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Project Gallery

Domestic life at Orile-Owu, Nigeria (*c.* AD 1456–1661): an initial insight

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This study explores early domestic life at the historic Yoruba site of Orile-Owu. Excavations and ethnography reveal insights into diet and food processing, medicinal practices and the daily routines of occupants during the mid-fifteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries AD.

Keywords: Africa, Yoruba Kingdom, Owu, Afin-Isale, medicinal herbs, household archaeology

Introduction

Orile-Owu is one of many Owu communities in Yorubaland. In Yoruba history, not much is known about Orile-Owu except for claims of connection with an early Owu town that was displaced during an inter-communal conflict in the 1820s. While historic studies have depended mostly on oral traditions and ethnography to discuss the origins of this Yoruba sub-group (e.g. Johnson 1921; Mabogunje & Omer-Cooper 1971; Usman & Falola 2019), the paucity of material evidence leaves a gap in our understanding of daily life in the early history of Orile-Owu. Thus, this study presents an initial exploration of domestic space in Orile-Owu in terms of the daily life and culture of its inhabitants.

The study site

Orile-Owu, located in Osun State in south-west Nigeria (between 7°14′ and 7°15′N, and between 4°18′ and 4°22′E), is bordered by major Yoruba kingdoms including Ife, Ilesa and Ijebu-Ode (Figure 1). The current vegetation is typical of a secondary forest, shaped by agricultural activities forming farmlands, fallow areas and a high presence of oil palm trees

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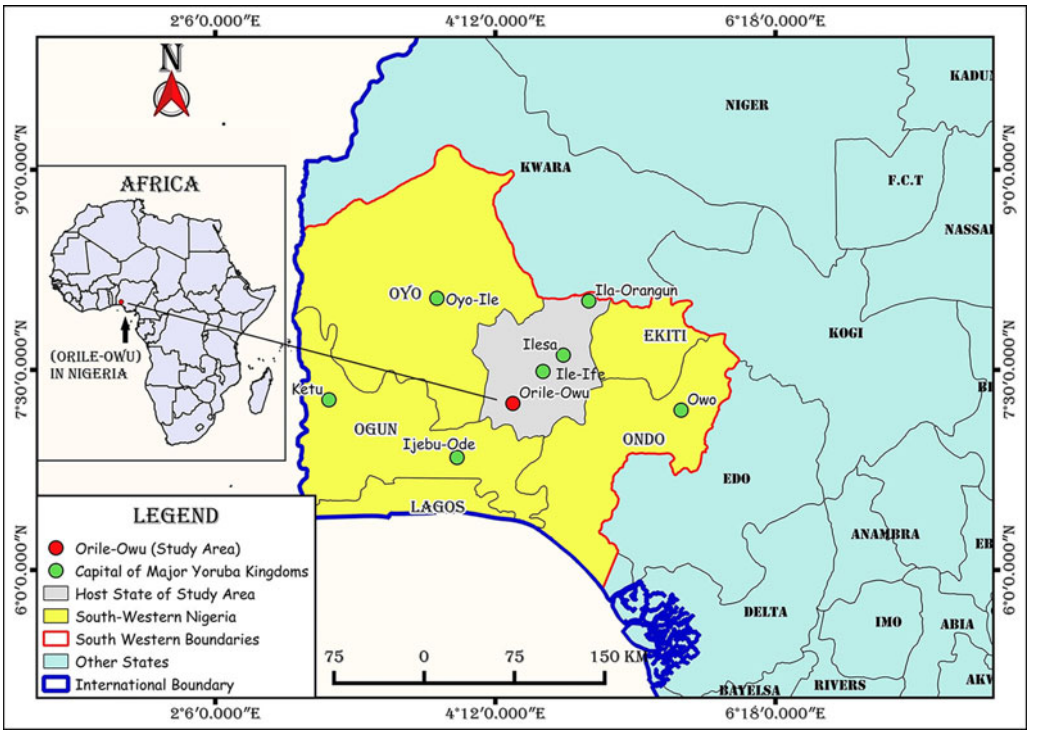

Figure 1. The location of Orile-Owu in Nigeria, West Africa (figure by Kingsley Chinedu Daraojimba).

(*Elaeis guineensis*). The people of Orile-Owu primarily engage in farming, with occasional hunting during the dry season. Their subsistence economy relies on food crops such as yam, maize, cocoyam, cassava, plantain and banana. Additionally, cash crops such as cocoa, kola and oil palm, contribute substantially to their livelihood and diet.

