

The Indigenous Knowledge of Illuminated Boat Procession of the Thai-Lao Ethnic Group in Mekong Sub-region

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Abstract: *The research design was mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The qualitative research was In-Dept Interview with 60 peoples comprised 40 Thais, and 20 Laos and quantitative research was survey research with 520 peoples of Thai-Lao ethnics group who involved in Illuminated Boat Procession (IBP). The content from qualitative research was analyzed to construct the questionnaire for quantitative research. Factor analysis was used for determination the component factors. The objectives of this research were to study conservation of Buddhism Srikotrabun culture relate to IBP and to analyze component factor of conserving IBP of Thai-Lao Ethnic Group in Mekong Sub-region. The results indicated that ten factors were as the followings: 1) Indigenous wisdom of IBP is secret codes for merit-making, and a knowledge center of three worlds (heaven, human and nether). 2) Local hydrographic knowledge related to geographical knowledge through practices of the Lord Buddha's worship and the ancestral worship. 3) The art of IBP passed from generation to generation via fundamental education. 4) Illuminated boat body of fire knowledge based on light and water that reflect dharma principles in human realm, the universe, god realm and the river god. 5) Physical knowledge of earth, water, air, and fire that related to the elimination of misery existed in all three realms: heaven, human and hell. 6) The lighted boat engineering and technology are wisdom related to aquatic plant and animal ecology. 7) During the festival, it is believed that motherhood and living creatures were born from the theories of physical science and wind folklore. 8) IBP is similar to the energy and chemical circulation in the living creatures' food chain. 9) IBP refers to philosophy and practices related to beliefs associated with Karma in Spirituality, Brahmanism, and Buddhism, and to protect ethnic and ecosystem. 10) The lighted boat construction is the procedure of merit practice, forgiving, and sacrificing connected to intellectual pathway.*

Keywords: *The Indigenous Knowledge / Illuminated Boat Procession / Thai-Lao Ethnic Group / Mekong Sub-region,*

1. Introduction

Indigenous knowledge is the accumulated knowledge and the expression of cultural diversity, and is worth preserving for next generations. Indigenous Knowledge is a valuable resource which is adaptable in facing present and future challenges. Thai-Lao ethnic group refers to a group of Thai people who live along Mekong River Basin and speak Laos. The area where the Thai-Lao ethnic group lives has long been regarded as the prosperous "Srikotrabun Kingdom", centered on the Mekong River basin. The resources from the Mekong river basin provide both income and sustenance to

over 60 million people who are leading subsistence agricultural lifestyles. The land yields petroleum, minerals, timber and coal, while water from various rivers supports agriculture and fisheries. The river has also provided a means of transportation, shipments and many more activities along 4,880 kilometers for thousands of years. The river originates in Qinghai province, China or on the Tibetan Plateau and flows through Chinese province of Yunnan, continuing a long southward journey, creating the international border between Laos and Myanmar, as well as between Laos and Thailand. Flowing through Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, it drains into the South China Sea to the south of Ho Chi Minh City. (Kasetsiri & Kumkoon, 2010). The Thai-Lao Ethnic group in Srikotrabun cultural area follows and adheres to the old tradition, called "Heed Sib Song Klong Sib See" (the twelve month tradition and the fourteen ways of life) as they believe the power of tradition creates customs within cultures and society (. This tradition has long been passed down through generations and has become distinctive in that society. The tradition of fire-worship, the old tradition that has still been carried on towards today, is known as the local wisdom and cultural heritage that has a direct link to beliefs and folk knowledge about the four elements; earth, water, air and fire. The examples of such tradition are including, "the second lunar month fire-worship" or the so-called "Yi Peng" of Lanna culture, the Illuminated Boat Procession held in Nakhon Phanom Province, Thailand and in Suwannaket Province, Lao PDR (Phanurat, 2011).

