

Threaded in Identity: The Alevis of Mădrevo and the Hıdrellez Tradition

Known locally as Alians, the Alevi community in Bulgaria preserves its heritage through ritual dress, collective memory, and spiritual continuity.

Traditional attire is not merely a costume. It is worn not for performance, but in remembrance. For the Alevis of Mădrevo, tradition is not a relic of the past - it is a way to remain alive, both within oneself and within the community.

When we speak of Bulgaria's cultural mosaic, the term 'Alevis' rarely enters public conversation. Yet within that silence thrives a community that has preserved its identity with quiet determination, enduring across centuries of change and marginalization.

This article is the first in a series devoted to the Alevi community in the village of Mădrevo. We begin where body and spirit intersect: in the sacred act of dressing. But first, who are the Alevis?

Who Are the Alevis?

The Alevis (also known as Kızılbaş, Alians or Aliani) are a religious and cultural community. In Bulgaria, the Alevi faith has developed a distinctive local form among the Turkish population. It is a branch of Shia Islam that has evolved under the influence of pre-Islamic practices, shamanism, Zoroastrianism, and early Christianity. As a result, this tradition incorporates many mystical, Sufi, and even pagan elements.

The community traces its origins to the 7th century, following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, when disputes arose over spiritual succession. Sunnis accepted leaders chosen by consensus, while the Alevis (Kızılbaş, Alians or Aliani) believed that leadership belonged to the Prophet's family, beginning with his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. The name "Alevi" itself reflects this lineage of devotion.

Over time, the community faced persecution, often forcing it into isolation. During the 15th-century Ottoman–Persian wars, many Alevis were forcibly resettled from Persia to parts of the Balkans, including what is now Bulgaria. They were referred to as Kızılbaş (“Red Heads”), due to the distinctive red turbans they wore, which marked their group affiliation.

To this day, Alevi communities (also known as Kızılbaş, Alians, or Aliani) exist in northeastern Bulgaria, as well as in the Eastern Rhodopes, the Stara Zagora region, and Haskovo. They sing nefes - mystical hymns composed by spiritual leaders and poets such as Ismail I (known as Şah Hatayî), founder of the Safavid dynasty. Everywhere they live, the Alians quietly but resolutely preserve their identity - as a remembrance of the past and a hope for the future.

The Alevi Woman: Equal and Sacred

One of the most distinctive features of Alevi culture is the principle of equality between men and women. There is no gender-based separation in rituals - all participate together, equally.

The woman holds a sacred position, embodying the harmony and balance that are central to Alevi spirituality.

Dressing as Ritual: The Day of Hıdrellez

On May 6th, before sunrise, Kamber Gochev's house in Mădrevo is already awake. Kamber and his mother prepare for Hıdrellez, dressing in silence, without haste, with reverence for each step.

The dressing begins with an inner layer: a silk shirt and wide trousers adorned with woven motifs. Then come the long woolen socks - not simply for warmth, but to open the way to the sacred.



Putting on a women's kenar shirt and woven decorative trousers - the first stage in preparing for the ritual

Then comes the miltan, a long silk robe. Over it, a pleated fata apron is tied with handmade cords, signifying maturity.



Securing the pleated fata - an important step in dressing the traditional women's costume

A beaded belt with copper clasps fastens in front like a seal, symbolizing feminine strength and fertility.



Beaded belt with copper clasps - the final element of the women's costume, symbolizing feminine strength and fertility



Detail of an embroidered uchkurna scarf - hand-stitched with floral motifs, carrying both personal and symbolic meaning

A velvet vest trimmed with silver threads bridges the inner self with outer appearance.



Women's attire in an almost complete form - the two final scarves, the three carnations placed on top, and the forehead adornment are yet to be added

Layered scarves are wrapped over the fez, each holding its own meaning.



Covering with the plain blue scarf - an intermediate stage in the ritual dressing, laying the foundation for the final silk scarf



*An important moment in the ritual dressing - the colorful scarf (**kefiye bezi**) is added over the already tied blue **kozan chemberi**, as part of the traditional layering*



Final adjustment of the second colorful scarf - a key finishing touch in arranging the ritual women's attire



Detail of the ritual adornment: beaded decoration with gold pendants (istifan), three carnations, and sequins on the forehead

The final silk scarf is adorned with three carnations, symbolizing Allah, Muhammad, and Ali. At this point, the garments become more than attire - they become her connection to ancestral memory.