Excavations at Orile-Owu

Excavations were conducted at Afin-Isale, an abandoned settlement site, in an area between 52m and 27m south-west of the secondary reference point (N0) of the grid, south of the new palace (Figure 2). Afin-Isale is dotted with cocoa and oil palm trees, along with collapsed residential structures now reduced to mounds less than 1m high and up to 5m wide. Based on village lore, this area was inhabited by Owu people before the internecine war of the early nineteenth century. The deep historic roots make this area an ideal location for exploring early domestic life. Within a 750m^2 gridded area, three mounds were excavated. In 2013, a 2 × 1m test pit (TP 1) was excavated to a depth of 0.7m, uncovering three cultural layers. In 2020, two 2 × 2m units (AFO 1 and AFO 2; abbreviation derived from site names AF (Afin-Isale) and O (Orile-Owu)) were excavated to depths of 0.6m and 0.9m, respectively, each revealing four cultural layers. An assemblage of artefacts dominated by more than 53kg of pottery was recovered (Table 1; Figure 3).

An occupation horizon was encountered at AFO 1 characterised by a large cluster of artefacts, including lids, knobs, a muller (the upper grinding stone), cobblestones and

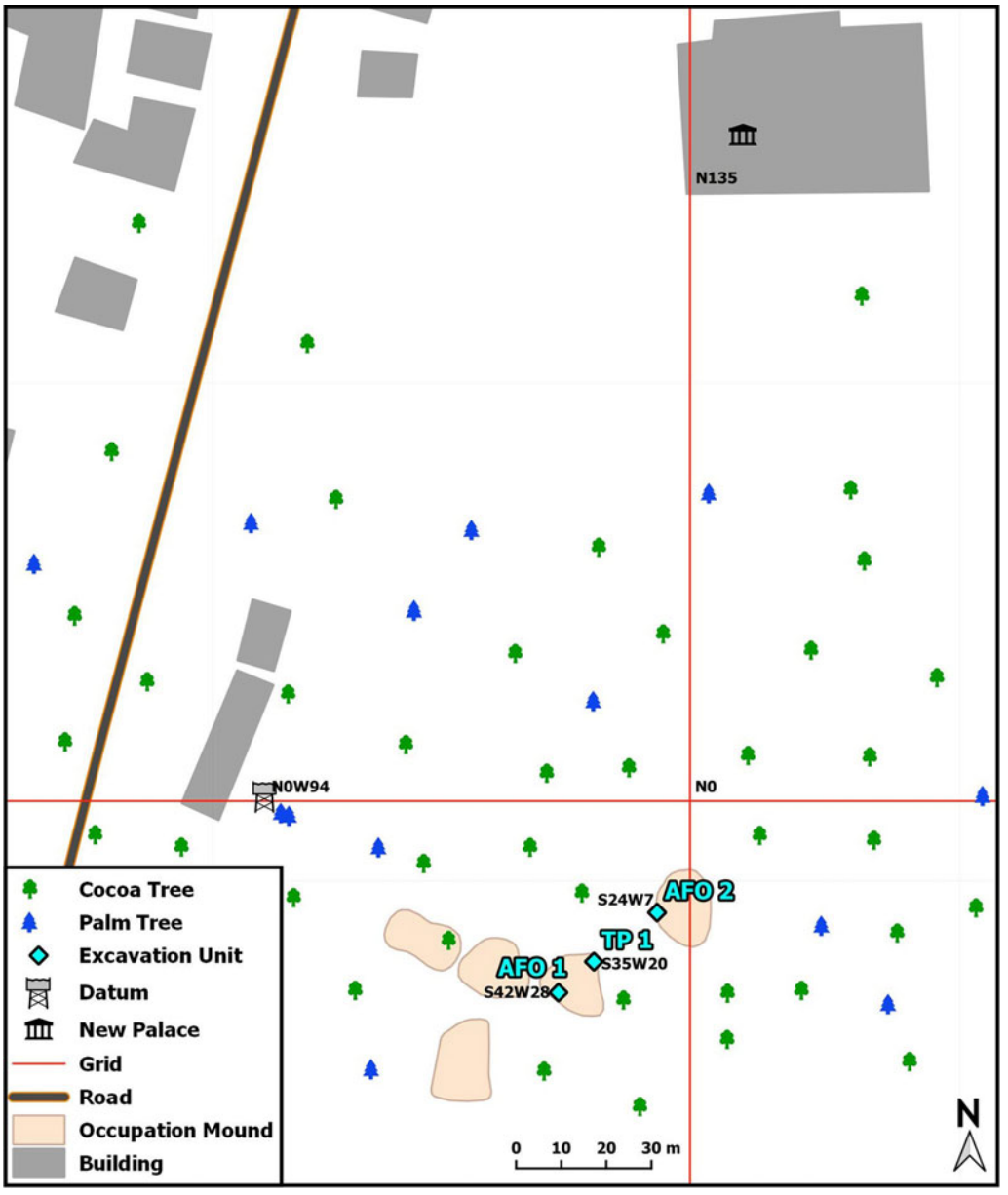

Figure 2. Site plan of Afin-Isale (figure by authors).

