The Magical Practices of Rebel Organizations: Introducing the Magical Acts by Groups in Civil Conflicts Dataset

Accepted and Forthcoming at the Journal of Peace Research

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Abstract:

Magical practices, such as wearing protective amulets, engagement in other rituals, and beliefs that rebel leaders wield magical powers, play a prominent role in many civil wars. These practices help shape the behaviors of militant organizations in a variety of ways. However, despite their relevance, there is a dearth systematically collected, cross-group data on the magical practices of rebel organizations. In response, we have constructed the Magical Acts by Groups in Civil Conflicts (MAGICC) dataset, which contains novel data on the magical practices employed by 106 African rebel organizations that were active at least at some point during the period of 1989 to 2011. To highlight the value of the data, we use them to test a hypothesis about the recruitment of child soldiers.

Key Words: Civil Wars; New Conflict Data; Rebel Ideology

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Beliefs in magical powers play an important role in many modern rebel groups, particularly in Africa (Ellis, 1999; Wlodarczyk, 2009). These practices, typically drawn from traditional African religions, involve rituals and manipulation of natural objects to fuse together the spiritual and physical worlds to use powers from the former to manipulate everyday outcomes in the latter (Wlodarczyk, 2009: 15). In rebel groups, these practices take various forms, including beliefs in protective powers derived from amulets; magical powers that enhance the fighting capabilities of soldiers; and beliefs that rebel leaders hold magical abilities beyond the average member (Ellis, 1999; Wlodarczyk, 2009).

For instance, men and boys in the National Patriotic Front of Liberia would go into battle wearing women's clothing and wigs, as regional beliefs led to the perception that adopting dual gender identities would confuse bullets, making them miss (Scheffler, 2003). Soldiers in other groups wear magical amulets, which they believe protect them from bullets (Wlodarczyk, 2009). Some officers in RENAMO claimed to have powers beyond those of other members, including flight and precognition (Wlodarczyk, 2009). These practices are theorized to shape the behavior of rebel organizations in various ways, including the mobilization and indoctrination of recruits (Ellis, 1999; Wlodarczyk, 2009), the recruitment of women (Loken, 2022), organizational survival (Wlodarczyk, 2009), engagement in sexual violence (Asadi, 2014), and other forms of violence against civilians (Wlodarczyk, 2013).

Despite this, previous cross-rebel group quantitative scholarship, to the best of our knowledge, has not accounted for magical practices. This dearth of data makes it difficult for scholars to conduct systematic analysis of new and existing theories about magical practices in civil wars. Additionally, prior quantitative work on religious ideology might be omitting an important variable that shapes rebel behavior (e.g., Basedau et al., 2022; Polo and Gleditsch,

2016; Wood and Thomas, 2017). To address this gap, we constructed the Magical Acts by Groups in Civil Conflicts (MAGICC) dataset, which contains novel data on magical practices of 106 African rebel movements.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. We begin by laying out the scope conditions of this project to contextualize how this dataset fits into the field. Specifically, we compare magical practices and other commonly studied forms of religion, as well as the reasons for, and the limitations of, collecting data on only African groups. We then explain why data on magical practices are needed. Next, we discuss our sample, our data collection procedure, and the specific variables we gathered. To highlight the utility of the MAGICC dataset, we then use it to test a hypothesis about magical practices and the forced recruitment of child soldiers. We conclude with suggestions for future research using the MAGICC dataset.

Scope conditions

It is important consider how the traditional African religions from which these magical practices derive differ from other religions, particularly religious ideologies commonly examined in civil wars scholarship (e.g., Basedau et al., 2022; Polo and Gleditsch, 2016; Wood and Thomas, 2017). Compared to other religions, which tend to view interactions as bounded or shaped by a god or gods, practitioners of traditional African religions tend to believe that individuals can harness unique powers to influence events, including warfare, and are not dependent on deities to manipulate events (Wlodarczyk, 2009). Consequently, some rebels believe they can employ magical practices to affect the outcome of conflicts, which has important implications for how they behave (Wlodarczyk, 2009).

