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# Fashion Statement or Political Statement: The Use of Fashion to Express Black Pride during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960's

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Mary is a senior at Bridgewater State College majoring in History. This paper is the result of a research assignment for Dr. Margaret Lowe's African-American History class. With the help and guidance of Dr. Lowe, Mary completed this paper during the Fall 2008 semester. Upon graduation, she plans to pursue a career in secondary education while continuing her education at graduate school.

**T**he Civil Rights Movement brought the plight of African Americans to the forefront of American political and intellectual thought. The ideological foundation of this movement was a feeling of black pride coupled with a strong sense of urgency for equality. Black activists and supporters, to express their solidarity and support of this movement, adorned symbolic clothing, accessories and hairstyles. Politics and fashion were fused during this time and the use of these symbolic fashion statements sent a clear message to America and the rest of the world that African Americans were proud of their heritage, that Black was indeed beautiful and that it was important to embrace ones African identity. Examples of significant cultural symbols that were used by black activists during, and since, the Movement to convey racial identity and pride include the use of Kente cloth in clothing designs, the uniform of the militant group the Black Panthers, and the "natural" African hairstyle called the Afro. These expressions of black pride are key examples of the Afrocentric principles held by the intellectual and political figures of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. This use of fashion to express black pride permanently fused the cause of equality with American culture and made the movement accessible to all supporters.

Kente cloth first captured the attention of African Americans in 1958 when Ghana's first president, President Kwame Nkrumah, visited Washington D.C. wearing Kente. Photos of the Ghanaian president adorned several newspapers and magazine covers, helping to establish the African cloth as a symbol of African pride and identity (Hernandez 1999, 46). Kente cloth is a brightly colored strip of cloth that is woven and pieced together to form clothing and accessories. The origin of Kente cloth dates to approximately 1000 BC and is credited to the West African Asante and Ewe people of what is now the Republic of Ghana (*New African* 2008, 32). There is great complexity in the meaning of each Kente cloth, with each color and chosen weave conveying distinct messages. According to a *New African* article on African textiles, in kente cloth gold represents status and serenity, yellow represents fertility, green is symbolic of renewal, blue refers to pure spirit and harmony, red represents passion, and black represents union with ancestors and denotes spiritual awareness (*New African* 2008, 33). This woven cloth of brightly colored strips of fabric became a strong symbolic representation of pride in African identity for African Americans of the 1960's and later. The most popular use of kente cloth in the 1960's was in the development of the dashiki, a loose

fitting tunic style shirt, though it was also made into shawls and large toga-sized wraps (Mead & Pederson 1995, 437).

Black nationalists groups and their supporters popularized Kente cloth in the 1960's. The clothing made from kente cloth directly linked the adorners of the cloth with African heritage and onlookers could not miss this message. It's lack of subtly and clear message made it a productive instrument in conveying to the public one's pride in their African identity. The cloth was often accompanied by slogans such as "Black Power," and "Black is Beautiful" (OMCA History Department, 2001). During a highly publicized trip to Africa in 1964, then-Heavyweight Champion of the World and black activist Muhammad Ali, wore a kente cloth wrap throughout much of his visit (Hernandez 1999, 47). It has since become incorporated into a variety of African American holidays and celebrations such as Martin Luther King Day, Kwanzaa and Black History Month (OMCA History Department, 2001).

As kente cloth's popularity grew throughout the 1960's its potent symbolism began to fade and radical black nationalists, such as the Black Panthers, did not want the cloth being associated with their organization. By the 1970's, dashikis had transcended the black power community, becoming common in many fashion magazine advertisements resulting in the Black Panthers forbidding anyone in their organization to wear a dashiki (Ogbar 2004, 116). In a publication of the newsletter *Black Panther* fashion-inspired wearers of dashikis and bubas (smaller kente cloth wraps) were called "opportunistic cultural practitioners [operating] as front men to further exploit black people and impede on the real revolutionary struggle" (Ogbar 2004, 117). The article conceded "while the African fashion movement may have helped beautify black America, certain practitioners have brought ugliness to its very existence" (Ogbar 2004, 117).

Though the radical black nationalists grew to reject kente cloth as a symbol of their movement, it remained a symbol of black consciousness and pride for mainstream African Americans. Kente cloth in its many forms became popular with the hip-hop culture of the 1980's and can now be found on everything from bookmarks and greeting cards to traditional wraps and artwork (OMCA History Department, 2001). Kente cloths uses have expanded and changed but its symbolic representation of black identity remains intact. In 2001 Reverend Cecil L. Murray of First A.M.E. Church in Los Angeles was asked about the meaning of kente to African Americans and he responded, "Kente reminds us that the world is larger than where you are. The world is larger than what you have suffered, what you have experienced. The world is large enough to step across the Atlantic, the Pacific, and to join people as people. So the

significance for me is that it's a bridge joining worlds together. Kente cloth means dignity, freedom, liberation, joining hands, love" (OMCA History Department, 2001). Reverend Murray's words are reminiscent of the language of both the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement and the adoption of kente cloth by American fashion and merchandise designers has led to the incorporation of the ideals of these movements into American popular culture.

