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Silence, Noise, and Ritual*

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This essay begins from Rodney Needham's observation of a cross-cultural pattern where percussive noise tends to accompany moments of ritual transition. Noise, that is, creates a frame around ritual, marking it off as something separate from ordinary life. I go on to contrast ritual uses of noise (uninterpretable sound) and silence (uninterpretable quiet). One example is a comparison of Pentecostal glossolalia and Quaker silence, and a second focuses on rural Taiwanese funerals in the 1970s. In both cases, silence and noise differ significantly in how much space they offer people for interpretation, but both help to create the rhythms of ritual and thus of social life. They do not, however, work in the same ways. If noise creates the frame, as Needham argued, silence often breaks through frames. However, silence is also fragile and easily broken, while noise can simply absorb interruptions. That is why silences are quite rare in ritual contexts.

Keywords: ritual, silence, noise, funerals, framing, emotion

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I want to begin by acknowledging my personal and intellectual debts to Professor Li Yih-yuan. I first met him when I was affiliated with the Institute of Ethnology while doing my dissertation fieldwork in the late 1970s. As a young graduate student, I found him somewhat intimidating, but in fact he was unfailingly generous. He shared his insights into my work and shared some of his own work with me as well, including things only in manuscript form at the time.[1] It was Professor Li who first alerted me to the need to place Taiwan's religion in the context of contemporary changes, from increasing reliance on the market to urbanization to political transformation. His advice would shape my research directions for decades to come.

This article, however, is shaped most directly by an interest in silence, something that to my knowledge Professor Li did not address. I have been writing about two intertwined aspects of silence: its resistance to easy interpretation on the one hand, and its crucial role in rhythm – and thus in sociality – on the other. In this essay I will explore just one aspect of those problems by thinking through the relation between silence and noise in ritual.

We may often think of silence and noise as opposites, but they share one very important feature: both are nondiscursive and opaque to any confident attempt at interpretation. That is, both are open to a wide range of interpretations, or to no interpretation at all. If we were to think of ritual as a system of meanings – as in the once-dominant anthropological traditions of Clifford Geertz or Victor Turner – the role of these insistently nondiscursive elements might seem puzzling.[2] Nevertheless, they are everywhere.

Everywhere, but not equally everywhere. As I will discuss, we can see silences in rituals most clearly as they create rhythms – the way that the silence between hand claps is as crucial to rhythm as the sound of the clap itself. Noise is less well suited to that role because noise can merge too easily into the sounds that follow and precede it. Beyond that, however, noise is extremely common in all kinds of ritualized situations, while silence is rare. Why? And why, as Rodney Needham (1967) pointed out long ago, is noise particularly associated with moments of ritual transition, while silence is not? The answers, I will argue, have to do especially with the relationship of ritual to framing, and with the potential of silence to unframe if it is not carefully circumscribed.

As a first step toward thinking about silence and noise in ritual, let me begin with the simple example of a Western classical music concert. The first such concert

1 The one most important to me at the time appeared in print later (Li 1998).

2 See, for example, the essays in Geertz (1973) and Turner (1967).

I remember attending was when I was perhaps seven or eight years old. I was with my brother, who was a year younger, and our sister Judy (who would have been in her mid-teens) had been put in charge of us. Judy was already quite experienced in the ways of little brothers, so she sat between us to make sure we did not misbehave. I no longer remember where my parents were, or why Judy was stuck with us, or even any of the music at the concert. The one memory that has stuck with me concerns the end of the first movement of whatever was being performed. As it came to a rousing conclusion, some people in the audience began to clap, and so did my brother and I – only to find our hands caught in Judy's iron grip. Baffled, we both looked at her, but she only shook her head, keeping the silence intact. From then on, we carefully followed her lead on applause, even though we were still puzzled. When it was finally intermission and we could speak, she explained that we should only clap at the end of the whole piece, and never between movements. We asked her why, and she told us that those are just the rules. Then why did some of the other people clap? Those people, Judy told us, do not really understand the rules, but we do, so we have to follow them.

In a sense, of course, this was more of a reiteration of the rule than an explanation. An actual explanation, for instance, might have looked at the rowdy noise that accompanied most concerts in the early nineteenth century, and at the extensive campaigns to enforce stillness on the audience throughout the end of that century and into the next (Levine 1988: 190-195). Yet, in another sense, Judy's answer went straight to the most important point. We applaud when the musicians (or the conductor) come on stage and at the end of pieces; we never applaud between movements. We do so because it shows that we accept a convention, which is effectively arbitrary. The arbitrariness is obvious in this case, because different genres of Western music have evolved different conventions. Thus, at an opera, applause is permitted after arias. At a jazz performance, the audience is supposed to applaud after each solo.

This little story thus helps us think about the formal structure of rituals and about the role of noise and silence in them. There is little symbolism to interpret in a case like this, which focuses our attention instead on the purely formal properties of ritual (Rappaport 1999; Seligman et al. 2008). Those formal properties are also the key to making the role of the nondiscursive – noise and silence – less puzzling. Rituals are, first of all, repetitive. The internal structure of any given ritual very often has repeated elements (like the brief silences between movements, in this case), and all rituals reiterate past performances of the same ritual (like classical music concerts). After all, if something occurs only once, we would never call it a ritual. Repetition means that rituals are also highly conventionalized, since repeating

requires acceptance of a set of standards about what would let this ritual count as the same as a previous one. As Rappaport phrased it, ritual is "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers" (Rappaport 1999: 24, emphasis removed). These formal properties of ritual explain Judy's rather unsatisfying answer about clapping between movements. The ritual is possible only because we accept its rules. We adapt to its conventions and in so doing we reinforce them. Judy knew that applause conventions at concerts must have come from some unknown (to her at the time) historical process, but she was quite right to point instead at the importance of just accepting the convention.

