

Local Justice, Global Image: The Abunzi Mediation System As Soft Power in Post-Conflict Rwanda

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Abstract

This study examines the Abunzi mediation system in Rwanda as both a mechanism of community justice and a strategic tool of soft power. Drawing on survey data from 385 participants—including mediators, officials, and community members in 15 districts of Rwanda—the research finds near-universal trust in the system's fairness (98%) and widespread participation, affirming its cultural legitimacy and integration in local governance. Respondents instead highlight a convergence: the Abunzi's international status as symbols of stability and reconciliation reflects a true domestic commitment to community-based justice, with government rhetoric closely aligned with grassroots realities. These findings reveal the Abunzi's hybrid legal identity and dual role in mediating both local disputes and Rwanda's global reputation, advancing debates on transitional justice, vernacular governance, and post-conflict legitimacy, while positioning the Abunzi as a globally relevant model of community-based soft power.

Keywords: Abunzi mediation system, Community justice, Soft power, Post-genocide Rwanda, Vernacular governance, Transitional justice, Legitimacy

Introduction

Following one of the twentieth century's darkest chapter, in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda launched an ambitious effort to re-establish trust, justice, and social cohesion. The Abunzi mediation system, a hybrid institution that combined long-held traditions with modern statecraft, was at the heart of this rejuvenation. The Abunzi is more than just a conflict resolution tool; it represents Rwanda's aim of restorative justice, grassroots empowerment, and reconciliation. Abunzi committees, reestablished under the 2004 law and managed by the Ministry of Justice, are made up of elected mediators at the cell and sector levels. They address conflicts ranging from land disputes to marital arguments outside of official courts, providing justice that is accessible, culturally relevant, and cost-effective. Their decisions are legally recognized and often binding, relieving citizens of the burden of costly and time-consuming litigation.

However, the Abunzi surpasses judicial convenience. It is an intentional combination of tradition and governance, intended to repair the shredded social fabric while expanding the state's presence into everyday life. It represents Rwanda's form of participatory, reconciliatory justice, which balances local authority with government monitoring. Internationally, it has been lauded as a model of decentralized peacebuilding and legal pluralism by donors, policymakers, and scholars (Mutisi, 2012). But underneath the adulation lies a more profound reality: the Abunzi is not simply an instrument for community

mediation, but also a strategic pillar of Rwanda's larger political objective, transforming grassroots justice ideas into national legitimacy and international reputation. To illustrate this dual role, this study places the Abunzi in the context of "soft power".

Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power," which refers to a state's ability to achieve purpose through attractions and persuasion rather than coercion. While classic theory has been criticized for its Western bias and neglect of postcolonial practices (Acharya, 2014; Mawdsley, 2015), this study expands on those criticisms by demonstrating how, in Rwanda, soft power emerges as a multi-scalar and performative practice, with local institutions and narratives becoming assets in global diplomacy and image-making.

Soft power is inextricably linked to domestic legitimacy. Its worldwide relevance is based on a compelling internal story that can be credibly projected overseas. In this way, soft power serves as both an instrument for governance and diplomacy, blurring the lines between domestic policy and foreign relations (Kurlantzick, 2007; Nye, 2011). The Abunzi represent this dynamic. They represent Rwanda's post-conflict reconstruction and institutional resilience while serving as a community-based justice system. The Rwandan government has strategically backed the Abunzi system as a tool for advancing grassroots reconciliation, promoting decentralization, and preserving cultural authenticity. By enhancing these local justice processes, the government communicates stability and competence to international audiences, boosting donor and foreign investors' confidence and shaping perceptions of national resilience.

As a result, this study views the Abunzi as a soft power statecraft technique that can be deliberately employed to build an appealing national brand overseas while reinforcing legitimacy at home. This reframing broadens soft power studies by highlighting its hybrid, postcolonial features, while also enriching peacebuilding arguments by demonstrating how community institutions can serve as global influence tools. The contribution is unique in that it emphasizes the intentional use of grassroots institutions to produce dual legitimacy, internal and external, in post-conflict state building. It also offers a policy-relevant argument by demonstrating that justice institutions can function as conflict resolution processes, governance instruments, and diplomatic vehicles all at the same time.

