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WITCHCRAFT BELIEF AND ACCUSATIONS
AGAINST CHILDREN IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Human Rights in a World of Cultural Diversity

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Abstract

Belief in witchcraft is widespread across the African continent. Recently, attention has been drawn to the relatively new phenomenon of witchcraft accusations against children, leading to punishment that severely violates their human rights. Analysing the recommendations made by NGOs and United Nations organs regarding this issue, I claim that they neglect a normative conflict between cultural belief and human rights as well as lacks philosophical depth. The purpose of this study is to present, clarify and discuss the normative problem surrounding the phenomenon of witchcraft belief and accusations against children from a theoretical perspective, in order to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the issue in a wider context of moral values as well as improve the possibilities for successful prevention strategies. Universalism and cultural relativism is presented and discussed, as well as the indeterminacy of human rights. Ultimately, the conclusion states the choice between treating a child as an individual or as a part of the community an important normative consideration, however the main normative problem is found within universalism in the form of conflicting human rights.

Keywords: witchcraft, human rights, children's rights, universalism, cultural relativism

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1. Introduction

'My aunt said I must leave. The neighbours beat me and burnt me. They said either you must admit to being a witch or we will kill you. There is no place for you here. I went to the church, but they gave me water to drink that made me sick. I said to neighbours, let me sleep somewhere, even in your toilet, but they refused. I was caught by some soldiers and they said, you are a witch - we saw you flying with birds. They said they were going to kill me, but I escaped.'¹

In a world of cultural diversity there exists a wide variety of different beliefs and practices. The belief in witchcraft is for many people in the western world a historical and mysterious phenomenon of medieval times, nowadays only existing in fairytales and fiction movies (e.g. Harry Potter). Witchcraft is thus usually seen as belonging to the past, not the present. However, belief in witchcraft is still highly present in many parts of the world today, especially in developing countries, and is, although mysterious, as real as it possibly can be in the eyes and daily lives of many people. They find themselves in a context where modernity and globalization rapidly expands and coexists with tradition and culture, creating a complex situation where choices are constantly balanced and affected in either direction. Furthermore, poverty and a sense of exploitation often lies as luring shadows over all this, making it even harder to fully understand these societies in the same way as we understand our own. In this sense, belief in witchcraft may not be as irrational as it may appear to outsiders.

However, in sub-Saharan Africa, belief in witchcraft is related to practices of accusations and punishment, leading to extreme human suffering and violation of several fundamental human rights. Notably, in the last twenty years there has been a rapid increase of witchcraft accusations *against children*, as reported by several United Nations organs as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). With an increased globalization and migration, this cultural belief and practice has spread to other parts of the world as well. Media has vividly reported several cases of children murdered or tortured due to witchcraft accusations, specifically in Great Britain but lately also in Sweden.² Witchcraft accusations against children is thus a relatively new phenomenon gaining more and more attention, making it relevant and interesting to examine closer.

¹ Dowden, *Thousands of child 'witches' turned on to the streets to starve*, interview with a 15 year old girl accused of witchcraft published by Royal African Society online.

² Topping, *The Guardian*, 2012-03-01, Phillips, *Daily Mail*, 2011-04-09, Svahn, *Dagens Nyheter*, 2012-03-02.

Since it is a new phenomenon, not much policy literature exists on how to prevent witchcraft accusations against children in sub-Saharan Africa. The recommendations that do exist, however, claim that witchcraft belief is only a problem when it leads to violence. Stating that the *belief itself* must be tolerated but accusations and punishment in consequence from it must not, they implicitly argue for consideration towards both children's rights and cultural belief. I agree with this on a conceptual level. However, I argue that it might be problematic to separate between the belief in witchcraft and the consequences from it since I believe that our ideas and worldviews inevitably affect our actions. But how can children's rights be protected then? How should belief in witchcraft be treated? In this sense, I claim the policy literature to be too simplistic in its interpretation of the issue, glossing over and even avoiding the important normative conflict surrounding children's rights and cultural belief hiding within it. In order to effectively prevent violence against children, this normative conflict needs to be theorised.

1.1 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose with this study is to present and discuss the normative considerations regarding witchcraft belief and prevention of witchcraft accusations against children in sub-Saharan Africa. Questioning the recommendations presented by NGOs and United Nations organs stating that witchcraft belief itself is not a problem, I claim that the existing policy literature is too simplistic and shallow in its interpretation of the issue at hand. Therefore, this study provides a thorough discussion of human rights and cultural belief from a theoretical perspective, aiming at clarifying the main normative problem when dealing with witchcraft belief and accusations. My specific research question is thus as follows:

Based on the recommendations currently provided on the issue, what is the central normative problem around witchcraft belief and prevention of witchcraft accusations against children in sub-Saharan Africa?

The philosophical discourse on the nature of human rights in a world of cultural diversity is very wide within the field of political theory, however the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations against children is new with relatively little research on it. Linking this phenomenon to the theoretical discourse will hopefully lead to an in-depth understanding of it in a wider context of moral values as well as to a more informed foundation upon which to build prevention work. The analysis and following implications may also be applicable to

other cases where children's rights are violated by cultural belief and practices, making this study relevant in a larger social and political perspective.

1.2 Disposition

The first section of the study will describe the general concept of witchcraft as well as the existence and meaning of witchcraft belief within an African context. Further on, the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations against children will be closer examined, presenting its causes and consequences thoroughly. As it is a relatively new phenomenon, I believe that this section is important to provide an overall picture. Moreover, too little empirical knowledge about the phenomenon will not provide enough reason and understanding for a discussion of its prevention on a more abstract and philosophical level.

In the second section, an argumentative discussion of the policy literature on preventing witchcraft accusations against children is provided. The aim is to demonstrate that the literature ignores a normative conflict surrounding children's rights and cultural belief, as described above, which should be deeper analysed from a philosophical perspective.

Thereafter follows the theoretical analysis, presenting philosophical perspectives available in the human rights discourse aiming at filling the gap that I perceive is lacking in the policy literature. The views of cultural relativism and universalism on the derivation of human rights is described and discussed as well as a third, less philosophical, perspective on children's rights particularly. Throughout the analysis I will relate the perspectives to the empirical case in question, that is, witchcraft belief and accusations against children in sub-Saharan Africa.³

Lastly, I will provide a concluding discussion, summarizing the theoretical analysis and its implications for the empirical case as well as present an answer to the research question.

³ Please note that the phenomenon of witchcraft belief and accusations against children in sub-Saharan Africa might also be referred to as 'the empirical case' throughout the study to facilitate the reading and avoid disturbing repetition.

2. Methodology

The form of analysis used in this philosophical study is qualitative to its nature. A qualitative text analysis, also called qualitative content analysis, simply refers to the scientific study of different texts. The focus of a content analysis is thus more on *what* the study aims to analyse and less on *how* it is done.⁴ Furthermore, this analysis is idea-based and thus focuses on different arguments. Therefore, it is irrelevant who have presented them, or when.⁵ A content analysis can have two aims; to systematise the content or to critically review the content of a text.⁶ This study includes both aims.

In the second section, as outlined in the disposition, the study seeks to critically explore the existing policy literature and its recommendations on preventing witchcraft accusations against children in sub-Saharan Africa. A critical content analysis goes one step further than a systematising content analysis, since it aims to evaluate an argumentation in terms of certain rational or moral norms.⁷ More specifically, the argumentation can be evaluated on the basis of, for example, logical validity and normative plausibility by looking for incoherence and inconsistency in its normative statements.⁸ The ultimate aim of a critical analysis is for the author to develop own arguments for or against a certain standpoint.⁹ Important when doing a critical analysis, however, is to strive to present the position that is criticised as reasonable and fair as possible. Otherwise the critique might not be taken seriously and thus be rather pointless.¹⁰

The theoretical analysis must primarily be understood as a natural continuing step after the critical analysis. It is in the theoretical analysis that I present material in order to answer my research question, whereas the critical analysis provides the actual foundation and assumption my research question is built upon. In the theoretical analysis my aim is rather to systematise than to criticise the content, that is, to clarify and explain thinking structures and the essential substance of philosophical literature and argumentations. The analysis is thus descriptive in its nature,¹¹ yet the content is discussed and questioned in a critical manner in relation to the implications for the empirical case as well as to with what precision it helps us to understand

⁴ Beckman, 2005: 11

⁵ Esaiasson et al. 2010: 246 f.

⁶ Ibid: 238

⁷ Ibid: 239

⁸ Beckman, 2005: 57

⁹ Ibid: 13

¹⁰ Ibid: 78

¹¹ Esaiasson et al. 2010: 238

the central normative conflict. However, I do not intend to normatively defend or emphasize with any specific standpoint or perspective.

2.1 Sources and Material

The literature regarding the issue of witchcraft belief and accusations against children is very limited. In this sense, I have not been forced to limit the scope of sources included in the background section but struggled to find and include as many as possible and available. Regarding the theoretical analysis on the other hand, the potential sources are instead extremely many. The discourse on human rights and cultural difference is very wide, forcing me to limit the amount of theories presented. The dichotomy that might be perceived between these should not exclude other concepts, ideas and discussions within the discourse that makes the picture more nuanced. These are, however, not possible to include in this study due to lack of space.

