

Magical Practices and the Recruitment of Women into Rebel Groups

RESEARCH NOTE

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Magical practices play a central role in the indoctrination and socialization processes of many rebel organizations. Qualitative scholarship has examined the central role that women play as practitioners of magic in some of these organizations. Some women are believed to have the powers to perform various rituals that help protect recipients, as well as enhance their fighting capabilities. Thus, groups that practice magic often incorporate women into logistical support roles because of the unique abilities that women are believed to possess in facilitating the use of magic. However, despite the relationship between magical practices and the incorporation of women that has been observed in various rebel groups, the burgeoning quantitative literature on the recruitment of women into armed movements has largely overlooked this association. To remedy this, we combine data on the magical practices of rebel organizations and their recruitment of women into logistical support roles to better understand this association. We find fairly strong evidence of a positive association between the use of magical practices and the recruitment of women into logistical support roles in rebel organizations.

Las prácticas de magia juegan un papel fundamental en los procesos de adoctrinamiento y socialización de muchas organizaciones rebeldes. La investigación académica cualitativa ha estudiado el papel fundamental que desempeñan las mujeres como practicantes de la magia en algunas de estas organizaciones. Se cree que algunas mujeres tienen el poder de realizar varios rituales mágicos que ayudan a proteger a los receptores, así como a mejorar sus capacidades de combate. En consecuencia, los grupos que practican magia tienden a incorporar a mujeres en roles de apoyo logístico debido a las habilidades únicas que se cree que poseen las mujeres con el fin de facilitar el uso de la magia. Sin embargo, a pesar de la relación existente entre las prácticas de magia y la incorporación de mujeres que se ha observado en varios grupos rebeldes, la cada vez más abundante literatura cuantitativa en materia del reclutamiento de mujeres en movimientos armados ha pasado por alto, en gran medida, esta asociación. Con el fin de remediar esta carencia, combinamos datos relativos a las prácticas mágicas de las organizaciones rebeldes con datos referentes al reclutamiento de mujeres en roles de apoyo logístico por parte de las organizaciones rebeldes con el fin de poder comprender mejor esta asociación. Concluimos que existen pruebas bastante sólidas de una correlación positiva entre el uso de prácticas mágicas y el reclutamiento de mujeres en roles de apoyo logístico en organizaciones rebeldes.

Les pratiques magiques jouent un rôle central dans les processus d'endoctrinement et de socialisation de nombreuses organisations rebelles. La recherche qualitative a analysé le rôle déterminant que les femmes jouent en tant que praticiennes de magie dans certaines de ces organisations. Certaines femmes auraient le pouvoir de réaliser divers rituels permettant de protéger les bénéficiaires, mais aussi d'améliorer leurs capacités de combat. Aussi les groupes qui pratiquent la magie intègrent-ils souvent des femmes à des rôles de soutien logistique en raison des capacités uniques qu'elles posséderaient dans l'utilisation de la magie. Néanmoins, en dépit de l'observation d'une relation entre les pratiques magiques et l'incorporation des femmes dans divers groupes rebelles, la littérature quantitative émergente sur le recrutement de femmes dans des mouvements armés a largement ignoré cette association. Pour pallier ceci, nous combinons des données sur les pratiques magiques des organisations rebelles et leur recrutement de femmes à des rôles de soutien logistique afin de mieux comprendre cette association. Nous trouvons des éléments qui viennent plutôt fortement étayer l'existence d'une association positive entre l'utilisation de pratiques magiques et le recrutement de femmes à des rôles de soutien logistique dans les organisations rebelles.

Introduction

In Africa, women play a central role in the magical practices of many rebel groups. These practices serve a variety of functions for militant organizations. For instance, female practitioners of magic are believed to help protect rebels on the battlefield. Jonas Savimbi, the leader of the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA),

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fought with a woman whose magic he allegedly believed would make him immune from harm on the battlefield (Pullella 2009). Female practitioners of magic have also used their perceived powers for other purposes, including to indoctrinate recruits. In Senegal, for example, priestesses working with the Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance (MFDC) helped create shrines at which recruits pledged their loyalty and prayed for success (Stam 2009).

Magical practices are a prominent feature of many traditional African religious and spiritual belief systems. Magical practices involve the manipulation of common objects to fuse together the physical and spiritual worlds to derive powers from the spiritual realm to affect everyday outcomes. Such practices, for instance, include rituals and the wearing of protective amulets intended to bring power and/or protection to practitioners (e.g., Ellis 1999; Włodarczyk 2009). Magical practices serve a variety of functions for rebel organizations, including helping them build legitimacy and attract recruits; indoctrinate members and achieve discipline among the rank-and-file; and motivate soldiers while intimidating the opposition (Włodarczyk 2009). These practices are widespread in African conflicts, with Soules and Avdan (2024a) finding that just over one-third of African rebel groups in their sample employ some form of magic.

Loken (2022) notes that rebel groups have recruited women into logistical support roles, including as facilitators of magical practices and rituals. These roles involve “internally facing work maintaining rebel organizations’ militant apparatus and denotes activities critical to carrying out successful, individual attacks” (Loken 2022, p. 145). Logistical support roles include a variety of functions such as attack planners, cooks, porters, radio operators, and spiritual mediums and magical practitioners, among a variety of other tasks (Loken and Matfess 2024a).

