to the mystery of its fate. Discovered on 4th December 1872, with everything intact and in place, except for the entire crew, the ship was found abandoned on the sea days after it started its journey from New York to Genoa, Italy.

There were seven crew members along with her Captain, his wife and their two-year-old daughter aboard the vessel, which was loaded with raw alcohol, but days after her departure from New York, a passing British ship called "Dei Gratia" found "**Mary Celeste**" under partial sail in the Atlantic, becalmed off the Islands of the Azores, the ship was unmanned with no sign of any crew and no struggle, nevertheless, the lifeboat was found to be missing.

A search of the ship revealed that nine of the barrels in the cargo were broached and there was a sword found on the deck. No trace of the people aboard the vessel or the missing lifeboat has ever been found. Studies of the ship clearly ruled out the possibility of a pirate attack since everything on the ship including the barrels of alcohol it was carrying, and the valuables belonging to the crew were untouched.

Theories surrounding the mystery of the "**Mary Celeste**" also encompass criminal conspiracy, alien abduction, and even an attack by a giant squid or mythical monster of the deep. Nonetheless, many of these theories seem unlikely, because why would a perfectly experienced crew, in good weather, with their ship entirely uncompromised, abandon it and then never to be seen again?

Another unnerving "triangle" mystery is connected with the American schooner, "**Ellen Austin**". In 1881, the 210 feet long "**Ellen Austin**" was on her way to New York from London when she stumbled upon a derelict ship close to the Bermuda Triangle. Everything seemed fine with the unidentified schooner drifting just north of the Sargasso Sea, save for her missing crew.

The Captain of the "**Ellen Austin**" stood off to observe the derelict hulk for two days, in order to make sure it was not any contrivance of pirates by way of a trap. After two days with no response from the ship, the Captain boarded the abandoned vessel with his crew to find a fully intact ship and cargo, but no sign of any crew.

So as, to tow it back, accompanied with “**Ellen Austin**”, the Captain placed a prize crew on the ship, and set sail in convoy. However, after two days of sailing in calm waters a sudden squall separated the two ships, following which the derelict vanished.

Days after the storm, according to the stories, the “**Ellen Austin’s**” lookout spotted the vessel through his telescope, only to realize the vessel drifting aimlessly once again. After hours of effort, “**Ellen Austin**” finally caught up with the drifting vessel.

Strangely, no one was on board. However, another version of the story suggests a second attempt by the Captain to bring her back to port was made but ended with the same fate, before “**Ellen Austin**” finally abandoned the cursed vessel. Other reports suggest that the derelict was spotted once again, but this time had a different crew than the prize crew placed on it by “**Ellen Austin**”. The disappearance of the ship, her reappearance and the absence of the prize crew is an intriguing story and one that has seemingly no chance of ever being resolved.

There are numerous other, more recent accounts, of mysterious and unexplainable happenings in the “**Devil’s Triangle**”, the loss of **USS Cyclops** and “**Flight 19**” to name but two.

**The Flying Dutchman** - Is a legendary ghost ship which was said to never be able to make port, doomed to sail the oceans forever. The myth is likely to have originated from the 17th-century golden age of the Dutch East India Company. The mythology has been dated to the late 18th century. According to legend, if hailed by another ship, the crew of the Flying Dutchman was said to try to send messages to land, or to people long dead. Professed sightings in the 19th and 20th centuries claimed that the ship glowed in a ghostly light.

In ocean lore, the sight of this ghost ship signifies doom. It seems that many years ago a Dutch man-of-war was lost off the Cape of Good Hope, and every soul on board perished; her consort weathered the gale and arrived soon after at the Cape. Having refitted, and returning to Europe, they were assailed by a violent tempest nearly in the same latitude. In the night watch some of the crew saw, or imagined they saw, a vessel standing for them under a press of full sail, as though she would run them down; one man in particular affirmed it was the ship that had foundered in the earlier gale, and that it must certainly be her, or the apparition of her; but once the tempest cleared, the object, a dark thick cloud, disappeared. Nothing could do away the idea of this phenomenon on the minds of the sailors and, on their relating the circumstances when they arrived in port, the story spread like wild-fire, and the supposed phantom became known as the **Flying Dutchman**.

It is a common superstition of mariners, that, in the high southern latitudes on the coast of Africa, hurricanes are frequently heralded in by the appearance of a ghost-ship, so named the **Flying Dutchman**. The crew of this vessel are supposed to have been guilty of some dreadful crime, in the infancy of exploration and navigation, and to have been stricken with fatal disease, and are believed still to traverse the ocean on which they perished, till the period of their penance expires.

**Mazu Chinese Goddess of the sea** - As the most influential goddess of the sea in China, Mazu is at the heart of a host of beliefs and customs, including oral traditions, religious ceremonies, and folk practices, throughout the country's coastal areas and countless Chinese communities around the world, especially sea folk. The legend behind the Chinese seafarers’ Goddess, originated with the glorification of a kindhearted girl initially named Lin Mo (or Lin Moniang). Born into an established family on Meizhou

Island in Fujian Province in 960 AD she showed remarkable intelligence at a young age, with a considerable knowledge of astronomy and Chinese medicine, she is also well-known for outstanding swimming skill and prowess. Throughout her life, Mazu helped coastal residents and local seafarers by making medicines, curing patients as well as forecasting the weather, planning safe routes, and saving lives from shipwreck.

