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Revealing the Secret Sounds and Movements: Presentations of Alevi-Bektashi *Nefeses* and *Semahs* from Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

The article examines how public and audio-visual media presentations of Alevi-Bektashi ritual music and *semahs* in Bulgaria act as a bridge between the community and outsider audience. Special attention is paid to the advantages of using the innovative format of the virtual tour for revealing a little known and still somewhat closed ethno-religious minority that is apprehensive about outside scrutiny.

Keywords: Alevi-Bektashi ritual, *nefes*, *semah*, Bulgaria, virtual tour

IZVLEČEK

Članek proučuje, kako javne in avdio-vizualne medijske predstavitve obrednih pesmi (*nefes*) in gibov (*semah*) skupnosti alevi-bektašev v Bolgariji vzpostavljajo mostove med to skupnostjo in zunanji deležniki. Posebna pozornost je namenjena prednostim uporabe inovativnih oblik virtualnih ogledov pri razkrivanju malo poznane in še vedno zaprte etno-religijske manjšine, ki je občutljiva na pogled od zunaj.

Ključne besede: alevi-bektaški obred, *nefes*, *semah*, Bolgarija, virtualni ogled

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Introduction

The topic of the present article, implied in title's keywords "secret," "reveal," and "presentation," concerns the complex process affording marginalized communities to achieve public visibility through mediatized display as viewed through the lens of applied ethnomusicology. This process is encapsulated in a triadic construct of relationships – community-mediator-audience – that will be utilized in a case example of the still thriving sacred ritual culture of Alevis-Bektashis in Bulgaria.¹ The clandestine nature of the religious ceremonies has allowed for their preservation, and by extension, the continuity of the esoteric meanings embedded in the religious minority's expressive culture which has no analogue in the pluralistic context in which it currently exists.

The topic at hand is of special and personal significance for me, as my research with Alevis-Bektashis in Bulgaria left an indelible mark on my first experiences as an ethnomusicologist. A life-long memory is my fieldwork "initiation" at an Alevi gathering in 1999, when my novice excitement was increased in response to the officiating religious leader's final metaphoric dictate: "Our path is a very secret path. You must not tell anyone what we have done here! [...] All we have talked about; all we have done here – everything must remain here on that table. Let us now walk back on our steps in the snow – nobody should know where we were." Not straying from this research project in the following twenty-two years, I had the opportunity to notice how the cloud of secrecy gradually lifted and the Alevis-Bektashis began to share their religious knowledge and ritual expressions with outsiders. The liturgical songs (*nefes*) accompanied by the plucked folk lute (*saz*) and the kinetic forms (*semahs*) occasionally left the limited circle of insider audiences and stepped into public and media contexts, which added another dimension to their functionality in that they became tools for social and cultural visibility and identity markers for the Alevis-Bektashi community.

The focus of the present study is therefore to investigate how the aforementioned tools are constructed and how they operate. In other words, the analysis will examine how public, scholarly, and audio-visual media presentations of Alevis-Bektashi ritual music and *semahs* in Bulgaria act as a bridge between the community and outsider audiences. I will do this by discussing several interconnected subjects including motives for crossing the centuries-valid

- 1 Alevis-Bektashi is a cover term for non-orthodox, Sufi and Shi'i-related communities in Turkey and Bulgaria that are identified with the Alevis of Turkey, formerly known as *Kızılbaş*, and the Bektashi order of dervishes. The communities in Bulgaria are Turkish-speaking and live mostly in compact villages in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains and in North-Eastern Bulgaria. There are two main subgroups in both regions – the Baba'is and Bektashis (and Musahips – in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains), which share common religious doctrines and ritual structure, but differ in some ritual elements and expressive forms. Today they use the self-designations "Alevi" or "Aliani" and sometimes *Kızılbaş* (in North-Eastern Bulgaria) that encompass all their subgroups, including the Bektashis, Baba'is and Musahips.

taboos concerning *nefes* and *semahs*, approaches to, and manner of presentation, and finally, the effects of the resulting visibility.

A Brief Discussion of Alevi-Bektashi and Their Expressive Culture

The collective term Alevi-Bektashi has been used in the scientific literature in the last twenty to twenty-five years to designate certain Muslim groups mostly from Asia Minor and the Balkans, together with the diaspora in Western Europe and North America, which differ from mainstream Islamic communities in terms of religious doctrine, ritual practices, and way of life (Margaritova and Gramatikova 2020, 132). Alevi-Bektashi doctrines are too complex to be sufficiently expanded on here, but two of the most important factors to be reminded of are: the cult of Ali ibn Abu Talib, the nephew and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammed (related to Shi'a Islam), and the search for, and maintenance of a deep, inner sense of faith that is allied to a *bāṭini* (esoteric) interpretation of Islam. The nature of the doctrine – comprising elements of moderate and marginal Shi'a beliefs, Islamic mysticism, and pre-Islamic Turkic religious views (Dressler 2008; Gramatikova 2011, 20), is secret and esoteric such that the set of beliefs is revealed only to initiated members of the community, who are guided by religious leaders (*dede/baba*) on their religious path (*yol*).

The individual religious sentiments are powered by and intensified through collective ritual contexts, in which initiated men and women participate together. All the meetings, traditionally held in secret, have a common structure of several highly symbolic activities. These activities are performed during every sacred gathering and include prayers, recitations from the Qur'an, discussions concerning religious and community life, the lighting of candles, limited consumption of alcohol, shared meals, and songs with and without movement, according to regional practices. These confessional practices are quite different from those of the politically dominant Sunnis; their obvious and hidden doctrinal and ritual peculiarities are still veiled in mystery and met with suspicion; when coupled with historic confrontations between the Shi'a and the Sunnis, the result has been continued prejudice. These factors cemented the Alevi-Bektashi immanent principle of *takiye* (Turkish; *taqiya*, Arabic), or "a masking of true identity in hostile environments" (Markoff 2009), resulted in feelings of unjustified rejection and misunderstanding, and prolonged the predominantly rural-based community's self-imposed isolation. The preservation of this closed religious minority's religious views and ritual expressions was a necessary survival strategy.

