

# THE MARAE TEMPLE GROUNDS IN THE SOCIETY ISLANDS, FRENCH POLYNESIA: A STRUCTURAL STUDY OF SPATIAL RELATIONS

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In this paper we will present some of our recent research on ceremonial sites, *marae*, in the Society Islands of French Polynesia. These islands are located in the central East Polynesia Ocean, and are divided into the Windward and the Leeward Islands (Figure 1). Our paper considers the structural organization of habitation and ceremonial sites in the Society Islands (cf. Kirch 1996; Ladefoged 1998), as well as relations between *marae* and the surrounding landscape (Figures 2, a and b).

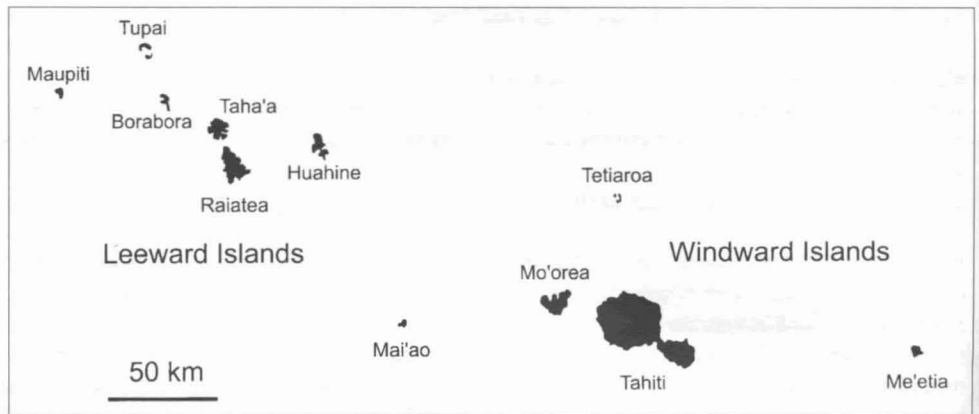


Figure 1. Map of the Society Islands showing the Leeward and Windward island groups.

## THE HOUSEHOLD

The settlement pattern in proto-historic Tahiti is described as dispersed, with the basic unit of habitation being the household. The household area, including a courtyard, was enclosed by a fence called *aumoa* (Turnbull 1813:355-356; Parkinson 1773:23; Handy 1923:34-35; Green et al. 1967:174-175; Ferdon 1981:79). Several houses with discreet functions were located within the courtyard. Generally, the household consisted of a sleeping house, *fare taoto*; a cook-house, *fare tutu*; garden or horticultural terraces; and a shrine for worshipping the family god. In addition, among chiefs, the household had a canoe house, *farau va'a*, an assembly house, *fare apo'oraa*, and a house for dance performances, *fare heiva* (Green et al. 1967:175).

Structural comparison between the *marae*, the *fare taoto*, the *fare heiva* and the death-house, *fare tupapa'u*, will be undertaken.

The general layout of a *marae* is a rectangular area. In the Windward Islands this was enclosed by a fence, with the *ahu*, a raised elongated stone structure, as a focal point at one end (Emory 1933, Sinoto 1996). The area in front of the *ahu* was usually paved and on the court were wooden altars, *fata-rau*, for food offerings plus upright stones serving as backrests for important people attending ceremonies at the *marae*. The area in front of the *ahu* was only accessible for the priests and, on certain occasions, the firstborn chief of the tribe. The top of the *ahu* was occupied



Figure 2a. Leeward Society Islands *marae* (photo: Wallin 1993).



Figure 2b. Windward Society Islands *marae* (photo: Wallin 1993).

by the gods themselves. The area located midway between the *ahu* and the opposite end of the court had backrests for the chief and his wife. The rest of the participants in the ceremony were situated at the entrance end of the *marae*. Commoners and



Figure 3. Human sacrifice at a *marae* by John Webber (1776). From Ferdon 1981.



Figure 4. Dwelling complex for a Tahitian chief by Sydney Parkinson (1773). From Ferdon 1981.



