

# LEXICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF POLYNESIAN RITUAL SPACE

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## ABSTRACT

*In the last decade, researchers have attempted to understand the structure of Ancestral Polynesian ritual space through Proto-terms found in lexicons of Proto-Polynesian and Proto-Oceanic. This practice can be seen as a “re-construction” of the marae complex based on linguistic and ethnological data. In this paper I review research that has been done on the Polynesian marae-complex since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to identify how archaeologists have used words and semantics in their interpretations of this history. Comparing words and meanings of words as a source to gain a deeper understanding of past and present phenomena seems to have been a common practice in Pacific research. In the field of research on Polynesian ritual space, the use of words and reconstructed terms may be described under three headings: a relational approach, concerned with meanings of individual features; a conceptual approach, in which various structures are seen as representing individual concepts; and a lexical approach, which reconstructs the historical development of ritual structures based on interpretations of the semantics of Proto-morphemes. The paper ends with a discussion of these practices and the problems and prospects that they entail.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the same manner as archaeologists reconstruct sites to their “original” state using the building material of the past, linguists, culture-historians and archaeologists have attempted to re-construct<sup>1</sup> an “original” Polynesian ritual space using words of present and past Polynesian languages and their meanings. In this paper I am going to explore the history of this approach, and possibilities and problems related to it.

The methods of historical, or comparative, linguistics were developed by European scholars working with Indo-European languages from the late 18th century onwards. After the realization that languages from Northern Europe to India had stemmed from one common language, both linguistic and archaeological research became a quest for the origin(s) of the people who spoke this language. Soon, culture-historical oriented scholars were using re-constructed words from comparative linguistics to make

inferences about the first Indo-European culture. This method was termed ‘linguistic palaeontology’. The methods of both historical linguistics and linguistic palaeontology were fully developed by the 1880s (Lehmann 1993:1-47), and, building on these methods, linguists had reconstructed parts of Proto-Austronesian as early as the mid-1930s (Blust 1976:20, 1990:137, Pawley and Ross 1993:429).

In Polynesia, early attempts to systematically treat the relationships between the various languages and to amass a database in order to reconstruct Proto-Polynesian were made by Churchill (1912) and Tregear (1969 [1891]). However, most works dealing with the combination of language and culture-history in Polynesia at this time were either unsystematic or presented erroneous hypotheses based on insufficient data (e.g. Fornander 1878). The first compilation of a Proto-Polynesian word list was published by D. S. Walsh and Bruce Biggs in 1966, the same year as the orthodox model for settlement of the region began to take shape (Emory and Sinoto 1965, Green 1966, Pawley 1966, Walsh and Biggs 1966). Based on this Proto-Polynesian word list, A. Pawley and K. Green made a first attempt to locate the Proto-Polynesian homeland from linguistic evidence (1971), while the first attempt to locate the Proto-Austronesian homeland was done by Hendrik Kern as early as 1889 (Blust 1976:35). Linguistic palaeontology, as re-constructing parts of a culture through language, began with the writings of Patrick V. Kirch and Roger C. Green in the 1980s (Green 1986; Kirch 1984, 1989).

## APPROACHES USING LINGUISTIC DATA IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

As early as the 1920s, researchers in Polynesia used words and their meanings to understand cultural institutions, features and structures for which no specific ethnological information existed. In particular, archaeologists used words and their meanings in their discussion on how Polynesian ritual space, often termed *marae*, had developed. Based on how various researchers use linguistic data in their interpretation of archaeological data, I suggest that three different approaches to investigating the history of the Polynesian *marae*-complex, with the help of language, be defined: the relational, the conceptual, and the lexical approaches (Figure 1).

