

# Tsunamis across Sri Lanka: Narratives of crisis when nature 'strikes'

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## Abstract

*The Boxing day tsunami in 2004 brought widespread loss of life and destruction to the Northern, Eastern and Southern coastal communities of Sri Lanka. Communities attempting to make sense of the natural disaster and subsequent destruction struggle to describe such unusual and cataclysmic events that transform benign physical local environments into disaster zones. Natural disasters force people to rethink the relationship between culture and nature, requiring the bricolage of available semiotic signs and concepts. This case study uses data from Sri Lankan English newspapers, in-depth interviews, and a focus group to identify prominent themes in the recollections of the tsunami and its aftermath. Four themes are drawn primarily from oral narratives of a small coastal community near Galle in the South: monster and monsterisation of victims, metaphysical reciprocity, reconsideration of mythical events, and unique corporeality. Arguably, these themes resonate in varying degrees with descriptive and explanatory force to facilitate psychological recovery for those affected.*

**Keywords:** Boxing Day tsunami; Sri Lanka; natural disaster narrative theory; monster theory

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## Introduction

On 26th December 2004 at approximately 8.40 a.m. a wave surge between 5 and 6.5 metres struck the Northern, Eastern and southern coasts of Sri Lanka around one hundred minutes after a major earthquake rocked the coast off Sumatra. A second wave struck approximately 20 minutes later. Official records of the human and ecological impact from the tragedy identify 30,527 deaths, 3,884 missing, 15,686 injured and 773,636 displaced, and damaged nearly two thirds of Sri Lanka's coastline, over one thousand kilometers (Department of Census and Statistics, 2005). Furthermore, two thirds of the fishing fleet including 27,000 fisher fatalities, created both social and financial devastation to communities heavily reliant on the industry (UNEP 2005: 58). Similarly, the fledgling tourist industry, showing signs of recovery after two decades of civil-war fuelled uncertainty, was devastated as coastal destinations were the primary areas affected; although the waves travelled up to three kilometres inland in parts.

The tsunamis came without warning at a time when most were enjoying the combined holiday festivities associated with Christian and Buddhist sacred days. Apart from the Christmas season, it was also a Poya day, a time of spiritual significance and celebration to Buddhists across the nation. Poya is a public holiday celebrated to commemorate the full moon phase of the lunar month. The timing of the tsunami event had both spiritual significance and material consequence for many Sri Lankans.

The rationale for the study is to explore and analyse the personal narratives of those affected by a natural event that caused significant devastation to their community years earlier. By definition, natural disasters are not common occurrences and involve significant use of cultural capital to schematize and describe. This study seeks to identify common themes among the media and personal narratives of selected participants, which may inform understanding of how groups rationalize, describe and explain natural disaster, while maintaining sufficient confidence to live with the uncertainties of their physical environment.

## Methodology

This paper uses narratives of the disaster taken from the Sri Lankan English print media and coastal survivors from some of the worse affected areas to inform communication discourses of how close-knit communities make sense of human tragedy brought on by widespread natural disaster.

Sinhala, Tamil, and English are the three official languages of Sri Lanka. Most children learn English from primary through to the completion of secondary education. Consequently, the media narratives incorporated into this research are mostly taken from national daily and weekly English papers, the *Daily News*, *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Observer*. The *Daily News* is a state-owned broadsheet, although the *Sunday Observer* boasts the largest circulation. However, exact circulation details are unpublished. The data collected from the respective newspapers came from publications between 1<sup>st</sup> January and 7 February 2005. The media data collection included a systematic search of the newspapers across the period guided by any stories or pictures presenting eye-witness accounts or reactions to the events. The news narratives of the event are used to supplement and reinforce the interview findings, which are undertaken almost six years after the event occurred.

The oral narratives that inform how the participants made sense of the disaster that occurred years earlier were collected during a field trip to Sri Lanka in November 2010. Through semi-structured interviews and a focus group situated near locations where the tsunamis came ashore, nine people relayed their stories of the disaster. The participants are Sinhalese living in the Southern Province, one of seven forming Sri Lanka. They come from the city of Galle and surrounding beach areas, which constitute a major port and trading centre, and tourist destination for nationals and foreigners. Most participants are members of a small fishing community, with the exception of an owner/manager of a beach-side restaurant in Hikkaduwa, and a public service manager from Galle.

