

# Cultural Characteristics Of Vietnam's Agarwood

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**Abstract:** Agarwood (Tràm Hương) is formed from *Aquilaria Crassna* Pierre ex Lecomte tree, in which Agarwood in Khanh Hoa province (Vietnam) is one of the best and wonderful type of Agarwood in the world with the highest quality and value. Agarwood is the most precious gift that nature bestows on Vietnam and Vietnamese. In the world's history and culture, Agarwood is always attached to the most sacred and noble things and it is an inseparable part of world's religion and belief. Agarwood presents in all major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Shinto. Regarding Vietnamese people, Agarwood and its incense are indispensable in all spiritual rituals and in traditional beliefs such as ancestor worship, Mother worship.

**Key words:** Agarwood, Agarwood incense, Vietnamese Agarwood,

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## I. Agarwood, a precious product of Vietnam

Agarwood (Tràm Hương) is formed from *Aquilaria Crassna* tree of the family Thymelaeaceae, and those mostly grew in India, Bangladesh and Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, *Aquilaria Crassna* trees are distributed from Nghe An province southward to Phu Quoc (Kien Giang province). Among them, Agarwood in Khanh Hoa province is the highest value and quality in comparison with other types of agarwood. From 570 million years ago, when the volcano erupted, a fertile red basalt land spread from the Central Highlands (Tay Nguyen region) to the coastal area of Khanh Hoa province. The mountainous terrain combined with the intersection of the two hot and cold ocean currents cause that the various ecosystem in Khanh Hoa is the most biodiversity in Southeast Asia. This special climate area affects tropical forests, causing plants to gather the aura of heaven and earth to gradually form, including Agarwood. Therefore, when people talks to Khanh Hoa province, it must be mentioned Agarwood:

“Khanh Hoa is the place of Agarwood

Loved people go high mountains and wide sea”

In Vietnam's traditional culture, there is a concept that Agarwood is the incense of the sky that flies with the wind and lands on the wound on *Aquilaria Crassna* trees. That tree is molded by the soil, the sun, the sea breeze and other special natural conditions and therefore Agarwood is the spirit of heaven and earth. Scholars Le Quy Don also argued that “The Agarwood incense in the top of the mountain in the communes of Binh Khang and Dien Khanh (today they are in Khanh Hoa province) in Quang Nam region is the best; which ones in Phu Yen and Quy Nhon areas are the second”.<sup>1</sup> Agarwood and Ky Nam (the best quality Vietnamese agarwood) are special products of the *Aquilaria Crassna* trees, but there is only one tree among thousands can create Agarwood, while Ky Nam is difficult to collect because it depends on the grace of people who find it. Only when the tree is injured (such as due to termites, chiseled ants, lightning strikes, shrapnel,...), it will secrete resin to protect the wound, thereby leading to a change in wood quality and then create Agarwood and Ky Nam. Therefore, it is often said that "suffering turns into Agarwood" to symbolize that the tree has to go through a lot of "pain" but does not fall to become a fragrant Agarwood. The image of the *Aquilaria Crassna* tree also creates a lesson to teach their next generations to work hard to achieve success.

Due to the difference in languages, Agarwood has many different names. Although this precious product is only available in a very few countries around the world, Agarwood has names in many languages. This shows the respect and esteem of Agarwood everywhere. In Vietnamese, the names Agarwood and Ky Nam (the best type of Agarwood, with great value, found only in the mountains of Khanh Hoa province) are Sino-Vietnamese words.<sup>2</sup> In Chinese: 沉香木 means frankincense wood; and 奇南 means Ky Nam or the miracle of country in the South (means Dai Viet, the previous name of Vietnam). In Japanese, 神道 -Jinkoh means

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<sup>1</sup> Le Quy Don, *A compilation of the Miscellaneous Records when the Southern Border was pacified*, Culture and Information Publishing, Hanoi, 2007, p. 403.

<sup>2</sup> Do Tat Loi, *Medicinal plants and herbs in Vietnam*, Hanoi, 1981, pp. 449-450.

Agarwood and Kyara, Kanankoh means Ky Nam; but both of them are original Sino sounds. Interestingly, there is no Agarwood in mainland China and this country only has *Aquilaria Sinensis*, a medicine for colic.<sup>3</sup> And there is also no Agarwood in Japan, and this country had to import 100% Agarwood from other Vietnam and other countries in Southeast Asia. Therefore, based on those data, we assume that the names Agarwood and Ky Nam originate from Vietnam.

