

**Theorising the tsunami:
participant observation and observing participation
in a disaster situation**

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Abstract

On 2nd April 2007, during my fieldwork in the Solomon Islands, a major earthquake and tsunami hit the area. Ranongga Island, where I worked, was lifted 3 metres out of the sea, destroying coral reefs, ripping trees from the mountainside, and turning my research upside down. For the remaining two months of my fieldwork, I liaised with aid agencies, provided basic first aid to villagers cut off from the clinic, learned to make sago palm thatch, escorted marine biologists around the island, repeatedly attempted to explain basic seismology, and in my spare time, tried to save what I could of my PhD research. I found myself in a relationship with the community that was entirely unexpected: sharing their time of disaster, I ceased to be a participant observer and was forced to become what Bernard (1995) calls an observing participant. In this talk I will tell the story of that time and attempt to explore what it meant, for me personally, for the community, and for my research.

Reference

Bernard, Russell H. 1995. *Research methods in anthropology: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.