

NO CAT AND NO CRADLE: RELIGION AND LIES AS CULTURAL NECESSITY

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Abstract

In Kurt Vonnegut's novel Cat's Cradle, peace in the poverty stricken community is ensured through an intricate system of falsehood. Falsehood becomes a political as well as a religious weapon that is indispensable for generating an unquestioning and complacent attitude in the masses. This paper draws upon Nietzsche essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" where he examines truth as illusions created and believed in by human beings. These enduring lies are powerful agents of political and psychological control; and are still socially and economically lucrative. The paper focuses primarily on Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle and analyses the system of institutionalized falsehood that is propagated through the religious and political practices of SanLorenzo. Both the dictatorship of "Papa" Monzano and the spiritual practices of Bokononism are a sham, acting as the yin and yang for maintaining stability and control over an otherwise chaotic system. The aim of the paper is to examine how fictitious religious practices and ideals can encourage peace, harmony and a sense of unity in a community and save it from obsessing over their own impending collapse.

Keywords: politics, religion, falsehood, truth, Bokononism, peace

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Falsehood is often systematically propagated through cultural institutions such as religion and politics for maintaining a state of peace in society. Peace refers not only to political peace but also to inner, mental state of satisfaction. Comforting lies are an essential part of every culture and civilization would most likely collapse without it. Nietzsche in his essay, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” observes,

What then is truth? . . . Truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn-out and have been drained of sensuous force; coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metals and no longer coins. (Nietzsche *Philosophy and Truth* 84)

Strongly influenced by postmodern ideas of futility of grand narratives that claim to comprehend a version of truth, Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* deconstructs religious texts to produce a humorous fictional religion of *Bokononism*. As a student of anthropology Vonnegut was greatly influenced by the ideas of cultural relativity. *Cat’s Cradle* is thus, a postmodern anthropological study of falsehood as a cultural necessity. In an interview, Vonnegut told the *Playboy* that he wanted to tell everyone that culture was not a rational invention, there were thousands like it and all equally functional in their own right. Most importantly however, he wanted to make the readers aware that ‘all cultures function on faith rather than on truth.’ (Allen 104) This idea is demonstrated by considering the religious practices and beliefs of the country of San Lorenzo. ‘Truth was the enemy of the people, because the truth was so terrible, so Bokonon made it his business to provide the people with better and better lies.’ (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 172) It is only through an utter disregard for everything sacred that the true peace can be achieved. *Bokononism* is a collective religious ideal that is shared by the community of San Lorenzo. Complete with its own lexicon, consisting of semiotically nonsensical words like *karass*, *grandfalloon*, *foma*,

wampeteretc, *Bokononism* functions as a tool for identity formation and affirmation for the society of San Lorenzo. Both *Bokononism* and the political rule of Miguel “Papa” Monzano are mendacious constructs of power but imperative in order to provide meaning to a meaningless existence and give the people a (albeit false) sense of purpose. *Bokononism* is banned in the country and its preacher/ prophet is outlawed and exiled. The people practice this religion in secret as nothing brings people together like a shared secret. As a sharp contrast to the exiled *Bokonon*, Miguel “Papa” Monzano is a feared despotic ruler of San Lorenzo. The novel reveals that the tension between the two figures is a carefully constructed lie. Both Lionel Boyd Johnson (who was later called *Bokonon*) and Earl McCabe (who later became a despotic ruler Miguel “Papa” Monzano) had arrived on the island when it was without a political body. Pitying the poverty of the people they had tried initially to help their economic condition and make San Lorenzo a utopia. They discovered however, that this was an impossible feat to achieve as the poverty was too great and could never be eradicated. This ugly truth they decided to hide from the people with the bittersweet lies of *Bokononism*.

The *Book of Bokonon* provided various constant distractions to its followers. It contained the religious hymns and songs that were meant to be sung out loud by people together, underlining unity as the chief aim of the religious practice. Robert Redfield, whose work greatly influenced Vonnegut’s own perspective on culture, says that a feeling of belonging is crucial for the survival of a group.