The empirical material for the critical analysis consists of reports by NGOs and United Nations organs that present prevention strategies regarding the issue of witchcraft accusations against children. These reports have not been chosen on the basis of any specific criteria, but simply because they are currently the only ones providing recommendations.

Notably, due to the overall lack of sources regarding witchcraft accusations against children, the empirical material also provides an extensive amount of facts presented in the background section. In this sense, a potential problem is that the reports often refer to each other, making the facts dependent and perhaps unreliable. On the other hand, the aim of this study is not to analyse whether the facts that prevention strategies are built upon are correct or not, but to enlighten the normative problem arising from these; given that the facts are correct, what normative considerations do the proposed recommendations lead to? In this sense, a lack of completely independent sources is not a substantial problem.

Lastly, the subject of human rights in a world of cultural diversity is very well discussed. This study can impossibly give a fully comprehensive picture but only treat a minor part of the field. A natural consequence from such a broad subject is that the study (although a limited inclusion of theoretical perspectives) explores many different paths and reflections, however I have tried to limit them on the basis of relevance for the empirical case.

3. Empirical Context

3.1 The Concept of Witchcraft

Witchcraft is a central theme in anthropological research, although it is also examined theologically, historically, mythologically, psychologically and sociologically. Witchcraft is an extremely diverse subject that is connected to different practices or believes in different cultures at different times, and therefore the phenomenon is hard to define. Historically there have existed witch-hunts in Europe, North America (e.g. the Salem trials 1692), ancient Rome, Inca Peru, Aztec Mexico, Russia, China, India and Africa. The belief in witchcraft is today still universal, however the highest level of belief exists in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹²

Witchcraft derives from the concept of sorcery, which is ‘a web of beliefs and practices whose purpose is to manipulate nature for the benefit of the witch or the witch’s client’.¹³ In turn, the belief in witchcraft can be understood in sociological and anthropological terms as:

... a set of beliefs, structured and shared by a given population, that addresses the origin of misfortune, illness and death, and the set of practices for detection, treatment and punishment that corresponds to these beliefs.¹⁴

This definition can be extended to include that ‘witchcraft is a theory that explains and justifies a conception of the universe’,¹⁵ thus also being able to explain misfortune by connecting it to ‘evil influence’. Important to mention though is that witchcraft has been, and sometimes still is, associated with positive factors as well, such as healing or cleansing.¹⁶

3.2 Witchcraft Belief in Africa

Across Sub-Saharan Africa belief in witchcraft is widespread. Although little statistical information available on the numbers of persons involved, cases of witchcraft accusations have been highlighted in the Central African Republic, Gabon, South Africa, Ghana, Tanzania, Mocambique, Nigeria, The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola.¹⁷

¹² Lehmann et al. 1993: 187

¹³ Ibid: 190

¹⁴ Cimpric, 2010: 10

¹⁵ Ibid: 10

¹⁶ La Fontaine, 2009: 9

¹⁷ Alston, 2009: 15 ff.

In contrast to previous evolutionist notions that witchcraft belief would disappear over time along with modernization and education, it seems as though these social and cultural practices are maintained and even growing. The phenomenon can thus be seen to transform and adapt to fit contemporary contexts and integrates into all aspects and milieus of the life of an ordinary African.¹⁸ In this sense, contemporary witchcraft in Africa is linked both to tradition and modernity at the same time; it is a mix between older representation and a craving for modernity. Anthropological studies claim that witchcraft is a discourse that constantly renews itself, making it impossible to only speak about one ‘African witchcraft’. Instead, there are several ‘witchcrafts’ existing in different socio-historical contexts across Africa.¹⁹

A possible driving force in this ever going process of sustained witchcraft belief in different parts of the world is a form of jealousy, embedded in the tension created between ‘the increased visibility of modern forms of wealth on a truly global scale... and the increased realization by large parts of the global population that they will never gain access to this wealth’.²⁰ Another importance put forth in the literature is the relationship between witchcraft and power, although there is a clear connection between wealth and power. Notable in this context is that rich or important people are never accused in public, but always the worst off and most vulnerable.²¹ Understanding it this way, the jealousy of these ‘successful’ people is thus projected onto certain vulnerable persons, used as scapegoats for the lack of success in the lives of the accusers.

Moreover, a report by UNICEF suggests that ‘the post-colonial crises, political instability, civil wars and the general impoverishment of the population appear to have reawakened a general fear of the Other’.²² This further increases the jealousy, suspicion and accusations, eventually leading to physical and psychological violence against the accused person.²³

Further on, as noted in the case of South Africa, even though most systems of law, economics and politics usually consider witchcraft as nothing but a primitive imagination founded in ignorance and backwardness, the existence and power of witches is most certainly real in the eyes of many Africans.²⁴ The *belief* in witchcraft must thus not be underestimated – it exists

¹⁸ Cimpric, 2010: 1

¹⁹ Ibid: 10, 7

²⁰ Ciekawy et al. 1998: 9

²¹ Cimpric, 2010: 14

²² Ibid: 12

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ashforth, 1998: 505 f.

‘as a social and cultural reality’.²⁵ Notably, these beliefs are not specific to those who have had no formal education, as outsiders might think; there are elites among state authorities, ‘intellectuals’, university-educated people and social welfare workers who also accept the phenomenon of witchcraft as true.²⁶

Even though the witchcraft notion in general cannot be interpreted as identical across Africa it has one overall commonality that makes it possible, at least in this study, to discuss witchcraft in Africa in singular; in general, the conceived effects of witchcraft in Africa have gone from being both positive (healing and cleansing) and negative to solely negative, perceived as a harmful force that needs to be eradicated from African soil. This reasoning further demands that the community identify the witch.²⁷ In consequence, witchcraft accusations (which often follows an accident, death or a difficult situation) lead to severe abuses of human rights in the form of harassment, banning from communities, violence and even murders. Notably, UNICEF Angola has highlighted the phenomenon of witchcraft allegations as one of the most serious in terms of human rights violations.²⁸

3.3 Witchcraft Accusations against Children

In the past mostly elders and specifically women were accused of witchcraft but since the mid-1990’s the number of witchcraft accusations against children is rising in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Angola and Nigeria, particularly in large towns.²⁹

Important to note is that witchcraft *accusations against children* is described as a new phenomenon, an ‘invented tradition’,³⁰ however the *belief* underpinning the practice is described in previous section. Since this phenomenon has not yet gained enough attention, precise statistical research is still lacking. The anthropologist Filip de Boeck claims that there are between 30 000 and 50 000 street children in the capital city Kinshasa in the DRC, the majority of whom have been accused of witchcraft.³¹

Usually, people believe that a child is given a spell through food or drink and then becomes a witch. The child witch is seen as capable of murdering innocent people and causing severe

²⁵ Cimpric, 2010: 6

²⁶ Aguilar Molina, 2006: 9

²⁷ Cimpric, 2010: 10

²⁸ Foxcroft, 2009: 8

²⁹ Cimpric, 2010: 2

³⁰ Ibid: 1

³¹ La Fontaine, 2009: 7 f.

diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, hepatitis, typhoid and cancer. Moreover, all other types of misfortune such as accidents, divorce and infertility are perceived to come from the witch. In this way, the misfortunes in life can be explained and, in extension, the social order maintained.³²

Children are usually accused by their families or Pentecostal pastors, who then try to ‘cure’ them through exorcism (deliverance), using different methods such as starving, beating and burning.³³ There are also cases in which children have been ‘abandoned by their parents or guardians, taken to the forest and slaughtered, bathed in acid, burned alive, poisoned to death with a local poison berry, buried alive, drowned or imprisoned and tortured in churches’³⁴ in order to get a ‘confession’ from the child. These are all very severe violations of children’s fundamental rights as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the General Assembly 1989, to mention a few of them:

...the inherent right to life (Article 6, Paragraph 1); protection against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the beliefs of the child’s parents (Article 2, Paragraph 2); and such protection and care as necessary for his or her well-being (Article 3, Paragraph 2) etc.³⁵

Many rejected children or children who are forced to flee from their communities live in the streets. Here, they are again victims of rights violations in the form of physical violence, prostitution and sexual violence (which in turn leads to diseases such as HIV/AIDS), the latter affecting increasingly younger girls. These facts can be seen as an indicator of the scale and importance of the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations against children.³⁶ In this context Article 19 Paragraph 1 of the Convention is worth mentioning:

State Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.³⁷

The practice of abandoning children also infringes on the principles proclaimed by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly 1948,

³² Foxcroft, 2009: 3

³³ Schnoebelen, 2009: 14

³⁴ Foxcroft, 2009: 5 f.

³⁵ Cimpric, 2010: 5. See also the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

³⁶ Ibid: 17, 42 f.

