

Profile of a 'barefoot' yoga teacher- Taking yoga into Papua New Guinea's Eastern Highlands

By Fiona Crockford

Jackson Manuai Kiap is a young Papua New Guinean man on a mission to introduce yoga to communities in rural PNG. Senior Iyengar Yoga teacher, **Alan Goode**, and Port Moresby-based teacher, **Fiona Crockford**, joined Jackson to teach at Bihute Prison in PNG's Eastern Highlands Province to celebrate International Yoga Day 2019.

As yoga communities around the world celebrated the 5th International Yoga Day in 2019, senior Iyengar Yoga teacher Alan Goode and his family joined me to take up a unique teaching opportunity in Papua New Guinea. We had been invited by local yoga teacher Jackson Manuai Kiap to travel to Goroka, the capital of PNG's Eastern Highlands Province, to teach a class for women – pronounced 'be-yu-tay' – Prison.



Originally designed as a male prison, Bihute has a population of around 220 inmates. That number includes

up to 40 women as the province has no purpose-built female facilities. The Bihute women are housed in a single dormitory with a kitchen, ablutions block, and an outdoor enclosure where they have practised yoga with Jackson since July 2018. Many of the women are there as a result of polygamy-related issues, including jealousy fights and murder.

The prison infrastructure is seriously run down and a lack of government funding means the Provincial Correctional Service struggles to provide education and training to facilitate detainees' rehabilitation. Jackson's yoga program has been welcomed by Bihute's Prison Commander, Simon Lakeng, as an innovative initiative helping Bihute inmates to manage anxiety and stress and develop concentration and steadiness of mind.

PNG's 'barefoot' yoga teacher

Originally from Mount Hagen in the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea, Jackson is a dedicated yoga teacher and a passionate advocate for women's health and wellbeing. Since 2015, Jackson has been part of a pioneering movement in Port Moresby's National Capital District (NCD) aimed at building safer, healthier, and more resilient communities through local grassroots initiatives such as 'Yoga for Life' and 'Walk for Life'. These healthy living projects have been actively championed by the Governor of NCD, Powes Parkop, and supported through local NGO Yoga Unites, Youth Empowerment and Transformation (Yu Yet).

When he first heard about yoga in 2014, aged 24, Jackson had been unemployed and a 'street boy' for ten years. He was initially sceptical about the yoga scene in PNG and made fun of the 'rubber bodies' but a close friend persuaded him to try it out. Before long, he was hooked: "Yoga had planted the seed for my life". His enthusiasm led him to undertake teacher training under the tutelage of Yu Yet manager and founder, Fazilah Bazari, earning him a British Wheel of Yoga Level 1 Foundation module certification.



Becoming a father in 2017 was transformative for Jackson: "It helped me understand the physical, psychological and emotional changes that women undergo during pregnancy, delivery and in the post-natal phase. I recognised that preventative health is critical for sustainable health outcomes in PNG, but it remains a significant gap in our health system and in PNG women's consciousness".

In 2018, Jackson chose to relocate to the Eastern Highlands to extend the benefits of yoga to youth and women beyond PNG's capital city. As well as establishing classes at Bihute Prison, Jackson also conducts free classes for local youth in Goroka's 'Peace Park', a recreational space close to the market in the town centre where local communal disputes are resolved.

We have often joked about Jackson's 'barefoot yoga' credentials but the description is apt. Barefoot – or grassroots – solutions to local development problems are organic, owned and sustained by the communities they support. Following the tradition of China's 'barefoot doctors', Jackson's leadership and credibility as a yoga teacher in Goroka rely on his ability to identify and connect with the communities he serves.

Being a barefoot yoga teacher in PNG's Eastern Highlands means blending into the community socially and physically. For Jackson, that means living a simple life and adopting a typically Highlander youth appearance – wearing a beard, dreads, a beanie and track pants. It requires humility, respect, and a nuanced understanding of how to work within local customary structures and relationships.

Jackson's barefoot practice also involves skilful communication, knowing how to frame yoga in terms that his students can understand and accept. PNG is a profoundly Christian country underpinned by Melanesian values and ethics. Introducing a 'new' – albeit ancient – philosophical tradition needs sensitive handling. But Jackson sees the yamas and niyamas as universal and therefore compatible with local culture, providing an important basis for his teaching.

