

*When all our obstacles have been overcome and we find ourselves in a state of total presence, the wisdom of enlightenment manifests.*

The above quote is from the practice of *Dzogchen*, a tenet of Buddhism that is practiced in pursuit of self-liberation. Dzogchen entails completeness, peace of mind, and an ultimate state of existence; all of which can be achieved through the approaches of renunciation, compassion, and self-awareness. While these approaches may be different, the practice ultimately requires that for an individual to attain self-liberation, they must remove themselves from the world. They must be different.

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It is a chilly back September night at the FreeMe Space, a creative centre for music, performative arts, and visual exploration situated in Lagos, Nigeria. The space is a few blocks away from the more prominent Nike Art Gallery, which precedes a stretch of residential buildings in the Ikate area of Lekki, Lagos, and adequately exemplifies the gradually closing gap between Lagos' residential setting and its bustling social scene.

There's a crowd outside the venue, yet nothing of significance - nothing that stands out in the general terrain of Friday nights in Lagos. Between the venue and the small gathering, a long table, flanked by security personnel, is situated to the side, for the taking and clearing of tickets. Because of its exterior aesthetic, the FreeMe building stands out from the cookie-cut array of houses that surround it, yet this distinction progressively shifts from the building's architectural layout to the throng of people that are now gathered at its front and slowly filtering into the premises.

As they reconnect on the other side of the gate, the camaraderie becomes even more glaring; people talking, laughing, and taking selfies, all while suitably blending into the subtle ruckus of a bustling drink stand, a radiant photo booth, and a busy technical unit at the far corner of the small yard.

In summary, it's a few minutes to Lady Donli's *Wild Sessions*, but it is a whole lot more than that.

Inside the building, a lobby adjoins the main hall, where the stage is being set. The FreeMe space is not designed for a large crowd - somewhere around two hundred to three hundred people on a packed night, somewhat resonating the message that boldness and eccentricity are for a select few. The main hall has a high ceiling and multiple garden lights hang wall to wall about twenty feet above the ground. The garden lights are the only source of illumination, save for the stage, a small cube-like arrangement of glowing frames that contains a band setup and a microphone stand right in the middle. The small stage, the closed-off homely hall, the intimate cohesion of both factors - one thing is immediately evident; the small audience is very much going to be involved in this performance. They look like they are excited about it too. The crowd consists of individuals with bright faces that are already entranced in the setting of dancing entertainers and a chime of club bangers from the DJ in the far corner. Phones are up and there are several instances of subtly swaying waists and tapping feet. Typical of an anticipating crowd.

Despite the evident typicalities, several elements of this crowd elude it from what would widely be considered the norm. There is a general sense of fashion choices, demeanour, and several other observations that indicate a deviation from mainstream culture.

It is all reflective of the *alte* sub-culture, a movement that Lady Donli herself is a part of, and one that is well-rooted in Nigeria's enormous entertainment scene.

But, again, it is a lot bigger than Lady Donli.

In 2007, Ladi Lanre, Tobenna Ofili, and Tobi Ajayi - all up-and-coming Nigerian artistes - formed a rap group known as Rap Royals. The group later incorporated the services of Teni Zaccheaus (more commonly known as Teezee), and the group name was modified to DRB Lasgidi. DRB, being short for Double R (Rap Royals) Boys and Lasgidi serving as a moniker for the city of Lagos. Over the following years, the group saw several changes in its operational dynamics; new members, rebranding, and changes in creative direction, all to arrive at the version of the music fit that released its pioneer album in 2018 titled *DRB 10*, and the follow-up two years later, *Pioneer*.

While these events may seem like one of many grass-to-grace stories of band/artist formations, a bulk of the contemporary *alte* culture can be attributed to them. Perhaps the most prominent of these elements is the kind of music they created, a blend of afrobeats, pop, and other elements into a cohesion that delivers a psychedelic feel. This feel is elusive of the traditional structures of afrobeats and others, further enabling the narrative proposed by the frontrunners of the genre - music does not have to make sense, it just has to be felt.

Several descriptions have been used to quantify *alte* as a brand of music, mainly because of how sonically different it is from what the Nigerian and African audiences have primarily consumed in the past. Most of these descriptions have been from a general standpoint of the *alte* music's deviance. *Imade Omo, from Culture Custodian*, describes it as a musical genre that was “born out of people rebelling against mainstream music”. These *descriptions*, however, have proven to be lacking. Because while music is deeply embedded in *Alte*, it has shown to be too far from a music brand to be viewed solely in that ramification. For example, while Wavy the Creator's *P.S. Thank You For Waiting* spurs a laidback envisage that entails lonely synth riffs and soft drum infusions, Santi's *MANDY & THE JUNGLE* poses a more ruffled body of work that peaks in tempo and momentum on some tracks, then descends into gloomy tones on others. Artistic variations can also be seen across other artists within the genre, spurring a difficulty in carving the creative lines that define what *alte* should sound like. Except that, as *Alte* people have continuously emphasized, there shouldn't be a stipulation for what the *Alte* crowd should sound, look, or feel like. Especially when the people driving these stipulations exist outside of their community.