Rebel groups that draw on traditional African practices often differ from militant organizations with other religious ideologies. Ideology is a systematic set of beliefs that establish relevant identity-based groups, highlight grievances, call for certain actions, and identify goals (Sanín and Wood, 2014). While groups that engage in magical practices often frame their struggle as spiritual warfare, including using these frames to justify their behavior, their goals are typically secular (Wlodarczyk, 2009). This differs from rebel groups with other religious ideologies who explicitly have religious goals, such as implementing religious rule. However, magical practices still affect rebels' behavior (e.g., treatment of civilians) and how they frame their grievances (Wlodarczyk, 2009), just as other (religious) ideologies do. Consequently, a better understanding of magical practices nuances our understanding of how religious ideologies affect conflicts.

Relatedly, it is important to consider the implications of the dataset focusing only on Africa. The decision was primarily driven by theoretical considerations. Similar practices, such as the belief in protective rituals, are featured in conflicts in other regions. For example, several organizations in Latin America invoke indigenous traditions and syncretic practices, calling upon deities and ancestral spirits for protection in combat. These groups include the FARC in Colombia, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico, the Shining Path in Peru, the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo in El Salvador, and others (Degregori, 2012; Heilman, 2010; Montgomery, 2018). However, the literature we build off focuses on magical practices derived from traditional *African* religions (e.g., Wlodarczyk, 2009).

Focusing on Africa helps reduce potential heterogeneity in the origins of these practices. Magical practices derived from traditional African religions might have different consequences for rebel behavior than similar practices based in other belief systems. Thus, it is possible that

results produced using our dataset will not be fully generalizable beyond Africa. However, an Africa-specific dataset still has value because (1) of the theoretical and policy value of understanding African conflict dynamics;[1] (2) it highlights the potential heterogeneity of armed groups featured in cross-national analyses; and (3) many quantitative studies on conflict use Africa only samples (e.g., Beber and Blattman, 2013; Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024; Thomas, 2014), and thus, would benefit from this dataset. Our dataset can serve as a template for scholars to gather data on similar practices of rebels in other regions. We now turn to discussing *why* there is a need for data on magical practices.

The need for new data

There is a lack of systematically collected cross-group data on rebels' use of magical practices. Collecting data on these practices provides two major benefits. First, new data allow scholars to evaluate novel and existing theories about the role of magical practices in civil wars with additional evidence. Scholars expect that magical practices affect a variety of rebel group dynamics, including their recruitment practices, treatment of civilians, and longevity (e.g., Asadi, 2014; Ellis, 1999; Wlodarczyk, 2009, 2013). While these studies employ high quality qualitative analysis, they tend to focus on one, or a limited number of, rebel groups or conflicts.

Additionally, these studies tend to focus on groups that employ magical practices, and do not systematically compare them to rebel movements that do *not* use these practices. This makes it challenging to determine the consequences of implementing, or *not* implementing, these

[1] Indeed, during the time period of this paper (1989-2011), approximately one-third of the conflict-year observations in the UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset occurred in Africa (Gleditsch et al., 2002).

practices. While quantitative data are not the only resource for providing such systematic comparisons, they are useful for doing so.

Second, our data can benefit scholars who study religious ideologies and conflict. As noted above, magical practices overlap with other forms of rebel religious ideology (e.g., Wlodarczyk, 2009). Scholars could use the MAGICC dataset to examine the similarities and differences between magical practices and other religious ideologies. Indeed, magical practices might have *some* similar consequences to other religious ideologies. For instance, certain religious ideologies, such as radical Islamist beliefs, are associated with longer and bloodier conflicts (e.g., Basedau et al., 2022). Groups that engage in magical practices are also expected to be more lethal and survive longer (Wlodarczyk, 2009, 2013). However, magical practices might diverge from other religious ideologies in other ways. For instance, magical practices are associated with the incorporation of women into rebel movements (Loken, 2022), but radical Islamist ideologies drive down the recruitment of women (e.g., Wood and Thomas, 2017).

Thus, scholars can use the data to examine whether, and to what extent, magical practices have similar consequences to other religious ideologies. Depending on their *theoretical expectations*, scholars can use the MAGICC dataset to either study magical practices together or separately from other religious ideologies.

However, existing data on rebel group (religious) ideology are insufficient for evaluating theories about the role of magical practices. Datasets such as the ACD2GTD, which combines data from the Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD) and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (Polo and Gleditsch, 2016); the Women in Armed Rebellion Dataset (WARD) (Wood and Thomas, 2017), and the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020), contain measures of whether a group has a “religious” ideology. The Rebel

Appeals and Incentives Dataset (RAID) (Soules, 2023) includes indicators of whether groups make religious-based recruitment appeals. The religious groups identified in these datasets, however, largely adhere to radical Islamist ideologies, which overlooks other religions. Indeed, of the 38 groups we found at least some evidence of engaging in magical practices, only 8 (~21.1%) were coded as having a religious ideology in *at least* one of the datasets mentioned above.