Figure 1. Pig offering, Sanxia, 1978 Source: Robert P. Weller

Much the same happened in my earliest fieldwork in Taiwan, when I would ask people for explanation of their rich ritual symbolism. Consider, for example, the pig in figure 1, which was offered to the major local deity on his birthday. Why dangle a fish from its pineapple-filled mouth? Why a knife in the back of the neck, and why leave a sort of mane of hair there? Why the necklace of old coins? I asked such questions of many participants, all of whom answered simply that they did it either "because we are Chinese" or "because it looks better like that". These explanations dashed my hopes for an elaborate exegesis along the lines that Victor Turner had led me to expect from his analysis of Ndembu symbolism. People seemed to agree that such an explanation should exist and suggested that maybe I could try asking a Daoist priest. They themselves, however, neither needed nor wanted such an explanation. Their answers, like Judy's, point entirely to the acceptance of convention as a necessary and sufficient explanation.

One consequence of this conventional nature of ritual is that we place a frame around ritual moments. Without framing, how would we know when we start and end? How can we know whether it counts as a repetition if we do not mark off the beginning and the end of the repeated unit? Rituals are often framed in multiple ways: in space, as we delimit a special arena for the event; in time, as we mark off particular moments (Sabbath, New Year's Eve, my birthday); and in sound as well.

This formal understanding of ritual is by no means limited to the religious sphere, as the classical music concert showed. A play, similarly, has a designated space and time, and always marks the beginning and ending with the noise of applause. Courtrooms also have a designated space, a highly conventionalized notion of jurisdiction, and mark openings and closings with the bang of a gavel. None of these events are as fully ritualized as something like Muslim daily prayers or Catholic Communion, but they share with religious ritual the need to mark off a temporary world that exists *as if* it were true – true within its frame (Seligman et al. 2008). In what follows, I will think through how silence (uninterpretable quiet) and noise (uninterpretable sound) play out in rituals. Both are nondiscursive, but as we shall see, they usually do not occupy the same niche. Noise is far more common in ritual contexts and silence more rare. My intention is to understand why, with a focus on the relative fragility of silence and its potentially different relationship to framing.

Sonic Density, Noise, and Ritual Frames

Let me turn away from these abstract considerations for a moment and introduce some of the ethnographic material I have been thinking about. Most of what follows dates from my earliest fieldwork in Taiwan, in the late 1970s, because that was the period I was most directly focused on ritual. I will discuss several rituals to show the interplay of sound and silence but will spend the most time on a village funeral for a neighbor that took place in 1978 (supplemented with material from five other funerals that year), when I was living on the outskirts of the northern Taiwan town of Sanxia.

The overwhelming experience of most rituals in Taiwan is noise, not silence. The most elaborate rituals there now are annual pilgrimages in honor of the birthday of the goddess Mazu (媽祖), and on a smaller scale, the birthdays or rites of cosmic renewal for any major community temple. These can attract crowds numbering in the thousands, or many tens of thousands for the larger ones. All these rituals take place in many media at the same time – there are the smells of incense, burning paper money, food offerings, and the many vendors who come to sell street food; the visuals of costumed ritualists, elaborate altars, and the crowds themselves; and a huge volume of sound that includes firecrackers, opera troupes, the raucous

music accompanying the ritualists along with their intoned texts, and the crowd noise itself, which carries no expectation of the quiet of a concert hall or mainline Christian church. All of this happens simultaneously. At one such ritual I attended three operas being performed at the same time, all highly amplified and near each other. The resulting sonic density, the overload of the senses, is part of the aesthetic that Taiwanese call *renao* ("hot and noisy", H: *lau ziat* 鬧熱), where colors are bright, crowds are huge, and activity is ceaseless (Weller 1987: 64-65). Adam Chau, working in northwestern China where the same aesthetic is called 紅火 ("fiery red"), glosses the feeling as red-hot sociality (Chau 2005, ch. 8). The people themselves will say that a hot and noisy ritual is a direct index of the efficacy and presence of the god herself.

The loudest experience I remember was the first time I was invited to parade through Sanxia's streets, along with dozens of other people, to accompany Zushi Gong (祖師公), the most important local deity, as he traveled through his territory. I felt flattered, even though in fact anyone could have joined the marchers. I did not, however, realize that the packed crowd of onlookers would be tossing strings of lit firecrackers at our feet the entire time. The acrid smoke from them soon grew astringently pungent, and the explosions were both deafening and terrifying. The god protected us, of course, so no harm was done beyond some temporary ringing of the ears. This was a very typical use of firecrackers to mark periods of transition, in this case the literal transit of Zushi Gong from one place to another. The Chinese New Year – the transition from one "zodiac" sign to the next, marking a change in the humoral content of time – is equally punctuated by barrages of firecrackers and fireworks. People even mark the opening of a new shop, another sort of transition, by setting off strings of firecrackers. The nondiscursive but sonic space-filling nature of noise is perfect for marking moments of transition.