Though the Black Panther's were not comfortable with the commodification of kente cloth, they themselves significantly influenced American fashion and popular culture with their revolutionary attire. Founders of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, developed a uniform for the Black Panther members to adorn. This uniform included a black leather jacket, powder blue shirt, black pants, black shoes, black beret, and optional black gloves (Ogbar 2004, 118). Newton and Seale decided that the black beret would be an essential part of the ensemble after watching a movie about the French resistance to Nazis during WWII. The resisters donned black berets and they felt that it was a strong symbol of militancy and such militancy was what they wished the Black Panther Party to convey (Ogbar 2004, 118). The Black Panther Party's goals were not much unlike those of the less-militant Civil Rights Organizations. They declared in a November 1967 issue of *The Black Panther*: "We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace" (Williams 2008, 19). It was their acceptance of the use of paramilitary action and violence to obtain their goals that set them apart from their non-violence preaching Civil Rights Movement counterparts.

The Black Panther Party uniform sent a powerful message to white society that African Americans fully embraced their "blackness" from head to toe and that they were completely committed to their heritage and cause. The uniform unmistakably made the Black Panther members stand out and be recognized no matter where they were and their appearance, to a great extent, helped them succeed in conveying their seriousness and revolutionary ideal. The uniform also, like kente cloth, surpassed its initial cause and became a prominent symbol of black pride throughout America. The black beret became an iconic symbol of Black Power and came to imply implicit support of the Black Power Movement and the Black Panther Party, even for non-members (Ogbar 2004, 118). It could be found on the heads of college students and inner-city youths throughout the nation who were moved to show their support for the cause of African American pride and equality. The beret even transcended the cause of Black Nationalism, becoming a revolutionary icon for Latino, Asian and various radical political organizations, though each group chose a distinct color for their beret (Ogbar 2004, 119).

The Black Panther uniform, in entirety or parts, also appealed to inner city street tough youth who were not at all participating in the struggle for black liberation and equality. The militancy of the uniform made these youths feel confident, strong and brave. The adoption of aspects of the uniform also brought increased police attention and confusion as to whether young inner city men were gang members or Black Panther members, though in many cases either was equally vilified by the police and white society (Ogbar 2004, 108). The Black Panther uniform succeeded in intimidating adversaries and clearly sent a message of black pride and power though it surpassed its initial intention of communicating solidarity among the Black Panther Party members.

Another example of elements of the Black Panther uniform transcending its militant organization occurred at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. After winning the gold and bronze medals in the 200-meter race, African American Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos gave clenched, black leather gloved fist salutes on the award stand with bowed heads (Hartmann 1996, 549). Though neither Smith nor Carlos was associated with the Black Panther Party, their actions declared their solidarity with the Black Power Movement and African American struggle. In Tommie Smith's own words, he describes the meaning of his and Carlos' actions that day:

*My raised right hand stood for power in black America.  
Carlos' raised left hand stood for unity of black America.  
Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The  
black scarf around my neck stood for black pride. The  
black socks with no shoes stood for black poverty in racist  
America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of  
black dignity.*

(Hartmann 1996, 550)

Both the physical and political elements of the above demonstration reflect the philosophy and nature of the Black Panther Party. Later in the games, despite the fact that both Smith and Carlos were stripped of their medals and publicly jeered, three African American athletes that received gold, silver and bronze medals in the 400-meter race donned black berets on the award stand (Ogbar 2004, 119). Lee Evans, the gold medal winner of that race explained "the berets were an affirmation of their commitment and solidarity with the struggle of black people worldwide" (Ogbar 2004, 119). The 1968 Summer Olympics became a platform for black nationalists and supporters of black liberation to voice their discontent with their situation in America and they used aspects of the Black Panther uniform to do so.

The Black Panther uniform helped to manifest the ethos "Black is Beautiful." The party and its uniform were alluring and full of mystique that captured the attention of onlookers, supporters or not. This fascination with the group resulted in its image reaching icon status in the fashion, film, music and advertisement industries (Renee and Raiford 2006, 224). Though the Black Panther's image reached commercial proportion, it would continue to be a symbol of revolutionary fervor and so remained popular with those on the outskirts of mainstream fashion.

