

# Mọremí or Mọrè mí: An Investigation into the Perception Error of a Deified Woman in Ilé-Ifẹ̀

Ọladiipọ Ajiboye

Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies

University of Lagos, Nigeria

[ajjjakoladi@gmail.com](mailto:ajjjakoladi@gmail.com)

## 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-Ifẹ̀ who had played a very significant role during the time the people of Ifẹ̀ were under incessant attacks from their enemies. What we hear every day is “Mọremí” with the tonal melodies of (HMH)!<sup>1</sup> 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 “Mọremí” in Ifẹ̀ or any other dialects of Yorùbá not to talk of Standard Yorùbá. Instead, what we have is *Mọrè mí*, an abridged form of *Ọmọ-ọ n rẹ mí* ‘(having) child (ren) pleases me’. We trace this to the transcription of Dúró Ládipọ’s tonal melodies of his song *Mọremí Àjàn sorò* which is basically a perception error. We argue that though “re” is a variant of the verb “rẹ”, the form “re” only occurs with referential nouns while “rẹ” is found with short pronouns (Déchaine, 2001).

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

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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 “MOREMI” from his linguistic knowledge of the theory of compositionality (Partee, 2004) of the name, which is famous among the Central Yorùbá dialects comprising, Ifẹ̀, Ìjẹ̀sà, Àkúrẹ̀, Èkìtì, Oṅdó and Mò bà. We rely on documented history of Ile-Ifẹ̀ to give a historical background of the woman and goes on to data collection from Ifẹ̀, Ìjẹ̀sà, Èkìtì and Mò bà 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 *Mó remí* instead of *Mò rè mí* which is an abridge form of *Ọmọ̀ rè mí* 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 MOREMI was said to have hailed from Ilé-Ifẹ̀ (Adelegan, 2009, pp. 112). The legend, according to (Johnson, 1921, p. 147) was known for two attributes: her bravery 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 Ifẹ̀ people were in crisis due to incessant attacks from their enemies described as Ugbo.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Adélgàn (2009: 113) makes it clear that:

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

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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 Ifẹ̀ without any intervention? We follow Adelegan to assume that they must have been a Yorùbá community not far from Ilé-Ifẹ̀ called Ugbó ‘forest’ people. Whatever may be the true historical fact about the history of this woman and the roles she played in Ifẹ̀, I am not going to take a position since that is not within the purview of this paper.

While the ravage lasted, the Ifè 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 Ifè enemies. MÒREMÍ'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 Ifè warriors could not defeat? One could only understand Ifè'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, MÒREMÍ made a covenant with Èsìnminrìn, the goddess of River in Ifè to offer a costly sacrifice to it if Ifè 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 Ifè 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 Ifè where she leaked the weakness of their enemies. At the next attack, Ifè had an easy defeat of the Ugbo who hitherto were considered to be spirit whereas they merely covered their body with dry è *kan* grass! The Ifè 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 Ifè, the statue of MÒREMÍ can be found at Qbáfèmi Awólówò University (OAU) and at the palace of Qòni when going to Àtibà enroute Eyindi route. She is also recognized and referred beyond Ilé-Ifè. In Òfà, (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, Òfà was also established in the early 1980s to further immortalise her. Apart from Òfà, 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 of *rè/re* and *wù/wu*.

First, is the data<sup>3</sup> on *rè* and *re*. as we can see, the low-toned *rè* occurs preceding the pronoun *mí* as in (1).

- |     |    |           |                                |
|-----|----|-----------|--------------------------------|
| (1) | a. | Adérè mí  | ‘Crown pleases me’             |
|     | b. | Oyèrè mí  | ‘Chieftaincy pleases me’       |
|     | c. | Awórè mí  | ‘Cult pleases me’              |
|     | d. | Elúrè mí  | ‘Elú pleases me’               |
|     | e. | Ògúnrè mí | ‘Ògún pleases me’              |
|     | f. | Akínrè mí | ‘Valour pleases me’            |
|     | g. | Fòlárè mí | ‘Make honour/wealth please me’ |
|     | h. | Omírè mí  | ‘River goddess please me’      |
|     | i. | Ifàrè mí  | ‘Ifá pleases me’               |
|     | j. | Oyárè mí  | ‘Oya pleases me’               |
|     | k. | Olàrè mí  | ‘Honour/wealth pleases me’     |

