Alevi Bulgarian Turks’ Self-Perceptions of the Alevi Ways: “The Path is One; While Practices are a Thousand and One”

An account of Alevi Bulgarian Turks’ perceptions of Alevisim (Alevilik) is required when existing academic literature either ignores the community altogether or utilizes generic depictions or treats Alevis in Bulgaria as a distorted derivative of Alevis in Turkey. In this chapter, I discuss Alevi Bulgarian Turks’ narratives and practices about Alevisim (Alevilik) by utilizing Max Weber’s concept “ideal type” for typical patterns reflecting the inner logic of particular meaning systems (Weber 1978, 19–22) and I examine Alevisim ideal-types among Alevi Bulgarian Turks. For my book, this focus is important since in my ethnographic analysis I operationalize the concepts dissimulation, dissimilation and assimilation by examining Alevi Bulgarian Turks’ narratives and practices in relation to such an Alevisim ideal-type. Specifically I portray Alevis’ dissimulations as their narratives and practices which publicly indicate their distancing themselves from an Alevisim ideal-type while they privately continue adhering to it. On the other hand, I see dissimilation as Alevis’ narratives and practices which publicly and privately indicate adherence to Alevisim and assimilation as those which publicly and privately indicate adherence to ideal-types of the groups other than Alevis.

I should note that I use the terms “public” and “private” to refer to domains of collectivities. In this usage, the term “public” refers to mixed settings where Alevis and non-Alevis are present, and the term “private” refers to Alevi-only settings. “Public” and “private” are also self-identified distinctions made by Alevi Bulgarian Turks, manifested in Alevi terminology such as insider (Can) versus outsider (Zahiri), notions of secrecy (Sır) and enacted in rituals such as cem. In this sense, my usage of the terms “public” and “private” is not directly linked to conceptualization of the “public sphere” and “private sphere” as oppositionary (e.g. Arendt 1998; Habermas 1989), or to the critiques of this conceptualization in feminist theory (e.g. Pateman 1989; Walby 1990; Frazer 1992; Okin 2008) and neo-Marxism (e.g. Negri 2003).

My analysis of the idealized Alevisim prioritizes an emic perspective. I focus on the accounts of Alevi Bulgarian Turkish religious leaders (babas) who are currently residing in Bulgaria and Turkey. It should be recalled that among Alevi Bulgarian Turks, babas are elected male members of the cem community,
based on the level of their spiritual maturity. During my fieldwork, all of my Alevi female and male informants directed me towards their babas to talk about “religious issues,” as they see themselves unauthorized to talk about such things. Therefore, my discussions on religious issues regarding Alevism comes from Alevi babas while those on other issues comes from them but also from regular Alevi male and female members of the community.

Alevi Bulgarian Turkish babas describe the Alevi Path (Alevi Yolu) or the Path (Yol) as their understandings of what typical beliefs and practices are anticipated from Alevis. They describe this Alevi Path not only on its own terms but also by making comparisons with Sunni Islam, Shia Islam and Alevism in Turkey. They specifically emphasize the internal differentiation of the Alevi Bulgarian Turkish community into subgroups of Bektaşi, Babai, Musahipli, and Derviş based on differences in perceived origins, affiliated saints, ritual orders and membership requirements.

I also utilize an etic perspective, since the broad geographic range of my multi-sited fieldwork made it possible for me to recognize some distinctions that were unnoticed by Alevis themselves, due to the long-term isolation of Alevi groups from each other. I noticed another level of internal differentiation crosscutting the subgroups (Babai, Bektaşi etc.): Alevis are also divided into regionally-marked subsegments, as Northeasterns and Southerners, depending on their location of origin or the “frontiers.” I use the term “frontiers” as cultural and territorial zones distinguished from other territories, as discussed in chapter three. I argue that Alevis’ regional differences have caused patterned differences in their religious practices. For instance, Alevis from Northeastern Bulgaria (e.g. Razgrad) value time-sensitive rituals such as cems, while Alevis from Southern Bulgaria (e.g. Kardjali) conduct space-sensitive rituals such as türbe visits in Bulgaria and Turkey.

These multi-layered differences among Alevi Bulgarian Turks cause interesting configurations. The members of the same Alevi subgroups (Bektaşi or Babai) from the frontiers in Northeastern and Southern Bulgaria differ in terms of the most common ritual forms, ritual frequencies and ritual space. In other words, different subgroups from the same frontier resemble each other more than the same subgroup from the other frontier. In terms of predominant ritual forms, Babais from Razgrad are closer to Bektaşis from Razgrad, and Babais from Razgrad have less in common with Babais from Kardjali. Following the same pattern of influence from where they originated, Bektaşis from Kardjali are closer to Babais from Kardjali and have less in common with Bektaşis from Razgrad. This means complications during the encounters of these four Alevi communities: Alevis debate on which subgroup’s and subsegment’s ritual order regarding cems and türbe visits should be followed. They deal with these