

# Homology of Medicine and Incense, Symbiosis of Incense and Custom: The Knowledge System, Ecological Wisdom, and Modern Transformation of Ethnic Aromatic Therapy in Yunnan—A Comprehensive Investigation Based on Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology, and Folklore Studies\*

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Yunnan, with its unparalleled ethnic diversity and ecological complexity, has nurtured a diversified and integrated system of aromatic therapy and incense culture among ethnic groups such as the Dai, Naxi, Bai, Yi, and Pumi. This system is not merely the utilization of medicinal plants but is deeply rooted in local cognition, belief systems, and social structures, forming a unique cultural morphology characterized by “homology of medicine and incense, symbiosis of incense and custom, shared incense by humans and gods, and ecological coexistence”. Adopting the core theoretical perspectives of ethnology, cultural anthropology, and folklore studies, and integrating methods from ethnobotany and medical anthropology, this paper systematically examines the practical skills, cultural logic, and social functions of representative ethnic aromatic therapy practices in Yunnan. The study aims to elucidate how incense culture operates across multiple dimensions—disease prevention and treatment, ritual communication, social integration, and ecological maintenance—and analyzes the inheritance crises it faces in the context of globalization and modernization. Building on this analysis, the paper proposes a path for “living inheritance” and “creative transformation” that balances cultural subjectivity, systematic knowledge, and sustainable development. This aims to provide theoretical reference and case studies for the contemporary preservation of ethnic traditional culture, regional ecological civilization construction, and the localized practice of the “Healthy China” and “Rural Revitalization” strategies.

*Keywords:* Yunnan ethnic minorities, aromatic therapy, incense culture, ecological wisdom, cultural inheritance, ethnology

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## Introduction

Yunnan, renowned as the “Plant Kingdom” and “Hometown of Spices”, is a crucial “crossroads” of China’s richest biological and cultural diversity. The distribution of hundreds of species of wild aromatic plants within its territory provides a substantial material foundation for the incense practices of various ethnic groups. However, the significance of incense in Yunnan’s ethnic societies far exceeds its physical properties and medicinal functions. Over a long historical process, various ethnic groups have developed their understanding and use of aromatic plants from basic deodorization and seasoning into a complex cultural system integrating disease healing, spiritual beliefs, ritual norms, spatial construction, and social governance. This system is closely attached to local ecological rhythms, religious concepts, and community life, constituting a spectrum of “local knowledge” distinct from the incense culture of China’s Central Plains and profoundly characteristic of Southwest China’s regional and ethnic identities.

Current academic research, although fruitful in areas such as single ethnic medicine, specific aromatic plant chemical component analysis, or isolated folkloric phenomena, lacks holistic, structural, and comparative studies of the multi-ethnic aromatic therapy system in Yunnan from a holistic perspective. There is a particular lack of interdisciplinary efforts to integrally analyze the connections between material resources, bodily practices, conceptual beliefs, and social organization. Therefore, this paper selects the Dai, Naxi, Bai, Yi, and Pumi as primary research subjects. It strives to transcend the boundaries of ethnic medicine, ecological anthropology, religious sociology, and material culture studies to deeply analyze how “incense” functions as a core cultural medium and integrative mechanism, weaving a web of meaning connecting humans, nature, the supernatural, and society. This research is not only an academic collation of a precious living cultural heritage but also a theoretical exploration of how to activate traditional wisdom to serve a better life in contemporary society.

### The Ecological and Cultural Matrix of Yunnan Ethnic Incense Culture Formation

#### Ecological Matrix: Aromatic Resources Under a Three-Dimensional Climate and Adaptive Wisdom

Yunnan’s unique three-dimensional climate and complex topography have shaped a complete vegetation spectrum from tropical rainforests to alpine meadows, making aromatic plants rich in volatile oils from families such as Lauraceae, Lamiaceae, and Zingiberaceae exceptionally abundant. Plants like lemongrass (*Cymbopogon citratus*), *Blumea balsamifera*, calamus (*Acorus calamus*), *Cymbopogon distans*, and *Nardostachys jatamansi* are not only important ethnic medicinal resources but also core ingredients for incense making. Ethnic groups did not passively depend on nature’s bounty; instead, through long-term practice, they developed a set of highly adaptive resource management principles characterized by “using local materials, combining medicine and incense, and sustainable utilization”. For example, ethnic groups in high-altitude cold regions developed a concise aromatic therapy system centered on *Cymbopogon distans*, while the Dai people in tropical 坝区 (flatlands) possess more diverse and systematic incense-medicine formulas. This differentiated incense-using system vividly reflects the cultural adaptation of each group to their specific ecological environment.

