# Awesome forces and warning signs
## Charting the semantic history
## of taboo-related words in Vanuatu

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## Abstract

The Proto-Oceanic etymon *taᵐbu (the source of Proto-Polynesian *tapu*, and of English *taboo*) is also preserved in other Oceanic languages, notably those of Vanuatu – albeit with phonetic and semantic changes. Reflexes of *taᵐbu combine the notion of prohibition with the sentiment of awe before the sacred. Sometimes, they simply refer to the mundane warning signs that are put up in various locations to fend off unwelcome visitors. But *taᵐbu words are also often linked with supernatural powers, good or evil, and with the sense of fear they induce upon us. In Vanuatu languages in particular, the root may evoke the numinous power of high-ranked dignitaries filled with *mana*; or the world of ancestral spirits or ghosts, and the forces of death.

Semantic maps prove helpful in visualizing the internal organization of the root's lexical domain, as we compare modern languages with each other. Adapting the principles of the Comparative method to semantic change, this study reconstructs the meaning of *taᵐbu at the level of Proto-Oceanic. The full potential of semantic maps becomes even more heuristic as we take a historical perspective: they offer new ways to visualize the evolution of polysemous roots, and to retrace the precise paths taken by changes in meaning.

## Keywords

linguistic anthropology – etymology – lexicon – Proto-Oceanic – Vanuatu – religion – taboo – spirit – semantic maps – lexical reconstruction

# 1     *Taboo < tapu < \*taᵐbu*

## 1.1     The question

The English word *taboo* was borrowed in the late 18th century by Captain Cook and his men, from Tahitian *tapu*.[1] Whether used as an adjective or a noun, the English word is closely associated with the idea of a socially-sanctioned prohibition – whether it's about banning an action or avoiding the mention of a sensitive topic, for fear of offending people or bringing trouble.

This modern sense in English has evolved from the original meaning 'forbidden, unapproachable, due to a form of religious sanctity' that *tapu* has in Tahitian and other Polynesian languages. The religious undertones of the Polynesian word were already noted by James 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 often associated with Polynesian languages, it really continues a pre-existing root \*taᵐbu that can be reconstructed all the way back to Proto-Oceanic (POc), the common ancestor of all Oceanic languages. This etymon \*taᵐbu is commonly glossed 'forbidden, taboo' (Blust & Trussel 2018), yet its precise semantics have not been explored much outside of the Polynesian group of languages. Do other Oceanic languages also endow this word with religious connotations, and if so, of what nature? what are the paths of semantic shift commonly observed for that etymon, between POc and modern languages? How do the different senses of this root's descendants relate to each other?

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. This study proposes to explore the semantic history of the POc word \*taᵐbu, mostly based on firsthand data collected in northern Vanuatu – combined with publications by other authors.

## 1.2     A note on linguistic taboos

The English term *taboo* is used in anthropology to refer to the cultural practice of avoiding specific 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 prohibitions.

One set of prohibitions include practices of tabooing certain words or names – as witnessed also in various other parts of the world (Stasch 2011, Dixon 1990, Herbert 1990, Treis 2005).

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Contrary to Tahitian *pi'i* which entailed the ban of certain words for whole communities (Ahnne 1994 [1917], Vernier 1948), the naming taboos observed in Vanuatu are based on kinship relations, and thus affect each person differently. The linguistic taboos are usually related to affine (in-law) relations:[1]

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, 2005b:121)

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 here words meaning 'avoidance':

- the language Mwotlap (Banks Is) has the noun *na-plig* /napliɣ/ '1) avoidance; 2) *hence* social practice whereby one avoids uttering publicly the names of in-law relatives' < verb /viliɣ/ 'avoid, refrain from' (François 2020a:322);

- the language Hiw (Torres Is) has *mañe visevise* /maŋə βisəβisə/ [liter. 'avoidance speech']: 'respectful speech register used for showing respect to one's in-laws' < /βisə/ 'avoid, make a detour' (François 2011:207).

Despite their interest for an anthropological exploration of taboos in Melanesia, these social practices will not concern us here. Instead, I will focus on those concepts of northern Vanuatu cultures that are expressed using reflexes of the POc root *taᵐbu. As we shall see, these include various forms of prohibitions – whether related to land ownership, to ascetic rituals during male initiations, or to funeral ceremonies – yet none that concerns restrictive behaviour linked to kinship.

## 1.3   The present study

Since the times of Proto-Oceanic, many words have gone through drastic change both in form and in meaning, making them at times difficult to identify. I will thus start this study by exposing the method for detecting with certainty the target words of this research (*Section 2*). For example, how can we know for sure that the Mwotlap noun /nɛtɛk͡pʷ/ 'graveyard' is a reflex of POc *taᵐbu, but not the verb /tam/ 'respect'?

Once the list of target words is established, *Section 3* will examine their various meanings, and *Section 4* will organise them into a semantic map. Finally, *Section 5* will reconstruct the most likely meanings of *taᵐbu at the time of Proto-Oceanic, and trace back cases of semantic change and lexical replacement in modern languages.

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[1] In the context of north Vanuatu, the set of in-law relations linked with prohibitions include 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]. By contrast, the taboo practices mentioned here do not concern the same-sex siblings of my spouse [WZ, HB], or the spouses of my same-sex siblings [(*m*)BW, (*f*)ZH].

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. Anthropologist readers will find here another illustration of how linguists can contribute, through methodical investigation, to the reconstruction of cultural systems and social practices of past millennia.[1]

As for linguists, they will find here a discussion of historical semantics around a particularly polysemous etymon. I will make proposals for handling its evolving polysemy, through the use of lexical maps (Haspelmath 2003, François 2008, Georgakopoulos 2019) – combined with some key principles of the Comparative method. By intertwining etymology with visual representation, I hope to contribute a new approach to the analysis of semantic change.

