Awesome forces and warning signs
The semantics of taboo-related words in Vanuatu

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Abstract

The well-known Polynesian form *tapu* goes back to a Proto-Oceanic etymon **taᵐbu* that is also preserved in Melanesian languages – notably in Vanuatu. As far as we can reconstruct its meaning using the linguists' comparative method, the lexical root **taᵐbu* combines the notion of prohibition with the sentiment of awe before the sacred. Indeed, Vanuatu languages usually link the term with supernatural powers, good or evil, and with the sense of fear they induce upon us. Modern words may evoke the numinous power of high-ranked dignitaries filled with *mana*; but also the world of ghosts, ancestral spirits, and the forces of death. In addition, reflexes of the root also draw connections with the more mundane warning signs that are put up in various locations to fend off unwelcome visitors.

Semantic maps can help us visualise the internal organisation of the root's lexical domain, both in modern languages and in their Proto-Oceanic ancestor. The map can be used as a background for reconstructing the historical evolution of **taᵐbu* reflexes up to modern times. Evidently, certain competing etyma have made their way into the lexical territory of **taᵐbu*, and forced it to redefine its semantic outline over time – in a manner different for each modern language. This study illustrates the valuable contribution that historical linguistics can bring to anthropology and ethnohistory, in the Pacific and elsewhere.

1   Taboo < tapu < *taᵐbu

The English word *taboo* was borrowed in the late 18th century by Captain Cook, from Tahitian *tapu*.[1] Whether used as an adjective or a noun, the English word nowadays refers to a sensitive topic that should not be brought up in certain social settings, for fear of offending people or bringing trouble. This modern sense reflects a semantic shift from the more general meaning 'forbidden, unapproachable, off limits' that *tapu* has in Tahitian and other Polynesian languages. The religious undertones of the Polynesian word was already noted by Captain Cook himself (Cook & King 1784:333):

> "The word *taboo* is indifferently applied, either to persons or things; as the natives are tabooed, the bay is tabooed, &c. This word is also expressive of any thing sacred, devoted, or eminent. The king of Owhyhee [= Hawai'i, A.F.] is called *Eree-taboo*, and a human victim, *tangata-taboo*."

While this term *tapu* is well identified in Polynesian languages, it really inherits a pre-existing root *taᵐbu that can be reconstructed all the way to the Proto-Oceanic ancestor,[2] and is commonly glossed 'forbidden, taboo' (Blust & Trussel 2018). In order to better reconstruct the semantics of this important concept, it is desirable to observe the various meanings it has taken up in non-Polynesian Oceanic languages – at least those that still reflect that protoform *taᵐbu. As this study will show, firsthand data collected by the author in northern Vanuatu – combined with publications by other authors – can shed light upon this question.

The English term *taboo*, incidentally, is used in linguistic anthropology to refer to the cultural practice of avoiding certain acts or words in certain social contexts (Allan & Burridge 2006, Pizarro Pedraza 2018). As it happens, the cultures of North Vanuatu do show a number of such avoidance practices in relation to one's in-laws:[3]

1.   I am forbidden from uttering in public the names of an in-law, or even a word that sounds similar to it (Codrington 1891:44). I must instead use an avoidance strategy (e.g. employ a kin term, a synonym, a periphrasis).
2.   I am encouraged to use honorific dual in lieu of singular, when addressing (2nd person) or mentioning (3rd person) an in-law (Codrington 1891:45; François 2001:388; 2005:121)

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[2] Among the vast Austronesian linguistic phylum, the Oceanic subfamily encompasses about 500 languages scattered around Pacific islands (Pawley & Ross 1995); the best known Polynesian languages – about 32 languages altogether – are a subset within that family. All Oceanic languages share Proto-Oceanic as their common ancestor – a language spoken about 3,200 years ago in the Bismarck archipelago (Ross et al. 1998).

[3] Similar practices are reported in other parts of the Pacific (Stasch 2011), Australia (Dixon 1990), and Africa (Herbert 1990, Treis 2005). In the context of north Vanuatu, the term "in-laws" refers to my spouse's parents [HF, HM, WF, WM]; my spouse's opposite-sex siblings [WB, HZ]; my opposite-sex siblings' spouses [(*m*)ZH, (*f*)BW]; and my children's spouses [SW, DH]. As for the same-sex siblings of my spouse [WZ, HB], or the spouses of my same-sex siblings [(*m*)BW, (*f*)ZH], they are not affected by the taboo practices mentioned here.

3. I am encouraged to use a special lexical register, perceived as more respectful, in a sentence addressing or mentioning an in-law.

While these practices could indeed be described in English as linguistic *taboos*, they are never labelled locally using reflexes of the Oceanic root *taᵐbu. Instead, northern Vanuatu languages use words meaning 'avoidance':

- the language Mwotlap (Banks Is) has the noun /na-pliɣ/ 'avoidance; *hence* social practice whereby one avoids uttering publicly the names of in-law relatives' < verb /βiliɣ/ 'avoid, refrain from' (François 2019b);

- the language Hiw (Torres Is) has /maŋə βisəβisə/ 'avoidance speech; *hence* respectful speech register used for showing respect to one's in-law relatives' < /βisə/ 'avoid, make a detour' (François 2011:207).

Despite their interest for an anthropological study of the notion of taboo in Melanesia, these social practices will not concern us here. The present study will instead focus on those concepts of northern Vanuatu cultures that are expressed using reflexes of the Proto Oceanic root *taᵐbu.

This article will start by explaining the method for detecting the modern words that form the target of our study (*Section 2*). How can we be sure, for example, that the Mwotlap word /tam/ 'respect' is not a reflex of POc *taᵐbu, but /nɛtɛk͡pʷ/ 'graveyard' is? As we shall see, many modern words have gone through drastic change both in form and in meaning, making them sometimes difficult to identify (cf. François 2013).

Once the list of target words is established, *Section 3* will examine their various meanings, and *Section 4* will organise them with the help of a semantic map. Finally, *Section 5* will reconstruct the most likely meanings of *taᵐbu at the time of Proto Oceanic, and suggest ways to trace back cases of semantic change and lexical replacement in modern languages. I will show how *taᵐbu revolves around the notion of proscription, with two main facets: mundane acts of proscription as a social practice; and religious types of proscription, due to the awe-inducing presence of spiritual forces.

This study will be conducted in the spirit of Dumézil (1958; 1995 [1968]) and Benveniste (1973), two scholars who used the insights of the linguists' comparative method to reconstruct the religion of ancient Indo-European societies. I hope to show here how linguists can contribute, through methodical investigation, to the reconstruction of anthropological systems and social practices of past millennia.

2 Identifying the proper reflexes of *taᵐbu

The Proto-Oceanic root *taᵐbu can be reconstructed based on a large number of Oceanic languages.[1] In many conservative languages, the root is easy to recognise, both in its form or meaning: thus Blust & Trussel (2018) cites forms like /tambu/ 'forbidden, taboo, sacred+' in Nggela (Solomons), or /tabu/ 'forbidden, prohibited; sacred, holy' in Wayan Fijian. There is no question that the POc root has a *C_1VC_2V pattern, in which C_1 was *t and C_2 a prenasalised bi-labial /ᵐb/, etc.; and that this etymon *taᵐbu included the meaning 'forbidden'.[2]

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[1] See Blust & Trussel (2018), *http://www.trussel2.com/acd/acd-s_t.htm#30099*.

[2] There is discussion whether the POc etymon should be reconstructed with a final consonant, that would
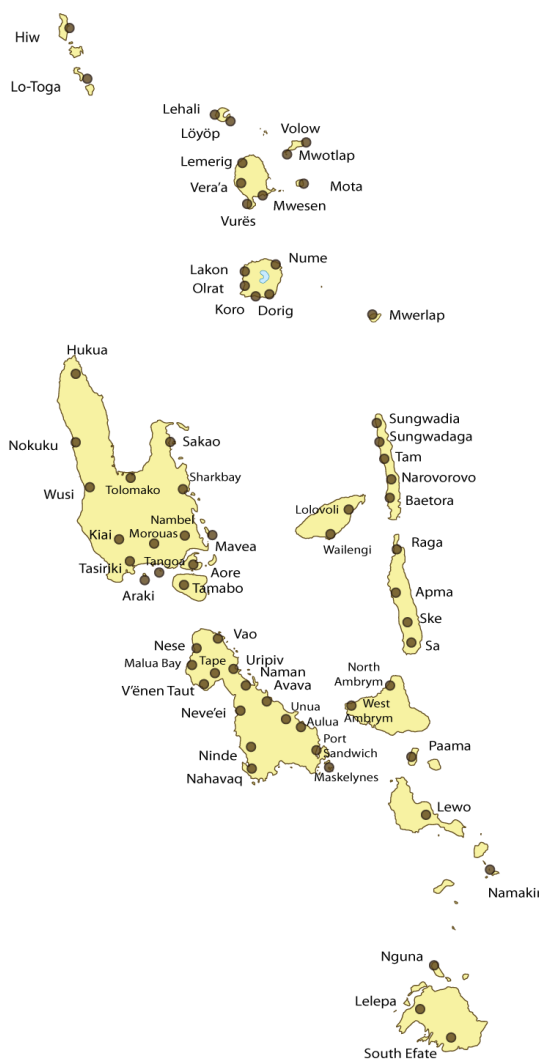
.../...

Vanuatu languages vary in how drastically they have been affected by sound change. Conservative forms include /taᵐbu/ 'set apart, prohibit' in Raga (Pentecost) or /tapu(-na)/ 'taboo, proscription, forbidden...' in Kiai (Santo) (Clark 2009:186-7), which are both transparent. By contrast, it takes more effort to realise that /etev/ 'burial ground, grave' in the Sakao language of Santo I. is also a reflex of the same root *taᵐbu. This is less easy to detect, due to the changes both in meaning as well as in phonological form: /etev/ shows loss of the etymon's final vowel; change of the stressed vowel *a > /e/ by umlaut (François 2005:491); lenition of the stop *ᵐb to a fricative /v/; and morphological accretion of the V- article to the word (cf. Touati 2015): *(n)a taᵐbu > *a-táβu > *ə-tæβ > ɛ-tɛβ.

