

# MONTAGNARDS



The Montagnards, hilltribe people from Vietnam, were recruited by the U.S. Special Forces to serve as front-line fighters with the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War. After the United States withdrew from Vietnam, the Montagnards were targeted by the Communist Vietnam government as traitors and U.S. spies. Many Montagnards continued to fight the Vietnamese after the United States left, still believing they were acting on behalf of the U.S. government. When they finally learned that the U.S. government no longer supported them, they were forced to flee as refugees.

In 1986, about 200 Montagnard refugees, mostly men, were resettled in North Carolina. A second group of about 400 people came in late 1992. While these first groups of refugees faced considerable difficulties, most have adapted reasonably well. Since that time, additional families have come, especially relatives and persons released from re-education camps (prisoners of war). In 2002, another 900 Montagnards were resettled in North Carolina. This last group brings with them troubled histories of persecution, and few have family or political ties with the established Montagnard communities here.

Their resettlement is proving to be much more difficult.

There are about 5,000 Montagnards in North Carolina. More than half of these are in the Greensboro area, but there are significant populations in Charlotte and Raleigh, as well.



## • DID YOU KNOW?

- The term Montagnard is a French term meaning “mountain people.” This was used by the French Colonial government in Vietnam to refer to the different tribal people who lived in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.
- Though the Montagnards who relocated here are from Vietnam, they do not consider themselves to be Vietnamese. Montagnards have long advocated for the Central Highlands to be a separate country under their control.
- Outside of Vietnam, Greensboro is the largest Montagnard community in the world. There are only a few hundred Montagnards in the United States outside of North Carolina.

- Information included here is provided to help you become more aware of the culture and traditions of your clients, students and co-workers. Please use this only as a guide, keeping in mind that all people within a culture are not the same. Be sure to ask your clients and their families about their specific beliefs, practices and customs. Showing respect and openness toward their traditions will help you build better relationships and provide more effective services.

## • CULTURE

**LANGUAGE** There are more than 30 distinct Montagnard languages. The most prevalent found in North Carolina are Rhade, Jerai, Koho, and Mnong. Rhade is the most common language in the Greensboro area.

Montagnards who came in 1986 and 1992 usually had at least a survival skill level of English, except for the elderly who were less able to learn the language. Some early refugees spoke English as a result of their work with the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. Most of the 2002 arrivals, however, were village farmers without English language skills.

Young children acquire oral English with very little difficulty, though they may suffer from limited literacy because most live in homes where there are neither books nor the motivation to read. Older children and adults progress more slowly in learning oral English. Acquisition of written English is dependent largely upon one's level of literacy in one's native tongue

### **RELIGIOUS PRACTICES &**

**BELIEFS** Traditionally, Montagnards practiced an animist religion that included a belief in many gods in nature, the practice



of animal sacrifice, and fear of evil spirits. Some Montagnards were converted to Catholicism during the French occupation of Vietnam. In the last 60 years, many were converted to evangelical Protestant Christianity by American missionaries.

Most Montagnards in the United States are active Christians. There are half a dozen active Montagnard evangelical Protestant churches in the Greensboro area, plus an active Catholic congregation.

Even with shared beliefs, Montagnards vary by tribal tradition, the language used in their services, as well as political opinion, particularly in regard to Vietnamese resistance movements. Most congregations are quite active. While they provide strong social support for their constituents, many are isolated from mainstream resources.

**SOCIAL CLASS** Montagnards were confined to a secondary social status in Vietnam. Those who received an education and became bilingual in Vietnamese increased their social standing, but they still maintained a lower status than the Vietnamese. In the U.S. Montagnard population, men who were officers and leaders in the resistance movement have a higher social status. However, if they are not bilingual in English, they lose that social status since



they cannot communicate with the dominant society.

**EDUCATION** While Montagnards value education, they had little access to it in Vietnam for political and economic reasons. Few men advanced beyond primary school, and many of the women received no primary education at all. Only a few had the opportunity to obtain higher education. Any specialized training was associated with the military or the church schools. Montagnard youth, who are moving on to college in this country, are embarking on a new path for most of their families.

