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Abstract

Conflicts are normally complex, multidimensional, and dynamic, making it difficult to propose a simple, easy solution. The leader's capacity to see warning signs that affect the healing of relationships and respond appropriately to bring about real change in people goes beyond resolution to transformation. This chapter explores how Esther employed conflict transformational strategies after Haman's edict ignited social conflict among the Jews to ensure empowerment that made the Jews triumph over the Persians. It looks at Esther's interactive processes that led to empowered relationships, reconciled tensions, and redefined interests, and shows how conflict transformation resonates with African traditional forms of conflict interventions. The approach is intercultural applied Bible studies, bearing in mind that interpretation across cultural boundaries has to be conceived as a multiple-way activity that is sensitive to both the culture of the Bible and the culture of the reader. The Ghanaian-Akan culture is used for the mutual engagement of conceptions and viewpoints. It proposes that Esther's approach can serve as a model for traditional leaders in the Akan traditional setting of Ghana to ensure transformed relationship during conflict situations.

Keywords: *Conflict Transformation, Alternative Dispute Resolution, Akan, Intercultural, Akan Tradition, Social Change*

1. Introduction

This chapter examines the story in the book of Esther from an intercultural Bible studies approach to highlight Esther's interactive processes in

conflict transformation that created new opportunities for social change, and social bonds at a time when the Jews were about to lose their lives. It looks at the relationship patterns, tensions, and interests of the personalities as key principles of conflict transformation and how these resonate within Akan traditional conflict resolution ideologies. The aim is that Esther's conflict transformation approach can mutually enrich Alternative Dispute Resolution in Akan traditional practices. The lessons can also complement the principles of transformational leadership practices. Leaders who pursue conflict transformation depend on the strengths and opportunities during conflict situations as powerful tools for fostering new changes within organizations and communities. Although conflict transformation is of considerable interest in itself, my purpose goes beyond presenting a theory of instrumental practice to context-sensitive behavioral patterns that are decisive in determining the social outcomes that transform conflicts. Moreover, the potential higher costs that accrue during conflicts in Akan societies can be minimized when one aims at transforming conflicts into positive opportunities.

The Intercultural Bible studies approach, which informs the discussion, operates on the assumption that interpretation across cultural boundaries has to be conceived of as a multiple-way dialogue that is sensitive to both the culture of the Bible as well as other cultures so that there is mutual engagement of conceptions and viewpoints. African intercultural applied Bible studies, like inculturation and liberation hermeneutics, seek to integrate African cultural thought in biblical exegesis so that there is cultural mediation (Loba-Mkole, 2008, p. 1362). It is a dialogical process that invites readers of the Bible to examine interpersonal relationships and reflect on those cultural issues that make people behave in particular ways, giving space for how it means in other cultures (Manus, 2003, p. 41). It also compares the ideologies promoted by the world of the biblical text and the world of the reader so that the emerging outcomes promote interdependence of cultures and interculturality. For Musa Dube, it is about reading the Bible with, through, and for cultural texts, contexts, and concerns since the Bible interacts with many cultures (Dube, 2010, p. 369). Hence, the cultural contact zones in the text that reveal attitudes and endorse certain constructs are reread to highlight the liberating interdependence of cultures (Dube, 2010, pp. 369–374). Lalsangkima Pachuau also

admits that intercultural interpretation has to be sensitive to diverse cultures and should engage conceptions and viewpoints from other cultural settings (Pachuau, 2015, p. 14). The diverse cultural mobility and cross-cultural issues should not threaten the existence of fixed cultural boundaries. In this present study, aspects of Akan traditional and cultural practices gleaned from proverbs, wise sayings, and maxims are used to dialogue with the story in Esther 4–8 where one can find the heightened conflict situation. The Akan are about 15 people groups of southern Ghana in West Africa that involve multi-ethnic and multi-lingual identities but speak a mutually understandable language, usually called Akan. The major language groups among the Akan are Mfantse, Asante Twi, and Akwapim Twi.

2. Conceptual Framework

Conflicts are normally complex, multidimensional, and dynamic. There is usually no simple, easy solution to conflicts. One cannot easily predict the outcomes of interventions or their consequences. In some cases, the pains and wounds created during conflicts hardly heal, causing further strains and distorted relationships even when resolved. The leader's ability to see conflicts as opportunities to one's advantage can be an ideal intervention. Such an approach can bring qualitative healing and respond appropriately to ensure growth and mental acceptance. This approach goes beyond resolution to transformation. Resolution of conflict and transformation of conflict are usually considered similar and describe a generic conflict outcome. However, the transformation of conflict, theoretically, goes further toward qualitative changes in individual behaviors of the parties, even in unresolved situations than the resolution of conflict construct. Conflict transformation assumes that conflict resolution can sometimes be difficult, if not impossible. However, one can utilize some of the situations within a conflict in such a way that some individuals engaging in conflict can move from a negative, destructive tactic to admit what is more positive, empowering, and constructive.