Despite women’s prominent role in facilitating magical practices, systematic cross-group quantitative analysis of this phenomenon remains lacking. Consequently, it remains difficult to assess whether anecdotal links between magic and women’s incorporation generalize across cases. Quantitative studies on female recruitment may also overlook a key factor that helps explain variation in women’s recruitment across rebel groups.

To address this gap, we use novel data on rebel groups’ magical practices to examine their impact on women’s recruitment. We expect that groups employing such practices are more likely to recruit women into logistical roles, given women’s central role in facilitating magic in broader society. Combining data from the Magical Acts by Groups in Civil Conflicts (MAGICC) dataset (Soules and Avdan 2024a) and Women’s Activities in Armed Rebellion (WAAR) dataset (Loken and Matfess 2024a), we find consistent evidence of a strong, positive association between rebel groups’ use of magical practices and their recruitment of women into logistical support roles.

Our quantitative analysis focuses exclusively on Africa for two primary reasons. Empirically, while the MAGICC dataset covers only groups in Africa (Soules and Avdan 2024a), it is the only cross-rebel group dataset on magical practices that exists, to the best of our knowledge. Theoretically, we build off research which focuses on the role of women as practitioners of magic in traditional African religions (e.g., Ebere 2011; Grillo 2018; Kilson 1976; Oriola 2012; Oriola et al. 2013). Thus, an African specific analysis most directly engages with this literature.

We hope to make at least five contributions with this research note. First, we contribute the burgeoning *quantitative* literature that examines factors driving the recruitment

of women into rebel movements. These factors include tactical needs (Dalton and Asal 2011; Thomas 2021; Thomas and Bond 2015), societal-level gender equality (Thomas and Wood 2018), and rebel group ideology (Henshaw 2016; Wood and Thomas 2017).

Particularly relevant to our paper is the contrast between patterns of women’s recruitment into radical Islamist and magic practicing rebel groups. Although women play important and diverse roles in many radical Islamist groups (e.g., Jadoon et al. 2022; Loken and Zelenz 2018), aggregate patterns still reveal that women are less likely to participate in these types of rebel organizations (Wood and Thomas 2017). Our findings show that certain spiritual beliefs *facilitate* the recruitment of women into armed groups. Our paper thus rectifies the disproportionate focus on women’s participation in radical Islamist ideologies by highlighting the importance of considering non-traditional spiritual ideologies.

Traditionally religious groups, such as radical Islamists, explicitly serve religious goals, like the establishment of the caliphate in the case of the Islamic State (ISIS) (Włodarczyk 2009). These religious goals entail congruence between women’s roles within rebel movements and their prospective roles post-conflict. For instance, women in ISIS were expected to play pivotal roles in constituting the Ummah (Termeer and Duyvesteyn 2022). In contrast, rebels that practice magic confer on women roles and tasks such as prophet, healer, spiritual leader, that mirror the roles they fulfill in the community at large. Additionally, religious doctrine circumscribes the roles accorded to women during combat: ISIS affiliated groups in Southeast Asia tended to deploy female recruits as suicide bombers but disfavor the mixing of women and men on the battlefield due to their interpretation of religious doctrine (Jadoon et al. 2022). Spiritual groups lack similar doctrinal limitations. These differences affect not only how women participate in armed movements but also how this participation affects them post-conflict.

Second, we contribute to a small quantitative literature that examines the effects of rebel groups employing magical practices. This scholarship focuses primarily on the association between magical practices and the recruitment of children (Beber and Blattman 2013; Soules and Avdan 2024a).

Third, understanding the role of female magical practitioners can help us understand more about the behavior and trajectories of rebel organizations. Qualitative literature suggests that the use of magical practices is consequential on a variety of dimensions, including for rebels’ use of lethal violence (Włodarczyk 2013), sexual violence (Asadi 2014), and their longevity and success (Włodarczyk 2009). The recruitment of women is expected to affect all these dynamics as well (Braithwaite and Ruiz 2018; Harrell 2023; Wood and Allemand 2022). Thus, understanding the role of women as magical practitioners in rebel organizations (e.g., Loken 2022) could help us shed light on why the use of magical practices and female recruits is so consequential for rebel organizations.

Fourth, while there are some quantitative studies that investigate the causes and consequences of the recruitment of women into non-combat roles (e.g., Harrell 2023; Henshaw 2016; Loken and Matfess 2024a; Thomas and Bond 2015), more of the quantitative literature tends to focus on women in combat roles (e.g., Braithwaite and Ruiz 2018; Brannon et al. 2024; Goldberg 2024; Manekin and Wood 2020; Thomas 2024; Thomas and Wood 2018; Wood and Allemand 2022; Wood and Thomas 2017). Relatedly, we also build off the larger *qualitative* literature that examines

women's participation in non-combat roles in rebel organizations (e.g., Coulter 2011; Cragin and Daly 2009; Loken 2022; MacKenzie 2012; Molyneux 1985; Parkinson 2013; Viterna 2013).

