

Eastern Europe  
**GEORGE GRIGORE**

# Muslims in Romania

**Romanian principalities, once known as the 'gates of the Levant', have a history of religious and ethnic diversity. In Romania today, the Muslim population traditionally lives together with the Romanian majority (Christian-Orthodox) in an area called Dobrudja, a territory bordered to the east by the Black Sea, to the west and north by the Danube River and to the south by the Romanian-Bulgarian frontier.**

The Muslim community from Dobrudja, which is Sunni, Hanafitic rite, is composed of two major ethnic groups: the Tartars and the Turks. Nowadays, Muslims from Dobrudja or from abroad live in all the important Romanian cities, being structured in more or less stable communities. According to the official census of 1992, there were 29,533 Turks and 24,649 Tartars registered, meaning that the Turks as well as the Tartars represent each an approximate percentage of 0.1% of Romania's 22,760,449 inhabitants.

## Ottoman presence

The Muslim presence in Dobrudja is explained by the fact that this territory was under the domination of the Ottoman Empire for almost five centuries. The Ottomans conquered Dobrudja in several stages. The first stage is represented by the conquest of the strategic points of Inisala and Isaccea by the Sultan Bayezid I (1389-1402). After a short re-conquest of these territories by the *voivode* of Wallachia, Mircea the Old, most of Dobrudja was conquered by the Sultan Mehmet I between 1419-1420. This marks the second stage in the process of settling Ottoman power in the region. The third and last stage is represented by the conquest of the fortresses Chilia and Cetatea Alba by the Sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512) in 1484. As a result, Dobrudja became a constituent of the Ottoman Empire, belonging to the great

*beylerbeylik* of Rumelia. Dobrudja had been under unceasing Ottoman domination until 1877 when, after the Russian-Romanian-Ottoman War, Romania gained independence as a state, subsequently acknowledging Dobrudja's annexation by the Treaty of Berlin (1878).

The first Muslims – a group of 10-12,000 Anatolian Turkomans led by Sari Saltik – settled down in Dobrudja in 1263-1264. The famous Arab traveller, Ibn Battutah (1334), made the first documentary attestation of Tartars living in this area. According to the discovered traces, the first groups of Tartars, as part of the empire of the Golden Horde, seem to have settled here during the time of the Tartar leader Noghai (1280-1310), who ruled over the northern side of the Balkan Peninsula up to Dobrudja. The name of Noghai assumed by a part of Dobrudja Tartars must have its origins in the colonization of that time.

Sultan Bayezid I brought Tartars to the area of Babadag. Later on, Sultan Mehmet I (1413-1421) colonized in Dobrudja both Tartars and Turkomans from Asia Minor. Another stage of the colonization in Dobrudja is connected with the Sultan Bayezid II who invited Volga Tartars to settle in the southern Basarabia (Budjak) and northern Dobrudja. During several stages, Anatolian Turks were colonized in Dobrudja. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Crimean Tartars continually migrated to Dobrudja. This migration grew to a considerable size at the time the Crimea was annexed by the Russians in 1783, after the Russian-Turkish War. After the Crimean Tartar emigrants had established themselves in Basarabia, as a first stage of the emigration process, they then crossed the Danube and settled down in Dobrudja in 1812. As a result of these suc-

cessive emigrations, there are three Tartar dialects in Dobrudja: the Crimean dialect or the steppe dialect (in Tartar: *krim* or *sol tili*, 70%), the Noghai dialect (in Tartar: *noghai tili*, 20%) and the seaside dialect (in Tartar: *yaliboyi tili*, 10%).

In order to accentuate the element of Islam in Dobrudja, the Ottomans brought in other populations from all over the Empire: Persians, Kurds, and Arabs. The latter, for instance, consisted in 150 Syrian families of *fellahs* who were brought to Dobrudja between 1831-1833. All these populations mingled with the Turks, being assimilated within a short period of time.

## Turks, Tartars, Albanians and Gypsies

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the deterioration of the economical conditions, Turkish and Tartar populations migrated massively to Turkey, so that many villages were left entirely abandoned. The number of religious shelters can also demonstrate the decrease of the Muslim population. Whereas in 1900 there were 260 mosques in Dobrudja, at the end of World War II there were only 151 left. The decrease has remained in process up to the present day, the number of functional mosques coming down to about 80. The number of Muslim graveyards has also decreased from 300 to 108, which are still in use.

Apart from the Turks and the Tartars, other Muslim ethnic groups can also be found in Romania, such as the Albanians who emigrated in great number after World War I from many regions of the Balkan Peninsula. According to certain studies, there are approximately 3,000 Muslim Albanians in Romania. They are fully integrated into the Tartar-Turkish community, not only by means of marriage, but also through the bonds of custom and tradition and by the sharing of mosques and graveyards. This makes it very difficult to establish their exact number. A fact that is worth mentioning is that the first translation of the Koran to modern Albanian (written with Latin letters), entitled *Korani (Kendimini)* was published by Ilo Mitko Qafezezi – an Albanian from Romania – in 1921 in Ploiesti.