In Indonesian, Gaharu is Agarwood. In India, there are many concepts for Agarwood; for example, in Sanskrit, it is Agar, and in Hindi it is Agar. Aluwwa is Agarwood in Arabic and it is Ahaloth or Oud in Hebrew. In Portuguese, Agarwood is Aguila. In French, calambac is Agarwood and Calambour d'aigle means Ky Nam.<sup>4</sup>

In English, the name of Agarwood is more complicated because its name is translated from many different language sources. The common noun when referring to all kinds of incense, including Agarwood incense is Frankincense or incense. Frankincense is a combination of "Frank" and "incense", which means agarwood of the Franks, which means a good, high-grade incense used by the Franks. Moreover, there are many different names to show Agarwood, such as: aloeswood, eaglewood, oudwood; and therefore, they can make confusions.

As a results, it can be seen that the names of Agarwood in the world are very various. That richness is due to the fact that Agarwood has a noble, unique aroma that is known, sought and used in many countries for thousand years. And in Vietnam, Agarwood is one of the most noticeable cultural characteristics.

## **II. Agarwood in humankind's spiritual culture**

Due to the specific climatic and soil conditions, Agarwood has traditionally used and traded in Asian countries than other regions.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, some countries can produce Agarwood are Vietnam, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. In which, most scholars consider that Khanh Hoa's Agarwood is the highest quality in the world. However, many people still confuse origins of Vietnamese Agarwood because of the following reasons:

Firstly, China, Japan, and some countries in the Middle East have a huge demand for Agarwood, and they use a lot of Agarwood, even more than those countries that can produce Agarwood.

Secondly, some countries such as China, India, Japan have great ancient civilizations so many people often "misunderstands" that they are the homeland of Agarwood because the frequent use of Agarwood in those countries and the influence of the theory of "Indoctrination" in culture. Many Vietnamese people also have the same mistake when they think that Agarwood comes from China and Japan.

However, it must be affirmed that Vietnam is one of the cradles of Agarwood. For example, in the ancient Champa Kingdom's culture, Agarwood and Ky Nam are considered sacred mascots, associated with the incarnation of the goddess Po Nagar (which the Vietnamese call Thien Y Thanh Mau).

Agarwood is always attached to the most sacred and noble things and it is an inseparable part of Vietnam's and of the world's religion and belief. Agarwood presents in all major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Japanese Shinto... Because, for all of the above beliefs and religions, the sacred, pure and ethereal fragrant smoke of Agarwood is a kind of sacred offering and is said to be able to connecting mundane people with the world above, the sacred world where humans cannot see, cannot feel, cannot reach, but the smoke of Agarwood and Agarwood incense can be reached. Thanks to frankincense, the sacred and noble person will understand the supplications, and their wishes with full of respect and adoration in the world.

For example, the fragrant smoke from Agarwood had been used in ancient Egypt since before 1470 BC, when the queen Hatshepsut (1508 - 1458 BC) sent 5 galleys to Punt and carried back many unique goods. The most prominent and luxurious commodities are myrrh and Agarwood which can be made incense sticks for daily use at temples and tombs.<sup>6</sup> In China, the image of bronze peaks (incense censers) was also one of the symbols of civilization in thousand years. Archaeologists have unpacked bronze peaks from the Shang Dynasty (1766 -

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<sup>3</sup> Nguyen Hien & Vo Van Chi, *Agarwood*, Science and Technology Publishing, Hanoi, 1991, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> J.A.C. Greppin, "The various aloes in ancient times" *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*, 16 (1988), pp. 33-48; D.J. McKenna & K. Hughes, *The incense bible: Plant scents that transcend world culture, medicine, and spirituality* (New York, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Nguyen Van Tuong, Tran Ngoc Dung, Nguyen Duy Thai, The importation of Agarwood into Japan in the medieval period, <https://ordi.vn/su-du-nhap-cua-tram-huong-den-nhat-ban-thoi-ky-trung-dai.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Marcel Westerlund (2015), *Hatshepsut*, Mid-Atlantic Wellness Institute.