The Illuminated Boat Procession or *Lai Ruea Fai* (or *Huea Fai* festival in I-san Language) is also a part of Heed Sib Song tradition, in which *Lai Ruea Fai* is held from the full moon day to the first day of the waning moon of the 11th lunar month at the end of the Buddhist Lent (Saratassananun, 1986). The festival is celebrated in the areas surrounded by rivers or streams. Besides Thailand, this long-practiced custom is also found in many other countries, such as India, Vietnam, China, Cambodia and Myanmar. The evidence shows that the ritual practices are similar among these countries, which are based on beliefs such worshipping Buddha's footprints, worshipping the relics of the Buddha in heaven, rain pleading ceremony, a tradition related fire burning misery , expressing apologies or asking for forgiveness from and show respect to the river goddess, and such. Most of these rituals are based on Buddhism beliefs (Ketkaew, 1978). In the past, the illuminated boats were simply made from banana stems and bamboo trees, decorated with flowers, joss sticks and candlelight. After that, people will make a wish and float their decorated boats on the river (Saratassananun, 1987). At the present time, the new technology has been highly involved in the boat assembling process, therefore contemporary versions of the illuminated boats have become impressively constructed and decorated. Against the darkness of the moonlight, the sight of the illuminated boats lining up in the middle of the Mekong River, with the flickering light from candles and the firework displays that are launched simultaneously, is mesmerizing. This dazzling event creates an impressive scene for viewers (Santaweek, 1996). Today, the spectacular illuminated boat procession can be seen in several provinces in the Northeastern part of Thailand that are located on the Mekong River, such as Srisaket, Sakonnakorn, Nong Khai, Loei, Ubon Ratchathani, Nakorn Phanom, and MahaSarakam provinces. The beliefs and practices of the ceremony vary among these provinces (Krongkaew, 1981). However, the most well-known one is held in Nakorn Phanom province. According to Preeya Santaweek (1996:144), the tradition of fire-boats has been passed down through generations for more than 532 years. Its origin was associated with the beliefs of two religions- Brahmanism and Buddhism.

This research focuses on the study of Buddhism Srikotrabun culture relate to illuminated boat process of Thai-Lao Ethnic group in Thailand and Laos Ethnic group in Khammouane province, Lao PDR, particularly, on the history, beliefs, the conduct of a ceremony, the evolution of the lighted boats, and the differences in practices between the two countries. Even in Lao PDR, there was none of the documents that has ever explained this ceremony background in detail. Furthermore, this thesis also analyzes the factors regarding the illuminated boat procession, in order to preserve and protect Buddhism in Srikotrabun cultural area, Thailand. The results of this study will be applied to write policy proposals on a topic related to connection building among education, religion and culture in schools, as well as, to create a greater understanding of such indigenous knowledge, which leads to chances of beginning a new phase of development that will enhance the integrity of the ecosystem in the Mekong River basin.

2. Objectives

2.1 To study preservation of Buddhism Srikotrabun culture relate to IBP.

2.2 To analyze component factor of preserving IBP of Thai-Lao Ethnic Group in Mekong Sub-region.

3. Methodology

3.1 Qualitative research was used for data collection from In-Depth Interview form with 60 peoples comprised 40 Thais were from Muang and Tha-Uthen districts, Nakorn Phanom province in Thailand, 20 Laos were from Muang-Tha-Kak, Khammouane province in Lao PDR. The interviewees were from a broad range of groups- consisting of senior or folk

wiseman, the committees arranging the annual illuminated boat procession, manipulators of fire boat assembling, fire boat assemblers and the participants from the fire boat festival.

3.2 Quantitative research was survey research with 520 peoples of Thai-Lao ethnics group who ethnic group who live in Srikotrabun area, consisting of 200 students, 150 university students, 50 seniors aged 35-45 years old who have participated in the fire boat festival, 20 institutional committees, 20 village headmen and 80 teachers.