³⁷ Ibid: 40. See also the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

stating that growing up in a loving and caring family environment is crucial for the personal development of a child.³⁸ Furthermore, the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations against children also violates several articles in the regional human rights framework, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), e.g. article 12, article 16 and article 21.³⁹

Children ranging between three and 18 years old, who are ‘special’ in some kind of way, are especially at risk of being accused of witchcraft. This includes children with epilepsy, some form of disability or physical characteristics or traits perceived as abnormal such as thinness, ugliness, bedwetting, bad behaviour, too nice, too wise and curious just to mention a few. Moreover, the majority of the accused children are orphans or only have one parent in life, often due to war. When a new spouse does not wish to care for the children of the previous partner, an easy way to get rid of them is to accuse them of witchcraft.⁴⁰

According to a report on child witches in DRC done by the NGO Save The Children, poverty is often presented as the only underlying cause to witchcraft accusations against children. This is however not the case, since the phenomenon also exists in geographical and socio-economical contexts where poverty is not a huge problem. Also, the phenomenon does not exist in all areas where poverty is a problem, for example in rural areas or in certain African countries. Most importantly, claiming poverty to be the only explanation for accusations of witchcraft is a way of justifying violence against children since authorities then might use it as an excuse for not dealing with the issue in particular. Further on, witchcraft *accusations* against children is described as a new practice, an ‘invented tradition’, while poverty is definitely not a new phenomenon in Africa. Instead there seems to be several reasons (social, economic and political) for accusations of witchcraft against children, and they often combine so that a child is accused for several reasons simultaneously.⁴¹

Moreover, during the past 40 years the image of the child within the family has changed due to urbanization, economic insecurity, HIV/AIDS and other micro and macro factors. Today, many children do not receive the protection and support needed for their development process but are considered fully responsible for their own actions. Changes of the traditional family

³⁸ Cimpric, 2010: 42. See also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

³⁹ Bussien et al. 2011: 18. See also the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

⁴⁰ Foxcroft, 2009: 5 f.

⁴¹ Aguilar Molina, 2006: 15 f.

ties, and thus disturbance in the balance of social relations, might trigger witchcraft accusations against children.⁴²

Many children who are accused of witchcraft eventually believe themselves that they are witches since adults keep telling them so.⁴³ Furthermore, even if they survive a spiritual treatment the children will be stigmatized forever within the family and community and sometimes also rejected. The risk for being accused of witchcraft again remains high and the children are discriminated, which enhances even more the psychological and emotional suffering.⁴⁴

⁴² Bussien et al. 2011: 7 f.

⁴³ Aguilar Molina, 2006: 33

⁴⁴ Cimpric, 2010: 35, 44

4. Policy Literature and Recommendations: A Critical Analysis

Even though a relatively small amount of literature and reports on the issue of witchcraft accusations against children, UN organs and NGOs have presented substantial recommendations on how to prevent witchcraft accusations against children. All these reports, and thus also the recommendations, claim to be based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and some of them also mention the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child when discussing violations of children's rights. Further on, almost every report discussing the issue of witchcraft accusations analyzed in this study implicitly express tolerance against cultural beliefs and practices. At first glance this might sound axiomatic, but a deeper look and reflection reveals important contradictions and inconsistency between promoting children's rights and cultural toleration simultaneously.

4.1 Distinctive Levels of Acceptance

The only concrete recommendations on how to deal with the issue of witchcraft accusations both in general and against children found in the literature is given by Save the Children, the NGO Stepping Stones Nigeria, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). They all suggest basically the same approaches since the reports draw upon each other to a large extent. They stress education and awareness raising programmes around the issue of witchcraft accusations in general and its related abuse and long-term psychological consequences for victims amongst both development workers as well as religious leaders, parents and children. Furthermore, education on the Convention on the Rights of the Child is to be given to practitioners of witchcraft allegations as well as to the victims, and the illnesses such as HIV/AIDS connected to witchcraft must be demystified. These strategies should be implemented on a grassroots level through dialogue with communities and not from a top-down approach, in order to promote social change and the best interests of the child.⁴⁵ This is in turn claimed to 'help to bridge the gap between social norms and international human rights norms'.⁴⁶

In my opinion, these recommendations sound well adherent to the human rights framework and promoting bottom-up approaches goes well in hand with the contemporary view on how

⁴⁵ Aguilar Molina, 2006: 36

⁴⁶ Cimpric, 2010: 3

development work is to be successful. Furthermore, the reports are careful on touching the subject of the *belief* in witchcraft itself, as it cannot be contested; respectful and tolerant, as it should be. But herein lies also the problem, I argue.

Stated in almost all of the above-mentioned reports is that the belief in witchcraft itself is not problematic – only when it leads to accusations and in consequence physical, psychological and emotional abuse.⁴⁷ The belief is thus to be acceptable, but not the consequences from it since it violates human rights. In fact, it is claimed that accusations alone suffice for violating human rights since it can be seen as emotional and psychological abuse.⁴⁸ It is thus a fine line between non-violation and violation of rights; the act of accusing. Stepping Stones Nigeria goes one step further in stating that the organisation itself does not share the belief but is nevertheless accepting other's right to believe in child witches:

Stepping Stones Nigeria does not believe that children can be “witches” and is not concerned with proving or disproving the existence or non-existence of child witchcraft. However Stepping Stones Nigeria acknowledges the right of individuals to hold this belief on the condition that this does not lead to the abuse of child rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁴⁹

The policy literature clearly states, as Stepping Stones Nigeria, that they do not intend to question the existence of belief in witchcraft. Furthermore, the right of the individual to hold this belief is acknowledged. I agree with this on a conceptual level, however I contend that there is a normative distinction to be made here. It is not evident that the substance of the belief and the consequences from it are readily separable. In this sense, accepting the *existence* of belief in witchcraft is not the same as accepting the belief itself. Should we really accept a belief that violates children's rights? Even though it can be safely assumed that ideas and behaviour are interrelated, we must not presume this causal chain. Therefore, the obvious question to answer first is if it is possible to separate between the belief in witchcraft and the actions (accusations) that are made on basis of the belief.

4.2 Action as Part of the Belief

In his article about witchcraft and democracy in South Africa, Adam Ashforth touches upon the question posed above. In an interview with a local in Soweto, the subject of witchcraft is

⁴⁷ Cimpric, 2010: 13, Foxcroft, 2009: 4, Schnoebelen, 2009: 2, Bussien et al. 2011: 2

⁴⁸ Foxcroft, 2009: 4

⁴⁹ Ibid: 3

clearly described as a crime that must be punished. Witchcraft is seen as a problem, as a ‘scourge’, for the community and thus the only way to get rid of witches is to kill them. However, the respondent also sees a problem with this approach; “Now they have these human rights, so you can’t just kill them”.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, he is resolute in his claim that they should be imprisoned for life.⁵¹ The implicit view here seems to be that the community, as a group, must be protected from witchcraft and the harm it brings. Human rights, individually applicable in favour of the accused witch, are thus seen as an obstacle for the best interest of the group.

Important in this sense is the inescapable logic in witchcraft as a cultural belief; it demands that a witch is identified, otherwise the community is not fully protected. I contend that if the belief that there are witches remains but no accusations are to be made, the people might feel insecure and unsafe, eventually creating an inevitable situation where suspicions are so high that accusations follow automatically. As Ashforth points out, people who believe in witchcraft perceive it as a form of action itself, which involves violence against the community. This in turn motivates social action to prevent it.⁵² Action against witchcraft, in the form of identification and punishment, is thus intrinsic to the belief in it. Therefore I believe it is very hard, if not impossible, to fully separate between belief and action. We are thus left with a clash between cultural belief and human rights.

4.3 The Child Within the Community

As shown above, the ‘community’ is of high importance in many African societies when discussing witchcraft. The report by UNICEF also acknowledge the general interdependence between the group and the individual as very strong; ‘the individual only exists as a member of a family, a lineage or a community’.⁵³ As for a child, this claim might be even more valid. However, being a member of a family or community is not necessarily negative when discussing children and their personal development. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that the family is of utmost importance in this sense:

Childhood is entitled to special care and assistance, convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members, and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and

⁵⁰ Ashforth, 1998: 523

⁵¹ Ibid: 523

⁵² Ibid: 530

⁵³ Cimpric, 2010: 21

assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community, recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.⁵⁴

Notable in this statement is that it describes the ability of a family to ‘assume its responsibilities within the community’ as some kind of prerequisite for the child’s personal development. Consequently, if the family do not have the possibility to be a part of the community it will not recognize the needs of the child. In other words, the community is important for the family and the family is important for the child. My interpretation from this is that the community needs to be protected and supported, in order for a child to grow up in a loving family. In a context of witchcraft belief however, this connection may prove highly problematic.

Seeing that the belief in witchcraft, and thus in child witches, is seen as a threat against the community that inevitably leads to action in the form of accusation and harm, a normative conflict between protection of the community and protection of the accused child arises. Is the community to be protected, the child witch has to be dealt with in either way. Is the child to be protected, the community trust and security might suffer harm, in turn affecting families’ ability to provide the required environment for their children.