## 2    *Identifying the proper reflexes of *taᵐbu*

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

There is discussion whether the POc etymon should be reconstructed with a final consonant, that would 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 point to an etymon *taᵐbu (cf. Clark 2009:186-7).

Among the 138 Oceanic languages that are spoken in Vanuatu (François et al. 2015), *Map 1* shows those that are cited in the present study. These languages vary in how drastically they have been affected by sound change since their reconstructed POc ancestor. Conservative forms include *taᵐbu* 'set apart, prohibit' in Raga (Pentecost) or *tapu*(-*na*) 'taboo, proscription, forbidden…' in Kiai (Santo) (Clark 2009:186-7) – both unproblematic in form and meaning.

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 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 2005a: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 > /ε-tεβ/. Yet all these changes can be shown to

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[1] For another study with a similar perspective on Northern Vanuatu languages, see also François (2013); for Oceanic languages as a whole, the volumes by Ross, Pawley & Osmond (1998–2016) – among many other works of scholarship.

[2] See Blust & Trussel (2018), *http://www.trussel2.com/acd/acd-s_t.htm#30099*.
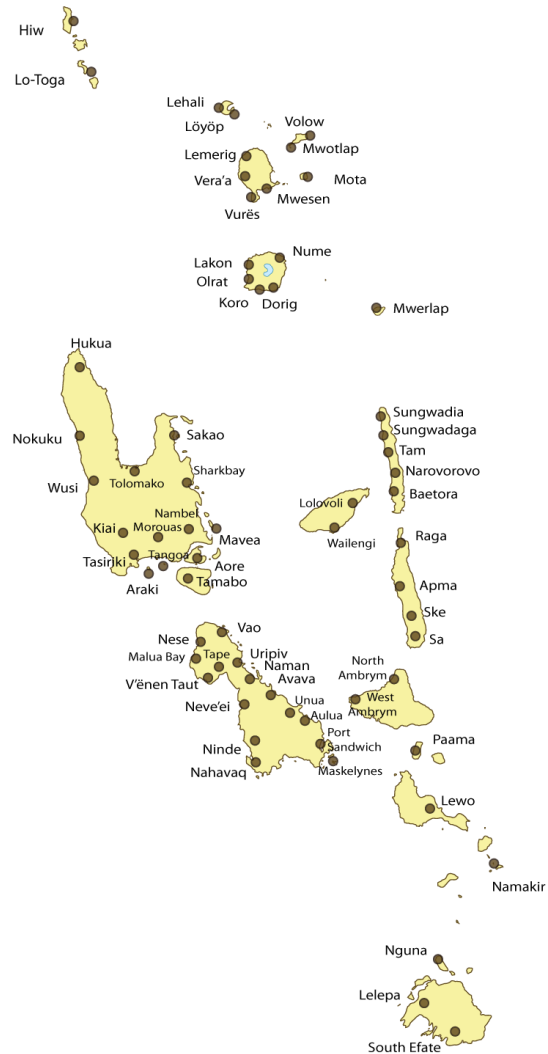
be regular in the phonological history of Sakao (Guy 1977). And indeed, this principle of *regular sound correspondences* provides the key to identifying with certainty the reflexes of a particular protoform.

The initial consonant *t remained /t/ in most Vanuatu 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**aṉa/ 'father'; *tolu > /**r**olu/ 'three' (François 2002, 2007).

Many Northern Vanuatu languages 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) /taːᵐ**b**/, (Mota) /ta**p**/, etc. In many languages, the new coda position led the prenasalized stop to deoralize (François 2016:31). This regular change *-ᵐb > /-m/ occurred in Koro /tɛ͡am/, Mwerlap /nɔ-tɔ**m**/, Namakir /ⁿda**m**/.

In the northernmost islands, a rounded vowel tended to assimilate a preceding bilabial stop, adding to it a labio-velar release: *ᵐbu > *ᵐbʷu. In Torres–Banks languages, the complex segment then



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

became both velarized and devoiced: *ᵐbʷ > *ᵑ͡gbʷ > /k͡pʷ/. This is how, for example, Mwotlap regularly reflects the noun *na taᵐbu (with article *na) as modern /nɛ-tɛk͡pʷ/. The two Torres languages later delabialized their labial-velar phonemes, yielding a /kʷ/ segment. This is how the regular reflex of *taᵐbu in Hiw and Lo-Toga is a form /tɔ**kʷ**/.[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 2005a). 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 (arranged here in a northwest to southeast order) with the reflexes of a similar etymon, *páRu 'hibiscus' (François 2013:192):

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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 /tu**kʷ**u/ in Lo-Toga (François 2005a:501).

(1)　　*taᵐbu 'forbidden, taboo+':

　　　Hɪᴡ *tɔkʷ*; Lᴏ-Tᴏɢᴀ *tɔkʷ*; Lᴇʜᴀʟɪ *(tpu)*; Mᴡᴏᴛʟᴀᴘ *nɛ-tɛk͡pʷ*; Mᴏᴛᴀ *tap*; Dᴏʀɪɢ *ta:ᵐb*; Kᴏʀᴏ *tɛ͡am*; Mᴡᴇʀʟᴀᴘ *nɔ-tɔm*.

(2)　　*paRu 'hibiscus':

　　　Hɪᴡ *βɔᵍʟ*; Lᴏ-Tᴏɢᴀ *βɔr*; Lᴇʜᴀʟɪ *n-βɤj*; Mᴡᴏᴛʟᴀᴘ *nɛ-βɛj*; Mᴏᴛᴀ *βar*; Dᴏʀɪɢ *βa:r*; Kᴏʀᴏ *βɛ͡ar*; Mᴡᴇʀʟᴀᴘ *nɤ-βɔ͡ɤr*.