Ritual attire in its complete form

Dressing the Alevi Man in Traditional Attire

The process of dressing follows a defined sequence, where each element of the outfit carries clear function and symbolism.

Poturi (Woolen Trousers)

The outfit begins with dark blue woolen poturi - traditional trousers. Their legs are fastened along the calves with wire buttons, ensuring a snug fit. This is more than a technical detail: the firm fastening provides stability during movement, especially during ritual dances and ceremonial acts.



Fastening traditional woolen poturi trousers with braided trim and wire buttons

Kenar Shirt and Woven Belt

Over the shirt, a belt made of handwoven wool is wrapped - usually in reddish tones with white threads. The belt serves a practical purpose: it keeps the lower back warm and holds together the upper and lower parts of the outfit. But it also carries symbolic meaning, representing maturity and masculinity.



Wrapping a woven woolen belt over a traditional shirt with gathered sleeves

Fez and Wrapping the Sarık

A fez is placed on the head and wrapped with a colorful sarık - a long, narrow strip of cloth. The wrapping is done by hand, in front of a mirror, and requires precision. The shape and tightness of the wrap are part of proper appearance and reflect respect for the occasion.



Tying the sarık in front of the mirror - the final detail of the traditional attire



Participants dressed in festive attire for the Hidrellez ritual, photographed in the courtyard before the event

Objects of Fate: The Ritual of Hidrellez

Once celebrated over two days, Hidrellez is now observed on a single day, May 6th. On the evening before the festival, young girls go from house to house collecting nişans - small personal objects imbued with symbolic meaning. The following morning, the items are drawn one by one from a copper cauldron, each accompanied by a quatrain, a brief rhymed verse offering a glimpse into the future.

This year, the village of Mădrevo is nearly empty, but Kamber and his family persist in keeping the tradition alive. In the neighboring village of Sevar, where I visit later, the celebration unfolds openly - people sing, dance, and exchange nişans as gestures of unity and shared hope.

The festive ritual begins with elder women gathering to perform the “Kasida for the Nightingale” (Bülbül Kasidesi) - a mystical hymn of praise for the nightingale. They set the tone for the ritual, creating an atmosphere of focus and reverence for tradition.



The beginning of the ritual - elder women sing a devotional hymn evoking the image of the nightingale

Next comes the drawing of the nishans. A young girl sits at the center of the group, her head covered with a scarf. At her feet stands a copper bowl filled with water and the nishans - personal items left by the women the night before. One of the elder participants draws out a nishan, and each object's removal is accompanied by a quatrain sung aloud.

The quatrains are part of the community's oral heritage. They combine prophecy, advice, and often - humor or a playful tease. Then the woman holds up the object and asks: "Whose is this?" Its owner recognizes it and takes it back. The quatrains are usually passed down from generation to generation and serve not only as entertainment, but also as a way of preserving the language, rhythm, and expressiveness of Alevi culture. In this way, personal attention blends with collective memory within the ritual circle.



During the Hidrellez ritual, an elder woman lifts a nişan and asks, "Whose is this?" while the young girl sits covered with a red veil

After the nishan ritual, various games are performed, with young women actively taking part. The participants join hands in a circle, singing and moving with smooth, synchronized steps. The dance is not a staged performance but an integral part of the ritual, affirming unity and the continuity of tradition.



Women perform a ritual circle dance at the end of the ceremony



Participants in a ritual reenactment perform a moment from the tradition with smiles and symbolic gestures



Alevi women in traditional clothing dance in a circle as part of the Hidrellez ritual, accompanied by the singing of songs specific to the occasion.

“Keeping the Tradition Alive”: A Conversation with Kamber Gochev

Kamber Gochev is one of the last keepers of Alevi traditions in the village of Mădrevo. In our conversation, he shares stories of holidays, customs, crafts, and music. His words offer a vivid glimpse into a living culture that continues to resist disappearance.

Important Holidays and Rituals

Diana Nikolova:

What are the most important holidays in the Alevi calendar, and what are their origins?