#### Cultural Matrix: Animistic Beliefs and the Need for Social Integration

Yunnan’s ethnic minorities generally hold animistic primitive religious concepts and polytheistic belief systems, where mountains, rivers, trees, animals, and even specific plants are believed to possess divinity or spirituality. Within this conceptual framework, “incense” is endowed with a sacred mediatory attribute, becoming a bridge for communication between humans, gods, ancestors, and natural spirits. The wispy rising of incense

smoke is seen as a symbol of wishes and reverence reaching the upper realms. Therefore, incense is an indispensable sacred object in rituals such as the Dai's "Dana" making offerings to Buddha, the Naxi's Heaven Worship ceremony, the Bai's Benzhu local patron deity worship, and the Yi's Torch Festival rituals. This profound religious foundation elevates incense use from an individual physiological need to a collective practice that strengthens ethnic identity, transmits cultural memory, and regulates social ethics. Incense customs are deeply integrated with ritual customs and ceremonial rules, constituting an important mechanism for maintaining social order and cultural continuity.

### **Unity in Diversity: Aromatic Therapy Practices and Cultural Expressions of Representative Ethnic Groups in Yunnan**

#### **The Dai: A Holistic Healing System Based on the "Pagodas and Aggregates" Theory**

Dai aromatic therapy is one of the most systematic and mature representatives within Yunnan's ethnic medicine. Its theoretical foundation stems from the Dai medical theory of "Four Tat and Five Khandhas" (Si Ta Wu Yun), which posits the balance of wind, fire, water, and earth as the core of health. It is believed that aromatic substances, through respiration and skin penetration, can regulate the Four Tat, thereby influencing the human "Five Khandhas" (form, sensation, perception, mental formations, consciousness), achieving holistic healing of body and mind). Practical techniques are rich and diverse, encompassing smoke fumigation, aromatic bath therapy, sachet wearing, topical application, and internal administration of incense-medicines. The collective aromatic bathing during the Water-Splashing Festival serves both as a religious purification ritual and a public health practice for preventing seasonal diseases. Daily practices like using lemongrass boiled water to dispel dampness or calamus drink to prevent heatstroke demonstrate the high degree of integration between aromatic therapy and daily life. The Dai aromatic therapy system showcases its traditional public health wisdom, particularly in addressing respiratory diseases, rheumatic pain, and emotional regulation.

#### **The Naxi: "Five Elements" Incense Rituals and Spiritual Healing Within the Dongba Cultural Context**

Naxi incense culture is deeply embedded in the Dongba cultural system. The making and use of incense strictly follow the "Five Elements" cosmology (wood, fire, earth, iron/metal, water). Incense is seen as a "messenger" for Dongba priests to communicate with deities and is also considered good medicine for purifying space and calming the spirit. Dongba incense formulas are often secretly transmitted from master to disciple, primarily using local materials like cypress wood, pine branches, and high-altitude herbs, involving complex processes. In various rituals such as Heaven Worship, Ancestor Worship, Disaster Dispelling, and Healing, specific incense products and fumigation rituals are indispensable, forming a unique "olfactory ritual" and spiritual health cultivation system. Naxi aromatic therapy particularly emphasizes "purifying the heart first, healing the body second", prioritizing spiritual soothing and guidance, representing a profound practice of traditional Chinese emotional therapy in an ethnic context.

#### **The Bai: Ritual Incense Customs and Social Norms Within the Local Deity Faith Framework**

Bai incense culture is closely centered around the Benzhu faith. Benzhu, whose origins are diverse including natural deities and heroic ancestors, are village guardian gods. Incense use is the core ritual for venerating Benzhu, pervading all important festivals like the March Street Fair, Benzhu temple fairs, and life-cycle rituals such as weddings and funerals. The Bai possess exquisite intangible cultural heritage-level incense-making skills, producing incense with elegant and long-lasting fragrances. Their incense customs strictly stipulate "purify the

body before worshipping deities, revere the heart before using incense”, directly linking the external act of incense use with internal moral cultivation and adherence to community norms. Thus, for the Bai, incense is not only a medium for human-deity interaction but also a key cultural symbol and social integration tool that strengthens community ethics, clarifies social status, and coheres cultural identity.

