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# The Resistance Movement of the Mareko People against the Fascist Aggression and Occupation in South-central Ethiopia

Yohannes Tesfaye Getachew and  
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## Abstract

*The primary objective of the present paper is to explore the patriotic resistance movement of the Mareko people of south-central Ethiopia against Italy's colonialist aggression and five-year occupation between 1935 and 1941. The paper also uncovers the role played by the Mareko people and other ethno-linguistic individual freedom fighters who opposed the Fascist administration within the Mareko woreda (district). Though the then governor of the Dobena sub-district and his officers became the leading collaborators (banda) with the Fascist administrators, the majority of the Mareko people strongly resisted these detractors. Like other nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia, the estimated 110 Mareko marched against the invaders at the battle of Maychew in 1936 despite enduring major casualties. Acknowledging the local spiritual leadership of Wäreqè Märe Yamè and Qegnazmach Tuji Anjilo, this paper celebrates the local Mareko defiance in staving off the encroaching Italian regime's divide and rule tactics specifically, and retaliatory colonialism in general.*

**Key Words:** Aggression, Mareko people, resistance, occupation, collaboration, Italian rule.

The Mareko people are one of the ethnic groups in Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The people live in Mareko *woreda* (district), which is found between the latitudes of 7:55' S and 8:04' N and longitudes of 38:26' W and 38:33' E.<sup>1</sup>

The Mareko, living mainly in Mareko *woreda*, consists of 66 clans and hundreds of sub-clans. Among those 66 clans of

the Mareko, 49 clans have now permanently lived under the administrative division of Mareko district and the rest live in the neighboring Meskan district and Silte Zone.<sup>2</sup> At present, Mareko district is one of the thirteen districts that make up today's Gurage zone in the SNNPRS.

### **The Resistance Movement of the Mareko against the Fascist Aggression and Occupation**

Fascist Italy, under the leadership of Benito Mussolini, justified its campaign against Ethiopia in the name of civilization extension for black Africans, though its hidden agenda was to avenge its defeat at the battle of Adwa 40 years before.<sup>3</sup> In order to connect its two colonies of Eritrea and Italy Somaliland, and consequently to build the great empire of Italian Oriente, Italy's control of Ethiopia became extremely critical. It was with these objectives that the Fascists waged war on Ethiopia in 1935<sup>4</sup>. Using Eritrea as stepping stone, the Fascists started attacking the area with the then modern weapons.

Italy's Fascist aggression prompted Emperor Haile Selassie I, then sovereign of the state, to migrate to Geneva, Switzerland, the headquarters of the League of Nations, of which Ethiopia was a member.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding Haile Selassie's acclaimed speech, Fascist Italy continued its attacks in Northern Ethiopia, particularly, in Tigray where local war chiefs on defending line, but until the Wal-Wal incident and Adwa attacks, the Emperor had not declared a state of emergency. On 1st October 1935, the emperor announced a state of emergency to which provincial governors and lower administrative rank governors recruited and organized fighters in the side of National army.<sup>6</sup>

To respond the Imperial decree, *Qäñazmaće* Oshebe Mesebo took the responsibility to recruiting fighters, and organized both manpower and logistic supplies for the coming campaign.

The Mareko enlisted experienced and notable fighters, some of whom were veterans of Adowa, as well as new recruits. Among the veterans of Adwa, *Qäñazmaće* Oshebe Mesebo, *Basha* Weld Giyorgis, *Basha* Gebre, *Tessema* Kasetew, *Fallo* Fonnee, *Leme* Mollorro, *Tessema* Abba Bora, *Basha* Weldayes, *Gade* Lije were leaders of fresh recruits.<sup>7</sup> Mareko fighters organized under *Kembata* force led by *Ras* Getachew Abate, governor of *Kembata*

*awraja* fought the Italian invading force in Mekele and Maychew at the last anti-Fascist and anti-colonial battle as well as others in like Bale and Dolo.<sup>8</sup>

After the unsuccessful battle of Maychew, the Emperor exiled to England. The news about the Emperor exile and the situation of the ongoing war in different battles and its which brought by veterans from war front frightened the people living in Mareko district, particularly the Mareko people. However, people who live in the Province and neighboring localities tried their best to sustain the former peace and keep the area safe from the intended anarchy.<sup>9</sup> Concerning resistance and impending Fascist-Italy rule, representatives of neighboring Mareko people, Meskan-Gurage, Silt'e people, and Sodo-Gurage voted and passed resolution that necessitated neither submission nor collaboration on the behalf of their people. Besides its main agenda, this occasional convention emphasized unity against Fascist Italy.