The process included questions initially in English, which were translated into Sinhalese, with responses translated back into English. All nine participants gave their consent to record the personal and focus group interviews to facilitate transcription. The translation delay also allowed for the taking of detailed scratch notes. The mixed focus group (two male, five female) participants, aged between thirty-seven and seventy-eight, come from the village of Kathaluwa, which was partially destroyed by the tsunami. Nine attended the meeting, yet only seven participated. Since the tragedy, the government relocated the focus group participants of this study three kilometres inland from the coast. The village meeting house provided a familiar and natural setting for the focus group interviews.

As with all research gathered by qualitative data collecting methods, the media artifacts and personal narratives do not claim to be representative of how Sri Lankans frame the event. However, by employing

multiple data sources, a thick description (See Geertz 1973) of lived experience through, and perceptions of traumatic natural disaster allows us to gain insights into how one group of coastal dwellers made sense of the events of 26 December, 2004.

## Theorising narrative

There are multiple theoretical approaches to analysing social phenomena using a qualitative narrative approach (Burke 1945; Fisher 1987; Riessman 1993). The diversity represented in non-fictional narrative theories is represented in the varied social situations they describe and analyse. Consequently, the theoretical perspective adopted complements the particular focus of research.

Kenneth Burke's dramatisic pentad provides a useful taxonomy of basic narrative elements, which allows further deconstruction of various sense-making stories told at any level. Briefly, the five parts are: the act, what is done by the actor; scene, the situation or background setting; agent, the actor; agency, means or vehicle used by the actor to carry out the act; purpose, the reason for the act (Littlejohn, 1999, p. 164).

As discussed, narratives are useful for making sense of the world, what happens in it and where we are located in the events. Similarly, narratives of the tsunami and its aftermath are psychologically and sociologically informative.

Fisher's narratology is arguably one of the more inclusive (Littlejohn, 1987, p. 169) and is used to support his conviction that all expressions of human rationality are expressions of narrative, as they "include any verbal or nonverbal account that has a sequence of events to which listeners assign meaning" (p. 169). Consequently, Fisher challenges the distinction traditionally made between story-telling and argumentation. Furthermore, Fisher does not differentiate between narrative and story, as indicated in his position that all argument is "...a story, an interpretation of some aspect of the world that is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by human personality" (as cited in Littlejohn, p. 169). Fisher's inclusive application of narrative to all forms of sequentially described phenomena arising from situated personalities to which meaning is ascribed by an audience, is the principal narrative theory informing this paper.

Consequently, narrative presents a unique approach to represent, construct and analyse the diverse frames of meaning found in public records, the media and other accounts of a disaster and its aftermath. Furthermore, disasters represent times when the normal business of working and living is temporarily suspended. When natural disaster strikes, we are forced to confront our own mortality, fragility, and uncivilised selves alone and in groups contemporaneously. In such circumstances, a narrative approach, which values both rational and affective elements in the construction of sense-making stories, makes a significant contribution to studying disaster and its impact. Hoffman (2002) observes that experiencing natural disasters actually upturns our social constructs of the relationship between culture and nature; they challenge our technological quests to tame, control and civilise nature – or at least live in harmony with 'her' (p. 121).

Similarly, our symbols of nature denoting the maternal provider clash with the material reality of immediate experience. In the attempt to reconcile our need to solve the cultural dilemma, we restore

symbolic legitimacy to 'mother nature', by re-ascribing cultural attributes, using symbolic bricolage from our limited reservoir of signs, we construct a bifurcated nature in the form of monstrous off-spring (p. 125-135). The monster is a powerful concept drawn from folk history that reconciles acts of cruel destruction with our cultured construct of 'mother nature', and shares a number of traits with our social frames of natural disaster.