Finally, mirroring Loken and Zelenz 2018, we stress that ignoring the phenomenon of women's recruitment into religious organizations runs the risk of a limited counterterrorism approach. However, we also emphasize that the policy prescriptions differ when we consider spiritualist groups rather than Islamist extremists. Rebel groups deploy magical practices to psychologically indoctrinate recruits and prevent desertion (Soules and Avdan 2024a). First, counterinsurgency strategies must take seriously, rebels' spiritual authority structure, which often includes female figures, and second, the psychological hold supernatural beliefs create over members. Third, given the resonance between spiritual beliefs in the community and within rebel groups, deradicalization must take a more comprehensive approach predicated on preventing the exploitation of supernatural beliefs for violent ends.

The article begins by examining the role of magical practices in rebel organizations and the centrality of women in facilitating them. We then outline our expectation of a positive association between these practices and women's participation in rebel groups. This is followed by research design, results, and additional analyses on women's involvement in other roles. We conclude with a discussion of our findings.

Magic and Rebellion

Magical practices offer several strategic benefits to rebel groups, helping explain their adoption—and the recruitment of female practitioners. While not all groups use them, particularly those outside relevant cultural contexts (Włodarczyk 2009), Włodarczyk identifies three core functions these practices serve for groups that do. First, these practices can help increase the public's perception of these groups' legitimacy, which subsequently helps rebels mobilize recruits. Włodarczyk notes that rebels often gain support for their cause by framing their struggle in spiritual terms and relying on spiritual leaders in the community to help garner further public support. Relatedly, the promise of the endowment of magical powers, including battlefield protections and enhanced fighting abilities, helps groups recruit (Włodarczyk 2009).

Second, Włodarczyk (2009) also posits that magical practices help rebel organizations strengthen discipline among the rank-and-file. Rebel leaders often cultivate the idea that they have magical powers that are even stronger than the average rank-and-file member. Cadres often come to believe, as a result, that the rebel leadership can use their magical powers to punish disobedience and to track down deserters and defectors. This helps increase discipline among the rank-and-file (Włodarczyk 2009). Gates (2017), for instance, argues that the fear of punishment through magical means has been essential in maintaining discipline in the Lord's Resistance Army.

Włodarczyk (2009) notes that a third benefit of magical practices is that they help rebel leaders motivate their own recruits and intimidate enemy combatants. The belief that magic increases the fighting capabilities of (rebel) soldiers, as well as making them invincible from enemy fire, motivates those who practice magic to fight harder and take more risks, while also intimidating enemy forces, making them less willing to engage such rebels on the battlefield (Włodarczyk 2009).

In sum, magical practices can help rebel groups overcome a variety of common challenges they face including (1) gaining legitimacy and recruits; (2) maintaining internal discipline; and (3) motivating their soldiers and intimidating enemy fighters. Thus, if they operate in a cultural context in which magic is commonly believed in and practiced, rebels have strong incentive to practice magic.

Theory

Magical practices can benefit rebel organizations in a variety of ways including bolstering their legitimacy, socializing recruits and enforcing discipline, and motivating members while intimidating opponents (Włodarczyk 2009). Rebels typically derive these magical practices from broader religious traditions that are common in their societies. Women often play central roles in facilitating magical practices in these religions. This increases the demand that magically practicing rebel groups have for female recruits, as the former rely on the latter to facilitate these practices, which are believed to provide significant benefits. Consequently, rebels that practice magic often recruit women into logistical support roles, including to perform rituals and provide spiritual guidance. However, magical practices are often associated with beliefs that reinforce patriarchal norms, often resulting in female magical practitioners being relegated to logistical support roles in rebel organizations.

Spiritual Beliefs, Magical Practices, and Female Recruitment

Magical practices increase the demand for female recruits. From the group's perspective, for strategic or sincere reasons, women possess magical utility. Group members may genuinely believe that women's fulfillment of spiritual duties lends battlefield advantages, and/or leaders may tout and harness such beliefs to enhance group cohesion and solidarity (Włodarczyk 2009). Rebel groups are opportunistic and recruit women to expand the pool of available recruits and leverage the tactical benefits that women provide (Wood and Thomas 2017), such as battlefield success (e.g., Thomas 2021) and media attention (e.g., Bloom 2007). Similarly, rebels may opportunistically incorporate spiritual narratives to suit their needs, reinterpreting beliefs to allow female recruitment. Thus, given that rebels can derive a high utility from employing magical practices, and that women play a central role as practitioners of magic, groups that practice magic will have a high demand for women.

In some spiritualist traditions, women serve as exclusive or primary mediums, healers, or diviners. Rebels that adhere to these beliefs may see women as uniquely qualified to channel supernatural forces, which enhances demand for female recruits. Thus, women's participation may not merely be tolerated but actively encouraged by group leaders. For example, Komian priestesses in Sierra Leone's Kamajors were exclusively women and fighters would not go into battle without the spiritual purification and protective rituals they conducted. Some Mai-Mai factions believed that rituals conducted by female Sangomas were more effective in making them invulnerable than those by men, leading to the recruitment of women (Allen 2023). Related, if spiritual beliefs sanctify women's indispensable magical beliefs, groups will encounter less friction in recruiting women. Importantly, we do not claim that magical practices lead women to occupy a wide range of roles in rebel groups.