Despite these efforts, Fascist Italy officials found favorable conditions to apply their means and method to effectively control the area and complete the submission of the Mareko people through religion-based intra-ethnic disunity sown among the population of Mareko district. Their divide-and-rule policy seemed to be effective after they secured the peaceful submission and collaboration of local Muslim leaders among the Meskan Gurage and in neighboring Silte areas, who coordinated with the local anti-government movement called Gogot. This movement grew under *Imam* Sugato Zeyne<sup>10</sup> under whom several anti-Imperial propaganda campaigns and readjustment promised and used for Fascist consumption. Most of the collaborators among the population of Mareko *woreda* welcomed Italians and submitted peacefully, having been informed that the Italians' policy towards Islam was to establish good relations<sup>11</sup> Local chiefs and religious leaders with their followers ignorantly and readily left the past peaceful interaction and ethnic integration aside. However, before Fascist Italy controlled the area, conflict erupted between the Sodo-Gurage (western neighbors of the Mareko) and Kembata fighters led by *Fitawrari* Tamrat as he returned home from national battle. On May 15, 1936, some Sodo-Gurage youths, considering the absence of the local security chief and the gap created in administrative office during national battle, seized the opportunity to rob these travelers as they passed the neighboring Sodo-Gurage area.<sup>12</sup> Due

to their attempt of robbery and defensive action taken by veteran soldiers, many were killed on both sides. This robbery and ill-treatment made by Sodo-Gurage youths opposed by most of the Sodo people, for instance *Qäñazmaće* Bobe<sup>13</sup> refused attending the funeral ceremony of his son, who died while committing robbery. This conflict created a serious of bloody wars Sodo and Mareko. This and other ethnic-based conflicts and disputes triggered by Fascist propaganda created dilemma for the Mareko people.

Generally, for the Ethiopian forces headed home after unsuccessful fighting in northern and other fronts, the journey was difficult since in some areas, people retaliated against the oppressive regime by robbing soldiers,<sup>14</sup> who were considered guardians of the feudal government. Just like the Sodo-Gurage area, the Mareko among the youths, whose hidden resentment and anti-regime sentiment, attacked the government fighters as they journeyed to back home from battle field. Then in 1936, the anti-government Mareko group attacked the Arsi force led by *Dējamać Wäldä-Şadiqe*.<sup>15</sup>

The first collaborators in Mareko promised economic and political privileges from Fascist officials who established camp at Butajira, the former administrative center of Mareko *woreda*. However they faced strong resistance among the masses due to their activities as agents of harsh treatment including flogging, torture, hanging, and killing with fire squad. The first Italians arrived in Dobenna to secure the submission of *Däjazmać* Debo Agebo, who was a veteran of Adwa and had been appointed governor of the sub-district by imperial government officials. While the *balabbats*, and, at that time, most of powerful leaders of the Mareko\_ *Qäñazmać* Oshebe Mesebo, *Baša* Weld Giyorgis, *Baša* Gebre, Tessema Kasetew, Fallo Fonnee, Leme Mollorro, Tessema Aba-Bora, *Basha* Weldayes, and Gadde Lije\_ were obliged to go to a different front, *Däjazmać* Debo Agebo stayed behind to guard his sub-district but he exploited the situation for his own sake and quickly improved his military and political position. This act of collaboration made division among the Mareko people that traced to historical rivalries from the time the Menelik conquest. The ruling clan opposed by masses under the leadership of Šäbo clan,<sup>16</sup> against the submission.

Mareko patriots got support from their spiritual Wärëqè Märeyamè, who strongly and officially displayed anti-Italian rule.