1122 BC) that were used to sacrifice heaven and earth, gods.<sup>7</sup> In the Han Dynasty (202 BC - 220), there were 博山 burners in houses of noble families and high-ranking mandarins, and they were used to burn Agarwood, which made "those who enjoy this incense smoke as falling into a dream".<sup>8</sup> In ancient Greece and Rome, places of worship had an acera tripod, which contained incense.<sup>9</sup> Alexander the Great (356 - 323 BC) was famous, especially fond of burning incense at the holy altar. Leonides, Alexander's teacher said that Alexander worshiped the gods by smoking incense.<sup>10</sup>

In the ancient Near East, incense was often used in religious and royal ceremonies. Kings and Mandarins often offered incense and priests burned incense. Agarwood was always only for the nobility whether in Babylonia or in Israel. On a rock dating to around 1175 BC, there is an image of the king standing in front of a god with an incense stick lit between them.<sup>11</sup>

In ancient India, Agarwood was mentioned in religious texts of Hinduism and Buddhism. This fact shows the long existence and use of the luxurious Agarwood. In the epic Mahabharata (writing down Indian history from 1493 to 1443 BC), Agarwood was mentioned as an expression of wealth, luxury and human happiness.<sup>12</sup>

In Japan, Kodo is famous all over the world, although this is not the hometown of Agarwood. In Japanese chronicles, the first record of Agarwood was in 595: An Agarwood tree drifted onto Awaji Island. The people on the island had no concept of Agarwood, so they used it as firewood for cooking, causing its aroma to spread and cover the island. Seeing this, they presented it to Emperor Suiko as a present.<sup>13</sup> Under the Emperor Shomu (724 - 748), the most famous and considered national treasure of Japan, a piece of Ky Nam, was found on the coast. Currently, this block of Ky Nam is still intact, managed by the Imperial Japanese Agency and displayed at the Nara National Museum. Previously, the Japanese believed that the Ky Nam chunks came from China, but many studies proved that this Ky Nam originated from Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> For hundreds of years, Japanese people have depended greatly on the Vietnam's supply of Agarwood. Especially, in the "Red Seal" trade in the early seventeenth century, Agarwood was an indispensable goods for exchange between the two countries, although the price was very expensive.<sup>15</sup>

In Vietnam, the Agarwood culture has a long history of thousand years and it is particularly profound. The noble sacredness of Agarwood can be seen through the two of the Nine Peaks of the Nguyen Dynasty (1802 - 1945). One of them (Cao đình) has sculpture of Agarwood, and another one (Nhân đình) had sculpture of Ky Nam. The Nine Peaks of the Nguyen Dynasty was a panorama of rivers, mountains, young water and typical products of Vietnam in the early nineteenth century, in which Agarwood and Ky Nam were especially favored.

In conclusion, people in all civilizations has the same opinion that burning incense creates a light, thin, curving fragrant smoke, and it will help connect people to heaven and make people happy. But Agarwood only appears in the most noble and sacred places, even the tools that come with Agarwood (bronze pots, worshiping objects...) are also the pinnacle of culture and art.

### **III. Agarwood in Vietnamese cultural values**

From the above examples, it can be seen that, from ancient times, Vietnam's Agarwood and especially Ky Nam have captivated many countries and peoples around the world. Unluckily, many Vietnamese only know about Agarwood but they do not understand this treasure although Agarwood has entered the depths of Vietnamese life and become a core cultural value.

#### **\* Agarwood in Vietnamese rituals and beliefs**

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<sup>7</sup> Ly Tung, (2013), Chinese bronze goods, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ly Tung, (2013), Chinese bronze goods, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing, p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> Nigel Groom (1981), *Frankincense and Myrrh : A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> Pliny the Elder (1 century BC), *The Natural History* chap 32.

<sup>11</sup> Amiet (1980), *Art of the Ancient Near East*, Abrams, New York, p. 516.

<sup>12</sup> R.N. Iyengar (2003), *Internal consistency of eclipses and planetary positions in Mahabharata*, Indian Journal of History of Science, 38(2), pp. 77 – 115.

<sup>13</sup> W.G. Aston (translated from the original Chinese and Japanese), *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the earliest times to A.D. 697* (London, 1896).