Some conflict theorists and practitioners have agreed that many conflicts are better off being transformed than being resolved. Notable among such

scholars and practitioners who have promoted the term "conflict transformation" include Adam Curle (1990), Johan Galtung (1995; 1996), John Paul Lederach (1989; 2003), James Laue (1991; 1993), Louis Kriesberg (1997), and Diana Francis (2002). They argue that conflict transformation focuses on the values of reducing suffering while increasing well-being, acknowledging interdependence between people, promoting justice, and changing the structure of society. It aims at a qualitative shift in individual behaviors of the parties that leads to a transformation in their relationship.

Conflict transformation is "to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships" (Lederach, 2003, p. 22). It has also been defined as actions and processes which seek to alter the various characteristics and manifestations of conflict by addressing the root causes of a particular conflict over the long term. It aims to transform negative destructive conflict into positive constructive conflict and deals with structural, behavioural and attitudinal aspects of conflict. The term refers to both the process and the completion of the process (Austin, Fischer & Ropers, 2004, pp. 464–465). A transformed approach, thus, rests on the capacity of a leader and followers to look beyond the immediate situation and its overwhelming demands to see windows that open toward change. The resulting effect is a generalized learning from historical experience for social change. The theories relating to conflict mediation, prevention, resolution, and transformation can be very fluid and confusing since there are different schools of thought. In this study, as argued, conflict transformation differs significantly from what is termed conflict management or resolution.

Conflict management is the art of designing appropriate ways to guide the inevitable conflict into appropriate channels, comprising one or more initiatives aimed at controlling or limiting the level of violence. Cordula Reimann (Reimann, 2004, p. 48), however, uses the term conflict management as an umbrella for the field when discussing conflict transformation. Haynes et al., on the other hand, use conflict resolution as an umbrella term for a field that includes mediation, conflict management, and conflict transformation, holding that conflict transformation is one of four strategies for conflict resolution (Haynes, Haynes & Fong, 2004). It

needs to be noted, also, that the process of conflict management is the foundation for more effective conflict resolution. Niklas Swanström and Milkael Weissmann argue that "Conflict resolution refers to the resolution of the underlying incompatibilities in a conflict and mutual acceptance of each party's existence, while conflict management refers to measures that limit, mitigate and/or contain a conflict without necessarily solving it." (Swanström & Weissmann, 2005, p. 25). Louis Kriesberg also points out ways in which practitioners place a somewhat different emphasis on different terms such as "management", "dispute", "settlement", "resolution", and "transformation", and adds that "conflict resolution means solving the problems that led to the conflict, and transformation means changing the relationships between the parties to the conflict" (Kriesberg, 1997, p. 64). John Paul Lederach avers that conflict resolution works towards "achieving an agreement and solution to the presenting problem creating the crisis" (Lederach, 2003, pp. 29–33) by using tools to end the conflict, while conflict management focuses on providing tools to mitigate conflict so it does not escalate. However, conflict transformation assumes that individual conflicts are influenced by larger cultures, systems, and structures that promote the continuation of conflict and when these elements are seen as positive signs, they bring about growth. Thus, conflict transformation has key characteristics inherent in conflict resolution (eliminate) and conflict management (control), or to some extent, conflict transformation is, to many people, a reaction to the conflict resolution school, although there are some distinctions.

Other key terms are conflict prevention and conflict settlement. Michael Lund defines conflict prevention as "actions taken in vulnerable places and times to avoid the threat or use of armed force and related forms of coercion by states or groups to settle the political disputes that can arise from destabilizing effects of economic, social, political, and international change" (Lund, 1996, p. 37). Kriesberg also posits that conflict settlement refers to "suppressing the conflict itself, without dealing with the deeper causes and relations" (Kriesberg, 1997, p. 64).

In all, for transformation to happen, a strategy should be developed that incorporates "the appropriate parties, issues, and combination of inducements for the desired movement at a particular time" (Kriesberg, 1989, p. 119). The movement should have structural–behavioral and subjective–

attitudinal features. Structurally, the process should be dynamic involving a change in the mixture of behaviors. Subjectively, feelings and beliefs need to change, so that the adversaries have increased mutual acceptance or mutual respect (Kriesberg, 2008, p. 402). The interaction between adversaries is the primary way in which relations become transformed (Kriesberg, 2011, p. 54). Changes in the conditions generating those feelings and beliefs are critical but not necessary in conflict transformation.