4. Results

The results showed that, the IBP has over 550 years of history. This festival has been celebrated since the year 1461 (Weerawong, 1986 : 39,42). It reflects Buddhist origins, Brahmanism as well as animistic beliefs and worship of ancestors, thus leading to customary social and religious practices. For instance, to worship Buddha's Footprints at Nummatanatee River Banks, to pay homage to Lord Buddha, to pay respect to the Triple Gem (Phra Buddha, Lord Buddha, Phra Dhamma) and the Five Buddhas, to worship the Naga (the Mythical Serpent God associated with water that dwells in three realms), to cast away one's grief, misery and ill-fortunes by setting the fireboats adrift, to express apologies and show respect to the river goddess, to worship ancestors and to use lanterns as a symbol of worship (Santaweessuk, 1996, and Trirayatha, interview, October 8th, 2011). In the past, the places used to conduct ceremonies were areas along the river. The local authorities then would arrange ceremony, by handing responsibility to some people to deal with boat building and prescribing procedures for conducting the ceremony. In the morning, people get up early to give food to the monks or to "Tak Bai Phra". After that, local people would gather up listening to the monks' sermons. The next activity was to worship the King's relics at Buddhist centers along both sides of Mekong River at Wat Phra That Phanom. A beautiful dance moves were to be performed in order to worship Phra That Phanom. In the afternoon, two ceremonies were held, the on land float-pulling ceremony and the Bee's Wax Castle Parade. At night, the fire boats were launched in the Mekong River and illuminated in a spectacular display. This illuminated boat procession in Thailand has continuously been carried down from several generations. However, in Lao PDR, the evidence has shown that, there had been a discontinuation of this event due to some political problems. Once the situations had settled, the ceremony was revived and from then onwards, the fire boat festival in Laos continued to be practiced once every year and it continues to this day. Traditionally, when it was several days prior to the Ork Phansa period, the monks would inform and invite local people to come together helping each other build and decorate the boats. The fire boats were made of natural materials such as bamboo, banana tree trunks, or other buoyant materials with a length of around 8-10 metres. The boats were decorated with materials that could be easily found in the vicinity, such as flowers, incense sticks, candles and lanterns. At approximately 11.00 am, the second meals were provided to the monks and were also given, as a treat, to those people who were engaged in the boat assembling process. In the afternoon, the locals dressed up and performed their traditional folk dances. The cultural performances and street processions created joyful moments for all. During the night time, these locals would place their homemade desserts and some other items that they want to donate onto their boats, then, lit them up with *ขี้กระเบื้อง* as an inflammable component, which had already been placed inside the boat. In some places, people attach *ขี้ไฟ* around the boat instead and lit them up. After that, the boats were set alight and floated down the Mekong River. The procession is celebrated on the 15th day of the waxing moon to the first day of the waning moon in the 11th lunar month of the Buddhist calendar (Poanharad, Interview. 2011: October 8th).

In Thailand, there are three types of illuminated boats: Ancient Illuminated Boat, On Land Illuminated Boat and Modern Illuminated Boat. However, there is no evidence for the existence of on land illuminated boats in Lao, PDR, which are the boats used for the parade. The boats contain sweets, the so-called Khao Tom Mud-stuffed fried sticky rice, objects to be donated inside and the tiny ancient boat (See Picture 1). The illuminated boat procession has been a part of the Thai-Lao Ethnic group in Mekong River since 1461 (Traiyata, interview. 2011: October, 8th). The rituals have changed over time due to changing environment and an advancement of technology. A rapid change in technology, such as engineering, design & architecture, together with the indigenous knowledge that has been passed down through generations, altered the illuminated boats' design, shape and size. The boats are spectacularly designed, larger in size, and varied in shapes. In order to make one of these lighted boats, it costs over thousand baht. A change in technology and cultural evolution has shaped the illuminated boat procession along the Mekong River Basin as it is today. The unique festival reflects the Buddhist merit-making rituals, cultural identity, indigenous culture, folk knowledge and skills of Nakorn Phanom local people. There are various methods to preserve and pass on this cultural heritage for future generations. The recommended method is to incorporate such indigenous culture into the school curriculum as a way to promote cultural-appreciation among younger generation. The Khammouane community started the idea of making the Modern Illuminated boats in 2006, with merely 5-7 boats initially (Kumpunya, Interview. 2011: October 9th). The sizes of

the boats in the Khammouane community were not as large as those in Thailand, indicating the early stages in technological development. Nevertheless, there's an emerging tendency to share or transfer the technological know-how between the two communities along the Mekong River Basin.

