Móremí or Mórèmí: An Investigation into the Perception Error of a Deified Woman in Ilé-Ifě

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Abstract

A known fact that has been established is the importance that Africans, especially the Yorùbá attach to names which is that names serve as a form of identification which may depict family heritage and occupation, and such names convey a deep meaning. It is this last case that the author focuses on in this paper. For quite a number of times over the years, the author has pondered on the correct pronunciation of the name of the female deity in Ilé-Ifẹ who had played a very significant role during the time the people of Ifẹ were under incessant attacks from their enemies. What we hear every day is “Móremí” with the tonal melodies of (HMH)! We asked quite a number of people the exact meaning of the name with no satisfactory answer. This has led me to undertake this research and as we showed from morpho-syntactic and semantic perspectives, there is nothing like “Móremí” in Ifẹ or any other dialects of Yorùbá not to talk of Standard Yorùbá. Instead, what we have is ‘Mórèmí, an abridged form of Omo-ón rë mì ‘(having) child (ren) pleases me’. We trace this to the transcription of Dúró Ládipò’s tonal melodies of his song Móremí Ajánsorù which is basically a perception error. We argue that though “re” is a variant of the verb “rë”, the form “re” only occurs with referential nouns while “rë” is found with short pronouns (Déchaine, 2001).

Keywords: Moremi, Perception Error, Ile-Ife, Yoruba dialects, Standard Yoruba.

1 HMH means a sequence of high-mid-high tones on the name.
Introduction

The research emanates from the curiosity of the author concerning the exact pronunciation of the name “MỌREMI” from his linguistic knowledge of the theory of compositionality (Partee, 2004) of the name, which is famous among the Central Yorùbá dialects comprising, Ifê, Ìjèṣà, Àkúrè, Èkìtì, Ondó and Mòbà. We rely on documented history of Ile-Ife to give a historical background of the woman and goes on to data collection from Ifê, Ìjèṣà, Èkìtì and Mòbà land on other names related to the name of this famous woman. We are going to show that [re], though exists as a variant of /rè/, it does not occur after an object pronoun with a high tone. We are also going to claim that the wrong pronunciation of the name as Mόremí instead of Mόrèmí which is an abridge form of Omórèmí is due to the tonal melody change when the name is rendered in a song, the channel through many people get to know about the woman.

Who is this woman?

The woman, who to me, has been corruptly or wrongly called MỌREMI was said to have hailed from Ilé-Ife (Adelegan, 2009, pp. 112). The legend, according to (Johnson, 1921, p. 147) was known for two attributes: her brav-ery and beauty. As to the first attribute, Adelegan (2009: 112) describes her as:

‘a woman of valor, a mother in a million, a unique personality, a woman of honor, a rare gem, an epitome of motherhood and a strategic warrior.

She grew up at a time the Ifê people were in crisis due to incessant attacks from their enemies described as Ugbo.2 Indeed, Adélégàn (2009: 113) makes it clear that:

‘The people who formed the Ugbo secret society before they raid Ifê were the Ifê but they went to go and settle at Igbogbó.’

2 Though this writer is not a historian but there are two issues with the story of ‘Moremi’ as told by many people. First, is the issue of the attacks by foreign warriors the cause of which nobody was able to state or ascertain. Second is the claim that the enemies are Ugbo/Igbo. This also raises questions such as: (a) Are the Ugbo attackers the same as the Igbo we know today or a Yorùbá community close by that was so nick named? (b) If they are the Igbo that we know today, the question would be, how did they manage to travel through other Yorùbá communities from their home to Ifê without any interven-tion? We follow Adelegan to assume that they must have been a Yorùbá community not far from Ilé-Ife called Ugbo ‘forest’ people. Whatever may be the true historical fact about the history of this woman and the roles she played in Ifê, I am not going to take a position since that is not within the purview of this paper.
While the ravage lasted, the Ifẹ people became helpless even with an appeal to their various gods. It was at this point that an unknown lady who had only a son (as reported in Johnson) came out and promised to confront the Ifẹ enemies. MỌREMI’S gesture met with no opposition contrary to expectation. How would a woman make up her mind to singlehandedly wage war against the enemies that the entire Ifẹ warriors could not defeat? One could only understand Ifẹ’s mute on this seeming ridiculous decision of a woman to confront an invisible army from the point of view that they have tried many times in vain and would accept any help coming from any source. To be brief about this, MỌREMI made a covenant with Ẹsinminrin, the goddess of River in Ifẹ to offer a costly sacrifice to it if Ifẹ could win the battle. On the next raid, she submitted herself to be taken as captive with a hidden agenda of going to know their secret so that she could find a way of revealing this to the Ifẹ warriors. Her beauty caught their attention, so they took her back to their base and handed her to the king with some other booties. After a while, having gotten what she wanted, escaped back to Ifẹ where she leaked the weakness of their enemies. At the next attack, Ifẹ had an easy defeat of the Ugbo who hitherto were considered to be spirit whereas they merely covered their body with dry ẹkan grass! The Ifẹ simply approached them with firelight which set them ablaze. In fulfilment of her vow, the woman offered Olúorogbo, her only son as sacrifice to the goddess.