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 2005a:490).

This criterion is helpful not only in identifying positive reflexes, but also in ruling out tempting yet false candidates (François 2013:195). 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 for a word meaning 'respect' to have some semantic relation with 'forbidden, taboo', which would have shed light on the semantic evolution of *taᵐbu reflexes. However, this hypothesis can be disproven in this case, by taking regular correspondences into account. In Mwotlap, a vowel /a/ never reflects a sequence *áCu; it can only have its origin in a sequence *áCe, *áCa, or *áCo (François 2005a:490). Comparison with Hiw /tep/ or Vurës /tĩam/ (same meaning as Mwotlap /tam/), combined with knowledge of regular vowel correspondences in the region, allows us to reconstruct with certainty a proto-form *taᵐb**e** rather than *taᵐbu. This cognate set {*taᵐbe 'love, esteem, respect'[1] > Hɪᴡ /tep/, Mᴛᴘ /tam/, Vʀs /tĩam/} does not belong with *taᵐbu reflexes.

## 3　　*The meanings of *taᵐbu* reflexes*

Applying the principle of regular sound correspondences thus 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 an analysis of 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 combines linguistic elicitation (see François 2019) with a literary corpus of 389 oral narratives recorded in 21 languages. These text corpora came in addition to periods of language immersion and participant observation, during which I learned and observed the languages in their social context, and took fieldnotes, both linguistic and ethnographic.[2]

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

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

## 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 used as adjectives,[1] 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;*[2] TAMABO *taᵐbu* 'forbidden'; NAMAKIR *daka-tam* 'prohibited, forbidden'.

In spite of the English translation as 'forbidden' or 'prohibited', adjective-like reflexes of *taᵐbu in Vanuatu normally do not refer to the mundane sense of the word – as when someone, e.g. a parent, prohibits a certain action to their children. Indeed, reflexes of *taᵐbu generally entail an aura of spiritual significance: if a place or a thing is *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 meanings associated with reflexes 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) directly inherited reflexes used as an active verb 'prohibit, ban', whether in the simple form *taᵐbu or through derivation.

### 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 Teanu, the main language of Vanikoro (François 2009, 2020b) in the Temotu province of the Solomons (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)     TNU  *Lek'*              *iape*      **etapu.**  [3]
            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.'

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[1] Northern Vanuatu languages have a category of adjectives that is distinct both from nouns and from verbs: see François (2003:48-53) for Mwotlap, François (2017) for Hiw, Malau (2016:118) for Vurës.

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

[3] 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.

(5)　TNU　*Enga　eo　**etapu**.*
　　　　　name　your　holy
　　　　　'hallowed be Thy name' [Tnu.Father.02]

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

(6)　TNU　*U-madau　**etapu** !* [1]
　　　　　2s:Irr-fear　PROH
　　　　　'Don't be afraid!'

Likewise, 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 – either as a loanword or an instance of codeswitching.

Such a grammaticalisation 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 North Vanuatu languages render the causative 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 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. These examples are from my Mwotlap (MTP) and Vera'a (VRA) corpora:[2]

(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]

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[1] Audio link: *https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003269#S7* [Teanu.Treasure.08].

[2] 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.

(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 or 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 actual 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* is a picture of such a ban sign – *na-tqō* [natk͡pʷʊ] – made of a wooden stick wrapped in 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.

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 *təkʷɵ*;  Lo-Toga *təkʷə*.



*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)

As we will 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 speakers from mentioning a particular 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 *tɛ͡am*.

This sense is illustrated by this sentence in Lo-Toga (Ltg):

(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). Durand also reports (p.108) on the use of similar signs during
wedding ceremonies, as a token of protection for the future marriage. 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 reserved for humans. This is an unusual 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 mere mortals are usually the ones
meant to keep away from it.

## 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 languages are
seldom associated with a mundane interpretation of 'forbidden, prohibit', that would apply to
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   weř~wař   ne   ñwut'   in   tom   "ne   ñwute   ***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, reflexes of *taᵐbu are better translated as 'haunted' or 'dangerous'.

Certain caves or stones in the wilderness are believed to be endowed with supernatural powers (*Figure 2* p.14); they would be used as an altar to perform sorcery. The Torres languages have special names for those stones,[1] but occasionally describe them with an adjective *taᵐbu 'haunted' or 'sacred' (Lo-Toga *ne vot toq* 'sacred stones').

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 (5) 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'

The word here does not imply danger or fear as in (18), but a sense of wonder in front of a godly presence. In both cases, a location or an object is 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 English *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". While these are two distinct meanings, they tend to be colexified[3] in several Vanuatu languages, with the same root *taᵐbu.

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

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

[3] For the concept of *colexification*, see François (2008).

### 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 paralleling Benveniste's description above really concerns the pre-Christian animist religion of Vanuatu, which in many respects persists in modern societies.

The spiritual force that is entailed by the concept of *taᵐbu is inherently neither positive nor negative. While they can receive many different names, the generic term for "spirits" in Vanuatu languages is generally a reflex of a local etymon *ata-mate 'dead person, ghost' (François 2013:213-8): this highlights their deep connection with death. Spirits are generally believed to represent the souls of the deceased; and numerous stories and myths recount how they threaten to kill and eat people. 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 none 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 – home to the two languages Hiw and Lo-Toga – the root *taᵐbu itself is precisely associated with the initiation rituals and ceremonies whereby male adolescents acquire the secret knowledge that will make them be 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-TOGA *tɔkʷ*.