Another Muslim group in Romania is comprised of Muslim gypsies living in Dobrudja. These are local gypsies who converted to Islam during the Ottoman domination, or Muslim gypsies who emigrated from other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Some of them seem to have mixed with the vagrant Anatolian Turks who were present in Dobrudja, becoming an ethnic group now called 'Turk gypsies'. Their number is not exactly known as they generally declare themselves Turks in the census.

After 1989, new Muslim ethnic groups appeared in important cities of Romania such as Bucharest, Iasi, Cluj, and Timisoara. Such groups are the Arabs (who came mostly from the countries of the Arab Mashriq like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine); the Iranians; the Kurds (who came from northern Iraq and south-eastern Turkey), etc. Some of these communities have their own mosques, schools (such as the Iraqi School in Bucharest), bilingual periodicals (Romanian-Arabic) such as *Al-'Usbu' Al-'Arabi* (The Arab Week), and cultural and religious centres (especially in Bucharest). These new communities have not joined the old Muslim community in Romania, the two groups living almost parallel lives. Very few of these newcomers to Romania have obtained Romanian citizenship and those that have, generally did so through marriage; most of them emigrate to Western Europe after they

have remained in Romania for a while, which makes these communities very unstable. On the other hand, many Turks from Turkey have joined the old Turkish community in Romania and consolidated it. There is also a small number of Romanians that have recently become Muslims, yet have not formed a unified community.

## Culture and education

Dobrudja is a place with lots of vestiges of the Ottoman domination period, such as mausoleums and tombs of some Muslim saints and Ottoman magistrates that can be found at Isaccea, Cernavoda and Babadag. In Medgidia are the ruins of one of the oldest Muslim schools (*medresa*) in the region. There are also some mosques, still in use, which are real masterpieces of architecture, such as Esmahan Sultan Mosque in Mangalia (constructed in 1590); Ghazi Ali Pasa Mosque in Babadag (constructed in 1522); and Hunkiar Mosque (constructed in 1870) and Anadolkoym Mosque (constructed in 1860) in Constanta. During the Ottoman times, education was mostly religious. In Dobrudja, the oldest *medresa* was built in Babadag in 1484, by the order of the Sultan Bayezid II. After 1878, the Romanian State reorganized the educational system in Dobrudja, secularized it and introduced the Romanian language in schools. The theological seminary in Medgidia, which had been moved from Babadag in 1903, was abolished in 1965. School education in Tartar and Turkish was gradually eliminated after 1959, and the study of these languages became optional. After the fall of the communist regime in Romania in 1989, the Turkish language was reintroduced as study language for both Turkish and Tartar ethnic groups in the schools with Tartar and Turkish pupils. Furthermore, in 1993 the Muslim theological and pedagogic secondary school 'Mustafa Kemal Atatürk' opened its doors, continuing the tradition of old seminary. ♦

*Dr George Grigore is professor at the Arabic Department of the University of Bucharest and research fellow at the Center for Arab Studies, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: grigoreg@hotmail.com*

*There are two monthly publications, issued in Constanta, worthy of mention: Haksess (in Romanian and Turkish) and Karadeniz ('The Black Sea'; in Romanian, Turkish and Tartar). In addition, the Kriterion publishing house in Bucharest has been printing books in Turkish and Tartar languages since 1980. In the High Institutions of the State, there are two deputies in Parliament representing two political organizations of the Turkish-Tartar community in Romania, namely the Democrat Union of the Turkish Muslim Tartars in Romania and the Democrat Union of the Turks in Romania.*

## References

- Ekrem Mehmet Ali, 1995, *Din istoria turcilor dobrogeni*, Bucuresti, Editura Kriterion;
- Mehmet Ablay, 1997, *Din istoria tatarilor*, Bucuresti, Editura Kriterion;
- R. Florescu, 1976, *Prezente musulmane în România / Muslims in Romania. Past and Present / Ma'alim Islamiyya fi Rumaniya*. With a Preface by Iacub Mehmet, Mufti of the Muslim Cult in the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing House;
- N.A. Gafer, Vladimir Drimba, 'Quelques problèmes relatifs au développement culturel de la population tatar de Roumanie', Bucharest, *Studie et Acta Orientalia*, I (1958), 339-343;
- Müstecib Ulküsül, 1966, *Dobruca ve Türkler*, Ankara, Türk Kültürünü Arastirma Enstitüsü Yayinlari.



**The King Carol I Mosque in Constanta**

PHOTO: MIHAI NESTOR