Today, in Ilé Ifẹ, the statue of MỌREMI can be found at Ọbá fẹ mé Awólọ́wọ́ University (OAU) and at the palace of Ọoni when going to Àtibà enroute Eyindi route. She is also recognized and referred beyond Ilé-Ifẹ. In Ṣafà, (a place where she was actually born) a building was erected in Onímòkàá compound. Several times, the building was demolished by overzealous Islamic fundamentalists who considered the erection of the building with her statue as fetish. However, each time the building was demolished, the people who constructed it would rebuild it and today, not only is the building standing, but now there is also a shopping complex around it. In addition, Moremi Comprehensive Girls High School, Ṣafà was also established in the early 1980s to further immortalise her. Apart from Ṣafà, at the University of Lagos, there is a female Hall named after her with her statue of hers in front of the building.

**3.1 Evidence for the true name?**

So far, so good, you would observe that we have been trying as much as possible to avoid writing the name of the woman and where we did, we tried to write it in capitals without marking any tones on it. In this section, we present robust data to show the distribution and occurrence or rè/re and wù/wu.
First, is the data on rè and re. As we can see, the low-toned rè occurs preceding the pronoun mí as in (1).

(1) a. Adérèmí ‘Crown pleaes me’
    b. Oyèrèmí ‘Chieftaincy pleases me’
    c. Awôrèmí ‘Cult pleases me’
    d. Elûrèmí ‘Elú pleases me’
    e. Ògûnrèmí ‘Ògûn pleases me’
    f. Akínrèmí ‘Valour pleases me’
    g. Fólárèmí ‘Make honour/wealth please me’
    h. Omírèmí ‘River goddess please me’
    i. Ifârèmí ‘Ifá pleases me’
    j. Ọyárèmí ‘Ọya pleases me’
    k. Ọlárèmí ‘Honour/wealth pleases me’

On the other hand, in (2), this verb surfaces as mid-toned re when it occurs after a referential noun eni ‘person’.

(2) a. Awôreni ‘Awo pleases person’
    b. Owôreni ‘Owó pleases person’
    c. Ọláreni ‘Ọlá pleases person’
    d. Ọmọreni ‘Ọmọ pleases person’
    e. Adéreni ‘Crown pleases person’
    f. Elûreni ‘Elú pleases person’
    g. Omíreni ‘River goddess please person’
    h. Ọlárènì ‘Honour/wealth pleases person’
    i. Ifâreni ‘Ifá pleases person’
    j. Ọyárènì ‘Ọya pleases person’

The last piece of evidence which corroborates the data in (1) and (2) is found in the song in (3) which is mostly sang by women in towns and villages in the entire central Yorùbá.

(3) a. É rè mí It pleases me,
    3sg please 1sg,

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3 I got the data in (1) and (2) from Deaconess Bámitálé Ájábí-Bêmí from Ilé-Ife. Thanks to Olúrèmí Adékọyà who facilitated the collection of data from the woman.

4 Note that (ẹ)ni can be replaced with any other personal name such as Adé, Òjó and strong pronouns like àwa, èmi, èyin and the tone will remain mid. Consider Ifá re àwa and not Ifá rè àwa. See the discussion in section 3 below.
bé se í rè ó  as it pleases you.
as do Prog please 2sg

Ìkàrà aǹ mú k’ọmọ the bean-cake given to a child
bean-cake 3pl take give-child
labó ojá on returning from the market
at-return market

É rè mí o e. It pleases me greatly
3sg please 1sg emph.