Another, perhaps more clear, example of this clash between the individual and the community can be found when looking at the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare on the Child, which is claimed to be better adapted to the African context. Article 31 lays out ‘The Responsibility of the Child’, which states that the child has certain responsibilities towards his family and society. These are, among others, to:

...work for the cohesion of the family... to serve his national community by placing his physical and intellectual abilities at its service... to preserve and strengthen African cultural values in his relations with other members of the society, in the spirit of tolerance, dialogue and consultation and to contribute to the moral well-being of society...⁵⁵

In this statement, concerning a *responsibility* of a child instead of a right, the importance of the family, community and cultural values is highlighted. In turn, a child is expected to share that view and to promote it. However, this might be problematic when it comes to the cultural ‘value’ of witchcraft, since the responsibility of a child to promote the cohesion of the family and community in this case risks clashing with its individual human rights. Should a value

⁵⁴ Cimpric, 2010: 42. See also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

⁵⁵ The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

that violates children's rights really be preserved and strengthened by children themselves? What 'tolerance, dialogue and consultation' mean in this sense is unclear, however a child's voice is most likely the least powerful in any dialogue or consultation.

4.4 The Critical Role of Legislation?

One way of dealing with witchcraft accusations against children is through legislation. In South Africa and Zimbabwe it is illegal to accuse someone of witchcraft, yet in Cameroon and Tanzania it is illegal to *practice* witchcraft. These judicial approaches have been criticized in terms of value, concerning difficulties in defining what constitutes the crime as well as ensuring respect of rights such as freedom of religion.⁵⁶ The UNICEF report suggests decriminalizing witchcraft and 'allow for the prosecution of persons harming children'⁵⁷ as a solution in protecting children's rights. However, this approach is not unproblematic.

Firstly, this might lead to children being killed directly instead of abandoned in the streets, since the parents then risk legal prosecution.⁵⁸ Secondly, it is not completely clear whether 'harming children' only relates to physical abuse or also includes emotional and psychological such. In that case, witchcraft *accusations* must also be criminalized.

This in turn can lead to the public impression that the state rather protects witches than their victims. Communities are then unwilling to name the perpetrators and when local policemen believe in the guilt of the accused, the perpetrators are protected even more. In this sense one must remember that people "believe that killing witches ultimately promotes community welfare".⁵⁹ The likely consequence is that the belief in witchcraft and the practice of dealing with it is driven underground.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the belief in witchcraft is deep-rooted even among state representatives. The judicial and government officials in DRC often fails to intervene in cases of abuse of children even though the constitution forbids witchcraft accusations against children.⁶¹ In a documentary on witchcraft accusations against children in DRC, a director of a special commission to protect children claims that 'it is illegal to accuse a child of witchcraft, unless

⁵⁶ Bussien et al. 2011: 19

⁵⁷ Cimpric, 2010: 4

⁵⁸ Foxcroft, 2009: 12

⁵⁹ Schnoebelen, 2009: 41

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid: 16

you have proof'.⁶² That child witches exist is thus self-evident. Moreover, he claims that witchcraft is part of their traditional beliefs but in the same time stresses that the government does not condone physical abuse of children.⁶³ How do these claims coexist?

Reflecting on what is expressed here, it is not hard to understand that the state fails to intervene when it should; confusing premises leads to an almost absurd outcome. In order to understand this complex situation, witchcraft can be seen as containing three components; the *belief* in it, the action in consequence from it in the form of *accusation* and the action in consequence from it in the form of *harm*. It is evident that these components are closely interrelated in the conceptual notion of witchcraft, yet in practice (and in law) they are seen as separable. If belief and action is seen as intertwined, and action in the form of accusation is understood as a form of mental harm, it inevitably implies that all three components of witchcraft has to be forbidden.

In his article, Adam Ashforth discusses this issue from a state-perspective with the Mayor of Soweto in South Africa. She also believes in witches and acknowledges the problem in allowing witchcraft belief but forbidding accusations. The government, she says, is inevitably trapped between protecting the individual and protecting the community.⁶⁴ Interestingly, even though it is acknowledged that legal responses are not probable to provide a long-term solution to the issue of witchcraft accusations against children, the law is still seen as critical in treating the issue.⁶⁵

4.5 A Normative Problem

The policy literature giving recommendations on preventing witchcraft accusations against children do so on the basis of an international children's right framework. Further on, they clearly state that the belief in witchcraft must be respected since it is 'unproblematic' in itself, stating only witchcraft accusations to be the problem. However, this section shows that the belief in witchcraft is intrinsically linked to accusations that violate children's rights. In turn, belief in witchcraft is manifested and conceived as a community protection concern in African societies. Looking to legislation for a solution, it implies that belief in witchcraft

⁶² ABC Nightline documentary, 2009-05-21.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ashforth, 1998: 525 f.

⁶⁵ Bussien et al. 2011: 19

needs to be forbidden in order to effectively cope with witchcraft accusations and punishment. Yet, from the policy literature view, it is not acceptable to criminalize belief in witchcraft.

Ultimately this leads to a clash between the interest of the community and the interest of the individual (the child) or more specifically, a conflict between the cultural belief of the community and human rights. From this viewpoint, I claim that it is hard to agree with the claim that the belief itself is unproblematic – at least when it comes to protect children from being abused or killed. Moreover, the regional children’s rights framework acknowledges the importance of the community and its critical role in a child’s personal development. However, assuming that we are shaped by our environment, I wonder if a child’s development is really promoted if growing up in a family and community that believe that children can be witches. In sum, can we really secure children’s rights when belief in witchcraft is still manifest?

My claim is that this important question is neglected and overlooked in present policy literature, hidden in unclear and contradictory statements and recommendations that simplistically gives the impression of both accepting children’s rights as well as cultural practices that clearly violates the first, leading to overall inconsistency, incoherence and a lack of philosophical depth. The policy literature is thus either oblivious or negligent of its own inherent illogic, hiding behind nicely put yet unjustified formulations that gives equal weight to human rights and culture which cannot be combined without raising questions. Leaving this normative discussion unnoticed, an in depth and more philosophical understanding of the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations against children will be lacking, certainly affecting the type (and the success) of strategies dealing with it. This section thus strengthens my claim that a philosophical analysis of the phenomenon and its prevention, as a case of human rights in the context of cultural belief, is very much needed. Therefore, I will now continue with a deepened theoretical analysis of the issue.

5. Moral Values and Cultural Differences: Theoretical Analysis and Discussion

The previous section showed that it is hard to fully separate between belief in witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, questioning the widespread view within the policy literature that the belief is unproblematic but that accusations must be stopped. In this sense, I stressed a philosophical analysis of the general conflict between human rights and cultural belief. The discussion of universal moral values and human rights in a world of cultural diversity is a well-documented issue in the field of political theory, philosophy and anthropology. Some claim that certain moral norms have universal value (that is that everyone can agree upon them) regardless of specific cultural belief and practices, while others mean that the cultural diversity that actually exists in the world is too strong for true universality to come about. There has also been suggested that these purported ‘universal norms’ are not adapted to, or grounded upon, all existing societal norms around the globe and that they therefore cannot be seen as universal. The literature today covers several areas around this normative debate; liberalism and multiculturalism, defending group rights against individual human rights, feminist discussions of women’s rights in different cultures,⁶⁶ questioning of the origin of the human rights concept and lately also questioning of the concept of ‘culture’ itself.⁶⁷

In this section I will present theoretical perspectives available on this broad discourse divided into three blocks, two more philosophical and one less so. Throughout the section, I will also apply these different perspectives onto the case of witchcraft belief and accusations against children, to bridge the gap between theory and practice and see how precise they can help us to understand the central normative problem of the case. Please note that the philosophical blocks should not be understood as counterparts but rather as two positions on a scale where the aim is to reconcile human rights and cultural diversity. There are many more positions on this scale, however the limited scope of this study does not allow me to include all of them. The third block in the analysis moves from a conceptual to a more concrete level, discussing children’s rights from a different perspective aiming at reconciling the two philosophical blocks in a nuanced way.

⁶⁶ For a much cited example of feminist critique against group rights see Moller Okin, Susan, 1999. *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

⁶⁷ For a critical discussion of the concept of culture see Phillips, Anne, 2007. *Multiculturalism without Culture*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

5.1 Multiculturalism and Cultural Relativism

Multiculturalism is a body of thought in political philosophy about the proper way to respond to cultural and religious diversity that can be described as ‘the principle of not only tolerating but also respecting different religions and cultures and encouraging them to coexist harmoniously’.⁶⁸ While multiculturalism is a term that is used for a variety of meanings and is hard to define properly, many scholars in the field of political philosophy have discussed it. Multiculturalism is closely connected to the notion of *cultural relativism*, which is the view that all beliefs, customs and ethics are relative to the individual within his own social context. From this perspective, there is thus no such thing as right or wrong moral norms.

In this first block of the theoretical analysis, I will present Bikhu Parekh as one of many multiculturalists that promotes a less extreme variant of cultural relativism. Arguing for extensive consideration (but not total relativity) to the cultural context when discussing moral norms, he proposes cross-cultural dialogue as facilitating the process. Notable, dialogue is also mentioned in the policy literature as the way to implement the prevention strategies, making Parekh’s reasoning particularly interesting. I have moreover, due to the lack of space, chosen to exclude other scholars that argue for cultural relativity from other platforms in order to present his reasoning comprehensively enough. An article focusing specifically on cultural relativism in the African context is however included.