## Natural disaster as monster

Hoffman (2002) identifies a number of similar traits between constructs of the monster and its actions, and natural disasters. The traits are embodiment, resistance to capture, ontological liminality, antidiachronicity, attract their victims through 'otherness'. Each emerges from a challenge to normative perceptions of nature's function and essence. For example, nature as mother is embodied and humanly ministerial. In contrast the monster such as Shelley's Frankenstein or the Grendel from Anglo-Saxon mythology is natural yet unnatural. It has shape but is mis-shapen. Both have corporeality, albeit manifested in very different forms. Hoffman, applying the features from Cohen's, *Monster Theory* (1996) argues the monster is a "resistant other, known only through process and movement, never through dissectable analysis" (p. 4-5). Both monsters and natural disasters resist capture. They come suddenly, they destroy, and they disappear. Monsters also have ontological liminality in that what forms them, or brings about their appearance is unknown by those affected (Hoffman, 2002, p. 129). Similarly, why natural disasters occur is equally unknown. We may know tectonic plates moved together at the top of Java, but why should a tsunami form at this time and not from other underwater earthquakes with significant magnitude? The measure of uncertainty among seismologists as to the impact of an earthquake is indicated by the ratio of tsunami warnings to actual events. Monsters and natural disasters share antidiachronicity in that everything known about them can only be learned through "hindsight and records". Hoffman describes the limitation as a phenomenon that can only be "read back from the present" (p. 129). Similarly, monsters and natural disasters complicate temporality, in that you can't calculate the calendar of the ogre's appearance (p. 129). The final shared trait discussed here between natural disaster and monster is the attraction to the other. Despite the deadly threat, for some the monster is perversely an object of desire and fascination. Similarly, so is natural disaster. The power of destructive force raises curiosity and the sheer strangeness of the phenomenon beckons us forward. In Colombo, when the sea rose two metres crowds gathered at the Galle-face break-water in Colombo to wonder at the phenomenon until police chased them away. Similarly, further south as the sea receded and left fish stranded on the sand-bed, many gathered to pick up their lucky wind-fall until swept away when the sea returned with devastating force several minutes later.

## Media narratives

The monster metaphor is used directly in one survivor's account to the media where he describes the sea as producing a giant makara or dragon:

Suddenly we heard a monstrous sound coming from the sea and a huge blackish-grey wave like that of a makara (dragon) rose high above the coconut trees”, Mr Karunathilake said shuddering as he recalled those deadly few moments (Attygalle, 2005, p. 5)

Karunathilake was the senior train conductor on a train struck by the waves. The monster metaphor is prominent in the title also, “A Makara-like wave came crashing”. The account includes other features of the monster myth such as huge blackish-grey wave denoting strangeness, its sudden appearance, and a reference to cruel acts of fate in the lead paragraph. The monster metaphor is indicative of the bricolage involved in making sense and describing extremely traumatic events.

The reciprocity between metaphysical forces resident in or external to nature and human communities is a dominant explanatory narrative evident in both media and personal accounts of the event. For example, one newspaper carries the picture of a child in a prayerful position beside a single word headline, *Why?* (Sunday Times, 2005e.). On the same page a story is carried describing the ‘unusual’ phenomena that most religious statues and buildings, icons of spirituality were left undamaged. Many papers carried stories and photos of religious relics from Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem and Christian faiths unscathed amongst the ruin of secular material wealth. Similarly, a Buddhist monk attributed the tsunami’s devastation to judgment on disobedience,

"Nature has given them some punishment because they are not following the path of the Lord Buddha. The people have to learn their lesson" (Buddha Statues Survive Tsunami 2005a).