This relation between firecrackers and transitions brings us to a famous old puzzle in anthropology, which concerns percussive noise in particular. After citing a great deal of cross-cultural evidence, Rodney Needham concluded a 1967 article with what he called "an unduly forthright and apparently unlikely hypothesis: *There is a connexion between percussion and transition*" (Needham 1967: 613, emphasis in original). He threw up his hands, however, when trying to think about why such a connection might exist, describing the problem as "seemingly intractable" (ibid.: 612). As we have seen, his findings are perfectly consistent with what happens in Taiwanese ritual (as well as Chinese rituals everywhere), although we might want to broaden his category of percussion to something more like noise, to include other extremely dense sonic effects like multiple competing music performances as well as the percussive noise of firecrackers, drums, and cymbals.

Needham's observation brings us directly back to the problem of how to frame

our entries and exits from "as if" worlds like rituals, concerts, sports events, or court sessions. Noise tends to take over exactly during those transitions between ritual (or concert, or play) time and ordinary time, and at those times within a ritual that involve important transitions in space and time like the transit of a deity from one place to another. Within each "as if" world there is plenty of space for symbolism, including that of discourse. While most Taiwanese and Chinese ritual is loud most of the time, the discursive parts (when the ritualist reads a petition out loud, for instance, or when people are instructed to bow and offer incense) are relatively quiet and not completely drowned out by the noise.

Noise takes over during the moments of transition, I would suggest, because representational content, whether verbal or in other symbols, is impossible during the moments when we are between worlds. Representational content requires a world for us to make any sense of it at all. No word, for instance, makes sense apart from the world of some language. There are no words when we are not in any ontological space. We cannot communicate, not even with spirits, at those moments of passage from one world to the next. Noise is thus a perfect marker for such transitions. It commands our attention as it fills the sonic and often the mental space. No one can talk over three operas playing at once, and no one can think as strings of firecrackers explode at their feet. Noise, with its formal, nonrepresentational, and antidiscursive properties, is one of the only things that can exist if there is no world. That is why, in many mythological traditions, what precedes the creation of the world is not silence, and certainly not language, but chaos – noise. That is, symbols, discourse and representation can only function within a "world" of established conventions that allows us to understand them. Outside any such world, there can only be noise. For the same reason, noise is what keeps rituals open to what lies beyond their worlds – and beyond the worlds of everyday life as well. It points to the possibility of that which has not (yet) been signified.

Fragile Silence

Why not silence in this role? Silence shares the characteristics that make noise so appropriate for marking transitions. In particular, like noise, silence is nonrepresentational and nondiscursive, if not exactly antidiscursive the way noise can be. Why is it so rare in the Chinese and Taiwanese rituals I have studied, and apparently in rituals in much of the world?

One reason is that ritual conventions generally require strict rules about time, space, and behavior. By filling the sonic (and sometimes cognitive) space, noise allows little opportunity to depart from those rules. Silence, on the other hand, is fragile. It breaks all too easily – a child cries at the wrong moment, someone's phone

rings, people walk by too engrossed by their own conversation to notice the ritual. The silence also leaves our minds to wander freely away from the moment at hand. In addition, there is always the possibility that someone can disrupt the silence intentionally as a way of rejecting that ritual moment. Noise, in contrast, can simply absorb all those interruptions. The fragility of silence means that ritual liturgies usually make far less use of it than noise. Still, we can identify several forms of ritual silence that I will very briefly discuss here, including silences of rhythm, moments of silence, and silences of discipline.

One example of rhythmic silence can be found in the annual rituals performed at the temple to Confucius in Taipei, held every year on his birthday. This event attempts to recreate court rituals of earlier dynasties, including the use of sets of archaic bells and chimes that go very far back in Chinese history, and that are never used in more everyday rituals. The liturgy relies on a master of ceremonies who directs every step of the ceremony. For example, he will very slowly intone "Light the first stick of incense!" One of the costumed participants will slowly move to the incense pot and do so. And then, still at a snail's pace, "Light the second stick of incense!" And so on, through three rounds of incense (and intervening silences), three offerings of wine (and intervening silences), and many other steps, each done at a pace that might generously be described as stately, and less generously as ponderous. Here, the long silent moments alternate with speech and action, creating a very slow pulse and achieving a very thin sonic density that is the opposite of red-hot sociality. The silences here measure the slow time of the ritual, but they do not mark any particular transitions. Their nonrepresentational nature leaves plenty of space for wandering minds, but the verbal instructions and required ritual actions keep each moment of silence very short, just a matter of seconds, so that its fragility does not much come into play. Such slow rhythms of course occur in many parts of the world, like the patient pace of an Easter Vigil service, for example.

This general ritual structure occurs elsewhere in Chinese societies today, especially when organizers are eager to avoid the excitement and potential chaos of a "hot and noisy" ritual. The main temple in Sanxia did this on the lunar New Year's Eve while I was there in 1979. The court-style ritual was then a recent innovation, introduced to allow respectful worship of the deity without the bedlam of thousands of people pushing against each other to try to get the good luck of being the first to add sticks of incense in the god's incense burner at the stroke of the new year. The temple management had felt threatened, sometimes even physically, by the chaotic crowds in the past. They thus changed to this new format, which protected the fragility of even the limited rhythmic silence in this style of ritual by locking the temple doors and performing their offering with only a very select group of temple leaders. Only when

they finished did they open the doors to the chaos waiting outside.

I saw another version of this "colder" and quieter style of ritual in Nanjing in 2014, when local leaders put on a ceremony for the birthday of Mazu at one of her temples there but seemed to have little idea how to proceed.[3] They began with formal speeches in the style of a Communist political meeting and then moved on to a court-style, slow-paced set of offerings with a very low sonic density. In this case, however, the impatient crowd simply overrode the silence with constant conversation, and the orderly offerings soon devolved into people offering incense at will.[4] Thus, the silence can fail even in this very constrained form.