broken and near-complete ceramic vessels (Figure 4). The assemblage appears to represent dumped broken ceramics and those smashed *in situ* following the collapse of a mud wall. Charred materials from the basal layers of three collapsed domestic structures at Afin-Isale yielded radiocarbon dates indicating early human occupation from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries AD (Table 2). This period in Yoruba history was marked by substantial sociopolitical changes, including migration, political turbulence, the rebuilding

Table 1. Summary of test pits and artefacts.

Unit	Type of deposit	Date of fieldwork	Depth (*m*)	No. of cultural contexts	Artefacts*										Total weight of pottery (*kg*)
					Palm kernel	Quern	Muller	Animal tooth	Charcoal	Iron knife	Animal bone	Sherds (*% decorated*)	Corroded sherds		
TP 1	Collapsed mud building	Mar 2013	0.7	3	37	0	0	1	x	1	25	1227	(43.4%)	236	13.32
AFO 1	Collapsed mud building	Oct–Nov 2020	0.6	4	0	0	1	0	x	0	0	1999	(32.1%)	383	32.09
AFO 2	Collapsed mud building	Oct–Nov 2020	0.9	4	50	1	0	1	x	0	1	1008	(17.8%)	168	8.13

*Artefacts listed as number, present (x) or absent (0).

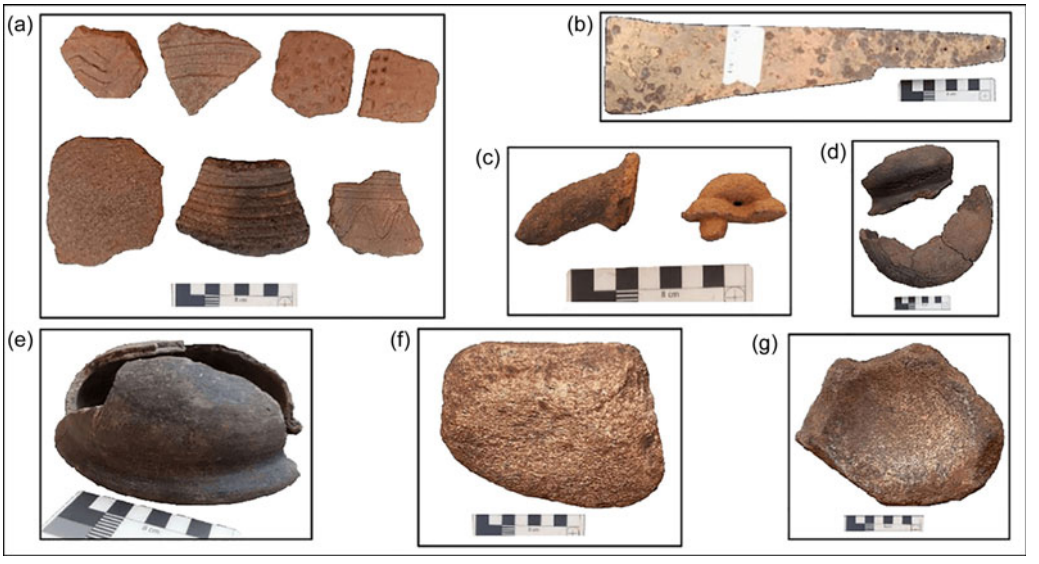

Figure 3. Excavated artefacts: a) decorated ceramics; b) knife; c: lid knob; d) decorated bowl; e) plain bowl; f: muller (upper grinding stone); g) quern (lower grinding stone) (figure by authors).

