

Ellen Matthews. *Culture Clash* (Chicago: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1982) viii, 135 pp., \$7.50.

One tragedy of war is a people uprooted—torn from their land, history, and culture to seek a haven in a foreign country. *Culture Clash* is such a story. Ellen Matthews describes a Vietnamese family's struggle to adapt to American culture and yet retain their autonomy and self-respect. As a free-lance writer and sponsor of Quang and his family, the author is well-qualified to write this unpretentious account of their mutual experience. Composed from a diary the author kept between 1975-1979, the text is a detailed subjective study of the day-to-day events and conflicts between herself and the Quang family.

This book succeeds on a number of levels. The author's main contribution is the honesty and force of her own conflict with Vietnamese culture and the subsequent insights she develops regarding American treatment and response to the Vietnamese refugees. Through a juxtaposition of her cultural attitudes and those of the Quangs, the conflict between their world-views is clearly brought to the reader's attention. For example, the Quang's inability to postpone expensive material goods for used items such as clothing and furniture came into direct conflict with the author's propagation of the American work ethic. By describing such conflicts, Matthews demonstrates how misperceptions, differing attitudes, and hard feeling develop as the Vietnamese try to adjust their own life style to the rhythm of American life. The author's inability to initially accept Quang's values and behavior can be viewed as a reflection of the dominant culture and how it impacts on Vietnamese refugees.

In retrospect, the probable value of the sponsorship program was its ability to sustain the refugee population until other factors prompted self-sufficiency. According to Matthews, these were: overcoming a language barrier, the birth of children, and the influx of new Vietnamese families into the area. As English language competence increased, the Quangs experienced greater mobility and self-confidence. The birth of Quang's son symbolized the establishment of roots and a commitment of the family toward the future. But the most important factor favoring self-sufficiency was the family's proximity to other Vietnamese.

Unlike other immigrant groups which settled in large enclaves in the United States, the Vietnamese were dispersed throughout the country. The mid-1970s was a period of social unrest and economic turmoil. America had just suffered a defeat in Vietnam. It was also a time of high inflation and the beginning of rising unemployment. The country wanted a respite. National policy toward the refugees, according to Matthews, was "to shotgun them throughout the country, to keep them from becoming a noticeable blight." Because of the political and social climate, the Vietnamese were denied access to familiar cultural

experiences they so desperately needed. Local sponsors were unprepared to cope with the anxiety and trauma that the Vietnamese suffered from such isolation.

As a critique of American ethnocentrism, Matthews attempts to set forth the cultural differences between the dominant culture and the Vietnamese. For the Vietnamese, who are group-centered as opposed to individualistic, self-sufficiency and security develop within the context of the group. When Vietnamese refugees did come into contact with others of similar background, cooperation, support, and extended helping networks developed. This helped foster individual motivation leading to independence and autonomy. Interestingly, nationalities that were ferociously antagonistic in southeast Asia, e.g. Vietnamese and Cambodians, finding themselves placed in our alien culture, cooperated in order to survive.

If public and private organizations sponsoring Vietnamese refugees had been more sensitive to the cultural needs of this population, the program's goals may have been accomplished more readily. One need only examine the history of other minorities in this country to understand how well-intentioned goals become contradictory. Since the early 1960s, blacks, Latinos, and women have sought a greater voice in various decision-making processes that have affected their lives. This process was to ensure that certain needs and aspirations would be met. Public policy has not brought this process to fruition. Evidence suggests that the greater the involvement people have in the decisions that affect their lives, the greater the prospects for change which may lead to increased personal dignity and self-actualization. This book is suggestive of such an emancipatory project.

With minor flaws—the work is not documented, which precludes drawing many generalizations and there is no distinction made between the first wave of refugees who were more well-to-do from the later “boat people”—Matthews has done a creditable job in bringing to life this human drama. Many would benefit from a reading of this book, especially human service workers and students who may work with Vietnamese or other minority groups where ethnic sensitivity is an issue.

— Robert Warshawsky  
Southern Illinois University