Her role in leading the resistance movement against the Italian was reportedly known by Italian officials who established headquarter at Butajira through their collaborator *azma'ce* Eremora.<sup>17</sup> Italian officials arrived to confirm the resistance of Wärèqè Märeyamè and found her reluctant to agree to submission. Consequently, she was accused of being a witch and mastermind behind the 1937 attack on an Italian military convoy crossing the Mareko area at Dida locality during their journey from Ziway to Butajira, resulting in the deaths of two Fascist military officials and after which, Wärèqè Märeyamè was taken hostage to an unknown place. After the Dida attack, an unorganized form of anti-Fascist resistance became smooth after several Mareko men were flogged and imprisoned. Direct participants in the anti-Fascist movement were punished with a death sentence. However, the exile sentence on Wärèqè Märeyamè revived the formerly passive resistance, and the majority of Mareko, who lost their spiritual leader, waited an opportunity for revenge. Some individuals even secretly communicated with patriots who were in the area.<sup>18</sup>

Fascist Italian officers imposed both peaceful and forceful submission upon notable local elders and clan chiefs.<sup>19</sup> Fascist Italian administration on Mareko land faced both support and resistance, which divide population of the area, largely along ethnic and linguistic division. Their containment policy initially seems to be profitable since they can produce collaborators from ethnic and religious group. However, Mareko people eventually became suspicious, realizing the deceitful tactics of the officers. They became specifically aware of what the Fascist Italians did to peacefully submitted patriots to whom agents promised mercy and award for surrender but who were publicly killed after surrendering.

While *Qäñazma'c* Tuji Anjilo and his followers retreated to a remote area to continue their anti-Italian occupation, Italian officials advanced on Mareko land and were welcomed by *Däjazma'c* Debo Agebo, the then governor on behalf of the Mareko people. Anti-fascist resistance sentiment revived was after the news about the army of *Ras Desta Damtew* approaching in Mareko-land reached the Mareko people in Mareko *waräda*. Thus an anti-Italian group among the Mareko people met to fight Italian forces by combining with the force of *Ras Desta Damtew*, which moved from Arbegona,<sup>20</sup> where they were in defending line against the

invading army in Southern Front with his army as it reached the border area of Mareko land and Sodo-Gurage area.

*Ras Desta Damitaw*, the governor of Sidamo and son-in-law of the Emperor, appointed to lead the southern Ethiopian force in south, had retreated after unsuccessfully defending against the southern Italian force with his notable war leaders, *Däjazmač* Beyene Maried,<sup>21</sup> and *Däjazmač* Gebremariam Gari, his wife princess Romanwork and as well as some of their soldiers.<sup>22</sup> The advancing part of the southern Italian infantry under the leadership of General Navarrini met the retreating force of *Ras Desta* at a place called Goggiti, a border area of Mareko and Sodo-Gurage on 24, February 1937.<sup>23</sup> The coming of national army in the area revives the fighting morale of anti-Italy Mareko resistance groups, who had lost spiritual leader and faced harsh treatment from Italians and their sympathizers.

The force of *Ras Desta*, which was attacked by the Italian at Goggiti,<sup>24</sup> got support from the Mareko people, and fighting continued for three days until the enemy got the an upper hand. Fresh fighters of Mareko people, who were knowledgeable of land scope of the area than Italians, engaged without victory in the battle of Goggiti. Particularly after the death of *Däjazmač* Gebremariam Gari, and wounding of <sup>25</sup> *Däjazmač* Beyene, who soon died, their position was among notables Imperial government in Harer, and the governor of Bale respectively. Nonetheless, the people of Mareko showed loyalty, patriotism, and integrity for their country at the battle of Goggiti.

*Ras Desta*, who lost the battle and his friends wounded or dead, went to Butajira area with hopes of getting anti-Italian support and/or place of fugitive accommodations. He narrowly escaped two times; at Arbegona and at Goggiti. However, he lost all military support and acceptance from local Meskan Gurage, who had collaborated with Italians under their religious leader.<sup>26</sup> Attempting to hide himself as a fugitive at the strategic place of Mount Zibider, *Ras Desta* faced strong opposition by the local collaborators. His surrender was also masterminded by local collaborators through fake promise.<sup>27</sup> Italian administration officials at Butajira sent their local collaborators to have him peacefully give up, and they found him in locale place called Yetebon around Butajira.<sup>28</sup> According to informants from the area and the available memo of a contemporary clergy member named Tesaf Gebryes,