Aspects of African traditional conflict management and resolution aim at achieving the same end as transformation. The emphasis is more on persons, not the problem, and harmonious living not justice. There are times when one has to sacrifice rights and privileges for peace to be sustainable. Benk Fred-Mensah, focusing on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), asserts that "Traditional conflict resolution mechanism is defined as the 'capability of social norms and customs to hold members of a group together by effectively setting and facilitating the terms of their relationship [...] sustainability facilitates collective action for achieving mutually beneficial ends'" (Fred-Mensah, 2005, p. 1). Ernest Uwazie also mentions that in Africa, "ADR programs focused on practical skills building and creation of foundational knowledge on interpersonal, community disputes, namely negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, and some combination of processes" (Uwazie, 2014, p. 2). As such, ADR from an African perspective focuses on the communal benefits that accrue out of the use of African approaches in Akan traditional dispute processes including transformation. ADR does not suggest that conflicts should be simply eliminated or controlled, since there is something that can happen in conflict situations that can be used to build peace, both in terms of changing destructive relationship patterns and bringing about social or systemic change. The Akan says *tɛkyerema na se mpo ɔyɛ a wɔko naaso wɔtsena faakor* ("the tongue and teeth usually fight yet they stay at one place"). At times, the teeth may bite the tongue yet it is the same tongue robbed at the back of the teeth that can show the extent of harm done. Both the tongue and teeth collaborate when food is to being taken even where the teeth hurt the tongue. Such collaboration, harmony, and togetherness are key principles in promoting peace.

Ghana has legalized out-of-court arbitration under The Arbitration Act 1961, Act 38. Arbitration, which also seems to be an umbrella term, is a

confidential and compromise solution process that helps minimize the effects of disputes. Africans believe in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) because public law courts function to interpret the law and issue judgments toward justice and not necessarily to resolve and transform conflicts. Litigations at the law courts are often grounded in adversarial processes and most cases do not bring about satisfaction and promotion of good neighborliness (Ibrahim, 2018, p. 89).

From the Akan traditional perspective, there are cases in which non-natives are not given the same opportunities as natives. The distinction is usually subjective, based on the traditions and the court's processes. On one hand, Akan tradition upholds *adze wɔ fie oyε* ("when something is at home it is good"), meaning one has to think of what is beneficial for one's own people first. The motif is when favor comes upon one's fellow it can be communally shared, but the same cannot be said about outsiders. Again, *ɔhɔhoɔ nni nkɔ, yε ɔmanifɔneε* ("let the stranger eat and go, makes the citizens lean"). This means non-natives cannot be happy and take the benefits elsewhere at the expense of natives. One's own people cannot suffer for non-citizens to be satisfied. The preference to consider one's own people first makes the Akan say, *ɔhɔho nsene kuromani* ("A stranger is not better than a fellow native"). All this is to say that the Akan cultural ideologies can be potentially unfair to non-natives. On the other hand, the Akan ADR and traditional processes can be trusted because the gods and the ancestors who are the final arbiters are impartial, fair, and just. The distinctions between natives and non-natives become blurred when all have the community at heart.

Good leaders play a major role not only in looking out for the windows of opportunities during times of conflict but also in shaping ideas, developing strategies, and changing relationship patterns (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2012, p. 81). In this light, there are some resonances between the goals of conflict transformation and transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are said to have the ability to stand out and activate followers' abilities toward newer motivations and desires and bring about change toward a higher level of morality and performance. They create new visions and energize others to refocus and revitalize new commitments toward institutionalized change. Gary Yukl defines transformational leadership as "the process of influencing major changes in the attitudes and

assumptions of organisational members and building commitment for the organisation's mission, objectives, and strategies" (Yukl, 1989, p. 269). Such leaders bring about change by illustrating four main characteristics: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985, p. 219). In other words, by being visionary, motivational, and captivating, transformational leaders bring meaning and purpose to address challenges in an organization. They also stimulate followers to develop new ideas, motivating them to take alternative routes to problem-solving, and to take a closer look at all possible solutions. As Bass and Avolio posit, transformational leaders stimulate the interest among followers so that they approach issues from new perspectives, generate awareness of a mission to be undertaken, and motivate followers to higher levels of ability to look beyond their own interests toward those that will benefit the group (Bass & Avolio, 1994, pp. 2–3).

Let us turn to the book of Esther to examine how Esther the Queen created opportunities to achieve conflict transformation, focusing on changing relationship patterns, reconciling tensions, and redefining interest.