Redfield’s idea of the folk society— behaviors characteristic of all primitive societies, including small, intimate groups of people, communicating exclusively with one another, sharing an oral history, treating each other equally as people— was wholly adopted into Vonnegut’s world view. It would be the scientific skeleton he used to advance his own idea that a large, supportive family would ease many modern societal anxieties. (Tomedi 16)

Within the practice of *Bokononism* these groups are called ‘*karass*’ which ‘ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial and class boundaries.’ (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 2) The narrator of *Cat’s Cradle* on his quest to piece together the events of the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, finds his *karass*. This idea of unity and harmony among varied and diverse groups of individuals is one of the things that *Bokononism* celebrates. The concept of

karassas all other concepts gives a false sense of uniformity and harmony that, in reality, is missing from the world. Nietzsche asserts that there is essentially no equality to be found outside of man's own constructed concepts. '... every concept arises from the equation of unequal things.' (Nietzsche *Philosophy and Truth* 83)

There is no absolute truth in the world of Bokonon and wherever truth occurs in the book, *Cat's Cradle*, it is thoroughly criticized. 'Truth' is the diabolical scientific exactitude that leads to genocide. Lies especially '*foma*' or the 'bittersweet' and 'harmless' lies of Bokonon provide comfort and protection against truth in a society at the verge of chaos. The first sentence in *The Book of Bokonon* reads, 'All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.' (Vonnegut *Cat's Cradle* 5) This tone of incongruity runs through Vonnegut's own text as well. The very next line reads, 'Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either.' (Vonnegut *Cat's Cradle* 5) The veracity of the author's statements is doubtful since the very first line of the novel where he introduces himself as 'Jonah' although it is not his name. From the very onset, therefore, *Cat's Cradle* creates an atmosphere of doubt where the idea of 'truth' may be questioned. Through the religion of *Bokononism* and indeed through the text itself, Vonnegut, like Nietzsche highlights man's hypocritical attitude toward the quest for truth.

[H]e desires the pleasant life-preserving consequences of truth. He is indifferent toward pure knowledge which has no consequences; towards those truths which are possibly harmful and destructive, he is even hostilely inclined. (Nietzsche *Philosophy and Truth* 81)

The genocide caused by ice-nine reflects the large scale massacre of the Second World War which had infinitely more devastating effects on humanity – at least the essence of humanity in the perpetrators of violence. Vonnegut puts it in a simple yet clear way, 'we dropped truth on Hiroshima'. (Vonnegut *Wampeter* 161) In the face of such facts, 'truth' becomes infinitely less important than peace. Science therefore, in the novel is a stand-in for truth or at least a form of exactitude. It is indicated various times that truth is a nefarious entity that causes, familial and social alienation, and a wide range of misery and bereavement. Superstition and ignorance on the other hand, preached by Bokonon brings one closer to the ever elusive happiness.

A clear example of this can be seen in the chapter “Back to Kindergarten” where Dr. Breed talks in defense of science saying ‘we don’t want to mystify’ (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 36). The world as the war has left it is better viewed through a veil than a crystal-clear glass. Bokonon realizes that mystifying the people is necessary for the collective happiness of humanity. Dr. Breed further makes the case worse for himself by adding, ‘New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become.’ (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 41) *Bokononism* acts as a foil to the doctor’s whole belief system, so much so that with the preaching of the *Book of Bokonon* coming to light, the doctor’s statements lose all credibility in the eyes of the reader. Science and ‘truth’ are the antagonists in *Cat’s Cradle*. The philosophical lessons or ‘foma’ of *Bokononism* emphasize not just Bokonon’s complete lack of interest in the truth but also underlines the necessity for moral and ethical knowledge before the acquisition of scientific knowledge. Dr. Hoenikker who invented ice-nine and was one of the co-founders of the atom bomb is seen as an adult with childlike curiosity and complete disregard for human life. His question ‘What is sin?’ reemphasizes the amoral nature of science and knowledge and shocks us with the power the truth may exert and the devastation it may cause when exercised by one who does not understand the unquantifiable details of life. Further it ensures that the real antagonist in the novel remains the abstract idea of ‘truth’. As a contrast, for Bokonon, only unquantifiable things like life, happiness and humanity is sacred.

“What is sacred to Bokononists?” I asked after a while.

“Not even God, as near as I can tell.”

“Nothing?”

“just one thing.”

I made some guesses. “the ocean? The sun?”