Wild Sessions is conveniently different from Nigerian music as we know it, both in the conceptual themes and the subtle displays of entertainment that fill the room ahead of Donli's arrival. Two topless young men are dancing in front of the stage. They are both wearing white flared trousers shredded at the bottom, and masks that are largely similar to that of Lagbaja, Nigeria's legendary masked Afrobeat artiste. To the side of the room, right by the entrance, a young lady is performing a headstand effortlessly as she maintains a beaming up-side-down smile. The stage has not been graced by the main act, yet the aura reeks of energy and is pregnant with potential for what would be a memorable night.

Enter Lady Donli.

Tonight, she diverges from her typical two-piece ensembles of warp-print designs with uniformed colour themes and has replaced it with a skin-tight unitard with a pair of matching arm sleeves. Her beaded dreadlocks are loose and glaring and she makes a point of it by swinging her head frantically as she steps forwards to the cheering crowd and the wave of phone camera lights that have emerged all around. Explosive drum roll and electrical guitar riffs establish her arrival and the increased magnitude of the moment. There is a brief discourse between her and her audience, along the lines of their welfare and readiness for the show. Cheers of confirmation ring through again and a set of drum sticks click in the background before the music takes over.

Once again, my attention is shifted to the crowd to see the full-blown excitement that their anticipation has translated to. The show has just started and is in its supposed subtle stages, yet the bobbing heads, stepping feet, and swaying shoulders are a collective expression of the energy that has now soaked the air. If there's anything that has been learnt from this crowd, it is that expression is taken in their stride.

Expression is at the foundation of the alte movement, as I soon learn. Not the music, not the fashion, not the aesthetics. Instead, the disposition to be different and express one's self in light of that difference. To articulate one's identity in a world that strives to deny it. When the movement is observed in the light of expression and deviation, a lot of things begin to align. For example, the pursuit of a new sound is bold and daring in itself. Any alternative approach to the norm would require a distinct shift in the socio-cultural scale that would not only accommodate this new sound but grow an audience for it.

This same cultural shift is evident in the ramifications of fashion. With the help of distinct influences from designers like Ashley Okoli and Mowalola Ogunlesi, a niche has been carved which manifests in the form of layered necklaces, mesh blouses, two-piece envisages, brightly coloured wigs or hair dye, body piercings, eccentric make-up, a prevalence of leather elements, and a general inclination towards a style-laden body positivity that is characterized by the irony of minimal body covering, yet conspicuous overall fashion statements.

A cultural shift. Perhaps this is the best way to define alte culture. A fast-growing shift that may be relatively subtle in its beginning phases, but is gradually peeling off the surface conservative constructs that traditionally characterize Nigerian youth. Not to say that Nigerian youth - or any youth - are paragons of virtue, but the metrics of good character are being re-evaluated and redefined to a version that is more suiting for the people that these metrics are built for. In essence, they are taking back the standards that are used to define them and are authoring the new constructs. They are also saying they are the "bad kids" our parents told us about, and they are completely fine with that. So while alte culture entails no shift in virtue or compromise to general societal coexistence, there is an evolving sense of perception as to how youth should behave, what they should wear, and how they should make their music.

In pursuing answers to this question, I spoke to *XDeoye* (XD for short), a contemporary artiste that has long created alternative music. As is reflected in a growing consensus amongst the sub-culture community, XD **sternly** points out that he does not make alte music, because alte is a culture - not a genre - and while music from that culture may often reflect a uniformity, it is a result of the cultural constructs that influence it. When I ask XD how he would then classify his music, he stresses the ineffability of his sound, stating that it does not belong in any major category. "I'm more of an Afropop artiste," he tells me, "Afropop is not as traditional..it is different, in the sense that it is freer". XD further tells me that alte as a musical genre is not defined, inhibiting its ability to stand. This inability to be defined stems from the widely varying musical styles that artistes within that genre practice, making it all too collectively multifaceted to be grouped together.

The need to elude being defined is also reflected by Goz, a fashion designer and stylist that has also voiced his dislike for being called alte. While he admits that it is a sub-culture, he states that there are several others. "I don't like being called Alte because I am not alte. I don't want people to put me in that box. Alte is not just dressing, it's more of the way you think. Being alternate, being different." Goz bases his perspective on the growing tendency of observers to generalize this way of life and group several other growing sub-cultures - such as emo and goth - into alte.

“Nigerians should understand that there are other aesthetics and genres that exist, they just want to put you in a box and define you by all means. Once you’re not mainstream or conventional, they call you alte.”

XDeoye and Goz reflect a growing discourse surrounding what defines alte and how these definitions are constantly being misused in public spheres. Lady Donli herself tweeted in March this year saying that Alte is a subculture that barely has to do with music, highlighting the public negligence in "categorizing anyone that doesn't make afrobeat(s) as 'alternative'".

An important takeaway from all of it is that while they are subject to analytics and thought processes as to who they are and what they should be called, they just want to be. These factors of perception are important in their future.

But several other things apparently lay in their future; given the growing contrast between the sub-culture and Nigeria's socio-cultural identity, Alte culture could increasingly accommodate perspectives that are not commonplace in the Nigerian aesthetic. There's a growing skateboard community in Lagos, one that may not be exclusively tied to Alte culture yet shares several members and is founded on the same basis of cultural deviations. Nigeria's queer community is also partly embedded in Alte culture against the duality of social backlash and a fourteen-year criminal sentence that have both been used to punch down on the LBGTQ+ community.