Another element of fashion that emerged from the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements that served both a political and cultural purpose was the Afro hairstyle. The Afro was so named because it is a way for African Americans to wear their hair in its "natural" state, expressing pride in their "African" features rather than altering or concealing them to conform to white beauty standards, as was the societal norm (Giddings 1990, 152). This new way to show and embrace black identity and pride especially impacted the lives of African American women who had long conformed to white beauty standards. The Afro symbolically rejected those white beauty standards and redefined beauty standards for African American women. Afros became part of a beauty standard that grew out of political struggle and sent a powerful message of change to American society (Walker 2007, 169).

The Afro originated in the United States as a style worn by a small population of chic African American women as early as the mid-1940's (Walker 2007, 178). These women tended to be artists, intellectuals and urban socialites, many with ties to the Civil Rights Movements. The reasons for the adoption of this trendsetting hairdo ranged from convenience and ease of styling to the conscious celebration of African beauty (Walker 2007, 179). Reaction to these early trendsetters switch to "natural" hair was usually negative, even by African American peers. In 1943 an art student named Annabelle Baker decided to let her hair grow in natural and was told by her black dormitory mates that she "should be ashamed to be seen with her hair in its natural state." She became a target for disciplinary action on campus and she equates her troubles to her radical hairstyle because she had had no problems with campus authorities prior to her switch to natural hair (Walker 2007, 180).

The rejection of the white beauty standards and the consequent attention and reaction that such rejection attracted made the Afro an effective symbol of black pride and identity for black liberationists. This visual communication of pride in ones African heritage became a very popular hairstyle for members and supporters of Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. One of the first women to wear an Afro that was

publicly involved with the Civil Rights Movement was Stokely Carmichael's girlfriend at the time, Mary O'Neal. Urged by her black and proud boyfriend, O'Neal claims political motivation for her change in hairstyle in 1961 (Walker 2007, 181). O'Neal helped set a precedent in the black liberation movements of the 1960's. The Afro became one of the most recognized symbols of racial pride for both male and female activists, students, actors, musicians, and even some professionals, though the Afro did remain mostly within the urban youth crowd (Walker 2007, 183).

By the late 1960's and early 1970's, at the height of the Black Power era, the Afro was as fashionable as it was political. It became part of a new standard of beauty that had grown out of political struggle. Commercial response to the new hairstyle was significant and for the first time the ideal of shiny, long, straight hair accompanied by a light complexion was challenged. Marketing agencies and corporations began using black models in their television and magazine ads and product packaging at an unprecedented rate (Walker 2007, 169). Corporations, for the first time, looked at African Americans as viable consumers and targeted them as such in their ad campaigns. Companies, such as Avon and Nadinola that had previously promoted skin whiteners and hair straighteners to black consumers were now embracing new beauty standards and came out with make-up for darker complexions and featured women donning Afros on their hair product packaging (Walker 2007, 170). Like kente cloth and the Black Panther uniform, the Afro became a fashion statement that helped launch and maintain the political and cultural activist's "Black is Beautiful" campaign.

Despite the growing success of the beauty standard revolution, many involved in the Black Power Movement spoke out against what they called "Blacksploitation" by American corporations. Activists such as Bobby Seale of the Black Panther Party, who had also spoke out against the popularity of the dashiki, rejected the integration that white companies producing black products implied (Walker 2007, 170). The Afro hairstyle was also met with mixed reactions by the African American mainstream. In a 1966 article of the African American lifestyle magazine

*Ebony*, readers were polled as to what they thought of the "natural" look and responses varied quite a bit. One responder called women that wear Afros "lazy, nappy haired females" where others shared ominous words of encouragement such as "may we all become more natural...in every way" (Walker 2007, 184). Support of these natural haired beauties also varied geographically. In 1969, *Newsweek* polled African American's as to their feelings about the Afro and 75% of northern blacks under the age of 30 said they approved where as only 40% of all southern blacks gave their approval (Walker 2007, 185).

Though approval varied and the Afro as a symbol of African pride and identity became complicated by white corporations and fashion magazines, it does not change the fact that the Afro hairstyle served a great and significant purpose during the Civil Rights and Black Power era. It gave African American women confidence and security in being themselves when they had been told by white society for years that their "blackness" was substandard and should be concealed where possible. The Afro was instrumental in awakening American society to a new tradition of beauty and was an impressive visual display of racial identity.

The use of fashion by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960's was a powerful means of altering American consciousness and implementing African elements into American society and popular culture. For the first time in American popular culture "Black was Beautiful." Fashion was a visual means of communication in the 1960's like it had never been before. Black liberationists were extremely effective in using these elements of fashion to express their discontent with their situation and to show America that they were proud of their heritage whether white society felt they should be or not. Though the use of kente cloth, the Black Panther uniform and the Afro hairstyle began as political statements and transformed into fashion statements, the efforts and successes of the black liberationists remained. The political meaning of these African inspired fashions was absorbed by society and allowed African American's to greatly influence the future of American culture.

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