5.1.1 Cross-Cultural Dialogue Without Moral Universalism

Parekh is largely inspired by Will Kymlicka’s assertion that liberalism demands that cultural beliefs and practices in different groups are to be protected, since these are seen as necessary for the individual’s ability to lead a good life. To lead a good life is described as living from ‘the inside’, in accordance with the beliefs about what gives value to life. Therefore, liberalism is strongly connected to autonomy since autonomy is needed for individuals to be able to live as they want without punishment. In turn, culture is seen as a condition for the development of autonomy.⁶⁹

Parekh develops this view of liberalism and autonomy further in highlighting the paradox in liberalists’ claim ‘that since the modern western society is liberal, it is entitled to ask its

⁶⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

⁶⁹ Parekh, 2006: 99 ff.

members to live by basic liberal values'.⁷⁰ Firstly, Parekh says, it is impossible to point out what basic liberal values are without disagreement since it is a relative concept; a value that is important to me might not be as important to you. Secondly, there are groups in modern western society such as e.g. conservatives and religious communities that are not, and cannot be, fully liberal. Therefore, calling contemporary western society 'liberal' is to homogenize and oversimplify reality as well as giving liberals a moral and cultural monopoly of the term. For Parekh, a true liberal society is not only defined by values usually ascribed to it such as tolerance, openness and freedom but is, more importantly, committed to a strong sense of autonomy, individualism, and self-creation.⁷¹

Further on, Parekh states that 'human beings are culturally embedded in the sense that they are born into, raised in and deeply shaped by their cultural communities'.⁷² Culture itself is defined as 'a system of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of human beings understand, regulate and structure their individual and collective lives'.⁷³ However, Parekh claims that beliefs and practices are autonomous in the sense that they have their own logic and patterns of change; a practice can change but the belief might not. When change happens at a rapid pace or are introduced by factors that the community cannot control, it may become very conservative regarding their traditional belief to maintain its sense of stability. In worst case, the members of a community might experience a sense of moral panic.⁷⁴

Parekh's reasoning is very interesting in the context of witchcraft belief and accusations. If a true liberal society is one that is deeply committed to autonomy and individualism, prohibiting or discouraging cultural beliefs and practices is highly illiberal since it infringes on those values. Consequently, the difficulty of separating belief from action disappears, since prohibiting any of it is seen as illiberal. Further on, acknowledging the sensitivity of the community, changing (prohibiting) the practice of accusing or punishing a person pinpointed as a witch might lead to an unstable environment or a collective moral panic, which in turn might have a destructive and unwanted effect on the community. Since people are seen as deeply affected and shaped by their community, everything that hurts the community can be seen as hurting the individual too. Consequently, prohibiting only the practice but allowing the traditional belief might be an idea as bad as prohibiting both parts.

⁷⁰ Parekh, 2006: 111

⁷¹ Ibid: 111 f.

⁷² Ibid: 120

⁷³ Ibid: 143

⁷⁴ Ibid: 145 ff.

Importantly, Parekh is not an *extreme* cultural relativist who assumes that since every community has a right to its autonomy and culture we are not allowed to criticize or promote changes in it. He contends that if we after careful consideration still find a culturally defended choice unacceptable, we have no duty to respect it; ‘we separate the right and its exercise, and do not allow our attitude to one influence that to the other’.⁷⁵ However Parekh also recognizes that the separation is not absolute; ‘situations might arise when the exercise of the right is so systematically perverse that we might wonder of the individual should continue to enjoy it at all’.⁷⁶

Implied above is that if an exercise of a right cannot be respected, the status of that right can be changed from the outside. This is however, according to Parekh, based on the tendency of western society to ‘act as global missionaries and assume that other societies are all devoid of reformist resources and need western guidance and “moral leadership”’.⁷⁷ Instead, a community’s cultural beliefs and practices are best changed from within since the outsider cannot understand its complexity. The outsider may press for change, but must generally respect the autonomy of the community. Western society did not need external assistance to reform themselves, why should any? In this sense, Parekh warns of ethnocentrism or more specifically of cultural imperialism, as the idea of moral superiority on behalf of the West, and is clear on the fact that it needs to be avoided at all cost.⁷⁸

The solution that Parekh offers to cope with cultural diversity is built upon what he calls ‘cross-cultural dialogue’ in the form of intercultural evaluations. To disallow all cultural practices that are disapproved of would be an act of extreme intolerance, but to tolerate all of them would be to ignore the moral duty to promote equality of all human beings. Therefore we need guiding principles, which can help us to decide if certain cultural practices should be tolerated. Parekh claims that the moral values that can be universally agreed upon are too few and basic and are therefore meaningless, failing to guide us once we go beyond them.⁷⁹ Conflicts between universal values cannot be solved by appealing to the values themselves; they need to be ‘prioritized in cases of conflict’. Therefore, Parekh states, ‘moral universalism is of limited help’.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Parekh, 2006: 176

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid: 178

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid: 264 ff.

⁸⁰ Ibid: 266

Instead, Parekh promotes intercultural dialogue and the development of ‘operative public values’ to achieve an adequate evaluation of cultural practices. These values are to be found in three levels in society; the general and regulative, enshrined in the constitution; the specific and substantive, enshrined in law; and the norms governing civic relations, i.e. those between public and private spheres. These are seen as interrelated and changeable in line with the society and local circumstances, together making up the environment for discussion. If a contested practice, for example female circumcision, cannot be defended in terms of these ‘public values’ it should not be allowed. However since moral values and beliefs cannot be discussed in an objective manner, it might be hard to reach this conclusion in a fair and comprehensive way. Therefore, this intercultural dialogue thus requires and rests on patience and sympathy, the goal being to create enough common ground to facilitate a consensus or at least a negotiated compromise.⁸¹

An intercultural dialogue will thus, at its best, provide a consensus or a compromise when moral values conflict. The question is if even this is feasible. When trying to imagine such a dialogue concerning witchcraft accusations against children, the obvious defence on behalf of the community would be the right to their culture and belief, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁸² The argument against this, on behalf of protecting accused children, would build upon violations of general human rights as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. How can a compromise be found in this situation where both sides can be seen as legitimately founded? High levels of sympathy and patience does not automatically lead to consensus – in this case one might even agree to both sides without being able to reach a solution. Parekh may be right in his claim that moral universalism is of little help here, however his cross-cultural dialogue poses the same problem in the end. Stating that moral values and beliefs cannot be discussed in an objective manner, Parekh undermines, right from the start, the potential success of a dialogue how much sympathy and patience the parties might possibly possess. In this sense, his perspective offers little direction when trying to understand and deal with the conflict between the cultural belief of the community and children’s rights.

Importantly, the main emphasis of Parekh’s argumentation lies on a *meta-ethical* level in the sense that he describes the *nature* of moral values, stating that right or wrong in conflicts between them is relative to the cultural context. Meta-ethics thus differs from *normative*

⁸¹ Parekh, 2006: 267 ff.

⁸² The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

ethics, which argue for a specific content in moral norms and thus judge actions to be right or wrong. In this sense, an interesting question arising from Parekh's argumentation is if the existing framework of international human rights reflects his notion of cultural relativity in practice. Are human rights, in reality, adapted to the social context?

5.1.2 Human Rights Without Legitimacy

In discussing the status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in African countries, Sonia Harris-Short claims that rather than cynically manipulating 'culture arguments' to defend cultural tradition and practices, most state delegates are genuinely committed to implement existing international human rights in their legal systems. The problem, she claims, is that there is a lack of grassroots support for the human rights principles, especially for those that impinge upon traditions and practices related to children and the family.⁸³

An example that illustrates the conflict between 'universal' human rights and cultural practices very well is female genital mutilation (FGM). Cultural defence for FGM have sometimes been built upon Article 24 in the Convention, that the practice is 'beneficial' to the health of children.⁸⁴ However, most African states do not defend but have passed legislation prohibiting or criminalizing FGM. Even so, the practice is still widespread and the resistance to eradicating FGM is strong among the local population.⁸⁵

Harris-Short describes this conflict as a 'chasm' between the adherence of states to the Convention and the values and beliefs of society at large; 'many of the African states report that within their local communities there exists a "negative attitude towards children's rights" and a strong resistance, even resentment, to being told that they must leave their old traditions and practices behind'.⁸⁶ Clearly, she claims, there is a perception that the idea of human rights is 'imported'.⁸⁷

Harris-Short sees the solution to this conflict in securing a 'cultural legitimacy' of human rights, making the grassroots accept and embrace human rights as theirs. To impose international standards and obligations on individuals, of which many is fundamentally inconsistent with their cultural world view, is not fruitful.⁸⁸ Instead, the concept of human

⁸³ Harris-Short, 2003: 134

⁸⁴ Ibid: 136 ff.

⁸⁵ Ibid: 141 f.