By association, the term is also used in relation to the male-only political grade system known in the ethnographic literature as *suqe* (Codrington 1891, Vienne 1984), and in Lo-Toga as *huqe* (< *suᵐbʷe, cf. François 2013:234):

(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 for 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. In Hiw, 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* /tək<sup>w</sup>ə/ is itself etymologically derived from *taᵐbu: see
(13) in §3.1.3. In other terms, the phrase *teqö toq* /tək<sup>w</sup>ə tɔk<sup>w</sup>/ in (24) reflects the root *taᵐbu
not just once, but twice: /tək<sup>w</sup>ə tɔk<sup>w</sup>/ < *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 tɔk<sup>w</sup>/, literally 'the Sacred Journey'. Likewise, Codrington & Palmer's Mota dictionary
cites 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*** ('sacred fire') → 'the fire belonging to each rank';
*im̄e **tapug*** ('sacred house') → 'the *gamal* [men's club house]'; *gana **tapug*** ('eat sacred') →
'consume the meals necessary for taking a step in rank'.

### 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 tək<sup>w</sup>tɔk<sup>w</sup>/, which could be translated as 'to go ascetic'. Crucially, the last word here, in
adverbial position, is none 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 *tək<sup>w</sup>tɔk<sup>w</sup>*;   LO-TOTA *tək<sup>w</sup>tɔk<sup>w</sup>*.

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

(26)   HIW

| 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. [2] |
|------|-----|-----|--------|----|----| 
| 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 are the semantic shifts undergone 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 observance of religious
rules.

### 3.2.4 SUPERNATURAL POWER

Another semantic extension of *taᵐbu has to do, not with religious rituals strictly speaking, but

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[1] In the Torres languages, unstressed syllables regularly reduce to schwa [ə] (François 2005a:466): hence
*toq* /tɔk<sup>w</sup>/ reduplicates as *teqtoq* /tək<sup>w</sup>ˈtɔk<sup>w</sup>/.

[2] Audio link: *https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003252#S53*   [Hiw.Religion.053]

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[1] (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 in their access to political power (see Vienne 1984:377).

Thus in Hiw, *ta{ᵐ}bu 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*:

(27)  HIW  Sise  kaȓ'  ike  ȓē  tuye :  tomn̄wëtom  ike  on
           3pl  shoot  ACC:2sg  on  pedestal  if  2sg  SBJV

           ȓōw  wȓog,  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, known in Hiw as *tuye* /tɰjə/ (*Figure 2*), are three- to four-feet high sacred stones that used to be erected at the entrance of men's houses – whether the 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) radiate with a numen that makes them *ta{ᵐ}bu (*toq*) *par excellence*. Now, what interests me here is the metonymic shift whereby a man becomes *ta{ᵐ}bu himself if he can show supernatural powers, in relation to that pedestal. One way to demonstrate 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* < *mana), and the man was then considered a *tayö toq*, a 'numinous' person.



*Figure 2* – A stone pedestal (*tuye*) in the Torres Islands.

(28)  ***ta{ᵐ}bu*** > 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 *ta{ᵐ}bu even further. The word is regularly associated with initiated men or men of power,

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[1] The connection of *ta{ᵐ}bu with *mana* was already hinted at in the definition of Mota *tapu* as given by Codrington & Palmer (1896) in (17) above.

even in the absence of a strong magical 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)  Hɪw  Ne  qoř̄      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 may also be described as "sacred", as in this passage in Lo-Toga (*mëne* < *mana):

(30)  Lᴛɢ  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, when using "avoidance speech" [§1.2], is *ne gë toq* 'the sacred thing'.

Finally, some contexts in Hiw associate the reflex of *taᵐbu with male gender in general:

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

Thus compare *yöñwřat* 'women's latrines' with *yöñwřat-**toq*** /jəŋʷᵍʟat.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 forbidden to the other gender, and each 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 root with the world of male initiates.

## 3.3    Funeral practices

### 3.3.1  Gʀᴀᴠᴇ, ɢʀᴀᴠᴇʏᴀʀᴅ

We have 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.

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

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 an 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' or 'graveyard' have generally lost the root's other meanings [§4.2].

### 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 with 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 widespread across the archipelago, while others appear to be 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 previous works on lexical semantic maps (e.g. Pawley 2005, François 2008, Georgakopoulos et al. 2016), I propose to collect all the meanings in question into a single semantic map: the maximal semantic map of *taᵐbu (*Figure 3*).

Each sense is numbered according to its identifier in previous subsections.[1] 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'… The boxes are colour-coded to show whether each sense corresponds to a grammatical use of *taᵐbu as an adjective, as a verb or as a noun.

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

**9.** [ADJ] (*Christ.*) holy, sacred

**12.** [ADJ] (s.o.) endowed w/ supernatural powers

**11.** [ADV] (go) ascetic

**8/9.** [ADJ] (s.th.) endowed w/ supernatural presence

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

**13.** [ADJ] restricted to men

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

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

**6.** [ADJ] (topic) taboo, secret

**14.** [N] graveyard

**4.** [N] ban, proscription

**2.** [V] prohibit

**5.** [N] enclosure for initiation

**15.** [N] grave

**16.** [N] day of mourning

**3.** [V] put up a ban (on a place)

**5.** [N] banned area

**4.** [N] sign of proscription

**7.** [N] protection against evil spirits

*Figure 3* – A maximal semantic map of *\*taᵐbu* reflexes in Vanuatu languages

## 4.2 From the maximal semantic map to individual lexemic maps

The term "*maximal*" semantic map indicates that the map does not represent the facts of a single 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 semantic range of each modern reflex of the *\*taᵐbu* etymon (cf. François 2008, f/c). The maximal semantic map then functions as an "etic grid", from where the precise contour of each emic category can be outlined (cf. Haspelmath 2003, Evans 2010:509). I propose to call *lexemic map* a chart showing the semantic outline of one or more individual lexemes.