**EMPLOYMENT** Most of the early groups of Montagnards were able to find work upon resettlement and have remained employed. They have typically found factory and warehouse jobs, landscaping, maintenance, or other work that is physically challenging but requires little English. Employers have been able to fill undesirable second- and third-shift jobs with Montagnards. Because of language barriers, however, few Montagnards have been promoted to higher-paying jobs.

Recent arrivals are facing more employment challenges because of the slow economy. While it is reasonable to assume that they will have the same success in

factory jobs as previous refugees, resettlement agencies now face significant barriers in finding these jobs because there are fewer positions available.

**TIME ORIENTATION** Like most agrarian societies, Montagnards are not time-focused but more cyclically-focused, with a sense of seasons, light and dark. This changes as they acculturate. With time, children should become more Western- or industrial-oriented. However, family concerns usually will take priority over outside concerns, even if that means skipping a scheduled appointment with a provider.

#### **RESETTLEMENT ISSUES & MISUNDERSTANDINGS**

There have been some complaints in the majority community about Montagnards hunting and slaughtering animals in food preparation, which was a common practice in their native Highlands. There have also been problems brought to the attention of Social Services organizations over the use of physical force as punishment within the family.

Other problems have surfaced as the result of alcohol abuse or the lack of knowledge of driving rules. There have even been misunderstandings due to a lack of awareness about mainstream

customs and neighborhood expectations; for instance, whether or not it is appropriate to have an upholstered couch, or similar items, in one's yard.

## • **FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS**

In Vietnam, Montagnard families traditionally lived in tribal villages. Families of 10 to 20 people lived in longhouses, large open structures shared by several



nuclear families, especially families with kinship ties. Many domestic tasks would be shared by the various residents of the longhouse. The Montagnards have duplicated this living arrangement in North Carolina to a degree, sharing housing for camaraderie and support, and to reduce expenses.

**GENDER ROLES** Traditionally, roles have been quite well defined. Men are responsible for

external issues such as hunting, village councils, war and politics. Women oversee domestic concerns, child rearing, cooking, and some of the gardening. Women also traditionally manage the money. Men and women usually socialize separately. The last generations in Vietnam have been caught up in war, which is the man's responsibility.

In the United States, adaptation to American culture and intermarriage with other ethnic groups is changing Montagnard traditions. Men and women now both work outside the home and share childcare and household responsibilities according to their work schedules.

Because of the shortage of Montagnard women in the United States, many men live together in simulated family units. Exposure to other communities is leading more men to marry outside their traditions. Inter-ethnic marriages create new patterns and roles that combine various ethnic customs within the context of working-class life in the United States.

Domestic violence is an emerging issue, as culture shock, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the loss of traditional gender roles come to bear on families. In some cases, parents see their children adopting the permissive

customs of the mainstream and do not know how to control this. Traditional social controls, including the shared supervision by the village and the longhouse, are gone.

**CHILDREN & YOUTH** Most Montagnard children arrive with little formal education or knowledge of English, and so they are ill-prepared for the U.S. school system. They may not know how to behave or dress appropriately. Parents are not proficient in English either, and may not even be literate, so they cannot help with homework. Also, they are unfamiliar with the role of the involved parent that is expected of them. Teachers may complain that Montagnard parents do not respond to notices, do not supervise their children at home, and allow their children to come to school sick.

Montagnard youth in the United States are the first generation in their families to have any opportunities for advanced education. Still, young people are limited because they have few mentors or role models within their own community. Almost all Montagnard students would benefit significantly from tutoring and other supplemental programs, both for academic achievement and the development of social skills.

Because many parents have

limited English skills, children gain special power in the family as they become bilingual. Parents see their children losing their traditions and not maintaining their conservative social customs. U.S. children have much more freedom, and Montagnard children have little supervision because their parents are both working. These problems are even more intensified during the teen years. Without mentors within their ethnic community who can provide advice on how to deal with peer pressure, first-generation children are easily led into trouble by their peers.