⁸⁶ Ibid: 159

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid: 180

rights needs to be ‘rebuilt from the bottom up, this time with its foundations firmly rooted in all of the world’s cultures’.⁸⁹

Drawing upon this discussion of the concept of human rights as lacking cultural legitimacy, it is simple to draw the conclusion that human rights are not very well adapted to the African context. Interestingly, the empirical case in this study is comparable to the case of FGM. Forcing a child accused of witchcraft through exorcism and torture might be culturally defended as beneficial to its health since it, after deliverance, can return to live in its community (which is seen as crucial for its well-being and sense of belonging). Prohibiting these practices in order to eliminate them would, if there is a general negative attitude towards children’s rights, probably not be that effective. If Africans in general lack support for human rights principles, how can any prevention strategy built upon them ever be successful?

Importantly, Harris-Short does not propose a new content in the international human rights framework, but rather that people from all cultures must be given reasons to accept them as shared instead of imported, or in other words, western. In order for this to happen the concept of human rights needs to be rooted in all cultures and beliefs, that is, founded upon cultural relativity. Only then do human rights gain true legitimacy. In the African context, this relativity is likely to include more consideration to the community and its cohesion and less focus on the individual. To rebuild the concept of human rights is however not an easy task. How can we possibly constitute cultural beliefs, such as the belief in witchcraft, as legitimate in international human rights law when the actions in consequence from it are so abhorrent?

In sum, both Parekh and Harris-Short meta-ethically argue, although slightly differently, for an extensive importance of and sensitivity towards the cultural context when dealing with human rights. Nevertheless, if a cross-cultural dialogue cannot lead to agreement on a body of moral norms due to their inherent subjectivity, and if human rights that are relative to the cultural context risk legitimising beliefs which violates the rights, we are still stuck in the vicious circle where children’s rights and cultural belief and practices cannot be reconciled. However, some claim that human rights include objective moral values that are universal despite cultural diversity, making the latter irrelevant in legitimizing them. This leads us to the next theoretical block in this analysis.

⁸⁹ Harris-Short, 2003: 181

5.2 Universalism

Another way of viewing and treating human rights is on the basis of *universalism*, which is a generic term for different ideas that perceive the individual as possessing certain human rights just because being a human. These rights are furthermore seen as universally applicable and egalitarian in their nature, that is, not depending on the social context. Therefore, a universalist discussion of moral norms gives less consideration to the cultural context than a relativist so. Notably, proponents of universalism have criticised relativism to be self-defeating, because the claim that meaning and truth can only be found within the cultural and social context is in fact universal and ‘context-transcending’ in itself.⁹⁰ However, as mentioned previously, cultural relativism and universalism should not be understood as two completely conflicting notions – most temporary universalist scholars acknowledge some scope for cultural difference and norms, although extensively less so than multiculturalists.

In this second block of the theoretical analysis, I will present Jack Donnelly as one of many scholars that argues moral norms to be inherently universal. As in the first block, the limited scope of this study forces me to exclude other similar philosophical positions as I rather present an in-depth analysis of one position of universalism than a shallow discussion of many. I believe Donnelly to be suitable for this analysis since he focuses explicitly on the universality of human rights, providing a less abstract defence for universalism than other philosophers. Drawing upon John Rawls’ idea of overlapping consensus, he argues that there is a global consensus on the concept of human rights, marking them as universal at least on a conceptual level.

5.2.1 The Universality of Human Rights

Jack Donnelly understands human rights as rights that one has simply because one is a human being. As such, they have specific characteristics; they are equal, inalienable and universal. They are equal because one is either human or not and the rights apply equally to all that are human, inalienable because one cannot stop being human, and universal because we are all considered human beings (and not any other specie) and thus holders of human rights.⁹¹ In other words, only *human* beings can have *human* rights.⁹²

⁹⁰ Joppke et al. 1999: 6

⁹¹ Donnelly, 2003: 10

⁹² Ibid: 25

Human rights can also be seen as universal in another sense; they are almost universally accepted. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the most known document of international human rights norms and it has nearly universal approval. Notably, it presents itself as a “standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations”.⁹³ In this light, Donnelly claims human rights to be ‘the highest moral rights’, and as such they can ‘take priority over other moral, legal, and political claims’.⁹⁴

Further on, in contrast with Harris-Short, Donnelly claims this international consensus on the system of human rights, or the ‘Universal Declaration model’, to be ‘more voluntary than coerced’.⁹⁵ In trying to explain how this consensus came about, he draws upon John Rawls’ idea of an overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice. Even though this idea was initially formulated for domestic societies, Donnelly argues that it is applicable on the Universal Declaration model as well.⁹⁶

According to Donnelly, human rights can be derived from several different moral theories; they can be seen as part of the natural law, as means to further human good or as institutions to produce virtuous citizens. Human rights do not depend on any particular religious or philosophical doctrine, but they are however incompatible with fundamentally inegalitarian doctrines (since they are to be held equally by all human beings). Donnelly further states that the principle of basic moral equality of all human beings is today accepted by all egalitarian doctrines in the world, forming the basis for a convergence on the rights of the Universal Declaration; there is an ‘overlapping consensus’ on a global conception of justice, irrespective of civilization, religion or philosophy. Internationally recognized human rights thus provide a standard of political legitimacy; states that do not respect, protect and implement these are simply not legitimate.⁹⁷

Donnelly acknowledges, moreover, the right of an individual to decide what constitutes the good life. The autonomy of an individual must never be restricted; to force ideas of what is right upon other people is to treat them as less equal, thereby violating ‘the central commitment to the equal worth and dignity of each and every person’.⁹⁸ In this sense, autonomy is intertwined with equality since inequality would impinge on autonomy. In turn,

⁹³ Donnelly, 2003: 12

⁹⁴ Ibid: 1

⁹⁵ Ibid: 40

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid: 41 ff.

⁹⁸ Ibid: 44

human rights constitute both the autonomy and equality of every individual, making them the highest moral rights there are.⁹⁹

Thus, for both Parekh and Donnelly, liberalism is not without autonomy. However for Donnelly, autonomy, as a conception of justice, is best manifested in human rights over which he claims there is a global overlapping consensus. Important to note here is that Donnelly first argues on a meta-ethical level, agreeing with Parekh that norms are individual, subjective and relative. However, when stating that this fact is best adhered to within the human rights framework, he changes into normative ethics since human rights consists of specific moral norms that are seen as better than other moral claims. Further on, Donnelly claims human rights to be universal despite cultural and moral diversity thanks to the overlapping consensus on the Universal Declaration. A specific normative ethics is thus meta-ethically justified through claims of universalism.

My interpretation of this reasoning is that moral universalism i.e. human rights indeed, in contrast with Parekh's claim, provide great help when evaluating specific beliefs and practices within a cultural context. Since autonomy, manifested as equality, is the basis for liberalism, a belief or practice that leads to inequality is illiberal. Autonomy is thus somewhat limited by the notion of equality; individuals are free to act according to what they believe constitutes the good life, as long as it does not affect other individuals' human worth and dignity. As Donnelly also states:

A system of equal and inalienable rights cannot be sustained in the face of social practices that deny the possibility of each enjoying his or her rights equally. As individuals, proponents of racial domination, for example, have the right to hold, perhaps even to advocate, their views. But efforts to implement them in practice fall outside the international consensus on human rights and may be – must be – resisted with all vigor.¹⁰⁰

In this sense, Donnelly stresses that some cultural practices demand our condemnation rather than our respect. Nevertheless, *beliefs* demand toleration since freedom of opinion and belief is also a human right, outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Importantly, Donnelly does not deny the fact of cultural relativity and that it affects the notion of human rights; 'moral rules and social institutions evidence astonishing cultural and historical variability' and therefore also 'numerous variations in interpretations and modes of

⁹⁹ Donnelly, 2003: 44 f.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid: 53

implementing internationally recognized human rights'.¹⁰¹ This recognition is the basis for what Donnelly calls 'weak cultural relativism', or 'strong universalism'; less consideration is given to the cultural context. This approach presumes universality of human rights but acknowledges the relativity of human nature, communities and rules regarding the form and implementation of them. Put simply, 'weak cultural relativism recognizes a comprehensive set of prima facie universal human rights but allows limited local variations'.¹⁰²

Furthermore, Donnelly acknowledges that human rights are themselves relative since they are formed on a conceptual level; they are clearly connected to basic notions of human dignity and stated in very general terms, making it almost impossible for anyone to morally reject them. Notable, it is only at this conceptual level that Donnelly claims that there is a consensus on the rights of the Universal Declaration. Regarding interpretation and implementation there might be more diversity, and therefore we need to accept a certain *limited* relativity on this level.¹⁰³ However, Donnelly states, we can never stand by and just watch horrible practices such as torture and disappearances 'in the name of diversity or respect for cultural traditions'.¹⁰⁴ We cannot wait for societies to reform themselves. In this sense, human rights are 'minimal standards of decency, not luxuries of the West' and thus not a reflection of moral imperialism.¹⁰⁵

What 'certain limited relativity' exactly means is unclear. Can we for example ever accept relativity when it comes to implementing children's rights? As Donnelly himself acknowledges, children as a group have a very high universal appeal and the Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most ratified international human rights treaty of all,¹⁰⁶ suggesting that children's rights are immune to the cultural context. We will however leave this discussion for now, returning to it in block three.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the practice of witchcraft accusations and punishment leads to a state of inequality and thus violates universal moral norms. Since accusations severely affect children's worth and dignity, they should not be tolerated. However, since accusations are hard to separate from the belief, the belief itself might also pose a threat to equality. The problem is that the right to freedom of belief is a human right itself that demands toleration.