At its core, this theoretical intervention values state legitimacy. Legitimacy is contested in a variety of contexts following a conflict, including local, institutional, symbolic, and international. The Abunzi is an excellent illustration of this process. Domestically, it increases state proximity and responsiveness. Its design, which is community-based, elected, and consensus-driven, replicates Rwanda's government model, blending state power into local cultural idioms and delivering what (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006) refer to as "vernacularised legitimacy." Internationally, the Abunzi is praised in donor reports, policy forums, and diplomatic language as evidence of Rwanda's innovative governance and recovery efforts (*International Development Law Organization (IDLO), 2025* ; Mutisi, 2012). This duality is not diametrically contrasting: Abunzi's participatory aesthetics reinforce centralized authority at home while offering the global community a story of inclusion, order, and resilience.

Thus, the Abunzi system is regarded in international circles as a model of Rwanda's creative administration and recovery efforts. This study expands on traditional interpretations of local justice by examining it through the prism of soft power, revealing how post-conflict nations can weaponize community-based institutions in the pursuit of peace, recognition, and authority. This study contributes to our knowledge of how states in the Global South use judicial institutions not only for domestic governance, but also for strategic visibility, normative capital, and regime resilience. Examining Rwanda's Abunzi mediation system through the lenses of internal consolidation and international performance reveals how local institutions can be repurposed as tools of legitimacy and soft power.

Following the destruction of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda embarked on one of the most ambitious post-conflict reconstruction projects in the Global South. The Abunzi system, a hybrid institution that combines customary and legislative logics, exhibits this innovative governance style, refusing easy categorization as "traditional" or "modern." This subject is important because it illustrates both the difficulties and the opportunities of state-building in post-conflict environments.

The Abunzi show how grassroots conflict resolution systems may deliver justice and solidarity while also solidifying political power and portraying a strong national narrative. Rwanda's strategy challenges existing peacebuilding paradigms by demonstrating that justice systems may empower communities while reinforcing centralized power. Its worldwide image as a "success story" in reconciliation and development makes this instance even more relevant, exposing how internal institutions are used to influence donors, shape diplomacy, and expand regional hegemony. Studying the Abunzi provides insights into how local processes handle the conflicts between tradition and modernity, justice and control, internal governance and global diplomacy, paving the way for new theory and practice in peace and conflict studies.

Building on Rwanda's unique position at the confluence of local innovation and global impact, this study is among the first to conduct an integrated theoretical and empirical analysis of grassroots justice as an intentional tool of state legitimacy and soft power. Rather than viewing community-based systems solely as centres of empowerment or informal justice, it places them within larger political and diplomatic initiatives, linking hitherto isolated literatures.

The study's contributions are threefold. First, conceptual innovation - The study broadens the definition of soft power beyond international attraction to include its domestic, performative dimensions in state development. It calls into question the traditional distinction between internal legitimacy and external projection by demonstrating how the Abunzi serve as both instruments of governance and diplomacy. Second, empirical depth - Drawing on privileged access and extensive fieldwork, the study provides unique insights into how the Abunzi function in practice, serving as both community mediators and emblems of Rwanda's national new written narrative. This dual perspective demonstrates how grassroots justice is reframed for global audiences as part of larger legitimization strategies.

Finally, the study calls into question Western-centric interpretations of peacebuilding by locating Rwanda's experience within a postcolonial Global South framework. It also shows how local judicial institutions can promote social cohesiveness while strengthening state authority, providing policymakers with lessons—as well as caution—for those seeking long-term peace and international legitimacy in post-conflict settings.

Following this introduction, Section 2 examines the relevant literature, Section 3 outlines the methodologies, Section 4 gives the findings, and Section 5 summarizes the study, draws conclusions, and discusses policy implications.

2. Literature Review

To analyze Rwanda's Abunzi mediation system, this study draws on four scholarly strands: soft power, post-conflict governance, traditional legal systems, and politics image. Each corpus of work provides valuable insights into influence, state formation, and justice. However, considerable gaps persist in connecting local judicial systems to the larger processes of state legitimacy and foreign diplomacy. This paper presents a paradigm for understanding how grassroots institutions are strategically mobilized for both domestic governance and global soft power by connecting these two literatures.

Soft Power

Joseph Nye's (2004) notion of soft power, which seeks influence through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, has transformed international relations theory. It emphasizes cultural attractiveness, political principles, and programs that are perceived as genuine. However, traditional viewpoints have been criticized for their Western slant and narrow focus on state-to-state relations (Acharya, 2014; Mawdsley, 2015). These critiques encourage scholars to reconsider soft power in the context of postcolonial nations and multilevel governance.