In the 1980s, Alevi-Bektashi activists in Turkey and Western Europe initiated the so-called "Alevi movement" (or "Alevi revival"), insisting on the recognition of Alevism (Sökefeld 2008). Steps in this direction were open discussions on doctrinal topics and the public performances of rituals, including

music and *semahs* – acts, which are commonly interpreted by the researchers as putting an end to *takiye*.

These processes impacted the related communities in Bulgaria, though nearly twenty years later. Heirs of settlers predominantly from the Ottoman times,² their complex social position there was of a double minority in terms of their position *vis-à-vis* the ethnic Bulgarian majority and the large minority of Sunni Turks who the local Alevi-Bektashis refer to as “the others.” In the aftermath of Bulgarian independence in 1878, the Alevi-Bektashi community have had to adapt to the inconsistent politics of changing governments. Extensive scholarship is devoted to the socialist period in Bulgaria (1944–1989), when the initial cultural and political tolerance towards ethnic minorities was replaced by intensified pressure on their identity in the 70s (Buechsenschutz 2000). The peak was reached in 1984–1989 during the so called “revival process,” when the authorities ruthlessly implemented measures to erase all the ethnic and religious markers of Turks in the state.³ The ensuing voluntary or forced mass migration of Bulgarian Turks to Turkey in 1989 greatly impacted the political, economic, and social life in Bulgaria. Of those Alevi-Bektashis who chose to stay in their places of birth, particularly those in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, their reduced number and the changed structure of their religious communities opened the door to the decline of their religious life and the transformation of their ritual culture.

After Bulgaria’s transition to democracy in 1989, ethnic and religious rights were restored and the “revival process” was officially recognized as a “historic mistake.” This smoothed the way for the opening of the closed Alevi-Bektashi community and at the end of twentieth century the echo of the Alevi revival resonated in Bulgaria through contacts with relatives and friends abroad. The process was institutionally shaped by two local Alevi-Bektashi organizations: the Cem foundation – Razgrad (Cem Vakfi – Razgrad, founded in 2003 and chaired by Veysel Bayram) and the Cem foundation – Southern Bulgaria (Cem Vakfi – Southern Bulgaria, founded in 2006 and chaired by Mustafa Mustafa). Later, in 2013, a second organization in North-Eastern Bulgaria was established – the Cem foundation in the village of Bradvari (Cem Vakfi – Yeni

2 Bulgarian historians consider that the majority of “non-orthodox” Muslims, who settled in the Balkans and on Bulgarian territory, were *Kızılbaş* Turkmen exiled during the Ottoman-Persian wars and the anti-feudal fights in Asia Minor in the sixteenth century. Other ways of spreading “non-orthodox” Islam involved the settlement of nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkic (mostly *Yörük*) tribes from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, the activity of *Abdalan-ı Rum* dervishes from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, and the Janissary corps connected with the Bektashi order of dervishes, for example (Gramatikova 2011, 141–230).

3 Using the argumentation that the Turks in Bulgaria were of Bulgarian origin, the state prohibited (or secularized) Turkish religious rituals and festivals, forbade the usage of the Turkish language in public (including the performance of Turkish songs and music), and enforced the changing of Turkish and Islamic names to Bulgarian and Slavic ones, etc.

Baltacı Köy). With the help of these institutions, cult sites were renovated, local religious festivals organized, and pilgrimages in Bulgaria and abroad arranged. These activities had a double effect on the community – on the one hand, they strengthened its internal structure and essence, and on the other hand, they made it more visible to outsiders.

The overcoming of the centuries-old restrictions is evident also on an everyday level in the sense that local Alevi-Bektashis are more willing to share elements of their faith and ritual culture. They occasionally discuss their beliefs with outsiders such as Bulgarians and non-Alevi Turks and allow visitors to observe their rituals and festivals honoring and venerating local saints.⁴ At a *maye* fifteen years ago, for example, an Alevi asked me emotionally, “Do you see what good people we are, and how beautiful our traditions are?”⁵ These sentiments illustrate how eager members of this minority within a minority are to be viewed in a positive way.

The possibilities for and occasions of open manifestations of Alevi-Bektashi expressive culture, or as I articulate it “revival through revealing” (Margaritova 2010, 208), still occur within limits. Needless to say, restrictions vary according to the individuals involved – be they insiders or outsiders – and the contexts in which negotiations occur. More importantly, decisions are dependent on the vision of local religious guides and more generally on discussions within the leadership of community councils. In this connection, there have been several waves of openings and closures of the community for the last twenty years, defined by Alevi-Bektashi leaders in response to social (and perhaps political) factors. In essence, today Alevi-Bektashis in Bulgaria decide in accordance with the views of their religious leaders when, how, and to whom to reveal (parts of) their religious views and practices. Paraphrasing the political anthropologist Hande Sözer, *takiye* still exists – but not in the sense of the total group concealment of the past, rather as a viable and flexible collective tactic of controlled visibility (Sözer 2014, 2).

To summarize, the motives of Alevi-Bektashis in Bulgaria for crossing the century-old lines of concealing their identity, religious views, and ritual practices lie in their desire to break the stigma of the negative attitude towards them and to achieve social and cultural equality. This chosen pathway to recognition and equality has been conditioned by the changing political, social, and cultural climate in Bulgaria, and stimulated by connections with related communities in Turkey and the European diaspora. As has been determined, Bulgarian Alevi-Bektashis chose the path of visibility, or controlled access to the expression of their religious values, the most revered values being the sacred sung poetry (*nefes*) and the ritual kinetic forms (*semahs*).

