

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

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 on a variety of dimensions. However, despite their relevance, there is a dearth systematically collected, cross-group data on the magical practices of rebel organizations. In response to this gap, 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.

Beliefs in magical and spiritual powers play an important role in many modern rebel groups, particularly in Africa. These practices, typically drawn from local and regional traditions, take a variety of forms, including beliefs in protective powers derived from amulets, clothing, and rituals; magical powers that enhance the fighting capabilities of soldiers; and beliefs that rebel leaders hold spiritually significant positions and powers (Ellis 1999; Włodarczyk 2009).

These practices are present across a range of conflicts and rebel movements. Magic is often employed for protection on the battlefield. For instance, in Mozambique, traditional healers would wave goat tails dipped in magic liquid at RENAMO soldiers as they left for battle, as some believed this practice would stop bullets from hitting those who had participated in the ritual (Weigert 1995). In Liberia, 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 it less likely that they hit soldiers engaging in these practices (Scheffler 2003). Soldiers in a diversity of other rebel groups also wear protective amulets, which they believe will protect them from bullets (Włodarczyk 2009).

Some rebel groups also feature leaders who are believed to have spiritual and magical powers beyond that of the average rank-and-file member. The leader of Ntsiloulous, who went by the name Pastor Ntoumi, framed himself as a messianic figure (Coyault 2018). Similarly, Joseph Kony, the infamous leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, claimed to be a prophet and that the holy oil and the Christian cross protect himself and his followers in battle (Al Jazeera 2014). Some officers in RENAMO claimed to have powers beyond that of other members, including the abilities of flight and precognition (Włodarczyk 2009).

These practices are theorized to shape the behavior of rebel organizations in a variety of ways, including the mobilization and indoctrination of recruits (Ellis 1999; Włodarczyk 2009),

the use of child soldiers (Beber and Blattman 2013), the incorporation of women into the ranks (Loken 2022), engagement in sexual violence (Asadi 2014), and other forms of violence against civilians (Włodarczyk 2013).

However, despite the significant role that these practices and beliefs play in armed organizations, previous cross-rebel group quantitative scholarship, to the best of our knowledge, has not accounted for them. This makes it difficult to both produce generalizable knowledge about the consequences of rebel magical practices and to evaluate competing theoretical claims. Additionally, prior quantitative work, including scholarship on rebel ideology and indoctrination, might be omitting an important variable that is shaping rebel behavior.

To address this gap, we have constructed the Magical Acts by Groups in Civil Conflicts (MAGICC) dataset, which contains novel data on magical practices of rebel organizations. Specifically, we collected information on whether these groups engage in magical practices among the rank-and-file and/or leadership. Our data cover 106 African rebel groups.

In the rest of the paper, we define what magical practices are, distinguish them from religion, detail our data collection process, and present the MAGICC dataset. We follow up with a demonstration of its empirical application and suggest avenues for future research.

Defining Magical Practices

Rebel groups tend to derive magical practices and beliefs from more common, societal-level practices (Ellis 1999; Włodarczyk 2009). We do not assume that any relationship between magical practices and violent behaviors should apply to the practitioners of these beliefs writ large, the vast majority of whom are peaceful.

Włodarczyk (2009, p. 15) writes that the magic-based practices of African rebel organizations, draw on traditional African religious beliefs, which:

“center around a local spirit world, mediated through specialist spiritual practitioners that can invoke their wisdom and power through the manipulation of natural objects, to resolve everyday dilemmas. Potions and remedies combine with incantations and rituals to fuse together the spiritual and the natural and exert control over both.”

Compared to other religions, which tend to view their interactions as bounded or shaped by a god or gods, practitioners of traditional African religions tend to emphasize “their own ability and skill to manipulate spirit power to the ends they choose.” (Włodarczyk (2009, p. 15) As such, they tend to have greater agency in interpreting and defining what morally acceptable behaviors are than members of many other religions (Włodarczyk 2009). Adherents of magical practices believe that individuals can harness unique powers to influence events, including warfare. This gives combatants a shared conceptual framework to operate under.

Magical practices serve a variety of functions for rebel organizations: (1) facilitating mobilization and promoting legitimacy; (2) instilling organizational structure and discipline among the rank-and-file; and (3) motivating groups’ members while intimidating civilians and soldiers on the opposition’s side (Włodarczyk 2009).