A second ritual use of silence is limited to just a "moment". Moments of silence control the fragility by keeping the time short, almost always just a minute or two. Nevertheless, even a minute can be impossible to maintain. As an example, I was riding in Boston's public transit system on September 11, 2002, the first anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center. The media had widely publicized the request for a minute of silence at the time of the first attack. The train I was on halted at that moment to honor the request, and the usual babble of conversations and phone calls stopped… except for a couple of oblivious foreign tourists, who kept talking to each other apparently unaware of the sudden silence around them. Limiting such moments of remembrance to a minute is usually invoked precisely because silence is increasingly hard to control as time passes.

In fact, large public silences are a modern invention, probably beginning in 1912 and becoming widespread after the First World War (Brown 2012). They require modern means of communication and coordinated time and rely on the tractability of large populations. Over the course of the twentieth century, the time involved has been reduced to a conventional single minute, and in some cases silence has been replaced with applause, precisely because its percussive noise is more robust and resistant to interruption (Berlins 2007).

Finally, let me briefly mention the silences of discipline. The most famous of these stem from virtuosic self-discipline, like Trappist monks (Thomas Merton, to cite the most famous example) who maintain silences through most of their days, or the silence of some Buddhist or Daoist clergy, who may not speak for years on end. These cases move us outside ritual, however, since the silence extends to every moment of life. Or, in most of these cases, perhaps it is better to say that the point

3 There are two Mazu temples in Nanjing, both revived because of their potential value in attracting interest from Taiwanese business people, for whom she is a primary goddess and who are vital to the local economy.

4 This event is described in more detail in Weller (2019).

of the silence is to dissolve the boundary between ritual and ordinary life. Silence is thus certainly not marking a transition across a frame, but dissolving the frame itself. I will return to such silent unframing in what follows.

Silence can also be enforced, like a child in a time-out. In ritual contexts, this happens mostly through peer pressure, usually not to focus people on the silence itself but to force them to pay attention to the ritual's other sounds and actions. Silence in a concert hall (but not a rock concert) works this way, as does the congregation's general silence in many forms of Christianity. Sometimes silence is enforced, for instance when people being initiated have to keep silent at the risk of corporal punishment. Even socially enforced silences of this kind usually have the backing of higher authority, as when ushers escort rowdy audience members out of a theater or concert hall, or a conductor stops the performance and glares at the audience because someone's phone has rung. In almost all these cases, however, the ritual as a whole is not silent. Its talk and activity continue even as some of the participants are required to maintain silence.

Traditional weddings in Chinese societies offer a more complex example. The bride was normally silent on her wedding day as she was transported by sedan chair (later by taxi) to her new husband's house. The isolation of the woman in transit forced the discipline of this, but we also need to understand it as an expression of the patriarchy that weddings idealized. Everyone else making that trip was associated with the groom's family. The bride, probably for the first time in her life, had left her natal family behind and was truly alone. At that point she was not yet a member of her new husband's family. For all those other people, the transition was again very noisy, with loud music and raucous conversation. The bride was silenced, but the wedding event was as noisy as any good Chinese ritual. Silence and noise here work similarly in the sense that both are nondiscursive and thus perfect for marking transitions. On the other hand, they are clearly doing different kinds of work. The noise marks the transition itself, and that noise would be apparent to anyone watching. Here, the bride's enforced silence is so thoroughly controlled – drowned in external noise and isolated by the walls of the sedan chair – that it is not fragile at all.

Unframing Silence

Fragility is not the only reason for the relative rarity of silence in ritual. If noise is an ideal framing device, as I have suggested by expanding from Needham's work, silence often functions as an unframing device. It can undermine any kind of ritualized performance of an "as if" world by threatening its frames. We can see this role of silence most easily if we begin from non-religious sources.

The most famous silence in modern music is probably John Cage's piece called *4'33"*, after the length of time the first performance took. At that concert, the performer sat down at the piano, opened the keyboard cover, and just sat there. After four minutes and thirty-three seconds, he closed the keyboard cover again. Cage's point was to force us to listen in a way that extended outside the conventions of the classical music concert (Cage 1961; Cage 1960). We would learn from him that we should listen mindfully, and in the moment, to hear an entire soundscape that is always present – the hum of a heating system, the birds outside, the blood flowing through our own ears. While opening and closing the keyboard cover still provided a kind of reduced frame around the performance, the general point was instead to unframe music (even the category "music") as much as possible. Thus, if we take Cage seriously, it is no longer clear what categories like "music" or a "concert" mean. Even the concept of "silence" itself comes undone as we realize there is no such thing in our unmediated experience. These words and concepts themselves have been unframed by forcing us beyond their usual conventions.

Much the same is true of "noise". That is, neither silence nor noise exists in some absolute sense in the soundscape. Instead, both are categories that we craft in relation to the aural world around us. For that reason, the same sounds can be heard as silence in one context and noise in another. For instance, writing about silence has encouraged me to sit in a concert hall trying hard to focus on the silence of the audience, and thus to experience the sounds coming from the musicians as distracting noise. A minute later, of course, I might focus on the sound instead, and hear it as music. And the person in the seat to my right might do the same, but still hear the dissonances or unfamiliar atonalities of a composer like Arnold Schoenberg as noise.