3. Transforming Conflicts in the Book of Esther

The Book of Esther shows how Esther the Queen deals with the challenges and struggles of conflict when she hears of an imminent death threat on the Jews in Persia during the exile. Esther, who is part of the minority Jews, takes the lead role in the struggle for the survival and salvation of her people using indirect but unassuming ways to transform the conflict in such a way that the Jews take a more positive and constructive approach to the otherwise negative and destructive situation. Chapters 4–8 of the book of Esther deal with reactions to the edict that sought to destroy, kill, and annihilate the Jews on the thirteenth day of the Jewish month of Adar (3:13–14). Esther, the queen, intervenes and Haman, who instigated the conflict, is exposed and killed and eventually the Jews triumphed over the Persian lords. How then does Esther transform the conflict using the life-giving opportunities to create constructive change processes in power relations? What are some of the Akan cultural ideologies that resonate with Esther's strategies?

3.1 Changing Relationships Patterns

Mordecai and the Jews hearing about the edict react publicly by putting on sackcloth and ashes, weeping loudly and bitterly (4:1–3). Mordecai, once again, breaks the law of the king by going to the king's gate in sackcloth. He is provocative, although he is powerless as an exile and as one who depends on the overlord for his existence (White, 1989, p. 169). Esther sends him new clothes to change from the mourning clothes when her servants prompt her about Mordecai's behavior, only for Mordecai to refuse them. To Esther, such a public demonstration at no mean place other than the king's gate is a serious crime even though motivated by a great concern. To manage the situation, a respectable servant of the queen, Hatach, is detailed to act as a mediator to find the way forward.

Esther's intervention makes Mordecai shift from public demonstration toward ADR. Mordecai sees an opportunity in the status of Esther as his daughter who is married to the king, and as such can she mediate in that grave situation. In ADR, where parties to a conflict do not have confidence in themselves to seek reconciliation or resolution, they rely on other parties' initiative and effort to address the conflict. Traditional leaders such as chiefs, queen mothers, heads of families, and elders command the respect of their community members and are trusted to be neutral, unbiased, and fair in the amicable arbitration and conciliation of disputes and conflicts (Wood, 2014, p. xvii). This is because the deities play a key role in their judgments. Mediation, from the Latin "mediare" which means "heal" connotes a process of arbitration that brings about healing and transforming relationships of disputing parties. Any mediation from the Akan perspective that does not end in healing is not worth its sort. The traditional system of arbitration, known among the Akan as *dwanetoa* ("mediation") has a notion of seeking refuge, that is hiding behind an authority who can calm tempers, compensate for losses, and coactivate a compromise to compel peace and healing of relationship. The *Dwanetoa hene* ("Mediation chief") is expected to be an advocate for the one who comes to seek help but should also stand by the other party. Such a person should have an identity and image worthy of respect to all. The *Dwanetoahene*, akin to *Baale* of the Yoruba, and *Xeer* in Somali, aims at some form of settlement or agreement through customary processes toward harmonious neighborliness (Ajayi & Buhari, 2014, p. 114). Mordecai's tone and command to

Esther to "go to the king" even when it is customarily inappropriate, unless invited, reveals his uncompromising stance (4:8). The narrator captures Mordecai's response to Esther by the use of the Hiphil infinitive construct הָשִׁיב translated "return" (4:13), thus indicating an intense and authoritative word of response. Esther had made it clear that the period was unlawful but Mordecai sends a strong word to Esther to go since he would not wait for a good opportunity. I do not agree with Iain Duguid who says that Mordecai uses the language penitential prayer when commanding the queen in the sense of seeking mercy and pleading before the king (Duguid, 2006, p. 91). If going to the king was a good option, why did Mordecai not initially petition the king but rather wear sackcloth as a way of protestation? Mordecai felt that Esther had to step into the conflict and resolve it, not considering the cost, adding that Esther may have come to leadership "for such a time as this" (4:14). Another possible meaning for "such a time as this" (4:14) is that Queen Esther is in that position just to intervene at the "wrong time" to save her people.

