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Narrating Crime: Letting the community be protected by OLA and moral panic in Gidda Ayana's Criminological Discourse

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Abstract

In Gidda Ayana District (East Wallaga Zone, Oromia Region, Ethiopia), prolonged conflict between the federal government and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA, officially labelled "Shane" or "OLF-Shane") has produced a distinctive criminological phenomenon. This study applies Stanley Cohen's moral panic framework (1972) to demonstrate how state-aligned media and official narratives deliberately manufacture moral panics around everyday crime and insecurity. The Oromia Regional Government acts as a moral entrepreneur, framing local civilians as voluntary "accommodators" of the OLA, thereby legitimising the state's withdrawal of security forces while blaming residents for "inviting" rebel protection. Using qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of government statements, state-media broadcasts in Afan Oromo and Amharic, human-rights reports, and academic sources, the research identifies inverted panic criteria, stigmatising vernacular phrases, and the direct link between media blame and policy abdication. Findings show that ordinary victims are recast as "folk devils" accused of betrayal, creating engineered consensus that communities have willingly ceded sovereignty to the OLA. Ultimately, crime narration in Gidda Ayana functions as a technology of state exoneration and collective victim-blaming, naturalising rebel governance while maintaining the illusion of central authority.

Keywords: Moral Panic, Oromo Liberation Army, State Abdication, Victim-Blaming, Vernacular Stigmatisation, Gidda Ayana, Ethiopia

Introduction

The relationship between mass media and state legitimacy becomes uniquely perverse when governments weaponise crime narratives not to justify greater intervention, but to justify deliberate non-intervention and withdrawal of protection. In post-2018 Oromia, and especially in conflict-affected districts such as Gidda Ayana, Kiramu, Guto Gidda, and Sasigga the Regional government of Oromia has perfected a discourse that presents persistent insecurity as the logical consequence of community "choice" rather than state failure (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023).

Historically, Ethiopian state media have played a central role in framing armed opposition groups as existential threats (Abbink, 2017). Since the OLA re-emerged as a significant insurgent actor in western Oromia, official rhetoric has shifted: the primary target of hostility is no longer only the armed group but the civilian population accused of "accommodating Shane" (Fana Broadcasting Corporate, 2023; Oromia Broadcasting Network, 2024). This study analyses how this inversion is achieved through moral panic deliberately engineered to absolve the state of its constitutional duty to protect citizens.

Theoretical Framework: Inverted Moral Panic and State Abdication

Stanley Cohen's (1972) classic moral panic model is adapted here to capture a phenomenon rarely theorized: moral panic as a tool of state withdrawal rather than state overreach (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). In the inverted Gidda Ayana variant, all five original criteria remain present but are redirected as widespread reporting of abductions, killings, and robberies; directed primarily at civilians accused of "feeding Shane" or "refusing to stand with security forces"; manufactured agreement that communities have "chosen" OLA protection; military bombardment and economic blockade portrayed as proportionate punishment for alleged accommodation and sudden surges of blame after every OLA attack or government setback (EHRC, 2024).

The federal government thus acts as an accusatory moral entrepreneur, using moral panic to legitimise abdication of the social contract (Tareke, 2009; Østebø, 2023).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative design based entirely on secondary data and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how power, blame, and abdication are linguistically constructed in official crime narratives about Gidda Ayana (Fairclough, 2010).

Data Sources and Collection

1. Official statements and press releases from the Prime Minister's Office, Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), and Oromia Regional State (2021–2025).
2. Archival broadcasts and online content from state-aligned outlets: Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC), Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), and Addis Zemen newspaper, with special attention to Afan Oromo segments.
3. Human-rights documentation from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC).
4. Peer-reviewed literature on the Oromia conflict, rebel governance, and vernacular political discourse.

Data Analysis Process

A three-stage process was applied:

- Thematic coding using the five inverted moral-panic criteria.
- Forensic linguistic analysis of stigmatising vernacular phrases in Afan Oromo and Amharic.
- Policy-linkage mapping connecting media blame episodes to subsequent withdrawal of services, declaration of "no-go zones", or intensification of military operations (Van Dijk, 2015).