Some languages assign to their reflex of *\*taᵐbu* just one or two of the meanings on the maximal map. Thus, Araki (Santo I.) has only kept meaning #15 'grave' with *rapu*. Mwerlap uses the noun *no-tom* only for senses #4 and #7 'protection against evil spirits'.

Mwotlap also has only one direct reflex of *\*taᵐbu*, namely *ne-teq* 'graveyard' [#14]; yet in addition, it also reflects the causative protoform *\*taᵐbúa*, either as a verb *tōqō*, 'put a ban' [#3] or as a noun *na-tqō* '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*. (Direct reflexes of *\*taᵐbu* are shown with a full line; its derivatives with a dotted line.)

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]. As the dotted line shows, meaning #11 'ascetic' is rendered by a derivative form obtained by reduplication (*teqtoq*). Finally, we can add the noun *teqö* /təkʷə/ [#5] 'enclosure for initiation', from *\*taᵐbua*. The lexemic map in *Figure 5* displays the array of senses associated with modern reflexes of *\*taᵐbu* in Hiw. In addition, the *Appendix* [§7.1] provides the lexical entries of these Hiw words as they would appear in a dictionary.
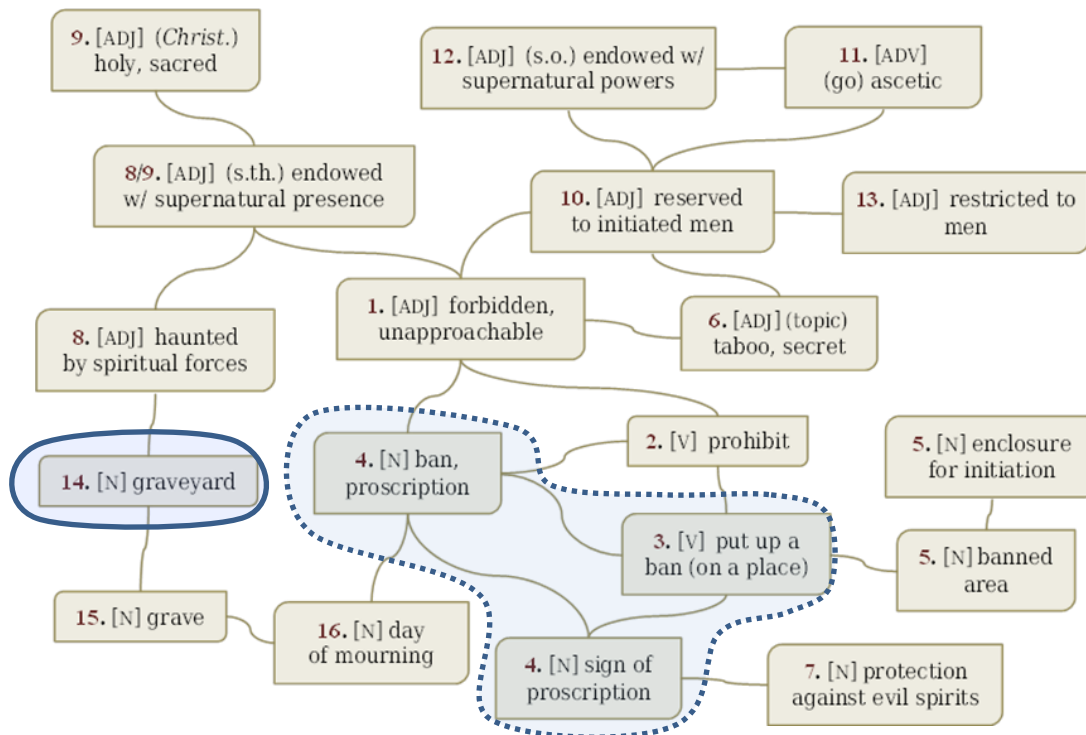
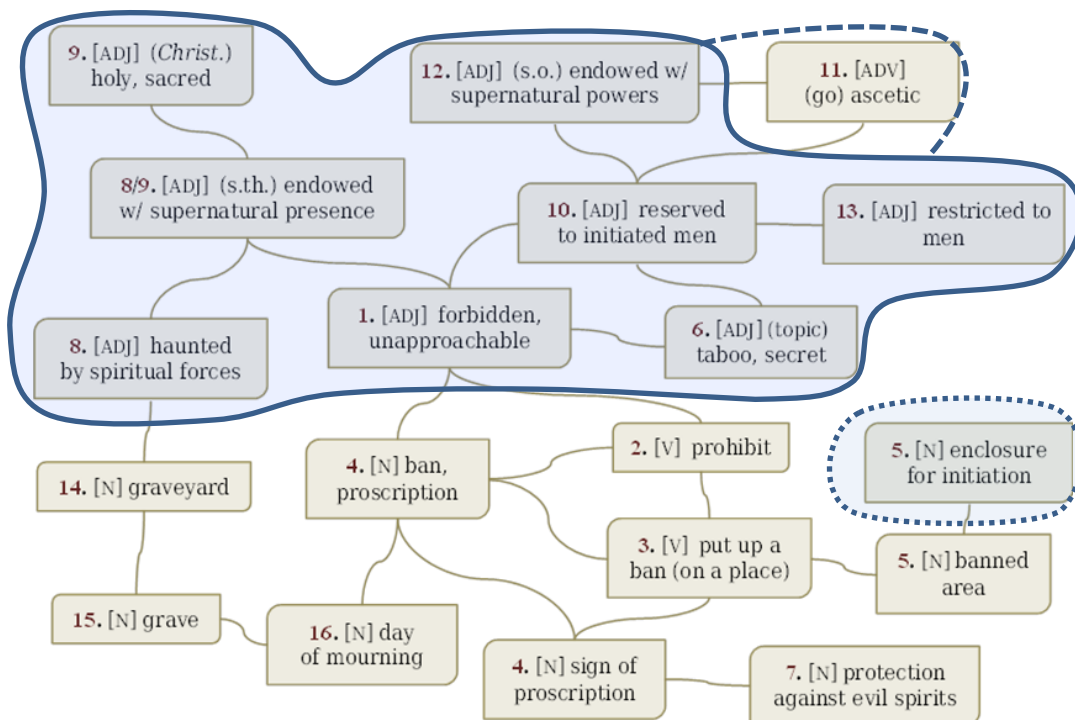*Figure 4* – Lexemic map of *taᵐbu reflexes in modern Mwotlap (Banks Islands).