Kamber Gochev:

There are several major holidays for the Alevis. First is **Kırklar (Nevruz)**, celebrated on the night of March 21st to 22nd. It marks the birth of Ali, as well as his wedding to Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. The celebration carries numerous cultural and religious symbols, many of which originate in ancient Mesopotamian rites later woven into Islamic tradition.

Next is **Köfür**, which coincides with Christian Easter. On this day, small piles of straw are lit in seven places, and people leap over them - a symbolic act of cleansing their sins.

The most popular holiday is **Hıdrellez**, once celebrated over two days (May 6th and 7th), but now observed only on May 6th. It commemorates the meeting of the saints Hızır and Ilyas. Its roots are pagan - a celebration of spring's renewal and the rebirth of nature.

There is also a day of mourning: **Aşure Bayramı** (also known as **Matem Bayramı**), which honors the martyrdom of Hussein, the son of Ali, at Karbala.

Diana Nikolova:

What specific rituals are performed during these holidays?

Kamber Gochev:

For **Kırklar/Nevruz**, the rituals take place in the home of the boba (the elder of the community), following a strict and established sequence.

For **Hıdrellez**, the most important tradition is the nişan ritual - small personal items collected by young women into a copper pot, meant for their fiancés or male relatives. On the following day, the items are drawn one by one, each accompanied by a sung quatrain believed to carry prophetic meaning.

Diana Nikolova:

Are there special places connected to these holidays?

Kamber Gochev:

Yes, one such place is **Düldül izi** - a valley with rock formations believed to be the hoofprints of the horse of either **Demir Baba** or **Hazreti Ali**. I personally believe they belong to **Hazreti Ali**, since his horse was named **Düldül**, while **Demir Baba's** horse was called **Alaca**. People go there to perform water-based rituals for health and healing.

Diana Nikolova:

What traditional dishes are prepared for the holidays?

Kamber Gochev:

There is a specific seven-course menu that is always served - whether at weddings, funerals, or festive holidays. It includes milk soup with chicken broth, lamb stew, stewed cabbage, keşkek (ritual wheat with chicken), rice pudding, milk banitsa with halva, and oshav (stewed dried fruit compote).

Traditional Crafts and Livelihood

Diana Nikolova:

What traditional crafts are the Alevis known for?

Kamber Gochev:

Primarily agriculture and animal husbandry. We also have a specific technique called **gerim dokuması** - a method of weaving where the threads are stretched, and the warp is wound around an animal bone and fixed to the loom.

Diana Nikolova:

Are there people in the village who still preserve these skills?

Kamber Gochev:

Interest has declined significantly in recent years, but I try to preserve at least part of this heritage by making elements of the traditional clothing myself.

Traditional Clothing

Diana Nikolova:

What does the traditional Alevi attire look like?

Kamber Gochev:

Our costumes are among the oldest authentic traditional garments in the region. The women's attire includes a kenar shirt, pleated fata (apron), miltan (long overdress), beaded belt, vest, decorated women's fez, and a silk headscarf. The men's outfit consists of a kenar shirt, anteriya (short jacket), poturi (baggy trousers), woven belt, fez, and a wrapped sarık (headscarf).

Diana Nikolova:

What is the symbolism of the colors?

Kamber Gochev:

Red stands for vitality and youth. Blue is for protection. Yellow serves as an accent color, and white symbolizes a transition to a new stage of life.

Music, Songs, and Dance

Diana Nikolova:

What role does music play for the Alevis?

Kamber Gochev:

A major one. Through music, we connect both spiritually and as a community. It's present in rituals, daily life, and festive moments.

Diana Nikolova:

What are the traditional instruments and dances?

Kamber Gochev:

Traditionally, we play the **bozuk** (a type of saz), **darabuka** (which we call lyub), **zilli maşa**, **def** (tambourine), and later also **accordion** and **clarinet**. Our most characteristic dance is the **semah** - a sacred, barefoot circle dance that symbolizes unity and the connection between humans and the universe.

Diana Nikolova:

Are there any well-known local performers?

Kamber Gochev:

From Mădrevo, **Rükiye Zaimova** is known for performing traditional songs. Most of our performers remain local.

The next article will be dedicated to music, dance, and the semah - the circle dance that connects the human being to the universe.

Text and photography: Diana Nikolova

Interview and consultation: Kamber Gochev