### **The Yi: Fumigation, Epidemic Prevention, and Ecological Adaptation in the Hearth Culture Context**

Yi incense culture centers around the household hearth. Burning aromatic plants like mugwort (*Artemisia argyi*), pine resin, cypress leaves, and *Atractylodes lancea* in the hearth utilizes the high temperature of the flame to accelerate the release of aromatic volatile oils to achieve comprehensive purposes of repelling mosquitoes and insects, air disinfection, dispelling dampness and preventing miasma, and expelling “evil and impurity”. Large-scale sprinkling pine resin powder and smoking mugwort during the Torch Festival are both climactic rituals of the grand celebration and serve significant group epidemic prevention functions. This practice of “using fire to carry incense, using incense to ward off evil fully embodies the Yi’s cultural adaptation wisdom to the cold and damp plateau environment, exemplifying the perfect integration of practical rationality and symbolic meaning.

### **The Pumi and Northwest Yunnan Ethnic Groups: Aromatic Therapy Simplicity in High-Altitude Ecology**

Facing the high-altitude cold, resource-scarce environment of the plateau, ethnic groups like the Pumi and Tibetans have developed an aromatic therapy system centered on a few high-altitude aromatic plants like *Cymbopogon distans* and *Nardostachys jatamansi*. *Cymbopogon distans* can be fumigated, worn, consumed as tea, applied topically, with wide-ranging uses for dispelling cold, unblocking nasal passages, preventing and treating colds, calming the spirit. Their aromatic therapy practices are characterized by simple material acquisition, flexible application methods, and emphasis on practical efficacy, profoundly embodying the eco-thrifty wisdom of “using less for more, maximizing utility”, and offering an intuitive reflection of ethnic ecological ethics in daily life practices.

## **Interwoven Multiple Functions: The Social Life and Ecological Implications of Incense Culture**

### **Medical Function: A Localized Health Cultivation System Integrated Into Daily Life**

Yunnan ethnic aromatic therapy is based on the material foundation of various active components like aromatic plant volatile oils, which are absorbed through the respiratory tract and skin to exert antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, immunoregulatory, and nervous system soothing effects. It is not an independent medical system but a body of practical knowledge embedded in daily healthcare, seasonal disease prevention, chronic disease regulation, and physical and mental adjustment around significant rituals. It emphasizes preventing disease before it occurs and valuing regulation, accumulating rich experience especially in dealing with regionally prevalent diseases, e.g., rheumatism, respiratory infections and emotional issues, constituting a highly distinctive component of the treasure trove of traditional ethnic medicine.

### **Belief and Ritual Function: Constructing Cosmic Order and the Spiritual World**

Within the animistic cognitive framework, incense is a sacred medium penetrating all important rituals sacrifices, praying for blessings, exorcism, funerals. The burning process of incense symbolizes the communication, purification, and transformation between the secular world and the sacred realm. It strengthens community faith identity; periodic ritual incense use continuously repeats and confirms the cosmic order and human-deity relationships, providing sacred guarantee and spiritual consolation for community life.

**Social Function: Regulating Etiquette and Cohering the Ethnic Group**

Incense use deeply intervenes in the reproduction of social relations. In weddings, funerals, guest reception, and village deliberations, the types, quantities, and methods of incense use have detailed regulations, invisibly marking and reinforcing social members' status, seniority, and roles. Shared incense customs become a cultural boundary distinguishing "us" from "them"; the shared olfactory experience in periodic collective rituals powerfully strengthens the internal cohesion and cultural belonging of the ethnic group. In this sense, incense culture acts as a "social adhesive".

**Ecological Function: Local Knowledge Imbued With Sustainable Development Principles**

The aromatic therapy practices of various ethnic groups generally follow simple ecological principles of "using local materials, collecting moderately, leaving the young and small, following the seasons". Many groups have faith-protected areas such as sacred mountains, dragon forests, and water-source forests where cutting or collecting is prohibited, objectively protecting the germplasm resources and habitats of aromatic plants. This traditional wisdom, which internalizes resource use and ecological protection within cultural taboos and customary law, provides valuable local perspectives and cultural paradigms for contemporary biodiversity conservation and sustainable natural resource management.