Teaching at Bihute with Alan Goode

The arrival of senior Iyengar teacher, Alan Goode, at Bihute Prison in June this year generated much excitement among the prison population. Prisons in PNG are characteristically understood as the country's 'las ples' (Tok Pisin: last place), an

expression that signifies a profound sense of loss, separation and invisibility.¹ Alan's visit was deeply appreciated by both the prisoners and Commander Lakeng. In a family-oriented culture, the fact that Alan brought his partner Saskia and 13-year old daughter Olive to Bihute signalled his openness to genuinely connect with everyday Papua New Guineans.

Together, Jackson and Alan led a class of 21 women through a sequence that included sun salutations, standing and sitting postures. The women were enthusiastic and needed no encouragement as, over the past twelve months and with the blessing of Commander Lakeng, Jackson has worked with the women to develop a regular yoga practice.



During the class, Alan emphasised the importance of the eight limbs of yoga and the connection between mind, body and spirit. This resonated with the women because 'wari' (worry/anxiety) is an abiding emotion and the ability to 'lus tingting' (forget/let go of thoughts) is an important way to manage stress. After the class, Alan and Jackson invited participant reflections. The women spoke of the physical and mental relief they experienced through yoga. Yoga practice with Jackson has become a ritual they look forward to. It grounds them in the present moment and frees them from obsessive thoughts. Regular practice also serves to relieve chronic aches and pains, especially joint stiffness.

The prison officers who work in the women's compound also participated in the class, taking photographs and translating instructions into Tok Pisin. They actively support the women's yoga practice, recognising the therapeutic qualities of yoga as an antidote to detainees' homesickness and sense of displacement. Almost apologetically, the chief prison officer contrasted the rudimentary conditions of Bihute with what she saw as an ultra-sophisticated and well-resourced Australian prison system. Correspondingly, we were struck by the strong sense of community and concern for inmates' welfare at Bihute, encouraged by Commander Lakeng and practised by the Provincial Correctional Service staff.

Introducing yoga for men at Bihute

We had hoped to teach a class for male prisoners during Alan's visit but, due to a recent break out, the men's privileges had been temporarily withheld. Despite the disciplinary action, Commander Lakeng remains a strong advocate for yoga classes for male inmates. As the benefits of yoga for the female inmates became apparent in 2018, Commander Lakeng invited Jackson and I to teach an introductory class for male inmates during the Christmas break. Travelling to Goroka from Port Moresby during the holiday period wasn't easy. It took three attempts due to monsoonal conditions and holiday chaos, with

¹ Reed, A. *Papua New Guinea's last Place: Experiences of Constraint in a Postcolonial Prison*. Berghahn Books, New York, 2003, p.3.

thousands of Papua New Guineans attempting to return to their home villages for the festive season.

When I finally arrived at Bihute to teach the men's class with Jackson, we were ushered into a concrete hall with wire mesh windows. As Jackson introduced the class the men were initially hesitant, unsure of what this 'thing' called yoga was. Most of the men hung back and volunteered others: 'em ya, man wantaim blupela t-shirt' (Tok Pisin: yes him, the man with the blue t-shirt). Only eight courageous participants came forward but thirty or so curious onlookers remained, observing through the wire mesh. The onlookers actively participated in the class repeating my instructions in Tok Pisin, by way of encouragement to our volunteer students and helping them to correct their postures: 'Stretim lek bilong yu; pulim win' (Tok Pisin: straighten your leg; inhale).

