



# Roses, Bread and Loyalty: Impressions from Isparta, Turkey

**Author: Lale Yalçın-Heckmann**

**October 11, 2017**

I have been making fieldwork visits to the province of Isparta over the last three years, mostly during the summer months when there is an interesting seasonal shift in the population. With its cooler summer temperatures, the region is favoured by many former locals who work in and have migrated to other cities and countries. Isparta residents welcome these returnees every summer, seeing the motivation of summer visitors as local patriotism for and loyalty (*vefa*) to their place of origin. Some of Isparta's towns, such as the centres of administrative districts, which are almost empty in the winter become lively and reminiscent of many other urban holiday resorts of Turkey. People roam around and spend time in parks or sit on balconies and terraces chatting loudly with one another across the space often late into the night, and youngsters race along the narrow and not always well-kept avenues of these cities with their scooters and cars, often irritating the locals with the noise they make. Families get together during these months, memories are revived, stories exchanged, neighbourhood and kin relations re-established. Some young returnees collect information and produce new pictures and stories for the social media outlets they have created around *hemşeri* ("compatriot") websites, which they maintain for connecting the returnees and locals across generations, and space and time. Nevertheless, locals complain about vegetable prices becoming higher in these summer months (despite it being the harvest season), especially when the returnees arrive from abroad with strong foreign currencies.



The anthropologist discussing kinship with relatives in Isparta.

I have been often treated as a returnee in Isparta, since I stayed in the same facilities and usually started my rounds by visiting the people I have gotten to know from previous stays and in order to extend my contacts through them. Furthermore since my father comes from a town in the province, I have often mentioned this when people ask me where I originate from (it is never enough or understandable, if I were to say “from Germany”). The connection has always evoked warm feelings and some of my interlocutors interpreted my coming to Isparta as “blood draws” (*kan çeker*, in Turkish). Turkish patriotism uses this metaphor that is similar in some ways to what is known in German as *Blut und Boden* (blood and land/territory), albeit in a more innocent way.<sup>1</sup> Even though I have been living in Germany for nearly forty years and had never been to the home city of my father until 2014 (he left the city around 1940s, but has written about the city in his memoirs), the fact that the place name is written in my Turkish identity card and especially my mention of the link through my father’s line as having a meaning for me was a an explanation that locals completely understood and approved of.

This year I was welcomed as warmly as ever, yet I felt a sense of tension in the questions my acquaintances were directing to me. “Why are Merkel and Germany taking such a hostile stance against Turkey?” some asked. “Why is there such an anti-Turkish mood there?” some added. Another interlocutor, a rose oil producer with a small firm whom I met on this trip for the first time, wanted to address my positionality in a more subtle way: “Are there other professors of Turkish origin at the university where you work?” and “If there are any, are they getting together and explaining the situation in Turkey to the Germans?” The implicit expectation behind this question was that someone who grew up in Turkey should have “loyalty” to Turkish society and lobby for the “Turkish cause”. *Vefa* is commonly translated as loyalty, yet in this context it is loyalty towards one’s nourisher (as well as to the place where one’s ancestors are coming from). *Yediğin ekmeğe ihanet etme, vefalı ol* would be commonly said when the debt towards the person/society which “fed one” needs to be underlined: “do not betray the bread you have eaten/received, be loyal to the bread-giver”, would be an appropriate translation.



Poster welcoming the Turkish President Erdoğan in Isparta in 2017, with the text: “Dear President, welcome to the city of roses Isparta”. The president in his speech expressed his pleasure in “returning”

to Isparta, reading a poem about someone returning to his beloved.

Since the tensions between the European Union (especially German and Dutch politicians) and Turkish government have been escalating during the summer months, returnees from European countries were frequently asked such questions and called upon to defend their own country of origin and be lobbyists for Turkey. Isparta does not receive many German tourists, hence the absence of tourists from there was not noted much. But people wanted to convince the returnees from abroad about the need to be loyal, and expected them to understand the threats Turkish society was experiencing, especially the threats from terrorism. They were also expected to explain why European countries which had been perceived as being friends of Turkey (*vefallı*, as the German-Turkish friendship going as far back as the First World War is typically referred to) now had become unreasonably critical, even boycotting a favourite holiday destination. The rose oil producers I talked to in previous years have not changed their strategy of connecting with the best buyers of rose oil in Europe; nevertheless some seem to be actively seeking buyers in non-European countries, like the rich Arab country of Kuwait and hubs like Dubai.