More recent research has broadened the definition of soft power to include its existence in domestic institutions, cultural narratives, and local government (Guzzini, 2013; Kurlantzick, 2007; Nye, 2011). This "everyday soft power" blurs the lines between domestic and foreign arenas, demonstrating how legitimacy is built through symbolic practices and institutional performance. In unstable post-conflict environments, narratives of justice and rehabilitation are critical to regime survival. However, there has been little empirical research into how local institutions actively shape soft power dynamics. Rwanda's Abunzi system directly tackles this gap, demonstrating how grassroots justice may be skillfully used to gain internal authority and external respect.

Post-Conflict Governance

Scholarship on post-conflict governance investigates how war-torn countries reconstruct institutions and maintain peace (De Zeeuw, 2022). Mainstream approaches prioritize formal changes such as courts and elections (Paris, 2007), but they frequently ignore hybrid systems that combine statutory and customary logics (De Zeeuw, 2022; Lund, 2006). Such arrangements can boost governmental legitimacy while also meeting citizens' needs in situations where conventional institutions lack trust. Rwanda exemplifies this duality. While pushing centralized modernisation, the government also relies on local institutions like the Abunzi to promote cohesiveness and legitimacy (Purdeková, 2015). However, unresolved questions remain: how do such institutions balance justice provision with political control? How do they relate to broader ambitions of legitimacy and international engagement? This paper addresses these concerns by putting the Abunzi within Rwanda's layered governance framework.

Traditional Justice Systems

Customary judicial structures are nevertheless important in many post-conflict settings (Oomen, 2005). Restorative principles and community participation underpin them, and they frequently fill gaps where formal courts are absent or distrusted (Clark, 2010). Critics argue that these practices can maintain hierarchies, marginalize vulnerable groups, and coincide with governmental goals, despite their cultural legitimacy. The Abunzi system is a rare combination of governmental institutionalization and local customs. This dichotomy provides a fertile ground for investigating how customary justice is simultaneously adapted and instrumentalized in state-building processes. It raises fundamental problems regarding the relationship between justice, power, and legitimacy in post-conflict administration.

Image Politics

Image politics is the process by which states create and maintain their public image in order to influence domestic and international attitudes (Goffman, 1949). To attract financial and diplomatic support, post-conflict regimes must portray images of recovery, resilience, and order. Such techniques frequently fit with donor discourses on the rule of law, local ownership, and participatory government (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). However, image politics can disguise existing disparities and cement authoritarian control (Kelsall, 2009). Rwanda's promotion of the Abunzi system shows this duality: it showcases participatory, community-based justice to international audiences while also strengthening domestic

governmental authority. This demonstrates the complicated interplay between image, legitimacy, and power in post-conflict statecraft.

Conclusion to Review

Together, this literature demonstrates that institutions such as the Abunzi exist at the intersection of tradition and modernity, local administration and foreign diplomacy, justice and control. By addressing these linkages, this study fills long-standing gaps in the literature and demonstrates how grassroots justice systems can function as strategic legitimacy and soft power technologies. This repositions local mediation as vital to the politics of post-conflict statecraft, rather than peripheral.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a mixed case study design that was selected for its ability to offer comprehensive, contextually grounded insights on complex political and social processes. Rwanda's Abunzi mediation system is a rare example of a state-sponsored, community-based justice mechanism that has survived nearly three decades since the genocide against the Tutsi. It is exceptional in that it combines traditional dispute resolution with formal state governance, not only surviving the transitional period but also becoming a pillar of Rwanda's decentralized administration and post-genocide national identity. Unlike other hybrid judicial systems, the Abunzi are institutionally embedded and formally required, making them an unparalleled research site for understanding how grassroots legal institutions function as soft power instruments. This design so directly aligns with the study's primary goal: to examine the Abunzi system as a dual mechanism of internal legitimacy and international image-building in post-conflict statecraft.

3.2 Methods

To capture the Abunzi's numerous nature, the study used a triangulated, multi-method approach that aimed to maximize depth, reliability, and contextual sensitivity. The major tool was a structured questionnaire meticulously designed to extract demographic profiles, sentiments, and lived experiences of residents who interact with the Abunzi. It examined the system's goal, perceived effectiveness, and principles of justice, community trust, cultural relevance, and contributions to Rwanda's national and international image. The tool combines closed-ended questions for systematic quantitative analysis with open-ended prompts to gather narrative richness. It was distributed to 385 respondents from both urban and rural locations across 15 districts of Rwanda, ensuring a wide socio-demographic and geographic representation.

