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Kaw Naw: Karen Fish Noodle Soup

BY PAW HSEE GAY

EDITED BY EDWARD Y. J. MILLAR

[*Editor's Note:* “*Kaw Naw: Karen Fish Noodle Soup*” is an edited excerpt from a paper written by Paw Hsee Gay, originally submitted in Prof. Edward Y. Millar’s course, AHM261A: Folklore in America in Fall 2020 at Niagara University.]

Food is an important part of Karen culture because it operates as an expression of cultural identity, and I think making traditional food is a way of preserving our culture when moving to a new place.

Growing up in a Karen household, something that is often made is *kaw naw*, also known as fish noodle soup in English. This dish is very well known in the Karen community, as it is always made when there is a major event. There are many different ways of cooking the dish, depending on one’s preference. Regardless of what those are, the soup is still a reflection on Karen culture, because it reflects our customs and where we came from. Since I was young, my mother, sister, and I would go grocery shopping for the ingredients at the Burmese and Laos stores. My mother would carefully handpick everything, as she would always want the freshest and most nutritious ingredients.

Kaw naw originated in Burma, and Karen people have our own version. When making *kaw naw*, everything is done by hand and made with respect to whoever taught you, because the recipe is



My family’s *kaw naw*. Photo courtesy of Paw Hsee Gay, 2021.

passed down through generations. That does not mean everyone follows the rules by the book. Many Karen people add their own twist in it, in addition to everything being done and measured to their own

liking. I think it is a comfort food that many households make because it is a traditional, social kind of food. The dish is very common and is frequently made when there is an important social event

such as a wedding, reunion, or festival, because of how it displays cultural identity.

Although some may think the fish noodle soup is simply a comfort food, I think of it as more than being just very convenient and filling. It is also a reminder of home, as the unique taste and smell unlock certain memories, so feelings of heavy emotion are also invoked. This explains why older generations, such as our parents and grandparents, would want to maintain the Karen culture and tradition and keep it alive, so that it is not forgotten and lost when the years pass. Keeping the traditions alive and known is a way to reflect on beliefs and values and depicts the accurate details of everyday life and language for a specific cultural group.

My family's *kaw naw* would always be made on a Saturday morning, when my mother would wake up early—and we'd wake up, too, with all the noise from her footsteps and the strong aroma coming from the kitchen. To make *kaw naw*, the first ingredient is a whole fish that you prepare by boiling and taking the skin off. After the fish is boiled and softened, my mother would retain its head and bone, and later, she would mash the meat into a paste with aromatics and spices, stirring the broth every five minutes. Onions, star anise, garlic, ginger, and turmeric would also be incorporated in the soup. While waiting for the soup, my mother also ground fresh red pepper to put it in the soup to add some spice. My family loves heat, so usually, our *kaw naw* is super spicy. The rice noodles in the soup are boiled and cooked separately.

For spices and seasonings, my family stays with the classics, using Thai chili pepper. Most important is the lemongrass, which gives a nice fresh, distinct taste and smell. The ingredients to this dish have not really changed at all in my family since I was young, and I think that is because it is best to keep it culturally traditional as well as original, so that when making the dish, it can be a reminder of the Karen history. When the soup is done, we usually eat it with a side dish of bean sprouts, parsley, basil, boiled eggs, lime, fried onion, Chinese

long bean, Asian meatballs, and fried split chickpeas.

As a Karen American, sometimes I feel that it's hard to find acceptance and clarity on where I belong, because I don't always feel fully traditional and culturally Karen, but also am not completely Americanized. I think this is something shared with many other Karen youth, as many of us came to the states at a very young age, and we are always adapting and assimilating to a new American culture, sometimes unintentionally losing parts of our own. Older generations sometimes subconsciously judge the youth over this adaptation, especially when not practicing a certain tradition or part of our culture. On the other hand, we also struggle sometimes to find acceptance of our Karen culture and traditions in mainstream American culture.

When I eat traditional food like *kaw naw*, it gives me that feeling and sense of belonging to the Karen culture. Having the ability to cook the dish is important, because it reminds us of where we came from and the sacrifices that our parents had to go through, helping me to understand more why I am where I am today.

Eating food together is essential and a big part of the Karen culture. It unites everyone—both my family and our community—as one. It enables us to stay connected with the ones we love, and I feel it helps improve our mental health and our well-being. When we eat together as a family, there are usually some sort of stories or jokes being shared, especially by my mother and brother. The stories are usually about something one of us did when we were younger, but we also talk and reflect on what's going on in our lives. When my mother tells stories from my childhood, no matter how repetitive the story is or how many times she tells it, when we're all together, it brings us warmth and comfort: just like the bowl of *kaw naw*. ▼

Paw Hsee Gay is a Social Work major and Psychology minor at Niagara University and a member of the Karen community in Rochester.

In Search of Healing

BY NANCY SOLOMON

As I wrote last spring, we were at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, and unfortunately, we are still social distancing, if emerging at all. The toll of this pandemic is new to all of us, but sadly, it is not the first one in our region's history. In 1917, the flu pandemic struck New York, ultimately taking the lives of millions of people around the world. One of the side effects of the pandemic was the exodus of many New York City residents to Long Island, on the advice of the health care community. Some came to West Meadow Beach near Stony Brook, where they erected tents on platforms and later, built modest summer bungalows, taking advantage of the cool Long Island Sound breezes to escape the tenements and apartment buildings where the flu had spread like wildfire.

Then as now, city residents came to Long Island's beaches for fresh air and salt water, where they could enjoy swimming and have picnic lunches and dinners. Others flocked to the party boats for a morning or afternoon of fishing and were able to eat outdoors on canals throughout Long Island. As an avid beachcomber, I enjoyed seeing families marveling at the variety of seashells found on our beaches and watching young children learning to swim in the bayfront beaches on the north and south shores. In addition, those with summer homes on Long Island have moved here semi-permanently, enrolling in local schools.

On the bright side, most of the party and charter boats returned to work in late June when the first restrictions were lifted. Recreational fishermen patronized the fleet, which had limited capacity to prevent contamination, and also went to the public docks and fishing piers around our coastlines. Often, there were families

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