Figure 5. Tahitian dance house, *fare heiva*. By John Webber (1776). From Ferdon 1981.

women had to stay at the back of the *marae*, the outside, or were excluded from being present at all (Henry 1928:125, 134, 142-143). That the *marae* was perceived as the “home-of-the-god” is attested by Teutira Henry’s ethnohistorical description on the inauguration of a national *marae*. As the priest “went up into the *marae*”, or the *ahu*, and sprinkled water, he invited the titular god to “take possession of his new home” (Henry 1928:137) (Figure 3). When the titular god participated in the ceremonies, it was placed in the *avaa-rahi* (a platform) directly in front of the *ahu* (Henry 1928:133), and we might assume that the *ahu* symbolically represented the house-of-the-god. Thus the whole *marae* should be seen as the household-of-the-god.

In Sydney Parkinson’s pen-and-wash drawing (Ferdon 1981:771) of a dwelling complex for a Tahitian chief, we see this same structural pattern (Figure 4). The Tahitian term ‘*marae*’ (Davies 1991:133) means both “the sacred place formerly used for worship . . .,” as well as “cleared of wood, weed, rubbish, as a garden, or the place of worship.” The courtyard and the inside of the sleeping house, *fare taoto*, was kept clean and either covered with grass or, as the courtyard, paved with stones (Banks 1963; Ellis 1830:389; Parkinson 1773:23; cf. also Ferdon 1981:80). The many altars for food offerings located at various places at the *marae*, can be compared to the racks for hanging raw food on the courtyard (Ferdon 1981:81-82; cf. also pen-and-wash drawing by S. Parkinson 1773:77) or inside the cookhouse (Handy 1932:24).

Looking at the *fare heiva* depicted by John Webber (Ferdon 1981:131) from Tahiti in 1776 (Figure 5), one cannot escape the feeling that in very general terms the structure resembles that of a *marae*. It has a raised building at one end within a fenced enclosure, which may suggest the symbolical similarity to the *ahu* of the *marae* with its enclosing walls and court. From the front of the house, extending a bit out on the court there are mats, instead of the paved area in front of the *ahu*. As in the *marae*, the ceremony – here the dance – is being conducted on this “paved” area, while the general crowds are outside the parameters of the structure (cf. de Bovis 1980:44, 50-51; Henry 1928:125, 137-138, 166, 170, and 175). Henry (1928:133) also states that the

drums were situated almost at the center of the *marae*, near one of the short-ends, as the drums in the drawing. The same structural principles seem to be used in the *fare tupapa'u*, or death house illustrated by John Webber (Figure 6).

### THE MARAE IN THE LANDSCAPE

Natural elements, such as, sea (water), land, and sky, were central in Polynesian creation myths. Therefore such elements played a central role in their world-view (Handy 1927:14; Henry 1928:337). The connection of natural elements to the stories of creation gave of course meanings to the landscape; meanings that were of importance when selecting the building place of the *marae*.

The environmental elements important for the location of the *marae* are the following: 1) *The sea*, including the open ocean, the coral reef section, and the lagoon; 2) *The land*, including the beach area, the coastal plain, and the valley; 3) *The sky*, including the sun, the moon, and stars, as well as geographical directions.

The open sea was of course important as provider of main food resources, as well as it had a strong connection to legendary seafarers and fishermen (Henry 1928:381). The passage in the coral reef was also of great importance. This was the entrance to the sea and the (is)land. The calm waters of the lagoon, were full of small fish, and access to water in general was of great importance in different *marae* rituals. The location of the *marae* close to the lagoon side may indicate its relation to this natural element. It may also indicate that the *marae* was accessible for visitors from far and near. Such main structures may have been of importance on the external political arena, as well as a focal point for visitors.

The coastal plain was a very fertile area with intensive agricultural and plantation activities. If *marae* were located in this area it might have been associated with such activities. The coastal plain was the extensive living area, and the importance of land ownership was shown and claimed through *marae* structures (Henry 1928:141-142). The coastal plain may be seen as the main internal political arena, in the competition between families, lineages and district groups.

