Adoptions from overseas are dwindling. Economic factors are partly to blame, but the biggest spoiler may be society itself.

Story Sian Powell

HANDS ACROSS BORDERS

Photography David Kelly

Rabia Whitson is just three – a true little Queenslander who loves going to the beach and playing in the ocean. Born in Ethiopia and adopted by her Australian parents when she was 20 months old, the toddler is a living symbol of an ever-shrinking band of Australians: children adopted from overseas.

At home in northern Brisbane, Rabia plays with soap bubbles, runs about on the lawn and flashes brilliant smiles. The last Ethiopian child adopted by Queenslanders before the Ethiopia adoption program was shut down last year, she is the embodiment of a child finally finding her way after a difficult start. The closure of the Ethiopia ▶

program put a dent in already dwindling Australian adoption numbers. And even those inter-country adoption programs that are still functioning are seeing fewer and fewer children arrive in Australia to begin new lives with adoptive families.

In the past 12 months, only five children have come to Queensland to live with their adoptive families, a fraction of the number arriving ten years ago. It's a worldwide trend, born of a combination of tectonic shifts in the global economy and a slow tide of changing social mores. Many poorer nations have edged up the wealth ladder, so families are less likely to relinquish their children to institutional care, and local families are more likely to adopt. The stigma of unwed motherhood has faded. In some Asian nations, a widespread hesitation to adopt a child who might have "bad blood" is slowly sliding away.

On the other side of the equation, the all-too-common scandals of baby-selling and adoption profiteering have tainted inter-country adoption, and there have been tales of woe and alienation from some adults who were adopted from Asian or African countries many years ago. So as the queues of Australians, Americans, Canadians and New Zealanders who want to adopt a child from another country keep growing, the numbers of children released for adoption – both domestically and internationally – continue to shrink.

RABIA BEGAN LIVING IN AN ETHIOPIAN orphanage when she was six months old. Her Australian mother, Gaye Whitson, doesn't want to describe it in any detail, but orphanages in developing nations often have similar characteristics: crowded and understaffed, places of distress and need.

When Rabia first left the institution, she was malnourished and underweight. She had diarrhoea that persisted for months, a chest infection and a middle-ear infection. She was still feeding from a bottle – Gaye, 35, and her husband Mark, 34, introduced her to solids. She wasn't walking, running or talking as she should have been at 20 months. She missed the only people she had known – the orphanage staff – was often inconsolable, and for a while she would only respond if spoken to in Amharic, the language of Ethiopia.

She was frighteningly insecure. For her first six months with the Whitsons, she woke up every single night with "night terrors". She clung to Gaye and refused to be left. "I would say the first six months was hell," Gaye Whitson laughs. "Rabia had separation issues, all the textbook problems that you read about and you hear about."

Even now, 16 months after the adoption, and although Rabia has notched up huge gains and walks and runs with confidence and chatters with ease, she remains an anxious child. Whitson feels she can't go back to work and leave her daughter with carers. From a bad start, with poor health and the uncertainty of life in an institution, Rabia is slowly adjusting to a new life in Brisbane, following in the footsteps of hundreds of children from China, Taiwan, India, Korea, Africa, the Philippines, from nations all around the world, who have been adopted by Australians. The toddler has a new beginning in the sun in suburban north Brisbane, with the love and care of her father and mother. She will have the tiny ups and downs of an ordinary childhood – the first bike, the pretty shoes, the birthday parties, the exams passed – and the hope of a life of comfort and peace.

IT IS INTERNATIONALLY ACCEPTED THAT THE best place for a child is with his or her parents, regardless of poverty or conflict or upheaval. Failing that, a home with the child's extended family. Failing that, with a family in his or her country of birth. And, as a last resort, with a family from another nation.

For thousands of children in institutions across the world, this "last resort" is their only choice. Institutional care is their lot – sometimes for weeks or months, sometimes for years. Numbers are always rubbery, just as parental emotions are usually raw, but according to a recent report in the *China Daily* newspaper, China was home to about 615,000 orphans and abandoned children in January this year, and more than 100,000 of them were living in government institutions. UNICEF estimates 1.3 million children in Central and Eastern Europe were living in public care in 2008 – more than half in boarding schools or other residential institutions. According to 2009 UNICEF estimates, more than 300,000 African children were living in residential care.