4 These festivals are called *maye* (or close phonetic variants) by the Alevi-Bektashis in South-Eastern Bulgaria.

5 The original statement of the anonymous interlocutor: “Vizhdash li kakvi dobri hora sme nie i kolko hubavi s ani adetite?” (Personal communication, May 26, 2001).

The Important Role of *Nefeses* and *Semahs* in Alevi-Bektashi Culture

Before analyzing the specifics of public presentations of *nefes*es and *semahs*, the question of what makes them such an important part of Alevi-Bektashi culture needs to be answered. One basic reason is certainly the fact that they are the steadfast building blocks of the ritual, as no ritual ceremony can occur without the singing of *nefes*es accompanied by the *saz* or the “turning” of *semah* (for Southern Bulgaria). But what underlies this structural connection is that the songs and the kinetic movements are one of the most powerful means for transferring clandestine religious knowledge. Both ritual music and *semahs* are based on poems in the Turkish vernacular for the most part ascribed to fifteenth century poet Kul Himmet and sixteenth century poets Pir Sultan Abdal, Nesimi, and Hatayi. These poems encapsulate essential Alevi-Bektashi doctrinal, ethical and social issues (Markoff 2002, 796; Gramatikova 2016, 563–582). Their sacred character is implicit in their common local names – *nefes* (meaning breath or hymn) or *quran* (meaning the holy book of Muslims). The performance of *nefes*es during the first part of the ritual gatherings⁶ is intended specifically for the transmission and perception of sacred scriptures and doctrines. During this time, the religious leader expects full attention from the worshippers in the *cemevi* (the space for the ceremonies), while the ritual music specialists clearly enunciate the lyrics sung to melodies performed at a slow tempo.



Figure 1: Performance of an *oturak nefesi* by Cafer Cafer, *Elmalı Baba tekkesi* (a *kurban*⁷ ceremony, March 2020).

6 These *nefes*es are called *oturak nefesi* (“*nefes*es performed while seated”) in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains (see Figure 1).

7 *Kurban* (Turkish, from *qurban* – Arabic) – a ritual animal sacrifice.

Singing and playing *nefes* also accompanies the performance of the several varieties of *semah*, with tempos that increase in speed. A central element of the *semah* is the movements of barefoot participants, positioned in the middle of the ritual space who pass around each other (more common in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains) or move in a circle or in lines in sync with the strict rhythm of the music, not touching each other and not turning their backs to the religious leader. Their individual steps and gestures, as well as the figures that emerge from their collective movements, are said to encode important symbols of the Alevi-Bektashi belief system. For example, the most sacred *semah* type *Kırklar* (the Forty) was described by my interlocutors from the Eastern Rhodope Mountains as a representation either of the suffering and death of Imam Ali's son Hüseyin at the battle of Kerbala (Sadula Hairula from the village of Gorna Krepot (Karalar), 2000), or the motif of the ascension of Muhammed to heaven (Kyazim Salif from the village of Chiflik (Çiflik), 2001).⁸

The dissemination of Alevi-Bektashi knowledge in the expressive forms of the *nefes* and the *semahs* (i.e., in mystical poetry and in sacred movement), occurs through the mediation of music. The local tradition has established several melody types known as *makam* (sing.; *makams* – pl.), as well as instrumental techniques, which are learned through oral tradition from master musicians referred to as *zakirs* or *İmam Cafers*. These male music specialists are highly respected in the Alevi-Bektashi community as transmitters of knowledge and for their crucial role within rituals to perform the meaningful *nefes* so that they elicit affective responses and to synchronize their instrumental accompaniment with the movements of the *semahs*. Though they differ in their vocal, instrumental, and improvisational abilities, all of them try to follow the fixed melodic models as reproducing traditional musical styles and movements during the ritual ensures the perpetuation of the religious ideas they are connected with.

In summary, the lyrics and accompanying music of the *nefes* and *semahs* continue to act as traditional channels for the transmission of Alevi-Bektashi sacred beliefs and world view in the context of rituals where the music, performed by the *zakirs/İmam Cafers* serves to intensify the emotional climate insider worshippers are immersed in.

Non-Traditional Contexts for Alevi-Bektashi Ritual Music and Kinetic Forms

This section of the paper addresses questions concerning types of public display of Alevi expressive forms in contexts such as stage performances, performances organized for scientific research, and media presentations. These questions include the following: What happens when the ritual music and kinetic

8 John Kingsley Birge discusses the first interpretation (Birge 1937, 216), and Irène Mélikoff the second one (quoted in Mikov 1988, 34).

forms are presented in non-traditional contexts that include the attendance of outsiders – on stage, in the audio-visual media, or for scholarly research? What are the strategies of the people involved (insider performers and/or outsider organizers, researchers, journalists, and filmmakers)? To what extent are the secret Alevi-Bektashi beliefs revealed or do they remain hidden or distorted? And finally, how does this visibility affect the Alevi-Bektashi community?

Public presentations of Alevi-Bektashi music and *semahs* began at the turn of the twenty-first century, with the start of the Bulgarian Alevi revival and the community's striving for visibility, following similar initiatives in Turkey. The first shifts of the *nefes*es and *semahs* from the ritual context happened because of transnational interactions that included participation in public displays of Alevi expressive forms in Turkey for insider audiences who highly appreciated the authenticity of the regionally-based village repertoire. To accommodate the new needs of "representation" for the community, Alevi-Bektashi organizations in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains and in North-Eastern Bulgaria strategically chose to establish *semah* groups, which gave performances in Turkey and Bulgaria.