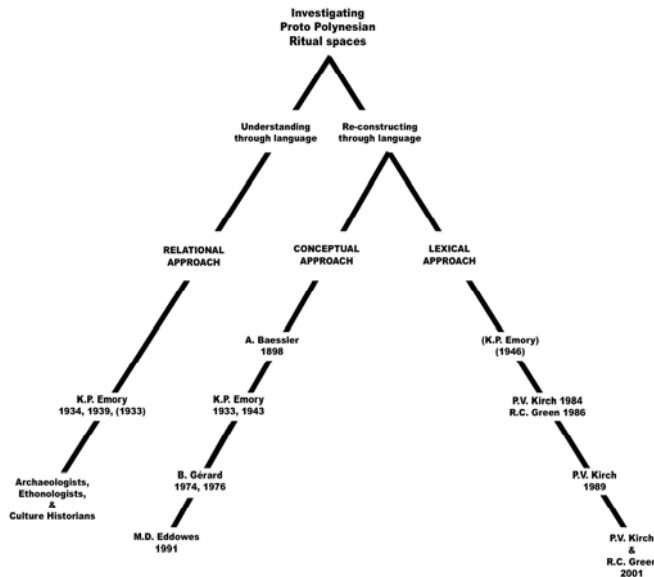


Figure 1. A phylogenetic tree displaying the relationships between the various approaches towards studying the marae complex through language.

*The relational approach*

The first approach is an intuitive one, in which the researcher compares only individual features. Either the meanings of a single term from various island groups are reviewed, in order to understand the function of a feature for which there exists no specific ethnographic information, or one common term helps the researcher to identify features that are described ethnographically but not found archaeologically. This approach is used in various disciplines throughout the Pacific, and it was used extensively by Kenneth P. Emory in his *marae* research (Emory 1933, 1934, 1939).

*The conceptual approach*

The conceptual approach was first employed by A. Baessler (1898). He defined *marae* and *ahu* as two distinct classes of monument; the *marae* was built as an ancestral temple for the whole tribe, whereas the *ahu* was built as a memorial shrine to commemorate a beloved person. Baessler treated the structures as concepts, and mainly defined the meanings of these concepts from ethnographic information, not linguistic data (Baessler 1898:252).

This approach treats the physical ‘structure’ and the ‘term-for-the-structure’ as one entity, as a cultural concept, and the origin and development of Polynesian ritual space becomes a case of structural history. Generally, lexical data are used to establish *marae*, *ahu*, or *tohua* as concepts and ritual structures at one stage in history, usually the Ancestral Polynesian Culture, corresponding to the Proto-Polynesian language stage. The semantics of these terms are mainly elicited from ethnographic sources and are not purely linguistic reconstructions. The investigators try to identify the

essential conceptual meaning of the term / structure rather than to trace a specific line of development back to an original ritual monument. The approach was used by Kenneth P. Emory (1943, 1970, 1972) and later by B. Gérard (1974). This approach was also used in the ethnographic comparison between the *ahu* of Easter Island and the *marae* of East Polynesia by W. Ayres (1973). The most comprehensive work using this approach has been presented by Mark Eddowes in his 1991 MA thesis “Ethnohistorical Perspectives on the Marae of the Society Islands: The Sociology of Use”.

*The lexical approach*

From the early 1980s and onwards, the main advocates of the lexical approach, or what is basically linguistic palaeontology, have been Roger C. Green (Green 1986, 1998, 2000), and Patrick V. Kirch (Kirch 1984, 1989) (Figure 2). They have also contributed towards refining the methodology of this approach (Kirch and Green 1987, 2001).

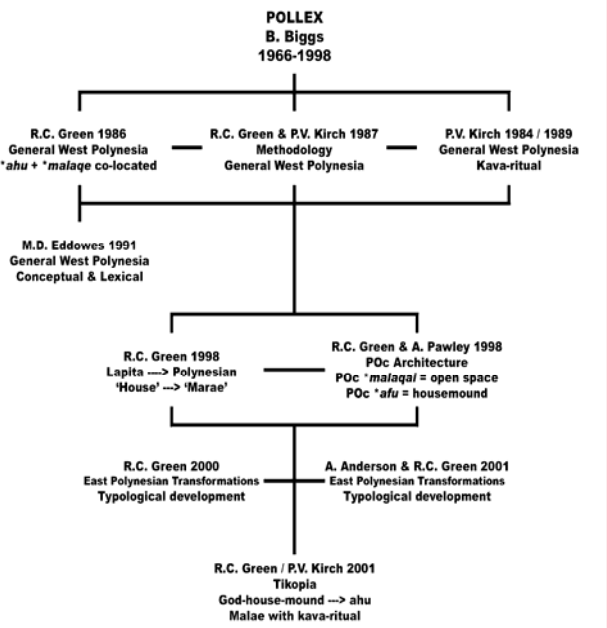


Figure 2. A chart displaying the relationships between the main examples of the lexical approach, all originating in the linguistic reconstruction work by Bruce Biggs and his colleagues.

