CHAPTER 7

Dissimilation and Assimilation

Scholarly literature generally portrays dissimilation and assimilation as antithetical conditions for minority groups. Accordingly, dissimilation means that minority groups maintain their salience and assimilation means the dissolution of a minority’s identity (Yinger 1981; Rumbaut 1997). Several studies have also questioned the assumption that a lineal relation exists between dissimilation and assimilation, claiming that there are different trajectories and rhythms of assimilation (Banton 1983) and dissimilation (Brubaker 2001). These works are limited because they focus on social contexts in the USA, France and Germany and do not help explain the situation for minorities in divided societies, or those outside of Western Europe or the USA, such as settlement areas of Alevi Bulgarian Turks in Bulgaria and Turkey.

In severely divided societies, I argue, dissimilation and assimilation are both antithetical and lineal conditions. In these societies a minority’s dissimilation is often interpreted as their resistance to assimilating into “the nation.” This situation may even provoke violent measures for their forced assimilation, such as the name change process that was implemented against Turkish Muslims in Bulgaria in 1984–89. Further, while the existing literature considers assimilation and dissimilation as static (though sometimes “reversible”) conditions (Yinger 1981), assimilation and dissimilation may be strategic, collective and less than permanent ways of being for some groups. This is especially true for those double minorities which are endogamous in principle and which prioritize members’ heritage identities over the individual members’ actual religious practices. Members of such double minorities might adjust to the prevailing circumstances by strategic dissimilation in an environment of broadened possibilities for expression, and by strategic assimilation one of increased constraints. This chapter focusses on Alevi Bulgarian Turks’ strategic assimilations and dissimilations in Bulgaria and Turkey. By “strategic” I mean their conscious, calculated and collectively decided and executed plans. In the Alevi Bulgarian Turks’ case, these plans are not to obtain something, such as a particular benefit, opportunistically or instrumentally, but rather to avoid negative actions such as persecution, social-political-legal exclusion and severe discrimination due to their Alevi identity.

It is necessary to emphasize that the terms dissimilation and assimilation ultimately are ways to name the conditions of a minority in relation to the wider society in which they live, and usually it is dominant actors in this wider
society as well as scholars, who label the actions of minorities as assimilation or dissimilation. In this respect, the terms dissimilation and assimilation are externally imposed upon minorities by outsiders and thus signal how a minority group appears in the eyes of outsiders. However, minority members may have self-perceptions about their group’s situation that are different from the externally-imposed ‘dissimilation’ or ‘assimilation’ labels.

This book focuses on strategic dissimilation and assimilation. Strategic dissimilation and assimilation refers to collectively calculated, decided and planned acts by religiously-marked minorities. I show that Alevi Bulgarian Turks decide whether they will follow the Alevi ways in public (i.e. dissimilate) or quit following Alevi ways by gathering in cems collectively, by evaluating changing political and social circumstances in their current societies or after major events such as mass migrations. However, strategic dissimilation is more visible on the collective level while strategic assimilation can be identified mainly on the level of individuals. For this reason, my empirical evidence for strategic dissimilation comes from cases involving collectivities acting visibly as such, while those for strategic assimilation come from cases involving individuals.

As the situation of Alevi Bulgarian Turks reveals, a minority may develop one appearance in relating to outsiders in public, while pursuing another way of being within the privacy of their own group. This collective privacy among Alevis creates the same effect as “cultural intimacy” in terms of “assur[ing a] common sociality” as Michael Herzfeld (1997, 3) puts it; but the intimate aspect of the group is kept hidden from outsiders due to self-protection rather than embarrassment. In chapter six, I discussed Alevis’ development of different public and private collectivities within the context of their dissimulations, but this is not the whole story. During my fieldwork, I was faced with the fact that even Alevis who appear to be assimilating defined themselves as heritage Alevis (Alevi orandası, meaning one with Alevi parents), and are seen as such by other Alevis. This was true even for those not initiated into the Alevi Path, who do not attend any cem community and who practice Sunni Islam.

We thus need to consider a potential distinction between public and private in assessing minorities’ dissimilations and assimilations, as well as dissimulations. I earlier showed dissimilation in the narratives and practices that Alevi Bulgarian Turks use to publicly distance themselves from an ideal-type Alevism and approximate another groups’ ideal type, while privately continuing to adhere to Alevi ways. In this chapter I focus instead on dissimilation and assimilation. I see dissimilation in those Alevi narratives and practices which both publicly and privately indicate adherence to Alevism. I see assimilation