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# Unwanted babies pay for ‘wrath of ancestors’

Traditional fears drive mothers to abandon children rather than put them up for adoption

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SOME mothers were abandoning their unwanted children to avoid enduring the wrath of their ancestors if they gave them up for adoption.

This is according to new research by Dee Blackie, a consultant to the National Adoption Coalition of SA, who has also found that one of the main reasons adoption was such a contentious issue among black families was that it was believed to be frowned upon by traditional ancestors.

“Bringing a child with unknown ancestors into a family can cause problems for both the child and the family, as the ancestors will not know... who that child is and cannot protect it. It may also make them angry and the family could suffer.

“This is not to say that there are not many wonderful black adoptive parents who take the risk and adopt children into their family but it is still very much seen as a taboo and the child and the family can suffer ostracisation by their extended family and community if the adoption is revealed.”

During Child Protection Week (May 26-June 1), Blackie, who is also a master’s student in anthropology, is releasing her research on child abandonment and unplanned teen pregnancies.

“Some of the mothers and community members told me they believed that to abandon



DOES ANYONE OUT THERE WANT ME?: Abandoned and orphaned babies sleep at an adoption home in Joburg.

PICTURE: BONGIWE MCHUNU

a child was better than to formally relinquish their rights to the child, allowing it to be adopted. (This) is seen as a conscious act and in the eyes of the ancestors; this amounts to rejecting a gift that they have given to you.

“The punishment can be

extreme suffering and bad luck and in some cases the woman may even be rendered infertile... if a woman abandons a child, however, she can always say that she was not herself at the time, that she was suffering from high levels of stress, possibly due to

how the child was conceived, for example through rape.

“Or that she had been abandoned herself by the father of the child and/or her parents, which is often the case. The mother can then sacrifice something to call her ancestors, and then when they

appear, apologise, at which point, they could forgive her.”

Blackie said children who had been abandoned did not know how to connect with their ancestors as they did not know their father’s name.

“A child who does not know who their ancestors are is

believed to live a difficult life and in many instances they are not able to fulfil many of their traditional roles and rituals effectively.”

In 2011, Blackie, then a brand strategist, was so horrified by the sight of a dead tiny baby dumped on a

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smouldering heap of rubbish that she helped form the National Adoption Coalition.

She has now returned to her full-time studies towards her master’s degree in anthropology, looking specifically at child abandonment and adoption in the context of African ancestral beliefs in contemporary urban South Africa.

She has spent the past year interviewing abandoning mothers, abandoned children and a range of child protection experts – from social workers, police officers and nurses to psychologists and psychiatrists.

Blackie said child abandonment was on the rise, fuelled by poverty, extreme gender inequality and violence, yet there was little to no national research on the causes and consequences of this crisis. At the same time, adoptions were on the decline.

Child abandonment has been termed a problem that

falls entirely within the domain of poor women, and frequently young teenagers.

“These young girls are often perceived and portrayed as irresponsible and immoral... and suffering from severe mental problems such as postpartum depression and trauma.

“What this allows the government and society to do is to make the problem the responsibility of the young women or teenagers, who in their view need to be treated medically as they are ‘sick’ and ‘unstable’, rather than to deal with it at a macro social level, which is where the problem is really situated.”

She said her research uncovered how the government and courts were delaying the implementation of the Children’s Act of 2010. “Many child protection experts... recounted endless examples of over-regulation, red tape and what can only be described as the constructive prevention of adoption in some provinces... with adoption social workers having to wait up to two years to get a response from their provincial department of social development.”

The coalition hopes to use the research to run a communication campaign specifically aimed at teenage and unplanned pregnancy, to expand its community engagement programme and explore how to make adoption more culturally relevant and accessible.