*Figure 5* – Lexemic map of *taᵐbu reflexes in modern Hiw (Torres Islands)

The advantage of the semantic map approach 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.

A comparison of Figures 4 and 5 makes it clear that the modern languages of Vanuatu with reflexes of POc *taᵐbu assign them to different sections of the map, each in its own way. The contrast between Mwotlap and Hiw is all the more extreme, that the two languages are

geographically relatively close to each other in northern Vanuatu. And yet, their reflexes of *taᵐbu have clearly become "faux amis" – two cognate forms with very different semantics. We will come back to these maps in the discussion about diachronic paths of change [§5.2].

## 4.3    When lexemes compete with each other

The map raises one question, namely: How do languages treat the portions of the map that they *don't* lexify using a reflex of *taᵐbu? Are there other roots that are semantically close to *taᵐbu, 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? Due to space limitations, and the sheer number of languages involved, this discussion must remain short, but a few examples can already be proposed.

When a language does not use *taᵐbu for one of the senses of *Figure 3*, this may correspond to either of two cases: either it doesn't express it at all; or it encodes it using a different word.

The first possibility is that a given sense in *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*" [§3.1.5]; of building a "*special enclosure in the bush for initiation rituals*" [§3.2.2]; or of "*going ascetic with respect to seafood and sexual intercourse, as a token of self-restraint*" [§3.2.3]. Just as many of those concepts are absent from European languages, likewise they can be lacking from some Vanuatu societies which happen not to share a particular custom.

The second, perhaps more common case, is when a given sense is indeed lexified by a modern language, but with a root other than *taᵐbu. Several etymons compete with *taᵐbu for those various senses. 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 a euphemism 'sleeping enclosure' (François 2013:223-4).

That said, the number of lexical roots belonging to this domain is not infinite, and we can identify some important etyma. Looking at the language Mwotlap, I will cite two roots in particular: *roŋo and *salaɣoro.[1] The excerpts from the Mwotlap dictionary (François 2020a) shown in the Appendix [§7] include not only 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 apparently 'quiet, silent', is used for senses #8 'haunted by spiritual forces', as well as for its Christian counterpart #9 'holy, sacred'. This adjective *yoñ* focuses on the inherent sanctity of an object or place, and

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[1] The reconstructions are given here at the level of "Proto Torres-Banks" (PTB) – cf. François (2013:230-3).

does not specifically entail the notion of proscription or taboo. This is consistent with the definition given for its cognate *roño* in Mota, which Codrington & Palmer (1896:146) gloss: "sacred, unapproachable, with inherent sanctity – not *tapu*". On the other hand, the noun *halgoy* (<*sala-ɣoro), etymologically 'closed path', evokes the notion of secret, taboo, proscription [#1, #6], particularly in relation to the secret knowledge of initiates [#10]. The same word *halgoy* also designates the secret enclosure devoted to initiation rituals [#5].

Interestingly, the contrast between *roŋo and *salaɣoro is here reminiscent of the opposition drawn by Benveniste [§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". In other terms, while the two types of sanctity are colexified in Hiw *toq* (< *taᵐbu), they are dislexified in modern Mwotlap, through its contrast between *roŋo and *salaɣoro. Historically, events of lexical replacement in Mwotlap resulted in a *lexical split* (François f/c) within the semantic domain of holiness, with the emergence of a contrast between positive and negative sanctity.

*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. Other senses are either not expressed in Mwotlap, or they are lexified with other roots again.
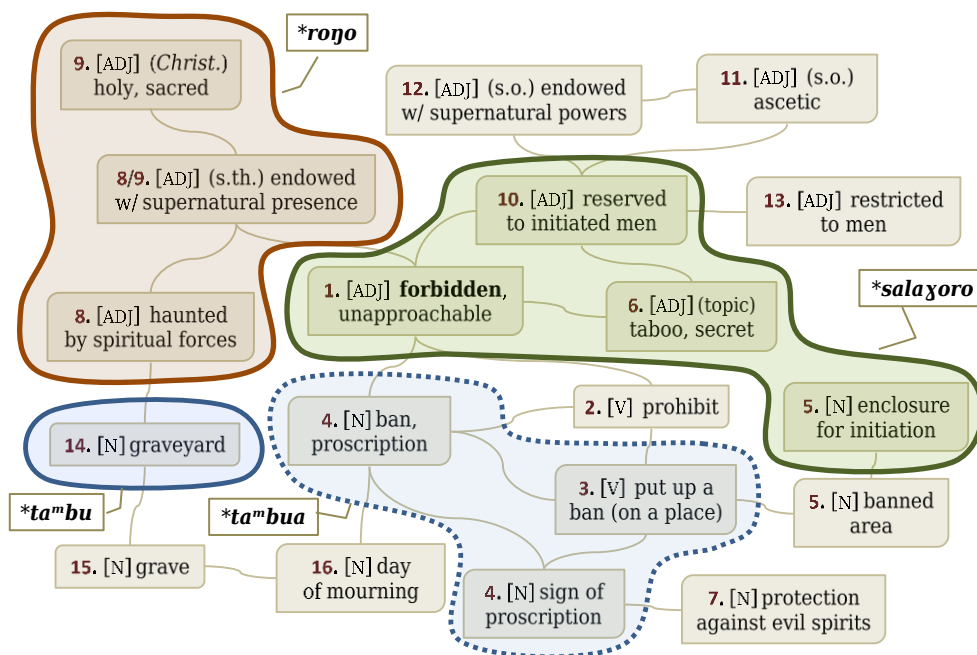


*Figure 6* – Lexemic map showing some of the roots used by modern Mwotlap to lexify the maximal semantic domain of *taᵐbu.