The next generation of the Montagnards, the youth now growing up in the United States, will be the ones to lead the community to a new level of acculturation. Some will get sidetracked by the conflicts of youth that are prevalent among the first generations of newcomers. Others will follow their parents into factories and mills and become respectable working class citizens. But if the right educational opportunities are provided, others will achieve higher education and positions of leadership.

## **CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Among the former soldiers and the children, physical fighting is sometimes used as a way of



dealing with conflict that is not resolved in discussion. However, politeness and humility will usually prevail with outsiders.

### GESTURES & CUSTOMS

Politeness and courtesy are common and expected. Guests are invited in and served a drink, usually water or tea. Bad manners are not acceptable.

## HEALTH & WELLNESS

In Vietnam, Montagnards traditionally enjoyed healthy lives when adequate food was available. With the loss of traditional farmland and the related poverty, there was a decline in nutritional health in the Highlands. There has always been a shortage of health care resources for the Montagnards, and the problem has increased since the end of the Vietnam War. War-related injuries and physical persecution have exacerbated health problems. Problems with malaria, TB, and other tropical diseases have been common. Potential refugees are screened for these, and persons with contagious diseases may be delayed in resettlement and given special medical treatment.

Some Montagnards have been diagnosed with cancer, which is

not known to be a traditional disease of the Central Highlands. Some refugees believe that it is the result of the government poisoning village wells to weaken the population. Others speculate that cancers may be related to exposure to Agent Orange, the defoliant the United States used in the Highlands during the war.

**MENTAL HEALTH** The Western concept of mental health is foreign to the Montagnards. In both the atheist and Christian communities, mental health problems are thought of as spiritual issues. In church communities, prayer, salvation and the acceptance of God's will are common responses to these problems. Persons with severe behavioral disorders are generally tolerated within the community, although they may be shunned if they are too disruptive or appear dangerous to others.

Many Montagnards suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder related to war, survivor guilt, persecution, and torture. For refugees, this condition is aggravated by the loss of family, homeland, culture, and traditional social support systems.

### OBSTACLES TO ACCESSING

**CARE** Montagnard refugees face the same obstacles to receiving

healthcare as many other immigrant and refugee groups, including transportation problems, language barriers and a lack of knowledge about how to access the healthcare system.

Health insurance has been a particular problem for the Montagnard community. Most Montagnards have gone to work quickly, but usually in jobs with inadequate health insurance benefits. Even with a limited income, they lose the Medicaid eligibility that is available with refugee status.

Montagnards do not traditionally think about disease prevention, and aggressive health education is needed to introduce this concept. In general, the population is cooperative when provided with health education and disease prevention information.

Like other low-income groups, Montagnards typically do not seek medical care except in emergencies because of the costs involved. When made available, Montagnards accept medication provided by health care professionals. If educated about the benefits, the Montagnards are receptive to Western medical practices.

## • HOLIDAYS & CELEBRATIONS

There are no major holidays or events celebrated specifically by Montagnard refugees in the United States. Traditional Montagnard celebrations were typically agricultural festivals. Community gatherings and social affairs are common. Sometimes these functions are church related. In North Carolina, people regularly travel to and from the three primary resettlement cities (Greensboro, Charlotte and Raleigh) to visit and socialize with one another.

Vietnam veterans typically host a Montagnard weekend picnic in May through an organization known as Save The Montagnard People (STMP).

The Montagnard Dega Association (MDA) organizes an annual statewide celebration in September. Sometimes these two organizations cooperate on festivals.

The Montagnard Dega Association, a Montagnard community self-help nonprofit organization, is located at 611 Summit Avenue in Greensboro. (336) 373-1812.

## • ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some sections of this profiles were written by Raleigh Bailey and extracted from a website operated by the Center for Applied Linguistics: [culturalorientation.net/montagnards](http://culturalorientation.net/montagnards). Information was also collected locally from Y Hin Nie, Pierre K'Briuh, Tuyet Rahlan, and Tom Hinton.