



# A Yearning for Roses

Max Planck scientists cooperate with partners in more than 110 countries worldwide. Here they relate their personal experiences and impressions. Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, who works at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, is studying values and moral ideas surrounding commercial transactions – taking traditional rose farming in Turkey as an example.

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The story of roses and me goes back a long way. When I was a child, my maternal grandmother used to tell me fairy tales about women in traditional bathhouses, *hammams*, who would luxuriate in bath water infused with rose petals. In early Ottoman times, the roses from which the fragrant oil was obtained came from the Middle East. From there they spread to the Balkans – including Bulgaria, where they were cultivated by Turkish settlers.

Given my family's roots both in Bulgaria and in Isparta, Turkey, it is hardly surprising that I have had a fascination for roses – especially the culture surrounding their cultivation and the production of rose oil – ever since. There is an expression in Turkish that describes the feeling perfectly; it translates roughly as “the heart's yearning.” My heart's yearning for culture and for roses makes perfect sense to the people I speak to in Turkey, especially around Isparta, where my father is from.

In my current research project, I am examining the values and moral ideas surrounding commercial transactions based on the example of how traditional rose farming and modern production processes in Turkey shape the regional community and its values. I spend weeks and months in Isparta, the traditional center of rose farming and rose oil production. I pick roses and talk with farmers, rose oil producers and seasonal workers. After all, social anthropology research is strongly dependent on local relationships, so it is essential to interact with people in order to fathom their knowledge of the economic situation.



**Lale Yalçın-Heckmann**, 62, studied sociology at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul before obtaining a PhD in social anthropology at the London School of Economics. Since moving to Germany in 1988, she has researched Turkish and Kurdish migrants and Islam in Germany and France. She qualified as a professor in 2009 and was a Group Leader at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Since 2010 she has taught at the University of Pardubice in the Czech Republic and is a faculty member of ANARCHIE, an International Max Planck Research School. Within the ERC project entitled *Realising Eurasia: Civilisation and Moral Economy in the 21st Century*, she mainly coordinates scientific activities and her own research in Isparta, Turkey.

However, spending time with people “on the ground” can be arduous. As roses are extremely delicate and their fragrance quickly fades, the harvest begins at 5:00 a.m. – though this has the advantage that the work is normally done before the midday heat. Whether a rose picker is treated fairly depends very much on his or her relationship with the farmer and how many seasonal workers are at the farmer’s disposal during the rose harvest. The amount picked by each worker is recorded at the end of every workday, and payment is made at the end of the harvest season. A strong worker can pick up to 40 kilograms a day, which in 2016 yielded a wage of 14 euros. Incidentally, my personal record is ten kilograms.

In the course of conversations and discussions, I’ve learned that rose farming – though characterized by expert knowledge and decades of experience – is by no means the only source of income for the farmers. In fact, mixed farming with apples or cherries or with dairy farming is what gives the farmers the leverage they need to negotiate prices with rose oil producers.

Rose prices saw a sharp rise in recent years, then rose oil prices recently plummeted. It is therefore in the farmers’ interests to argue that they can easily switch to another product. Whether they keep a fruit tree or a rosebush depends on its market value. Since the farmers can usually adopt a flexible income strategy, and the factories are secretive about the actual volume of rose oil they produce, the pricing structure is highly opaque.

As in many rural areas, it’s rare for the next generation to follow in their parents’ footsteps. Families are migrating to big cities, and the rose harvest spans a period of just two months a year. The process of organizing workers for the season is thus heavily dependent on friendships and kinships. To put it simply, entire extended Turkish families gather in their native village to help with the rose harvest and ensure the survival of this age-old tradition. Ultimately, their heart’s yearning leads them back to the roses.