Both Mordecai and Esther understand that the Jews are facing a dangerous crisis but their approaches toward "relief and deliverance" (4:15) are different. Esther, in my view, seems to be hesitant to follow Mordecai's strategy on several levels even though she continued to submit to his instructions. First, there is no need to further break the laws of the Persian king and go to him uninvited as Mordecai commanded. Second, her hesitation to appear uninvited is not a result of cowardice or refusal to see herself as a Jew. Rather, she feels that diplomacy is the best way to address the problem, an approach Mordecai did not suggest. Third, doing the right thing at the right time can offer a stronger chance of saving the Jews. All along, Mordecai did not do the right thing at the right time, thereby creating problems for himself and the entire Jewish population. Fourth, and most importantly, conflicts, especially when the signet ring is used as a seal on the edict, cannot be resolved. Finally, it would be unwise to approach such an enormous death threat simply by seeking to manage the problem. Therefore, a conflict transformation strategy will be ideal for a conflict such as this. Hence, the relationships between the Persians and Jews need to be reexamined to unearth opportunities for transformation. Esther has to change the perception of Mordecai and the Jews and realign

their patterns of relations so that he can see the Persian servants on their side.

Mordecai, who was Esther's foster father, wanted to continually exercise his parental authority over Esther even though she is married and enthroned as a queen. Jo Carruthers rightly observes that, Mordecai's heavy-handedness is noted because he forgets that the queen cannot be treated like a daughter, and he sees Esther's royalty as only beneficial in so far as it enabled her to better fulfill her duty as his daughter (Carruthers, 2008, p. 170). The Akan people, however, believe that there are the elders or the parents before a great person is born. However, the relationship patterns change when one assumes a position of authority, and all of the elderly should submit to the one enthroned. Recognizing the identity of those in authority is a virtue Africans uphold. Mordecai's words to Esther the queen, thus, do not show the true moral virtues of a subject. He did not realize that a servant could not refuse an offer from the queen of the powerful Persian empire or order the queen about, no matter what. Esther may be a young girl but she occupies a sacred throne and cannot be treated as a child. The Akan says *Opanyin nto bo-hyew nto abofra nsam* ("An elder does not roast hot stone and put it in the hand of a child"). In other words, it is immoral for a well-meaning adult to assign a great task to a young person who cannot handle it (Opoku, 1997, p. 50).

Esther knew the mission to the king was a death mission but she decides to go, hence her statement: "if I perish, I perish" (4:16). Carey Moore sees Esther as a heroine because she was ready to face death (Moore, 1979, p. 53). Such a brave sacrificial mission echoes the tale of two Ghanaian-Akan heroes in the 17th Century, Nana Tweneboa Kodua of Kumawu-Asante and Egya Ahor of Gomoa-Mfantse, who voluntarily offered themselves to be killed to save their communities from calamities even though they were royals. Nana Tweneboa Kodua's sacrificial death brought victory to the Asante kingdom in a time of war while Egya Ahor's death brought an end to a strange disease that was taking the lives of many people in the community. Generally, women and men do not labour equally in enhancing life because ways to achieve life in its fulness in the African setting are somehow gender-specific. Women are traditionally life-givers through childbirth while men are life-savers. When women are coerced to give up life in a bid to save others, it is unacceptable. Patriarchal ideas that insist

women should not care about their lives or well-being but must sacrifice for others need to be challenged and reviewed. Mordecai did not see Esther's claim to a right to life because he was blinded by his own self-interest.

Esther carefully analyzes the situation and using her intellectual prowess sets in motion a secret plan. She first gains the trust of all so they support her in fasting. Such a constructive change in the approach to the conflict revitalizes the Jewish people's energies. After the three-day fast, Esther goes to the king and favor locates her, making the king allow her to live and make a request. Esther thus invites the king and Haman to a banquet, perhaps a sure bait to catch the two great men in their tracks to alter the relationship. The tables have turned and Esther need not go to the king; the king rather comes to Esther. The second banquet's invitation by Esther for the two after the first one sees the king anxiously sending eunuchs to hasten to bring Haman to the banquet Esther had prepared (6:14). It is the king, rather than Esther, who is worried about Haman's delay to the banquet although Haman is very important for Esther's agenda. Esther suspended putting forward her request, although the king's interest in knowing Esther's petition and grant became a real need during the two banquets (5:3,6; 7:2). When it came to naming her request to the king, Esther pleads for life rather than a gift of half the kingdom promised. Esther laments over the threats she and her people are facing. Her tone appears mild and helpless as she pleads with the king:

> Let my life // be given me // as my petition,
> and my people // ... // as my request (7:3).