According to media publications, two *semah* groups in North-Eastern Bulgaria appear to be the most operative – those in the village of Chernik (Karalar) and in the village of Bradvari (Yeni Baltacı Köy), formed through the institutional support of community cultural centres known as *chitalishta*. These groups maintain a regular presence at public festivals and celebratory events in the region and in Turkey. Although some of the events referred to were certainly secular, the sacred nature of the "ritual dance," as it is designated on the website of the *chitalishta* in Chernik (Karalar), is not hidden – it is described as rhythmic and synchronized mystical and aesthetic body movements, grounded in the religious conception of unity with God ("Grupa za Semah [...] [n. d.]). These phrases (in Bulgarian) are in fact translations of the official text of the inscription of the *semah* genre in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity of UNESCO (UNESCO [n. d.]).

As opposed to North-Eastern Bulgaria, public performances of *nefes*es and *semahs* in Southern Bulgaria occur rarely, and during special occasions as presented in the following section.

Case Examples of the Staging of Alevi-Bektashi Sacred Musical Repertoire and Kinetic Forms

One of the most significant examples of the staging of ritual expressive culture on stage in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains occurred in 2011, at a religious festival (*meye*) in celebration of the newly renovated Bektashi shrine complex Elmalı Baba Tekkesi, near the village of Bivolyane (Mandacılar). Together with *zakirs/Imam Cafers* from the region, a *semah* group affiliated with the

Cem Foundation (Cem Vakfi) of Southern Bulgaria performed for political and religious figures from Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Romania, and Macedonia and thousands of other visitors, demonstrating the continuity of local Alevi-Bektashi ritual practices.

Four years earlier, in 2007, the same *semah* group participated in a concert celebrating one of the most important Muslim celebratory religious festivals or holidays known as Kurban Bayramı (Festival of the Sacrifice) along with local performers of Bulgarian and Turkish traditional music. As the concert was organized by the municipality of Kürdzhali (Kırcalı) in the province of the same name, whose administration consisted mostly of Sunni Turks and Bulgarians and whose cultural politics were directed towards promoting regional cultural diversity, it is not strange that the Alevi-Bektashi performers were introduced as “a folk dance group.” In fact, the stage performance of *nefes* and *semahs* was notably close to that found in the ritual context. The religious leader was present throughout, chanting relevant prayers, and observing the correct execution of prescribed ritual etiquette that included prostrations and bows.



Figure 2: Muharem Aliosman, director of the culture house in the village of Zvinitza, Eastern Rhodope Mountains.

A step towards popularizing the local Alevi-Bektashi community through its ritual expressive culture was a *semah* demonstration which occurred in the Regional Historical Museum – Kürdzhali in the spring of 2013. The demonstration was organized by a local village culture house, chaired by

university educated, Bektashi Muharem Aliosman (see Figure 2), in cooperation with the museum.⁹ Aliosman also prepared the nomination documents for inscription of the *nefes*es from his home village of Zvinitza in the former “Living Human Treasures – Bulgaria” list for 2014 (part of the UNESCO program of the same name). His greatest desire was to receive support for transmission of the ritual musical and poetic traditions to the more and more disinterested and decreasing younger generation. The nomination was not successful at the national level, but it passed the regional one, displacing a proposed Bulgarian tradition. Given the fact that the assessors were ethnic Bulgarian, non-Muslim experts, the regional success was a sign of a good level of (at least) local institutional recognition of the *nefes*es as a traditional cultural phenomenon of value.

Having followed these cases over many years, it seemed to me that the stage presentation of *nefes*es and *semah*s would legitimize them as the “public face” of the Alevi-Bektashi community in the region. On the contrary, they remained exceptions for the Eastern Rhodope Mountains. Even the *semah* group, once the official representative of the ritual music and *semah* traditions in Southern Bulgaria, ceased its activities. As my interlocutors revealed, the main reason was the generally distanced attitude of the local community and its leaders towards the public display of elements of ritual and its predesigned choreography for the stage. In particular, the Alevi-Bektashis mistrusted the motives of the outsider organizers, one stating “they just use us to gain popularity” (Margaritova 2016, 64). They also shared that they could not accept the time restrictions imposed on their participation in the events. In other words, they refused being used as pawns for political purposes and rejected the perceived desecration of their ritual traditions in secular contexts. In short, they refused (and still refuse) to be visible in secular contexts. Their position is so firm, that even the *meye* at the Elmalı Baba Tekkesi, the organization of which is in the hands of insiders, now takes place with Alevi-Bektashi *zakirs* from Turkey rather than local *Imam Cafers*.

It can be concluded from the discussion above, that in both regions of compact Alevi-Bektashi settlement in Bulgaria, the regular or rare occurrence of *nefes* and *semah* stage presentations has helped the community be acknowledged for its unique means of cultural expression. What seems to be lacking, however, is a deeper understanding of the expressive culture in its ritual context that continues to be concealed by the Alevi-Bektashis themselves and/or is not fully recognized or understood by outsiders.

9 The proclaimed centuries-old ritual traditions were presented in a non-traditional way by Muharem and his sister who are not yet formally initiated into the local Bektashi community: the musical accompaniment consisted of recordings as the village *zakir* fell ill and the demonstration covered only a part of a typical *semah* performance that normally occurs within rituals.

Alevi-Bektashi Demonstrations of Expressive Culture for Researchers

Another example of *nefes* and *semah* presentations is that which is connected to scientific research. What makes me place such presentations in a separate category is the objectives of the researchers (mostly outsiders) not only to document and gain insights into the poems and the ritual kinetic forms, but more importantly to understand the specific contexts in which they take place.