Yetebon was not only the fugitive hideout of *Ras Desta*, but also the birth place of his mother.<sup>29</sup> The grand-daughter of *Ras Desta*, named Martha, established and ran two semi-charity projects: Mersi-Hospital and Mersi-Secondary School for needy community members at her ancestral Yetebon land near Butajira.<sup>30</sup>

*Ras Desta*, who surrendered, was killed by firing squad with his few loyal followers who were remnants of Imperial troops of southern front, at their camp, Butajira. His body was secretly taken by Shaka Bekele Weya, who had been conducting patriotic movement in the area at Acheber, and he was buried at Medre-Kebde Abbo Church in Sodo Gurage area.<sup>31</sup> The death of *Ras Desta Damitew* raised the eyebrows of Italians, who then secured the area from probable acts of anti-Italy resistance movement. Subsequently in the following months, just after the death of *Ras Desta*, the Italian forces occupied Hossana in March 1937. Tenente Aimoni was the first Italian commissioner at Hossana who appointed and exercise jurisdiction over the people of Mareko, Gurage, Hadiya, Kembata and Tembaro, Soddo-Oromo, and Weliso<sup>32</sup> under their main camp and resident at Hossana. (The Italian officials set up camps at each former government administrative town). Butajira town, the administrative site of Mareko district where they established temporary camp now after the first commissioner arrived at Hossana, becomes the site for assigned Italian officials to rule the district.

Under Commissioner Tenente Aimoni, Commissioner Casamaro was appointed to head the Italian camp at Butajira. Most of the time during his supervision, Commissioner Casamaro preferred to recruit local soldiers than Somalis, Eritreans, or Italians for two reasons: first, to overcome language barriers, and second, to develop his geographical knowledge of the area. He was the most notorious Italian officer in the area, accused of committing war crime and genocide— particularly the killing of 375 civilian churchmen at Medere-Kebed Monastery in the neighboring Soddo-Gurage.<sup>33</sup>

Italian Officers tried their best to peacefully handle the patriotic movement of anti-Italian government peacefully. For instance, in 1938 the Italian General Dolosso arrived at Goggiti, the border locality of Mareko. The objective of General Dolosso was to meet on the reconciliation process of the area with the local notables. Nevertheless the patriots ignored him and his first mission was



failed. Subsequently, on March 27 in the same year, General Dolosso, accompanied with other general who was commissioner of Jimma arrived at a place called Kondalditi, near Mareko. At Kondalditi, the Italian force lead by these two generals fought against patriots of the area. However, the battle ended without victory for either side.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, anti-Italian movement among the Mareko people lost momentum after the execution of *Ras* Desta and become passive until Italian officials start to recruit youths among Mareko for *corvee* during the Zway-Butajira road construction, which cross Mareko land.

Generally, Italian officials put their trust in collaborators of the area, divide and rule policy, and in modern arms to control Ethiopia. Eventually, in areas like Mareko district, these three factors secured Italian occupation and temporary colonial administration until 1941.



**Figure 1.** The compound of the present Butajira Behre General Secondary School, the former camp of Italian during their occupation where *Ras* Desta Damtew was killed. Source: Photo by the author, May 25, 2020.



**Figure 2.** This photograph shows the national flag in Butajira Behre General Secondary School. It is the exact place where *Ras Desta Damtew* was assassinated by a fascist firing squad. Source: Photo by the author, May 25, 2020.

### **Political and Economic Conditions of the Mareko during the Italian Occupation: 1936-1941**

The victory of the Italians over the Ethiopians in the battles of Tembeyen, Maychew and Mekele brought about a political change in that the Ethiopian feudal government led by aristocrat Emperor Haile-Selassie was replaced by Italian rule. This event brought about the end of over four decades of *gäbar-mälekña* relationships in Mareko, as elsewhere in the country. This meant the end of the external obligations demanded by the *mälekña*, such as tribute payment, both in-kind and in cash, and the provision of labor services by the *gäbar* Mareko.<sup>35</sup> It is clear that this was due to the new Italian policy, which eliminated tribute payment.

