

# Sudanese family ripped apart by war reunited in suburban Melbourne

It's an amazing story of love and endurance that saw one woman rise above experiences that would have crushed many others. **Simon Mann** reports.

RIGHT about now, Tereaza Audo is completing a journey that began more than 25 years ago, an odyssey of heartbreak, despair and triumph that bears witness to the notion of the indomitable human spirit.

"I thank God. I thank God every day," says the 46-year-old Sudanese community leader, clutching at her chest as she draws breath, as if sometimes the intensity of her story — in which she lost and then found both a son and a husband — almost suffocates her.

The Footscray woman's tale starts in the dusty south of Sudan, a nation haunted by decades of civil war.



In 1983, after a long lull in fighting, conflict erupted once more, fuelled by racial, religious and geographical grievances. Communities scattered as armed gangs massacred thousands.

On the night that her village was attacked, Tereaza Audo and her family ran for their lives. Her father and three other family members were shot dead in front of her. She bundled up her children, but in the chaos became separated from her toddler son, first-born Emmanuel. Her husband, Andrew, also went missing.

Lugging her baby and her one-year-old, she joined a throng that sought safety in the bush. During the day they hid. At night, they journeyed north in a blind and desperate convoy. "Many, many people died," she says. "Only a few of us made it."

When she stopped running, she was in Khartoum, Sudan's Arab-dominated capital, hundreds of kilometres from home. Desperate attempts to learn the fate of her husband and son

yielded nothing and, assuming the worst, she eventually set about rebuilding her life, changing her name to conceal her Christian identity.

She remarried and with her new husband, a hotel manager who had also escaped the conflict, started a second family. She had a girl and then a boy. A third child died and then came another daughter, Achol, whose name means "replacement". For a decade or so life took on a semblance of normality, Ms Audo even studying medicine at university. But by the late 1990s, trouble was brewing again. Fearing for their lives, the family again took flight. Again, they became separated.

Over the course of the following year, and with the help of relatives and confidants, the family was reunited in Egypt, where they registered with the UN's refugee agency and began their search for a new home.

Four years later, Ms Audo and her family were accepted for resettlement in Australia, arriving in July 2004. And yet, the euphoria of safe passage and a new homeland was dampened by a nagging sense of loss and helplessness.

The family settled in Melbourne's western suburbs — Ms Audo, her husband and five children from two marriages. Life began all over again. New ties were slowly established. But the physical wrench of leaving Sudan had awakened in her a yearning to know definitively what had happened years earlier to her son Emmanuel.

She enrolled in English classes but often found herself in tears. "I'd lost hope," she admits.

A contact from the migrant settlement agency AMES steered her to the Red Cross, which had long before tried — and failed — to find Emmanuel. She registered her details, submitted a photo of herself and filled in numerous forms. This time, the reply, via Nairobi, was relatively swift. A young man, possibly her son, was registered with the agency. He had been living in the vast and sprawling Kakuma refugee



Tereaza Audo with her son Emmanuel Mayol, 26, whom she thought she had lost in Sudan, and her daughter Achol Mabior, 18.

PICTURE: REBECCA HALLAS

camp in northern Kenya for more than five years. Ms Audo tells of the discovery matter-of-factly, but gives a little squeal of delight, waving her arms in the air in a low-key re-enactment of her joy at hearing the news.

A photograph told Ms Audo instinctively that the malnourished figure was indeed her son and such was her faith that she telephoned him and started sending what little money she could. DNA testing would provide proof of their connection. She raised the required \$1500 for the procedure and when confirmation arrived, she said simply: "Of course."

Finally, three years after he was "discovered" in Kenya and

24 years after he was "lost" in the middle of a night of mayhem and murder in southern Sudan, Emmanuel joined his family in Footscray in November 2007.

**4 Finally reunited, Ms Audo says her son fell into her arms "and cried and cried". "I said, 'Manuel, you're lucky to get your mum and I'm lucky to get you'. "** TEREAZA AUDO

Finally reunited, Ms Audo says her son fell into her arms "and cried and cried". "I said, 'Manuel, you're lucky to get your mum and I'm lucky to get you'. And he said to me: 'Mum, God is good. If God had not been there for me I would have died many times. This is the miracle that I come here.'"

Emmanuel's history remains unclear. Slowly, pieces are being revealed. Ms Audo surmises that he had survived that night of bloodshed in 1983 by tagging along with people

from the village. He had probably lived in camps before Kakuma. There had been years of begging and simply surviving. But there are huge gaps and she is anxious not to press. "I don't want to push it," she says, opting for prayer and song, rather than formal counselling, to ease his pain. "In

Australia, it's different. People say you must talk about everything. But Sudanese people sit together and pray and that helps to get rid of frustration. And I tell Emmanuel about the good things when he was a little boy and how we lived happily... and I tell him, 'Here is your brother, your sister. You are safe here, you are lucky.'"

Now 26, Emmanuel has completed an English course and has enrolled in year 11 VCE studies at Victoria University, where his half-sister, Achol, 18, is studying business.

Emmanuel is a man of few words but he acknowledges quietly: "It is very good here. I like Australia very much." Adds his sister: "We've seen such a big difference since he came.

He smiles so much more and he goes out often with friends."

The reunion has had its cost, however. Adjustment has been difficult and Ms Audo and her husband have separated.

But resilience is a precious gift. Ms Audo, who plays a key role in the Sudanese women's group supported by the Catholic agency Centacare, accepts her lot with remarkable grace. "I am happy to be an Australian woman," she says proudly. "This is a new country for us and a new life for everyone coming here. We bring hope but we know to deal with the challenges and to be a success, we have to struggle."

But the story does not end there. A few months ago, a member of the congregation at

Ms Audo's church visited family in Sudan, taking with him a video that showed the church choir performing. It was shown on a TV in a village deep in the south of the country. There was great interest, when suddenly a man pointed at Ms Audo and said, "I think I know her". He also knew Ms Audo's first husband — Andrew Kauch Mayol, a civic leader who lived nearby.

Soon, Mr Mayol was watching the video, too. "She is like Tereaza," he apparently agreed, before adding on closer examination: "It is Tereaza!" "Mama thinks he must have gone into a coma," he says, laughing at the thought of such a shock. "Can you believe it?"

Mr Mayol wrote a letter to his former wife, which was hand-delivered by the returning church member. It was brief, expressing astonishment: "I thank God," he wrote. "I could never have believed that one day I would learn of you again."

Since that dramatic discovery, the two have spoken by telephone. They learnt little during their first conversation because the space was occupied mostly by floods of tears as Mr Mayol learnt the fate of his three children, including Emmanuel. "I am so happy that you are all alive," he repeated over and over.

There were more surprises. Mr Mayol had remarried, too. His wife had died and his mother-in-law had later escaped the Sudanese conflict, taking his three children with her. They live in Geelong. Ms Audo has since made contact and they have visited her.

"I think that if I can get Andrew to Australia to see his children it will be wonderful," Ms Audo says. "Especially for Emmanuel, his first-born."

Ms Audo left Australia before Christmas to greet the man she last saw in 1983. She is due to meet him any day now. But she admitted to a certain anxiety before leaving. She is unsure of her former husband's domestic situation. Nor has she inquired.

"When you have not seen someone for 25 years, it is not something you ask over the telephone," she says. "There are some things that you leave until you meet face to face. You have so much to talk about. You start from the ground and work up from there."

TOMORROW: Dedication and discovery