Semi-structured interviews with a strategically chosen cohort of Abunzi mediators, local government officials, system users, and national politicians were conducted to supplement and contextualize survey findings. To reflect Rwanda's social and institutional variety, participants were selected based on their gender, age, area, and institutional role. Audio recordings were avoided in accordance with culturally appropriate practice to promote openness and trust. Instead, comprehensive notes were made in Kinyarwanda, which were then enlarged, translated into English, and double-checked for semantic accuracy and emotional depth. Manual theme coding was used with a colour-coded method to discover repeating patterns of mediation, authority, and soft power. This low-tech but context-sensitive approach increased confidence and yielded uncommonly frank results.

To situate the Abunzi within broader political and discursive contexts, the study examined government policy documents, legal texts, Non-Government Organizations (NGO) reports, political speeches, and national and international media coverage. This layer shed light on how the Abunzi are portrayed—as

agents of government, reconciliation, and soft power—in both domestic and global development narratives.

3. Fieldwork Strategy

Field sites were deliberately chosen across urban and rural districts to reflect Rwanda's diverse socioeconomic and institutional settings. The Ministry of Justice and local authorities encouraged access, which increased credibility. The fieldwork lasted one month, allowing for iterative data gathering, validation of emerging themes, and strategic modifications. The research team comprised certified bilingual assistants who spoke Kinyarwanda and English, assuring cultural fluency, precise translation, and conformity to local standards. Rather of emphasising centralised control and rigorous regulation, the study advocated for open, formal venues and openness to encourage candid debate of delicate or contentious matters.

However, while the study was conceptually based on "soft power," the term was intentionally removed from all research tools to minimize jargon and misinterpretation. Instead, it was implemented through proxy themes including legitimacy, trust, influence, cultural authenticity, and state image-building. The questionnaire was divided into theme clusters that reflected the study's conceptual framework: effectiveness, trust and legitimacy, cultural resonance, public communication, and differences between local experience and worldwide representation. This design allowed for a multifaceted examination of citizens' perspectives.

4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a triangulated mixed-method technique. The survey's quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to identify patterns based on gender, geography, and institutional role. Qualitative data from open-ended replies and interviews were manually classified into theme clusters to support interpretation based on participants' narratives. The study analyzed document and media sources to contextualize Abunzi practices within broader political discourses of governance, reconciliation, and international legitimacy. The combination of these elements resulted in a fully textured, context-sensitive image of how the Abunzi function as tools of justice, community governance, and soft power.

5. Ethical Considerations

Given Rwanda's sensitive political and historical setting, ethics were essential. Participants were thoroughly instructed on the study's objectives, told of their ability to withdraw, and ensured of anonymity. All consent was given voluntarily, and the data were securely kept for academic purposes exclusively. During fieldwork, the study avoided using politically charged terms and instead focused on culturally based conceptions of justice and legitimacy. Potential dangers of distress or political exposure were reduced by carefully structuring questions and conducting exchanges in safe, trust-building settings. The researcher used continual reflexivity, recognizing how positionality and institutional linkages might influence access, interpretation, and representation. A reflective field notebook chronicled ethical quandaries, uncertainties, and decision-making processes throughout. This practice increased transparency and analytical rigour.

6. Limitations and Delimitations

This study admits several boundaries: The study focusses on Rwanda's post conflict governance landscape,

providing context-specific findings. While not generally applicable, they can be theoretically transferred to similar situations of hybrid justice and soft power in post-conflict settings. Translation and interpretation: Despite bilingual help and iterative cross-checking, some nuance may have been lost during translation. Collaborative transcript evaluation helps to reduce this risk. Analytical focus: The study is designed to focus solely on the Abunzi in order to achieve depth and theoretical clarity. Other mechanisms, such as Gacaca and the formal judiciary, are barred from consideration. These limits improve analytical clarity and emphasize the study's principal goal: to show how grassroots justice processes can be organized as strategic tools for both domestic governance and international legitimacy.