The Need for New Data

There is a lack of systematically collected, cross-group data on rebels’ use of magical practices. This is problematic for three reasons. First, existing work, while valuable, tends to focus on one, or a limited number of, rebel groups or conflicts (e.g., Asadi 2014; Beber and

Blattman 2013; Ellis 1999; Włodarczyk 2009, 2013), making it difficult to produce generalizable results.

Second, existing scholarship produces competing implications for the effects of magical practices, including whether magic facilitates voluntary recruitment or abductions (Włodarczyk 2009), or whether magic boosts internal cohesion (which militates against sexual violence; Cohen 2013) or if magical practices promote the perpetration of sexual violence (Asadi 2014).

Third, existing cross-sectional data on rebel group ideology are insufficient for evaluating theories about the role of magical practices in civil wars. Indeed, the role of magical practices is often overlooked in the quantitative study of rebel ideology and indoctrination. Datasets such as the ACD2GTD (Polo and Gleditsch 2016), WARD (Wood and Thomas 2017), and FORGE (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020) contain measures of whether a group has a “religious” ideology. RAID (Soules 2023) includes an indicator of whether groups make religious-based recruitment appeals.

However, datasets such as WARD and FORGE capture the broader, publicly declared ideologies of rebel organizations, rather than any actual internal practices. The data in RAID are specific to groups’ recruitment practices, not their efforts to indoctrinate, which are often distinct processes (Wood 2009). Furthermore, the “religious” groups identified in these datasets largely adhere to radical Islamist ideologies, which misses groups with other spiritual beliefs. Thus, they provide an incomplete picture of the effects of magical beliefs, as many of these are internal practices that are not explicitly part of groups’ ideologies.

Table 1 compares the groups captured in MAGICC to the classifications of the same organizations in other datasets. The table includes groups in our data for which there was at least some evidence that they engaged in magical practices. Groups not coded as engaging in these

practices in our dataset are *not* included in the table. As the table shows, most groups that we found evidence of engaging in magical practices are not coded as religious in other existing datasets. Thus, our data provides information on features of rebel groups not accounted for in existing datasets.¹

¹Relatedly, the Rebel Organization Leaders database (Acosta et al. 2022) contains information on the religions that rebel leaders identified with. While useful, this dataset does not capture whether rebel leaders are believed to be magically powerful. Thus, our data also provide a unique contribution on this dimension, as we will discuss later.

Table 1: Comparing Religious/Spiritual Practices Measured Across Datasets

Groups in MAGICC that Employ Magic	FORGE	WARD	ACD2GTD	RAID
ADF ⁺	X	X	X	X
AFDL ⁺				
Al-Shabaab ⁺	X	X	X	X
BDK				X
Boko Haram	X	X	X	X
FDLR ⁺				
FDSI-CI				
FPR				
FRCI				
Faction of SPLM ⁺		N/A		
INPFL				
Kamajors				
LRA	X	X	X	
LURD				
MFDC				
MJP ⁺				
MODEL				
MPCI				
MPIGO ⁺				
NDPVF ⁺				
Ninjas				X
NPFL				
Ntsiloulous		X		X
ONLF ⁺				
Palipehutu ⁺				
Palipehutu-FNL ⁺				
RCD				
RENAMO				X
Republic of South Sudan ⁺				
RUF				
SLM/A				
SLM/A-MM ⁺				
SLM/A-Unity ⁺				
SPLM ⁺				
SPLM/A-N				
UNITA				
WSB ⁺				

⁺Denotes groups that only meet the more inclusive evidence threshold.

N/A denotes groups not included in a particular dataset.

As **Table 1** highlights, of the groups that we identified as engaging in magical practices (those listed in the left-most column), the vast majority are *not* categorized as religious groups in other datasets. This is significant first because the information reinforces the inadequacy of existing data to assess arguments about rebel use of magical practices. Second, it may suggest that some proportion of extant quantitative work may suffer omitted variable bias. Indeed, scholars have examined how religious ideology affects rebel groups' treatment of civilians, longevity, and success (e.g., Polo and Gleditsch 2016; Keels and Wiegand 2020; Basedau et al. 2022). However, as the information in **Table 1** suggests, a large portion of rebel groups that engage in religious practices might not be fully accounted for in existing analyses. We now move to discussing how we constructed the MAGICC dataset.

