

Thongs, Woolworths, and a PNG Business Woman

People | Trailblazers



Thongs, Woolworths, and a PNG Business Woman HISTORY

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I've always been fascinated by the legacy of the PNG Banking Corporation (PNGBC). From its people to its place in our national story, it holds a special place in my memory.

Like many Papua New Guineans, PNGBC was where I opened my first bank account. I even had relatives who worked there. I remember once visiting my uncle at their downtown HQ and being treated to lunch at the staff-only cafeteria right at the top of the building. Years later, when I was invited for a meeting by Gorethy Semi, we sat at their new Waigani cafeteria, beautifully modern and thoughtfully designed, but I still think fondly of that old lunch spot above the city.

As a hobby, I've spent time researching the bank's early days, and each discovery leaves me more intrigued than the last. One such discovery is the reason I'm posting a picture of thongs and Woolworths - odd for a bank story, I know, but stay with me.

In 1974, one of PNGBC's first female directors was a woman named Akanisi Taureka. Mrs Taureka was from Fiji and many will recognise the Taureka name from her husband, Sir Reuben Taureka, a prominent doctor and politician. But Akanisi was a powerhouse in her own right.

While most women of that era were teachers, nurses, or community workers, Akanisi was a business owner and not just any business. She ran PNG's only thong (footwear) manufacturing business at the time: Wokabout Footwear.

That name might spark memories for some of you. For me, it was a forgotten brand until I stumbled upon a 1974 National Gazette announcing her PNGBC board appointment. That led me to the remarkable story behind her business.

In September 1972, Akanisi made headlines by exporting 8,000 pairs of locally made thongs to Woolworths in Sydney, with another 12,000 pairs destined for Brisbane the following month.

Speaking to the Post-Courier at the time, she said:

“I like to see women be enterprising, and by going into business I want to encourage our Papua New Guinea women to start thinking that nursing and teaching are not the only things they could do.”

What a visionary.

Akanisi Taureka was more than a board director, she was a trailblazer for women in business, exporting PNG-made products internationally before independence.

And that, my friends, is the link between thongs, Woolworths, and PNGBC.

In 1974, Fiji's then Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, announced Mrs Taureka as his honorary consul in Papua New Guinea.

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