### **Inheritance Dilemmas Under Modernity's Impact and Contemporary Re-valuation**

**Multidimensional Challenges and Inheritance Crisis**

Currently, Yunnan's ethnic incense culture faces unprecedented systematic challenges: (1) Inheritance Gap: Elders holding core knowledge are aging, and the oral transmission inheritance chain is fragile and easily broken; (2) Market Impact: Cheap, industrialized incense products flood the market, squeezing the living space for traditional natural incense and weakening its cultural uniqueness; (3) Knowledge Loss: A vast amount of "tacit knowledge" concerning spice identification, formulas, processing techniques, and ritual procedures risks disappearing with the passing of inheritors before being systematically recorded and organized; (4) Ecological Pressure: Over-harvesting driven by commercialization leads to the depletion of some wild aromatic plant resources, shaking the material foundation of incense culture; (5) Identity Shift: Younger generations' lifestyles and cultural identities are increasingly diversified, reducing their participation and sense of identity in traditional customs.

**Rediscovering Contemporary Value**

Despite these challenges, the contemporary value of Yunnan's ethnic incense culture is being reilluminated in new contexts: (1) Academic Value: As a typical case of human-nature-society-spirit interaction, it provides vivid samples for ethnology, anthropology, and ecology research. (2) Health Value: Its concept and practice of holistic healing of body and mind highly align with trends in contemporary integrative medicine, preventive medicine, psychotherapy, and aromatherapy. (3) Cultural Value: It is an important resource for forging a sense of community for the Chinese nation and showcasing cultural diversity. The ecological ethics and community spirit it contains offer inspiration for constructing ecological civilization and a harmonious society. (4) Economic and Social Value: Integration with cultural tourism, health industries, cultural and creative design, etc., can foster characteristic industries, assisting rural revitalization in ethnic regions and cultural improvement of people's cultural livelihood.

## **Towards Living Inheritance and Creative Transformation: Pathways for Discussion**

### **Rescue, Systematization, and Digital Archiving of the Knowledge System**

Conduct interdisciplinary joint fieldwork, using text, audio recording, visual recording, physical specimens, and other means to comprehensively and systematically record the knowledge, skills, rituals, and cultural contexts of various ethnic groups' aromatic therapy. Establish open-access digital archives and knowledge graphs to achieve permanent preservation and visualized presentation of endangered knowledge.

### **Deepening Scientific Interpretation and Cultural Reading**

Employ modern pharmacology, phytochemistry, psychology, and other methods to conduct cautious, respectful scientific verification and interpretation of the efficacy and mechanisms of traditional aromatic therapy. Simultaneously, there is a greater need for deep cultural readings from the perspectives of cultural anthropology and folklore studies to interpret the underlying cosmology, views of the body, society, and ecology, achieving dialogue and complementarity between “scientific discourse” and “cultural meaning”.

### **Innovating Inheritance Mechanisms and Talent Cultivation**

Support the inclusion of core skills in various levels of intangible cultural heritage lists. Establish apprenticeship and teaching centers at multiple points within communities, schools, and inheritance bases, encouraging the combination of “master-apprentice systems” with formal education. Design experiential education programs targeting youth and the public to stimulate intrinsic interest and cultivate a new generation of inheritors equipped with both traditional knowledge and modern perspectives.

### **Promoting Ecological Cultivation and Sustainable Industrial Development**

Establish in-situ conservation areas for important aromatic plants. Promote under-forest wild-simulated planting models and develop community-managed spice cooperatives to ensure sustainable supply of raw materials and benefit-sharing. Build regional public brands with cultural depth and ecological credibility, promoting the integration of incense culture products with health tourism, in-depth experiential tourism, cultural and creative R&D, forming a virtuous cycle of “culture tourism, and industry culture”.

## **Conclusion**

Over a long historical process, Yunnan's ethnic groups, using locally abundant aromatic plant resources as the material carrier, an animistic belief system as the spiritual core, and the practical needs of community life as the guide, creatively developed the unique incense culture system of “homology of medicine and incense, symbiosis of incense and custom”. This system transcends simple medical techniques; it is a comprehensive life wisdom and cultural heritage integrating ecological cognition, bodily practice, sacred beliefs, and social norms.

Facing the tide of modernization, neither simple “museum-style” preservation nor blind commercial development is viable strategies. Future protection and development should adhere to the basic concepts of “living inheritance” and “creative transformation”. This entails consolidating the foundation and nurturing the source through digitization, education, etc., to safeguard its core knowledge and cultural genes, while also stimulating internal vitality through interdisciplinary research, integration with ecological industries, and incorporation into contemporary life. This will allow the ecological wisdom, health concepts, and social harmony ideology it contains to radiate enduring vitality across time and space in serving contemporary better life,

promoting ecological civilization construction, and advancing ethnic unity and progress. This endeavor is not only about cherishing and continuing diverse ethnic cultures but also a profound exploration of how humanity can live in harmony with nature and build a warmer social community.

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