Data on Magical Practices

Sample

Our sample of 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 the NSA and UCDP. We include groups that were active at least at some point between 1989 and 2011. Our data cover only this period primarily due to the time and resources that had to be expended to construct this dataset.²

Our sample encompasses exclusively African rebel organizations. We gathered data on groups across the entire continent, not just those operating in countries south of the Sahara. Our

² Following the precedent of existing datasets, such as WARD (Wood and Thomas 2017) and RAID (Soules 2023), we exclude coups and military-related factions from the sample, as their prior attachment to national armed forces might make their recruitment and socialization practices somewhat unique from the rest of the sample.

decision to focus exclusively on African militant movements is primarily driven by theoretical considerations. Similar practices are featured in conflicts in other countries including Myanmar (Aglionby 2000), Laos (Baird 2018), and Colombia (Kaplan 2022). However, these practices tend to be more common in rebel groups in various parts of Africa, compared to other regions, because they are derived from local practices and beliefs that are common in many areas of the continent (Wlodarczyk 2009).

We do not claim that these results are fully generalizable, as magical practices are less common in armed groups in other regions. However, these practices are still important features of many African rebel organizations and ignoring them can miss the full picture of the factors that shape the behaviors of armed organizations. Additionally, the data provides valuable insights into a crucial regional factor that feeds heterogeneity in rebel behavior in a global sample of organizations.

Our final sample includes 106 groups. Due to the limited information available on many of these organizations, we constructed a cross-section of groups with no temporal variation. However, given that these practices draw on deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and practices, they may not vary substantially, within groups, over time.

Magic in Practice

To measure the magical practices of rebel organizations, we identify common categories of these practices. First, there are magical practices commonly shared among both the rank-and-file and rebel leadership (Wlodarczyk 2009). This includes “charms, potions, rituals, and codes of conduct,” rebels are offered protection from their enemies (Wlodarczyk 2009, p. 27). For

instance, combatants in conflicts in Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and the DRC, among other places, would wear protective charms that were believed to make them immune to enemy fire (Włodarczyk 2009). Additionally, cadres in some groups believed that they could be granted powers that made them better fighters (Włodarczyk 2009).

However, for a subset of these organizations, rebel leaders are sometimes believed by their followers to have a range of special powers of their own, that outstrip the powers possessed by the average cadre, and that leaders employ to shape group strategies (Włodarczyk 2009). For instance, commanders in RENAMO were believed to be able to fly and divine the future (Włodarczyk 2009). In other cases, militant leaders are regarded as having even more significant spiritual powers, including being messiahs, prophets, etc. For example, in the DRC, the leader of the Bundu dia Kongo, Na Muanda Nsemi, was seen as a prophet by some (Human Rights Watch 2020). Thus, we attempt to capture these two broad categories of practices: those shared among all members and those primarily reserved for rebel leadership.

The Variables

Based on the common practices discussed above, we are interested in measuring two different dynamics. First, we capture groups that are perceived by the members to have magical or spiritually significant or powerful leaders. Second, we capture groups that possess magical beliefs and practices related to enhanced powers of protection and/or fighting for all members of the group, including the rank-and-file.

Leadership

The first variable is a binary indicator measuring whether a rebel group has any leader or leaders who claim to have special or unique magical or spiritual connections and/or powers that are not possessed by most members of the group. We classify rebel groups as being in this category if they have a leader or leaders who claim to be prophets, messianic figures, and/or to possess divine or spiritual powers not held by most or all the other members. High ranking leaders and officers are sufficient evidence for a group to receive this categorization; 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. Being labeled as a religious leader is not a sufficient indicator of special “connections” in this context, rather, such powerful connections would include beliefs that the leaders are prophets or messiahs. For magical powers to qualify groups for this category, their leaders must have powers beyond the average member. For instance, it is not a sufficient threshold if everyone in the organization, both leaders and rank-and-file, are believed to have immunity from bullets. However, if claims are made about the immunity of the rank-and-file, but also that the leaders have additional powers (e.g., precognition, flight, etc.), then this is sufficient for groups to be coded as having a magically powerful leader.

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 excludes instances of discrepant reports about groups' engagement of these practices, and cases where only a faction of the group engaged in these rituals. For instance, there is substantial evidence of the SLM/A in Sudan employing magical practices, and some evidence of the SLM/A - MM doing so. However, none of the evidence addressed SLM/A - Unity. Such factions as the SLM/A - Unity would fall under the more inclusive measure, but not the stricter one.

It is also important to clarify what practices these measurements do not capture. These variables do NOT measure the broader ideologies, goals, and/or recruitment tactics of groups. For instance, a leader of a rebel organization with religious goals is not automatically coded as having a special religious status or powers. Relatedly, declarations of religious ideologies and/or goals are not criteria for groups to be considered engaging in magic. Indeed, some groups with broader religious ideologies and goals do not engage in these behaviors, while some groups with secular goals and ideologies do.