The methodological key to identifying with certainty a reflex of a particular protoform is the principle of *regular sound correspondences*. The phonological history of Sakao, for example, is well known (Guy 1977), and teaches us that final-vowel apocope, umlaut, fricativization of stops, and article accretion, are all regular phenomena in this particular language.

Map 1 – Some languages of northern Vanuatu, including those mentioned in this study.

The initial consonant *t remained /t/ in most languages, yet it changed to /ⁿd/ in Namakir (*taᵐbu > /**ⁿd**am/) and to a trill /r/ in Araki: *taᵐbu > /**r**apu-/. This change is systematic in Araki: e.g. *tama- > /**r**an̪a/ 'father'; *tolu > /**r**olu/ 'three' (François 2002).

Many Northern Vanuatu languages (*Map 1*) went historically through a change in phonotactics, as a sequence of two open syllables *$C_1V_1C_2V_2$ lost its final vowel, and changed to a closed syllable /C_1VC_2/. Hence *taᵐbu > *taᵐb# > (Dorig) /ta**:ᵐb**/, (Mota) /ta**p**/, etc.

In many languages, a prenasalized stop in coda position is regularly deoralized (François 2016:31). This change *-ᵐb > /-m/ explains such forms as (Koro) /t͡ɛ͡a**m**/, (Mwerlap) /nɔ-tɔ**m**/, (Namakir) /ⁿda**m**/.

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have been retained in a handful of modern Oceanic languages yet lost everywhere else. Blust (1978:216) once proposed to reconstruct *tabu**s** for the level of PEMP (Proto Eastern Malayo-Polynesian), an ancestor of POc. Lynch (2001:302) reconstructs *tabu**r** for Southern Vanuatu. The data I have access to does not permit to confirm this final consonant. The languages of north-central Vanuatu have regularly lost all final consonants of POc etyma, and thus point to an etymon *taᵐbu (cf. Clark 2009:186-7).

In the northernmost islands, a rounded vowel showed a strong tendency to assimilate a preceding bilabial stop, changing it into a labial-velar: *ᵐbu > *ᵐbʷu. In several languages (François 2016:31), the complex segment then became both velarized and devoiced: *ᵐbʷ > *ᵑᵐg͡bʷ > /k͡pʷ/. Thus Mwotlap changed the noun *na taᵐbu* (with noun article *na) to modern /nɛ-tɛk͡pʷ/. As for the two Torres languages, they ended up delabializing their labial-velar phonemes, yielding a /kʷ/ segment. This is how the regular reflex of *taᵐbu in Hiw and Lo-Toga is a form /tɔkʷ/.[1]

In the whole area, the process of final-vowel apocope was correlated with a change in the quality of the preceding stressed vowel, in a general process of umlaut or metaphony (François 2005). The vowels resulting from a sequence *áCu differ from one language to another, yet they are regular within each language. Compare the reflexes of *táᵐbu in a selection of Torres and Banks languages (organised from northwest to southeast) with the reflexes of a similar etymon, *páRu 'hibiscus' (François 2013:192):

(1)   *taᵐbu 'forbidden, taboo+':
        HIW *tɔkʷ*; LO-TOGA *tɔk*; LEHALI *(tpu)*; MWOTLAP *nɛ-tɛk͡pʷ*; MOTA *tap*; DORIG *ta:ᵐb*;
        KORO *tɛ͡am*; MWERLAP *nɔ-tɔm*.

(2)   *paRu 'hibiscus':
        HIW *βɔᵍʟ*; LO-TOGA *βɔr*; LEHALI *n-βɳj*; MWOTLAP *nɛ-βɛj*; MOTA *βar*; DORIG *βa:r*; KORO *βɛ͡ar*;
        MWERLAP *nɢ-βɔ͡ɢr*.

The criterion for identifying reflexes must be applied rigorously within each language. For example, the noun /nɛ-tɛk͡pʷ/ qualifies as a reflex of *taᵐbu, because the sound changes it reflects are all regular in Mwotlap – e.g. the velarization *ᵐb>*ᵐbʷ>/k͡pʷ/ before a rounded vowel, or the particular pattern of metaphony (umlaut) whereby *áCu is always reflected by /ɛ/, never /a/ or /ɔ/ (François 2005:490).

These criteria are helpful not only in identifying positive reflexes, but also in ruling out tempting yet false candidates. For example, Mwotlap has a verb /tam/ meaning 'love, esteem, respect'. At first glance, a form like /tam/ might have looked like a possible reflex of *taᵐbu, since we saw that syllable-final *ᵐb is often reflected as /m/; as for its meaning, it wouldn't be implausible that a word meaning 'respect' may have some semantic relation with 'forbidden, taboo', which would have shed light on the semantic evolution of *taᵐbu reflexes. However, this hypothesis can be proven wrong if one takes regular correspondences seriously. In Mwotlap, a vowel /a/ can never reflect a sequence *áCu; it can only have its origin in a sequence *áCe, *áCa, or *áCo (François 2005:490). Comparison with Hiw /tep/ or Vurës /ti͡am/ (same meaning 'love, esteem, respect') makes it possible to compute with certainty an underlying protoform *taᵐbe, rather than *taᵐbu. This reasoning enables us to rule out this cognate set {*taᵐbe 'love, esteem, respect'[2] > HIW /tep/, MTP /tam/, VRS /ti͡am/} from the set of *taᵐbu reflexes.

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[1] For a similar example, the POc etymon *tuᵐbu- 'grandparent' is reflected as /tupu-/ in Mota, /tuᵐbu-/ in Koro, /tᵐbu-/ in Dorig, /ʔuᵐbu-/ in Vera'a… – but as /itk͡pʷu-/ in Mwotlap, and /tukʷu/ in Lo-Toga (François 2005:501).

[2] The meaning 'love, esteem, respect' of *taᵐbe is possibly a metaphorical extension of the verb *taᵐbe 'lift, raise' (cf. Clark 2009:186).

3 The meanings of *taᵐbu reflexes

Applying the principle of regular sound correspondences makes it possible to identify with certainty reflexes of the etymon *taᵐbu in at least eighteen different languages of Vanuatu. This figure combines ten languages mentioned by Clark (2009:186-7), plus eight on which I gathered firsthand data (Hiw, Lo-Toga, Lehali, Mwotlap, Dorig, Koro, Mwerlap, Araki).

Now that the historical origin of these forms is secured, we can proceed to analysing their modern meanings. My observations will be based on several field trips I carried out in the various communities of north Vanuatu, between 1997 and 2011. My data combine linguistic elicitation (François 2019a) with a literary corpus of 389 narratives recorded in 21 languages. These text corpora came in addition to periods of language immersion and participant observation, during which I learned the languages in their social context, and took fieldnotes – both linguistic and ethnographic.[1]

3.1 Proscription and ban

3.1.1 FORBIDDEN

Reflexes of *taᵐbu in modern languages are sometimes used as adjectives, sometimes as verbs, and sometimes as nouns. If we first examine the reflexes of *taᵐbu used as adjectives,[2] a widespread meaning is "(place, thing) off limits, unapproachable, forbidden":

(3)   ***taᵐbu** > MEANING 1 "(place, thing) off limits, unapproachable, forbidden":
       HIW *tɔkʷ*; LO-TOGA *tɔkʷ*; LEHALI *tpu*; MOTA *tapu* 'taboo, unapproachable, not to be touched'; RAGA *saᵐbuɣa*;[3] TAMABO *taᵐbu* 'forbidden'; NAMAKIR *daka-tam* 'prohibited, forbidden'.

In spite of the English translation as 'forbidden' or 'prohibited', *taᵐbu reflexes in Vanuatu normally do not refer to the mundane interpretation of the word – as when someone, e.g. a parent, prohibits a certain action to their children; this would be expressed using different words. Most reflexes of *taᵐbu entail an aura of spiritual significance: if a place or a thing are *taᵐbu 'forbidden, unapproachable', that is usually because they are associated with magical or spiritual forces. We will come back to these meanings ('sacred, holy…'), as they are central to the whole family of *taᵐbu.

That said, the secular, trivial interpretation 'forbidden [of any action]' is not entirely absent from *taᵐbu reflexes in Melanesia. This concerns: (a) borrowings from Polynesian *tapu*; and (b) use as an active verb 'prohibit, ban', whether in the simple form *taᵐbu or through derivation.

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[1] My audio recordings are freely accessible at *http://tiny.cc/Francois-archives*. My field notes are also archived online, at *http://www.odsas.net*.

[2] Northern Vanuatu languages have a category of adjectives that is distinct both from nouns and from verbs: see François (2003:48-53) for Mwotlap, and François (2017) for Hiw.

[3] The term *sabuga* in Raga (Pentecost, Vanuatu) is described in detail by Duhamel (in press).

3.1.2 Borrowings from Polynesian *tapu*

While the form *tapu* found in Polynesian languages does include religious interpretations 'taboo, sacred', it has also generalised to a more general sense 'forbidden, prohibited' (Bender & Beller 2003). This semantic generalisation is echoed in a few Melanesian languages that borrowed *tapu* directly from Polynesian.

Thus, the pidgin-creole Bislama – now the lingua franca of Vanuatu – commonly uses *Tapu!* as an interjection; it is uttered by parents to toddlers as a general prohibition 'Don't [do that]! Stop!'. The interjection is sometimes heard in the vernacular languages too, in the same context – whether this is a loanword or a case of codeswitching.

Likewise Teanu, the main language of Vanikoro (François 2009) in eastern Solomon Islands close to northern Vanuatu, has a form *etapu*, borrowed from one of the two Polynesian languages of the Temotu area (Tikopia or Vaeakau-Taumako); *etapu* coalesces the root *tapu* with a predicative particle *e*. In Teanu, this loan has several meanings as an adjective (*etapu* 'sacred, holy; unapproachable, forbidden...'):

(4) Tea *enga*   *eo*   ***etapu***
      name   your   holy
      'hallowed be Thy name' [Tea.Father.02]

(5) Tea *lek'*   *iape*   ***etapu***   [1]
      opp.sex.cross.cousin   his   unapproachable
      [In Vanikoro, opposite-sex cross-cousins (*leka*) must avoid crossing paths.]
      'His female cross-cousin was unapproachable to him.'