Thus, our data provides information on religious-based features of rebel groups not accounted for in existing datasets. This suggests that quantitative scholarship on political violence does not fully capture the different ways in which religious practices affect rebel organizations. The MAGICC dataset provides a tool for scholars to both gain a fuller understanding of the aggregate effects of religious ideology and heterogeneity within rebel religious practices and beliefs. We now turn to discussing how we built this dataset.

Data on Magical Practices

Sample

Our sample of African rebel organizations is taken from the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset (Cunningham et al., 2009), which is derived from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD) (Gleditsch et al., 2002). MAGICC is thus compatible with a variety of other conflict datasets that build off these sources. We include groups that were active at least at some point between 1989 and 2011. Our final sample includes 106 African rebel groups. Due to the limited information available on many organizations, we constructed a cross-section of organizations with no within-group temporal variation.

This sample presents three potential limitations. First, critics might note the limited temporal range of the dataset (1989-2011). However, the end date of 2011 makes it compatible with other prominent rebel group-level datasets that end around this time including the NSA dataset (Gleditsch et al., 2009), the Rebel Contraband Dataset (Walsh et al., 2018), and the updated Child Soldier Data Set (Haer et al., 2020). Magical practices were also used in war before the time period of this study, including during the Maji-Maji Rebellion (Capeci and Knight, 1990) and in conflicts after, such as the civil war in Central Africa (Verini, 2014). Thus, we do not expect that magical practices are unique to the period under study.

A second issue is the lack of temporal variation in the variables. This limits the ability of users to establish causal identification. However, we still expect there to be significant differences between groups that choose to adopt these practices and those that never do. Finally, results produced with these data may not be generalizable beyond Africa.

Data collection procedure

To identify these practices, we crafted qualitative narratives on the magical practices of these organizations. First, we consulted a variety of existing narrative-based sources on militant organizations associated with other datasets. Second, we conducted searches in both Google Scholar and the regular Google search engine. Third, we conducted queries in Nexis-Uni to find additional news stories. We then coded the variables using these narratives. More information on the construction of the qualitative narratives is in the codebook. Next, we discuss the specific variables we coded using information in these narratives.

The variables

There are two common categories of these practices identified in previous literature (Wlodarczyk, 2009). First, there are groups in which members across the entire organization, both rank-and-file and leaders, engage in magical practices. Second, there are groups who have leaders believed by their followers to possess magical powers that are stronger and more unique than the average rank-and-file member (Wlodarczyk, 2009). Using information from the qualitative narratives, we measure both categories. More details are available in the codebook.

Entire group

The first variable is a dichotomous measure of whether rebel movements engage in any sort of magical practices across the entire organization, including both the rank-and-file and leadership. Groups in this category engage in magic-based hazing or initiation rites; practices claimed to provide immunity from physical harm on the battlefield (e.g., wearing protective amulets); practices believed to enhance one's fighting ability (e.g., invisibility, firing magically powerful bullets, etc.); and various other ritualistic practices (Wlodarczyk, 2009). For instance, new recruits had to take a mystical oath, performed by priestesses in forest shrines, when joining the MFDC in Senegal (Stam, 2009). Combatants in conflicts in Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo used charms and rituals that were believed to make them immune to bullets (Wlodarczyk, 2009).

Leadership

The second variable is a binary indicator measuring whether a rebel group has any leader(s) who claim to have unique magical powers not possessed by most members of the group. We classify groups as being in this category if they have a leader or leaders who claim to be prophets, messianic figures, and/or to possess magical powers *not held by most members*. For instance, Joseph Kony was believed by some members of the Lord's Resistance to be a prophet (Wlodarczyk, 2009). Commanders in RENAMO were believed to be able to fly and see the future (Wlodarczyk, 2009). High ranking leaders or officers are sufficient; the evidence does not have to be exclusive to the top leader in the organization. Having a leader with extensive religious knowledge and/or training is NOT sufficient for this categorization.

