The Indian Ocean tsunami on 26 December 2004 was remarkable both in terms of the magnitude of the disaster and the scale of the relief and recovery operations by national and international, state and non-governmental organizations. Following the tsunami and the “second wave” of humanitarian assistance there has also been a wave of academic writings on the tsunami, emphasizing questions of vulnerability to disaster, participation in disaster recovery and the links between the disaster and intrastate conflicts, especially in the Aceh Province of Indonesia and in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

The volume edited by Dennis McGilvray and Michele R. Gamburd focuses on tsunami recovery in Sri Lanka. The book consists of nine chapters that are organized in three thematic sections. The first section contains overview discussions of tsunami studies, the politics of disaster recovery and peace and the question of ethnicity and human vulnerability in Sri Lanka. The first chapter, written by the editors, provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the tsunami and highlights the interdisciplinary and cultural orientation of the book. This is followed by a chapter by Alan Keenan on the politics of tsunami recovery, emphasizing the failed attempt to use internationalized humanitarian rehabilitation as a forerunner to conflict resolution. Thereafter, Randall Kuhn offers a quantitative overview of ethnicity and coastal vulnerability in Sri Lanka, drawing attention to the complex realities of minority status at different geographic scales and units. The middle section of the book contains three ethnographic case studies of tsunami recovery processes in the Sinhala-speaking Galle District on the southwest coast (written by Michele Gamburd), on the Tamil-speaking Batticaloa District on the east coast (by Patricia Lawrence) and on Tamil-speaking Muslims and Hindus in the Ampara District (authored by Dennis McGilvray). These ethnographic case studies and the comparisons between two regions (the southwest and the east coast) and four ethnic communities (Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burgers) make up the substantive core of the volume. The final section returns to more general questions of disaster recovery. Timmo Gaasbeek provides an insider account of NGO activities and organizational culture in the recovery process in eastern Sri Lanka, while Georg Frerks examines the tsunami in regard to critical issues in interdisciplinary disaster studies. Finally, the main lessons from the three sections are brought together in a brief concluding chapter written by the editors.

The main identity and strength of this volume is found in its emphasis on ethnographic field studies of disaster recovery, providing an important
corrective to the prevalence of state-centered and macro-scale analysis of politics, development and the tsunami in Sri Lanka. The ethnographic studies of the selected cases in Galle, Batticaloa and Ampara districts and the study of NGO organizational culture deserve to be read by both disaster scholars and practitioners in humanitarian and development organizations. These and the other chapters demonstrate the complex ways in which the reconstruction process was hampered by political patronage, by the competing efforts of humanitarian organizations and by the ongoing civil war. Still I would have liked to see a more systematic integration of the macro-scale politics and local experiences with patronage politics in disaster recovery. It can also be argued that the book would have benefitted from a more systematic engagement with the role of LTTE in the north and east and I find it regrettable that the book does not include a separate chapter on tsunami recovery in areas that were at the time controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Leaving this aside, the book is a well-researched and much-needed grounded contribution to the understanding of tsunami recovery and the politics of state power, conflict and development in Sri Lanka. As such it will prove itself to be of great value to Sri Lanka studies and to the interdisciplinary field of disaster studies.

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