Findings

This section presents the findings of a mixed-methods investigation into Rwanda's Abunzi judicial system as both a culturally embedded dispute resolution mechanism and an instrument of governmental soft power in the post-conflict era. The findings, based on data from 385 survey respondents, 191 qualitative interviews, and documentary and media research, show a complex interplay between community legitimacy, institutional trust, and national image-building. Participants frequently regarded the Abunzi as a source of moral authority, cultural continuity, and symbolic state representation, rather than simply a legal venue. It appears not just as a forum for dispute resolution, but also as a method for strengthening national unity, cementing political legitimacy, and presenting reconciliation to external audiences.

Table 1 demonstrates atypically high public familiarity: 95.8% of respondents said they were well aware about the Abunzi. This saturation shows that the system is extensively integrated into Rwanda's social and cognitive milieu. However, views of effectiveness contain significant subtlety. While 49% rated the method "highly effective," half (50%) said it was simply "effective." Both groups clearly recognise the system's effectiveness, but the difference in intensity demonstrates that broad trust does not always equate to the greatest possible endorsement. In other words, while the Abunzi's efficiency is almost universally acknowledged, many people maintain tempered confidence, emphasising the distinction between general approval and enthusiastic support.

It is also worth noting that respondents with less firsthand experience gave the system a positive rating. Even limited exposure appears to be sufficient to elicit favourable reactions, indicating the strength of the system's public narrative and institutional status. Only 1% of respondents had a neutral view, most likely because they were familiar with the system through reputation but had not engaged directly. The absence of unfamiliar respondents emphasizes the Abunzi's prevalence, visibility, and symbolic internalization in Rwandan public life.

Overall, the results confirm that extensive familiarity with the Abunzi is substantially associated with efficacy ratings. The nearly equal distribution of "effective" and "highly effective" assessments implies that perceptions are influenced not only by generic recognition, but also by more specific criteria such as procedural fairness, satisfaction with outcomes, mediator behaviour, and broader sociopolitical dynamics. While the statistics cannot fully distinguish between these drivers, the patterns suggest that respondents use measured judgement rather than unconditional approval. What remains obvious is that the Abunzi have both operational and symbolic power: they administer justice at the village level while also aiding in nation-building and post-conflict statecraft.

In this way, the data support the claim that the Abunzi act as a living example of grassroots conflict resolution, linking state law and ordinary justice. Rwanda's domestic legitimacy and foreign image as a governance innovation are strongly reliant on its perceived effectiveness.

Table 1: survey Responses on Familiarity with the Abunzi System and Perceived Effectiveness in Dispute Resolution

Response Category	Q5. Familiarity with Abunzi (%)	Q7. Perceived Effectiveness (%)
Very familiar / Very effective	95.8%	49%
Somewhat familiar / Effective	4.2%	50%
Heard of it / Neutral	0%	1%
Total	100%	100%

Perceived Purpose and Symbolic Role of the Abunzi System

When asked about the Abunzi system's primary purpose, respondents overwhelmingly recognized it as an accessible, community-based judicial mechanism dedicated to promoting social harmony. Participants from all demographic groups emphasized its importance in resolving local problems, particularly those concerning land, family, and interpersonal relationships, using culturally grounded, inclusive methods. However, participants considered the Abunzi as much more than a dispute resolution forum. They continually presented it as a defender of greater societal ideals such as justice, reconciliation, and a commitment to Rwanda's post-genocide against Tutsi imperatives. By emphasizing conversation and compromise, the Abunzi were seen as strengthening national solidarity and providing a moral and procedural counterweight to formal courts, particularly in rural areas where official justice is less accessible.

At the same time, the Abunzi system was largely regarded as a concrete manifestation of the government's responsiveness to local realities and post-conflict aspirations. The state promotes adaptive, people-centered governance by institutionalizing a grassroots system that preserves indigenous traditions while serving national objectives. This dual perspective strengthens citizen trust and positions the Abunzi not only as a legal tool, but also as a symbol of accountable, participatory statecraft.

Beyond Rwanda's boundaries, the system's structure and values serve as a subtle yet strong declaration of transition. The Abunzi illustrate Rwanda's capacity to balance tradition and modern administration, establishing the country as a pioneer in indigenous, reconciliatory justice. In this way, the Abunzi broaden their influence from communal mediation to international diplomacy, providing as a foundation for Rwanda's moral authority and soft power.