Still, it is no coincidence that Cage used silence rather than noise to dissolve categories. Four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence was meant to compel us to hear differently: It allows us to hear the rest of the soundscape and thus can undermine the very idea of silence. The same interval of noise, however, would not have allowed us to hear differently at all. With silence, we can learn that there is no such thing as silence; with noise, we can only learn that there is noise. Only silence unframes. No wonder silence is rarely welcomed into the world of ritual, which depends so much on its framing. The following section turns back to questions of ritual proper, to continue to show how, even when silence is incorporated into ritual, it often serves to unframe.

Silence, Noise, and Protestant Suspicions of Language

The best-known exception to the rule that silences are rare or very tightly controlled in rituals appears to be Quaker meetings. Based on what I have just said,

however, I hope to show that Quaker silence makes sense within the broader logic of silence and noise in ritual, even though it is unusual. This becomes clearest through a comparison of Protestant noise and silence, the contrast between Quaker silence and Pentecostal sound, especially the incomprehensible sound of speaking in tongues.

Silence dominates Quaker meetings.[5] These meetings have no liturgy and no set agenda beyond occasional announcements. Members of the meeting sit silently, often for long periods, and speak only when the inspired by the Light (sometimes used for Christ and sometimes as a more general quality of the divine) (Lloyd-Richards 2011: 20). Quakers even see silence as the key to establishing a sense of "meeting" when they make group decisions at business meetings (Molina-Markham 2014). Meetings could be even more radically silent during the Quakers' early period in the mid-17th century, when "a complete and perfect meeting for worship could be held in complete silence, without a word being spoken out loud. God's Word, manifested in the inward experience of his presence and the communion of the congregation was sufficient" (Bauman 1983: 122).

For the Quakers this was part of a radical Protestant questioning of human language, and more broadly of all human constructions that stand between us and God. Early Quakers thus refused to doff their hats in front of superiors and insisted on using "thee/thou" for second-person singular, because the thou/you distinction marked purely human distinctions of status. Liturgically, they marked no special holidays.

> The essential point… was to proceed solely from the immediate movings of the Holy Spirit within, free of all taint of human will or empty formalism. Accordingly, anything that smacked of human will or customary formalism in worship was to be rigorously excluded. This imperative represented a rather sweeping departure from prevailing religious practice because it precluded any kind of established, formalized liturgy prescribing who should speak, when, and the form of the words spoken. (Bauman 1983: 126)

God's language was absolute and true. Quakers, after all, also accept the opening words of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1: 1). Human words, however, were another matter altogether. While not inherently evil, human languages were the result of the collapse of the Tower of Babel, and could never be adequate to contemplate divine

5 This discussion is primarily based on secondary sources, supplemented by several interviews with members of a Quaker meeting.

wisdom (Bauman 1983: 21). The silence at Quaker meetings allows space for the Light to enter and for people to come closer to the divine message.

This is the Quaker answer to the problem that people constantly bend the words of ordinary language to suit their earthly purposes and to mouth empty conventions. As Roy Rappaport pointed out, the very features that make denotative human language powerful imply two very serious problems. First, the arbitrary nature of the connection between a symbol and its meaning carries with it the ability to lie: "The very freedom of sign from signified that enlarges by magnitudes the scope of human life also increases by magnitudes possibilities for falsehood" (Rappaport 1999: 11). Second, there is what he calls the problem of alternatives. "If there is enough grammar to think and say 'YHVH is God and Marmuk is not,' or 'Socialism is preferable to capitalism' there is, obviously, enough to imagine, say and act upon the opposite" (Rappaport 1999: 17). Religions may never have put it in quite these terms, but these are the considerations that often lead to a suspicion of human language.

The Christian God's language, however, is True. It is never a lie and never open to alternatives. For Quakers, that is why silence offers a superior way of being with Him. The other major Protestant response to these problems, however, is anything but silent. Pentecostal speaking in tongues accomplishes something very similar to Quaker silence in the sense of avoiding the weaknesses of ordinary human speech. As Tomlinson writes about Christian glossolalia in Fiji, "Semantically, the words are supposed to be unintelligible when uttered, indexing the otherworldly, even miraculous, fact of their utterance… But pragmatically, their utterance indexes the Holy Ghost's presence in a person speaking these divine words, and that presence is held to be the meaning that really matters" (Tomlinson 2012: 285).[6]

My main experience of this was with a congregation of the True Jesus Church in Nanjing in 2014.[7] The True Jesus Church is an indigenous Chinese Christianity that began in 1917, during the early global expansion of the Pentecostal movement. Unlike the Quakers, True Jesus (and other Pentecostal) worship does have the usual liturgical organization we would expect from a Protestant service, including things like sermons and the singing of hymns. It differs most strikingly, however, at the moments when the congregation is called on to pray. At those times, everyone in the group drops to their knees and begins to speak in tongues. They consider this to be one of the gifts that Pentecostals receive from the Holy Spirit. Their version of

6 See also Harkness (2017).

7 For a history of this group, see Inouye (2018). For more detail about this particular congregation, see Weller and Wu (2017).

glossolalia tends not to have anything like phonemes or syllables (unlike that in many other Pentecostal groups); most people just loudly and quickly repeat a single sound over and over, or shrilly trill their tongues the entire time. Each person appears to be in their own world, and many have their eyes closed. Several hundred such voices creates a sonic density so thick that it becomes complete cacophony for the many minutes of each prayer period, ending abruptly at a signal from the leader.