The narrative of divine judgment has an historical parallel in Sri Lankan sacred texts as indicated in a feature appearing in the *Sunday Observer* three weeks after the tsunami (Mahendra, 2005, p. 22). According to legend, two thousand years ago Devi, a courageous Princess offered herself as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of the sea gods. They were stirred to anger by the foolish actions of Devi’s father, King Kavantissa when he ordered the death of a pious monk, who was subsequently thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil. According to the myth, the gods caused a giant wave that threatened thousands until Devi voluntarily offered herself as a sacrifice to the raging waves. The gods, appeased, calmed the seas, spared her life and brought her safe to land in the North. The story retold by Professor Mahendra is taken from the Mahavamsa, a national cultural artifact having particular significance to the people of Sri Lanka. The Mahavamsa is the epic history of Sri Lanka that interlaces references to historical events with mythical descriptions of encounters between spiritual deities and people. Myth is used in the anthropological sense that describes how cultural groups assign metaphysical meaning and causal significance to events occurring in the natural world (Masse et al. as cited in Cashman & Cronin, 2008, p. 408). In a similar vein, some linked the tsunami to specific examples, such as the timing of dotting the eyes of a Buddhist statue brought about the unforgiving tidal waves (Sri Lanka: Victims find solace in prayers, 2005c). Regardless of how people now view the event, various forms of the narrative as some form of judgment involving metaphysical reciprocity is prominent in the social imagination immediately after the event, as indicated by the media prominence given to the theme.

## Oral narratives

...it was higher than a coconut tree (Anil, M 46yrs. )...the tsunami blocked out the horizon (Nelson, M, 54 yrs.)...the water exploded from the sand and destroyed everything (M, 78 yrs.)

From the descriptions of eye-witnesses, it is evident that people experienced the event differently depending on their location. Various coastal dwellers and communities experienced the event as a threat, appearing in multiple physical forms. The physical difference is due to variances in the marine and coastal topography and their interaction with the seismic forces behind the waves. The monster had many forms. It exhibited unique corporeality. Consequently, a photo or story depicting the tsunami does not resonate with the same meaning for the participants. Different manifestations of the tsunami are constructed by survivors, using metaphors and descriptions as skilful bricoleurs to construct their own narratives.

Nelson owns a beach-front restaurant in the tourist strip of shops and cafes along the popular vacation destination, Hikkaduwa Beach just north of Galle. After his customary chat with customers, mostly foreign tourists from Germany and other parts of Europe, he looked past the tables out to sea. Moments later he noticed the water completely blocked out the horizon. He estimates he had thirty seconds to warn patrons before the water crashed into the cafe with great force. After the first wave receded, the sea exhibited further unusual behaviour by withdrawing hundreds of metres offshore, exposing muddy sand and fish life. Unlike many of the curious locals, he moved his family inland and onto a shop rooftop across the road before the second much larger wave struck twenty minutes later.

In contrast, a few kilometres south in Galle, the waves killed most of Anil's family and destroyed his house. Anil is a community officer who lost members of his family that day. That morning, he left his wife, their three year old adopted daughter, and mother at home, and began walking to a friend's place. Suddenly, he saw terrified children running toward him screaming, "the sea is coming". Behind them he saw a wall of "muddy water" destroying everything in its wake. The appearance was also unusual in that unlike a normal curved wave, it was flat like the "blade of a road hoe machine" (bulldozer).

He picked up the young children and ran for a nearby house. The water burst into the building as he lifted them up onto the roof from a cavity inside. He recalls at the time his thoughts went to his family, particularly his young daughter and went to search for them after the water receded.

Minutes later he saw the second wave approaching, terrifying in size and appearance. He described the colour as:

dark, dark, black...blacker than anything I have ever seen...I was filled with fear and can't describe anything more about its appearance. The wave was at least the height of that palm tree [pointing to a palm tree approximately six metres high] (Anil M 46 yrs.).

Anil finds it difficult to describe anything more of the second wave. He discovered from a neighbour his daughter had been taken to a nearby house where the survivors gathered the dead and critically injured. She appeared lifeless with a swollen belly distended from taking in large quantities of water and his only inclination was to expel it by squeezing her. Surprisingly, she spluttered leading him to intensify his efforts and apply resuscitation methods until he could transfer her to a hospital. He panicked when she began purging a *dark green slime* from her body, until the doctor reassured him that it was a good sign and

necessary that she expunge the toxic fluids for recovery. Later, he recovered the bodies of his wife and mother. Gradually, his mother underwent a grotesque transformation. By dusk her body had bloated and her distended facial features took on the appearance of a *devil*. The vivid descriptions of Anil's daughter and mother's physical transformation from the tsunami describes a monsterisation process, where the characteristics of the tsunami are inscribed on its victims create revulsion even in those nearest, as indicated in the descriptions used to describe the effects.