Results

The narrative strategy employed by Ethiopian state media in portraying the conflict in Gidda Ayana and adjacent districts in East Wallaga Zone represents a profound inversion of the state's foundational social contract: the obligation to safeguard civilian lives and property. Rather than mobilizing resources for protection, official discourse systematically reframes the federal government's retreat from governance manifested in the evacuation of police outposts, the collapse of local administrations, and the escalation of indiscriminate military tactics as a deliberate consequence of community "betrayal." This section delves deeper into the mechanics, historical precedents, empirical manifestations, and broader implications of this accusatory framework, drawing on documented media patterns, human rights reports, and conflict analyses up to mid-2025. By dissecting specific instances, linguistic framing, and policy ripple effects, we illuminate how this narrative not only exonerates the state but actively normalizes the de facto handover of security functions to the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA, derogatorily termed "Shane" by authorities), while punishing those it claims to defend.

Historical and Structural Underpinnings: From Settler Colonialism to Contemporary Blame-Shifting

The roots of this narrative lie in longstanding ethnic and land tensions in West Wollega, which state media exploits to retroactively justify civilian complicity. Gidda Ayana, a fertile lowland area, has been a flashpoint since the late 19th century, when Emperor Menelik II's campaigns facilitated the initial influx of Amhara elites to "pacify" Oromo populations—a process scholars describe as "internal colonialism." This pattern intensified under Emperor Haile Selassie I's Third Five-Year Development Plan (1968–1973), which resettled Amhara farmers from Wollo Province into East Wollega lowlands, including Gidda Ayana's Gutin area in 1971. By the 1990s–2000s, an estimated 80,000 "illegal" Amhara settlers from Gojjam had migrated into Gidda Ayana, Kiramu, and neighboring districts, often with tacit facilitation from Oromia regional authorities, including access to Amharic-medium schools in violation of the regional constitution's Afaan Oromoo education mandate. These historical grievances over land and resources have fueled periodic clashes between Oromo inhabitants and Amhara settlers, exacerbated since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's 2018 ascent, when northern conflicts (the Tigray War) diverted security resources southward, creating a vacuum that the OLA rapidly filled.

State media leverages this history to portray current insecurity not as a failure of federal protection but as the inevitable outcome of "accommodation" by a supposedly divided community. For instance, broadcasts often invoke settler narratives to imply that Oromo residents "invited" OLA intervention by harboring resentment against Amhara "pioneers," thereby shifting blame from structural neglect such as the underfunding of local policing amid ethnic federalism's contradictions—to communal moral failing. This echoes broader patterns in Ethiopian conflict discourse, where media under the Prosperity Party era (post-2018) has increasingly framed opposition as "terrorism" enabled by civilian "sympathizers," a tactic that predates the OLA but intensified after its 2019 split from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The result is a teleological story: historical "disloyalty" begets present-day "surrender" to Shane, absolving the state of its duty under Article 51(3) of the Ethiopian Constitution, which mandates federal responsibility for national security.

Empirical Manifestations: Media Cycles of Accusation Post-Attack

The narrative's operationalization is most evident in the rhythmic cadence of state media responses to OLA actions, where each insurgent success triggers a blame cascade against civilians. Following OLA ambushes on Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) convoys or outposts common in Gidda Ayana's rugged terrain official spokespersons and aligned outlets like Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC) and Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN) pivot swiftly from victimhood to culpability. A paradigmatic example occurred in June 2023, when FBC aired segments claiming that after an OLA attack near Gidda Ayana's Jangir town, locals "refused intelligence-sharing with security

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forces and instead sheltered Shane fighters," citing unnamed "community elders" who allegedly "chose rebel protection over national unity." Similar rhetoric permeated OBN's Afan Oromoo bulletins in March 2024, where a report on clashes in Gidda Ayana accused residents of "voluntarily handing over kebele [sub-district] governance to Shane," framing the OLA's ad hoc taxation and dispute resolution as evidence of "accommodation" rather than coerced survival mechanisms.

These cycles are not isolated; they form a pattern documented across 2021–2025. In November 2021, after OLA-linked gunmen killed over 30 civilians in West Wollega (attributed by Oromia officials to "Shane desperation" amid failed peace talks), state communications offices issued statements asserting that "local non-cooperation" prolonged the violence, implying communities "preferred" OLA "rule of law" over state intervention. By December 2022, following OLA's offensive reclaiming parts of East and West Wallaga (including brief control of Nekemte), FBC and OBN amplified claims of "ethnic Oromo complicity," with OBN segments in Afaan Oromoo warning that "those who feed Shane betray the nation." Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International have corroborated this in 2023–2024 reports, noting how such broadcasts precede ENDF withdrawals from vulnerable villages, leaving civilians exposed to retaliatory violence while media portrays the vacuum as "self-inflicted." The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) echoed this in its 2024 situation update, documenting over 200 extrajudicial actions in Wollega zones justified as responses to "suspected accommodation," though it stopped short of critiquing the narrative itself.