In the same language, *etapu* has also grammaticalised as a TAM marker for prohibitive:

(6) Tea *u-madau*   ***etapu*** *!* [2]
      2s:Irr-fear   PROH
      'Don't be afraid!'

Such a grammaticalisation process from an adjective meaning 'unapproachable' or 'holy' to a general prohibitive illustrates what can be described as the "secularisation" of the root *taᵐbu* – as shown here for Teanu and for Bislama: it has acquired a mundane sense 'forbidden', that can apply to any action.

3.1.3 Setting up a ban

A general sense of proscription also becomes apparent when *taᵐbu* is used as a causative verb, meaning 'make s.th. forbidden, prohibit'.

(7) ***taᵐbu >*** meaning 2 "[v] prohibit, set apart":
      Mwerlap *tɔm/ɣɔr*; Raga *taᵐbu*.

The language Mota encodes this meaning using a derived form *tapug* /taᵖu-ɣ/ 'to make *tapu*; a mark of *tapu*' (Codrington & Palmer 1896:199). Other languages render the causative

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[1] The link *https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003352#S68* provides direct access to the sentence whence this example is taken [ref: *Teanu.Mwasu.068*], including the audio.

[2] Link: *https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003269#S7* [Teanu.Treasure.08].

meaning as *taᵐbúa, showing a fossilised 3sg suffix -*a*:

(8)   *taᵐbu → *taᵐbu-a > MEANING 3
       "[V] ban access to one's private territory by standing up a conventional sign":
       MWOTLAP *tʊk͡pʷʊ*; VERA'A *ʔuᵐbu* 'put up a ban (on an area)'

The type of prohibition mentioned here bears no connotation of religion or sacredness: it is a mundane practice that people carry out when they wish to indicate ownership of a certain area – typically, a house, a garden (9), a fishing spot on the reef (10), or a group of trees (11), that they wish to reserve for themselves:[1]

(9)   MTP No   mal   **tōqō** mahē gōh   kē,   n-et   tit-kalbat   vēhte.
             1sg   CPLT ban   place this here   ART-person NEG:POT₁-enter   NEG:POT₂
             'I've put up a ban on this place, nobody can come in.' [Mtp.Wild-boy.Mika.062]

(10)   MTP Ige   mal   **tōqō** nē-ñēlmet.
             people CPLT ban   ART-reef
             'They've put up a ban on the reef.' [Mtp.AP2-184]

(11)   VRA Maro-mruō ga   **'ubu** gōr   ēn=   'uvu   ñar.
             uncle-2du STAT ban   (prevent) ART= tree   Canarium
             'Your uncle has put a ban on the Canarium trees.' [Vra.Cave.03]

The way such bans are announced is by means of a conspicuous sign made of a leaf (e.g. a coconut palm, a cordyline leaf), that the owner puts up at the entrance of the area in question, for everyone to see. By metonymy, the verb *taᵐbu, or its derivative, is sometimes converted to a noun to refer to the (abstract) ban, or to the (concrete) sign itself:

(12)   *taᵐbu → *taᵐbu-a
       > MEANING 4
       "[N] a ban imposed on a given
       area; a sign set up to make that
       ban known":
       MWOTLAP *na-tk͡pʷʊ*; MOTA *tapua*.

Figure 1 – A 'taboo' sign (*na-tqō*) set up above the lagoon of Motalava island, meant to ban fishing activities there for a period. (photo: A. François, 2011)

Figure 1 is a picture of such a ban sign – *na-tqō* [na-tk͡pʷʊ] – made of a wooden stick wrapped with coconut leaves. This sign was set up on a rock above the lagoon of Motalava island, with the effect of prohibiting all fishing activities in the area, so as to allow fish to reproduce for a period.

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[1] The present paper cites alternatively cognate sets like (8), and corpus examples like (9). While the former transcribes words using the International Phonetic Alphabet (e.g. /tʊk͡pʷʊ/), the latter employs local orthographies (e.g. *tōqō*). Each sentence example is followed by an indication of its source in my corpus; when possible, I provide a link to an online corpus where the sentence can be heard.

The two Torres languages have lost trace of any causative verb, but have a noun that reflects *taᵐbua. It refers to the enclosure dedicated to men's initiation rituals:

(13) *taᵐbu → ***taᵐbu-a** > MEANING 5 "[N] an area or enclosure with restricted access, reserved for men's initiation rituals":
      HIW *təkʷθ*; LO-TOGA *təkʷə*.

As we'll see in §3.2.2, Torres languages indeed strongly associate initiation rituals with the root *taᵐbu.

3.1.4 FORBIDDEN MENTION

One particular type of proscription is one that prevents us from mentioning a topic of conversation. This is the sense closest to *taboo* in modern English:

(14) ***taᵐbu** > MEANING 6 "[ADJ] taboo, not to be mentioned lightly in public":
      HIW *tɔkʷ*; LO-TOGA *tɔkʷ*; DORIG *ta:ᵐb*; KORO *tɛ̂am*.

This sense can be illustrated by this sentence in the language Lo-Toga:

(15) LTG Ne   siga   in   na   ***toq*** hiarēt, dege   tat   ho   vese
           ART   thing ANA STAT taboo   INTSF   1inc:pl NEG:IRR POT mention

           teltël vete pe   qere   wureri   mi   qerqergë   ve   tog' ē
           around place REL HUM:PL   children   and HUM:FEM:PL IPFV stay ANA:OBL
      'This topic is extremely taboo, you can't just mention it lightly when you're surrounded by children and women.' [Ltg.q06:18]

3.1.5 A BAN AGAINST EVIL SPIRITS

Durand (2014) reports on a special kind of ban found in the culture of Merelava (Banks Is.). In the Mwerlap language, the noun *no-tom* /nɔ-tɔm/ (< *na taᵐbu) refers to a conventional sign made with certain plants of high symbolic power: *Ficus wassa*, *Cycas seemannii*, *Codiaeum variegatum*.

Besides its ordinary use as a sign for banning, say, fishing activities (cf. Figure 1 above), a *no-tom* sign – "a taboo post" in Durand's terms – is also put up at the entrance of a house in order to deny access to undesirable guests. In particular, it will be erected at the door of a woman who just gave birth, so as to keep evil spirits from snatching the soul of a newborn baby (Durand 2014:102).[1] This brings up a new meaning for a reflex of *taᵐbu:

(16) ***taᵐbu** > MEANING 7 "[N] a sign meant as a protection against ghosts and spirits":
      MWERLAP *nɔ-tɔm*.

In this particular case, the prohibition is directed at the spirits themselves, who are banned from entering an area dedicated to humans. This is an original configuration, considering how often – as we shall see now – the order is opposite: in most cases, the area which is *taᵐbu is the one characterised by the presence of spirits, while we, mere mortals, are usually the ones meant to keep away from it.

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[1] Durand (2014:108) also reports on the use of similar signs during wedding ceremonies, as a token of protection for the future marriage.

3.2 Sacred, supernatural, initiated

3.2.1 THE TWO MEANINGS OF 'SACRED'

Unless they are borrowed from Polynesian, the reflexes of *taᵐbu in Vanuatu are seldom associated with a mundane interpretation of 'forbidden, prohibit' that would apply to just any context. Instead, the prototypical meaning of *taᵐbu is one where things or places are rendered unapproachable due to the presence of supernatural forces:

(17) ***taᵐbu >** MEANING 8 "(place) haunted by ghosts or spiritual forces":
 HIW *tɔkʷ*; LO-TOGA *tɔkʷ*; LEHALI *tpu*; MOTA *tapu* 'unapproachable, under a prohibition with the sanction of some *mana* belonging to men' (Codrington & Palmer 1896:199)

The following sentence refers to those places in the island (the bush, the rocks) where Spirits are believed to dwell (François 2013:224):

(18) HIW Tite   wer̄~war̄ ne   n̄wut'   in   tom   "ne   n̄wute   **toq**".
        1inc:pl   IPFV~call   ART   place   ANA   QUOT   ART   place   numinous
        [places in the island where Spirits dwell]
        'We call those places *haunted places*.' [Hiw.q06:12]

What makes such places unapproachable is not so much that they are revered or worshipped, but that they are feared. Ordinary people – especially non-initiated – carefully avoid coming close to such haunted places, for fear of having their souls snatched by evil spirits. In this context, *taᵐbu could be translated as 'forbidden', but perhaps better as 'haunted' or 'dangerous'.

Certain caves or stones in the wilderness are believed to be endowed with supernatural powers; they would be used as an altar to perform black sorcery. The Torres languages have special names for those stones,[1] but occasionally describe them as *taᵐbu, which in this context would mean "haunted" or "sacred" (Lo-Toga *ne vot toq*).

In some languages, the same root *taᵐbu refers to what is 'sacred' or 'holy':

(19) ***taᵐbu >** MEANING 9 "holy, sacred; numinous, endowed with spiritual or divine presence": HIW *tɔkʷ*; LO-TOGA *tɔkʷ*; RAGA *saᵐbuɣa*; TAMABO *taᵐbu* 'sacred'; VAO *tamp* 'sacred'; NAMAKIR *ⁿdam* 'holy'; NGUNA *tapu* 'holy, sacred'.

The concept was adopted by missionaries to render the Christian interpretation of holiness [see also (4) above]:

(20) HIW ne   ya   në   **toq**
        ART name:2sg   STAT   holy
        'hallowed be Thy name' [Hiw. Paternoster.01]

(21) HIW ne   gengon   **toq** [2]
        ART   food   holy
        [lit. the holy food] 'the Lord's Supper'

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[1] The name is *tuye* in Hiw (see *Figure 2* p.13), and *tegar* in Lo-Toga – see François (2013:222, 239).

[2] Link: *https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003252#S33* [Hiw.Religion.033].

The word here does not imply danger or fear like in (18), but a sense of wonder in front of a godly presence. In both cases, a location or an object are endowed with a supernatural or spiritual force, whether it is seen as formidable and dangerous, or beneficial and protective. The ambiguity between the two senses of *taᵐbu is reminiscent of the one found with Eng. *awe*, a word that has connotations both of fear and of reverence.