The ellipsis in Line 2 is intentional and purposeful. She does not specifically say what the king should do for her people, but the ellipsis indicates what she wanted – the Jews should be given to her. The king has already promised to give half of the kingdom to Esther if she so desires. Giving the Jews to Esther may change the effect of the edict which the king was ready to support without thinking about the consequences. If Esther moves all the Jews into half of the kingdom promised to her, how can the Persians enter that kingdom to destroy the Jews? The Akan says *obi ntoto namporɔreɛ mfa nhyɛ ne yɔnko anom nse no sɛ: 'W'anom bɔn'* ("no one bakes rotten meat and puts it into his companion's mouth and says to him: 'Your

mouth stinks'"). In other words, one cannot blame someone for something that the person is not responsible for. She cannot force the blame on the king in deciding against his own people. Significantly, Esther was wise and knew the implications of her request although she is open to all ideas (Aidoo, 2020, p. 128). If Esther and the Jews are killed then it is the king, and not Haman, who has caused it.

Mordecai has earlier made Esther understand that even though she is a queen, she would not be spared if all the Jews are annihilated (4:13). As Sidnie White avers, Esther acts primarily based on her loyalty to the Jewish community (White, 1989, p. 172). The enemy's threat is very much a threat against Esther herself. She has to rely on power play, but she is not ready to physically show to Haman that she also has power, and is leveraging her position to claim what belongs to her, or maneuvering herself into being in control. Haman should play to her emotional plot of either surrendering or pleading in a manner that would make him stupid. Esther accordingly transforms the atmosphere in such a way that the problem becomes that of Haman's. She makes the king shift from being loyal to Haman at all costs to her interest. Esther's approach to conflict transformation puts her in control of wealth, court appointments, and access to the king.

3.2 Reconciling Tensions

A conflict transformational approach rests on the capacity to see positive windows that are open in negative situations. Such a vision calls for collaboration and co-operation. Briskin, locating the strengths of transformational leadership in community building, inclusive decision-making, and heroic leadership skills, posits that although the leader's presence is very important, it does not take one person to bring about change (Briskin, 2011, p. 521). It is said that when a broomstick stands alone it cannot sweep well. Likewise, when broomsticks are tied together, they cannot be broken easily. Esther's story is impressive on the level of how she involved all the people around her by first calming the tensions. She reacted to the news of the death threat in an intrigued, brave, and mature way by also involving her servants. Her demeanor when she heard about the threat was not that of weeping loudly and uncontrollably but bringing all people – Jews and some Persians – on board to fast and support her plan (4:16).

She used food and wine to transform the anxieties of both the leaders. Haman was haughty and needed to be brought low. The king was ignorant and needed to be guided to make a new decision.

The atmosphere in the kingdom was tense because of the edict. The Jews, including Mordecai, were worried and needed to be pleased. Much as weeping and wearing of sackcloth are associated with fasting in the biblical world (Neh 9:1; Dan 9:3; Ps 35:11; Jon 3:5), Esther's call for a fast seems to downplay the earlier public demonstration so that they remain in their rooms. The prophet Isaiah also reveals how the Lord desires social justice and compassion rather than wearing sackcloth in fasting (Isa 58:3–14). Perhaps, Esther's fast deemphasized weeping aloud and wearing sackcloth which was consistent with spirituality to reduce the tension in the community. The people were only told not to "eat and drink for three days, either day or night" (4:15). This was a complete fast because it included the night (Moore, 1979, p. 51).

Esther uses the main elements of peace-making, as listed in Article 33 of the UN Charter – negotiation, inquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, and resort to regional arrangements – to address the problem (Goodrich & Hambro, 1949, p. 591–592). Such a comprehensive approach fits ADR. Her heroic strategy to calm the tensions, name and shame the enemy of the Jews, and use silence may probably not have gone well with the Jews who were desperate. Managing someone like Mordecai to understand how to reconcile tensions with silence can be a handful task, yet she succeeds in calming him when she declares a fast. Eventually, her strategy gives the Jews the upper hand and they celebrate their hope with feasting, thus causing fear to seize their overlords (8:15–17). Such leaders with skills that inspire high performance and effectiveness are worth emulation (Sarros, Cooper & Santora, 2008, p. 145).

Esther's immediate inner tension comes to the fore when she has to reveal her Jewishness to the king and identify with "her people", against the command (צִוָּה) of Mordecai not to disclose her identity (2:10). Certainly, her identity cannot be concealed in such a plea before the king; it will definitely come out and may be construed as a deception to the Persians. She has to come to terms with herself first, as a Persian queen before revealing her Jewish identity. Putting on her Persian royal robes and standing before the king echoes how identity matters in conflict transformation. That is to

say, she adopts a wise and sophisticated approach of a *Dwantoahene* ("transliterate") to navigate new circumstances. She first identifies with the Persians more than the Jews. Her calm unmitigated faith, coupled with her beauty in the royal robes, may have helped reduce the tensions between her and the king. In all of her actions, she epitomizes a transformational leader who shows a strong sense of intelligence, collective purpose, and drive that gives energy and motivation to others instead of regret.