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, before finally settling in a portion of the semantic territory, different in each language.

# 5 From modern languages to Proto Oceanic, and back

## 5.1 The meaning of *taᵐbu in 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 there is no reason for assuming such a scenario. 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.

Ideally, when reconstructing the semantic contour of a given etymon, we should impose upon ourselves the same sort of rigor and demands as we do for computing its phonetic form. And indeed, while the Comparative method has more often concerned itself with the discussion of sound change, there is no reason why its principles could not be extended to semantic reconstruction (cf. Blust 1987).

One relevant principle, sometimes known as Meillet's principle, concerns the conditions for a given feature to be reconstructed at the level of a family's ancestor – while avoiding the pitfalls of contact or coincidence. Meillet (1903), working on Indo-European, proposed that an etymon should be reconstructed in a protolanguage if, and only if, it is attested in at least three distinct subgroups descended from it (cf. Rankin 2003:191).

I propose to apply Meillet's principle to the semantic domain. In a lexical family of cognate words all descended from the same etymon, a given sense should be assigned to the proto-form if, and only if, it is attested in at least three subgroups. Even though we still lack relevant data for many Oceanic modern languages, a fair sample can be found in Robert Blust's *Austronesian Comparative Dictionary*, under the entry *taᵐbu.[1] I propose to compare the glosses provided by Blust for Oceanic languages with the 16 senses I already identified for Vanuatu languages [*Figure 3* p.17].

In the list below, I indicate in bold those senses on the map which are also found in at least two Oceanic subgroups besides Vanuatu; each language name is followed by its subgroup. In some cases [#5] marked by curly braces, 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 [Southeast Solomonic] *tabu* 'sacred, forbidden; a prohibition placed on use or handling of anything';

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

→ Wayan [Central Pacific] *tabu* 'be forbidden, prohibited by strong communal sanction; (place, thing) be prohibited from use' ++

**2 – [V]   prohibit, set apart**

→ Gela [Southeast Solomonic] *tambu* 'set apart'++

→ Gilbertese [Micronesian] *tabu-a* 'to forbid, prohibit, interdict'

**3 – [V]   put up a ban on a place**

→ Fijian [Central Pacific] *tabu* 'forbidden, prohibited, implying a religious sanction, but now used also for legal prohibition, such as "no admission"';

→ Māori [Polynesian] *tāpu-i* 'mark to indicate claim or right to property'

**4 – [N]   sign of proscription**

→ Bugotu [SES] *tabu* 'a prohibition placed on use or handling of anything'

→ Woleaian [Micronesian] *tab* 'ban, ritual restriction protected by supernatural sanction, marked by a taboo sign'

→ cf. Biak [SHWNG] *kābus* 'tree branch or anything else placed on fruit tree or other object by its owner in order to make others afraid to approach the marked object lest ill fortune befall them'

**5 – [N]   enclosure for initiation rituals**

{→ Kwaio [SES] *abu-abu* 'sacred area beside men's house where ancestral spirits are addressed';

→ Mandegusu [WOc] *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 [Polyn.] *tapu* 'under religious or superstitious restriction';

→ Tanga [Western Oceanic] *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**

→ Cheke Holo [WOc] *tabu* 'taboo, prohibited, sacred'

→ Bugotu [SES] *tabu* 'sacred, holy'

→ Rennellese [Polyn.] *tapu* 'taboo, forbidden, sacred, hallowed'

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

→ Niue [Polynesian] *tapu* 'prohibited to common people'

→ Gilbertese [Micronesian] *tabu* 'forbidden, prohibited (generally used with religious meaning of sacred, consecrated)'

**11 – [V]   be ascetic, observant of rituals**

→ Roviana [Meso-Melanesian] *tabu* 'put a taboo on food';

→ Molima [Papuan Tip] *tabu-gu* 'a food forbidden to me'

→ Rennellese [Polyn.] *tapu* 'to observe taboos, as on the Sabbath'

**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 language outside the archipelago.

17 – [PRED] general prohibitive: don't (cf. §3.1.2)

   &rarr; Nauna [Admiralties] *tapu* 'dehortative, don't'

   &rarr; Tubetube [WOc] *tabu* 'don't'

   &rarr; 'Āre'āre [SES] *āpu* 'prohibitive, dehortative to children';  Arosi *abu* 'don't';

18 – [N]    charm, sacred or magical object

   &rarr; Mandegusu [WOc] *tabu-na* 'charm, sacred object+';

   &rarr; 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 *ta\*ᵐbu – see *Figure 7*. My hypothesis is that *ta\*ᵐbu in Proto Oceanic only had the meanings shown inside the blue line; the senses shown outside of that line are later semantic extensions local to Vanuatu [§5.2].



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

In sum, the protoform *ta\*ᵐbu 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; POc *ta\*ᵐbu evidently colexified positive and negative sanctity. Other senses refer to profane, social practices of proscription, such as banning entrance to a territory. Somewhat lying in

between these two poles, sacred and profane, are the senses linked to magical charms or initiation rituals – when spirits and humans meet.