In his linguistically informed reconstruction of Proto Indo-European religion, Benveniste (1973) suggests that ancient IE languages regularly distinguished between two concepts of "sacred". Indeed, he notes the existence of a recurring semantic contrast in Avestan, Gothic, Latin and Greek (Benveniste 1973:445):

Book 6: RELIGION — Chapter 1: *The "Sacred"*

(…) The study of each pair – Av. *spənta* : *yaoždāta* (cf. also Got. *hails* : *weihs*); Lat. *sacer* : *sanctus*; Gr. *hierós* : *hágios* – leads us to posit, for the prehistorical period, a notion with a double aspect: POSITIVE "what is charged with divine presence", and NEGATIVE "what is forbidden for men to contact."

While Benveniste's description sheds light onto a semantic contrast that is attested in some ancient IE languages, it also helps us define two different potential types of holiness – one "positive" and one "negative" – which some Vanuatu languages associate both with the single root *taᵐbu.

3.2.2 INITIATION RITUALS

The Christian interpretation of *taᵐbu is mostly linked to the "positive" interpretation of 'sacred': the feeling of fearsome awe is rather downplayed in Christian rituals. The ambiguity inspired by Benveniste's description above really concerns the pre-Christian animist religion of Vanuatu, which in many respects continues to live in modern days.

The spiritual force that is entailed by the concept of *taᵐbu is inherently neither positive nor negative. Spirits – which Vanuatu languages generally lexify using the etymon *ata-mate 'dead person, ghost' (François 2013:213-8) – are associated with death in various ways. They are generally believed to represent the souls of the Deceased; and numerous stories and myths recount how they threaten to kill and eat us. Yet this terrifying aspect of spirits – which warrants the reactions of fear and avoidance mentioned above – goes along with a sense of awe and respect towards their power and significance. After all, the ghosts of the Deceased are no other than our ancestors, who built the world we live in, and whose aura continues to inhabit our landscapes. Dance and music, songs and poetry, myths and legends, wisdom and culture, are all understood to have been carried over from the world of Spirits to the society of men (Vienne 1984, François & Stern 2013:74 sqq.).

Much of the cultural knowledge inherited from ancestral spirits is handed over from one generation to the other through the initiation rituals involving men. Those rituals include the learning of dances, songs and poetry, or the secrets to make the ritual headdresses that represent the Spirits themselves (Vienne 1996). In the Torres islands, the root *taᵐbu itself is precisely associated with the initiation rituals and ceremonies whereby male adolescents acquire the secret knowledge that will make them seen as full adults.

(22) ***taᵐbu >** MEANING 10 "of restricted access, due to its association with initiation rituals or grade-taking ceremonies": HIW *tɔkʷ*; LO-TOTA *tɔkʷ*.

By association, the term is also used in relation to the male-only political grade system known in the literature as *suqe* (cf. François 2013:234), and in Lo-Toga as *huqe* /hʉkʷə/:

(23) LTG Ne huqe,　　　　nie ne *sega* **toq**,　　nie ne sega
　　　ART grade.system 3sg ART thing　sacred　3sg　ART thing

　　　te li gemël,　　nie ne sega te li vetgë,
　　　ORIG LOC men's.club 3sg ART thing ORIG LOC initiation

　　　wë heñwere temtēmetō na mesiu gōr ne volgë.
　　　SUB MASC:PL PL~old.person STAT secret OBL ART thing
　　　'The grade system is a *sacred* thing; it belongs to the men's club, it belongs to the initiation – where the elders keep everything secret.' [Ltg.Ranks.03]

Those are contexts where 'sacred' and 'secret' are closely associated.

Candidates to initiation spend a period of several weeks secluded in the forest, in a secret cabin or enclosure, so as to stay away from the gaze of non-initiates, particularly women and children. That enclosure is called *teqö toq*, literally 'sacred/secret enclosure':

(24) HIW Tekñwa pe sise ve suqe piti, sise tañwöy
　　　those REL 3pl BKG initiated CPLT 3pl only

　　　… on r̄ak ne temët yö **teqö** **toq**.
　　　… SBJV hold ART spirit LOC enclosure sacred
　　　'Only those who have gone through initiation are entitled
　　　to handle spirits in the *sacred enclosure*.' [Hiw.q06:17]

It is noteworthy that the word *teqö* /təkʷə/ is itself etymologically derived from *taᵐbu: see (13) in §3.1.3. In other terms, the phrase *teqö toq* /təkʷə təkʷ/ in (24) reflects the root *taᵐbu not just once, but twice: /təkʷə təkʷ/ < *taᵐbúa támbu 'restricted-area that is sacred'.

One of the initiation rituals that candidates go through is called in Lo-Toga *n' elevēn toq* /nələβen təkʷ/, literally 'the Sacred Journey'. Likewise, Codrington & Palmer's Mota dictionary cite a number of phrases related to the rituals of *suqe*, which involve the word **tapug** /tapuɣ/ 'sacred, taboo' [§3.1.3]: e.g. *av-**tapug*** (lit. 'sacred fire') 'the fire belonging to each rank'; *gana **tapug*** (lit. 'eating sacred') 'to make the meals necessary for taking a step in rank'; *im̃e **tapug*** (lit. 'sacred house') 'the *gamal* [men's club house]'.

3.2.3 GOING ASCETIC

During the process of initiation, the candidates must enter a period of ritual restrictions on food and sexual relations. Hiw calls these rites *veyvoy* /βəjβɔj/ 'to abstain'; or *vën teqtoq* /βen təkʷtəkʷ/, which could be translated as 'to go ascetic'. Crucially, the last word here, in adverbial position, is no other than the intensive reduplication of *taᵐbu:[1]

(25) *taᵐbu → reduplication **taᵐbu-taᵐbu** > MEANING 11
　　　"ascetic, in adequacy with constraints associated with initiation rites":
　　　HIW *təkʷtəkʷ*; LO-TOTA *təkʷtəkʷ*.

Here is how Pastor Jimmy Tiwyoy of Hiw, in 2006, described these rites:

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[1] In the Torres languages, unstressed syllables regularly reduce to schwa [ə] (François 2005:466): hence *toq* /təkʷ/ reduplicates as *teqtoq* /təkʷˈtəkʷ/.

(26)   HɪW   Sise   *vën*   **teqtoq**,   sise   veyvoy: sise   tat   gon   ne   pēgone,
            3pl   go:PL   ascetic   3pl   abstain   3pl   NEG:IRR   eat   ART   sea

            sise   tat   vën   yeqyōq   mi   tuñwuyegë. [1]
            3pl   NEG:IRR   go:PL   random   with   women

   'Then they *become ascetic*, they go into abstinence. They can't eat anything from
   the sea; and they cannot go around with women.'

   Noteworthy here is the semantic shift followed by *taᵐbu. The word may apply to a location or an object (e.g. a stone in the bush), and refer to the presence of a supernatural force. By metonymy, it may also designate an institutional location – the secret enclosure of initiation rituals – and describe it as 'sacred' by association with the religious rites that take place in it. Finally, the same word reduplicated refers to a certain behaviour linked with those rites: not a 'sacred' behaviour per se, but one that indicates piety and obser-vance of religious rules.

3.2.4   SUPERNATURAL POWER

Another semantic extension of *taᵐbu has to do, not with religious rituals strictly speaking, but with the supernatural power associated with chiefs of high rank in the ancient society. This supernatural power is itself called *mane* /manə/ in Hiw (François 2013:237), which is the same word as the *mana* of Mota[2] (Codrington 1891; Ivens 1931) and other Oceanic languages (Keesing 1984). *Mana* is a property not only of spirits and deities, but also of men of great wealth, which is a key condition to their access to political power (see Vienne 1984:377).

   Thus in Hiw, *taᵐbu is not only a characteristic of places or objects, but also, potentially, of an individual. A man will be a *tayö toq* /tajə tɔkʷ/ 'numinous person' if he shows to have magic, supernatural powers – such as the ones needed to become a man of high rank in the grade-taking system *suqe* (see François 2013:234):

Figure 2 – A stone pedestal (*tuye*) in the Torres Islands. (photo: A. François, 2007)

(27)   HɪW   Sise   kař'   ike   rē   tuye :   tomñwëtom   ike   on
            3pl   shoot   ACC:2sg   on   pedestal   if   2sg   SBJV

            řōw   wřog,   ike   ne   **tayö**   **toq**.
            pass   through   2sg   ART   person   numinous

   'People shoot [arrows] at you on the stone pedestal; in case you manage to survive, [this means] you are a *supernatural man*.'   [Hiw.Pedestals.11]

   In the Torres Islands, stone pedestals (*Figure 2*) known in Hiw as *tuye* /tɨjə/ are 3'-to-4'-high sacred stones that used to be erected at the entrance of men's houses – whether the

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[1] Link: *https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003252#S53*   [Hiw.Religion.053]

[2] The connection of *taᵐbu with *mana* was already hinted at in the definition of Mota *tapu* as given by Codrington & Palmer (1896) in (17) above.

entrance of the secret enclosure *teqö toq* devoted to initiation rituals in the bush (24), or of the men's house *gemoy* in the village. These pedestals (François 2013:222) are endowed with a numen that makes them *taᵐbu (*toq*) *par excellence*. But of interest here is the metonymic shift whereby a man becomes himself *taᵐbu if he can show to have supernatural powers, in relation to that pedestal. One way to show this was for a young man to go through a ritual ordeal, where he'd stand on top of the pedestal while older men shot at him using sharp, poisoned arrows made of human bone (*yiwe*). The only way to avoid death was to dodge the arrows by jumping or dancing on top of the pedestal, without falling or getting hurt. Succeeding in that ordeal was taken as a sign of supernatural powers (*mane*), and the man was then considered a *tayö toq*, a 'numinous' person.

(28) ***taᵐbu >** MEANING 12 "(s.o.) numinous, endowed with supernatural powers":
    HIW *tɔkʷ*; LO-TOTA *tɔkʷ*.

3.2.5 MEN OF POWER

In line with the semantic shifts we just saw, the two Torres languages push the semantics of *taᵐbu even further. The word is regularly associated with initiated men or men of power, even in the absence of a strong magic or supernatural component.