The findings indicate the differences of the festival's characteristics between the two communities which are as follows:

- 1) The illuminated boat procession in Thailand is organized by local authorities and is more systematized than the procession in Lao PDR.
- 2) The information of the fire-boat event is widely and more effectively communicated within people in the Thai community. The festival is grandly celebrated and the cost of organizing is considerably higher than the ones of Laos.
- 3) The illuminated boat procession in Khammouane community is similar to that of Loy Krathong festival in Thailand. In addition, the lighted boats in Laos, are designed similarly to the floating baskets that are set alight and floated down the river, on the full moon of the 12th month of the traditional Thai lunar calendar (Picture 1, A-B)
- 4) There's little evidence showing that the land-based parades of lights are practiced in Lao, PDR. There are few on-land illuminated boat processions, but they are not made for being set afloat down the Mekong River.
- 5) The modern illuminated boats in Thailand have been around since 1983 whilst the ones in Lao PDR have been around since 2006.
- 6) The sizes of the modern illuminated boats of the Khammouane community are 2-3 times smaller than those of Thai community (Picture 1, E-F)
- 7) Laos still lacks support from their government and local authorities. Hence, it is more difficult to preserve and maintain such traditional culture practices. In contrast, Thailand has more support from its government and local authorities in the conservation of IBP.
- 8) The binding bamboo strips or 4-6 long-tail boats were used to build the base of the modern illuminated boats as to create a buoy. Some people use woods and bamboos with 200 litre fuel tanks attached as their floatable base. (Picture 2, A-B) The interesting part is that, the bases of the lighted boats in Laos resemble those of Thai lighted boats that were structured in 1983.
- 9) The lamps for boat decorations in Khammouane community, were made of energy drink bottles, while coffee drink bottles were applied in Thai's illuminated boats. (Picture 2, C-D)
- 10) The decorated lamps in the illuminated boats of the Lao community have a longer distance than the ones decorated in Thai illuminated boats.
- 11) The celebration of the traditional illuminated boats procession in the Khammouane district has been practiced in a simple, plain and easy way. There are not as many animated images decorated on the boats, unlike the ones in Thailand. The reason behind is that, there are more intense competitions in Thailand.
- 12) The preparation time it takes to perform such traditional event takes approximately 1 week in Khammouane district but 1 month in Thailand.

Table 1 shows the number of variables and the weights associated with those factors.

Table 1 Factors related to the Conservation of the IBP in Thailand.

Factors	Number of Variables	Weight
1) Indigenous wisdom of illuminated boat procession is secret codes for merit-making, and a knowledge center of three worlds (heaven, human and nether).	22	0.723-0.332
2) Local hydrographic knowledge related to geographical knowledge through practices of the Lord Buddha's worship and the ancestral worship.	7	0.716-0.358
3) The art of Illuminated Boat Procession passed from generation to generation via fundamental education.	6	0.783-0.404
4) Illuminated boat body of fire knowledge based on light and water that reflect dharma principles in human realm, the universe, god realm and the river god.	6	0.708-0.486
5) Physical knowledge of earth, water, air, and fire that related to the elimination of misery existed in all three realms: heaven, human and hell.	4	0.702-0.371
6) The lighted boat engineering and technology are wisdom related	5	0.645-0.411

to aquatic plant and animal ecology.		
7) During the festival, it is believed that motherhood and living creatures were born from the theories of physical science and wind folklore.	3	0.651-0.422
8) The illuminated boat procession is similar to the energy and chemical circulation in the living creatures' food chain.	1	0.689
9) The illuminated Boat Procession refers to philosophy and practices related to beliefs associated with Karma in Spirituality, Brahmanism, and Buddhism, and to protect ethnic and ecosystem.	4	0.727-0.387
10) The lighted boat construction is the procedure of merit practice, forgiving, and sacrificing connected to intellectual pathway.	2	0.724-0.508

5. Discussion

The practices of illuminated boat procession of Srikotrabun Kingdom in Thailand and Lao PDR, has over 550 years of history. Through cultural rituals and words of mouth, knowledge has been passed on from generation to generation, forming the indigenous knowledge. Historically, the illuminated boat procession was originated in the era of Jao Fah Ngum and King Chaiyachetta, the Kings of Laos. During that time, the Heed Sib Song Klong Sib See tradition was the most booming then. The customs have been annually practiced in the 11th lunar month (or heed 11). The ceremonies which are held in the 12th lunar month, usually involve rice protecting rituals. Since the 12th lunar month is the harvesting season, the farmers generally pray and give offerings to ancestral and wandering spirits to ask them to protect and nurture their rice crop towards a plentiful harvest. The rituals have been in practice until today due to the belief that Mae Posop or the Rice Mother exists, thus paying homage to her, the farmers will gain protection of their rice fields throughout the crop season and that the harvest will be abundant and free from harm throughout the year (Chaiyawinit, 1988).