Both silence and noise seem like equally good solutions to the problem of false language, since both are nondiscursive. Daniel Maltz, who made a much earlier comparison of Quaker silence and Pentecostal noise, suggested that:

> Although both Quakerism and Pentecostalism envision Spirited meetings as the antidote to empty formalism, the Quaker stress on silence and the Pentecostal stress on noisiness… indicate radically different conceptions of the Holy Spirit, the self, communication, and relations with outsiders. In general Quakers… contrast an inner spiritual self with an external natural one; stress the silent wait for inspiration over the inspired utterances which result; and they have an ambivalence about the preaching necessary to evangelize among outsiders. Pentecostals, in contrast, conceptualize the Holy Spirit as external, capable of engaging in intimate interaction with the individual, but only by burning up and replacing one's inner sinful nature and using the outer form of the individual Christian as a 'vessel'. (Maltz 1984: 134-135)

Maltz concludes that "the inherent logical contrast between noisiness and silence allows reformers to stress silence as a protest against noisiness or advocate noise as a protest against silence" (ibid.: 134). In his analysis, the different historical contexts of Quakerism in the seventeenth century and Pentecostalism in the twentieth account for when the various kinds of protests became important.

This explanation, however, does not explain why Quaker silence is so much rarer a solution than Pentecostal noise. In the current world, Pentecostals outnumber Quakers a thousandfold and more. There are roughly five times more members of just the relatively small True Jesus Church than Quakers, who number just over 300,000 globally (Castle 2016). Even in the seventeenth century, Quakers were greatly outnumbered by Puritans and other radical Protestants who did not emphasize silence, not to mention Catholics and members of the Church of England. That is, Protestant noise is a vastly more common substitute for language than silence. Quaker meetings thus offer a theoretical puzzle, both in relation to the far greater prevalence of Pentecostal noise and to the larger pattern I have been discussing, where noise occurs much more frequently than silence in ritual contexts.

We can understand this puzzle through the two factors I have been discussing here: the general fragility that makes moments of silence so brief in most contexts, and the ability of silence to unframe. Quaker meetings are not totally silent, of course, so breaking the silence is not inherently problematic. The problem is breaking the silence inappropriately by making comments that may be too loud, too long, too frequent, or filled with content considered inappropriate. Quaker meetings avoid this in part by making clear how important a role silence will play, so that anyone who requires making or absorbing more noise will look elsewhere. In part, they also quietly discipline speech they consider inappropriate, most often with a few words from leaders in private after the meeting, or more rarely, during the meeting itself. Their methods of enforcing silence are thus gentler than those of monastic orders or Chinese brides of the past, but they are still important.

The unframing work of silence is probably most crucial of all for Quakers. In fact, Quaker silence is not really an exception to the pattern that silences are rare in ritual, because Quaker meetings are not intended to be rituals at all. Quakers rejected all ritual forms even more radically than other Protestants, who themselves had rejected the formalism of the Catholic Church. While other sorts of Protestants would recognize the general structure of a True Jesus service, for instance, a Quaker meeting has no liturgies at all (Bauman 1983: 126). Such meetings in a sense are a continuation of how life should always be, so that the beginning of the meeting is not marked by any framing at all: The meeting begins when the first person walks into the room and sits down (Lloyd-Richards 2011: 129). Silence here is an attitude toward life rather than a ritual step and brings us far closer to the unframing John Cage was trying to foster in his *4'33".*

Funeral Noise and Silence

Let me turn to a more extended ethnographic example of ritual sounds: village rituals on burial days that I observed in Sanxia, mostly in 1978, with a particular focus on the funeral of Mrs. Yu, who died in March of that year at the age of 90. I will go into some detail here because these rituals include many of the dynamics of ritual noise and silence I have been discussing, and because they include one of the very few moments in my experience where silence comes to dominate a ritual. They thus offer fruitful ground for thinking about the similarities and differences that stem from the nondiscursive nature of silence and noise.

We already have other detailed ethnographic descriptions of Taiwanese village funerals from around the same period, including Stuart Thompson's analysis of food offerings and Emily Ahern's description of the entire process, though neither attends

much to the soundscape (Thompson 1988; Ahern 1973: 164-165, 221-225).[8] For that reason, I will not recapitulate the entire proceedings, but just give a summary of Mrs. Yu's funeral, supplemented by others I observed during that period and by follow-up interviews with some of the mourners and ritual specialists. Much has changed in the decades since then, of course, including quite fundamental transformations in Taiwan's economy and politics, and important changes as well in the specific rituals I will discuss. Nevertheless, the late 1970s works as well as any period for the theoretical issues I want to discuss. Many of the general patterns of sound and silence apply as well now as they did then.

Mrs. Yu's funeral, like all those I saw that year, began during the day, with the exact time and date determined through chronomantic methods suggested by an expert, in this case the *fengshui* master who would later align the coffin properly in the ground. As relatives, friends, and neighbors gathered, they could already hear the priests performing the relevant rites at an altar set up in an empty house nearby. In Sanxia, the priests who do this are called "black-head ritualists" (烏頭司公). Elsewhere in Taiwan that term usually refers to Daoists, but here black-head ritualists identify themselves as followers of the "Sakyamuni teaching" (釋教), that is, Buddhists, even though they are not Buddhist clergy.[9] They recite ritual texts and lead the soul through the underworld in ways that can be more-or-less elaborate, depending on the desires (and means) of the mourners.

As people arrived that day, the priests were in front of their altar, one of them chanting a text as the others provided deafeningly loud musical accompaniment on drums, cymbals and the wailing double-reeded *suona* (嗩吶). These texts are a form of preaching to both the living and the dead. The living certainly cannot understand a word over the music, but perhaps it is different for the dead.