Female practitioners typically serve in logistical roles, offering magical protection to fighters (Loken 2022).

More broadly, women play a central role in many traditional African religions in which the aforementioned magical practices feature prominently. Kilson (1976) notes that while there are strong patriarchal dimensions to some traditional Africans religions (as with other religions across the world), women still play important roles in these religions. Indeed, Kilson explains that while women often serve in subordinate roles in many of these religions, they still fill essential tasks, including serving as ritual assistants and spiritual mediums. Kilson notes that women play an essential role in many major rituals, including those related to birth, life, and death. Ebere (2011) further emphasizes that women and men often play *complementary* roles in traditional African religions, with women playing a central role in the practice of various rituals, including fertility rituals.

Women as Magical Practitioners in Rebel Groups

Across West Africa, women play a central role in rituals of “spiritual combat” against malevolent forces (Grillo 2018). Beliefs in women’s protective and healing powers have made them vital to many rebellions (Thabane 2000) and insurgent movements, where they offer “spiritual fortification” to fighters (Oriola 2012, p. 547). As such, groups seeking to perform these rituals must incorporate women into their ranks.

Female magical practitioners in rebel groups typically fill non-combat roles, which fall into two main categories. One key function involves performing protective rituals to shield soldiers from harm—such as rituals for bullet immunity. Some groups, like ALiR in Rwanda and RENAMO in Mozambique, use female spiritual mediums, while others, like the CDF and RUF in Sierra Leone, rely on female herbalists (Loken and Matfess 2024c; Mazurana and Carlson 2004). These women may conduct rituals before battles or accompany fighters to provide ongoing protection (Pullella 2009). Despite their varied roles, their central task is safeguarding soldiers.

A second key function of female magical practitioners is providing spiritual guidance to rebel members, helping to inspire, discipline, and influence decision-making. Groups like the FDLR, ALiR, and RENAMO used female mediums for motivation and control, while others relied on women’s prophecies to guide battle decisions (Loken and Matfess 2024c). Alice Auma (Lakwena) led the Holy Spirit Movement, claiming to channel the spirit Lakwena commanding her to rebel against the Ugandan government (Behrend 2000). Though most female practitioners do not hold top leadership roles, they remain influential spiritual figures. Auma’s rise also reflects how spiritual work could offer infertile or unmarried women an alternative path to power in patriarchal settings (Behrend 2000, p. 132).

Our theoretical focus is on women who are members of rebel groups, not civilians. The data on women’s participation in rebel groups also only cover women who are members (Loken and Matfess 2024a). Still, civilian spiritual practices can influence rebels: groups using magic may seek support from spiritually active women in the community, and local traditions often assign women ritual roles that carry over into rebel movements. We argue, however, that such groups are more likely to recruit these women directly, given their centrality to magical practices and the benefits of closer integration.

Reinforcement of Patriarchal Norms

It is also important to acknowledge the paradoxical nature of women’s involvement as magical practitioners in rebel groups. Indeed, some aspects of rebel organizations’ magical practices help reinforce patriarchal norms in at least a couple of different ways. First, female practitioners often serve in somewhat marginal or subordinate roles in rebel organizations.

Oriola (2012) explains that while women play an essential role as magical practitioners in many rebel movements, these same organizations often engage in behavior that marginalizes these women. For instance, there is a belief that magical charms will wear off men who have sexual intercourse with women or who encounter women who are menstruating, justifying the RENAMO’s ban of menstruating women (Wilson 1992) and the Niger Delta’s categorical ban on women (Oriola et al. 2013). Consequently, it is often postmenopausal women who carry out protective rituals for rebel groups (Oriola 2012; Oriola et al. 2013).

Second, while some faiths confer spiritual leadership upon women, this does not translate into operational leadership. These faiths create space for women to take on a diverse set of roles, some of which elevate women’s spiritual importance within the group, but this does not upend societal patriarchal norms. Spiritual roles do not override patriarchal norms about women’s subordination to men within society writ large. Joseph Kony relied on female priestesses for divination, but the LRA also perpetrated forced marriages and gender-based violence, showing the paradoxical nature of women’s involvement in spiritual roles within rebel movements (Allen 2023). In short, the practice of magic by women may empower them spiritually and symbolically but not materially or organizationally in rebel movements.

As a result of these dynamics, we do not expect that female magical practitioners will often achieve high-ranking roles within their organizations. While these women fill a variety of roles and functions in rebel groups, they are not typically in positions of authority. Indeed, the aforementioned female spiritual medium and leader of the HSM, Alice Auma, appears to be more of the exception than the rule for female magical practitioners in rebel organizations.

Third, there is also some evidence of an association between magical practices and violence against women. Indeed, (particularly older) women who engage in magic sometimes become negatively labeled as witches (Stevens 2006). This is especially concerning given that women are often labeled as witches to justify their murder (Miguel 2005). This is another example of how magical practices and beliefs can sometimes reinforce patriarchal structures.