Another piece of evidence comes from the synonym of rè and wù and their behavior in the exact way when they enter into syntax especially in the composition of personal names. Consider the parallel names to (1) and (2) in (4) and (5) respectively.

(4) a. Adéwùmí ‘Crown pleases me’
b. Oyèwùmí ‘Chieftaincy pleases me’
c. Awówùmí ‘Cult pleases me’
d. Elúwùmí ‘Elú pleases me’
e. Ògúnwùmí ‘Ògùn pleases me’
f. Akínwùmí ‘Valour pleases me’
g. Fọláwùmí ‘Make honour/wealth please me’
h. Omíwùmí ‘River goddess please me’
i. Ifáwùmí ‘Ifáplease me’
j. Ọyáwùmí ‘Ọya pleases me’
m. Ọlàwùmí ‘Honour/wealth pleases me’

(5) a. Awówuni ‘Awo pleases a person’
b. Owówuni ‘Owó pleases person’
c. Ọlàyuni ‘Ọlá pleases person’
d. Ọmówuni ‘Ọmọ pleases person’
e. Adéwuni ‘Crown pleases person’
f. Elúwuni ‘Elú pleases person’
g. Omíwuni ‘River goddess please person’
h. Ọlàwuni ‘Honour/wealth pleases person’
i. Ifáwuni ‘Ifá pleases person’
j. Ọyáwuni ‘Ọya pleases person’

In Úlálè, a village where the researcher hails from, there are two interesting names: Òmọ wùmí and Òmọ rèmí given to two girls some sixty years ago
from the same compound that best shed more lights to the point being established here. While Ṣẹ̀gbowé rèmí is given by parents who were unexposed and no member of the entire family ever received a western education, Ṣẹ̀gbowé wùmí was given to a girl by her parents who were not only Christians but also enlightened, yet the two names mean the same thing. Our observation is that the parents who named their daughter Ṣẹ̀gbowé wùmí had gotten interaction with people who have western education and speak the standard Yorùbá language; thus, the choice of Ṣẹ̀gbowé wùmí instead of Ṣẹ̀gbowé rèmí whereas the other parents had no privilege to mix with people from outside the environment at that time. In other words, Ṣẹ̀gbowé rèmí is common to the people from the central Yorùbá dialects as a name while Ṣẹ̀gbowé wùmí is common among people from the other parts of Yorùbá land especially the Òyó.

Discussion

From the data presented in 3.1, the emerging facts are the following. First, the verb rè comes with an underlying low tone which changes to mid. This phenomenon has been widely discussed both descriptively and theoretically in the literature. In a theory-based account (Déchaine, 2001) and (Ajibóyè, Déchaine, Gick, & Pulleyblank, 2011), it is demonstrated that a monosyllabic verb which bears a low tone drops its low tone when it takes a referential noun or a strong pronoun as its direct object and takes a default mid tone instead. That is what we find in (2). By contrast, the low tone is retained if the object is a weak pronoun as reflected in (1). Note that all the weak pronouns have two variants based on high and mid tones. In the case under discussion, the 1sg pronoun can either be realized as mí or mi, depending on the tone of the verb. In other words, if the tone of the verb is low or mid, its object weak pronoun is going to bear a high tone. (6a&b) But if the verb bears a high tone, the tone of the object changes to mid (6c)

(6) a. Ṣẹ̀gbowè ̀nà mí ‘Ṣẹ̀gbowè beat me’
   b. Jùníò ̀jọ mí ‘Junior resembles me’
   d. Jùmòkè ̀bú mi. ‘Jùmòkè abused me’

In the realm of phonology, the tone alternation under discussion has been observed as instance of tone polarity and the explanation and analysis for this is due to Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP). The same explanation holds for the second verb wù which I have shown has exact distribution and behavior with rè.
How Does Mọremí come to be?

Having established that *Mọremí* is the correct form that will give the correct pronunciation which will in turn give a true meaning of the name, what remains to be accounted for is how *Mọremí* comes to be. Beginning with Johnson (1921: 147) which wrote the name as *Mọremi* with no tone marks! That name is outrightly ruled out and none of the possible outputs in (7) is tenable because, it is either they are nonsensical i.e., connoting no meaning, ungrammatical or unintended meaning.