Meanwhile, most of the villagers and the family had gathered in the street, where they saw the elaborate coffin, various ritual objects to represent the deceased, and a long row of tables to hold the food offerings people brought. Female descendants (and at one of the funerals I saw, hired mourners) draped themselves over the coffin, keening and wailing and singing laments. The sound of the wailing, combined with street noise, casual conversations, and the loud music from the ritualists' altar, formed a rich and complex sonic density. After this, a knowledgeable person (in this case the village head, which was usual where I was living) served as

8 For a more general description as well as an analysis of more recent changes, see Huang (2015).

9 Only one of the funerals I saw differed. It used a Buddhist sutra singing group instead, although the general set of activities was the same.

master of ceremonies. He instructed people to line up by gender and generation to offer incense, sons first, and eventually working down to the great-granddaughters, if the deceased was lucky enough to have any (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Mourners arranged by generation and gender to make offerings.
Source: Robert P. Weller

Because the deceased was a woman, a kneeling descendant presented an axe and nails to a representative of Mrs. Yu's natal family. This would normally be a brother, but he had died earlier, so his son stood in. He used the axe to tap the nails into the four corners of the coffin, symbolically sealing it and thus also accepting the death, absolving the family she married into of any blame. After this, the offering tables were dismantled, and the coffin was prepared to be moved to the burial site. The descendants circled the coffin three times, led by one of the ritualists beating cymbals (figure 3) and then a large group paraded out to the burial ground, with descendants carrying the photograph of the deceased, the new ancestral tablet, and other paraphernalia, accompanied by the ritualists playing their music, and by both a Western brass band and a more traditional Taiwanese ensemble (figure 4).[10] Just as we saw with firecrackers or competing opera performances at other rituals, at this time of transition, the varied (but invariably loud) music genres intermingled and confounded each other, although a stationary observer could hear the overlapping genres fade in and out as different parts of the parade passed by.

10 Much of this would be familiar from traditional rural funerals across most of China, although the Western brass bands appear to have been an introduction from Japan during Taiwan's colonial occupation of 1895-1945.

Figure 3. Leading descendants around the coffin. Source: Robert P. Weller

Figure 4. Part of the burial procession. Source: Robert P. Weller

Once they reached the gravesite (most of the attendees stopped at the edge of the village), the mourners had some downtime as they waited for the predetermined auspicious time for the burial. It was not silent, though, as conversations continued – the silence was relative. When the time arrived, the fengshui master made sure that the coffin was aligned properly in the grave to bring the most benefits to the descendants, and scattered grains and nails (all fertility symbols) over the grave while reciting aphorisms of good will and good fortune at this moment when such words carry a lot of performative weight (figure 5). The fengshui master then led the group in circling the grave three times before returning home.

Figure 5. Fengshui master recites aphorisms as mourners make offerings.
Source: Robert P. Weller

Much of the anthropological analysis of these rites has focused on the rich symbolism involved. I would add to that work only the idea that the day also makes for an accomplished piece of emotional choreography. Up until this day, the corpse in its coffin had lain in the front room of the family's house, constantly attended to. This was the first day when mourning moved into the public sphere. It began with grief as the women loudly wailed and cried. All the descendants may have felt sad in their own ways, of course, but at this moment they were ritually compelled to express their grief loudly and publicly, no matter how they felt in the moment. And, as with much of the Confucian idea of ritual, the point was that performing grief will make you feel the grief, rather than the other way around. That is why hired mourners were perfectly acceptable, even desirable, at this point.[11]

Right after the public grieving, the process of reintegration began as offerings of incense reinforced (and created) a kinship hierarchy of descendants. At this point, outpourings of emotion like grief were no longer welcome, and everyone was instead expected to perform their respect for the dead and assume their place in the hierarchy. Next came the obvious symbolism of circling the coffin before leaving the village and circling the grave before returning. This marked the removal of the dead person from the village. There was still the hierarchy of seniority as people lined up, but it was far less rigidly determined than in the earlier offering of incense. This fit well with the fengshui master's invocation of good fortune for the future of the entire

11 On professional mourners, see Liu (2023).

group. The emotional trajectory thus moved from grief to order to a shared future. The loudest noise (and the least discourse), as usual, came during the transition between village and grave.

The emotion-work continued into the evening of that day. The ritualists had continued chanting texts and playing music through the afternoon, usually attended only by a single representative of the mourners. Everyone else came back in the early evening, where now the mood had shifted to something carnivalesque, entertaining, and sometimes funny. The ritualists, who had been loudly working their way through their texts all day, now switched to activities that were supposed to help smooth and speed the dead person's passage through the perils of the underworld.

At the beginning, one of the ritualists invoked various deities, including those of the underworld. He accompanied this with many mudras, contorting his fingers into implausible shapes and attracting onlookers with that alone. He also preached to the crowd, admonishing them to be good so they could avoid the tortures of the underworld, which he described in some detail. In that process, he improvised in ways that could sometimes be comedic. For instance, on seeing me, he suddenly broke into "A tok-a! [H: 阿啄仔, a term for foreigners, referring to our big noses] ABC, ABC! 123, 123!" This got a general laugh, though not from me.