Loyalty is somehow an unexpected concept in the urban world of neoliberal economies of essential oil, cosmetic and aroma industries. Yet loyalty of and being loyal to rural producers is becoming more and more crucial. It is differentiated from having trust (*güven*, in Turkish) in economic relationships. For instance, rose oil processors expressed the obligation to pay at least the previous year's rose prices to rose growers this year, even if the rose oil prices have crashed this year (see my Working Paper 2016 for a discussion of increasing rose oil and rose prices since 2010, [http://www.eth.mpg.de/cms/de/publications/working\\_papers/wp0178](http://www.eth.mpg.de/cms/de/publications/working_papers/wp0178)). The price of rose oil had risen to nearly 12,000 euros per kilogram in late 2016. But after the harvest in the summer of 2017, rose oil processors had to go down to as low as 9,000 euros, and some could still not sell all their oil. My interlocutors were keen to assure me that they will not reduce the price they pay for roses and will remain loyal and keep their commitments to the rose growers. Since the prognosis for the coming years is that the price of rose oil will continue to fall (as a result of increasing rose production, with new rose gardens have been planted in the last three years and they will all become fully productive by next year), there are new considerations about how to ensure the loyalty of the rose growers. Rose growers would be expected to be loyal to the rose processors as well. In previous years, I was told, some rose growers took advance payments (similar to credit without written contract) from rose oil processors but did not provide them with the promised amount of roses. The remaining debt in roses from this prepaid amount would then be transferred to the following year as open debt. This will not be tolerated any more, some processors commented; they would maintain partnerships with those loyal growers who have been giving their harvest of roses to them for

several years, and such growers will be given priority if they run into difficulty in harvesting the promised amount or have some urgent need for credit (hence advance payment). But new rose growers without previous records of “loyal behaviour” or those who have frequently been willing to sell their roses to different buyers will in the future find it difficult to sell their roses, I was told.

Loyalty on the whole therefore implies a relationship between people around things, ideas, principles, places, and objects. One is loyal to a place, comes back and visits it even if decades have passed. This is how the director of a local museum explained the reason why a returnee “guest worker” from Australia had come back to Turkey: that he was visiting his home country and showing *vefa* to the place. People are loyal (*vefali*) to one another by getting together at each home-coming, sharing stories and memories from the past years and periods of absence, renewing knowledge about relatives, learning who married, had babies, or passed away. One is loyal to one’s nation and state, in that one acknowledges and remembers the way the nation/state has been “feeding” one, as the Turkish president Erdoğan often reminds his audience. When commenting on why thousands of former state employees have been dismissed from their jobs, he emphasised that all those who have been “eating the state’s bread” (*devletin ekmeğini yiyenler*) but had betrayed it (*ihanet* in Turkish, a stronger emotional term than saying simply they have been disloyal, *vefasız*), allegedly by being supporters of so-called terrorist organisations (in this case supporters of the Gülen movement or of the Kurdish PKK). Here *vefa* and *ihanet* are clearly politically loaded terms which have been implicated in the fate of many business people, firms and employees in Isparta. *İhanet* as the stronger version of lacking *vefa* could surely be the reason for legal investigations and subsequent take-over of firms’ assets, businesses, economic investments, and livelihoods. It remains to be seen whether *vefa* between rose growers and rose oil processors will prevail and shape economic behaviour in the economy of the rose in Isparta. While the rose industry might have no major political implications, *vefa* (or at least re-establishing trust, *güven*) between Turkey and the European states remains a big political question which needs urgent attention and reconsideration from all parties.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In Germany, *Blut und Boden* is connected to the Nazi ideology, propaganda and politics of the Third Reich. The Turkish “blood affinity” applies to connections between persons and territory, but even more to connections through persons of the same descent/origins, implying that people of the “same blood” would have links to the same territory/country.

