

# Dr Ako Toua – Tying Two Worlds Together

Feature | Guardians of Culture



## Dr Ako Toua: Tying Two Worlds Together People

We are honouring a man who tied two worlds together from Motuan language to English, from oral memory to written record, from past to present so that future generations could dig deeper, ask questions, and retell these stories.

One of the most important pieces of infrastructure in Motu Koitabu communities today is the Metoreia Health Centre. It is a fine structure, yes, but more importantly, it serves a purpose that extends far beyond concrete and steel. It represents care, continuity, and a deep commitment to community.

Within the Centre is a wing named after Dr Ako Toua. For many, the name is familiar. Dr Ako was a pioneer in Papua New Guinea's medical sector, and the decision to honour him in this way feels entirely fitting. Yet for some, his story and the breadth of his contribution may not be fully known. I say this in a cultural, historical and religious context.

To describe Dr Ako only as a medical doctor would be to miss the fuller picture. Based on my own research, he was something more. He was what I would call a thought leader. I'll explain why.

Before Metoreia, the last major health facility many in our community may remember was the hospital at Gemo, an island we now associate mostly with church gatherings and social visits. That history alone reminds us how deeply health, faith, and community life have always been intertwined.

But there is a quieter story about Dr Ako that sits outside medicine. One rooted in history, culture, and the church.

### The Irutauna

When Marjorie Cocombe, a researcher from the Cook Islands, came to Port Moresby in the early 70's to document the stories of early missionaries such as Ruatoka and Piri, it was Dr Ako Toua who assisted her as an oral translator.

Pause for a moment and picture this.

A medical doctor, undoubtedly a busy one, sitting with elders in the irutauna. The mat is laid. Elders speak in one language, recounting stories passed down through generations. Dr Ako listens carefully, then translates those words into another language for a researcher deeply committed to retracing the footsteps of her, and our, forefathers.

Through oral history passed down by Kari Taboro of Pari Village, and later recorded by Cocombe, we are taken back to a moment that would shape the spiritual history of this land.

## The First Contact

The year was 1871.

Elders from the Kwaradubuna and Tubumaga clans, Lakani Toi, Vagi Tau, and their brothers travelled to Manumanu and Gorohu in search of building materials. While out at sea, they spotted something unfamiliar: a strange boat.

Curious, yet cautious, they paddled out in their canoe to investigate.

That was when they met Ruatoka, one of the South Sea missionaries of the London Missionary Society. These were not Europeans arriving in distant authority, but fellow islanders from the Pacific, men who understood the delicate balance between faith and culture.

Ruatoka did not speak their language.

But he understood the universal language of peace.

He offered gifts: clothing, axes, and practical items, and in doing so, he offered something far more valuable: goodwill. Encouraged by this peaceful encounter, Lakani Toi and his party returned home with news of the meeting.

## The Knotted String

Before departing Manumanu, Lakani Toi handed Ruatoka a string.

Tied along it were a series of knots.

Each knot was a marker, a guide for the journey ahead. Together, they mapped the coastline leading to Poreporena:

- Lagava (Redscar Point)

- Varivara, a small offshore island
- Iduata, a rocky point near Boera
- Haidana, an island off a sandy beach
- Roku village
- The sighting of Gemo Island
- Lolorua

“When you see Lolorua and Gemo,” Lakani Toi instructed,

“you will be near a big village. Call out my name.”

Talk about trust.

About memory, tied carefully into knots.

Carrying Stories Forward

Does this not help explain why Lakani Toi later led a group to protect the LMS visitors upon their arrival in the harbour?

We often retell the dramatic moment, the famous words, “Kill me first, before you kill them.” But there is a deeper story beneath that moment. One grounded in prior trust, earlier encounters, and relationships already formed.

This is where Dr Ako Toua’s role becomes so important.

His work as a translator was not incidental; it was essential. He stood at the intersection of medicine, culture, faith, and history, ensuring that what was spoken was not lost in translation.

So the next time you walk through the Metoreia Hosipele, or pass the wing that bears his name, remember this: we are not just honouring a doctor.

We are honouring a man who tied two worlds together from Motuan language to English, from oral memory to written record, from past to present so that future generations could dig deeper, ask questions, and retell these stories.

And here we are today, re-enacting Part Two of the story.

Part One gives us context.

Part Two gives us clarity.

This, my friends, is what I mean by thought leadership the kind of thought that lives on long after the thinker is gone.

And this too reminds me of an old Moari proverb:

"The past is behind us, urging us on."

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