What is not coded

It is important to note what dynamics are *not* captured by these measures. Specifically, we do not measure the goals and ideologies of groups. These variables also do not measure radical Islamist or radical Christian practices. For groups with such ideologies to be coded as engaging in magical practices, they must use practices derived from African spiritual beliefs (even if they combine religious practices). Only three radical Islamist groups in our dataset were coded as also engaging in magical practices: the Allied Democratic Forces, Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram.

Measurement inclusivity

We create two versions of each of these variables, one with a stricter standard of evidence, based on clear and direct evidence of widespread practice and one that has a lower threshold for inclusion, coded for anecdotal accounts of some members engaging in these behaviors. The stricter measure also excludes instances of discrepant and unclear reports about groups' engagement in these practices, and cases where only a faction or splinter of the group engaged in these rituals. We also discuss inter-coder reliability in the codebook.

Descriptive statistics

Of the magically powerful leadership variable, 9 groups, or approximately 8.5% of the sample, meet the more exclusive threshold for inclusion, while 14 organizations, or about 13.2% of the sample, meet the more inclusive threshold. In terms of magical rituals among the entire organization, including the rank-and-file, 21 groups (19.8%) meet the more exclusive threshold, while 38 (35.8%) meet the more inclusive threshold. Almost all groups that have magically significant leaders also engage in magical practices among the rank-and-file, although the reverse is not true. **Figure 1** displays the frequency of the leadership and entire group (both rank-and-file and leadership) variables for both thresholds.[2]

[2] "Exc." denotes variables with the exclusive measurement threshold; whole "Inc." denotes the inclusive threshold.

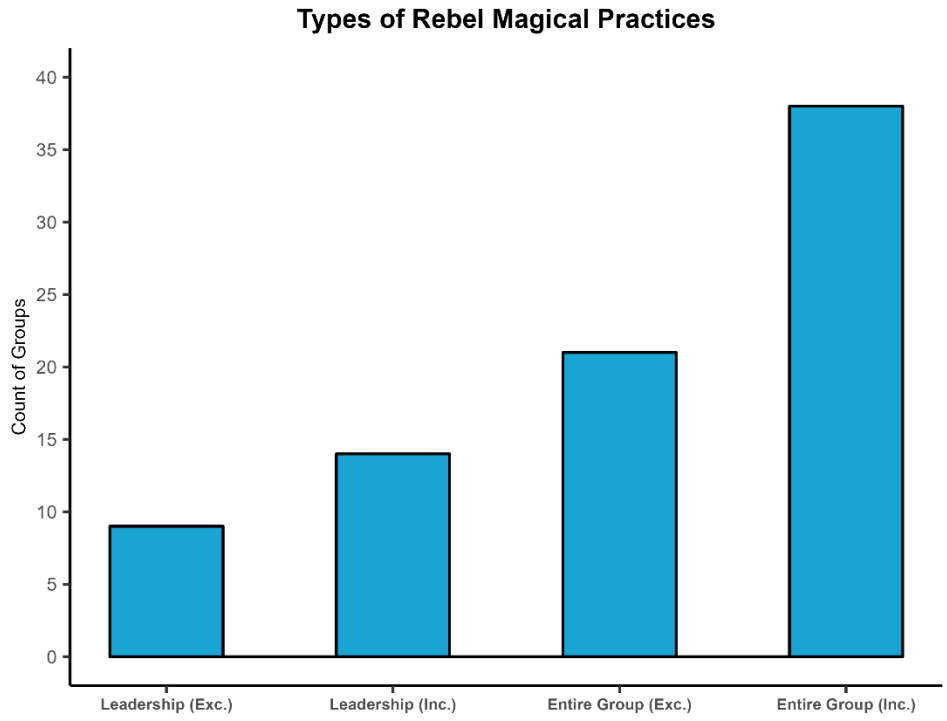

Figure 1. Frequency of Magical Practices.

Application

We employ an empirical application to demonstrate the value of the MAGICC dataset. Specifically, we examine the connection between magical practices and the forced recruitment of children, as magical practices play an important role in the recruitment and indoctrination of child soldiers in groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) (Gates, 2017; Wlodarczyk, 2009). We expect there to be a positive association between magical practices and the forced recruitment of children because the former helps reduce the costs associated with the latter.