For example, an area in the village can be considered 'sacred land' (*vönyö toq*) if it is restricted to initiated men, and forbidden to non-initiates:

(29) HIW Ne qoȓ ve toge takē ***vönyö toq***.
       ART mausoleum IPFV stay side land sacred

       Takē ***vönyö toq*** pe takē ñwute
       side land sacred FOC side place

       pe ne gemoy vē ēn eye. [1]
       REL ART men's.house IPFV lie:NPL ANA
       'Stone mausoleums [for high chiefs] were erected on sacred land.
       We call '*sacred land*' the area around the house of initiated men.'

The beverage called kava (*Piper methysticum*) is not only reserved to men, but also linked with the supernatural power (*mana*) that characterises men of power. This explains why it is also described as "sacred", as in this passage in Lo-Toga:

(30) LTG Ne vaverō nie na metegtog ne gi,
       ART evil.spirit 3sg STAT fear ART kava

       ur ne gi ne sega ***toq***, ne sega ***mëne***.
       CAUS ART kava ART thing sacred ART thing magic.power
       'Evil spirits are scared of kava because it is a sacred thing, a thing of *mana*.'
       [Ltg.FP1-26a]

And indeed, kava's secret name in Hiw is *ne gë toq* 'the sacred thing'.

Some contexts seem to associate the reflex of *taᵐbu with male gender in general.

(31) ***taᵐbu >** MEANING 13 "(s.th.) restricted to men": HIW *tɔkʷ*.

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[1] Link: *https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003252#S3* [Hiw.Religion.003].

Thus compare *yöñwr̄at* 'women's latrines' with *yöñwr̄at-**toq*** /jɵŋʷᵍʟat.tɔkʷ/ 'men's latrines'. While the latter place is certainly not holy in any way, it still entails the notion of restricted access, as only men are welcome there. Admittedly, each of these locations (the one used by women, the other one by men) is restricted to the other gender, and could in principle be labelled as "taboo" in that sense. It is significant that the one that gets to be called *taᵐbu is the one linked with men – presumably due to the frequent association of that word with the world of male initiates.

3.3   Funeral practices

3.3.1   Grave, graveyard

We've seen several examples where a reflex of *taᵐbu was associated with the notion of death. Spirits (*atamate) are primarily ghosts of deceased ancestors, and their presence in a cave, a rock, a stone, render the place unapproachable and dangerous. Haunted places (18) are *taᵐbu, and so are religious ceremonies performed in the company of spirits.

Some languages of Vanuatu have gone further, and use *taᵐbu as a noun meaning 'graveyard, cemetery':

(32)   ***taᵐbu** > Meaning 14 "[N] graveyard, cemetery":
Mwotlap *nɛ-tɛk͡pʷ*; Sakao *e-tev* 'burial ground'; Vao *taᵐbu* 'cemetery, place of burial'.

Reflexes of *taᵐbu sometimes refer to the individual grave:

(33)   ***taᵐbu** > Meaning 15 "[N] grave":
Sakao *e-tev* 'grave'; Araki *rapu-na* 'his/her grave'; Tamabo *taᵐbu* 'grave'.

The languages in which *taᵐbu has come to mean 'grave' have generally lost the root's other meanings.

3.3.2   Death rituals

According to Codrington & Palmer (1896:196), the Mota language has a word *tap* 'a quiet day, for death or by order of *tamate* [secret societies]: no drumming, singing, playing':

(34)   ***taᵐbu** > Meaning 16 "a day of mourning, when villagers refrain from cheerful activities": Mota *tap*.

The word is here associated to death, while keeping a notion of constraint or restriction – itself reminiscent of Meaning 1 'forbidden'.

4 The semantic space of *taᵐbu*

4.1 The maximal semantic map of *taᵐbu

The preceding sections presented a vast array of meanings associated with modern reflexes of *taᵐbu (including its morphological derivatives) in various languages of Vanuatu. Some meanings are commonly found across the archipelago, while others appear to be idiosyncratic semantic developments specific to a certain area or an individual language.

In many cases, it was possible to propose logical links between one sense and another, and reconstruct which semantic shift must have arisen from which sense. In line with the method exposed in François (2008), I propose to collect all the meanings in question into a single semantic map: the Maximal Semantic Map of *taᵐbu (*Figure 3*).
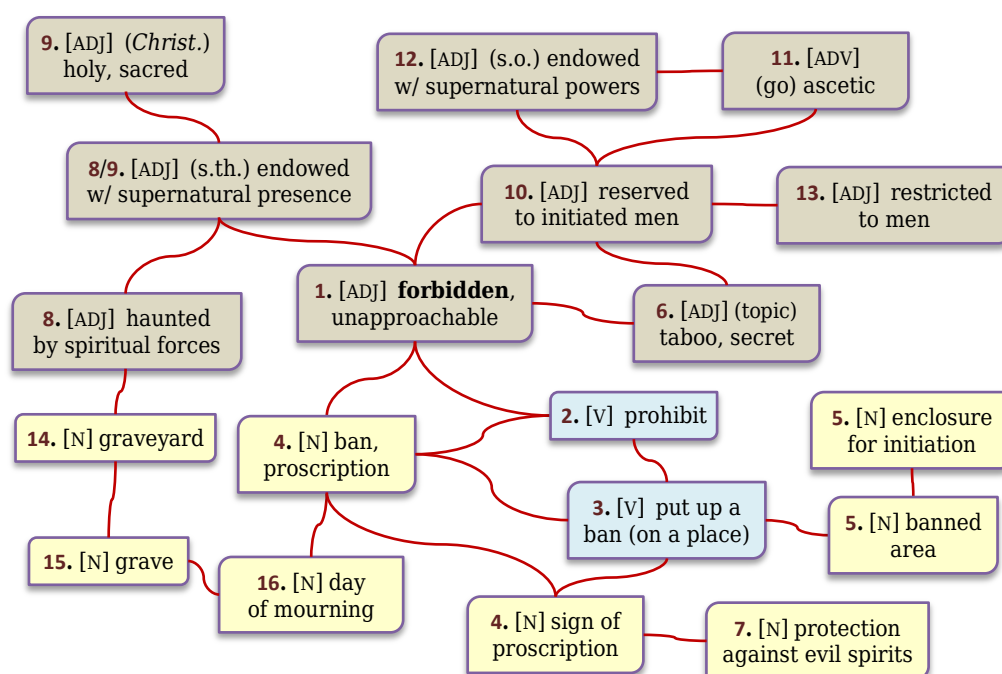

Figure 3 – A Maximal Semantic Map of *taᵐbu reflexes in Vanuatu languages

Each sense is numbered according to the meaning id in the preceding pages.[1] The boxes are colour-coded to show whether each *taᵐbu meaning corresponds to a grammatical use as an adjective, as a verb or as a noun. The paths linking senses together highlight what I understand to be the direction of semantic change – e.g. 'endowed with supernatural presence' > 'haunted by spiritual forces' > 'graveyard' > 'grave'…

4.2 From the maximal semantic map to individual lexemic maps

The term *Maximal* Semantic map recalls that the map does not represent the facts of a single

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[1] For example, the sense 'ascetic', listed under (25) above, was there identified as MEANING 11.

language, but aggregates the semantic extensions of *taᵐbu as they are found in a large set of languages. It is then possible to use this map as a background, and project onto it the precise outline of each modern reflex of the *taᵐbu etymon (cf. François 2008). The maximal semantic map then functions as an etic grid, from where the outline of each emic category can be observed (cf. Evans 2010:509). I propose to call *lexemic map* a chart showing the precise semantic outline of one or more individual lexemes.

Some languages assign their reflex of *taᵐbu to just one or two meanings on the map. Thus, Araki (Santo I.) has only kept meaning #15 'grave' with /rapu-na/. Mwerlap uses the noun /nɔ-tɔm/ only for senses #4 and #7 'protection against evil spirits'.

Mwotlap also has only one direct descendant of *taᵐbu, namely *ne-teq* /nɛ-tɛk͡pʷ/ 'graveyard' [#14]; yet Mwotlap, in addition, also reflects the causative protoform *taᵐbúa, either as a verb *tōqō* /tʊk͡pʷʊ/, 'put a ban' [#3] or as a noun *na-tqō* /na-tk͡pʷʊ/ 'ban; sign of proscription' [#4]. All in all, reflexes of *taᵐbu and its derivatives in Mwotlap cover a rather small portion of the map: see the lexemic map in *Figure 4.*[1]
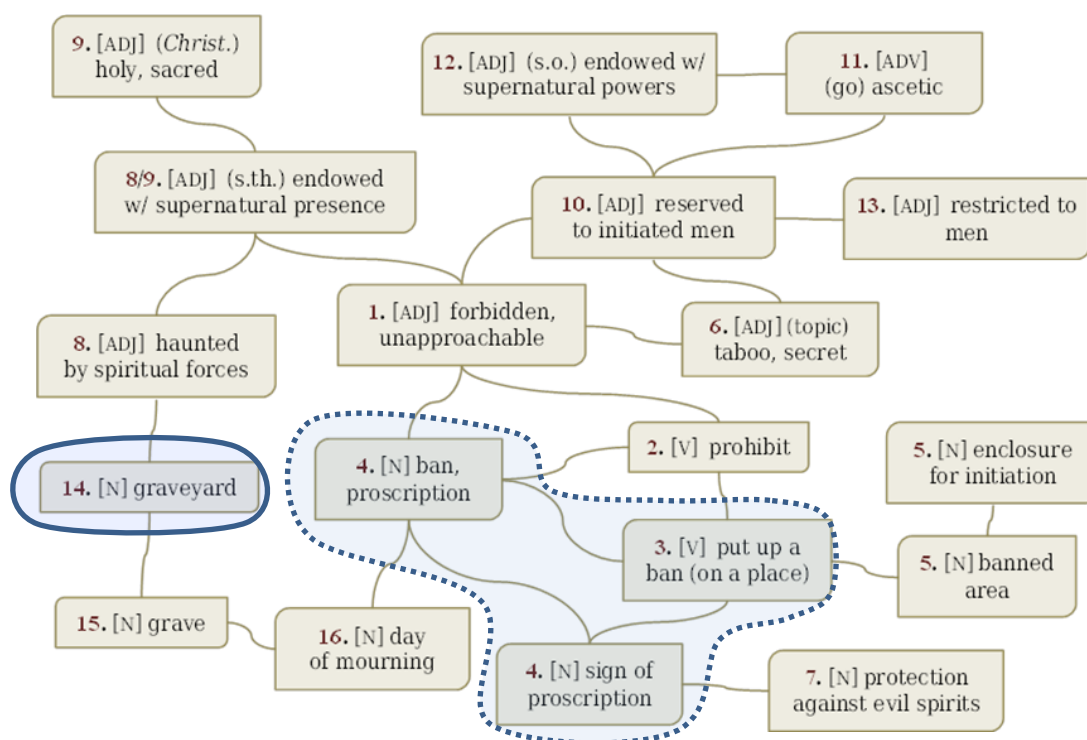

Figure 4 – Lexemic map of *taᵐbu reflexes in modern Mwotlap (Banks Islands).