Figure 4. AFO unit with its large concentration of artefacts (figure by authors).

Table 2. Radiocarbon age determinations (recalibrated using OxCal v.4.4.4).

Lab no.	Sample context	Date BP	$\delta^{13}C$ correction	Calibrated date range (cal AD) 95.4% confidence	Calibrated date range (cal AD) 68.3% confidence
Beta-403755 (charred palm kernel)	TP1 (0.60–0.70m)	350 ± 30	−22.9	1456–1640 (1.0%)	1556–1632 (0.6%) 1476–1526 (0.4%)
Beta-588173 (charcoal)	AFO 1 (0.40–0.50m)	330 ± 30	−26.5	1466–1645 (1.0%)	1493–1637 (1.0%)
Beta-588174 (charcoal)	AFO 2 (0.90m)	290 ± 30	−25.2	1502–1598 (0.7%) 1616–1661 (0.3%)	1525–1558 (0.7%) 1632–1648 (0.3%)

of old kingdoms and establishment of new ones (Usman *et al.* 2005; Ogundiran 2020). These changes influenced the political landscape and cultural development of the Yoruba people, yet little is known about Orile-Owu at that time.

Domestic life in early Orile-Owu

The material culture uncovered from the excavations at Orile-Owu provides valuable insights into the daily lives of its inhabitants during the fifteenth–seventeenth centuries AD. Plain ceramic wares dominate the ceramic assemblage. Orton and Hughes (2013) note that

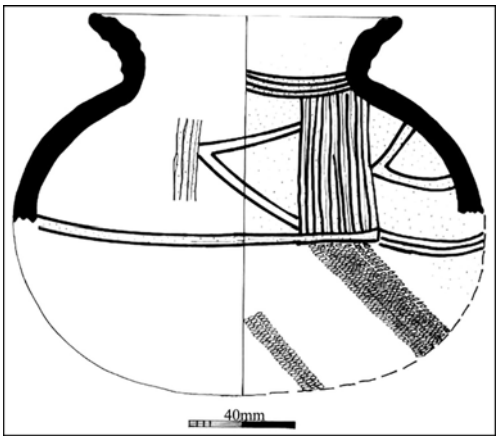

*Figure 5. Drawing of the pitcher (*Orù*) excavated from TP1 (figure by Kingsley Chinedu Daraojimba).*

plain wares can be indicative of functional uses and economic contexts, though it would be perfunctory to argue that the high frequency of plain wares necessarily indicates routine daily activities (e.g. cooking, storage or serving food), as these wares could represent undecorated portions of vessels. The recovery of a medium-sized, nearly complete, globular ceramic vessel (*Orù*) (Figure 5) from a depth of 0.5m in TP1 offers valuable evidence of cultural practices. In Yorubaland, *Orù* (pitchers) are primarily used for fetching water and preparing medicinal herbs (Fatunsin 1992). This vessel has been documented ethnographically and in dated archaeological contexts (e.g. Alabi 2002). Evidence of burnt residue in the pitcher suggests herbs were burnt for medicinal purposes, and indicates specialised knowledge in the treatment of ailments. Analysis of the organic residue (University of Bristol) failed to identify any lipids, but pollen analysis of a 2m sediment core from Orile-Owu identified 15 plant species that can be eaten or have ritual and medicinal properties, including *Cola acuminata* (Òbì-gìdí), *Chromolaena odorata* (Àkíntọ́lá) and *Elaeis guineensis* (Ọpẹ́) (Daraojimba *et al.* 2021). Locally, Àkíntọ́lá is used in treating malaria and other digestive and respiratory issues.

The recovery of grinding stones (a muller from AFO 1 and a quern from AFO 2) suggests food processing on site. Grinding is a daily practice in Yoruba societies, used to prepare grains and other foodstuffs (e.g. cracking palm kernels for their nuts which can serve as food or be processed for oil); the presence of grinding stones therefore sheds light on historic dietary practices and daily activities. Burnt palm kernel endocarps from TP1 provide direct evidence for the exploitation of palm nuts *c.* AD 1456–1640 (Daraojimba 2016). Zooarchaeological material is highly fragmentary, making it difficult to identify the species exploited but suggesting the consumption of animal protein.

Conclusion

This study marks the beginning of our exploration into what domestic spaces reveal about daily life at Orile-Owu during the mid-fifteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries AD. Present evidence supports historical practices of food processing, the consumption of animal protein and the use of herbal medicine.

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