Forced recruitment of child soldiers

Beber and Blattman (2013) argue that, on the surface, the recruitment of child soldiers is puzzling. Such recruitment practices can be reputationally costly at both the domestic and

international levels, and child soldiers take longer to train and are less likely to be used in combat roles until they are older (Beber and Blattman, 2013). Furthermore, child soldiers, especially when they have been forcibly recruited, can undermine group cohesion and frequently escape (even if they are less likely to desert than adults) (Faulkner and Welsh, 2022).

Instead, Beber and Blattman expect that because children make less effective soldiers than adults, children will only be recruited if at least one of two conditions is met: (1) children can be sufficiently indoctrinated so that they contribute to the group at a lower cost than adults or (2) children have worse exit options than adults to the degree that the ease of retaining children outweighs their lack of ability. Rebel groups engage in strategies to decrease the rate at which forcibly recruited child soldiers defect and undermine cohesion (Faulkner and Welsh, 2022).

Indoctrination increases the probability children will act towards the interests of the group and that they will be obedient, while poor outside options for children make it easier to retain them (Beber and Blattman, 2013). Given that threats and punishment are an important part of recruiting child soldiers, there is a strong connection between coercion and the incorporation of children into rebel groups (Beber and Blattman, 2013). Based on these dynamics, we now turn to discussing why we expect there to be a strong association between magical practices and the forced recruitment of children.

Magical practices and child soldiers

We expect there to be a positive association between the use of magical practices and the forced recruitment of children because such practices (1) facilitate the indoctrination of children and (2) relatedly, affect child soldiers' perception of their outside options. Starting with

indoctrination, rebel organizations often try to reshape the identity of abducted recruits, as this helps increase cohesion among the rank-and-file and increases individuals' commitment to the group (Gates, 2017). Religious rituals are particularly effective at promoting cohesion, commitment, and obedience among cadres (Gates, 2017).

Wlodarczyk (2009) explains how many rebel movements use magical practices for indoctrination to help increase cohesion and obedience among the rank-and-file. We expect that children are particularly susceptible to indoctrination via magical practices. Indeed, in their survey of former LRA members, Beber and Blattman (2013) find that younger recruits were more likely to believe that Joseph Kony (the LRA leader) had magical powers to protect them from bullets. Thus, if ease of indoctrination increases the marginal utility of recruiting children (Beber and Blattman, 2013), then groups that engage in magical practices are well-positioned to recruit children because they are effective at indoctrinating recruits (Wlodarczyk, 2009).

Second, as noted above, child soldiers tend to have worse real and perceived exit options, which makes it easier for rebel organizations to retain them (Beber and Blattman, 2013). It is typically easier for rebel groups to manipulate children's perceptions of their exit options (Beber and Blattman, 2013). Magical practices also affect the perceptions that recruits have of the viability of deserting. Such practices induce fears among members that they will be spiritually punished, or at least lose their magical protections, if they desert (Wlodarczyk, 2009). Since children are more likely to believe that their leaders have magical powers (Beber and Blattman, 2013), groups that engage in magical practices should have an easier time managing the costs associated with forcibly recruiting children than adults because these organizations can more easily alter children's perceptions of their outside options. Furthermore, desertion becomes unappealing for minors insofar as life outside the group appears psychologically and emotionally

remote (Faulkner and Welsh, 2022). Magical practices can reinforce these perceptions, particularly among those forcibly recruited, since indoctrination can erode recruits' desires to flee. Thus, such beliefs can exacerbate the perception that recruits will face danger if they desert.

We expect that the use of magical practices will be associated with the use of *forced recruitment* of children specifically. Rebel organizations that recruit children often rely on coercion to retrain them (Beber and Blattman, 2013) and groups that are primarily composed of volunteers have less incentive to threaten punishment because their recruits are less likely to desert (Gates, 2017). Given that children are more susceptible to indoctrination than adults (Beber and Blattman, 2013), we expect magical practices to have a stronger association with the forced recruitment of children than adults. We are also not arguing that groups that practice magic have a higher demand for abducted child soldiers. Instead, we expect that all else equal, groups that engage in magical practices are better able to lower the costs associated with forcibly recruiting children than other types of groups, which strengthens the association between magical practices and the forced recruitment of child soldiers. This leads to our central hypothesis that:

H1: Rebel groups that employ magical practices will be more likely to engage in the forced recruitment of children than those that do not employ magical practices.