By contrast, Hiw *toq* /tɔkʷ/ occupies a much larger zone, since it includes all the adjectival meanings on the map [#1, 6, 8, 9, 12, 13]. Meaning #11 'ascetic' is rendered by a derivative form obtained by reduplication (*teqtoq*). Finally, we can add the noun *teqö* /təkʷɵ/ [#5] 'enclosure for initiation', from *taᵐbua. *Figure 5* visualises the semantic array of senses that are represented by reflexes of *taᵐbu in Hiw. The *Appendix* [§7.1] provides the lexical entries of these Hiw words as they would appear in a dictionary.

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[1] Direct reflexes of *taᵐbu are shown with a full line; its derivatives with a dotted line.
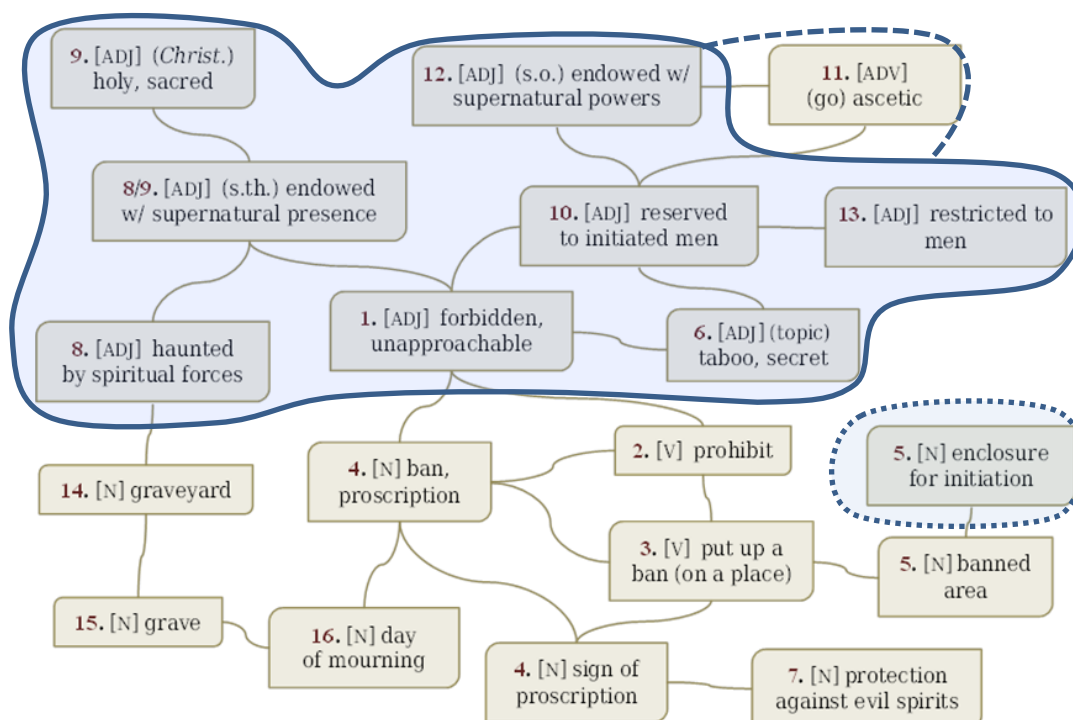
Figure 5 – Lexemic map of *ta^mbu* reflexes in modern Hiw (Torres Islands)

4.3 When lexemes compete with each other

A comparison between Figures 4 and 5 makes it clear that the modern languages of Vanuatu with reflexes of POc *ta^mbu* assign them to different sections of the map, each in its own way. The advantage of the semantic map approach (Haspelmath 2003, François 2008, Georgako-poulos 2018) is to provide an overview of a whole lexical field, while at the same time tracking with precision the various senses and their distribution across languages.

The map raises one question, namely: How do languages treat the portions of the map that they *don't* lexify using a reflex of *ta^mbu*? Are there other roots that are semantically close to *ta^mbu*, and which fill the gaps? Is the domain then structured in the same way as in *Figure 3*, or does each etymon entail its own semantic organisation?

For reasons of space, this discussion must remain short, but a few hints can already be proposed. When a language does not use *ta^mbu* for one of the senses of *Figure 3*, this may correspond to two cases: either it doesn't express it at all; or it encodes it using a different word.

One first possibility is that a given sense on *Figure 3* is simply not lexified at all in the target language. While that situation is rare in the case of basic vocabulary, it is not that uncommon when the referents are themselves highly sensitive to local cultural practices. Thus, all languages of Vanuatu (and elsewhere) can be assumed to have a word for 'grave' or 'graveyard' – assuming people bury their dead in a dedicated area. But we can't take it for granted that all cultures in Vanuatu, in all their diversity, should share the practice of putting up a "*leaf to protect a newborn child from evil spirits*"; of building a "*special enclosure in the bush for initiation rituals*"; or of "*going ascetic with respect to seafood and sexual intercourse, as a token of self-restraint*". Just like many of those concepts are absent from European

languages, likewise they can be lacking from some Vanuatu communities which happen not to share a particular custom.

The second, perhaps more common case, is when a given sense is indeed lexified by the language, but with a root other than *taᵐbu. There is no unique other etymon that would compete with *taᵐbu for all of those meanings, but several. For example, the meaning 'grave' is rendered diversely across languages, using either a root *ᵐbʷaru 'grave, tomb'; or *ᵐbʷaraŋa 'hole, cavity'; a word meaning 'yam mound'; a phrase 'fence of ghosts', or another phrase 'sleeping enclosure' (François 2013:223-4).

That said, the amount of lexical roots belonging to this domain is not infinite, and it is possible to identify some important etyma. Looking at the language Mwotlap, I will cite two roots in particular: *roŋo and *salaɣoro.[1] The Appendix [§7.2] shows excerpts from the Mwotlap dictionary (François 2019b); these include the reflexes of *taᵐbu (*teq* 'cemetery', *tōqō* 'put up a ban') mentioned earlier, but also two lexemes that belong to that same semantic domain: *yoñ* 'quiet; holy, sacred' and *halgoy* 'secret, taboo'.

Evidently, the latter two words cover a certain section of the maximal map of *taᵐbu. On the one hand, the adjective *yoñ* (<*roŋo), whose original meaning is 'quiet, silent', is used for senses #8 'haunted by spiritual forces', and for its Christian counterpart #9 'holy, sacred'; it focuses on the inherent sanctity of an object or place, and does not specifically entail the notion of proscription or taboo. This is consistent with the definition given for its cognate *roño* in Mota: "sacred, unapproachable, with inherent sanctity, not *tapu*" (Codrington & Palmer 1896:146). On the other hand, the noun *halgoy* (<*sala-ɣoro), etymologically 'forbidden path', evokes the notion of secret, taboo, proscription [#1, #6], particularly in relation to the secret knowledge of initiates [#10]; it is also the name of the secret enclosure devoted to initiation rituals [#5].

Interestingly, the contrast between *roŋo and *salaɣoro is here reminiscent of the opposition drawn by Benveniste [see §3.2.1] between, respectively, positive holiness ("what is charged with divine presence", *roŋo) – and negative sanctity ("what is forbidden for men to contact", *salaɣoro), except the latter should be redefined as "what is forbidden to non-initiates". Through its contrast between *roŋo and *salaɣoro, Mwotlap thus operates a lexical split between two sets of senses which Hiw, by contrast, colexifies[2] together under *taᵐbu.

Figure 6, derived from *Figure 4* above, shows how modern Mwotlap divides up the maximal semantic domain of *taᵐbu across several lexical items – including reflexes of *taᵐbu, *taᵐbua, *roŋo, *salaɣoro.

Given enough fine-grained data, similar lexemic maps could be drawn for the various languages of Vanuatu, each displaying a different organisation of this particular lexical domain. Such maps would illustrate how the root *taᵐbu has been competing with other etyma to encode the various senses belonging to this semantic network.

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[1] The two reconstructions are given here at the level of "Proto Torres-Banks" (Pᴛʙ) – cf. François (2013: 230-233).

[2] For the concept of *colexification*, see François (2008).
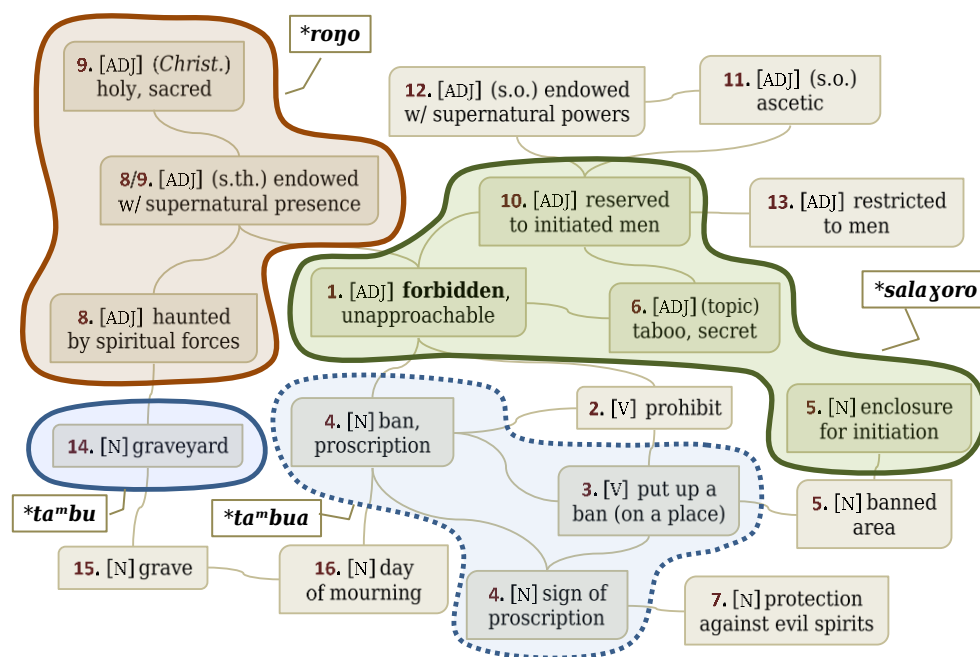
Figure 6 – Lexemic map showing some of the roots used by modern Mwotlap to lexify the maximal semantic domain of *taᵐbu.

