Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style & the Global Politics of Soul
Tanisha C. Ford, University of Massachusetts Amherst
April 20, 2016

Summary by Meghan Warman. MBA candidate

The emergence of soul fashion in the 1970s was tied to the re-emergence of Blacks embracing their heritage. We view clothing and style as an extension of our own personal identity, or “brand.” Dr. Tanisha C. Ford began her lecture by asking the class “What went through your mind when you decided what you were going to wear today?” This question opened up the class to discover what fashion means to them personally and how it shapes who they are as people. This personalized focus on fashion shifted to how Blacks felt in the 1970s and how it drove their desire to focus on their own personal brand and what it meant to be Black in the 1970s.

In the 1970s, college campuses were becoming more racially diverse but Blacks were still greatly outnumbered. This began a movement on college campuses around the United States to start to develop all Black clubs to encourage those fighting battles of racial prejudice to band together. Even though Blacks were admitted to colleges, most Blacks were still treated as second-class citizens and routinely marginalized by their classmates, professors, and even the school administrators. Dr. Ford gave an example that a college in Indiana even let the Klu Klux Klan march through the college campus, but a large gathering of Blacks on campus called for the police to step in.

This set the stage for Blacks to want to re-embrace their heritage as a show of Black power and as a political statement. Many Blacks wanted to show that they were proud of their culture and that their African heritage was a large piece of their personal brand. For many, the best and safest way to do this was to dress in a way that showcased their affinity for African styles. Essence magazine focused on college campuses and what fashion was on trend for Blacks, while also producing articles that highlighted the racial complications of being one of the few blacks on campus. Blacks decided to capture what made them different with their style and proudly show their support for their culture. What was unexpected was how this style became a global fashion trend.

Two big fashion trends emerged from this global viewpoint: Dashikis and Afros. These weren’t only trends in Black communities. Dashikis were marketed to both Blacks and non-blacks. For Black people however, wearing a Dashiki was a way to celebrate Black history and the authenticity of your Dashiki became the prime way to show your pride. Getting your Dashiki made with fabric and patterns from Africa became the height of fashion for Blacks. At the same time Afros were becoming a global phenomenon that symbolized both trend and rebellion. The reach of the Afro not only liberated Blacks to embrace their natural hair, but also allowed Jews and Italians to embrace their natural afro-hair tendencies and become entrenched in the soul movement.

American Blacks embracing African fashion was a way to express connection to Blacks around the world, support global political movement for equality, and also define what it meant to be Black. This fashion movement resulted in fashion designers taking on the look and popularizing it in a high-society setting. African fashion’s re-emergence and everything it stood for was so powerful that it gripped the entire world and became a trend that symbolized the decade.