Research design

Dependent variables

To test the central hypothesis, we take the dependent variable from Haer et al. (2020) who built a three-point ordinal indicator of the extent to which groups engaged in the forced

recruitment of children. The measure captures whether there was no evidence of child soldiers (0), fewer than 20% of all children in the group were forcibly recruited (1), or if more than 20% of children in the group were forcibly recruited (2). The recruitment of children is not automatically considered to be forcible. Instead, groups are coded as forcibly recruiting children when they employ methods such as abduction, press-ganging, and/or quota systems to do so.

We also employ two additional outcome variables to evaluate our expectation that magical practices are associated with the forced recruitment of children specifically and *not* just coercive recruitment in general. First, using data from Haer et al. (2020), we create a binary indicator of whether a group is coded as recruiting children but *not* forcibly recruiting them to capture the voluntary recruitment of children. Second, with data from the Rebel Human Rights Violations dataset (Walsh et al., 2023), we investigate the association between magical practices and a three-point ordinal indicator of the general use of forced recruitment (both adults and children). We employ ordered logistic regression analysis for the first and third dependent variables, and logistic regression analysis for the second. The unit of analysis is the rebel group.[3]

Independent variables

The central hypothesis is concerned with how magical practices across the entire organization affect patterns of forced recruitment of children. Our theoretical argument focuses on the role of magical practices in fostering cohesion and discipline among the rank-and-file. Thus, we employ both the stricter and more inclusive binary measures of rebel organizations' use of magical practices across the entire organization (both the rank-and-file and leadership).

[3] Specifically, rebel organizations that were active at least at some point between 1989 and 2011 in fighting that involved at least 25 battle-related deaths (Cunningham et al., 2009).

Control variables

We hold several potentially confounding factors constant. Due to space constraints, we provide theoretical justification for our choice of control variables in the appendix. First, we include a binary indicator of whether the group is coded as having a *religious ideology* in the FORGE dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). Second, using a transformed version of the NSA dataset's measure of rebel groups' relative strength, we include a binary indicator of whether a rebel organization is *much weaker* than the government it is fighting (Cunningham et al., 2009). Third, we control for a dichotomous measure of whether a group ever profited from *lootable resources*, using data from the Rebel Contraband Dataset (Walsh et al., 2018). Fourth, using data from Version 3 of the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset (Kreutz, 2010), we construct a variable that measures the number of years from when the first battle-related death associated with the group is recorded to the last year it is in Kreutz's dataset.

Fifth, using data from the UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset (version 24.1, Davies et al., 2024), we control for a logged measure of the total number of *battle-related deaths* associated with a group across its lifespan. Sixth, we include a binary indicator of whether *government forces forcibly recruited children* during the conflict, using data from Haer et al. (2020). We also include the *Polity2 measure* of regime type, which is taken from the Polity V dataset (Marshall and Jaggers, 2020) and a measure of *logged per capita GDP* from Fariss et al. (2022). Additionally, with data from the World Bank Development Indicators (2024), we control for the percentage of the population that is between the ages of 0 and 14 (*youth population*). Finally, we control for the percentage of the population that adhere to Animist religions, using data from the World Religions Dataset (Maoz and Henderson, 2013).

Results

The results for the tests of the central hypothesis are presented in **Table 1**. The standard errors are clustered by the rebel group in each model.[4]

[4] In the appendix, we run additional models that gradually add control variables, beginning with bivariate analyses, to show that the inclusion of a relatively large number of control variables is not driving the results (**Tables A2 – A4**).

Table 1. Rebel magical practices and coercive recruitment.