It is worth noting that as early as the 1950s, during a period of ideologically and politically-motivated hardline atheistic propaganda, Bulgarian folklorists conducted research in some North-Eastern Alevi-Bektashi villages and managed to describe or record elements of the rituals observed (Marinov, Dimitrov, and Koev 1955, 95–216; Marinov 1956). The researchers were obviously able to get close enough to members of the community to receive and publish data about music as an integral part of the ritual, about the importance of the *nefes*es for the transmission of religious knowledge, and about the high position of the *zakir* in the religious community, as well as to give a general description of *semah*. Several archival recordings of *nefes*es from the 60s and 70s are also available in the Sound Archives of the Institute of Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, but the details concerning how the recordings were made is scant (Vlaeva 2008, 131–138). Despite the existence of these early documents, the political and ethnocentric orientation of the humanities in socialist Bulgaria imposed constraints on continuing research devoted to ethnic and religious minorities in the country, including Alevi-Bektashis until 1989. That was the reason for the delayed publishing of the results from an interdisciplinary project concerning the *Aliani* (Alevis) in North-Eastern Bulgaria, carried out at the end of the 1980s (Georgieva 1991). Among the abundant ethnographic data, valuable information about the so-called *Aliani* religious system and ritual practices, including the *nefes*es and *semah*, also found a place.

The limited amount of published scientific literature about Alevi-Bektashism was insufficient to prepare me for understanding this deep and complex phenomenon, when I made my first visit to communities in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains in 1999,¹⁰ experiencing what I partly referred to at the beginning of the article. It took me years of regular visits to gain the trust of the local people and to be allowed access to more of their doctrinal and ritual practices, which I tried to systematize in my PhD thesis (Margaritova 2013; see also Figure 3). Some of my fieldwork research was accomplished together with prof. Irene Markoff – an ethnomusicologist from York University, Canada, whose expertise, *saz* performing abilities, and delicate approach towards

10 I took part in the multi-disciplinary project of the New Bulgarian University *Perpere* and its *Adjoining Microregion – a Joint Investigation of a Millenary Multireligious Centre in the East Rhodope Mountains*, led by Professor Valeria Fol.

the local people easily ingratiated them.¹¹ My experiences in the field as well as hers prove that when deep interest and appreciation is shown, corresponding loyalty is earned and the scholars (regardless of their ethnicity and religion) can be received and appreciated as precious guests (Markoff 2018). And, valid at least for Southern Bulgaria, is the established syncretic connection of ritual music with the other elements of the ceremonies that is still vital, even in these non-traditional contexts as the performances of *nefes* and *semahs* in response to our research interests, always happened as part of *kurban* ceremonies or within informal conversations, but along with other elements of ritual such as prayers, restricted drinking of alcohol, and a shared meal. It seemed that the musicians turned such interviews into a reduced model of the ritual.



Erenler meclisinde kırklar ceminde...

Figure 3: One of the *oturak nefeses* (*makams*) in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains.¹² Transcription from the performance of Sebahtin Ahmed (1942–2014), a *zakir* from the subgroup of the *Baba'i* from the village of Zvinitza (Boyacıklar).

- 11 Irene Markoff has shared her observations and analyses in three publications (Markoff 2007; Markoff 2016, 50–60; Markoff 2018, 23–31). Another valuable contribution to the topic is that of Alevi historian Nevena Gramatikova (see Figure 4), who wrote an important article with field data concerning the ritual music, poetic traditions, and *semahs* of Alevi-Bektashis from North-Eastern Bulgaria, that also included a comprehensive historical account with many sources (Gramatikova 2016, 531–591).
- 12 The melody (*makam*) of the *nefes* is typical for the repertoire of the Alevis-Bektashis in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains and is not performed in Northern Bulgaria. It is distinguished by its

In reflecting on my personal experiences and observations, I must admit that despite the respectful approach of outsider researchers and their attempts to validate the ritual music and kinetic forms in their complex forms, meaning and functions, the resulting publications involving their scientific efforts are rarely accessible to the local people who find the accounts to be incomprehensible. Thus, even if the local Alevi-Bektashis are appreciated and their ritual expressive culture has been properly contextualized, they may experience the lack of increased visibility and could question a semblance of communicative reciprocity with the researchers they interact with.

Alevi-Bektashi Expressive Culture and Audio-Visual Media

With regards to increased visibility of the Alevi-Bektashi community, the most effective mediators are unquestionably the audio-visual media. Of particular interest in this study is recent visual presentations of *nefes*es and *semahs* found in a number of Bulgarian-produced documentary films that will be introduced briefly as follows.¹³

The first film, *Hand over the Heart* (*Rŭka na sŭrtseto*), directed by Verginia Kostadinova and financed by the Bulgarian National Film Center, appeared before the rise of the Alevi revival in Bulgaria, in 1996.¹⁴ It was made in the first years of democracy in Bulgaria, shortly after the Revival Process. In these times of intense ethnic tension, major political efforts were directed towards achieving social balance, through the arts. Thus, the main idea of the film was to mitigate the confrontation, by positioning the unknown Alevi-Bektashi community as a bridge between Bulgarians and Turks, and between Christians and Muslims. Not only were some of the mysteries surrounding the community revealed, but performances of the secret *ilabîs*¹⁵ (hymns of Sunni dervish orders) and *nefes*es were also presented to a general audience for the first time. In addition, they were properly contextualized, as the film director secured the services of Alevi historian Nevena Gramatikova (see Figure 4) to act as a translator and consultant.¹⁶

formal and melodic structure, and especially by the asymmetric meter 11/16 (2–2–3–2–2). In his performance, the *zakir* set the poem *Erenler meclisinde* (*In the Gathering of the Forty Saints* – concerning the ascension of the Prophet to heaven when he beheld the manifestation of Divine Reality in Ali during the Gathering of the Forty Saints) to the melody. According to local practice, any *nefes* lyrics with the same syllable-line structure can be used with the same *makam*.