This lexical approach is based upon the methods of historical linguistics. Linguists first subgroup the languages in a phylogenetic tree, then reconstruct the phonetic structure of these languages. Finally, they reconstruct the ancestral phonemes, usually with a suggested meaning for each term (Biggs 1979, 1996; Walsh and Biggs 1966). Culture-historians and archaeologists then investigate the semantics of these reconstructed terms by comparatively exploring the meanings for cognates in present day languages, utilising mainly linguistic, but also ethnographic sources (Figure

3). Based on these various semantic meanings and an archaeological survey of ritual spaces, archaeologists and culture-historians re-construct an original meaning of a term and relate this to other re-constructed terms of ritual structures or spaces thought to exist at a certain point in time, generally Ancestral Polynesian.

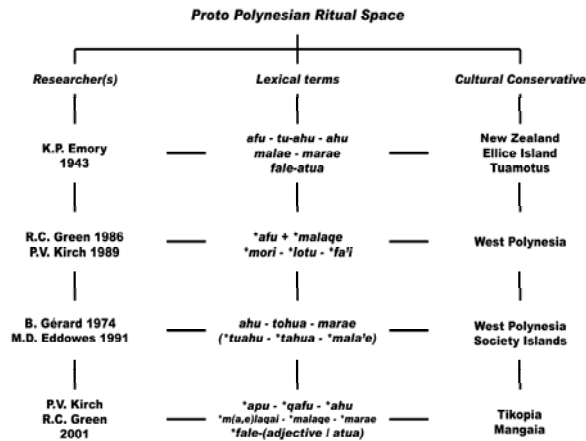


Figure 3. A chart of reconstructed phonemes, from Proto-Oceanic, through Proto-Polynesian and Proto-Eastern Polynesian, to general Polynesian terms. The phonemes relate to forms of Ancestral Polynesian ritual space.

The main distinguishing trait between the lexical and the conceptual approaches is that the former seeks an explicit historical development of structures, based upon several levels of reconstructed languages, whereas the latter tries to construct a more general history of concepts. It gives the lexical approach a linguistic time-depth not found in the works of more concept-oriented archaeologists.

MODELLING ANCESTRAL POLYNESIAN RITUAL SPACE THROUGH TIME

In the first synthesis of his *marae* research, Kenneth Emory wrote that the earliest Polynesian shrines were individual uprights mounted on small stone mounds, called *afu* in Ellicean (1943:13). He further suggested that these later developed through a row of uprights, into a platform with uprights and backrests called *ahu* (Figure 4). During this process an open area, a *mala*, was attached to the front of the *ahu*. Emory believed that *ahu* was the original concept, term and structure, and that the Polynesian ritual space acquired the name *marae* sometime during its transformation. The remnants of the original concept could be seen in the Ellice Islands, and likewise the remnants of the early East Polynesian religious complex could be found in the New Zealand Maori *tuahu*.

In the mid-1970s, B. Gérard charted the ethnographically attested forms of *ahu*, *marae*, and *tohua* in all island groups in Polynesia, and compiled information on the morphological variation in these structures in order to analyse their development (Gérard

1974). He, and later M. Eddowes (Eddowes 1991), believed that *ahu*, *marae* and *tohua* had existed as three independent types of ritual structure in Ancestral Polynesian times.<sup>2</sup> They suggested that the development of Polynesian ritual space(s) should be seen as a fusion or co-location of the three ritual structures/spaces into one, and that this fusion took place in East Polynesia. In the process, the symbolic significance of these ceremonial spaces changed. Eddowes believed that some of the simpler *marae* found in the Society Islands were similar to early Polynesian “temples”. Emory, Gérard and Eddowes’ approach must be classified as conceptual, although Eddowes based much of his synthesis upon the lexical works of Kirch (1984, 1989) and Green (1986).