As in other areas of the country, in Mareko there was a dilemma in Mareko: Peasants appreciated the end of the aristocratic system but hated the Italian rule. Conversely, part of the feudal class exhibited an opportunistic desire to ally with the incoming power and to maintain their elite status. However, the view of the majority working class was that they were victims of the politically oppressive and economically exploitive feudal

government, fueling some pro-Italian sentiment in the neighboring community. Worku Nida (2000:55) describes the following from the testimony of his informants.

The Italians liberated the Gurage from *näffjääna*-caused slavery. The *näffjääna* did not treat us equals, but as slave. Because of their bad deeds *Waa'* took them to Maichew, where they were finished by the Italians. *Waa'* heard our cries and grievances and permitted the Maichew miracle to occur. Since then, there has been no payment [tribute], or work [free labor] for the *näffjääna*, and we become free from them.<sup>36</sup>

During the time of Italian occupation, the Mareko people, who categorized under the administrative region of Mareko district in Dobenna sub-district represented by *Qerazmach*<sup>37</sup> Debo Agebo, (the governor of Mareko from Medore rule), were recognized by emperor Menelik I. Italian administrative officials at their center at Butajira continued to rule the Mareko people in collaboration with *Gerazmach* Debo<sup>38</sup>(particularly until additional camp was established at Koshe). Italians administrative officials conduct strict supervision in Dobenna *meketele woreda* (sub-district) at a weekly market known as *Oshebe-Mëra* (Oshebe market).<sup>39</sup> The day had been intentionally selected to find more Mareko people than usual then announce to all Mareko indigenous nobility, government officials — most of them members of Amhara ethnic groups —, and religious representatives to publicly meet with local Mareko people concerning administrative issues. Under the pretext of “all blacks are equal. . .”<sup>40</sup> Italian officials encouraged ordinary class participants who emotionally insult higher class personalities if there is maladministration on the eye of fascist rule. Under this system Italian officials distorted former class relations and successfully sowed social antagonism among the Mareko people.

The Italian occupation and administrative policy undertaken to facilitate the conquest exacerbated already occasionally erupting boundary conflicts among ethnic and linguistic groups had have been living in Mareko district. This was to intentionally stimulate disagreement and conflict<sup>41</sup> in the district. Epicenter of the border dispute was Mareko land, where Mareko people shared frontier with Mesakan-Gurage, Silte, and Sodo-Gurage. Dispute occurred at the eve of Italian occupation, when neighboring Silte

group supported by Meskan-Gurage invaded, war broke out and a serious of conflicts erupted until Italian occupation ended. Mareko people also engaged in war against their northern neighbors, Sodo-Gurage. These border conflicts and other against neighboring people were the result of Italian policy of “divide and rule.”

Road construction marked the period of the Italian occupation, and the Mareko contributed significantly to the road-building Labor force. The role of the Mareko laborers in road construction has also been reported by contemporary informants. Concerning the road construction by Italian government, Jonathan Baker reported that the construction of roads was one of the highest priorities for the Italians in their East African colonial agenda; about 85 percent of their colonial budget was earmarked for road construction. Baker also reopened the roads the Italians constructed in Ethiopia, added up to 7,000 kilometers, half of which were asphalted. Concerning this, Baker stated that by 1941, the Italians had laid down an imposing road system throughout much of the country.<sup>42</sup> However, Bahru Zewde (2002:164) explained the objective of Italian colonial road construction program and remarked, “This is not surprising, as Italian road-building was geared towards promoting the conquest of the country rather than its development.”<sup>43</sup> Since Italian administration bases functional in urban area due to the activity of patriotic resistance movement in rural areas, the Italians occupying the Mareko area first began to conduct road construction aimed at connecting Butajira with Ziway across Mareko-land to make the area accessible through infrastructure.<sup>44</sup> This road construction project mainly used free labor *corvee* among Mareko youths, the road crosses Mareko-land.<sup>45</sup> This forced work, aside from exhausting the youth laborers, indirectly affected agricultural productivity in the area: Since most Mareko farms had been held by families and clan, and elder men and other members of the group were excluded from plowing agricultural works had been the duty of youth, who were now busy with forced road construction.<sup>46</sup> Consequently the road work distorted the farming season and made feeding difficult in the region because recruits were inexperienced and overworked, and there was inefficient plowing and harvesting.