We also do NOT include radical Islamist practices in these variables. For any radical Islamist group to be coded on any of these dimensions, they would have to employ practices that draw on traditional, non-Islamist, African spiritual or magical beliefs. There was at least some evidence of engagement in non-Islamist, magical practices among only three radical Islamist groups in the data: Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), Al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram.³

³ See the corresponding, qualitative narratives on these groups, made available with the dataset.

Data Collection Procedure

To identify these practices among rebel groups in our sample, through a multi-step procedure, we crafted detailed, qualitative narratives on the magical practices of these organizations. First, we consulted a variety of existing narrative-based sources on militant organizations, including narratives from the Big, Allied and Dangerous (BAAD) dataset (Asal et al. 2019), the Mapping Militant Organizations Project, the NSA dataset case description notes (Gleditsch et al. 2009), and the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia.

Second, we conducted searches in both Google Scholar and the regular Google search engine to produce academic journal articles, books, think tank reports, government reports, and news stories, among other sources, which covered the magical practices of rebels in our sample. Third, we conducted queries in Nexis-Uni to find additional news stories about these organizations.⁴

Using these narratives, all authors coded each variable for every group. There was moderate intercoder reliability across the coders. The Cohen's Coefficient for the intercoder reliability for the different variables ranged from approximately 0.52 to about 0.87. The greatest discrepancies arose in determining the threshold of inclusivity that groups met, rather than whether they met any criteria at all. To compensate for the issues with intercoder reliability, we identified all the coding discrepancies, discussed all the disputed cases, and came to a consensus on how to code each case.

⁴ To execute these searches, we followed the best practices recommended by Karstens et al. (2023).

Trends in the Dataset

Turning to data trends, of the magically powerful leadership variable, 8 groups, or approximately 7.5% of the sample, meet the more exclusive threshold for inclusion, while 13 organizations, or about 12.3% of the sample, meet the more inclusive threshold. In terms of magical rituals among the rank-and-file, 20 groups (18.9%) meet the more exclusive threshold, while 37 (34.9%) 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. Groups with magically powerful leaders comprise a subset of those that engage in broader magical practices among the rank-and-file. **Figure 1** displays the frequency of the leadership and rank-and-file (denoted as “rituals” in the figure) variables for both thresholds.

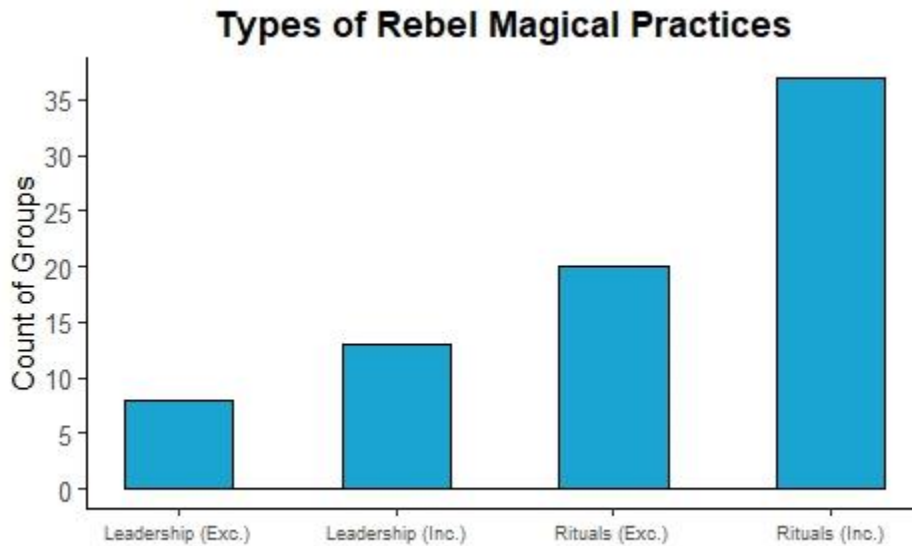


Figure 1: Frequency of Magical Practices

Application

In this section, we employ an empirical application to demonstrate the value of the MAGICC dataset. Wlodarczyk (2009) argues that in some cases, groups such as the Holy Spirit Movement successfully used magical practices to increase their perceived legitimacy and strength, which helped the group attract volunteers. However, Wlodarczyk notes in other cases, such as the LRA in Uganda, magic can facilitate the abduction of recruits (including children) through indoctrination and intimidation.