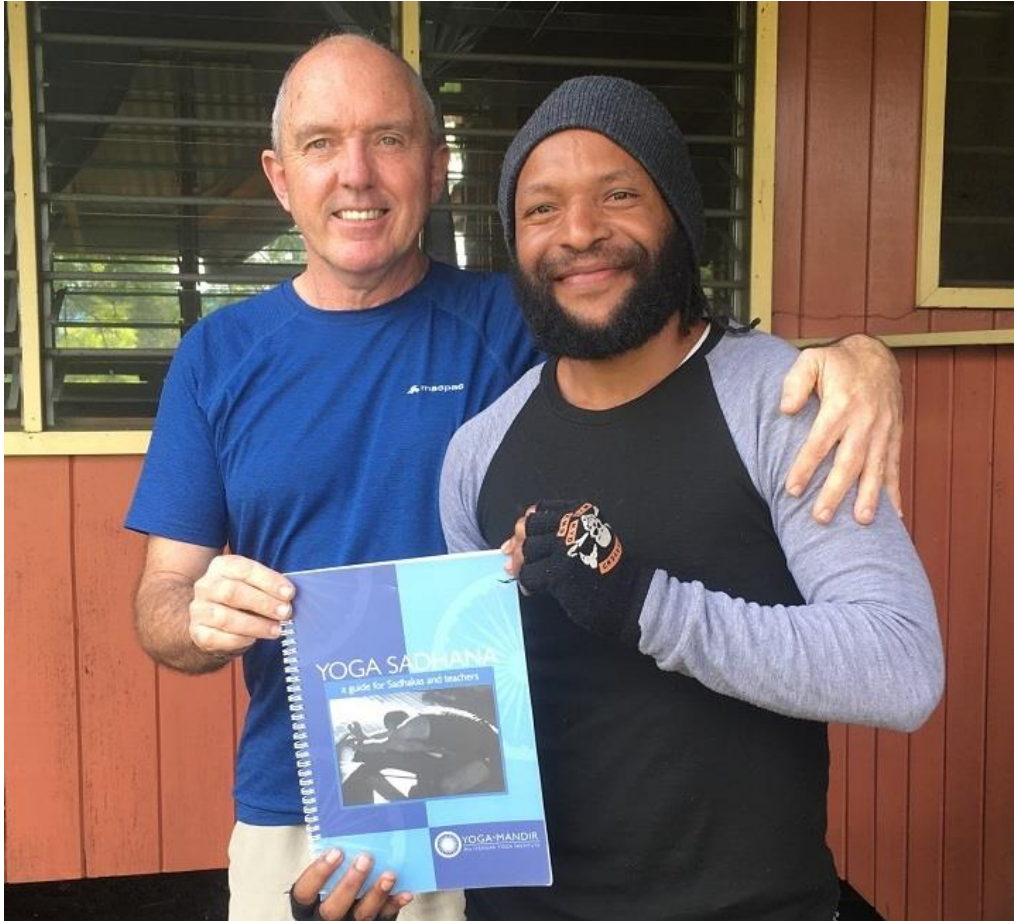
Teaching the men required a different approach to teaching the women at Bihute. The men needed to be challenged physically and they responded to inversions and stronger poses. Nevertheless, their responsiveness to 'repose' was evident when we took the men into Savasana, as Jackson observed: "When we took them into yoga relaxation none of them wanted to get up. We could see that their bodies were connected to the ground. Their minds were in meditation focusing on their breath. It was a real truth and peace they found in their body."



Jackson has continued to teach regular yoga classes for the men at Bihute and class numbers have grown. He accommodates their need for a stronger practice but includes a focus on self-reflection, applying the same principles he uses in the women' classes using the yamas and niyamas as a framework.

Jackson's concern for the wellbeing of the Bihute inmates extends beyond the 'classroom'. Over time Jackson has become a mentor and friend to young male detainees and to the Bihute 'mamas' and he provides whatever support he can, including clothing and magazines. In turn they confide in him, sharing their worries for the future and how they will reintegrate into their communities. As Jackson says "yoga is changing lives in the prison, but more needs to be done to help them transition back to life on the outside". To that end, he has created a small agricultural project for ex-prisoners, providing seeds and a piece of land to cultivate carrots, potatoes and corn so they can generate an income and support their families after their release.

PNG's 'barefoot' yoga teacher is an inspiration both inside and beyond Bihute Prison. His commitment to raise the health, wellbeing and self-sufficiency of Bihute prisoners and local youth through grassroots, community-led development exemplifies the resourcefulness and drive of young Papua New Guinean emerging leaders.



Biographies

Fiona Crockford worked for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade at the Australian High Commission in Port Moresby and taught community yoga classes in Port Moresby and Goroka from 2016-2019. E: crocfi@ozemail.com.au

Alan Goode is the Director of Yoga Mandir in Canberra, Australia. He is a senior teacher and a direct student of BKS Iyengar. <https://www.yogamandir.com.au/>