Rebel organizations sometimes violently target accused witches, often women. For instance, while UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi relied on a woman whom he believed would bring him magical protections on the battlefield (Almeida 2009), he would also have his opponents accused of witchcraft and burn them to death at public rallies (Whitney and Jolliffe 1989). We also find evidence of other rebel groups that employ magical practices attacking people they accuse of sorcery and witchcraft, including the Bundu dia Kongo, Boko Haram, the FDLR, the Lord’s Resistance Army, and the West Side Boys, among others. Many of these groups also recruit women, including female magical practitioners (see appendix for more discussion of the evidence). Thus, while such groups sometimes incorporate women because of magical practices and beliefs, other times they violently target them because of such beliefs.

However, despite these dynamics, we still expect that the desire to employ magical practices increases the probability that rebel groups incorporate women because of the perceived benefits that female practitioners of magic bring. As an important caveat, we are not arguing that all individual beliefs or interpretations of traditional African religions, from which magical practices are derived, place the exact same level of importance on women's participation. However, we expect that, on average, groups that engage in magical practices derived from these religions are more likely to incorporate women, given the very prominent role that women play in many traditional African religions (Ebere 2011; Grillo 2018; Kilson 1976; Oriola 2012; Oriola et al. 2013; Thabane 2000).

Testable Implication

Magical practices serve key functions for rebel organizations, including enhancing legitimacy, motivating recruits, enforcing discipline, and intimidating opponents (Włodarczyk 2009). To realize these benefits, groups often have strong incentives to adopt such practices. In many belief systems, women are seen as essential ritual practitioners, particularly in protective rites (Oriola 2012). Because protection is central to the mobilizing and morale-boosting value of magic (Włodarczyk 2009), rebel groups may recruit women specifically to fulfill these ritual roles. However, given that magical beliefs and practices often contribute to the reinforcement of patriarchal structures, we expect that female magical practitioners will be particularly recruited for logistical support roles. We therefore hypothesize that:

H1: Rebel organizations that employ magical practices are more likely to recruit women into logistical support roles than groups that do not practice magic.

Research Design

Sample and Explanatory Variables

To test our hypotheses, we use the *Magical Acts by Groups in Civil Conflicts* (MAGICC) dataset (Soules and Avdan 2024a), which documents magical practices among 106 African rebel organizations active between 1989 and 2011. These groups are drawn from the Non-State Actor Dataset (Cunningham et al. 2013), based on the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's Armed Conflict Dataset (Gleditsch et al. 2002). Given resource constraints and the regional prominence of such practices, the dataset is limited to Africa (Soules and Avdan 2024a; Włodarczyk 2009).

MAGICC draws on diverse sources, including academic publications, think tank and government reports, other datasets (e.g., the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia), and media coverage (Soules and Avdan 2024b). We conduct cross-sectional analyses due to the data's time-invariant nature (Soules and Avdan 2024a). While this limits causal inference, these are the only cross-group data that exist, to the best of our knowledge, on the magical practices of rebel groups. Furthermore, the data we use on women's participation are also time invariant (Loken and Matfess 2024a).

MAGICC distinguishes between two categories of magical practices. The first captures organizational-level practices—used by both leaders and rank-and-file—including (1) initiation rituals; (2) protection rituals; (3) performance-enhancing rituals; and (4) other magical acts. The sec-

ond identifies whether leaders are believed to possess extraordinary powers, such as prophetic status or abilities like flight or shapeshifting (Soules and Avdan 2024b). Our main analyses focus on organizational-level practices, reflecting our theoretical expectation that women play key roles in facilitating magical practices that benefit the group broadly.

One potential concern is that such practices may be ubiquitous among African rebel groups. However, even using an inclusive threshold, only 38 of 106 groups (35.8 percent) show evidence of magical practices. Their newsworthiness suggests true variation, not just data limitations. Moreover, we employ both inclusive and restrictive measures, with the latter requiring widespread use within the ranks, further confirming meaningful variation across groups.¹

Outcome Variable

Our dependent variable comes from the *Women's Activities in Armed Rebellion* (WAAR) dataset (Loken and Matfess 2024a), which documents various forms of women's participation in rebel groups featured in the UCDP dyadic dataset, overlapping with MAGICC. WAAR compiles information from digital archives, government and NGO reports, think tank publications, ethnographic studies, and scholarly work (Loken and Matfess 2024a, p. 491).

Again, we expect rebel groups engaging in magical practices to recruit women into logistical support roles, reflecting gendered beliefs about women's association with magic (Loken 2022). WAAR includes a binary indicator for whether a group recruits women *members* into non-combat logistical roles, which involve "performing logistical tasks, including but not limited to nurses, medics, cooks, couriers, planners, administrators, radio or weapons operators and guards" (Loken and Matfess 2024b, p. 10). We also explore women's recruitment into other roles in supplementary analyses.

This variable is available for 99 of the 106 groups in MAGICC. Among the 99, 38 groups (38.4 percent) recruit women into logistical support roles. Of these 99, 36 meet the inclusive and 21 meet the stricter threshold for magical practices. Of the 38 groups recruiting women into logistical roles, 27 meet the inclusive threshold for magical practices and 16 meet the stricter threshold. Given the binary nature of the outcome, we use logistic regression with standard errors clustered by country.