¹⁰¹ Donnelly, 2003: 89

¹⁰² Ibid: 90

¹⁰³ Ibid: 90-94

¹⁰⁴ Ibid: 159

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid:149

We are thus in a situation where moral values clash in a specific cultural context despite their purported universality.

Further on, it seems as though belief in witchcraft is shared by the community as a whole within the African context. If the interest of the community in turn is seen as very important, the well being of an individual might come in second hand. This seems to be the case when children are accused of witchcraft; the group is prioritized before the child. But are human rights supposed to protect groups before individuals? In this sense, there is a conflict between individualistic and collectivist notions of human rights. We thus return to the discussion of human rights in practice where, in the previous block, they were argued to be lacking cultural legitimacy since they are seen as too individualistic and western, but this time from a universalist perspective.

5.2.2 Cultural Legitimacy of Human Rights: A Non-issue

According to Donnelly, the fact that human rights are centrally linked to western societies is most certainly true; claims that all existing societies have had ideas of human rights, if by that we refer to equal moral rights held by all human beings, is simply not correct.¹⁰⁷ Yet, he argues, the western origin of universal moral values is not as problematic as many multiculturalists suggests.

According to Donnelly, human rights arose from two interrelated changes especially connected to ‘modernity’; the development of modern markets and states as well as the rise of political claims of toleration and equality. The list of human rights thus emerged from real human beings and their struggle to defend their dignity and not from ‘an abstract philosophical reasoning and *a priori* moral principles’.¹⁰⁸ That this process happened in the west is only a coincidence and it should therefore not be seen as reflecting a special western virtue. Nevertheless, human rights have been affected by its geographical whereabouts and have a certain western ‘twist’ to them. This does not mean, however, that human rights today should be seen as *only* the heritage of the west since they have come to be the possession of all human beings.¹⁰⁹ The theory and practice of human rights may have begun in the west, but that does not mean that these ideas and practices are irrelevant to the rest of the world. In this sense, Donnelly states that the ‘overlapping consensus’ clearly indicates that human rights

¹⁰⁷ Donnelly, 2003: 71

¹⁰⁸ Ibid: 57 f.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid: 62 f.

‘have also become a part of the heritage of every culture, religion, or civilization’.¹¹⁰ Defending his meta-ethics on this point, Donnelly thus claims that the *origin* of human rights is irrelevant since they apply equally to every human being, inevitably marking them as universal.

As to the relationship between the individual and the group within human rights, Donnelly provides an abstract discussion of the individual versus collective rights conflict making it a non-issue. To be a member and participate in various social groups is an essential part of a life of dignity. Not even in the modern western societies, people define themselves only as individuals but also in categories of religion, race, gender and nationality. In almost all contemporary societies there are several collective groups, such as business corporations, religious communities and states etc. that hold legal and moral rights.¹¹¹ Further on, individuals might exercise many human rights as a member of different groups; for example freedoms of thought, opinion and expression protect both group and individual differences.¹¹² Moreover, *cultural* rights can be seen as protecting a communal way of life, since it is a class of rights that refer principally to the individual as a member of a community. A community can thus make use of cultural rights to defend a way of life in face of other communities and the state.¹¹³

Sometimes group rights and individual rights do, however, conflict. In these cases, Donnelly claims that individual human rights triumph that of group rights, even if the integrity of the community might be threatened.¹¹⁴ This argument is simply based on the assertion that ‘so long as a group is transformed or eroded by the free exercise of the human rights of its members, such an outcome is likely to be morally and politically acceptable, often even desirable’.¹¹⁵

Notable, the strongest argument against group rights seems to be semantic. As stated previously, only *human* beings and thus individuals, not groups, can hold *human* rights. The fact that individuals can make use of their rights as part of a group is enough to protect communities and their beliefs and practices. Therefore, human rights can impossibly be too individualistic.

¹¹⁰ Donnelly, 2003: 62

¹¹¹ Ibid: 217 f.

¹¹² Ibid: 205

¹¹³ Ibid: 217 ff.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid: 218

In the case of witchcraft belief and accusations, the conflicting human rights in question are, indeed, applicable principally to individuals; a person has the right to freedom of opinion and belief and a child has the right not to be abandoned, abused, killed or tortured etc. However, since the general perception is that the *community* must be protected from witchcraft, the belief in it and the action related to it is collectively encouraged. The right to freedom of opinion and belief can thus be interpreted as primarily protecting *the group* in this case, i.e. individuals exercise their rights as members of the community. Seen as a group right it would, drawing upon Donnelly's argumentation, be trumped by children's rights since the latter is applying to individuals. The fact that the community might lose its integrity if belief in witchcraft would be suppressed by the duty to protect children must, however sad a lost integrity might be, be morally acceptable since it is based on the free exercise of human rights by individuals. Individuals thus have preference over the group. Consequently, the normative conflict is solved without undermining the validity of human rights as universal.

Nevertheless, the above reasoning and conclusion is only solid if the right to freedom of opinion and belief is indeed manifested as a group right. In reality however, this right is applicable to individuals too. In this sense, Donnelly's argumentation should not be seen as providing a solution to the individual versus collective rights conflict within the case of witchcraft accusations against children, yet giving us important insights.

In sum, this block has argued for human rights as universal without taking a large amount of consideration towards the cultural context. Importantly, it demonstrates that both 'sides' in the debate around cultural belief in witchcraft and accusations against children, aiming at protecting either the child or the community, are argued for with the help of human rights. In this sense, the normative conflict is not really between cultural relativism and universalism but between *universal* human rights. However, Donnelly contends that the universality of human rights is only intact on the conceptual level, stressing certain relativity when interpreting and implementing them. Further on, he does not provide a specifically convincing argumentation for how the human rights involved in the case of witchcraft belief and accusations against children can be collectively interpreted and used since their individuality persists, failing to defend his stance from relativist critique about cultural legitimacy.

In this sense, it might be worth examining children's rights from a less abstract and philosophical level, drawing the attention from the nature of human rights within universalism and cultural relativism to the interpretation and implementation of them instead. Can

children's rights be feasibly implemented, satisfying relativists and universalists alike? Going from a conceptual to an implementing level I will thus end this analysis with presenting block three.

5.3 The Best Interests of the Child

Witchcraft belief and related practices in Africa give rise to a general normative discussion about the possibility of universal moral values in a world of cultural diversity. More specifically however, it is reconciliation between human rights and culture from a children's perspective that needs to be reached; it is witchcraft accusations *against children* as well as its prevention that we seek to analyse. The policy literature builds upon both children's rights and respect for cultural diversity when suggesting prevention strategies to protect children. But can implementation of children's rights ever be allowed cultural relativity? In this sense, this last block will present the human rights practitioner and senior UN appointments holder Philip Alston's discussion of the principle of the best interests of the child in the context of cultural diversity, suggesting that a choice between universalism and cultural relativism is unnecessary when implementing children's rights if the principle is understood in a nuanced way.

5.3.1 Children's Rights as Universal yet Sensitive...

The principle of the best interests of the child is found in Article 3 (1) in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and provides that:

In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.¹¹⁶

This principle is mentioned in other treaties as well as in other places within the Convention, for example in relation to the separation of the child from the family setting (Article 9) and with reference to parental responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child (Article 18). Further on, the principle is also found in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child Article 4 providing that 'in all actions concerning the child undertaken by any person or authority the best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration'.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Alston, 1994: 1

¹¹⁷ Ibid: 3 f.

Even though the principle has been recognized in several international human rights instruments, Alston states that it is interpreted differently in different settings. The drafters of Article 3 (1) simply seem to have, consciously or not, taken for granted what ‘the best interests’ of a child refers to, without discussing potential clashes between different rights or the interpretative nature of the phrase when it comes to implementation in the context of different cultures.¹¹⁸ For example, in industrialized (largely western) countries the child’s best interest is often seen as requiring policies supporting autonomy and individuality. In more traditional societies on the other hand, the importance of the family and the local community is so vital that the principle of the best interests of the child might be interpreted as ‘requiring the sublimation of the individual child’s preferences to the interests of the family or even the extended family’.¹¹⁹ Further on, terms such as ‘primary’, ‘action’, and ‘concerning’ may be interpreted differently in domestic law, making the principle even more diffuse.¹²⁰

The principle of the best interests of the child is thus clearly indeterminable in character, yet this is the paradox of human rights law; norms must be sufficiently clear and comprehensive to help the international community to make use of them, yet any norms that are universalist in its aspirations and aims to address a wide range of issues must also be flexible and adaptable to specific contexts.¹²¹ Thus, Alston contends, ‘at a certain level, the debate over the nature of the relationship between international or ‘universal’ human rights standards and different cultural perspectives and contexts can never be resolved’.¹²² Nevertheless, there are some points to be made in defence for a universal, yet sensitive, aspiration of human rights based on the principle of the best interests of the child.