13 Links to some of the films are found in the References.

14 I am grateful to Nevena Gramatikova for supplying me with information about the film, which is not available online.

15 *Ilabîs* are hymns of Sunni dervish orders, which were included in the repertoire of the Alevis-Bektashis from North-Eastern Bulgaria because of the historic connections between both communities on the local level.

16 Two of the *nefes* performers were Gramatikova's talented grandfather – the *zakir* Gafil, and her grandmother from the village of Sevar (Caferler); see also Footnote 9.



Figure 4: Nevena Gramatikova, an Alevi historian.¹⁷

The next two documentaries about Alevi-Bektashis in North-Eastern Bulgaria – *Mezhdu polumesetsa i krüsta* (*Between the Crescent and the Cross*, scripted by Stoyan Radulov, 2011),¹⁸ and *Alianite ot selo Bisertsı* (*The Aliani from the Village of Bisertsı*, author Teodor Stamboliev,¹⁹ directed by Elena Mishkova, 2018)²⁰ share a similar perspective with *Hand over the Heart* in their search for parallels between different faiths and ethnicities in Bulgaria. “Authentic music” also finds a place within the discussions of Alevi-Bektashi doctrines, religious structure, and ritual practices. Moreover, interlocutors’ interpretations of expressive culture influenced by Turkish media sources (TV, the internet, etc.) are presented. For example, the *semah* genre is equated with the “universe” and viewed as a means for achieving spiritual ecstasy and purification, and the participants’ circular kinetic movements are interpreted as a symbol of the equality between people and the trajectory of the planets, etc. (Mishkova 2018).

17 Photo by Nikola Boshnakov, used with the permission of the author.

18 The film (Radulov 2011) was produced and broadcast by the private broadcaster Television Tourism (Televiziya Turizüm), but was enthusiastically received by an engaged audience at the Second Ethnography and Anthropology Film Festival in Sofia (Bulgaria) in 2011. Again, Nevena Gramatikova was a consultant.

19 Teodor Stamboliev is an opera director based in the city of Rousse (one of the biggest regional centers in North-Eastern Bulgaria).

20 The film (Mishkova 2018) was produced by Bulgarian National Television 2 for its weekly travel series.

The community in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains remained undiscovered for the audio-visual media for a considerable amount of time. It wasn't until 2015 that the first film was shot there, in the village of Gorna Krepot – the village of my first encounter with the Alevis. *Alianite (Aliani)* produced by Bulgarian National Television for the popular series *Otblizo – s Mira Dobрева (Up Close with Mira Dobрева, Dobрева 2016)* gained popularity among Bulgarians, but the lack of sensitivity of the author, a famous Bulgarian journalist, during the shooting process, as well as the misinterpretations of the improperly chosen main interviewee, offended the local Alevis and the curtains were drawn again.

In contrast with the search for exoticism of the previously discussed film, and despite the difficulties in finding interlocutors, the next one under discussion – *Siyanieto na Dvanadesette (The Radiance of the Twelve, directed and written by Tzvetan Simeonov, 2020)* gives perhaps the most profound and comprehensive view of the philosophy and religion of the Alevi-Bektashis in Bulgaria.²¹ *Nefes* and *semah* performances are also included as illustrations, and the clarifications about their meaning and significance are woven into the philosophical tapestry of the film, rather than like dabs of paint added to a canvas for a more colorful picture.

The newest documentaries on Alevi-Bektashis in Bulgaria – *Aşk (Love, 2021)* and *Hayır (No, 2001)* directed by Vladimir Andonov, portray two *zakirs* from the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, telling their human stories with warmth and empathy.

To summarize, the way Bulgarian directors and authors present *nefes* and *semahs* in films depends on their motivations, interests, creative abilities, and approaches. Included in the footage as merely excerpts, these ritual expressive forms appear either as an integral, socially meaningful, and deeply religious part of community culture, as artistic activities, or just as sonic and visual components. These different approaches affect the community, enabling them to reevaluate their attitudes towards visibility.

New Directions: A Virtual Tour of Alevi *Nefeses* and *Semahs*

A new audio-visual project involving Alevi-Bektashi expressive culture emerged when Vladimir Andonov viewed the film *Aliani* mentioned above. Perceived as unsatisfactory by the insider community, but intriguing for uninformed outsiders, Andonov, as an uninformed outsider was captivated by the film as it resonated with his own search for the lost values and hidden wisdom lacking in contemporary society. As a result, he looked for opportunities to meet with the community and contacted freelance film-maker Nikola

21 Muharem Aliosman, the active Bektashi from the village of Zvinitza (Boyacıklar) introduced above, mediated between the director and the community.

Boshnakov, the afore-mentioned Alevi historian Nevena Gramatikova, and me as potential collaborators. Andonov had formulated a vision for a project that would creatively and ethically reproduce Alevi-Bektashi devotional practices but realized that it might not be suitable because of the sacred ritual context in which the *nefes* and *semahs* played such an important role. The focus of the project eventually became audio-visual presentations of Alevi-Bektashi sacred music and kinetic forms from the Eastern Rhodope Mountains. Our aim, as a collaborative team, was to document the current state of the ritual traditions, as well as to arouse deeper outsider interest in the little-known culture through virtual immersion into some of its most intriguing elements. In this way we hoped to assist the local community in their efforts to shift away from its marginal social status in the region.