Intercountry adoption really began in Australia in 1975, when several hundred war orphans were airlifted out of South Vietnam and brought to safety and a life with adoptive parents. Since then there has been a steady stream of unwanted, abandoned or orphaned children arriving from overseas to join Australian families. But the stream is drying up. From a peak of 65 in 2004-05, each year the official figure of inter-country adoptions in Queensland is becoming inexorably smaller. The national figures have shown a similar slump: from a high point of 434 in 2004-05 to 149 in 2011-12.

As the president of the International Adoptive Families of Queensland organisation, and father to Hannah, 9, and Jeff, 5, both adopted from the Philippines, Brisbane businessman Tony Dunne, 50, finds this sharp decline deeply frustrating. He concedes that many nations, such as Korea and Thailand, now have more money than they used to, and find themselves better able to take care of abandoned or parentless children. But there are lots more deprived children out there in other parts of the world, he says, and the federal Attorney-General's department should be actively seeking adoption agreements with a whole range of nations

PEOPLE SAY, "WOULD YOU DO IT AGAIN?" WE'D GO THROUGH IT AGAIN, AND MORE, TO HAVE RABIA.

Girl in a million … (*left*) Mark and Gaye Whitson waited seven years to adopt Rabia (*also previous page*).

in Africa and Asia, nations where many children are languishing in care-homes or orphanages. Many of these nations are signatories to the Hague Adoption Convention (which regulates international adoption). "They say they're investigating a few, but I don't trust anything that comes out of them, to be honest," Dunne says. "There are kids in orphanages in African and all sorts of other countries that are signatories to the Hague and the Australian Government's doing nothing about it."

Dunne thinks there's a general Australian governmental aversion to international adoption, and it's one based on simple fear. "It's a knee-jerk to things like the stolen generation and the Australian adoption policies," he says.

More than a cultural exchange … (*above*) Analee Matthews as a toddler with her adoptive father and siblings; (*below*) Tony and Rhondda Dunne with Jeff, 5, and Hannah, 9.

For her part, Gaye Whitson thinks too many people are simply ignorant about adoption. "It's quite confronting when people will come over and say, 'she's not really yours, how much did she cost?' like she was some detergent," she says, adding that too many people play strange psychological games with adopted children, telling them they are very lucky and they should be grateful to their adoptive parents.

The Whitsons try to block that sort of talk. Rabia is just three. She doesn't need to feel a sense of obligation to her parents. She doesn't need to be told she should be grateful and a good girl because her parents saved her life. "So much is wrong with that. So much emotional and psychological damage can be done as a result of the public not being aware of the repercussions of what I'm sure they think are nice comments."

BUT THERE SEEMS TO BE A JUSTIFIABLE deeper issue regarding future anxieties and frustrations for a child adopted from overseas, adopted from a different culture, a different heritage, a different race. These days adoptive parents are encouraged to forge a link with the country of their child's birth, to visit and even to learn the language. "Deracinated" is an ugly word, meaning "uprooted, removed or separated from a native environment or culture", and a child who feels deracinated is likely to have problems in life.

Analee Matthews, 39, who was adopted by Anglo-Australian parents, has lived through such difficulties. She was born in Vietnam during the war, and brought to Australia as a baby. Her Australian parents were loving, but as a child she fought with a constant fear she would be abandoned. Her birth certificate read: "born to unknown parents and abandoned at birth".

It left a mark. "I always felt loved unconditionally, but I think on a subconscious level I wanted to make sure I never gave them a reason to give me up," she has written. Now a successful writer and journalist, living in Sydney with a child of her own, she remembers her life as the child who looked different.

"Being raised in a town in regional Victoria, I grew up with a distinct sense of isolation and a constant niggling of loneliness. I didn't have any other Asian faces around me; I don't even think there was a Chinese restaurant in the town I lived, so I never really had anyone around that I could relate to." She grew up by the beach thinking of herself as a "blonde-haired, white surfie chick", and it took a long time for her to mesh the inner-Analee with how she looked to others.