## 5.2  The tectonics of semantic change

The present study provides a compelling illustration of the sorts of semantic reconfigurations that characterize semantic change over time. A given meaning, which used to be "lexified" (encoded) by a certain word X at a given point in time, will end up being expressed by a different word several centuries later, following events of semantic shift and lexical replacement. A given lexeme can show quite different semantic contours on a map at distinct points of its historical development (see also J. François 2007, 2013; Georgakopoulos & Polis f/c).

   This slow process, which I have elsewhere dubbed "*lexical tectonics*" (François f/c), can fruitfully be represented using semantic maps. Through their spatialized layout, maps are an effective tool for representing the paths followed by words as they evolve through semantic space, expanding or restricting their meaning, shifting from one sense to the other, shoving around other words as they push into new semantic territory. As the lexemic outlines of words (represented by the blobs on our maps) change their shapes over time, they resemble tectonic plates shifting, drifting in space, and colliding with each other.

   Let us thus take, as our starting point, the lexemic map of POc *taᵐbu, shown in *Figure 7*. If we compare it with modern Hiw in *Figure 5*, we find that the form *toq* is semantically quite conservative: this reflex of *taᵐbu has kept such core meanings as 'forbidden' or 'holy', and has preserved strong ties with spiritual powers. That being said, Hiw has evidently receded some territory, with respect to the profane meanings of *taᵐbu (e.g. 'ban entrance to a place'). Conversely, *toq* has expanded on the religious meanings of the root, resulting in such semantic extensions as 'ritual enclosure' or '(person) endowed with supernatural powers'.

   Mwotlap has proven more spectacularly innovative. Following a cascade of semantic changes – including lexical splits, mergers, and shifts (François f/c) – the root *taᵐbu has ended up confined to a single sense #14 'graveyard'. While this meaning does not seem to reconstruct to POc, it constitutes (together with #15 'grave') an innovation found in several languages of Vanuatu [§3.3.1]. As for the other meanings initially connected to *taᵐbu, they have been relexified using different roots: *roŋo 'silent → holy', and *salaɣoro 'closed path → secret, prohibited' [*Figure 6*]... 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 competition between *taᵐbu and an intruder etymon *roŋo (originally 'quiet'). After a period of lexical rivalry between *taᵐbu and *roŋo (a struggle still ongoing today in Mota – see §4.3), eventually *roŋo prevailed in Mwotlap for meanings #8 and #9 'haunted, sacred, holy'. Whether it is resolved or not eventually, this sort of competition between two words for a given meaning – a type of lexical variation – is the key to any change in the lexicon (Sweetser 1990:9; François f/c).

   Parallel with the territorial shrinking of the root *taᵐbu, Mwotlap witnessed the territorial expansion for *salaɣoro 'forbidden path' → 'secret' → 'taboo'...; this ended in *taᵐbu being eliminated from meanings #1, 5, 6, 10. All in all, Mwotlap has lost *taᵐbu everywhere – except for one pocket of retention, as it were, around the innovative meaning #14 'graveyard'.

In spite of their genealogical relatedness, the close languages Hiw and Mwotlap now differ quite drastically in their "patterns of lexification" (cf. François f/c) – that is, in the way they cut up the semantic space, and distribute word forms across a network of senses. Such examples are precious for the insights they give us on the history of linguistic change, in an archipelago renowned for its strong tendency for language diversification – even in spite of sustained language contact (François 2011).

# 6  Conclusion

This study of *taᵐbu in the Oceanic languages of Vanuatu has illustrated the various facets of the work of lexical 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 and misleading similarities [*Section 2*].

The second step consisted in the careful semantic description of these words in modern usage [*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). Firsthand exposure to language in its social context proved indispensable to appreciate the deeper meaning of words. For example, certain specific contexts (a walk in the forest, an encounter with haunted stones) tie *taᵐbu words with emotions of fear and awe that can manifest themselves in the form of body language or facial expressions [§3.2.1]. Participant observation in the field is here much more enlightening than what could have been achieved through mere translation or elicitation.

The polysemies observed in modern languages are then best laid out on a semantic map. This provides an efficient tool to visualize the semantic similarities and differences between the modern reflexes of a given etymon. Maps help the comparison of polysemies in synchrony, but also prove illuminating when reconstructing the historical evolution of meaning, and the semantic diversification of cognate forms in related languages.

Finally, we saw that the Comparative method helped reconstruct the likely semantic profile of the root *taᵐbu in Proto-Oceanic times. By comparing its reconstructed meaning with the different configurations in modern languages, we were able to propose scenarios of semantic evolution to explain the shifts and changes in the organization of each language's lexicon. Ultimately, this case study showed how the discipline of historical semantics can contribute to social sciences by reconstructing 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 2020a), and in a future dictionary of Hiw.

### 7.1 Hiw

**teqö** [təkʷɵ] ~ **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 r̄ēne, 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. **tr̆aňe**.

♦ **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 kar̆' ike r̄ē tuye tomñwëtom ike on r̄ōw wr̆og, 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 r̄ak 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 qor̄ 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 taṁan, 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.*

(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** ~ **ṁōl 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 ṁōlṁōl 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 ṁag a le-teq?** (joc.) *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-ēṁyoň** [*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']

**yoň**₂ 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-ēṁ yoň** [*holy house*] *church* ▸ **nu-Vu Yoň** *the Holy Spirit* ▸ **vasigyoň** *baptize*

B (**no-yoň**) N. numen, holiness, sacredness (of s.th., s.o.). ▸ **Nitog hahalege n-et a kē n-en hiy en, veg no-yoň tiple su.** *Do not step over someone lying on the ground: this would harm her sacredness.*

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

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