<sup>14</sup> David Oller & Kyozauro Nakata (1999), Japanese incense Aloeswood - Agarwood, Baieido

<sup>15</sup> Li Tana (2013), *Nguyen Cochinchina : Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Youth Publishing, Ho Chi Minh City, p. 133.

If Agarwood is the word to refer to the pure one, incense refers to the type of incense sticks that has the main ingredient from Agarwood plus a number of other flavorings and materials. Agarwood incense has been associated with Vietnamese national culture for thousand years. Firstly, incense sticks are used in the life-cycle rituals of Vietnamese people from the full-month ceremony, the full-year ceremony, the marriage ceremony and the funeral rites, as they are considered as a way to connect with their ancestors and deities. Every month, incense sticks are used in the ancestral worshipping belief. Whether the poor or the rich, the ancestral altar is always taken care of and placed in the best position in the house. On the altar, there are “censer, candle, vase and incense tube...”<sup>16</sup> With its pure aroma and sacred white smoke, Agarwood will connect people with their ancestor and deities. Therefore, other types of incense which makes from sawdust and flavorings (even toxic chemicals) can never be compared with Agarwood or traditional incense in both spirituality and health.<sup>17</sup> We consider that because agarwood and its incense are closely related to Vietnamese daily life, they sometimes forget this cultural identity.

**\* Agarwood as a precious product, an important trading commodity, and a precious gift to the king**

In the Vietnamese feudal period, Agarwood and Ky Nam were only used by the King, royal families and Rulers exclusively. Before 2005, Agarwood was a banned product in Vietnam's trade. Cristoforo Borri (1583 - 1632), an Italian missionary, in his book about Cochinchina, mentioned that: “The Lord kept the monopoly to trade Ky Nam because of its fragrance and special effects... Only one ship with full stock of Agarwood was enough for merchants to become rich and prosperous for whole life”.<sup>18</sup> Some documents of the Nguyen Dynasty show that whenever Ky Nam is found, the mandarins and people must seal it up and send it back to the capital for the King. Interestingly, the report of the Governor of Khanh Hoa province, Trinh Ngoc Lam to the King Thieu Tri argued that Ky Nam was able to pay taxes.<sup>19</sup> As a result, there is difficult for Vietnamese people to have their own a piece of agarwood or Ky Nam.

Vietnam's Agarwood has actively participated in international trade because of its preciousness and uniqueness. This trade can be mentioned in the records of Marco Polo in his travel book written in the 13th century<sup>20</sup>, or the books of Tome Pires (1465 - 1524): the best type of Agarwood originates from the southern region of Vietnam, called Calambac.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Vietnam's Agarwood and its existence in the regional trade routes are also found in many studies about the maritime silk trade road, or on the diplomatic relations between Vietnam and China,<sup>22</sup> or in the Vietnam - Japan trade route with the Red Seal ships.<sup>23</sup> Until now, evaluations of Vietnam's Agarwood on the international market have not changed. Agarwood from Vietnam is at the grade 1, with the highest value, sometimes they are 2-3 million Vietnamese dong per kg.

According to Mr. Nguyen Van Tuong, the "servant" of Agarwood trees, the Chairman of Khanh Hoa Agarwood Company – ATC<sup>24</sup>, only a few veteran Agarwood makers in Khanh Hoa province know about a special forest called Son Tap forest (where Tay Son military exercised) in the Van Ninh district (where it is known as the hometown of Agarwood and Ky Nam). It is said that, the Tay Son insurgents planted a lot of Aquilaria Crassna trees and used Agarwood and Ky Nam to exchange for weapons.

**\* Agarwood as a symbol of fine things in Vietnamese literature and art**

Agarwood entered Vietnamese literature and poetry, especially in the “Tale of Kieu” by the great poet Nguyen Du (UNESCO's list of World Cultural Celebrities):

When Kim Trong met Thuy Kieu in the first time:

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<sup>16</sup> Nguyen Van Huyen (2020), Vietnamese civilization, Writers Association Publisher, p. 70.

<sup>17</sup> In Vietnam's medical history, especially in books of famous doctors Tue Tinh, Hai Thuong Lan Ong, Agarwood is mentioned as a rare medicinal herb to treat many chronic diseases.