The modern illuminated boats vary in shape and form. They do not only reflect cultural identity, indigenous culture and indigenous knowledge, but limitless artistic imaginations were also drawn out from various styles of the lighted boats. The scene of the lights decorated on the boats shows different cultural imaginations, which can be characterized into 4 distinct groups as follows:

1. The group containing lighted boat decorations which reflect Buddhist motifs, important ancient ruins within the province and throughout the country such as Phra That Phanom, Phra That Tha Uten, Phra That SriKotrabong, The Lord Buddha, etc.
2. The group containing lighted boat decorations which reflect the institution of the monarchy such as the Suphannahonsa or golden swan, the personal barge of the king, the portraits of the King, H.M. the King 84 years celebration logo, His Majesty's accomplishments, etc.
3. The group containing lighted boat decorations which reflect social status, governance and politics, and economy such as the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy, the Thai People, Occupation, Important historical events i.e. the opening ceremony of Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge on 01/11/2011, etc.
4. The group containing lighted boat decorations which reflect sacred symbols such as gods, angels, the Naga, etc.

The differences of the ceremony practices and types of illuminated boat procession between Thailand and Lao PDR show the continuity in the tradition as it has been practiced for centuries. However, there's the evidence showing that the Lao-ethnic group had once discontinued their rituals due to the effect from political problems in the country, therefore, Lao Ethnic group still lags behind in the progress of modernizing the ceremonial practices. Nonetheless, there has been an exchange in the technological and traditional knowledge between the Thai-Lao ethnic group and the Lao ethnic group. In addition, the evidence has also shown the tendency towards greater future progress in the practices of the illuminated boat procession in the Lao-ethnic group, if the government or local authorities have provided more supports.

The ten factors related to conservation of the IBP in Thailand indicated some traditional activities performed by local people on the 15th day of the waxing moon to the first day of the waning moon in the 11th lunar month. On the event day, the senior people would gather up helping each other make the lighted boats which composed of cut or sliced banana trunks (as a base of the boat), filled with three pieces of betel nuts, cigarettes, candles and incense sticks, and flowers. These materials have been used to show homage/respect to the Naga and the river goddess. According to Buddhism beliefs, heaven is a place for deities/gods, and the Lord Buddha. Human world is a place where ancestors reborn and live in, and the nether world (or one of the regions of hell) is the place where the evil spirits, ghosts, gods and the Naga may lodge.

The IBP, nowadays are elaborately adorned with lights, which demonstrate the belief that the fire and water can burn and wash away misery and all the bad lucks in life. The lights decorated on the boats are compared as the shining light in your mind, guiding you towards the noble path and that your life would be filled with prosperity and happiness. The ceremony aims to guide you to understand the core teachings of the Lord Buddha. Moreover, the IBP has also shown the relationship between the four great elements (earth, water, air, and fire) and the living creatures. It was believed that the earth element gave humans (and other living creatures) plants and food. The water element was a source of fish, crabs, and shrimps. Air (or wind) provided air for breathing. The senior people in the past often said that if there's no air, then the living creatures would all die. Lastly, the fire element, provides a guiding light in humans' lives or refers to the element which brings warmth and visibility.

These four primary elements are essential for human and other living creatures' lives, thus this field of mysticism is worth preserved and shared for future generations. The ritual of the Illuminated boat procession explains a balance between traditional and technological knowledge. As the technology grows, there's limited capacity for elders to pass on traditional knowledge to the young. Once these elders pass away, all the valuable traditional knowledge will also be diminished. Therefore, it is important to find ways of preserving this knowledge. The traditional knowledge can be used in science, which means that the two knowledge bases will be in contact with each other if practitioners attempt to weave them together. One of the most effective ways to preserve the valuable Illuminated boat tradition is to embed it in the school curriculums, so that the knowledge will be transmitted through oral teachings and stories, ensuring that the societal norms, religious values and belief systems are transferred to the next generations.