(7) a. Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí
Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí
Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí
Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí Mọremí

Next, we trace this to Dúró Ládiipò, a famous dramatist, actor, traveling theatre guru and a poet who first brought this lady out of the historic cocoon to the limelight in his drama piece titled ‘Moremi Ajasoro’ first staged in 1970 (Raji-Oyelade, Olorunyomi, & Duro-Ladipo, 2008, pp. 17-18) and which has been staged within the length and breadth of Nigeria and to many different parts of the world. The famous song where the name appears is rendered as follows:

Mọremí Àjánsórò o/2x Mọremí Àjánsórò o/2x
Èúrè o ún mi mó mó gbà o The goat you gave me, do not take it back
Mọremí Àjansorò etc. Mọremí Àjánsórò etc.

Today anywhere and everywhere they talk about this great woman she is being addressed as *Mọremi*.\(^5\) The immediate question that readily comes to mind is what does this name mean with this pronunciation? Recall that one thing that Yorùbá is known for in name giving is in its semantics; every name has meaning. As far as we can tell, *Mọremí* connotes no meaning as it is written and pronounced. We have shown above that the correct pronunciation of that name is *Ọmọ rẹmí* (<*Ọmọ -rè-mí*) which is shortened to *Mọrẹmí* with the deletion of the first vowel.

There is one variant of the name that we also stumbled on in the course of our research. According to Johnson (1921: 147-148), the legendary woman is referred to as “Mọremí”. Johnson used this name four times in his two-page narration of the story of this woman of great virtue. We came across this new

\(^5\) All the artists on the troupe that produced the play MOREMI who had cause to pronounce it utter it as such!
version for the first time and was wondering if it could be a corrupt form of Mórèmí or another name entirely. Appealing to morphology and semantics seem to have no support for a name like this. However, if we go into a diagnosis of the name as done to “Móremiti”, we may claim that “Mórèmí” also originates from Omo miremi ni ekun ‘child has avert me of weeping’ which is shorten to Mórèmí. This hypothesis may actually be on the right track. However, we drop the idea because this is the only instance where we come across this in the literature.

“Móremí”: A Case of Language change?

It will not be out of place to take the case under review through the lens of Historical Linguistics and explore the possibility of an explanation that will be based on language change to reveal why Mórèmí has changed to Móremí. Language change like language variation, which is a branch of Historical Linguistics is usually attached to time. In other words, language is said to be subject to change over time; such change, over time, can be chronological (O’Grady & Archibald, 2009, p. 246). Another thing that has often been discussed is direction of change. What has not been mentioned is whether the change is positive or negative? By being positive or negative we mean if the change that a language undergoes over time is desirable or not. It can be rightly asserted that language change positively or negatively may begin with one person or a group of persons among the community of native speakers of such language. In what we have presented above, we have shown that the change in the name, Mórèmí is due to wrong pronunciation from tonal melody of the song produced by Dúró Ládípò Theatre Group where the name has been projected to the outer world, thus it has been corruptly and wrongly pronounced as Móremí even among most Yorùbá speakers, including people from Central Yorùbá dialects where Ífẹ is situated. We consider this as a negative change. There are other such corrupt changes over time. For example, only very recently, through radio and television that we got to know that the proverb:

(8a) Kí ní o rí lóbè
What 3sg see in-soup that-3sg use
tóó fi warú sowó take-locust beans in-hand?
‘What is it that you see in the soup that makes you take locust beans in your palm’?

Which many grew up to know is wrong, and that the actual correct form is what is presented in (8b).
What is it that you find in the soup that makes you hold back your hand?

The irony of it all is that such change must have started from one or two people and spread to others and before you know it, it has become the acceptable form, and no one questions the sensibility or otherwise of the entire sentence. It is now that we know that the form in (8a) makes no sense when compared to the form in (8b); *waaru ọwọ́* is an hesitance that will occur when the person eating sees something strange in the soup rather than *warú só wọ́*, which if indeed is intended will be difficult to accomplish considering is the fact that *irú* is almost always grinded before added in the soup and where the one that is not grinded is added, they are scattered in the soup such that it will be difficult if not impossible to gather and put in the palm of the eater.