There are several legends about her "death" and how she turned into the Goddess. A frequently told version claims that Mazu eventually sacrificed herself at the age of 28 while trying to rescue the survivors of a shipwreck. Her fellow townsfolk then built a temple in memory of the virtuous and kind woman and to worship her as the Goddess, representing mercy, kindness, and compassion. Today, many Chinese, especially those living in coastal China, still strongly believe that Mazu will always look out for the brave sailors and fishermen, bringing them good luck and fortune. As maritime activities flourished, Mazu temples were established in various port cities all over the world, following in the footsteps of Chinese immigrants.



In the Contonese dialect, Mazu, is also known as “**Tin Hau**”. She is a Chinese Goddess who is not only popular in Hong Kong but has a strong claim for the most worshipped Goddess in the world, with a few hundred million followers. As her popularity increased and fame spread, the temple expanded, and more were added. All over Fujian and Guangdong, more temples started to appear.

Once the Goddess’ powerful reputation started, it escalated rapidly, creating the cultic worship known as Mazuism. Reports of the Goddess intervening during crises at sea and appearing to help those in need or peril circulated among the sea-faring communities of Southern China.

The sea is the reason for her popularity in South China. In the southern part of the Middle Kingdom, sailing and fishing were way of life for the majority, of the population. While there are many sea Gods in the region, such as Tam Kung and Hung Shing, something about “**Tin Hau**” captured the hearts of the seafaring southerners. All the ethnic groups adopted her, not just her native Fujian and Hoklo people.

Hong Kong was not only a fishing community in its own right, but a magnet for Chinese families who wanted to make their fortunes from the sea and eventually on the back of British trade. Groups from all over China came to the territory and as they did, they built temples to the Goddess to protect their endeavors on the waters. **Tin Hau’s** birthday is on the 23rd day of the 3rd lunar month. On that day, all her temples in Hong Kong are alive with ceremony and activity.

In Hong Kong, you are never far from the sea, which means you are never far from **Tin Hau**. As land has been reclaimed over the years, some former sea-front temples have found themselves inland. So, whether by the coast or in the city, you can see the Goddess, accompanied by her demonic guardians, thousand Li Eyes and favorable Wind Ears, wherever you go. Though she is not a native of Hong Kong, like most of its other inhabitants, she has become very much settled into the territory. If you don’t know of **Tin Hau**, you don’t really know Hong Kong.



**Susanowo** - Was the God of the sea and the storms according to the ancient Japanese religion Shinto, which means "the way of the Gods". He had a furious and impulsive temper. He could create ravaging storms that caused a lot of damage. Once, his sister, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, was so distressed by his fierce temper that she decided to hide herself in the cave of heaven.

Unfortunately, without Amaterasu, who ruled the realm of light, darkness surrounded the world. Evil spirits left their hiding places. Using a trick, the assembly of the Gods got Amaterasu to come out of the cave. Light once again encompassed and colored the world. To prevent another similar accident, the Gods banished Susanowo in the province of Izumo, and seized everything he owned.

Thereafter, Susanowo had to overcome many dangerous adventures. Once he killed a monstrous serpent with eight heads, and found the sacred sword, Kusanagi. After many adventurous journeys, Susanowo went to live with his mother Izanami in the underworld.



**Sirena** – is a mythological sea creature from Filipino culture. In some regions of the Philippines, particularly Bicol and Visayas, Sirenas are known as Magindara and portrayed as vicious mermaids. Unlike Sirens of Greek mythology, who are portrayed as women/bird creatures, Sirenas are often portrayed as mermaid-like creatures who live under the sea.

In Philippine mythology, the Sirena is a mythological aquatic creature with the head and torso of a human female and the tail of a fish. The Sirena is an Engkanto – the Filipino equivalent of European mermaids. Engkanto are mythical environmental spirits that are said to have the ability to appear in human form. They are often associated with the spirits of ancestors in the Philippines. They are also characterized as spirits like Sirens, dark beings, elves, and the like. Belief in their existence has probably existed for centuries, and continues to this day. Engkantos, are classified as one of the Bantay Tubig, a Filipino term for mythical guardians of the water and oceans.

Sirena are beautiful sea creatures with the upper body of a human with long, flowing hair that is often curly or wavy and the lower body of a fish or has a tail of a fish. In pre-Hispanic Philippines they were believed to be beautiful.

In Guam and the other islands of Micronesia, the Sirena is also revered and imbedded in maritime folk lore.



Oceania and Polynesia, a vast region of the Pacific Ocean consisting of many hundreds of widely separated, culturally and politically diverse island groups. Ranging from Midway and Hawaii in the north to New Zealand in the south, the triangular area called Polynesia also includes Tahiti, Samoa, Tonga, Tuamotu, the Cook Islands, and the Pitcairn Islands.

Although the mythology of Polynesia takes different forms on various islands, many of the basic stories, themes, and deities are surprisingly similar throughout the region. One of these is **Tangaroa**.

**Tangaroa** - Is the great undeniable God of the sea, lakes, rivers, and creatures that live within them, especially fish. As Tangaroa-whakamau-tai he exercises control over the tides. He is sometimes depicted as a whale.

In New Zealand Maori and Cook Island Maori traditions, Tangaroa is a son of Ranginui and Papatūānuku, Sky and Earth. After he joined his brothers Rongo, Tū, Haumia, and Tāne in the forcible separation of their parents, he is attacked by his brother Tāwhirimātea, the supernatural being or spirit of storms, and forced to hide in the sea.

**Tangaroa** is said to be the father of many sea creatures.

There are hundreds of other superstitions and myths relating to the sea, far too numerous to include in this short review.

End

References: Various Historical and Cultural Archives, Various online data available on Public Domains, from which much material has been sourced.

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**The Jolly Jack Tar, full of Yarns and Ditties**