

Ethnobotanical Survey of Aromatic Plants Used in Rituals and Healing Practices as a Cultural and Therapeutic Tapestry

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DESCRIPTION

The traditional use of aromatic plants in rituals and healing is a practice that predates written history, embedded deeply in the spiritual and medicinal cultures of indigenous and rural societies worldwide. The intersection of plant science and cultural anthropology known as ethnobotany plays a critical role in understanding these ancient relationships. Conducting ethnobotanical surveys of aromatic plants used in rituals and healing not only preserves traditional knowledge but also offers insights that may be valuable for modern medicine, cultural studies, and environmental conservation.

Aromatic plants, due to their strong fragrances and essential oil content, are among the most frequently used botanical resources in ceremonial, religious, and healing contexts. In many cultures, these plants serve as both spiritual mediators and therapeutic agents. For example, the burning of frankincense and myrrh in African and Middle Eastern spiritual traditions serves both to purify the space and deliver calming or antiseptic effects through inhalation. Similarly, in India, tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) and sandalwood (*Santalum album*) are not only worshipped but also widely used in Ayurvedic medicine for their adaptogenic, antibacterial, and cooling properties.

An ethnobotanical survey typically involves fieldwork in remote or rural regions where traditional plant use remains a living practice. This process includes interviews with local healers, elders, and religious practitioners, as well as direct observation of rituals and healing ceremonies. Such research often reveals how local communities categorize, prepare, and use aromatic plants for both physical and spiritual ailments. It also highlights the symbolic meanings ascribed to specific species meanings that are often transmitted orally across generations.

What makes aromatic plants particularly significant in rituals and healing is their dual impact: the physical properties of their essential oils and the psychological or symbolic effects they invoke. Plants like sage (*Salvia officinalis*), lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), and rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) are globally known for their ability to relax the mind, clear negative energy, and enhance mental focus. When used in spiritual ceremonies,

their effects go beyond aroma they are believed to invoke divine protection, healing, or emotional cleansing.

Moreover, the geographical and cultural diversity of aromatic plant use is striking. In the Andean regions, coca leaves are not merely chewed for stamina; they are also offered to mountain spirits in ritual contexts. In Southeast Asia, pandan leaves (*Pandanus amaryllifolius*) are used in both culinary and spiritual settings to bring blessings and prosperity. In North America, Native tribes burn cedar, sweetgrass, and tobacco in smudging ceremonies to purify and communicate with ancestral spirits. Each practice reflects a deeply rooted belief in the interdependence of humans, nature, and the metaphysical world.

However, this rich tapestry of botanical tradition is under threat. Rapid urbanization, deforestation, and the erosion of indigenous cultures are leading to the disappearance of both plant species and the knowledge systems that sustain them. Ethnobotanical surveys thus become urgent acts of preservation not just of scientific data but of cultural heritage. These studies provide a platform for communities to document their wisdom and potentially benefit from it, whether through community-based conservation efforts or ethical collaborations in herbal product development.

Importantly, the outcomes of such surveys can also inform modern integrative healthcare systems. Aromatherapy, once considered alternative, is now gaining scientific backing for its effectiveness in managing stress, insomnia, and even pain. The validation of traditional uses through phytochemical and clinical research could pave the way for incorporating safe and effective plant-based therapies into mainstream practice. For example, recent studies on essential oils from holy basil, lemongrass, and eucalyptus have demonstrated antimicrobial, anxiolytic, and anti-inflammatory effects—corroborating their ethnobotanical uses.

Still, researchers must approach these surveys with ethical sensitivity and cultural humility. Intellectual property rights, benefit sharing, and informed consent are important crucial elements of responsible ethnobotanical research. Too often, traditional knowledge has been extracted without recognition or

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Received: 16-May-2025, Manuscript No. MAP-25-37809 **Editor assigned:** 19-May-2025, PreQC No. MAP-25-37809 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 02-Jun-2025, QC No. MAP-25-37809; **Revised:** 09-Jun-2025, Manuscript No. MAP-25-37809 (R); **Published:** 16-Jun-2025, DOI: 10.35248/2167-0412.24.14.511

Citation: Iqbal N (2025) Ethnobotanical Survey of Aromatic Plants Used in Rituals and Healing Practices as a Cultural and Therapeutic Tapestry. Med Aromat Plant. 14:511.

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compensation, leading to biopiracy and exploitation. New models of community participation, collaborative research with local knowledge holders are helping to address these ethical gaps.

The role of women in transmitting knowledge about aromatic and medicinal plants also deserves greater recognition. In many

traditional societies, women serve as healers, midwives, and keepers of ritualistic practices, making their contributions central to the ethnobotanical landscape. Surveys must actively engage with and include women's voices to present a holistic understanding of plant use.