



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

### **HUMBLE AKISI INSPIRES OTHERS TO FARM**

*LICE MOVONO*

Akisi Vinaka is well known and highly regarded in sugar circles in Labassa. Upon speaking with the 61 year old Sirdar you will quickly understand why the Nubu, Macuata chieftain is so respected in her field.

Originally from Wainidrua, Nadogo, Akisi was born to a noble family. But while her roots are well respected, it's her humility and character that connects her to just about every race and rank in the area.

Akisi is the Sirdar or leader of eight cane cutting gangs. She doesn't let age, gender or ethnicity stand in her way to being a great leader. A Sirdar performs the role of manager for cane cutting gangs, each gang can have between eight to ten

"When I started in 2001 they gave me one gang. Within two-to-three years, they gave me eight gangs, that's up to 80 people to manage. It's a big job and I work hard to make sure the gangs are looked after," she said.

Akisi has been a Sirdar for 18 years. She knows the job well and enjoys it and the challenges that come along with managing such a group of people.

"Every two weeks, I have to go to the sector office to check the paperwork and confirm the amount of cane that each gang has harvested. The following Wednesday, I have to collect the money from the bank and then make sure that each and every labourer is paid for their work" she said.

Akisi also manages to find time to tend to her own thriving farm. On her farm, she has a diverse crop with sugar cane, rice, cash crop vegetables and raises livestock.

"This year I harvested 96 tonnes of sugar cane, last year I harvested 101 tonnes and the year before that I harvested 100 tonnes," she said.

"Most of the time I work alone, I plant the cane, apply the fertilisers and weedicides, alone."

Located in Lagalaga, Akisi's 15 acre farm and farm house is divided by a river. Each morning to begin her day, Akisi swims across the river, with her change of clothes packed in a dry bag. Then her work begins.

“I’m 61 years of age and I’m still going to the farm each day because this is the land that God gave us, so, we need to cultivate it.”

The life lessons she has learnt have made her a powerful source of knowledge that she is keen to share, to help guide others around her, especially fellow itaukei and women.

“People should see what I’m doing so that they can follow the way I work on my farm. I particularly love teaching young people, like my nieces and nephews, about farming” she said.

While she works in the field, women of her social background are in the kitchen and she’s often reminded of this. “My job is in the field. Sometimes they ask me ‘why do you work on the farm as it’s mens work?’ but I’ve always said that anyone can do this. Women can cut cane, be a Sirdar and anything else.”

“It’s not very hard to be a Sirdar. We just have to give our best to the industry and to keep learning. During my first year I was frightened and ashamed but now I love it and challenge all women to come and try this,” she said.

“The reason I was ashamed was because I didn’t know all of the parts of a Sirdar’s job, like going to the bank and paying wages, but, in my second year everything was ok.”

She’s delighted that more women are joining the industry and is generous in devoting her time to teach interested women how to look after a farm. “Women are starting to try farming, I like to help teach them because it makes money and helps their family” she said.

Days are broken up by visits to nearby farms where she spends time sharing with her peers, the challenges and lessons of growing cane. Punctuated by Kava or jungli murgee with brown rice, the conversations are always about ways to make their yield better.



“Being a Sirdar and a grower, I like to spend my time with other growers to explain things and also hear them talk. When I attend meetings they often ask me to explain things and I find that enjoyable,” Akisi said.

She certainly is generous with her time, her wisdom and in sharing her farming tactics and practices.

**ENDS**

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