CHAPTER 6

Dissimulation as In-Your-Face Disguise: Speaking Others’ Languages, Practicing Others’ Practices, Manipulating Others’ Places

When there is a trap, set up for you
In every corner of this town
And so you learn the only way to go is underground
When there’s a trap set up for you
In every corner of your room
And so you learn the only way to go is through the roof . . .

. . . Just like their meanings they lay between the lines
Between the borders their real countries hide
The strategigo’s [sic] saw their advertise
Their strategy of being is one of in-your-face disguise
Ooohohoooh, through the roof, underground!

GOGOL BORDELLO (2002), Through The Roof ’N’ Underground

A common configuration of dissimulating minorities is that a minority’s members dissimulate against one single majority group, as was the case for Jews and Muslims in Inquisition Spain (Root 1988; Ibrahim 2008; del Mar Rosa-Rodriguez 2010), and Christians in Anatolia (Clark 2006). I use the phrase “dissimulation against” in order to stress the oppositional nature of the process: dissimulating minorities simulate a majority’s beliefs and practices in order to protect their members, their group and their group identity from the same majority. Alevi Bulgarian Turks’ dissimulations are more complicated than these other cases because Alevis have dissimulated against varying national majorities and political regimes as these have changed over time, throughout which the Alevis have constantly remained a double minority in both Bulgaria and Turkey. In this chapter I examine Alevi Bulgarian Turks’ dissimulations by focusing on their narratives and practices, which publicly indicate their distancing themselves from the Alevi ideal-type while they privately continue adhering to it. Sometimes Alevis disassociate from Alevi ways in the presence of Alevis who have not been initiated into the Alevi Path. More often, though, Alevis’ dissimulations are intended to address the threat coming from non-Alevis. It is for this reason that their public disassociations from Alevi ways go together with their public simulations of the practices of the dominant majority.
My fieldwork data let me analyze the current patterns of dissimulations adopted by Alevis, depending on the political demography of their immediate surroundings. Kardjali Alevis often dissimulate not against the Bulgarian national majority but rather against local Sunni Turks, who now form the demographic and political majority at the local level. In contrast, Razgrad Alevis dissimulate against both Bulgarians and Sunni Turks, who compete with each other for demographic and political majority status, at the local level in Razgrad. Alevi migrants' dissimulations are also patterned by the dynamics of political demography affecting migrants in Turkey. The Alevi migrants in isolated villages of Turkish Thrace or cosmopolitan neighborhoods of İstanbul do not need to utilize dissimulation since they are already assured a degree of every-day level invisibility in the broader society. Temporary dissimulation becomes a viable option for Alevi migrants when they need to interact with outsiders, such as Turkish civil servants and even Kurdish Alevis. On the other hand, in Bursa, there are few Alevi migrants and only a handful of them may dissimulate, by trying to hide their Alevi heritage in the rigorously Sunni-dominant Bursa. The majority of migrant Alevis in Bursa seem to have voluntarily assimilated into Sunnism after migration.

I should note that my model is not grounded in geographical determinism but is meant to identify dissimulation patterns among Alevi Bulgarian Turks in relation to the political demography of their surroundings. Of course, there are exceptions to these regional generalizations. For example, according to my model, Kardjali Alevis' dissimulations are directed towards Sunni Turks on the provincial level. Yet in the few isolated Alevi-only villages of Kardjali, as in the isolated villages of Turkish Thrace, there is no need to dissimulate unless there is interaction with non-Alevi outsiders. At first glance this exception seems to contradict the model but in fact it conforms to its logic, since I argue that invisibility is about the performance of identity as much as visibility is. We may compare dissimulation to the veil, which is not merely a form of clothing but also an instrument of embodied performance of a gendered identity. Veiling literally masks visibility of the individual's facial and physical features while simultaneously heightening her visibility due to veiling in her broader community. In the same vein, but in inverted fashion, dissimulating minorities' performances for invisibility are hypervisible within their own communities, which is how it is possible to study dissimulation as a performance of invisibility.

I begin this chapter by examining Alevi Bulgarian Turks' particular notions of secrecy and of the Secret, which I see as symptomatic of their dissimulations. I then analyze particular cases of dissimulation, examining first Alevi Bulgarian Turks' linguistic dissimulations by means of using specific words from the vocabulary pool of various majorities in order to hint at Alevi beliefs.