Esther's initiative to be a savior in the impending death threat, echoing Christological resonances, does not follow any Jewish law or strategy but brings to mind a qualitative shift in the approaches of inclusivity and exclusivity. She does not see the problem as "I" against "them" or "my people" against "your people". She frames her words in a way that does not make her side with one group over the other. She will lose her people and the king will lose her. Each party, nonetheless, is interdependent on the other in that complex situation. Still, she sees the adversary not as the problem but rather as the answer to the problem. The paradigm shifts in her inclusive-exclusive approach led to the advantage of the Jews over the Persians, thus transforming the relationship between the Jews and the Persians.

3.3 Redefining Interests

Africans derive their sources of adjudication from wisdom and traditional knowledge of the forebears and the gods, and as such it is expected of those who sit on the stool of the forebears to play key roles in matters of conflict. The gods help the adjudicators arrive at the truth and to know how to reconcile all parties. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms among Akan in Ghana, for example, also referred to as Restorative or Transformative justice aim at repairing the harm done to victims and relationships rather than only punishing offenders. As such, the interest of all parties has to be weighed and addressed for peace to prevail. The problem at stake becomes a burden for the state while reconciliation becomes the burden of the feuding parties. Matters of criminal justice, however, are centered on the victim rather than the State since the offender will eventually live in the same community as the victim. Therefore, there is the need to consider the feelings and interests of both the victim and

the offender with the intention of transforming all parties to live in social peace and harmony (Adjei & Ackah-Yensu, 2021, p. 106).

Esther calling for fasting shows her interest in connecting with her God to guide her path to success. She used banquets in a bid to make her interest come second. Being emotionally secure, she trusts God who prepares a table for his people in the presence of their enemies (Ps 23:5). Her first intention was not to seek the death of Haman but to make the king come to terms with the problem so that a solution could be brokered. If the queen belongs to the king, then the use of "I and my people" (7:4) may imply that Esther is drawing the Jews into the circle of the king. The Akan says *wotane kookoo a wonndi ne mba* ("we do not hate cocoyam but eat the growing ones"). The king cannot stand against the Jews who have provided a queen for him.

Esther makes it clear that Haman is fighting the king instead of the Jews. Esther says she would have accepted it and kept quiet if she and her people were only sold into slavery, but on account that the threat is intended to affect the king's well-being she would not keep quiet. Significantly, Esther's words כִּי אֵין הַצָּר שֹׁוֶה בְּנֶזֶק הַמֶּלֶךְ "for no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king" (7:4; NRSV), is difficult, making translators offer diverse views. For example, the NKJV uses "although the enemy could never compensate for the king's loss." The Jerusalem Bible uses "it is well beyond the means of the prosecutor to make good the loss that the king is about to sustain", while the NIV uses "because no such distress would justify disturbing the king." It is not clear whether she was talking about compensation, financial loss, or loss of dignity. Either way, it seems Esther's reference to the 'damage to the king' shows that the king would eventually be the loser. Jon Levenson explains that "Esther would not bring the king's prime minister down merely to cancel a sale of her people into slavery, but annihilation is another matter and supersedes any financial loss the king may sustain by counteracting his previous decree" (Levenson, 1997, p. 100).

When Esther names Haman as the enemy to the Jews to the king, it makes the identity of Haman shifts from being an adversary to a petitioner. It did not occur to Haman that his downfall was in motion as his wife predicted (6:13). He is only interested in saving his life and needs a mediator. He presses Esther to mediate for him with no success, making him change

from his standing position to "falling" (נֹפֵל) on the couch where Esther was sitting (7:8). The Hebrew participle, נֹפֵל denotes to fall accidentally, perhaps indicating that Haman's action was not intentional. It could also mean falling prostrate on the ground (Koeler & Baumgartner, 2001, p. 709–710). Generally, falling prostrate on the ground or holding the feet was a common posture for pleading for mercy but Haman chooses to lie on the couch. Perhaps, Haman wants to overwhelm Esther by absolutely competing for the same space used by Esther. His action can therefore be interpreted as attacking to overwhelm her so that she comes to his side.

In Akan culture, seizing a married woman's wrist or sharing the same seat with a married woman is traditionally considered a violation. Esther, whom Haman was so proud of, was probably silent all along as if Haman was not important. The king comes in to find Haman action in an odd position and interprets it as Haman violating Esther. The Hebrew verb כבשׁ (7:8), translated as "violate" or "molest" can denote degrading, bringing into bondage, or subduing others. It may give the impression that Haman is further sexually abusing Esther. For the king, that is not the posture for pleading. It is ironic that Haman "seals his own fate by literally throwing himself upon Esther, in the king's absence, to beg for mercy" (Larkin, 1996, p. 60). Hence, it is the sexual molestation – not Haman's original plot – that caused the king to condemn Haman to death (Wijk-Bos, 2002, p. 137).