¤	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Forced child recruitment		Voluntary child recruitment		General forced recruitment	
Group magical practices (exclusive)	1.028†		-0.216		0.0770	
	(0.599)		(0.809)		(0.744)	
Group Magical Practices (inclusive)		1.528**		0.139		0.627
		(0.489)		(0.655)		(0.673)
Religious Ideology	0.963	1.112	-1.774	-1.741	1.070	1.187†
	(0.790)	(0.807)	(1.096)	(1.063)	(0.671)	(0.713)
Lootable Resources	1.171*	1.039†	-1.306†	-1.346†	0.370	0.267
	(0.582)	(0.551)	(0.772)	(0.807)	(0.642)	(0.673)
Much Weaker	-0.228	-0.234	0.773	0.841	-0.952	-0.868
	(0.697)	(0.666)	(0.728)	(0.740)	(0.919)	(0.906)
Rebel Age	-0.00992	-0.0164	0.0113	0.00872	0.00756	0.00225
	(0.0240)	(0.0276)	(0.0341)	(0.0329)	(0.0270)	(0.0255)
Battle Deaths (Logged)	0.340	0.349	0.179	0.160	0.829***	0.837***
	(0.242)	(0.230)	(0.218)	(0.218)	(0.214)	(0.211)
Forced Recruitment by Government	2.236***	2.084***	-1.871*	-1.866*	0.988	0.899
	(0.514)	(0.535)	(0.758)	(0.764)	(0.760)	(0.762)
Polity2	-0.0469	-0.0513	0.0464	0.0405	0.185*	0.189*
	(0.0883)	(0.0861)	(0.0754)	(0.0758)	(0.0879)	(0.0873)
per capita GDP (Logged)	0.115	0.0253	-0.403	-0.466	-0.271	-0.389
	(0.523)	(0.525)	(0.661)	(0.656)	(0.653)	(0.657)
Youth Population	-0.00708	-0.0266	-0.128	-0.137	-0.0766	-0.0992
	(0.0981)	(0.0972)	(0.118)	(0.121)	(0.123)	(0.128)
Percent Animist	5.437*	5.026*	-8.356*	-8.794*	3.193	2.634
	(2.450)	(2.531)	(3.573)	(3.617)	(3.494)	(3.467)
Cutpoint 1	3.931	3.160			3.462	2.511
	(5.362)	(5.254)			(6.532)	(6.628)
Cutpoint 2	6.505	5.956			4.123	3.175
	(5.409)	(5.287)			(6.581)	(6.658)
Constant			5.866	6.389		
			(5.808)	(5.926)		
Observations	100	100	100	100	100	100
Chi^2	50.61***	57.99***	25.33**	25.84**	44.18***	44.58***
Log Likelihood	-72.22	-69.39	-44.88	-44.89	-56.80	-56.28
Pseudo R-squared	0.313	0.340	0.243	0.243	0.305	0.311

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, † p<0.1

Across both measures, we find support for our core hypothesis that magical practices are associated with an increased prevalence of the forced recruitment of children. Given the data limitations, we do not claim to establish causality; however, we believe understanding the association between these variables is still essential. We also do not find evidence of statistically significant associations between magical practices and the voluntary recruitment of children or the forced recruitment of both adults and children. Thus, we find evidence of an association between magical practices and the forced recruitment of children, but *not* other coercive recruitment practices. While the findings for some of the control variables conform to existing literature (e.g., lootable resources), others do not (e.g., rebel group capacity). This might be attributable to our sample covering only African militant organizations.

We also conduct additional analyses (available in the appendix). First, we reconduct the main analysis, instead employing the restrictive and inclusive measures of magically powerful rebel leaders (**Table A5**). Having a leader that is believed to possess extraordinary powers does not have a consistent association with the extent to which groups rely on the forced recruitment of child soldiers. These results potentially highlight the importance of magical practices as a socialization tool to increase cohesion across the entire organization, rather than as a top-down processes in which rebel leaders use the threat of magic to coerce compliance. We also employ a general measure of the recruitment of children from Haer et al. (2020), which does not distinguish between forced and voluntary recruitment (**Table A6**). Finally, we conduct additional tests with alternative sets of control variables and continue to find support for the central hypothesis (**Tables A7 – A8**).

Conclusion

Rebel groups employ a variety of magical practices that affect their behavior in important ways. However, prior quantitative research on rebel groups tends to overlook these practices (e.g., Basedau et al. 2022; Polo and Gleditsch 2016; Wood and Thomas 2017). To remedy this, we built the MAGICC dataset, which contains measures of magical practices of rebel organizations. To demonstrate the usefulness of these data, we show that groups that engage in magical practices are more likely to forcibly recruit children. Such data can be used in quantitative research to expand our understanding of the role of magical practices in civil wars.

The MAGICC dataset could be paired with existing datasets to examine a variety of consequences of these practices. This includes investigating how magical practices are associated with sexual violence, the killing civilians, and the duration and success of rebel groups. The use of magical practices plays a significant role in civil wars and should be taken seriously in quantitative studies of political violence.

Replication data

The dataset, codebook, and do-files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the online appendix, are available at https://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets/ All analyses were conducted using *Stata 17*.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Ahaan Bagwe for his excellent research assistance. The authors also wish to thank Jeremy Berkowitz, Jim Piazza, and Will Reno for their valuable comments.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

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