Firstly, Alston argues that the indeterminacy of the best interests principle can, in practice, be significantly mitigated through the application of local conventions or understandings, thereby giving space to specific local cultural values. The indeterminacy is thus seen not as an obstacle but as a promoter for reconciliation between human rights and cultural diversity, without human rights having to give up its universality.¹²³

Secondly, Alston proposes that the Convention as a whole includes the ‘broad ethical or value framework’, which human rights in general have been accused of lacking, as giving ‘a greater

¹¹⁸ Alston, 1994: 11

¹¹⁹ Ibid: 5

¹²⁰ Ibid: 12 ff.

¹²¹ Ibid: 17 f.

¹²² Ibid: 16

¹²³ Ibid: 19

degree of certainty to the content of the best interests principle'.¹²⁴ Put simply, the other Articles in the Convention implicitly and collectively guide those seeking to establish the best interests of the child in a certain case. This will, by implication, exclude certain elements and interpretations.¹²⁵

Interestingly, Alston further claims that the very formulation of the best interests principle proves that the international conceptions of human rights as either wholly individualistic or predominantly collectivist are without foundation; 'the very wording of the article, particularly through its juxtaposition of the words 'children' and 'child', brings out the interplay between these different, co-existing dimensions of human rights'.¹²⁶ According to Alston, the individuality is certainly of essential importance, but the collective claims must influence the way in which the individual rights are interpreted and exercised.¹²⁷

5.3.2 ... Applied on the Case of Witchcraft Belief and Accusations

I believe Alston pinpoints an important problem when dealing with implementation of children's rights by noting how the principle of the best interests of the child is interpreted differently in different cultures. Even if agreement on the universality of human rights would come about, they are still relative to the notion of interpretation, in turn affecting implementation. As noted previously, it might be seen as beneficial for a child accused of witchcraft to go through exorcism and torture since the aim is to remove witchcraft, which is inherently evil. Parents might thus believe that they are helping their child, with only the best of intentions. Outsiders would probably claim that there is no love and care for a child that is forced through exorcism, but in fact love and care could actually be the driving forces; the child is forced 'for its own best'.

In deciding the content of the best interests principle, Alston suggests looking to the other Articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. From this it is clear that torture of children can never be accepted, irrelevant of cultural defence. The best interests principle as defending witchcraft related punishment thus has a clear limit. More interesting however, is his suggestion that the application of local conventions might facilitate the interpretation and implementation of it. In the case of witchcraft accusations against children in sub-Saharan

¹²⁴ Alston, 1994: 19

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid: 21

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Africa, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child is applicable. Even though Article 31, stating the responsibility of the child, might be used as a defence for prioritizing the community before the individual child it cannot win over the clarity of Article 16, about protection against abuse and torture. Consequentially, in this case the individual rights of children triumphs protection of the community yet, since the ACRWC is a local convention, there cannot be complaints of moral imperialism or forced universalism. When local conventions overlap with international ones, the cultural legitimacy of the latter necessarily increases, strengthening the universalist perspective of human rights.

On the other hand, acknowledging that communalism is very manifest in African countries, the case of witchcraft accusations against children could also be an example of Alston's reasoning of 'sublimation' of children's individual preferences in favour of the family or the community; protecting the community is prioritized before securing children's rights. Then it is no longer about defending witchcraft accusations and punishment in terms of the best interests of the child, but to state the value of the individual as lower than that of the group. In this sense, Alston claims that human rights must not be concluded to be individualistic *or* collectivist, as the wording of the best interests principle (and of many other human rights as well) uses both dimensions. In turn, if relating individualistic notions of human rights mainly with universalism and promotion of collectivist interpretations of human rights as connected to cultural relativity, this is ultimately the simplest illustration of Alston's claim that a choice between universalism and cultural relativism is both impossible and unnecessary.

6. Concluding Discussion

Based on the recommendations currently provided on the issue, what is the central normative problem around witchcraft belief and prevention of witchcraft accusations against children in sub-Saharan Africa?

This study has presented, explored and discussed several normative considerations when dealing with the issue of witchcraft belief and accusations against children. Perceived as a case of children's rights versus cultural belief, the most obvious conflict is perhaps the one illustrated between cultural relativism and universalism. What is the nature of human rights? How important is cultural belief? Whereas many multiculturalists claim the subjectivity of moral norms and their relativity to the social context, universalists stress the inherent universality and global applicability of them in the form of international human rights. Within cultural relativism, it is important to respect the autonomy of both the individual and the community since the latter is what constitutes the social context for the first. Universalism, on the other hand, prioritizes the autonomy of the individual since human rights can only apply to humans (and not groups).

Consequently, it pins down to a choice between treating a child as an individual or as a part of the community. In this sense, proponents of cultural relativity argue that the very concept of human rights is lacking legitimacy in Africa, as it does not acknowledge the notion of community importance. Indeed, when comparing the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations against children to the practice of FGM, it reinforces the foreseen risk that legislation against accusations will not put an end to the practice but only force it underground since the belief in witchcraft is so deeply manifested. The question arising from this is whether prevention work should really be based upon the Convention on the Rights the Child, seeing that Africans might not be susceptible to it. With such a strategy, risks are that the organisations working with prevention will commit to moral imperialism, or in other words, a top-down approach, which is exactly what they want to avoid.

In this sense, the third perspective in the theoretical analysis might provide helpful insights. It shows that human rights often are indeterminable in character and actually reflects both individualistic and group-based interpretations. Thus, a choice between cultural relativism and universalism is not only impossible and unnecessary but will not affect how children's rights can be implemented successfully. Instead, local conventions which are more adapted to local

values might be paired with international human rights and thus improve the cultural legitimacy and facilitate implementation. In this sense, prevention work should consider to make use of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child as well in educating on human rights, and not only the international UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

More importantly, however, there is a significant commonality in cultural relativism and universalism; both contend that certain practices simply cannot be tolerated, whatever cultural defence there might be. This must be the case when children are accused of witchcraft, seeing that the consequences are extremely severe including torture, murder and social stigmatization, hardly reconcilable either with Parekh's public values or Donnelly's limited relativity. Consequently, universalism and cultural relativism might be less different than perceived, removing the (at first sight) so obvious conflict between the two.

Further on, if belief in witchcraft cannot be separated from witchcraft accusations and punishment, it must be questioned if strategies should be undertaken to change or eliminate the belief. However, the human right to freedom of opinion and belief protects the belief in witchcraft – every person must be free to decide what he or she believes to be true. Moreover, eliminating a belief is impossible in itself; the mind of a person can never be controlled. Consequently, the inherent right to life, to not be tortured, abandoned etc. must ultimately be weighed against the right to freedom of opinion and belief. Therefore, *the central normative problem regarding the issue of witchcraft belief and prevention of witchcraft accusations against children in sub-Saharan Africa lies within universalism*, promoting equal human rights for all individuals.

However, I believe there is an important difference between eliminating and promoting change of beliefs. Whereas none of the different perspectives presented in the theoretical analysis probably would see elimination of belief in witchcraft as desirable (or feasible), they might be useful in arguing for a change in attitude, or at least for paying attention, towards the belief as a potential problem in itself. The right to opinion and belief will always stand strong, but in certain cases it might be worth to question if the belief can be changed (to not demand action, for example). But should we really try to influence what people believe in? Is that not committing to elitist thinking and a form of moral imperialism? On the other hand, I am quite confident that the well being of African communities as well as the lives and personal development of the children will be positively affected by a witchcraft belief less manifested

and frightening. In this sense, does not the end sometimes justify the means? Even though highly relevant, these questions will be left unanswered in this study.

My point is thus not to decide whether witchcraft belief should or can be changed, but to enlighten the normative problem around it. If the policy literature on witchcraft accusations against children would also reflect awareness of witchcraft belief as a potential problem as well as provide convincing argumentation for why or more probable, why not, the belief must change – I believe the recommendations would be less shallow and provide a more stable foundation upon which to build successful prevention strategies. Furthermore, knowledge among development and NGO workers about preventing witchcraft accusations against children as a wider conflict between individual human rights is of great significance in order to handle the phenomenon in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. In this sense, this study provides useful insights and discussion.

Lastly, to increase the validity of this study, more theoretical perspectives regarding universalism and cultural relativism could have been included in the analysis. However, the results show that the main normative problem lies outside what the tension between cultural relativism and universalism offers (even though it puts the empirical case at hand in a wider context which is also of importance), but in weighing the importance of two human rights against each other. Therefore, more theories might only have repeated what had already been said. Nevertheless, this study is very philosophical and abstract, including my personal argumentative chains and assumptions of the nature of witchcraft belief and thus its implications for human rights. This subjectivity inevitably leads to a low reliability.

For future research I would recommend a field study based upon interviews, exploring the relationship between witchcraft belief and witchcraft accusations. Is action in fact intrinsic to belief in witchcraft? Or is it, for believers, possible to separate belief from action? How important is really belief in witchcraft for the cohesion of the community? Depending on the results from such a study, the question if a change in witchcraft belief should be promoted and how it can be done might gain more substance and relevance. Even though the reliability of a field study might still not be perfect, it would be significantly improved. However, this study is the first to treat the phenomenon of witchcraft belief and accusations against children from a philosophical perspective, making it valuable in itself.

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