When asked how he made sense of the tsunami, Anil commented:

..,the world has to be controlled. It gets destroyed and comes back up. That is the balance (Anil 46 yrs)

A similar sense of reciprocity resonates in the comments from the focus group undertaken in Kathaluwa, a fishing village ten kilometres south of Galle. Despite losing everything, most of the villagers survived the tsunami waves. They attribute their survival to being *good Buddhists*, and recounted tales of people who survived by clinging to Buddhist statues. Similarly, their children survived certain death by the Poya that kept them from the coast-side school that day. Because the waves struck in the morning, many fishermen were at sea and rode over the disturbances. Furthermore, the loss of life would have been significantly greater had the tsunami struck in the evening.

Unlike most records of the tsunamis, many of the villagers did not describe a monstrous wave but an explosion of water that burst from the sandbank:

The wave didn't come from the sea, it came from underneath the water (M 78 yrs.)...The wave didn't come from the sea it shot up from the beach, you know where our children play (F 37 yrs.), ...There was no sound, (we) saw the water and [then heard] the sound of water hitting [people and buildings] (M 55 yrs.).

The villagers described the water as *poisonous, bad, very smelly*. The second wave was *dirty, muddy brown*. In other words, the water was not familiar or natural.

For many in the focus group, events described in the Mahavamsa took on a new mythological significance for the villagers following the tsunami. Previously, they were sceptical of the possibility of giant waves beyond the size of occasional but regular high tide activity, coming as far inland in the way described in the record of Princess Devi and King Kavantissa. However, most now expressed belief in the narrative. Similarly, the film *2012*, and associated media stories warning of apocalyptic weather patterns that some link to the end of the Mayan calendar are treated with less scepticism than before the events of Boxing day 2004:

Now we hear from TV that 2012 will be the end of world... Don't know whether to believe...But before we wouldn't believe it ...before the tsunami. But now I am scared (F 37 yrs).

We hear ice-mountains are melting...When we hear of these things we are scared. In the news and all over the world we hear of disasters (F 50 yrs).

The reconsideration of the status of myth and belief ascribed to improbable historic and contemporary events indicate the social and cultural impact of the tsunami. As a consequence, most of the focus group

participants express a sense of uncertainty and unease concerning the future. Like those who survive an encounter with a monster, they don't know when it will reappear and upturn their lives. They live in a heightened sense of impending disaster and as a consequence keep copies of important documents such as birth certificates and other essentials in plastic bags ready to evacuate at any time.

The preparedness is not without reason as a tsunami warning twice caused the evacuation of Eastern, Northern and Southern coastal areas, including the villagers participating in this study after earthquakes struck off the coast of Sumatra on two occasions –13<sup>th</sup> September and 25<sup>th</sup> October 2010. In response to the latter, they left for the meeting place on higher ground at 1 am and didn't return to their homes for three hours.

## Discussion

Arguably, one or more of the four themes drawn from the media and oral narratives drawn from the data emerge in the stories of survival following any major disaster, natural or otherwise. Reciprocity; monster characterisation and monsterisation of victims; reconsideration of mythological claims, and unique corporeality may be used to describe the physical characteristics and damaging effects of extreme weather events, wars, technological disasters or any other phenomena that cataclysmically disrupts a community.

Reciprocity is a common theme in the survivor narratives. Most resonate with a psychological and cognitive need to attribute cause and effect to the tsunami and its destructive impact. According to Cashman & Cronin (2008), a community is thrown into psychological as well as physical crisis when disaster strikes (p. 408). Consequently, meaning and purpose must be restored to assist recovery. One way is to employ what Barber and Barber (*in* Cashman & Cronin, 2008, p. 408) describe as the Willfulness principle, which attributes all action to intentionality, similar to relations among humans. The origin may be monstrous or religious. Of course, none of the participants believed the waves were evil personalities incarnate. However their language indicates the symbolic bricolage required to describe and make sense of the phenomena as well as internally narrativise it. Similarly, *bulldozer blade, explode from the sands and destroyed everything* indicate agency, or action with purpose, necessary components of Burke's narratology (Littlejohn, 1999, p. 64). However, agency requires an agent that exercises the action. Consequently, the anthropomorphizing of environmental phenomena serves a narrative function as well facilitating psychological recovery.