Control Variables

Turning to control variables, we account for alternative ideologies that influence female recruitment (e.g., Wood and Thomas 2017) by including binary indicators of religious and leftist ideologies from the FORGE dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020). We draw on the NSA dataset (Cunningham et al. 2013) to code whether a group is weaker than the government it opposes. To capture group age, which affects women's recruitment (e.g., Israelsen 2020), we calculate group lifespan using the UCDP

¹Another potential concern is that (Western) media outlets heavily report the use of magical practices because they consider them to be "newsworthy." This could result in an overinflation in information about magical practices that is not reflective of more systematic behaviors of rebel groups. However, we examined the qualitative narratives used to code groups in the MAGICC dataset (Soules and Avdan 2024b). Of the 38 groups that were coded as having at least some evidence of engaging in magical practices, the coding for only 11 of the groups (28.9 percent) was based exclusively on news reports and *not* academic or government reports.

Table 1. Rebel Magical Practices and Recruitment of Women into Non-Combat Roles

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Magical Practices (exc.)	2.097*** (0.605)	1.219 (0.950)	2.055* (1.079)			
Magical Practices (inc.)				2.652*** (0.554)	1.668** (0.741)	2.572*** (0.957)
Religious		-2.578*** (0.953)	-2.900** (1.136)		-2.520** (1.163)	-2.908** (1.269)
Left-Wing		2.498* (1.286)	2.183 (1.626)		2.543* (1.404)	2.032 (1.760)
Much Weaker		-0.688 (0.532)	-0.00846 (0.853)		-0.835 (0.667)	-0.179 (1.055)
Rebel Age		0.228*** (0.0707)	0.284*** (0.0901)		0.219** (0.0914)	0.290*** (0.104)
Forced Recruitment of Children		1.245** (0.573)	1.592** (0.682)		1.040* (0.595)	1.380* (0.789)
Percent Animist			-0.739 (2.736)			-1.532 (3.266)
Percent Muslim			2.368 (1.651)			2.438 (1.593)
Women's Political Empowerment			0.833 (2.524)			0.950 (2.757)
per capita GDP (Logged)			-3.894 (2.461)			-4.358** (2.189)
Polity2			-0.0155 (0.0993)			-0.0307 (0.0973)
Constant	-0.934*** (0.328)	-2.906*** (0.674)	-4.664*** (1.749)	-1.553*** (0.394)	-3.024*** (0.693)	-4.797*** (1.744)
Observations	99	96	93	99	96	93
Chi ²	12***	26.37***	48.79***	22.92***	24.49***	49.90***
Log Likelihood	-57.93	-36.15	-32.05	-49.42	-34.33	-30
Pseudo R-squared	0.121	0.431	0.475	0.250	0.460	0.509
Robust standard errors in parentheses						

*** $P < 0.01$, ** $P < 0.05$, * $P < 0.1$.

Conflict Termination Dataset (v3-2021; [Kreutz 2010](#)). Finally, given the link between magical practices and child soldiering ([Soules and Avdan 2024a](#)), we include [Haer et al.'s \(2020\)](#) ordinal measure of forced child recruitment.

At the country-conflict level, we control for the population shares practicing Islam and Animism (World Religion Dataset; [Maoz and Henderson 2013](#)), women's political empowerment (V-Dem; [Sundström et al. 2017](#)), regime democracy scores ([Marshall and Gurr 2020](#)), and logged per capita GDP ([Fariss et al. 2022](#)). We include a discussion of the justification for including these control variables in the appendix.

Results

The findings are presented in [table 1](#). We find fairly consistent evidence that groups that employ magical practices are also more likely to recruit women into logistical support roles. The association is positive in all models and statistically significant in all but one, dropping just below statistical significance ($p \sim 0.143$). The marginal effects for the more restrictive measure of magical practices, with the full set of control variables, is presented in [figure 1](#). Based on this model, groups who employ magical practices are almost 22 percent more likely to recruit women into logistical support roles than groups who do not.

Case Vignettes

To evaluate the causal mechanisms further, we include two brief case vignettes about female magical practitioners in rebel organizations in our sample. Additionally, in the appendix, we include a case vignette for the Holy Spirit Movement, a group outside of our sample.

RENAMO

Spiritual beliefs in Mozambique are so well integrated into the community's psyche that these traditions played a role both during combat and in post-conflict reconciliation ([Honwana 2011](#)). The Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO) capitalized on these beliefs, using them to recruit and indoctrinate members ([Honwana 2011](#), 61). In addition to the socialization of rank-and-file members, the group attributed powers including flight and precognition to high-ranking officials in the group ([Soules and Avdan 2024a; Włodarczyk 2009](#)). RENAMO used beliefs about the supernatural invincibility of rebels to successfully intimidate government forces. Women played influential spiritual roles, for example serving as spiritual mediums to help protect and inspire soldiers ([Loken and Matfess 2024c](#)).

