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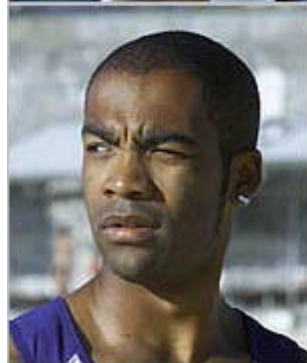
Home sweet home .. Lynelle Beveridge as a child on the farm in Australia and today. Middle, Ngita Bowers, and below, Damian Obataiye. Photos: Peter Rae



The children brought to Australia in the 1970s in the first wave of international adoptions have grown up and their adult voices reveal the scars of their struggle for identity in a strange land. Debra Jopson reports.



The mirror tells Ngita Bowers that she looks Indian. But when she dreams, she is "very white," right down to the arms and hands she sees before her. "It just goes to show how Westernised I am, how integrated into the supposedly white culture," said Bowers, who in 1976 became the first child to be adopted from Bangladesh by Australians.



She was found on the streets of Dacca, starving and beaten up so badly that she was taken to Mother Teresa's home for the dying. She still puzzles over "inexplicable scars" on her body.

She does not know who her birth parents were. Her "birthday" is March 28, the day she was handed to a nutritional centre which brought her back to health. Though she is officially 27 - her age was estimated

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on her weight when she arrived in Australia - Bowers believes she is older. At school, she developed physically ahead of her classmates.

Bowers has "a very distinct memory" from babyhood of someone trying to drown her by holding her head underwater. "I can still taste the dirty water in my throat that I'm choking on. It is my mother who is holding me under the water and there is no way anyone will ever budge me on that point," she said in a chapter she wrote for a book to be launched tomorrow, *The Colour of Difference - Journeys in Transracial Adoption*.

Among the 27 personal stories in the book, this wisp of memory - or imagination - makes hers one of the most shocking. But of all the contributors, who include 18 adopted from other countries, she is also one of the most positive about such adoptions.

"Transracial adoption is a better option than same-race adoption because it's more honest. It forces the child and the parents to be honest as well," she said this week.

Bowers grew up in Sydney surrounded by things Indian. Her mother, an antique dealer, is passionate about that country, decorating their home with its arts and crafts, wearing the clothes and cooking the food. But Bowers, a media buyer for a North Sydney advertising agency, wants little to do with the culture of the Indian sub-continent, including Bangladesh.

"I have done the trips to India and I feel no connection with it whatsoever. I should have been born in Europe and my mother should have been born in India," she said.

The book - in which the "first wave" of adoptees from 18 countries through Africa, Asia and Latin America lay bare the emotional threads of their unusual lives - shows that such outright rejection of birth culture is unusual. Indeed, the common cry to new and would-be parents as is: "Don't just adopt the child, adopt their culture."

Bowers cannot say whether growing up with adopted siblings from Bangladesh in an Indian-focused household made her strong enough to shun her birth heritage.

Other contributors to the book appear to have suffered terribly from cultural isolation, marooned in a sea of whites confident in their identity. Often such

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adoptees learnt to hate the mirror and family photos because they saw how different they were, said Lynelle Beveridge, founder-director of the Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network, which now has 80 members.

These were the types of revelations editors Sarah Armstrong and Petrina Slaytor sought when they edited the book for the Benevolent Society's Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC), which saw an upsurge in the past few years of clients grappling with the legacy of cross-cultural adoptions.

Incomplete figures show that at least 4,700 children from more than 18 other countries have been adopted by Australians since the 1970s.

PARC workers, who have talked to more than 20,000 people about adoption issues over the past decade, found new and complex issues emerging in counselling sessions with transracial adoptees - but there were few resources to assist.

"This is a very public adoption. Total strangers can see you are not the birthchild of your parents," said Armstrong. "It's a struggle to establish identity among white birth families, but put on top of that the question of racial identity and having no-one from that culture to teach you to have pride in it."

Eleven of the 27 adoptees whose stories are told in the book described their adoptions as difficult. Some were abused, but even many of those whose family life was smooth had to deal with confusing feelings of being white people trapped in different-looking bodies or of being required to show gratitude for having been "saved".

Several, said the editors, "described a wish or a real attempt to change their appearance by scrubbing, bleaching, tearing their brown skin from the imagined white self that existed below the surface".

On a happier note: "There was a collective sense of fond embarrassment at the efforts their families had made - the attempts at creating the food of their culture ... the Colombian carvings and Chinese ornaments - coupled with a generous appreciation of the good intentions that these efforts had represented. There was a general agreement, however, that one's original culture can only be learnt from somebody of that culture."

Bronwyn Taverne, president of the Australian

Society for Inter-Country Aid to Children, representing about 300 adoptive parents, said that adopting three children from Korea and Thailand was for her and husband Philip "the best thing we have ever done in our lives".

They have relished becoming friends with people from their children's cultures. They have taken the children back to their birth countries, made firm friends with other families who have children from the same countries in their home shire of Sutherland, and when the children were young, attended Korean festivals.

Taverne is aware of the identity questions raised by looking in a mirror. "It does help that there are three of them because they are very close and have each other to look at. It's an issue I'm aware of. It's important for them to have contact with people of their own race so they can develop a positive self-image."

Her teenage girls can share make-up and clothes tips with other Thais and Koreans because what suits their mother will not necessarily suit them.

Beveridge said some parents were afraid that the new voice adult adoptees have found would be used to blame the white families who took in children of other races. The adoptees' organisation has its Web site (www.geocities.com/icasn1/) where members tell their stories. Beveridge and others give talks to adopting parents. There are plans to run camps at which older adoptees can mentor teenagers during a time when their sense of identity is most vulnerable.

The aim, she said, is not to blame, but to promote honesty and to let others learn from past mistakes.

A problem solver with the IT company IBM GSA, Beveridge, 28, was adopted from Vietnam into a Victorian country family which she said mistakenly believed "love could conquer all".

"I did feel very alone and very isolated, even in my own family." She feels her parents floundered without help. As a war baby, she had a "starvation mentality" and bewildered them by hoarding food.

She was told her birth mother was probably a prostitute - which hurt. On a voyage of discovery to Vietnam, she found that many poor women had to give their children up to save them. Now she tells parents to be very careful of what they say in front of

their adopted children.

Damian Obataiye, war child of a Vietnamese mother and African-American father, was adopted into a white family who lived in Wagga and Broken Hill. After a childhood of teasing and taunts, with friends whose parents would not let him play at their houses and girlfriends whose families disapproved, he has, like Beveridge, found multicultural Sydney a relief. His childhood, he said, was "lonely".

Visiting America, where he was accepted among black communities, he finally felt a sense of belonging. He now has African friends. "When I sit in a Vietnamese restaurant, I feel like a ghost because everyone else looks Vietnamese and I don't. It's been the whole issue of my life, claiming an identity."

He changed his surname last year to Obataiye, a Nigerian word he found on the Internet meaning "king of a twin".

"I've had a lot of confidence struggles through my life. I thought I would give myself a name which is really powerful."

Obataiye, just one exam short of becoming a qualified fitness instructor, rates his chances of finding his parents "zero to minus 100". He used to be angry at his birth mother, but believes that by leaving him outside a Saigon church, she was doing her best. He was raised for his first two years by a Canadian priest.

On a visit to Vietnam two years ago he was told by an old woman that it didn't matter if he knew his parents: "You just look in the mirror and see them." That is what he does.

The Colour of Difference - Journeys in Transracial Adoption, Federation Press, \$29.95.

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