In 2019 our team, under the institutional cover of ALOS,²² got support from the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture,²³ so we managed to make several short-term visits to villages with active Alevi-Bektashi ritual music specialists. In general, the local people were positive about our work and intentions and cooperated with us because most of them knew and trusted me and Nevena Gramatikova. They were also driven by the desire to preserve their heritage that was threatened by loss, or with the hope that they would receive a positive response both inside and outside the community. Nevertheless, a few *zakirs* and *İmam Cafers* refused to share their musical knowledge with us or in front of the camera as they were still bound by the old rules of *ta-kiye* trying to protect the tradition from outsiders who might interpret them incorrectly.

Fortunately, we were able to document community events, such as an *Aşure*²⁴ gathering, a *meye* festival, and a *kurban* ritual. We were also able to negotiate the recording of a demonstration of ritual music repertoire. Our observations proved that the Alevi-Bektashi ritual expressive culture in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains was still vital and well preserved, rooted in the old local repertoire and enriched with several popular *deyişes* (mystical sung poetry in the vernacular) imported from Turkey.²⁵ In general, the musicians, most of whom were self-taught in the sense of listening and observing elder *zakirs* and *İmam Cafers*, were not *saz* virtuosos, but did try to maintain a good level of musical expertise.

22 Center for Informal Education and Cultural Activities ALOS, <https://alos.bg/en/>.

23 The project was named “The Unknown Other Close to You: Alevi Ritual Music and Dance from the Eastern Rhodopes” and was financed by the National Culture Fund of Bulgarian Ministry of Culture.

24 *Aşure* (Ashura) is an Islamic holiday, which is celebrated by the Alevi-Bektashis (and by the Shi’a Muslims) in commemoration of the martyrdom of Ali’s son Hüseyin.

25 Some of the beloved *deyişes* of that kind are *Çeke Çeke* and *Dostum Dostum*.

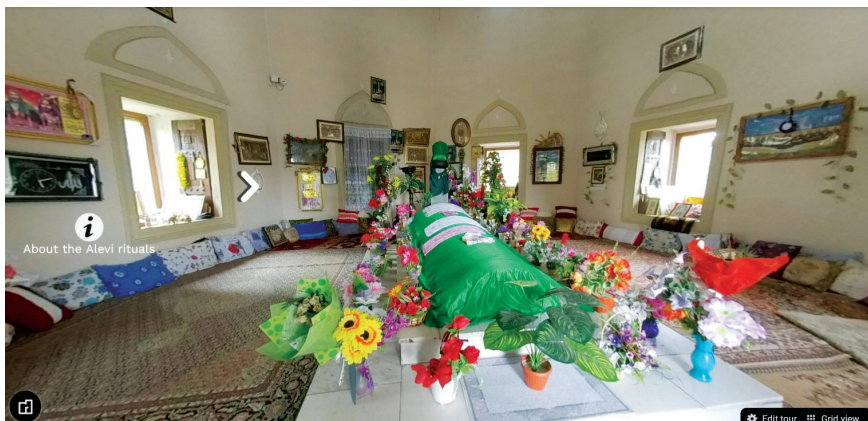


Figure 5: A snapshot from the virtual tour “Ritual Songs and *Semahlar* of the Alevis and Bektashis from the Eastern Rhodope Mountains.”

According to the project objectives, the recorded material had to be presented in live interactive multimedia exhibitions in several Bulgarian cities. This was impossible with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 so we decided to introduce the material in two virtual tours for two²⁶ of the community subgroups in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains (the Baba’is and the Bektashis). Seeking a more integrated presentation of Alevi-Bektashi ritual expressive culture in Bulgaria, we combined text, audio and video recordings of ritual music and *semahs*, as well as interviews, with panoramic photos of cult sites such as saints’ tombs (*türbes*) and dervish lodges (*tekkes*), in the region (see Figure 5). In other words, we tried to provide in a concise, comprehensive, and graphic way, highlights of our knowledge of and respect towards the Alevi-Bektashis.

Initially we utilized the Kuula platform,²⁷ generally used for real estate, architecture, construction sites, museums, etc., trying to adapt it to our needs. Apart from its advantages (easy manipulation, possibilities for attaching different types of multimedia, etc.), it did not allow for embedding videos and playing VR footage,²⁸ which made the virtual tour run slowly and with hitches. The required monthly subscription for the platform needed to support the tours was also an obstacle, given the financial limitations of the project. Searching for a new permanent decision,²⁹ we released only the first virtual tour that was dedicated to the Baba’is.

26 The third group, known as *musahips*, is generally considered as the most closed subgroup in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains, so including them was not possible.

27 <https://kuula.co/>.

28 Part of our material was shot with a VR camera.

29 The links to the final versions of the virtual tours will be announced on the site of ALOS, alos.bg. In June 2022 our team released a new virtual tour concerning Alevi-Bektashi ritual music and semahs from North-Eastern Bulgaria: alevineb.artstudies.bg.

Before making our project public, we searched out the opinion of the local people. The generally supportive feedback was encouraging, but two remarks stood out. The first one was made by an Alevi, who questioned the appropriateness of including the ambient sound of a cow mooing, viewing it as a sign of profanity and lack of respect towards the sacred *nefes* genre as it is heard in its traditional context. This fear of the debasement of sacred music clearly demonstrates the community's deep sensitivity towards outsiders' misconceptions of its culture's true nature. The second comment was made by a Bektashi who criticized the terms used for Baba'i and Bektashi musicians (*zakir* vs. *Imam Cafer*) and of the number of religious duties during rituals of the two subgroups (seven for the Baba'is vs. twelve for the Bektashis). He insisted on the superior correctness of the Bektashi interpretation of both issues, neglecting the ethnographic (and perhaps historic) realities.³⁰ This sentiment could be read in light of current attempts of the Alevi-Bektashis in Bulgaria to demonstrate a solid front in order to be accepted as a united community.