Alienation problems can be minimised if a child grows up among similar-looking people, Matthews believes, and elements of his or her birth culture should be easily available if they want to explore them. Dunne and his wife Rhondda, 48, have done their best to stay connected to the Philippines. "We've fallen in love with the country, we go there, we cook the food, we've got lots of friends from there," he says. They are even struggling with Tagalog, the most prevalent language in the Philippines. "I can speak half-a-dozen words, my wife can speak probably a couple of hundred. We try to learn. It's enough to muddle by in the shops and make the shopkeepers and the taxi drivers smile."

Gaye and Mark Whitson took pains to get as much information as possible about Rabia's early life, to have the answers ready for those questions that will inevitably emerge as she grows older. They talked to her Ethiopian relatives about her birth and about the life they wanted for the child. They went to the countryside where Rabia was born and took photos and videos. "It was for Rabia," Gaye Whitson says. "To say this was your birth family, and this is what they wanted you to know about them in the future. It was to try to help Rabia later on in life when those questions come up. It's not about you. It's about your child, who's going to really struggle. It's just a fact of life."

She doesn't want to go into much detail about the meetings, or about the people in Rabia's early life; she wants to hold on to some privacy for the little girl. It wasn't an easy time for the Whitsons, or for Rabia's Ethiopian relatives. But it was important for Rabia. "I think the photos, and all those sorts of things, will help." The Whitsons were prepared to deal with any number of emotional difficulties and clamber over all the bureaucratic hurdles to adopt their daughter. But many Queenslanders, still on long adoption waiting lists, have found the layers of bureaucracy difficult to deal with. To start with, potential adoptive parents have to have some money. It's a sensitive subject, and of course children are not commodities, but Whitson reluctantly concedes they have spent "tens of thousands" of dollars on their quest for Rabia. For his part, Dunne says he's always careful to thwart the "how much did your baby cost?" questions. But, generally, he says, the cost of the adoption process will be between $15,000 and $30,000.

And these parents-in-waiting must be patient. ▶

Dunne and his wife waited six years for their daughter Hannah. The Whitsons waited seven years for Rabia. Some Australians "age out" of the process – they wait so long they exceed the maximum adoption age limit imposed by various nations.

According to Queensland's Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, Queensland is now working with China, Chile, Colombia, India, Hong Kong, South Korea, Lithuania, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Taiwan on adoption. But many of those familiar with inter-country adoption in Australia find that a laughable statement. Certainly, some of these programs appear to be almost impossible to access. For example, Lithuania's requires at least one of the applicants to be a Lithuanian citizen. The India program, according to the Australian Attorney-General's Department website, is "currently on hold". South Korea accepted no files last year. Only a tiny number of children from Hong Kong are adopted by Australians and special needs children will be prioritised. Other programs are very small, pushing through only one or two adoptions a year, and sometimes, like Sri Lanka's, favouring certain ethnicities.

Most programs seem to be effectively restricted to special needs children, with mental, physical or emotional problems, or older children – and some people think that older children who have lived in institutions for years should constitute their own special needs category. A department spokesperson will not say how many of the children recently adopted by Queenslanders have special needs – "it's not reported data".

New start … The Whitsons on a northern Brisbane beach with their adopted daughter Rabia, 3, the last Ethiopian child to be adopted by Queenslanders.

Most nations permitting international adoption specify certain necessary characteristics in potential Australian adoptive parents. One Taiwanese agency requires adoptive parents to be practising Christians, and to have a body mass index of less than 30 (Queensland Health regards anything over 30 as obese). The Philippines requires couples who want to adopt younger children to be married, practising Christians and in good mental and physical health, with a BMI of less than 35. China is less strict about weight, requiring a BMI of less than 40.

Dunne struggled with the Philippines' BMI requirement, but he lost some weight and got there in the end. He and his wife already had two biological children, older sons. "We had two homegrown boys," Dunne says. "I'd rather that than biological, because biological suggests a test tube or something. People say, 'oh, your own children', well, they're all our own. Two homegrown and two adopted."

So why adopt when you already have children? "We just felt that was something in our hearts that we wanted to do. My wife had talked about this before we were married even, so it was just something that was there all along."

The Whitsons, too, were unwavering during their long, long wait for a child. "It took seven-and-a-half years, and people say, 'would you do it again?'" Whitson says. "Which is crazy, because we've got Rabia. We would go through that again, and more, just to have her." ●