How about the underlined word in (9)?

(9a) Owó aṣọ yẹn kò *gara*.
Money cloth that not ???
‘The money for that cloth is not costly’

That is what we hear Yorùbá program presenters on 92.9 fm say very often instead of:

(9b) Owó aṣọ yẹn kò *gâ ju ara lọ*
Money cloth that not tall surpass body go
‘The money for that clothe is not costly (beyond one’s capacity)’

Again, whereas the form in (9a) continues to gain acceptability, nobody is looking at the components of the word *gara*: *ga* + *ara* which will not bring any meaning close to what is intended. What (9a) lacks is *jù*. In other words, *ga* cannot take *ara* as a direct object. It is *jù* that can. Consider the following:

(10) a. Adé *ju* Olú  ‘Adé surpasses Olú’
b. Adé *jù* mì  ‘Adé surpasses me’
c. Adé *ga ju* Olú  ‘Adé is taller than Olú’
d. Owó aṣọ yẹn *ga jù ní tèmi*  ‘The cloth is too costly for me’
e. Owó aṣo yẹn ga ju ara lo. ‘The cloth is too costly for me to bear’

To recap, the point that is being made here is that certain undesirable changes occur in language, which within a short time, enters the lexicon, of a language or the grammar. Such is the case of Móremí that is under review here which has displaced the correct form, Móremí.

One important thing that is also paramount to Historical Linguists is the regularity of change. This is what informed neogrammarians like Karl Brugmann, Berthold Delbrück, and August Leskien among others to develop ‘the Regularity Principle’ or ‘Neogrammarian hypotheses’. Whereas a change that follows a definite pattern is said to be regular, a change that is arbitrary in nature will be termed ‘irregular’ (Campbell, 2006). Finally, the change can be phonological, lexical, or syntactic. In this paper, we have focused on one lexical item which is Móremí. So, the change witnessed in this single lexical case cannot be said to display regularity in any way.

Is Móremí from Òfà: Evidence from the very name?

The final point we would like to make is in relation to the name Móremí and the place of origin of its bearer. Already, it has been established that Móremí is not from Ilé-Ife. It has equally not been disputed that Móremí hails from Òfà. In the play, that depicted her attributes, it confirmed that she was from Òfà. However, between the name, Móremí; the bearer and her place of origin is the question of whether the Òfà people so-name their child Móremí. We have demonstrated that Omóremí is a name common among the Central Yorùbá (Ife, Ìjeṣà, Èkìtì, Àkúrè and Móbà) people. Surprisingly, Prof S.O. Bióbákú in Adelegan (2009: 113) erroneously claims that: Moremi sounds suspiciously like Mariam (or Mary)…” He goes further to link the sacrificed son of Móremí to Jesus Christ in the bible. Our point is this. While Bióbákú could not have been right, it only further confirms that the name has not been correctly pronounced. The most likely conspiracy theory will be that Móremí might not be the original name of this heroine woman before she got to Ilé-Ife. But when she got to Ilé-Ife she was nicknamed Móremí because of her beauty. Unfortunately, such conspiracy theory cannot hold water.

Conclusion

In this short paper, we have dwelt on one issue which revolves round a renowned woman in Yorùbá history, Móremí, whose name rings bell from far and near, focusing on the etymology of the name. Drawing examples from the Central Yorùbá dialects and Standard Yorùbá, We have been able to establish
that the name Môremî has been wrongly written and pronounced, tracing this to the songs of Dûró Ládiipô who promoted the woman through his theatric works. From our findings in those dialects and Standard Yorùbá, the correct and full form of the name is Ọmọ̀ rè mí which has its variants as Ọmọ̀ wù/wùn mí. We claim that the error emanates from the transcription of Dûró Ládiipô’s tonal melodies of his song Môremî Àjàn sorò which is basically a perception error. We argued that though “re” is a variant of the verb rè, the form re is syntactically conditioned as it only occurs with referential nouns while rè only occurs with short pronouns. As it is in the day to day use of the name and as robustly shown in this paper, whenever rè takes high tone noun as its object, the high tone is retained, but whenever the verb rè takes a referential noun (personal name) as its object, a syntactic rule of L-drop selects the re-form.

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