5 From Proto Oceanic to modern languages

5.1 Proto Oceanic

One final question that arises is what can be said about the reconstruction of earlier linguistic stages. The reasoning so far has been resting on synchronic data from modern languages; and the maximal semantic map of *taᵐbu (*Figure 3*) was created by compiling together the principal meanings encountered in that synchronic exploration.

One hasty interpretation would be to take that maximal map as representing the whole semantic array of the root *taᵐbu in Proto Oceanic times. If such were the case, then this etymon would have been initially hyperpolysemous, and the process leading to modern times would have mostly consisted in each language losing some of these senses. But such an interpretation would probably be inaccurate. After all, some of the meanings listed above (e.g. [#11] 'go ascetic', [#16] 'day of mourning'…) were only attested in a handful of languages, and were most probably local innovations, that took place by extending or reshaping earlier meanings.

Reconstructing the meanings of *taᵐbu in POc should follow the principles of the comparative method, and involve comparison across different areas of the Oceanic diaspora. Such an endeavour would go beyond the limits of the present study, but a brief overview is possible.

I propose to compare the 16 senses I already identified for Vanuatu languages [§3] with the glosses provided for Oceanic languages outside Vanuatu in Robert Blust's *Austronesian Comparative Dictionary* (Blust & Trussel 2018). In the list below, I indicate in bold those senses on the map which are also found outside Vanuatu, followed by a couple of examples. In some cases [#5, 11], the semantic match is not perfect, but the meanings are close enough to

warrant a mention. A meaning followed by a star is apparently attested only in Vanuatu [#6–7, 12–16]. A '++' sign means there are many other senses or examples.

1 – [ADJ] **forbidden, unapproachable**

→ Bugotu *tabu* 'sacred, forbidden; a prohibition placed on use or handling of anything'; Wayan *tabu* 'be forbidden, prohibited by strong communal sanction; (place, thing) be prohibited from use' ++

2 – [V] **prohibit, set apart**

→ Nggela *tambu* 'set apart'++

3 – [V] **put up a ban** (on a place)

→ Fijian *tabu* 'forbidden, prohibited, implying a religious sanction, but now used also for legal prohibition, such as "no admission"'; Māori *tāpu-i* 'mark to indicate claim or right to property'

4 – [N] **sign of proscription**

→ Woleaian *tab* 'ban, ritual restriction protected by supernatural sanction (marked by a taboo sign)'

5 – [N] enclosure for initiation rituals

[→ Kwaio *abu-abu* 'sacred area beside men's house where ancestral spirits are addressed'; Mandegusu *tabu-na* 'shrine, skull-house, sacred or forbidden place']

6 – [ADJ] (topic) taboo, secret*

7 – [N] protection against evil spirits*

8 – [ADJ] **haunted by spiritual forces**

→ Māori *tapu* 'under religious or superstitious restriction'; Tanga *tabun* 'ritually restricted (used in reference to the immediate environs of a funeral house of a certain clan – only members of that clan may walk on this ground)'

9 – [ADJ] **holy, sacred**

→ Nggela *tambu*; Fijian *tabu* ++

10 – [ADJ] **reserved to initiated men**

→ Niue *tapu* 'prohibited to common people'

11 – [ADV] ascetic

[→ Roviana *tabu* 'put a taboo on food'; Molima *tabu-gu* 'a food forbidden to me']

12 – [ADJ] (person) endowed w/ supernatural powers*

13 – [ADJ] restricted to men*

14 – [N] graveyard*

15 – [N] grave*

16 – [N] day of mourning*

Finally, one can briefly mention a couple of meanings which are not found much in Vanuatu, yet are attested in more than one Oceanic languages outside the archipelago.

17 – [PRED] general prohibitive: don't

→ 'Āre'āre *āpu* 'prohibitive, dehortative to children'; Nauna *tapu*; Arosi *abu* 'don't'; cf. Teanu *etapu* [§3.1.2]

18 – [N]   charm, sacred or magical object

→ Mandegusu *tabu-na* 'charm, sacred object+'; Māori *taputapu* 'charm, incantation'

These observations can be synthesized in the form of a lexemic map, showing the most likely semantic array that can be reconstructed for the POc etymon *taᵐbu – see *Figure 7*.
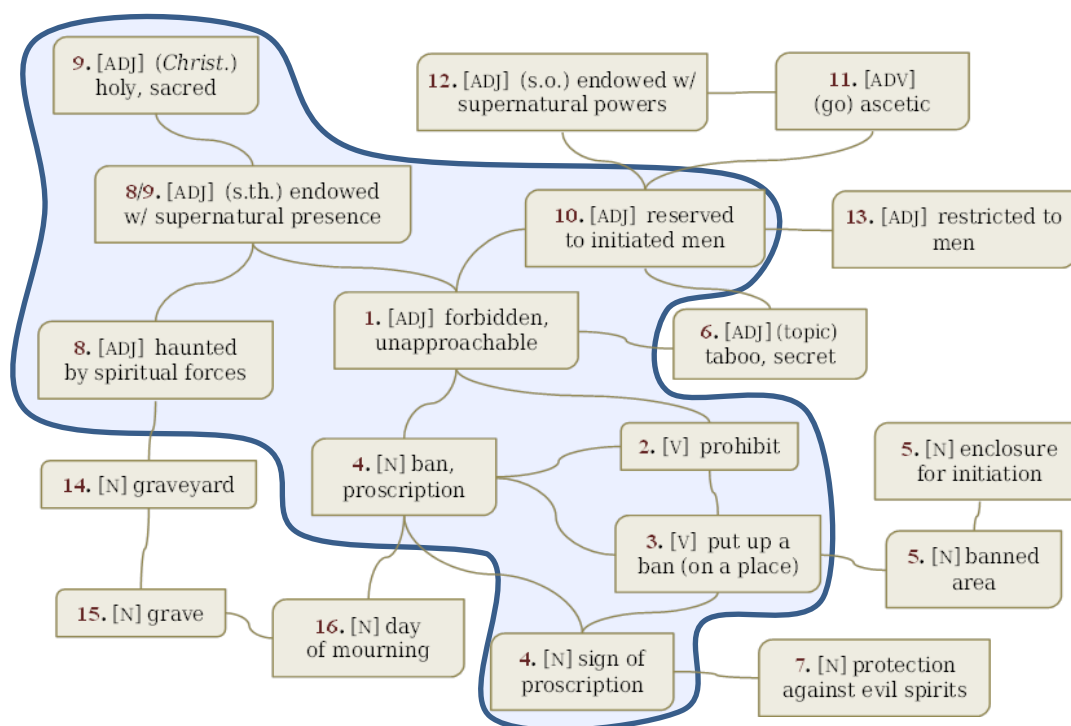

Figure 7 – Lexemic map showing the most likely semantic reconstruction for the Proto-Oceanic etymon *taᵐbu.

In sum, the protoform *taᵐbu of Proto Oceanic can be reconstructed with two sets of meanings, both of which revolve around the notion 'forbidden, unapproachable'. Some of these senses relate to the inherent sacredness of a place or object that is endowed with a divine or supernatural presence, whether that presence induces fear or a sense of awe. Other senses refer to profane, social practices of proscription, such as banning entrance into a territory. Somewhat lying in between these two poles, divine and human, are the senses linked to magical charms or initiation rituals – when spirits and humans meet.

5.2   Reconstructing semantic change

Finally, comparing the semantic array of POc *taᵐbu with its reflexes in modern Oceanic languages makes it possible to reconstruct paths of semantic change in individual languages. I will only comment on two languages we explored earlier: Hiw and Mwotlap.

Let us compare the lexemic map of POc *taᵐbu (*Figure 7*) with that of its reflex *toq* in Hiw (*Figure 5*). The latter has remained essentially faithful to its POc origin, by keeping such meanings as 'forbidden', 'holy', or its strong links with spiritual powers. Hiw has evidently receded some territory with respect to the profane meanings of *taᵐbu – such as 'ban entrance to a territory'. Conversely, the Torres languages have expanded on the religious

meanings of the root, and subsequent semantic extensions – such as 'ascetic' or 'ritual enclosure'.

As for Mwotlap, it has gone through a more spectacular shift. The root *taᵐbu has now been confined to a meaning #14 'graveyard' which does not seem to be reconstructable to POc, but which (together with #15 'grave') constitutes an innovation of several Vanuatu languages [§3.3.1]. As for the other meanings initially connected to *taᵐbu, they have been relexified using different roots: *roŋo 'silent → holy', and *salaɣoro 'forbidden path → secret, prohibited'… This process of lexical replacement must have taken several steps. Initially, #14 'graveyard' and #15 'grave' must have arisen as a semantic extension of #8 'place haunted by spiritual forces', at a time when that sense was still expressed by *taᵐbu. Later on, that same meaning #8 underwent the competition between *taᵐbu and an intruder etymon *roŋo – itself meaning originally 'quiet'. After a period of lexical rivalry between *taᵐbu and *roŋo (a struggle still ongoing in Mota – see §4.3), eventually the latter root prevailed in Mwotlap for meanings #8 and #9 'haunted, sacred, holy'. Mwotlap also witnessed a similar territorial expansion for *salaɣoro, which eventually resulted in *taᵐbu being also eliminated from meanings #1, 5, 6, 10… As a result, Mwotlap has lost *taᵐbu everywhere – except for its pocket of retention, as it were, with meaning #14 'graveyard'.