Unlike the makara allusion in the media, the tsunami as monster is implicit in the oral narratives rather than explicit. The adjectives *Dark, dark black; poisonous water, very smelly* all describe strangeness and danger in contrasted reference to the normal appearance and action of the sea. The abnormal size of the waves is a prominent characteristic of monstrosity as indicated in fable and fairy-tale narratives. The liminal and antidiachronic restriction linked to the difficulty of "capturing or freezing in time" (Hoffman, 2002, p. 129) the monster reinforces the villagers continuing sense of anxiety as they wait for its reappearance. In this sense, although the tsunami warning systems put in place after 2004 function to instill confidence in the adequacy of preparation, they also reawaken old anxieties when activated. As a consequence of their operation, a heightened sense of uncertainty and anxiety is a cumulative effect on the community.

The tsunami's monsterisation of its victims is a prominent theme in Anil's narratives of the tsunamis effect. His reference to bloated bodies and his mother's disfigured face that looked like a *devil* describes the

monstrous activity that leaves its mark on its victims. Another reference to the green slime purging from his daughter's body also describes unnatural, unclean activity by the tsunami on the innocent.

The reconsideration of mythological claims for some in the Kathaluwa focus group involved the reconstruction of sacred texts, which reclassified them as not only historic texts describing events in exaggerated detail, but more historically accurate than previously thought. For many, after their tsunami experience, the giant wave associated with the Princess Devi narrative from Mahavamsa was no longer narrative hyperbole. However, the reduced skepticism directed to cataclysmic mythical events also left the villagers more susceptible to apocalyptic panics and media sensationalism in its varied forms bringing increased anxiety.

The final theme evident in the media and oral narratives of the tsunami survivors is the unique corporeality evident in descriptions of the tsunami. The monster took different forms and shapes depending on where its victims were at the time. Corporeality or embodiment refers not only to the physical appearance but the type of encounter experienced. Nelson first observed the sea blocking out the horizon, Anil's first wave lacked a curved peak but was flat like a bulldozer that indiscriminately destroyed everything in its path, and although some in the Kathaluwa experienced a wave, most describe the sand as simply exploding with water. They saw and experienced their own unique monster - one arising not from the sea far away but from the sand 'where our children play'. To this day some of the older members refuse to believe the phenomenon was a wave at all, as their experience contradicted all knowledge of wave activity.

## Conclusion

Cataclysmic natural disasters that bring widespread devastation and loss of life force those affected to rethink their relationship with the environment. The participants in this study are primarily members of fishing and tourist communities intricately connected to their coastal environment, drawing their livelihood from the same resource that destroyed their homes and families. Their narratives are informed by symbolic bricolage that construct the event in the context of their knowledge, beliefs and experience. Consequently, both individuals and communities construct new schemas and organising narratives. A key feature of emergent narratives is their 'world' is far more dangerous and unpredictable than previously imagined, which had a psychologically destabilising impact on many. Contemporaneously, the revisiting of unusual events recorded in sacred texts read in the context of the tsunami functioned to stabilise their anxiety, which may restore psychological equilibrium. Consequently, for many of the participants narrative bricolage has therapeutic psychological value as well serving a cognitive function. However, the stabilising effect of reappropriating myth can also lead to new anxieties as discussed. The four themes drawn from the narratives identified in the records from national English media and participants' recollections of the Poya Day tsunami offer continuing research opportunities for contrast and comparison with other natural disasters causing recent devastation. Their narratives suggest that there is more going on than a simple regurgitation of media hype, when eye-witnesses describe extreme natural events as 'monster cyclones', 'killer earthquakes' and 'cruel fires'.

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