Table 2: Core Values Promoted by the Abunzi Mediation System

Values Promoted by the Abunzi System	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Justice	302	78.4%
Reconciliation	379	98.4%
Community harmony	374	97.1%
Trust in the state	371	96.4%
Participation	385	100%
Cultural identity	381	98.9%

Perceptions of the Abunzi System’s Role in National Unity and International Reputation

The survey results (Table 3) show a clear consensus that the Abunzi system is critical to promoting national unity and healing in Rwanda's post-conflict situation. Half of respondents (50%) rated it as a key

contributor, with another 28% describing it as extremely important. This overwhelming affirmation emphasizes the Abunzi's important role in fostering social cohesiveness and community reconciliation. However, perceptions of its international importance are mixed. While 65% of respondents said the Abunzi was relatively important to Rwanda's global image, just 25% thought it was very important, and only 3% thought it was extremely influential. This difference implies that, while the Abunzi are deeply rooted in Rwanda's grassroots legitimacy, their contribution to the country's international soft power is underappreciated.

Qualitative interviews provide a more complete picture. Respondents repeatedly regarded the Abunzi as essential for post-conflict reconciliation, emphasizing its accessibility, cultural embeddedness, and participatory ways for fostering trust and societal cohesion. The system was also viewed as a concrete example of state responsiveness and participatory governance. Simultaneously, other participants viewed its symbolic worldwide significance as evidence of Rwanda's dedication to homegrown, reconciliatory justice, which contributes to the country's strong global reputation. Others, however, cautioned that this soft power potential has yet to be completely realized, pointing to a chance to increase the Abunzi's worldwide profile to match its domestic importance.

Table 3: perceptions of the Abunzi System’s Role in National Unity and International Reputation

Response Category	Q9. Contribution to National Unity & Reconciliation (%)	Q10. Importance in Shaping Rwanda’s International Reputation (%)
2 – Slightly	0%	7%
3 – Moderately	23%	65%
4 – Very much	50%	25%
5 – Extremely	28%	3%
Total	100%	100%

Survey results show widespread participation: every respondent indicated direct involvement with the Abunzi mediation process, demonstrating its profound integration into everyday community life. This breadth of involvement validates the Abunzi as not only accessible, but also deeply trusted—functioning as an integrated mechanism of everyday justice throughout Rwanda. Unlike formal courts, which might appear distant, bureaucratic, or threatening, the Abunzi system is intertwined with communal rhythms, making justice a participatory and culturally relevant practice. The study purposefully collected opinions from a variety of roles—mediators, disputants, witnesses, and observers—to demonstrate the system's validity and impact from several angles. This inclusiveness broadens the analysis, revealing the Abunzi as a live, community-owned institution rather than a limited legal procedure.

Among the 385 participants, 138 (36%) started disagreements by recommending cases, demonstrating the community's active engagement in initiating settlement processes. Another 116 (30%) were direct disputants, 89 (23%) were witnesses, and 42 (11%) worked as non-participant observers. This broad spectrum of interaction demonstrates how the Abunzi relies on collective participation to maintain its efficacy and validity. Mediation is not a private interaction between disputants, but rather a communal act that promotes responsibility, openness, and shared ownership of justice, in stark contrast to the individualized, adversarial nature of formal court systems.

Table 4: Participation in the Abunzi Mediation Process

Role	Frequency	Percentage of Participants (%)
Party in a case	116	30
Referred a case	138	36
Witness	89	23
Community member	42	11

Perceptions of Fairness and Respect in the Abunzi Mediation Process

The data demonstrate widespread trust in the Abunzi system as a source of justice and respect. An incredible 89% (342 respondents) stated that their rights and perspectives are always honoured, while 74% (285 respondents) strongly agreed that the system assures equal treatment for all community members. Smaller percentage reported encountering respect and fairness "often" or "sometimes," while no respondent voiced negative feelings.

These findings reveal exceptionally high levels of confidence and satisfaction, establishing the Abunzi as a unique paradigm of procedural fairness in post-conflict justice systems. Its continual protection of individual rights and equitable treatment throughout the community not only maintains its legitimacy, but also ensures long-term public engagement. Such widespread conviction in fairness is more than just a measure of satisfaction; it is the foundation of the Abunzi's reputation, durability, and ability to function as a trustworthy grassroots judicial mechanism.

Table 5: Community Perceptions of Fairness and Respect in the Abunzi Process

Response Category	Q14. Respect for Rights (%)	Q14. Frequency	Q15. Fair Treatment (%)	Q15. Frequency
Always / Strongly Agree	89	342	74	285
Often / Agree	9	35	16	62
Sometimes / Neutral	2	8	10	38

Respondents consistently described their interactions with the Abunzi mediation process as courteous, fair, and rights-protective. Mediators were frequently lauded for their neutrality and impartiality, which boosted confidence and trust in the institution. Participants also emphasized the system's efficiency in achieving peaceful resolutions and its importance in preserving social cohesion. Many people appreciated how Abunzi mediation combines ancient cultural values with modern ideas of justice, establishing it as both based in legacy and sensitive to contemporary government demands.