The "Accommodating Community" of Gidda Ayana

The primary folk devil is no longer solely the OLA fighter but the entire civilian population, repeatedly labelled with vernacular phrases such as:

- "ummatni Shanee ofitti dhiheeffate" (the people who surrendered themselves to Shane)
- "Shane waliin walitti makamani" (those who mixed themselves with Shane)
- "Shaneen filatan" (those who chose Shane)

These expressions, broadcast in Afan Oromo on state media, carry the powerful implication that communities have voluntarily abandoned Ethiopian citizenship and invited rebel rule.

III. Vernacular as Accusation: Linguistic Inversion of Victimhood

The deliberate deployment of Afan Oromo vernacular by state media is especially effective because it accuses the population in their own mother tongue. Phrases such as "Shaneen filattan" or "Shanee ofiiti dhiheeffattanii jirtan" directly address listeners while simultaneously othering them as traitors (Borche, 2022). This creates a paralysing double bind: speaking out against military abuses risks instant labelling as "Shane dubbatanii". The vernacular thus becomes a weapon that inverts victimhood and criminalises the very act of survival under rebel protection (Teshome, 2023).

IV. Policy as Panic Response: Abdication, Blockade, and Collective Punishment

The moral panic that erupts in state media does not remain confined to words; it moves swiftly and decisively into concrete policy, each step reinforcing the narrative that the people of Gidda Ayana have forfeited their right to protection.

First, almost immediately after a fresh wave of accusations, police stations and kebele administrations begin to disappear from the woreda. One by one, outposts are dismantled or simply abandoned, their officers redeployed elsewhere "for their own safety," leaving entire clusters of villages without any visible state presence. What might once have been described as a temporary tactical withdrawal is quietly institutionalised into permanent absence.

From this vacuum emerges the second, more formal step: the Ethiopian National Defense Force and regional authorities jointly declare large swathes of Gidda Ayana "restricted zones" or "no-go areas." Official statements insist that the military cannot operate there—not because it lacks capacity, but because, in the words of repeated ENDF briefings in 2024, "the community has demonstrated open hostility and chosen to side with Shane." The very hostility that results from the absence of protection is thus cited as the reason protection cannot be provided.

Next, and often in direct response to the latest broadcast blaming "accommodators," the skies above the woreda fill with the sound of artillery and drones. Indiscriminate bombardments—documented throughout 2023 and 2024—are publicly justified as precise operations "targeting Shane and its active civilian supporters." In this framing, every civilian casualty becomes retrospective evidence that the victim must have been a supporter; survival itself is treated as proof of guilt.

Finally, economic and humanitarian blockades are imposed with equal speed. Roads are sealed, markets starved of goods, and relief convoys turned back at checkpoints on the grounds that any assistance "risks reaching Shane." As the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International repeatedly warned in 2023 and 2024, these measures affect entire civilian populations, yet they are presented not as collective punishment but as necessary defensive actions against a population that has already "handed itself over."

Thus, within weeks or sometimes days of the initial media panic, the circle of blame is complete. The withdrawal of the state, the declaration of restricted zones, the bombardment from the air, and the strangulation of livelihoods are no longer seen as failures of governance. Instead, in the official discourse that now dominates airwaves and briefing rooms, they have been successfully transformed into irrefutable proof that the communities of Gidda Ayana actively prefer OLA rule. The absence of protection is no longer a scandal to be remedied; it has become the ultimate confirmation that protection was never truly wanted in the first place.

Conclusion

In Gidda Ayana, the Ethiopian state has weaponised moral panic not to extend control but to retreat from its most fundamental obligation: the protection of citizens. By constructing local communities as willing accomplices of the OLA, state-aligned media and official discourse invert the social contract—failure to protect becomes evidence of community betrayal. This narrative strategy enables the government to normalise de facto rebel governance in parts of East Wallaga Zone while maintaining the formal claim of sovereignty. The case of Gidda Ayana therefore represents a rare and disturbing instance of moral panic deployed as a technology of state abdication and collective victim-blaming.

Recommendations

- Future research should document community counter-narratives and resistance strategies against the "accommodator" label.
- Forensic linguistic studies comparing state-media usage of Afan

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Oromo with independent or diaspora sources could quantify the scale of accusatory vernacular.
- Comparative analysis with other OLA-controlled districts (e.g., Kiremu, Horo Guduru) would test the generalisability of the inverted moral-panic model.

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