Some valleys extended about 10-15 km inland. The main river, its smaller connecting streams and waterfalls were the main localization factors for *marae* structures inside the valleys. This is due to the importance of water in cleaning rituals before and after *marae* ceremonies (Handy 1927:52). Terraced taro plantations and certain wild resources such as *fei* (bananas) and *ofe* (bamboo) might also have been of importance for the location of certain specialized structures. These *marae* were probably of interest at the local political arena when it came to the control over certain resources that were valuable for the people of the valley and connecting coastal plain.

The description above is mainly based on ethnohistorical descriptions of *marae* structures and their theoretical location

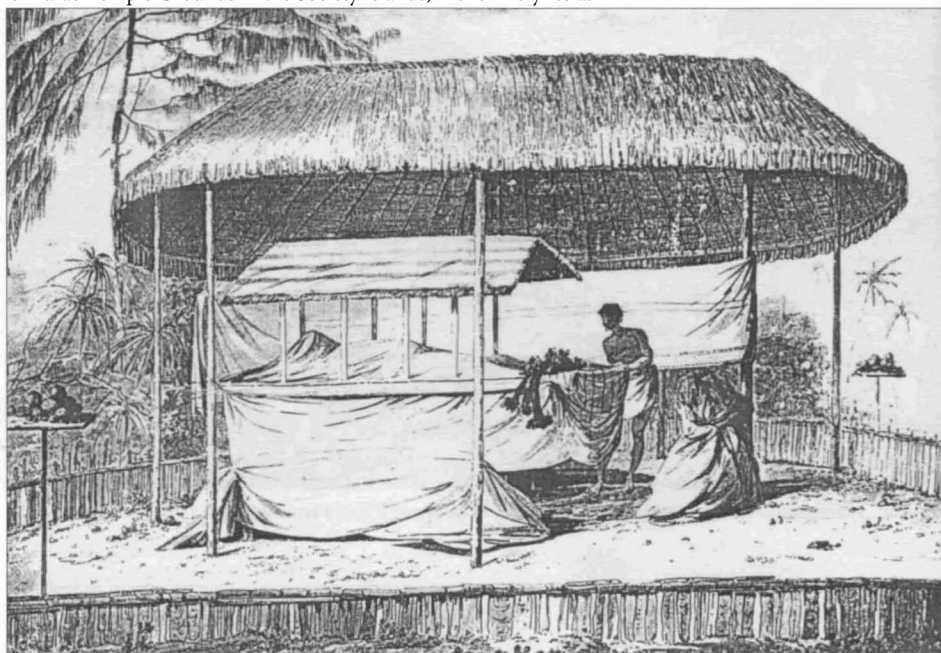


Figure 6. A Tahitian death house, *fare tupapa'u*, by John Webber 1776. (From Beaglehole 1967).

on the landscape. So one can really ask, what picture may be shown through archaeological practice? The diagram (Figure 7) shows the preliminary results of a statistical correspondence analysis based on construction variables defined in Wallin (1993), with some new landscape-oriented variables added. The horizontal axis shows landscape, size and type orientation, and the vertical axis show social aspects.

The right field represents large stepped *marae* located on the beach/shore, with an orientation towards the sea/opening of the reef. They were the expression of certain individual/high chiefs as an externally oriented power demonstration.

The large central field represents a mixed group of *marae* located on the coastal plain/ridges and lower valley, where *ahu* generally are oriented toward the interior. These structures had a social/tribal function, used in land division and internal power struggles.

The two left fields represent medium and small *marae* located up the valley. The *ahu* (when existing) was oriented towards rivers and hills. They also represented individual specialized structures with limited functions.

In summary, this statistical analysis is in line with the ethnohistorical descriptions, which in individual cases points at large coastal-bound structures tied to powerful individuals and medium/lesser structures on the coastal plain or further inland tied to the lineage/family group or specialists.