Trust in mediators was particularly high: 68% of respondents indicated "much trust," with an additional 17% expressing "complete trust." Mediators are so widely regarded as trustworthy, unbiased actors. Assessments of political autonomy were more nuanced than divided. While 68% of respondents thought mediators were "mostly" independent of political influence, 27% were absolutely confidence in their independence, and 5% remained undecided. However, neutrality did not mean a denial of independence; rather, it showed careful acknowledgement within an overarching climate of trust. Taken together, these perspectives show that impressions of the Abunzi's autonomy are mainly good, with just slight worries about possible political interference. Cultural resonance arose as one of the Abunzi's distinguishing features. Nearly four-fifths of respondents (79%) said the system reflects Rwandan ideals "very much,"

with the remaining 21% saying "completely." This remarkable adherence to cultural standards boosts both credibility and community adoption.

Finally, 98% of participants agreed that the Abunzi approach promotes long-term peace and reconciliation. This exceptional consensus emphasizes the Abunzi's relevance not only as a conflict resolution tool, but also as a pillar of societal stability in post-conflict Rwanda. In comparison, few hybrid justice procedures in post-conflict societies—from Sierra Leone's local courts to Timor-Leste's community mediation—have achieved this level of trust, cultural legitimacy, and peacebuilding impact. Rwanda's Abunzi thus stand out as a worldwide example, illustrating how locally rooted institutions can deliver justice while also reinforcing legitimacy and contributing to national reconciliation.

Table 6: perceptions of Trust, Autonomy, Cultural Alignment, and Peace Contributions in Abunzi Mediation

Response Category	Q17. Trust in Mediators (%)	Q19. Independence from Political Influence (%)	Q20. Reflection of Cultural Values (%)	Q21. Contribution to Peace (%)
Some trust / Moderately / Neutral	15%	5%	0%	0%
Much trust / Mostly / Agree	68%	68%	79%	98%
Complete trust / Completely / Strongly agree	17%	27%	21%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

When asked if all community members, including women, teenagers, and other social groups, are treated equally in the Abunzi mediation process, the response was practically universal. Of the 385 respondents, 379 (98.4%) strongly agreed, with the remaining 6 (1.6%) agreeing, leaving no dissenting opinions. Such overwhelming affirmation confirms Abunzi's reputation as an inclusive and impartial procedure.

Qualitative reflections supported this conclusion. As one community member observed, *"In my experience, the mediators ensure that everyone—whether young, old, male, or female—has a chance to speak and is treated with respect."* *"It seems like our fairness culture is still alive here."* A young participant echoed this, stating, *"I was surprised how seriously they took my voice, even though I was younger than the others in the room."* Mediators portrayed fairness as an intentional activity rather than an abstract principle, saying, *"We are taught to maintain fairness in all aspects. We aggressively encourage everyone to speak openly, regardless of wealth, gender, or age. That's how we build trust."*

When taken together, these viewpoints show Abunzi as more than a conflict-resolution mechanism: it serves as a social platform where dignity, participation, and equality are actively practiced. In doing so, the system goes beyond conflict resolution to represent Rwanda's broader post-conflict values of restorative justice and societal cohesiveness, transforming fairness into a daily experience.

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Agree	6	1.6%
Strongly agree	379	98.4%
Total	385	100%

Moral Authority of Abunzi Mediators

Survey results and qualitative comments agree that Abunzi mediators have moral authority based on community trust, cultural resonance, and demonstrated effectiveness. Their credibility begins with their method of selection: being chosen by other residents places them in local accountability networks and confers legitimacy that external appointees cannot. Respondents consistently identified impartiality and fairness as distinguishing characteristics of Abunzi practice, with 98% believing that all groups are treated equitably and 85% having great trust in mediators.

This confidence is strengthened by the mediators' embodiment of Rwandan cultural values (reconciliation, unity, and mutual respect), which elevates them from technical arbitrators to stewards of community ethics. Their constant track record of peaceful dispute resolution strengthens their authority, with participants underlining that legitimacy stems not just from successful settlements but also from the rehabilitation and amendment of damaged relationships. In this sense, Abunzi mediators serve both as practical problem solvers and moral role models for post-conflict reconciliation.