On the other hand, in (2), this verb surfaces as mid-toned *re* when it occurs after a referential noun *èni* ‘person’.<sup>4</sup>

- |     |    |         |                                |
|-----|----|---------|--------------------------------|
| (2) | a. | Awóreni | ‘Awo pleases person’           |
|     | b. | Owóreni | ‘Owó pleases person’           |
|     | c. | Oláreni | ‘Olá pleases person’           |
|     | d. | Omóreni | ‘Omọ pleases person’           |
|     | e. | Adéreni | ‘Crown pleases person’         |
|     | f. | Elúreni | ‘Elú pleases person’           |
|     | g. | Omíreni | ‘River goddess please person’  |
|     | h. | Olàreni | ‘Honour/wealth pleases person’ |
|     | i. | Ifáreni | ‘Ifá pleases person’           |
|     | j. | Oyáreni | ‘Oya 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, |                |

3 I got the data in (1) and (2) from Deaconess Bámítálé Àjáyí-Bèmbé from Ilé-Ifè. Thanks to Olúrè mí Adékòyà who facilitated the collection of data from the woman.

4 Note that (*e*)*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 rẹ̀ ó as it pleases you.  
as do Prog please 2sg

Ìkàrà	àṅ	mú	k'òmọ	the bean-cake given to a child
bean-cake	3pl	take	give-child	
labò	ọjà			on returning from the market
		at-return	market	

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

Another piece of evidence comes from the synonym of *rẹ̀* 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  | 'Ògún pleases me'              |
|     | f. | Akínwùmí  | 'Valour pleases me'            |
|     | g. | Fọ́lávùmí | 'Make honour/wealth please me' |
|     | h. | Omíwùmí   | 'River goddess please me'      |
|     | i. | Ifáwùmí   | 'Ifápleases me'                |
|     | j. | Oyáwùmí   | 'Oya pleases me'               |
|     | m. | Ọ̀lávùmí  | 'Honour/wealth pleases me'     |
|     |    |           |                                |
| (5) | a. | Awówuni   | 'Awo pleases a person'         |
|     | b. | Owówuni   | 'Owó pleases person'           |
|     | c. | Ọ̀lávuni  | 'Ọ̀lá pleases person'          |
|     | d. | Ọ̀mọwuni  | 'Ọ̀mọ pleases person'          |
|     | e. | Adéwuni   | 'Crown pleases person'         |
|     | f. | Elúwuni   | 'Elú pleases person'           |
|     | g. | Omíwuni   | 'River goddess please person'  |
|     | h. | Ọ̀lávuni  | 'Honour/wealth pleases person' |
|     | i. | Ifáwuni   | 'Ifá pleases person'           |
|     | j. | Oyáwuni   | 'Oya pleases person'           |

In Ùlálẹ̀, a village where the researcher hails from, there are two interesting names: *Ọ̀mọ wùmí* and *Ọ̀mọ rẹ̀mí* given to two girls some sixty years ago

from the same compound that best shed more lights to the point being established here. While *Ọmọ rẹmí* is given by parents who were unexposed and no member of the entire family ever received a western education, *Ọmọ 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 *Ọmọ wùmí* had gotten interaction with people who have western education and speak the standard Yorùbá language; thus, the choice of *Ọmọ wùmí* instead of *Ọmọ rẹmí* whereas the other parents had no privilege to mix with people from outside the environment at that time. In other words, *Ọmọ rẹmí* is common to the people from the central Yorùbá dialects as a name while *Ọmọ wùmí* is common among people from the other parts of Yorùbá land especially the Ọyó.

### Discussion

From the data presented in 3.1, the emerging facts are the following. First, the verb *rẹ* 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.        *Şégbowẹ nà mí* ‘Şégbowẹ beat me’  
       b.        *Júnìọ jọ mí*        ‘Junior resembles me’  
       d.        *Jùmò ké bú mi.* ‘Jùmò ké 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 *rẹ*.