The virtual tour was also presented to a Bulgarian audience in May of 2021, during the *Dzhoben festival – Festival na kratkite formi v izkustvoto* (Pocket Festival – Festival for Short Forms of Art in Sofia). The mostly young public, free of ethnic and religious prejudices, reacted with a strong interest towards the unfamiliar community and with excitement about gaining access to the profound and universal messages of Alevi-Bektashi faith, culture, and traditions. The virtual tour proved to be an effective tool for approaching “the unknown other.”

Laying the topic of the Alevi-Bektashi ritual music and *semahs* aside, I will try to give an objective assessment of this innovative audio-visual format, considering its potential use in applied ethnomusicology. The virtual tour stands between ethnographic film and ethnographic exhibition and falls into the category of interactive and immersive documentaries known as i-docs (Vannini 2020, 8). It is up to the user to navigate through the tour in a non-linear manner, following his/her own interests and perceptions. This is certainly one of its advantages. Others lie in the possibilities for adding or editing content, thus enriching, or improving a presentation over time. On the other hand, constantly changing technologies can make the content vulnerable because of the inability to update the materials in a timely fashion. A second disadvantage is that presenting data (in the virtual tour) instead of telling a story (as the case would be in ethnographic film) does not necessarily provoke an emotional response in the audience – which is preferable to just provide information. But, as our experience indicates, a virtual tour

30 As pointed out above, the Baba'is and Bektashis in Bulgaria are subgroups of a homogenizing community which shares common religious views and ritual structure, but still differs in some doctrinal and ritual elements which can be observed using an ethnographic approach. Nevena Gramatikova states that the differences are a result of historical, geographical, and psychological factors (Gramatikova 2011, 230). Given the current state of written and oral sources, such differences are probably hard to trace.

can at least provide media content for the correct audio-visual presentations of cultures that are a part of closed communities.

Concluding Remarks

Alevi-Bektashis in Bulgaria do want to be socially and culturally accepted and appreciated, but in their pursuit of this goal they may need to abandon or transform the rules of *takiye*. A basic tool for gaining visibility is the public presentation of their *nefes*es and kinetic forms, *semahs* that until recently were not allowed exposure to the view of outsiders. Extracted from rituals and performed on stage at concerts or at festivals, analyzed in scientific journals, or showcased in films or in innovative formats such as virtual tours, the presentations of *nefes*es and *semahs* help Alevi-Bektashis in Bulgaria become more understood. But as the community is still sensitive to and somewhat suspicious of others' observations and interpretations, its increased visibility can be interpreted affirmatively or offensively by its members, depending on the degree of understanding and approach of outsider researchers, filmmakers, and other cultural agents. For a more positive effect, ethical concerns should be at the forefront for outsider culture brokers as they engage in the social mediation of representation and exchange of insider knowledge.

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POVZETEK

Razkrivanje skrivnih zvokov in gibov: predstavitve zvrsti *nefes* in *semah* iz Bolgarije

Živa obredna kultura alevi-bektašev v Bolgariji je stoletja ostajala tajna, kar je omogočilo ohranjanje vanjo vtkanih pomenov. Njeni bistveni elementi so pesmi (*nefes*, ed.), ki jih spremlja *saz* (lutnja), in posebne kinetične oblike (*semah*, ed.), ki v okviru obredja delujejo kot tradicionalni elementi za prenašanje alevi-bektaškega skrivnega izročila preko besed, dejanj ter interakcije med glasbeniki (*zakirji* / *İmam Caferji*) in poslušalstvom, preplavljenim s čustvi, ki jih sproža ali krepi moč glasbe.

Z željo, da bi presegli stigmo negativnega odnosa do njih in dosegli družbeno in kulturno enakopravnost, so alevi-bektaši izbrali pot vidnosti oziroma nadzorovanega dostopanja do njihovih religijskih vrednot – med najbolj cenjenimi so religijska uglasbena poezija (*nefes*) in obredne kinetične oblike (*semah*). Občasno so zapustili omejen krog poslušalstva svojih skupnosti in prešli v javne in medijske kontekste, ki so njihovemu delovanju dali dodatno dimenzijo, saj so postali orodja alevi-bektaške družbene in kulturne prepoznavnosti ter označevalci identitete njihove skupnosti.

Zvrsti *nefes* in *semah*, vzeti iz obredja in izvajani na koncertnih ali festivalskih odrih, analizirani v znanstveni literaturi ter predstavljeni v filmih ali inovativnih oblikah, kakor je virtualni ogled, sta pripomogli k razumevanju in prepoznavanju bolgarskih alevi-bektašev. A ker je skupnost še vedno občutljiva in nekoliko nezaupljiva do opazovanj in interpretacij drugih, tovrstno pozornost lahko interpretira kot razumevajočo ali žaljivo, odvisno od stopnje razumevanja in pristopa zunanjih raziskovalcev, filmskih ustvarjalcev in drugih kulturnih agentov. Za bolj pozitiven učinek mora biti etična skrb za zunanje kulturne posrednike vedno na prvem mestu, saj sodelujejo pri družbenem posredovanju predstavljanja in izmenjavi znanja o kulturi alevi-bektašev.

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O AVTORICI

RUMIANA MARGARITOVA (rumiana_margaritova@yahoo.com) je docentka na Inštitutu za umetnostne študije Bolgarske akademije znanosti. Magistrirala je iz muzikologije na Nacionalni akademiji za glasbo »Prof. Pancho Vladigerov« v Sofiji, doktorirala pa iz etnomuzikologije na Inštitutu za umetnostne študije Bolgarske akademije znanosti. Njeni raziskovalni interesi in objave so osredotočeni na turško tradicionalno glasbo v Bolgariji, alevi-bektaško obredno glasbo ter tradicionalno glasbo v večkulturnih okoljih.