In African thought, the enemy is never tolerated. An enemy, from a competitive securitarian view, is any opposing force that stymies an individual's ability to well-being in life as guaranteed by destiny. An enemy's right to sovereignty, life and liberty is therefore limited. In enemy discourses, people are not just motivated to reconsider the response to the violence done. The Akan says, *onipabɔnefoɔ na ɣɛwɔ no sɛpɔ* ("It is a bad person who gets the executioner's knife"), and also *onipabɔnefoɔ wuo nyɛ* ya ("the death of a bad person does not pain people"). When an enemy is known, some psychological processes such as „trauma" become central, generating emotions such as fear, anger, and hatred. An Akan proverb says, *etse ase na nyi tamfo a, nna ewu* ("whoever is alive but has no enemy is already dead"). Again, *obi ngu nsa nhyira n'atamfo* ("no one pours libation to bless the enemies"). It is also said: *wo tamfo wu anɔpa na wo wu anwumerɛ a, ɛnyɛ hwee* ("if your enemy dies in the morning and you die

in the evening, it is no matter"). That is to say, it is good to see one's enemy fall, it is acceptable.

Esther stimulates the hanging of Haman by creatively challenging Haman's interests before the king and promoting an environment where new ideas can be explored to address the problem. Haman, who wanted all to bow before him, now bows before Esther to plead for his life. Haman, who sees the Jews as his enemies is now called the enemy. As such, Harbona, a servant of the king saw the new use of the pole erected by Haman for Mordecai and suggested to the king to hang Haman on it (7:9–10).

4. Conclusion

Esther's conflict transformational approach led to changing relationship patterns, reconciling tensions, and redefining the interests of the Jews so that they became empowered. Esther used an adaptive approach to conflict transformation by displaying transformational leadership skills when the edict was published that the Jews should be destroyed, killed, and annihilated on the thirteenth day of Adar. She knew that some conflict situations can give opportunities for personal and social development and not follow the confrontational approach of Mordecai and the Jews when she heard about the conflict. Esther paid attention to the needs and concerns of all but redefined each one's interest. She provided support, coaching, and mentoring as well as challenging others to gain a new understanding of conflict situations. By accepting to intervene and calling for a fast, Esther depended on spiritual strengths and made the Jews who were wailing and weeping became transformed so that in the end, they became a symbol of fear among the natives. She emphasized the collective good, shared responsibility, teamwork, and positive spirituality.

Esther displayed a high level of emotional intelligence to manage conflicts so that positive outcomes can accrue out of it. She is aware of her own emotions and the emotions of others but goes as far as building positive relationships with Haman and navigating the complex social situations of transforming conflicts. To be effective in conflict transformation, one should transcend individual personal egos, challenge the status quo sagaciously, and stay focused on the goal. Esther set an example of creativity

and innovation in the effort to create new ways to address issues efficiently. Such an approach brings an increase in productivity and profitability, although it involves risk-taking. In conflict transformation, the tables should turn; the weakling becomes empowered to take control of the situation. Transforming one's identity matters a lot.

It has been observed that some conflicts cannot be resolved so one should create opportunities for new social change and new social bonds. Whereas others look at constructive or destructive ways to manage or resolve a conflict, conflict transformation looks at the changing relationship patterns to serve as an important component of gaining some advantages. Esther's approach, therefore can augment the conflict intervention models in Africa, especially the Akan traditional setting of Ghana, to ensure transformed relationships during conflict situations. The life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase peace and respect, and construct means and norms for dealing with conflict. Calming tensions, naming and shaming, and silence are key elements in conflict transformation. Leaders who integrate conflict transformation into their leadership approach can create healthier, more resilient organizations.

Professor Joachim Kügler, a German biblical scholar, who created opportunities for African biblical scholars to share their scholarship with the world, especially in Germany for over 20 years, has shown how to transform African negative situations into positive ones, even as someone who is not from Africa. His support through the Bible in Africa Studies (BiAS) series and Exploring Religion in Africa (ERA) has transformed positively the apparent conflict between African scholarship and the rest of the world. Like Esther, African scholars can tap into the systemic, social, and spiritual dimensions of transformation to help not only resolve other academic conflicts in Africa but also to rebuild relationships. Being transformational gives a better chance to promote growth in African societies.

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