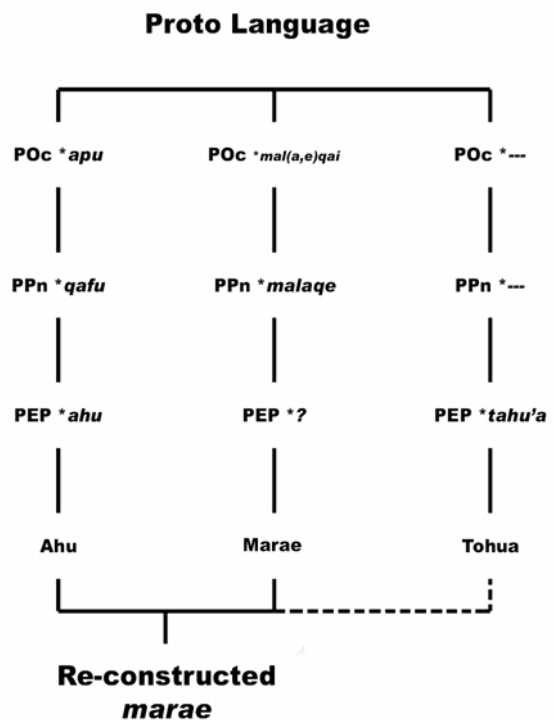


Figure 4. A diagrammatic presentation of four models of a Proto-Polynesian ritual structure, and the main concepts involved in the re-construction.

During the 1980s, the lexical approach was explored and presented further by P.V. Kirch and R.C. Green in a series of works (Green 1986; Kirch 1984, 1989; Kirch and Green 1987). The most detailed statement was published by Green in 1986, in which he defined the PPn \**mala'e* as “... a public meeting place with apparently strong religious connotations” (Green 1986:53-54; PPn = Proto Polynesian; \* indicates a linguistically reconstructed phoneme). It was believed to be a cleared space located next to the PPn \**afu*, defined as a raised place or mound made for a god-house or a unspecified religious structure (Green 1986:54). Kirch suggested (1989:23) that kava rituals were performed in connection with PPn \**mala'e*. Thus, Kirch and Green were visualising the Proto-

Polynesian ritual space to be akin to a classic West Polynesian *mala'e*, with backrests at one end and a god-house in close proximity. The *ahu*, as a platform or enclosure in East Polynesia, would then have evolved either from the backrests or from the foundation of the god house. The principal concept, from which the East Polynesian *marae* evolved, was in the view of Green and Kirch view the PPn *\*mala'e*, and not the PPn *\*afu* as in Emory's theory.

In 2001, Patrick V. Kirch and Roger C. Green published the most coherent statement of the lexical approach to date. In this work (Kirch and Green 2001), they also refined their views on how the Ancestral Polynesian ritual space was organised and how it developed into the East Polynesian *marae*. Their main emphasis was on the changes in meaning of re-constructed terms from Proto-Oceanic to Proto-Polynesian. The term *tohua* cannot be re-constructed as a Proto-Oceanic nor a Proto-Polynesian term, and therefore plays no part in the development of an Ancestral Polynesian ritual space. *Tohua* is first found in Proto East Polynesian, as PEP *\*tafu'a*. The principal role is still accorded by Kirch and Green to *marae* (PPn *\*malaga*), developing from an open cleared space to a sacred structure. The *ahu* (PPn *\*qafu*) is here considered to be the actual house mound of the god house, which diminished and was only retained symbolically (Kirch and Green 2001:254-255, 275). The original ancestral Polynesian ritual structure is here envisioned as that which was described by Raymond Firth from Tikopia in the mid-1930s (Firth 1936). Consequently, this island is seen to have preserved the original form up to modern times, along with the Manganian *marae*, which is also said to be "culturally conservative".

The most important point throughout the research of Kirch and Green is that they attempted to establish the East Polynesian *marae-ahu* complex as an Ancestral Polynesian entity or concept. This implies that the modern West Polynesian *mala'e* and the various East Polynesian *marae* complexes, like the Easter Island *ahu*, are variants on a common theme of an original religious space archaeologically traceable to Ancestral Polynesian times. The "development" seen in these structures is then only a matter of phylogenetic divergence from the original structure. Both Emory's model, and the works of Gérard and Eddowes seem to treat these structures more as an East Polynesian invention.