However, women were relegated to support roles. Women serving in combat roles was rare, in deference to societal norms, which established an inextricable link between

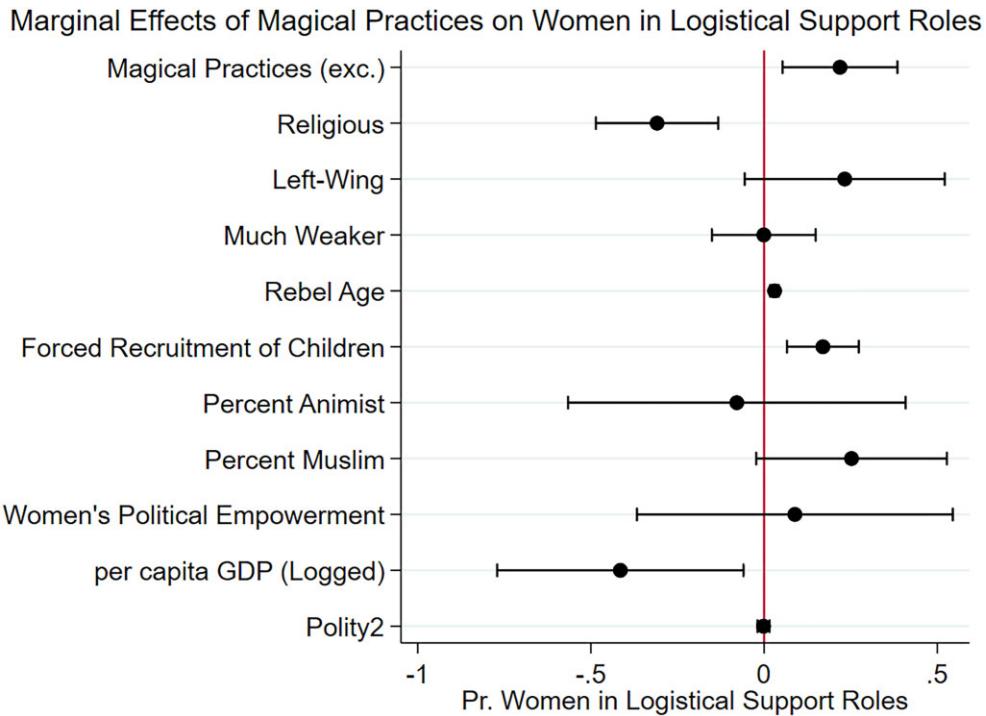


Figure 1. Marginal Effects of Magical Practices on the Probability of Recruiting Women into Logistical Support Roles

militarism and masculinity, and saw combat as a fundamental pillar of male superiority (Honwana 2011, p. 93–94). Instead, women acted in support roles, such as spies, nurses, instructors, and porters. Consonant with our arguments, spiritual roles did not augur more active roles for women within the group.

Importantly, while RENAMO's reference to spirituality accorded specific mystical tasks to women, this did not necessarily empower women. In fact, RENAMO forcibly recruited women and girls and subjected them to domestic servitude (Honwana 2011). Spiritual beliefs sometimes were used to stigmatize women, as evidenced by the ban the group imposed on menstruating women soldiers (Wilson 1992). In sum, RENAMO illustrates the impact of existing community traditions on the instrumental use of spiritual faiths by rebels. It also shows that these faiths accord specific mystical roles to women, but also that these roles do not negate or weaken patriarchal norms.

MFDC

As noted earlier, in Senegal, priestesses played an important part in the Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance (MFDC). Priestesses played a vital role in mobilizing recruits into the MFDC, both through persuasion and coercion, sometimes threatening those who did not join or support the group (Stam 2009). Once they joined, recruits participated in initiation rituals in sacred forests, taking mystical oaths facilitated by priestesses (USAID 2009). Recruits were told that if these oaths could only be “undone” by the priestesses who performed them, and if recruits tried leaving the group without having the oaths lifted, they would become ill or die painfully (Home Office 2010; USAID 2009). Evidence suggests that many recruits took this threat seriously (USAID 2009).

The MFDC provides a prime example of a group in which women played an important role as spiritual guides or mediums. The priestesses harnessed beliefs in magical powers to both persuade and coerce recruits as parts of recruitment and indoctrination efforts. However, while priestesses played an important role in the MFDC, fewer than 10 percent of combat roles, and no leadership roles, were filled by women (Loken and Matfess 2024a). This reinforces earlier discussion about how women are still marginalized in rebel groups in many ways, even when they play important roles as magical practitioners.

Additional Analyses

We briefly summarize the sensitivity checks displayed in the paper's appendix. First, we consider women's incorporation into a variety of other roles in rebel organizations: using measures from the WAAR dataset for non-combat (Table A1), outreach (Table A2), clandestine (Table A3) roles, frontline (combat) roles (Table A4), and leadership roles (Table A5). Magical practices are strongly linked to women's general non-combat and frontline participation, but there is less consistent evidence of these practices affecting their participation in outreach, clandestine, and leadership roles. This last finding suggests that women's agency is still often limited in groups that practice magic (Oriola 2012; Oriola et al. 2013; Wilson 1992).