<sup>18</sup> **Cristoforo Borri** (1998), Cochinchina in 1621, Ho Chi Minh City Publishing, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> **Chau ban** of Nguyen Dynasty, Thieu Tri Dynasty, volume 1, sheet 266, National Archives Center 1, Hanoi.

<sup>20</sup> **The Book of Ser Marco Polo, translate by Henry Yule (London: John Murray, 1903), Vol. II, pp. 266-268.**

<sup>21</sup> **Pires** (1944), *The suma oriental of Tome Pires: An account of the East, from the Red Sea to China*, written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515, p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> Vu Duc Liem (2019), The Song Dynasty, Southeast Asia and the rift of the tribute scene, Journal of Historical Review, vol.1, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Li Tana (2013), *Nguyen Cochinchina : Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Youth Publishing, Ho Chi Minh City.

<sup>24</sup> **Lê Ái, Tiễn Đạt** (2020), The servant of Agarwood trees, <http://daidoanket.vn/nguoi-phung-su-cay-tram-huong-viet-nam-435068.html>.

“There is still a faint scent of Agarwood that has not faded”

When Kim Trong and Thuy Kieu swore to each other:

“Hastily made the procession to enter

The lotus is connected to wax, but peaches add incense”

Kim Trong decided to find Thuy Kieu:

“Sometimes the study room is empty,

Burning incense and playing the past music.

Broken bai drooling silk,

Agarwood's smoke blows in the winds”

And finally, when they make their wishes, come back together:

“Music is gentle on the hand of the fairy,

*The smoke of frankincense mixed with the echoing sound of the zither”*

It can be seen that Agarwood always presents in the most special moments of Kim Trong and Thuy Kieu's love. Remarkably, while the old poets often borrowed the moonlight to speak for their hearts, Nguyen Du chose Agarwood.<sup>25</sup> It's strange but also "worthy" because Agarwood is pure, ethereal, and it embodies the best things that heaven and earth send through fragrance. There is nothing finer than moments with Agarwood incense.

The great poet Nguyen Du came from a "famous family", as his father Nguyen Nghiem was a Minister. Therefore, the great poet had the opportunity to interact with Agarwood and bring the sacredness and nobility of Agarwood into the immortal poems of “Tale of Kieu” and glorify the fragrance of Vietnam.

#### **\* Agarwood as the most precious gift in Vietnam's diplomatic culture**

In Vietnam's diplomatic history, together with gold, silver, rhino horn, ivory..., Agarwood has an irreplaceable role and it is used as the most solemn diplomatic present. In the diplomatic relations with China for thousand years, Agarwood and Ky Nam played an important role as gifts since the reign of the King Le Dai Hanh. In the Song dynasty, it is recorded that: "in the 8th year of Thai Binh Hung Quoc (983), Le Hoan sent an ambassador, Trieu Tu Ai, to China with presents of 100 pieces of ivory, 200 kg of incense, 10,000 packs of silk, and 100 peacock feathers".<sup>26</sup>

Following that diplomatic culture, Vietnam's Government selected the traditional Agarwood fan as a gift for international political leaders, scholars and businessmen in the event of APEC Vietnam 2017 to show the hospitality and goodwill of Vietnamese people towards special international guests.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Agarwood has been associated with the flow of Vietnamese history and culture for thousands of years. Vietnam's agarwood not only has tangible value but also imbued with great intangible values of culture, history, religion, belief, medicine, literature, art.. Agarwood is the most sacred, sacred Vietnamese fragrance.

The Chinese, Japanese...know how to enjoy Agarwood, tea and to watch flowers, and they consider those enjoyment is the pleasures of the masters. In Vietnam, it seems that there had been a profound art of rewarding Agarwood. This fact is mentioned in ancient records or is discovered through archaeological artifacts. However, over time, the art of rewarding Agarwood of Vietnamese has faded due to wars and historical influences. Each Vietnamese must have the responsibility to preserve and restore the cultural heritages from Agarwood - a treasure of nature bestowed on Vietnam and spread Vietnam's Agarwood around the world.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.tienphong.vn/van-hoa/thuong-tram-huong-cam-tho-kieu-nhung-tuong-dai-van-hoa-vn-chinh-phuc-the-gioi-1524169.tpo>

<sup>26</sup> Nguyen Thi Kieu Trang (2016), The tribute relation between Minh and Dai Viet, National Political Publishing House, p. 95.