## How Does Mòremí come to be?

Having established that *Mòrèmi* 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 *Mòremí* comes to be. Beginning with Johnson (1921: 147) which wrote the name as Mòremí 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. Mòrémí Mòrèmi Mòrèmi Mòrémí Mòrèmi  
 Mòrèmi Mòrémí Mòrèmi Mòrèmi Mòrèmi  
 Mòrémí Mòremí Mòremí Mòremí Mòrémí  
 Mòrèmi Mòrèmi Mòrèmi

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 word. The famous song where the name appears is rendered as follows:

Mòremí Àjànsòrò o/2x	Mòremí Àjànsòrò o/2x
Èúré o ún mi mò mò gbà o	The goat you gave me, do not take it back
Mòremí Àjansorò etc.	Mòremí Àjànsòrò etc.

Today anywhere and everywhere they talk about this great woman she is being addressed as *Mòremí*.<sup>5</sup> 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, *Mòremí* connotes no meaning as it is written and pronounced. We have shown above that the correct pronunciation of that name is *Omòrèmi* (<*Omò-rè-mí*) which is shortened to *Mòrèmi* 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 “Mòremí”. 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 MÒREMI 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 *Mòrè mí* 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 “*Mòrè mí*”, we may claim that “*Mòrè mí*” also originates from *Ọmọ rẹ mí ní ẹkún* ‘child has avert me of weeping’ which is shorten to *Mọ rẹ mí*. 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.

### “*Mòrè mí*”: 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 *Mòrè mí* has changed to *Mòrè mí*. 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, *Mòrè mí* is due to wrong pronunciation from tonal melody of the song produced by *Dúró Ládípọ* Theatre Group where the name has been projected to the outer world, thus it has been corruptly and wrongly pronounced as *Mọ rẹ mí* even among most Yorùbá speakers, including people from Central Yorùbá dialects where Ifè 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      ni      o      rí lọ bẹ  
 What   Foc    3sg    see    in-soup that-3sg use  
 tóo fi warú sọwọ      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).



- (8b) Kí ni o rí ló bẹ́ tóo fi  
 What Foc 3sg see in-soup that-3sg use hold  
 waaru ọwọ́  
 back hand  
 ‘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 sọ́ 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) Owo aṣọ yẹn kò ga 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 mí ‘Adé surpasses me’  
 c. Adé ga ju Olú ‘Adé is taller than Olú’  
 d. Owó aṣọ yẹn ga jù ní tẹ̀mí ‘The cloth is too costly for me’

- e. Owó aṣọ 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 *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí* that is under review here which has displaced the correct form, *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí*.

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 *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí*. So, the change witnessed in this single lexical case cannot be said to display regularity in any way.

### **Is *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí* from *Ọ̀fà*: Evidence from the very name?**

The final point we would like to make is in relation to the name *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí* and the place of origin of its bearer. Already, it has been established that *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí* is not from Ilé-Ifẹ̀. It has equally not been disputed that *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí* hails from Ọ̀fà. In the play, that depicted her attributes, it confirmed that she was from Ọ̀fà. However, between the name, *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí*; the bearer and her place of origin is the question of whether the Ọ̀fà people so-name their child *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí*. We have demonstrated that *Omọ̀rẹ̀mí* is a name common among the Central Yorùbá (Ifẹ̀, Ijẹ̀ṣà, Èkitì, Àkúrẹ̀ and Mọ̀bà) people. Surprisingly, Prof S.O. Bíòbákú in Adelegan (2009: 113) erroneously claims that: *Moremi* sounds suspiciously like Mariam (or Mary)...'. He goes further to link the sacrificed son of *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí* to Jesus Christ in the bible. Our point is this. While Bíòbákú 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 *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí* might not be the original name of this heroine woman before she got to Ilé-Ifẹ̀. But when she got to Ilé-Ifẹ̀ she was nicknamed *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí* 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, *Mọ̀rẹ̀mí*, 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 Mòremí has been wrongly written and pronounced, tracing this to the songs of Dúró Ládiípò who promoted the woman through his theatrical works. From our findings in those dialects and Standard Yorùbá, the correct and full form of the name is *Omó rè mí* which has its variants as *Omó wù/wùn mí*. We claim that the error emanates from the transcription of Dúró Ládiípò's tonal melodies of his song *Mó remi Àjàṅsorò* 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 pronoun 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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