Second, we consider the possibility of intersectionality in female recruitment, whereby age and gender have nuanced effects on the demand for women. As girls gain maturity and move to adulthood, they are more likely to take on spiritual tasks. Also, groups vary on their preferences toward the ages of female recruits, often basing these preferences on spiritual traditions. While some believe girls to possess magical powers (Dallaire 2010; Gilbert and Green 2015), others only confer spiritual powers on postmenopausal women

Table 2. Summary of Results of Alternative Tests

Appendix Table	Modification	Relationship
1	DV: Ordinal Measure of Women in Non-Combat Roles (General)	Positive and always statistically significant (6/6 models)
2	DV: Binary Measure of Women's Participation in Outreach Roles	Positive but not consistently statistically significant (2/6 models)
3	DV: Binary Measure of Women's Participation in Clandestine Roles	Positive but not consistently statistically significant (2/6 models)
4	DV: Ordinal Measure of Women in Frontline Roles	Positive and always statistically significant (6/6 models)
5	DV: Ordinal Measure of Women in Leadership Roles	Positive but not consistently statistically significant (3/6 models)
6	DV: Ordinal Measure of Recruitment of Girls (Any Role)	Positive but not consistently statistically significant (3/6 models)
7	IV: Magically Powerful Leaders	Positive but not consistently statistically significant (2/6 models)
8	Thomas and Bond (2015)—Replication: Women in Any Roles	Positive and mostly statistically significant (3/4 models)
9	Thomas & Bond (2015)—Replication: Women in Combat Roles	Positive but never statistically significant (0/4 models)

(Oriola 2012; Oriola et al. 2013). We explore the effects of magical practices on recruitment of girls, using data from Haer and Böhmel (2018). Table A6 shows that magical practices are not significantly associated with recruitment of girls into rebel groups, likely a testament to the varied ideological motivations for recruiting girls for spiritual roles.

In Table A7, using both inclusive and exclusive measures from MAGICC, we demonstrate that rebels that have magically powerful leaders are not significantly more likely to engage in magical practices. Next, we replicate Thomas and Bond's (2015) findings on female recruitment into rebel, terrorist, and pro-government militias in Africa, considering any role (Table A8) and combat roles (Table A9). Table 2 summarizes the findings from all our model specifications.

Discussion and Conclusion

Female practitioners of magic have played an important role in rebellions in places such as Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and Uganda. Women have played a vital role for these groups specifically because so many rebel organizations use magical practices to facilitate recruitment and indoctrination. However, despite its relevance, quantitative scholarship on women's participation in civil wars has largely overlooked the relationship between magical practices and women's participation in rebel groups.

To remedy this, we provide the first, to the best of our knowledge, cross-rebel group quantitative analysis on the relationship between magical practices and the incorporation of women into rebel movements. Our results show that groups that engage in magical practices are significantly more likely to incorporate women into logistical support roles, highlighting the central role of women as practitioners of magic in many rebel movements.

There are, of course, limitations to our study. Due to the time invariant nature of the data, we are not able to establish causality. Rather, we simply found evidence of a positive association between magical practices and the recruitment of women into logistical support (and to a certain extent, combat) roles in rebel organizations. However, given the many examples of the important role that female practitioners of magic have played in various rebel organizations, we believe it is important to highlight this relationship. We believe that quantitative studies on women's participation in armed groups, particularly those that examine the role of (religious) ideology, should account for the role of magical practices.

While rebels in other parts of the world do engage in magical practices (Soules and Avdan 2024a), we do not make

strong claims about the generalizability of our findings. Indeed, the data on magical practices we use are limited only to Africa. Additionally, much of the theoretical literature we draw on is specific to traditional African spiritual beliefs and practices. However, given the prevalence of civil conflict in Africa, understanding region-specific dynamics is valuable. Furthermore, cross-national quantitative analysis can sometimes overlook important regional variation, and thus, it is valuable to understand this regional variation in the dynamics of civil wars.

Indeed, much of the theoretical literature we draw on focuses on female magical practitioners in West Africa (Grillo 2018; Oriola 2012; Oriola et al. 2013). However, while many of the groups in our data that mobilize female magical practitioners are in this region of Africa, they have also played an important role in militant organizations in other African regions, including Angola (Almeida 2009), Rwanda (Loken and Matfess 2024c), and Uganda (Behrend 2000). Thus, while it is vital to acknowledge that this phenomenon is more common in West Africa, we observe it in other regions of the continent as well.

While existing scholarly research examines both the benefits of recruiting women and employing magical practices, our study highlights the importance of the intersection of these phenomena. We examine the association between magical practices and the recruitment of women, but future research could gather data on the presence of female practitioners of magic in rebel organizations. Using such data, scholars could investigate why some rebel organizations recruit female magical practitioners, while others do not, as well as how the recruitment of women into such roles affects militant groups' treatment of civilians, and their longevity and success. Scholars can also investigate how female practitioners in rebel organizations enhance their legitimacy and thereby facilitate recruitment in general. Thus, while existing research has separately highlighted how magical practices and female cadres affect the behavior and trajectory of rebel organizations, our study underscores that studying them together can shed light on rebels' behavior and outcomes.

Women serve a variety of vital functions in many rebel organizations. In many armed movements, women have been viewed as essential because of their roles as practitioners of magic, as such practices are believed by adherents to improve everyday outcomes. In the context of civil wars, rebel groups use women to perform magical rituals believed to bring power and protection to members, which, in turn, serves a variety of functions, including for recruitment, discipline, and motivation. Scholars who study civil wars, particularly women's participation in these conflicts, should not overlook the central role of women as practitioners of magic.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *International Studies Quarterly* online.

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