#### SOME COMMENTS ON THE MODELS

Most attempts at re-constructing ancestral Polynesian ritual space(s) with the help of language, from K. P. Emory to P. V. Kirch and R. C. Green, have focused upon only four main terms: *ahu*, *marae*, *tohua*, and *fare-atua*, the latter meaning god house. Few other reconstructed terms have been brought to bear on the question of origin and development, although Green and Kirch have begun

work in this field (Green 2000; Kirch and Green 2001: 274-276). The consequence of this practice is that any variation in the early history of Polynesian ritual space is difficult to discover. I suggest, when exploring the development of meanings behind re-constructed words like PPn *\*qafu* or PPn *\*malaga*, that interpretations of the development of various social and religious institutions, settlement patterns, or how the first Polynesians perceived their island landscape, should be included. The development of meanings of all other features found within a *marae* complex should be considered when exploring a re-construction or interpretation of Ancestral Polynesian ritual space, or *marae*. Polynesian ritual space was probably never one singular entity or concept with a fixed set of meanings, at least not until protohistorical times.

Another point to consider is that most researchers within this field work mainly with lexical and ethnological data. Archaeological surveys have, up to now, only been used to a limited extent. Typologies and construction sequences are only implicitly considered, with one or two exceptions (Emory 1943; Green 1998, 2000). Archaeological data on early Polynesian ritual spaces are not abundant but I am of the opinion that existing data have not been explicitly used or discussed in re-constructing Ancestral Polynesian ritual space. A few archaeological excavations have revealed structures that could be interpreted as early East Polynesian ritual structures. For example, Yosihiko Sinoto uncovered in 1974 an upright placed on a carved coral base at the Vaito'otia site (Figure 5) in the Society Islands (Sinoto 2002:257), dated to between AD 1100 and 1300. This structure, which Sinoto interprets as a shrine, is visually identical to the *afu* of the Ellice Islands. The significance of this structure for the re-construction of Polynesian ritual space has so far not been discussed by any of the conceptual or lexical oriented researchers as part of their model-building, even though it was uncovered before most conceptual or lexical contributions were published. The exception is the paper by Anderson and Green (2001) on the finding of an early East Polynesian ritual structure on Norfolk Island, but this is not discussed as a part of Green's lexical re-constructions (i.e. in Kirch and Green 2001). On Easter Island, archaeologists from the Kon-Tiki Museum in Norway have excavated an *ahu* structure dating to AD 1100 (Martinsson-Wallin 1994; Skjølsvold 1994), and a similar structure was found at Tongariki in 1993, although dates for this structure have not yet been published (Figure 6).

The excavated structures just mentioned are not Ancestral Polynesian, but they might be related to the Proto-Nuclear Polynesian or the Proto-Eastern Polynesian language stages, and as such they are interesting examples of early Polynesian ritual spaces, at least when the data that are considered by most researchers come from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.





Figure 5. Yosihiko Sinoto holding an upright at Vaito'otia, Huahine, Society Islands in 1974. Dated to c.AD 1100 (Photo courtesy of Dr. Y. Sinoto, B.P. Bishop Museum).



Figure 6. Ahu Tongariki, Easter Island. The earliest construction phase (currently undated). (Photo R. Solsvik).

## AN “ALTERNATIVE” MODEL

I suggest that a possible model for further consideration is that the *marae* might be an invention of southeastern Polynesian societies at around A.D. 1000. Only later, from the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, was this concept “exported” to the more central parts of the region (cf. Green 2000). Hawaiians, in the far north of the region, seems to have had their own form of ritual space from c. AD 1200 onwards. Perhaps the term *marae* - defined as a *ceremonial* or *sacred* space – is not Ancestral Polynesian at all – but refers to a more secular space. This is the meaning of the word in both Proto-Oceanic (POc \**mal(a,e)qai*) (Green 1998: 271), and was one of several meanings in 19th century Tahitian (Davies 1851: 133). In the 12<sup>th</sup> century there co-existed a typical *marae* complex on Easter Island, an shrine with an upright in the Society Islands, and later in the 13<sup>th</sup> century possibly a ritual space in the form of a domestic building in Hawai’i (Kolb 1991). To me, this indicates a greater physical variation in ritual spaces than is suggested by lexical theories. Instead of re-constructing one type of ritual space, we may have to re-construct several.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE MODEL BUILDING

Reconstruction, either performed on actual monuments or as theoretical research into cultural origins, is not a straightforward exercise. Since all the models that I have reviewed above have been simple, I suggest that we should begin to construct complex models. I do not propose to throw away linguistic palaeontology, or the lexical approach as I have termed it in this paper, but it should be expanded in several ways.