Generally, the Italian occupation did not bring any significant economic changes to the Mareko people, who depended on agriculture and animal husbandry. This was true despite the

recruitment of youth and other Mareko workers for road construction. Politically, Italian rule produced agents, collaborators from the nobility and the appointed governor, particularly after the resistance group led by *qäñazmač* Tuji Anjjilo exiled with his loyal followers.



**Figure 3.** An Italian artifact supposedly called a rain gauge still stands in Koshe town in the compound of Mareko District Police Office, which was the Italian camp during their occupation. Source: Photo by the author, May 25, 202

## Conclusion

The architects of Fascist aggression on Ethiopia relied on the ethno-linguistic and religious heterogeneity of the people to apply their “divide and rule” tactic and distort unity and national sentiment. However, the design aced its difficulties, and it proved to be ineffective among the Mareko people.

The Mareko fighters combated the Italians at several national battlefields as well as at home after the unsuccessful battle of Maychew. The anti-Fascist movement among the Mareko was undertaken using two methods. The first, in which the majority of Mareko passively resisted Fascist rule, was led by the Mareko spiritual leader Wārèqè Märeyamè. The second method was active resistance through armed forces under the leadership of *Qäñazmac* Tuji Anjilo.

The active resistance of the Mareko people forced the Fascist officials to establish a camp in Koshe *Kebele* to control the resistance. However, it was unsuccessful, not only in getting the Mareko to submit, but also in weakening the resistance of the patriots. Until the end of Fascist rule, the people of Mareko paid dearly with their lives for the independence of their country, Ethiopia.

***For the memory of patriot Ato Bezabhe Agune, a great-grandfather of my children, sacrificed much in the prisons of Italian-Somaliland, for the liberation of his country, Ethiopia.***

## Notes

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- <sup>12</sup> Edemo, *Metē*, 43-44; Tesfa, *Aymalale*, 111.
- <sup>13</sup> Tesfa, *Aymalale*, 111.
- <sup>14</sup> Alebachew Kemiso and Samuel Handamo, *The History and Culture of Hadiya People* (Addis Ababa, 2010), 94.
- <sup>15</sup> Alebachew and Samuel, *The History*, 94.
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- <sup>33</sup> Tesfa, *Aymalale*,119.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Lاپسو Dilebo, *Ye Ethiopia Ye Mekera Siratena Eritera*, (Addis Ababa:1985), 40-41. Imam Tuke, *Ato* Nune, and *Abegaz* Anbesse, “the socio-economy condition of Mareko after the collapse of the Imperial government,” interview by Yohannes Tesfaye, Koshe, May 20, 2016, audio.
- <sup>36</sup> Worku Nida, “*Fanonet*: Ethno historical Notes on the Gurage Urban Migration in Ethiopia,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 28, no 2-3 (2000): 55.
- <sup>37</sup> It is one of the military titles of feudal Ethiopia, which is literally means leader of the left.
- <sup>38</sup> Imam Tuke, *Ato* Nune, and *Abegaz* Ambese, interview. Sintayhu, “A Socio,” 10.
- <sup>39</sup> Imam Tuke, *Ato* Nune, and *Abegaz* Ambese, interview.
- <sup>40</sup> Tesfa, *Aymalale*, 116.
- <sup>41</sup> Sbacchi, “*Ethiopia under*,” 36. Tesfa, *Aymalale*, 113-116. Marcus, *A History*, 150.
- <sup>42</sup> Jonathan Baker, *The Rural-Urban Dichotomy in the Developing World: A Case Study from Northern Ethiopia*, (London and New York: Norwegian University Press, 1986): 50.
- <sup>43</sup> Bahru, “*A History*,” 164.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> Sintayhu, “Socio. . .,14”
- <sup>46</sup> Hailu Gagoroo, and Lile Oddo, and Demeke Ahmed. “The Road Construction of Koshe-Ziway by the Italian Through *Corvee*,” interview by Yohannes Tesfaye, May 21, 2016, audio.