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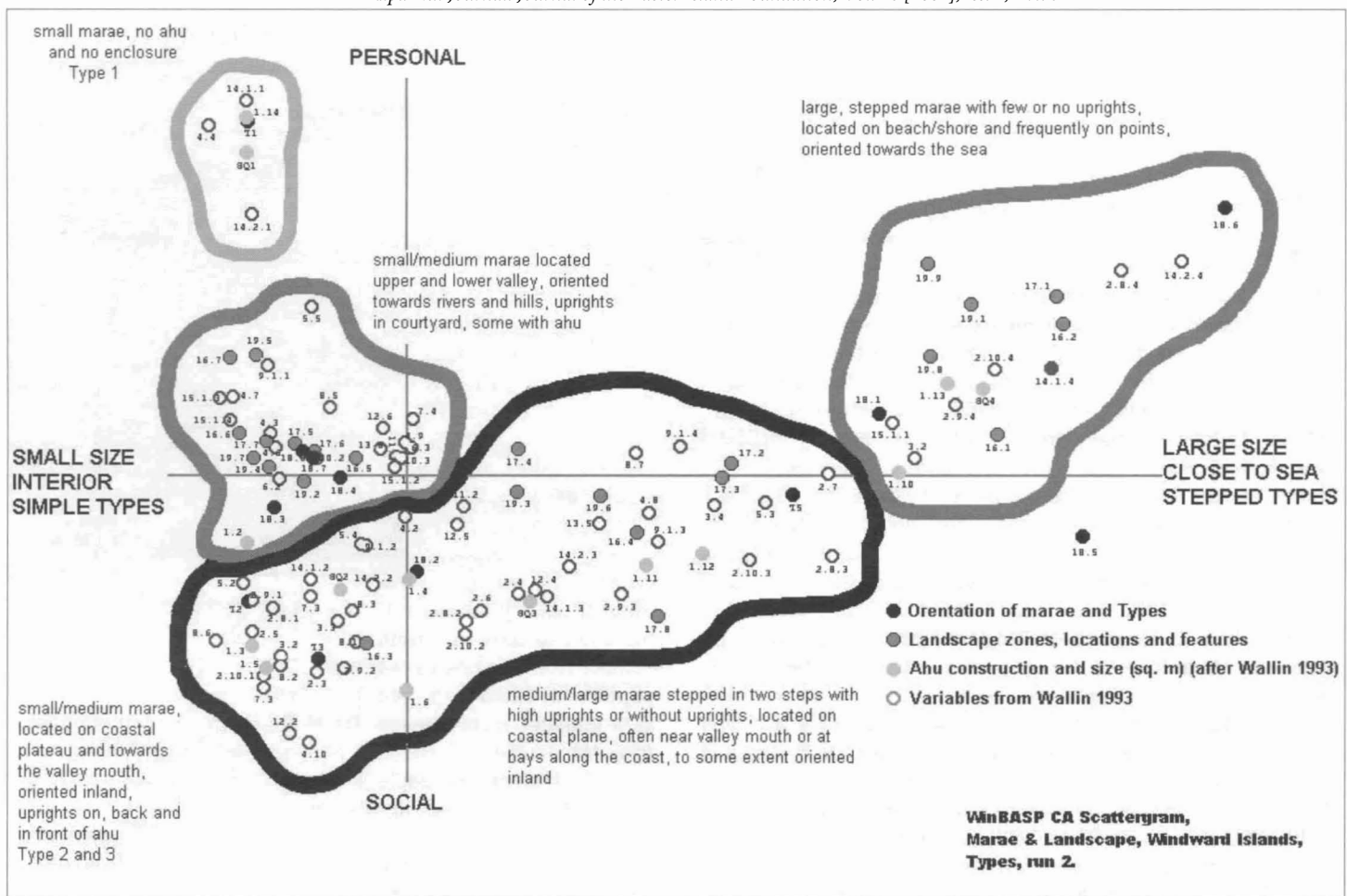


Figure 7. Correspondence analysis, Windward Islands.

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