After this, the village head read a long petition out loud, which the ritualists described to me as the only really crucial moment of the evening. After invoking the gods again, it gave details about the ancestry and residence of the deceased, and then individually named each of the mourners. It ended with a prayer that sins be forgiven. After that, the ritualists acted out various parts of the soul's passage through the underworld in ways that revealed a completely new repertoire of skills: tumbling, juggling, fire-eating, and other general clowning around. When I asked people whether they thought these performances really helped the dead person through the underworld, most were skeptics, but they watched with great pleasure anyway. If the emotional trajectory of the day had been grief to order to shared future, now it turned to comic relief after the strains of a draining day.

Finally, very late at night, the descendants gathered in a circle around an enormous pile of paper spirit money. Instructed by one of the ritualists, each held onto the mourning dress of the person next to them as the money was set afire and they all stood – silently – watching the pile flare up and then gradually burn down to nothing but ashes. These final minutes of the mortuary observances, when even the street noise had largely died away, was the only ritual moment I experienced in Taiwan where communal silence reigned.

Silence and Ritual Frames

How can we understand this rare moment of ritual silence? I have been suggesting that there are two primary reasons for the rarity of such silences. The first is, as we have seen, that silence is too easy to break, to disrupt, while noise can simply ingest competing sounds. That is why silent moments appear mostly to contribute to the work of rhythm in ritual. In the Chinese or Taiwanese cases, this is most obvious in Confucian rituals and their echoes in modern state-sponsored rites (as at the Nanjing temple mentioned above) or in the most hierarchical moments of a funeral, where a master of ceremonies instructs people to burn incense in rank order by generation and gender. All rituals create a rhythm, in the sense that they have a liturgical framework whose steps create a kind of time. Sometimes these rhythms consist of longer units, as in the broad structure of the burial day, with its noisy times (wailing over the coffin, parading out to the cemetery, escorting the soul at night) and its quieter moments (waiting at the graveside, or standing around the spirit money fire at the end of the day). In all these instances, the silence need not be absolute. It is sufficient just to lower the sonic density enough so that the pauses establish a slow rhythm. Beyond that, silences are limited either to brief spans (the minute of silence) or to strongly disciplined situations like the bride in her sedan chair.

The second reason for the rarity is that silences dissolve frames. They do this through an opacity that offers a wide space for interpretation – we never know for sure what a silence is supposed to indicate. Noise, on the other hand, crowds the sonic and often cognitive space. Both silence and noise are nondiscursive, but only silence has the capacity to open up a world of infinite possibility.

The idea of the ritual frame is crucial to understanding the roles of noise and silence. All rituals contain both external and internal frames. The external frames distinguish ritual time/space from other contexts, while internal frames mark transitions within the ritual itself, like the crucial conversion of the corpse from a disturbing presence in the house to an honored ancestor, a transition marked by the loud parade out to the burial site. At the risk of being overly formalistic, the frame is what distinguishes art from wallpaper. That is, it marks something as adhering to the conventions of "art" the same way we need to mark the conventions of ritual. The frame does not participate in the substance of the work, but it makes the work possible; it separates one kind of space from another.

Unlike paintings, rituals take place in time, and so require a different sort of separation. Noise and the frame combine to help solve Needham's half-century-old puzzle about percussion and transition. Noise is perfect for marking the transition from one frame to another because only the nondiscursive exists outside frames, so that noise can mark the moment between frames without letting us wander away

completely. Silence's opacity to easy interpretation, the way it sends each of us into our own thoughts, its capacity to unframe, and its fragile openness to interruption make it much less useful as a marker of transitions. It is not impossible to frame with silence instead of noise, but only in circumstances that are highly controlled.

With this in mind, we can reconsider that rare silence at the end of the funeral ritual. It is appropriate there in part because the most important transitions have already happened with plenty of noise: the removal of the corpse from its home village and its initial treatment as an ancestor, and (with the evening performances) its transition through the underworld toward rebirth. One could even argue that this silence does not mark the end of the funeral ritual, although it does mark the end of the burial day. Further rituals will be conducted every week for seven weeks, and after that regular worship will continue at the ancestral altar at home and occasionally at the graveside. Thus, in a sense, this silence does not mark an end, but is part of a changing rhythm now that the dead person has been incorporated as an ancestor.

In part, I also see it as an important conclusion to the emotional choreography of the day—from the demonstrations of grief to the solemnity of the incense offerings, to the humor and excitement of the evening, and finally to that moment of calm uniting a circle of descendants who watch the flames slowly die down. The relatively small size of the group, the late hour, and the exhaustion of the long day make the silence easier to maintain, and the ritual frame around the entire burial day can thus be allowed to fade out slowly instead undergoing a rapid change through noise.

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寂靜、喧雜與儀式

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本文從Rodney Needham觀察到的跨文化發現開始：儀式的轉換往往伴隨著敲打的喧雜聲。亦即，喧雜為儀式創設框架，標示出它與日常生活的分隔。本文進而對比儀式如何運用喧雜（不可詮釋的聲音）與寂靜（不可詮釋的無聲）。其中一個例子比較五旬節派的方言與貴格教派的靜默，另一個聚焦於一九七零年代台灣農村的葬禮。在這兩個例子中，寂靜與喧雜在提供人們得以詮釋的空間上有著顯著的不同，但兩者都創造出儀式的節奏，也就是社會生活的節奏。然而，兩者運作的方式並不相同。若喧雜如同Needham所說創造出框架，寂靜則破除了框架。此外，寂靜脆弱而容易被打破，喧雜則能輕易吸收一切的干擾。這也就是為何儀式場域中寂靜如此罕有。

（高晨揚翻譯）

關鍵詞：儀式，寂靜，喧雜，葬禮，框架，情感