First, we need to consider not only the terms *ahu*, *marae* and *tohua*, but we have to re-construct the meanings and histories of all the terms related to these ritual structures. These include both the terms of the structural parts of the *marae* or *ahu*, as well as concepts related to the ritual practices that took place on these ceremonial structures.

Secondly, I am of the opinion that we have to expand our analysis to consider how these concepts and terms were actually used by various social groups, and in different situations. We also need to consider the linguistic contexts these terms were used in. How different words were used in various social situations, or related to shifting grammatical contexts, can give valuable information on the significance of the range of semantic meanings of a term (cf. Hoëm 1995). This can be studied both through the present uses of the terms, or in old “texts” such as recorded chants. This is important, because a re-constructed language is based on surviving cognates in contemporary languages. Not all words, nor all meanings, can be reconstructed, and invariably the proto-language is on the conservative side of things when we talk about variations in meanings and plurality of terminologies. Also, because the meaning of a re-

constructed term has to be inferred from a range of contemporary meanings, we would do well to expand the database before a historical semantic hypothesis is put forward. The world of historical anthropology tends to be a homogeneous rather than a heterogeneous world.

Thirdly, I suggest that we need to realise the probable degree of variation in the ritual spaces that we re-construct linguistically. This can be easily demonstrated by comparing ceremonial structures on various island groups in East Polynesia. The term *ahu* exists in a hierarchy of structures and concepts. In New Zealand, the word *tuahu* is firmly grouped under the social-spatial term *pa*. Besides *tuahu* the Maori had several other ceremonial spaces, like *marae* and *heketua*,<sup>3</sup> that are grouped under the term *pa* or perhaps under the term *wahi tapu*. On Tahiti, the term *ahu* is just a structural part of the more inclusive *marae*. In fact, based on some early European observations, it appears as though Tahitians used *marae* as a general term for ritual spaces, and sites like *ahu* and *tahua* were grouped under this term. The meaning of any one such term, then, comes from its place in the lexical and social-conceptual hierarchy of which it is a part, and not only from its re-constructed history. By lexically analysing the part-whole of terms associated with ritual spaces from each island group (cf. Cruse 1986:157-180), we can reach an understanding of how people categorised ritual spaces, both socially and lexically.

I believe that research concerned with these issues also would benefit from viewing ‘historical-anthropology’, with linguistic palaeontology constituting the main part of its method, as a multi-disciplinary approach and not as an integrated method. Archaeology and linguistics study qualitatively different histories and distinct realities. They can be reconciled (Shnirelman 1997), but only as long as we regard them as separate entities and distinct records. Being separate entities, linguistic, ethnographic and archaeological data represent distinct realities. On an epistemological level, they do not always tell the ‘same’ story. It is also important that archaeological data should be introduced into the discussion to a greater extent. Ethnological comparison has been central to most previous models, but, with more substantial archaeological excavations, models based on typological, chronological and spatial data, in addition to the linguistic data, can be re-constructed.

## NOTES

1. In this paper I have preferred to use the term ‘re-construct’ to describe the practice of using terms from a Proto-dictionary to talk about the development of the *marae* complex, to avoid confusing it with the archaeological restoration and reconstruction of sites and monuments.

2. The term *tohua* was for Gérard, and probably for Eddowes as well in this context, an ethnographic term and *not* a linguistic reconstruction of a PPn word. Today *tohua* are reconstructed as

PEP \*tafu'a, but in 1986 Green believed it could be reconstructed to PPn \*tafu'a meaning a "platform for various secular or council meetings and similar events" (1986:53-54), and Mark Eddowes had PPn \*tahua probably meaning "an assembly ground or dance platform, a focus of display to the community" (Eddowes 1991:198-199).

3. This was, of course, not a permanently ceremonial space, but it was used at times for rituals (Johansen 1958:93).

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