Deliberate communication amplifies the symbolic character of their function. The majority of respondents indicated regular or occasional exposure to government or media messages regarding the Abunzi system (39% frequent, 52% occasional), demonstrating the system's prominence in public discourse. This widespread message does more than just inform; it situates the Abunzi within a national narrative of participatory, reconciliatory justice, bolstering both their practical usefulness and symbolic significance.

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Frequently	150	39%
Occasionally	200	52%
Rarely	35	9%
Never	0	0%
Total	385	100%

Public and official communications continually highlight the Abunzi system as the foundation of communal justice, emphasising ideals like as fairness, reconciliation, and social peace. Many respondents said that such marketing portrays the Abunzi as both approachable and effective, combining traditional Rwandan values with modern legal concepts to present Rwanda as a stable and culturally grounded society. This positive narrative not only boosts national pride, but it also strengthens Rwanda's worldwide reputation as a country dedicated to peace, justice, and reconciliation in the post-genocide period.

Several respondents, however, voiced trust, stating that official narratives truly reflect local realities rather than hiding them. They contended that such portrayals provide external audiences with a fair and genuine knowledge of both the system's strengths and its current challenges. As a result, public communications not only promote Rwanda's global image, but also highlight the country's stability, progress, and the effectiveness of community-based dispute resolution as an example of grassroots justice.

When asked about the contrast between local practice and international portrayal, respondents emphasized a strong alignment between cherished narratives and lived realities. Widely praised overseas for advancing justice and peace, the Abunzi system is also seen locally as effective, accessible, and trustworthy. Adequate training, community support, and the successful blending of customary norms with formal legal frameworks reinforce both public confidence and the system's perceived legitimacy in Rwanda. These strengths also shape external perceptions: locally, they inspire genuine trust and satisfaction, while

globally, they project an accurate image that captures the system’s achievements without distortion. This convergence underscores the value of consistent communication and ongoing institutional support, not only to sustain the Abunzi’s credibility at home but also to affirm its role as a global model of community-based justice in post-conflict contexts.

Table 8: Perceptions of Government Emphasis on Abunzi System Success

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree	12	3.1%
Disagree	37	9.6%
Neutral	71	18.4%
Agree	189	49.1%
Strongly agree	76	19.7%
Total	385	100%

Summary and Conclusion

This study looked at the Abunzi mediation system's dual role as a communal justice mechanism and a key component of Rwanda's worldwide image-making. A mixed-methods methodology, which integrates survey findings with qualitative insights, provides several remarkable conclusions:

All respondents had firsthand experience with the Abunzi, demonstrating its strong integration into social life. The roles included parties, referrers, and witnesses, and mediator trust was unusually high (85% rating "much" or "full" trust). 98.4% of respondents believe the system treats community members fairly, especially women and youth. The Abunzi legal system is considered as more modern (53%) or largely modern (26%), indicating its changing nature. Domestic primacy above worldwide recognition: Participants acknowledged the system's importance in building Rwanda's international reputation, but emphasised that its greatest worth resides in achieving domestic unity and peace.

Perceived instrumentalization: Several respondents, however, voiced trust, stating that official narratives truly reflect local realities rather than hiding them. Taken together, these findings reveal the Abunzi system as a sort of vernacularised governance—locally lawful but also mobilised for statecraft. Its power comes from grassroots efficacy, cultural resonance, and symbolic utility.

Policy Recommendations

To improve the Abunzi system's integrity, effectiveness, and perception, both locally and internationally, the following policy actions are recommended:

1. Provide further training in impartiality, conflict sensitivity, ethics, and legal hybridity.
2. Maintain mediation independence by forming community monitoring boards and rotating tenure to limit political influence, which was found to be limited.
3. Increase district-level budgets for effective case management, consistent operations, and outreach.
4. Use technology like digital records and case-tracking systems to improve transparency and efficiency.
5. Maintain a balance between image-building and transparency by disclosing both achievements and current issues.
6. Prioritise actual mediation cases and community testimonials in national and international communication to ensure that narratives are founded in lived experiences.

7. Encourage global exchange through visits or virtual talks between Abunzi mediators and their international counterparts.
8. Encourage participatory storytelling, where communities co-create narratives for external stakeholders.

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