“Man,” said Frank, that’s all. Just man.” (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 211)

The encounter with Miss Faust reinforces the idea that heinous crimes are committed every time someone places science and truth above humanity. “I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, can be enough for one person.” (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 21) Ice-nine too at one point becomes a stand-in for ‘truth’, ironically each character willingly surrenders it in exchange for something that they desire more- for Frank it is a position in

SanLorenzo, for Angela and Newt it is love. ‘Truth’ is tossed away at a moment’s notice as an accessory to gain something higher.

Bokonon is not entirely constructed on myth and ignorance; it is perfectly aware of the squalor that it is trying to hide. “‘Ah God,” says Bokonon, “what an ugly city every city is!””(Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 27) Bokononism operates upon a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ as Coleridge would have put it that makes its lies stay afloat. This disbelief incorrectly termed ignorance is what the outsider first notices about the country. ‘The people down there are poor enough and scared enough and ignorant enough to have some common sense.’(Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 89) Ignorance goes hand in hand with political stability and peace in SanLorenzo. Miguel “Papa” Monzano rules with an iron fist and the punishment for subscribing any idealistic religious or political practice is the ‘hook’, i.e, the perpetrator is forced through a giant hook like a fish bait in public and left there to hang till his death. Once we come to know that Miguel “Papa” Monzano is himself a Bokonist, it becomes evident that his political rule is as precariously balanced on fear as the religion of *Bokononism* is on hope and faith.

It was the belief of Bokonon that good societies could be built only by pitting good against evil, and by keeping the tension between the two high at all times [. . .]

“Papa” Monzano, he’s so very bad,
But without “Papa’s” badness,
tell me, if you would,
how could wicked old Bokonon
Ever, ever look good? (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 102-103)

“Papa” unites a country by exiling a fictional religion based on semiotic nonsense and jargon that preached happiness above knowledge. He keeps up his façade for as long as he could and yet when he suffers from cancer and is aware of his imminent demise, he is impatient of the balance the doctors have created between pain and the drug- much like the balance he has created between fear and hope. Tipping the balance and taking his own life directly result in the ironic end of the world.

It is through a humorous handing of various cultural aspects of society that the Kurt Vonnegut is able to produce a text on genocide that reads like a comedy. Bokonon preaches that

we must have faith even when paradoxically, all faith is openly false. In other words, true peace, even true inner peace may only be achieved when one lets all the paradoxes of existence coexist unquestioningly. The book hides a terrible message, that there is 'No damn cat, and no damn cradle.' (Vonnegut *Cat's Cradle* 166) The cat's cradle is held up simultaneously by the two important institutes of society as well as the collective suspension of disbelief of the people of San Lorenzo. Underneath the ornate entanglement of the strings, there is the hollow postmodern truth of vacuity. Hiding this vacuity is essential for peace and longevity of any culture. Newt succinctly puts his childhood trauma in words as he has come to realize that 'a cat's cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands,' (Vonnegut *Cat's Cradle* 165) and nothing more. And yet he finds himself using the same old trick to distract his sister from her unhappy marriage. What makes man seek the solace of falsehood? For Nietzsche the answer is, 'anything at all'.

This man, who at other times seeks nothing but sincerity, truth, freedom from deception, and protection against ensnaring surprise attacks, now executes a masterpiece of deception: he executes his masterpiece of deception in misfortune, as the other type of man executes his in times of happiness. (Nietzsche *Philosophy and Truth* 91)

Bokononism as a religion has as its tenants only what comforts the people in the face of their impending doom. Bokonon told the people to 'live by the *foma*- that make you brave and kind and healthy' (Vonnegut *Cat's Cradle* vii). For Miss Faust the *foma* was 'God is love' for others it may be whatever they chose it to be. So cruel and unyieldingly brutal was the truth that, the people chose to believe the lies of Bokonon over it. Indeed, their active participation in the lie ensured its success. '[L]ife became a work of art' (Vonnegut *Cat's Cradle* 175) fabricated by one man and affected by a community. Ignorance too can be a work of art when it is a studied, hard earned ignorance born out of pain and suffering. Despite the way the novel ends, Bokonon in no way preaches nihilism; it merely answers man's need for distraction which reality cannot hope to offer.

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