Below, we discuss why we expect that magical practices facilitate the forced recruitment of child soldiers. In doing so, we also contribute to a robust quantitative literature, which examines how a variety of factors, including rebel logistical and tactical needs (e.g., Beber and Blattman 2013), organizational foundations (Faulker and Doctor 2021), material wealth (e.g., Haer et al. 2020), and population vulnerabilities (e.g., Achvarina and Reich 2006), incentives the (forced) recruitment of children.

Forced Recruitment of Child Soldiers

Berber and Blattman (2013) expect that militant organizations will be more likely to use child soldiers when they can be more easily intimidated, indoctrinated, and misinformed than adults. According to the authors' argument, it is easier to indoctrinate and mislead children than it is for adults. Such indoctrination can make recruits more loyal and well-disciplined. Groups opt for child recruitment given the lower costs and added benefits from more committed and disciplined members.

Child soldiers are also less likely to defect and desert because they have fewer outside options (i.e., security, economic opportunity, family and community ties). As such, child recruits

will be more likely to remain in rebel groups, even if forcibly recruited, as they fear leaving might be more dangerous. Rebel leaders, according to Beber and Blattman, can also intentionally manipulate the perceptions that recruits have about their outside options.

We expect that the magical practices of rebel groups affect both dimensions. First, as noted earlier, magical practices and rituals are often used to indoctrinate rebel recruits, ranging from convincing them of the spiritual significance of the conflict to promoting the idea that spiritual powers will protect them (Włodarczyk 2009). Thus, groups that employ magical practices are better positioned to indoctrinate recruits. According to Berber and Blattman, child soldiers are easier to indoctrinate than their adult counterparts. Taking these premises together, we surmise that rebel organizations that employ magical practices are better positioned to recruit child soldiers.

Second, we also posit that magical practices within militant organizations affect the perceptions that recruits have of the viability of their outside options and their corresponding ability to leave. Magical practices induce fears among members that they will be spiritually punished, or at least lose their spiritual powers, if they are disobedient (Włodarczyk 2009). Thus, such beliefs can exacerbate the perception that recruits will face danger if they leave their organizations. Since children are more easily indoctrinated (Berber and Blattman 2013), we believe that this dynamic will especially hold true for children.

However, we expect that these dynamics are particularly applicable to the *forced* recruitment of child soldiers. As abducted recruits are often insubordinate and desert at high rates, forced recruitment imposes greater costs for leaders (Eck 2014). Cohesion also tends to be lower in groups with a higher percentage of abducted recruits, as fear and distrust are rampant among such recruits (Cohen 2013).

We expect that indoctrination via magical practices can help overcome these issues. First, such indoctrination can aid in mitigating the ensuing costs of monitoring abducted recruits. Specifically, indoctrination can lead to abducted recruits being more loyal and obedient (Gates 2017). Second, threats of spiritual punishment from magically powerful leaders can reduce the probability that recruits attempt to desert. Indeed, forced recruitment is more common when abductees have fewer outside options (Gates 2002; Berber and Blattman 2013).

Again, child soldiers tend to be more susceptible to indoctrination than their adult counterparts (Berber and Blattman 2013), and thus, indoctrination should be more effective at solving the problems associated with forcibly recruited children than forcibly recruited adults. When the costs associated with monitoring and punishing disloyal and disobedient abductees are lower (which is the case when magical indoctrination is an available tool), the forced recruitment of children will be particularly common (Beber and Blattman 2013).

Overall, we expect that magical practices will facilitate the forced recruitment of children by both decreasing the associated obedience and cohesion problems, and increasing the perceived risks these individuals face when attempting to flee their abductors. This leads to our first 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

To evaluate this hypothesis, we conduct cross-sectional statistical analysis of all organizations in the MAGICC dataset.

Independent Variables

The central hypothesis is concerned with how magical practices across the entire organization affect patterns of forced recruitment of children. 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).

Dependent Variables

The first hypothesis maintains that groups will be more likely to forcibly recruit child soldiers when they also employ magical practices. To capture this, we use data from Haer et al. (2020) who built a three-point ordinal indicator of the extent to which group engaged in the forced recruitment of children. Specifically, 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). In these data, 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 (e.g., requiring one recruit from every family), to do so. We employ ordered logistic regression analysis because the dependent variable is ordinal.

Control Variables

We hold several potentially confounding factors constant. First, to ensure that the results are not driven by a group's broader ideology, 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, rebel group strength and resources are affected by rebel magical practices (Włodarczyk 2009) and they affect rebel recruitment strategies (Haer et al. 2020).