6   Conclusion

This study of *taᵐbu in the Oceanic languages of Vanuatu has illustrated the various facets of the work of historical reconstruction.

Knowledge of regular sound change in different languages was an indispensable first step in order to identify with certainty the target forms of our study, in spite of at times drastic sound change [*Section 2*]. The second step consisted in the careful semantic description of these modern words [*Section 3*]. Considering their important ties with cultural practices, this detailed description required long periods of fieldwork with different communities – including a specific investigation of ancient belief systems and religious practices in northern Vanuatu (cf. François 2013). My firsthand exposure to language in its social context sometimes proved useful in my interpretation of linguistic facts – such as when I witnessed my friends' reactions of fear and awe as they realised we were walking past a haunted site on our way to the forest [§3.2.1].

The semantic map approach has proven an efficient way to capture the similarities and differences I was able to notice in the field, between the various reflexes of a given etymon. It helps comparison both in a synchronic and in a historical perspective.

Finally, the principles of the comparative method also helped reconstruct the likely semantic profile of the root *taᵐbu in Proto-Oceanic times, more than three thousand years ago. By comparing that reconstruction with the different configurations in modern languages, we were able to propose scenarios of semantic evolution to explain the shifts and changes in the organisation of each language's lexicon. This shows how historical linguists can help historians and anthropologists reconstruct the ideologies and cultural constructs of the past, while paying attention to their dynamics and their constant ability for innovation.

7 Appendix: Dictionary entries

This appendix contains a sample of lexical entries that have been cited in this chapter, as they appear in the dictionary of Mwotlap (François 2019), and in a future dictionary of Hiw.

7.1 Hiw

teqö [təkʷə] ~ **töqö**. N. enclosure, restricted space meant to be kept off aliens, esp. non-initiates.

♦ **teqö toq** N. lit. "sacred enclosure": the area, gener. hidden in the bush, where initiation rituals take place. Cf. **toq**.

[PTB **taᵐbʷu-a*; POc **taᵐbu* 'sacred, taboo']

teqtoq [təkʷtɔkʷ] ADV. (act) in a pious or ascetic way, in adequacy with constraints associated with initiation rituals.

♦ **vën teqtoq** VI. lit. "go ascetic": (man) enter a period of ritual restrictions on food and sexual relations, during the process of initiation. ▷**Sise vën teqtoq, sise veyvoy: sise tat gon ne pēgone; sise tat vën yeqyōq mi tuñwuyegë. Ike mas yöy teqtoq voy-köñ voy-köñ voy-köñ.** *As [initiates] become ascetic, they must enter a mode of avoidance. They aren't allowed to eat anything from the sea; and they cannot go around with women. You must live piously like that, every single day.* Syn. **veyvoy**.

♦ **yöy~toge teqtoq** VI. lit. "stay ascetic": (man) be ascetic during a given period.

toq [tɔkʷ] ADJ. (1) (stg) endowed with special status inducing awe and special respect: sacred.

(2) <Christ> sacred, holy. ▷**Mama te řēne, ne ya në toq.** *Our father in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name.*

♦ **gengon toq** N. lit. "holy food": altar bread, Lord's Supper. ▷**n'oye-vë-gengon-toq** *[the consumption of holy bread] the Eucharist*

(3) (place) unapproachable, off limits, typic. due to being haunted by ghosts (**temët**).

♦ **ñwute toq** N. lit. "taboo place": locations on the island known to be haunted by ghosts and spirits (**temët**), and to which visits are advised against.

(4) (topic) taboo, not meant to be mentioned in public. ▷**Ne voygë pe nëne nëgë toq, tite tat vegevage vitikëyë ie ñwute pe tuquñkë ve toge ie mi tuñwuyegë.** *Subjects like that are a bit taboo: you can't just mention it randomly when kids or women are around.*

(5) (s.o.) numinous; endowed with supernatural powers (cf. **mane**). Syn. **třañe**.

♦ **tayö toq** N. lit. "numinous person": a man endowed with supernatural, magic powers, hence worthy of higher status in the grade-taking system (**suqe**). ▷**Sise kař' ike řē tuye tomñwëtom ike on řōw wřog, ike ne tayö toq.** (ritual pedestal **tuye**) *They'll shoot arrows at you [as you stand] on the stone pedestal; if you survive, this means you're a magic man.*

(6) (s.th., location) of restricted access, due to its association with initiation rituals or grade-taking ceremonies. ▷**Tekñwa pe sise ve suqe piti, sise tañwöy on řak ne temët yö teqö toq.** *Only those who have gone through initiation are entitled to handle spirits in the sacred enclosure.* Cf. **teqtoq** 'ascetic'.

♦ **vönyö toq** N. <Hist> lit. "sacred land": area in a village that was restricted to initiated men, and forbidden to non-initiates. ▷**Ne qoř ve toge takē vönyö toq. Takē vönyö toq pe takē ñwute pe ne gemoy vē ēn eye.** *Stone mausoleums [for high chiefs] are erected on sacred land. We call 'sacred land' the area around the house of initiated men (**gemoy**).*

[< **taᵐbʷu*; POc **taᵐbu* 'unapproachable, off limits']

7.2   Mwotlap

halgoy (**na-halgoy**) [halɣɔj] N. (1) a secret. ▹**Et-halgoy vitwag te.** *It's not a secret.* Cf. **bat** '*secret (adj.)*' ; Syn. **lehigoy**.

(2) (*rare*) (body) taboo parts, privates. ▹**Te-nenen a— la-tayben ige lōqōvēn en; a la-halgoy non ige lōqōvēn.** *That is found on the body of women, on their taboo parts.*

(3) taboo, proscription. ▹**Nēk t-et vēhte kē. Veg na-halgoy ! Na-halgoy so nēk so et kē.** *You can't see her, it's forbidden. You don't have the right to see her.* ▹**Ige lōqōvēn kēy nē-dēmap a nē-dēmap, veg na-halgoy non ige tam̄an, so ni-tiy tamat nan aē.** *Women pay [this ritual] the greatest respect, because it's a secret of the men, which is tied to Spirits.*

The enclosure of secrets
[*na-halgoy**]

During a few weeks, a group of young men will settle in a secret enclosure outside the village, in the bush. Strictly reserved to men, this enclosure is called *na-halgoy* "secret, taboo". Initiates learn there important and secret knowledge from their elders, including myths, tales, dances, songs, poems, and lessons of morality.

That wisdom takes its source in Spirits (*na-tmat*), who are present in the enclosure. The masked dances (*no-kolkol*, *na-tmat*) that take place in village ceremonies come out of the Spirits' enclosure, and return to it.

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(4) <Ethn> (*meton*) secret enclosure, strictly forbidden to non-initiates, where male candidates to initiation gather; hence secret society. ▹**Na-halgoy so ni-wot, a so ige tamat kēy so wot van la-halgoy.** *The initiation rituals are born when the Spirits appear in the secret enclosure.* See **lēs** '*initiate*'; **sōq**.

♦ **van la-halgoy** ~ **m̄ōl la-halgoy**. VI. lit. "go into Secret" : (young boy) enter the period of initiation, by moving for a few weeks into the secret enclosure ; hence follow the initiation rituals, become initiated. ▹**Nēk wo ma-van tō la-halgoy, no mas mōk geh hōw l-eh.** *If you went through the initiation rituals, I will mention it in my poem.* ▹**Ige mey malig hōw, kēy tit-van te**

muy vēh te la-halgoy. *Those who are underaged are not allowed to take part in secret ceremonies.* ▹**Ige m̄ōlm̄ōl van la-halgoy a kem et-lēs tamat qete : nē-dēw mi kemem, kem nē-dēmap so kem so hayveg van.** *When men used to gather together in their secret societies, we the non-initiated were quite impressed, we felt too much awe to join them.*

[< **sala-ɣoro* 'forbidden path']

teq (**ne-teq**) [nɛtɛk͡pʷ] N. <Ethn> graveyard, cemetery. ▹**Ige talmiy kēy so van a le-teq.** *The shaman's soul travels to the cemetery.* ▹**Nēk so van m̄ag a le-teq?** (joke) *Do you want to go already to the cemetery?* See: **quy (tamat)** '*grave*'.

[Cf. Malo **tabu** 'sacred, forbidden; grave'; PNCV, POc ***tabu** 'sacred, forbidden']

t[ō]qō [tʊk͡pʷʊ] VT. <Ethn> put up a sign of ban onto o.'s property, so as to prevent aliens from entering it. ▹**No mal tōqō mahē gōh kē, n-et tit kal bat vēh te; ba so iyē ma-van me gōh?** *I had put up a ban on this place, so nobody would come in; so who can be coming this way?*

♦ **na-tqō** N. a ban put up on a place; public sign announcing that ban, in the form of leaves bundled together in plain sight. ▹**na-tqō b-ēm̄yoň** [*ban for the church*] *fishing reserved for the preparation of the church day.* See: **ak goy**.

[<°*tabʷú-a*; cf. Mota **tapua** 'a thing or place made taboo; a mark or sign set up'; PNCV, POc ***tabu** 'sacred, forbidden']

yoň₂ A [jɔŋ] ADJ. Redup : **yoyoň**.

(1) (*anc*) quiet, silent. ◊ Only in **tog-yoň** 'keep quiet', and in the reduplicated form **yoyoň**.

(2) (place, thing+) endowed with special status inducing awe and respect: sacred, numinous.

♦ **ne-vet yoň** N. <Magic> lit. "holy stone": a stone endowed with supernatural aura or power, used for rituals of sorcery (**vēgēl**). ▹**Nok sese eh van le-vet yoň vitwag, tō kē ni-vēhgi bago.** *I chant to a sacred stone,*

so it turns into a shark.

(3) <Christ.> holy, saint. ▸ **n-ēm̄ yoñ** [*holy house*] *church* ▸ **nu-Vu Yoñ** *the Holy Spirit* ▸ **vasigyoñ** *baptize*

B (**no-yoñ**) **N.** numen, holiness, sacredness (of s.th., s.o.). ▸ **Nitog hahalege n-et a kē**

n-en hiy en, veg no-yoñ tiple su. *Do not step over someone lying on the ground: this would harm her sacredness.*

[cf. Mota ***roño*** 'sacred, unapproachable+']

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