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Interviewing

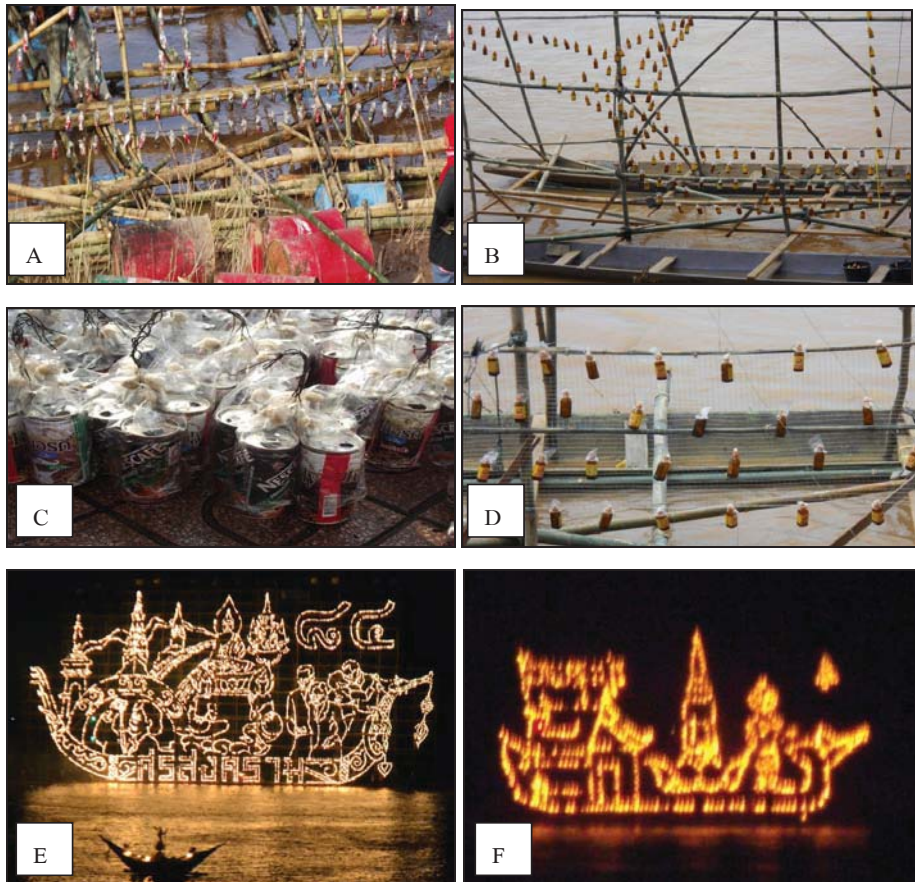
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Appendix



Picture 1: Various types of the illuminated boats found in the Thai-Lao Ethnic group community.

Picture A, illustrates important materials needed for making the ancient illuminated boats. Picture B, shows the ancient illuminated boat of Khammouane local people, Lao PDR, resembles Krathong of the well-known Thai festival (Loy Krathong). Picture C, is the example of the on-land illuminated boats and picture D, presents the materials used for decorations within the on-land illuminated boats, while there is no on-land illuminated boats found in Lao PDR. Picture E, Shows the style of modern illuminated boat decorations in Nakorn Phanom province. Picture F, shows the style of illuminated boat decorations in the Khammouane community. As the pictures clearly show that, the Thai modern illuminated boat is much larger in size and is more elaborately designed than that of Laos. The distance between each bamboo is around 1.5x2 square meters.



Picture 2: The differences in shapes and forms of the illuminated boats between Thai's (Left) and Khammouane communities (Right).

Picture A, the base of the lighted boats in Thailand was made of bundles of bamboo stalks bind with ropes and the 200 liters fuel tanks, as a buoyant material. Picture B, the base of the lighted boats in Khammouane province was made of a long-tailed boat. Picture C, the Thai lanterns were made of coffee cans. Picture D, the Khammouane lanterns were made from the cans of energy drinks. Picture E, shows the modern and on-land illuminated boats that were set alight and floated on the river together. The modern illuminated boats are large in size, decorated with a dazzling array of the animated scenes and more neatly designed than the ancient ones. Picture F, shows the shape and form of the modern illuminated boats in Khammouane province, Lao PDR.