Thus, 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).⁵ Relatedly, using data from the Rebel Contraband Dataset (Walsh et al. 2018), we include a dichotomous indicator of whether a group profited from lootable resources at any point during its lifespan. As a final measure of capacity, we also control for the age of the group.

We also control for country-level factors that commonly influence conflict dynamics. We include a binary measure of whether a group was involved in a conflict that had at least one year of 1,000 battle-related deaths. We include the Polity2 measure of how democratic or autocratic a regime is, which is taken from the Polity V dataset (Marshall and Jaggers 2020). Finally, we include a measure of the logged per capita GDP of the country, with data from the World Bank. The latter two measures are taken for the first year a group was active in the given country.

⁵ While the original measure captures whether groups are much weaker, weaker, at parity, stronger, or much stronger than the government, only approximately 16% of the sample is coded as being at parity or higher. Thus, due to this skewed distribution, we distinguish between the weakest groups and all others. Wood and Thomas (2017) take a similar approach.

Results

The results for the tests of the central hypothesis are presented in **Table 2**. The standard errors are clustered by the rebel group in each model.

Table 2: Rebel Magical Practices and Forced Recruitment of Child Soldiers

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Magical Practices (exc.)	2.022*** (0.524)	1.628*** (0.604)	1.185* (0.697)			
Magical Practices (inc.)				2.248*** (0.469)	1.970*** (0.482)	1.923*** (0.516)
Religious Ideology		0.0495 (0.538)	-0.719 (0.785)		0.238 (0.565)	-0.331 (0.813)
Much Weaker		-0.222 (0.524)	0.0696 (0.533)		-0.387 (0.503)	0.0929 (0.501)
Rebel Age		0.0331 (0.0205)	0.0343 (0.0422)		0.0246 (0.0226)	0.00288 (0.0448)
Lootable Resources		1.157** (0.522)	0.995* (0.575)		1.033** (0.487)	0.958* (0.576)
Intense Conflict			0.507 (0.623)			0.540 (0.580)
Polity2			-0.0606 (0.0719)			-0.0786 (0.0807)
per capita GDP (Logged)			0.121 (0.256)			0.0771 (0.270)
Cutpoint 1	0.176 (0.219)	0.513* (0.284)	1.443 (1.639)	0.502** (0.243)	0.737** (0.311)	1.474 (1.722)
Cutpoint 2	1.850*** (0.301)	2.317*** (0.362)	3.215* (1.708)	2.362*** (0.327)	2.709*** (0.411)	3.460** (1.740)
Observations	103	103	90	103	103	90

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Across all models, we find support for our core hypothesis that the use of magical practices is associated with an increased prevalence of the forced recruitment of children. These findings highlight the importance of accounting for magical practices in analyses of rebel behavior.

Additional Analysis

We also conduct some additional robustness checks. First, we consider whether having a rebel leader perceived to have extraordinary magical powers has similar effects to magical practices among the rank-and-file. Thus, we reconduct the main analysis, employing the restrictive and inclusive measures of magical rebel leaders instead of the measures of magical practices (among the rank-and-file) used in the main analysis. 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.

It is also possible that magical practices affect any form of recruitment of child soldiers, not just forced recruitment. Thus, using data Haer and Böhmelt (2016), we employ a three-point ordinal indicator of the extent to which groups recruit children, which does not distinguish between their forced and voluntary recruitment. Magical practices are negative and statistically significant in all but one model ($p \sim 0.46$). However, this suggests that magical practices have a more consistent effect on the forced recruitment of children than the use of child soldiers overall, including child “volunteers.”

We also investigate whether the findings are specific to the forced recruitment of children, or whether they apply to the coercive recruitment of both adults and children. We use the three-

point ordinal measure of the extent to which rebels rely on forced recruitment, taken from the Rebel Human Rights Violations (RHRV) dataset (Walsh et al. 2023). This variable is not specific to the recruitment of children or adults. Magical practices have a significant association with general forced recruitment in only some models. Thus, magical practices appear to have a more consistent effect on the forced recruitment of children, relative to other coercive recruitment practices.

Conclusion

Rebel groups employ a variety of magical practices that affect their behavior in important ways, including their recruitment practices and treatment of civilians. However, despite their importance, prior quantitative research on the ideology of rebel groups, while valuable, tends to overlook these practices as they often do not correspond to the broader ideological platforms of militant organizations. To remedy this, we built the MAGICC dataset, which contains measures of magical practices within 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, in line with the wisdom in existing literature.

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

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