

For Magqubu it was all in a day's work. But his courage, cool head and experience had saved our lives. He had also saved our new project, for if anyone had been killed, it would have been the end of the concept.

Over the years, I have followed Magqubu for thousands of kilometres along rhino paths. When he checks these animals, he searches the ground and trees for clues. A bent tip of a branch, a broken leaf, a slight indentation on the ground invisible to the normal eye are enough.

But he doesn't just see the bush and animals — he senses them through a unique combination of finely tuned intuition and experience. And he is always alert to any danger ahead. On one occasion, six of us walking along the Black Umfolozi River had come to a shallow ford where we thought we'd cross. We followed Magqubu to the bank and took off our shoes preparatory to entering the water. Suddenly Magqubu ordered "Wait!" and pointed at something in the river.

**Close Call.** We looked but saw nothing. Then Magqubu picked up a log and threw it into the water. In a flash a crocodile surfaced, gripped the log in its jaws and shook its huge head. The log broke into pieces as if it had been a twig. Magqubu's instinctive scanning had saved one of us from certain and horrible death.

Like his bravery, Magqubu's courtesy never leaves him even with those who have been insulting. Once we were on a trek with a group when it began to rain, obliging us to crawl under a small tent. One man com-

plained about Magqubu's being inside with us. Magqubu understood the gestures and prepared to leave. I stopped him and told the man that if he did not like Magqubu in the tent, he was at liberty to get out. After a few hot words, he backed down. But Magqubu gave no hint that there had been any unpleasantness. The following morning he patiently and politely imparted his knowledge of the bush to the offender of the evening before. The man was humbled. Magqubu the Zulu had shown the white man how a gentleman behaved.

Today, at the age of 88, Magqubu still moves through the bush with an ease that a man half his age would envy. One reason is that he is particular about his diet and never eats fat or dairy products. Neither does he smoke or drink. But this was not always so. Until he was 40 years old, he ate everything, smoked and drank, particularly home-brewed beer and the liquor made from the marula fruit. His knuckles are marked from innumerable fist fights.

His life changed in 1941, when he was bitten by a poisonous snake and was in a coma for three days. He was cured by a Zulu religious healer, and from then on he changed his diet and habits and began to pray twice a day. Even on trail, he prays aloud morning and evening for his family, friends and the world. When he returns to the group, his eyes shining, there is no doubt of his devoted belief in the Great Creator.

At the end of each trek we always have an *indaba*, Zulu for a gathering,

to discuss the experiences of the previous days. After one *indaba* in the 1970s, Magqubu said it was time we had an *indaba-nkulu*, or big gathering, where people from all over the world who had walked the trails with us could come together. This idea led to the first World Wilderness Congress in 1977 in Johannesburg, where Americans, Australians, Britons, Canadians, South Americans and South Africans gathered to talk. Magqubu Ntombela was one of the speakers, the first time a black game warden had spoken at an international gathering in South Africa. Unawed by the audience of 1 500 people made up of leading scientists, artists, writers, bankers and politicians, he gave a poetic Zulu interpretation of summer, winter, autumn and spring.

But it is the trip we made together in September 1987 that will remain forever in my memory. On our way to the Fourth World Wilderness Congress in the United States, we stopped over at Brecon in Wales, home of the South Wales Borderers regimental museum. Magqubu's father had fought at the great battle of Isandlwana on January 22, 1879, when Zulu warriors of King Cetshwayo had annihilated 858 of Great Britain's best troops on the African continent. Magqubu's father had killed four redcoats, and Magqubu wanted to make his peace with the *amadhlozi*, the spirits of the men.

At lunch in the mess, Magqubu set the example by asking for grace to be

said and, after the meal, by thanking the waiters who had served at the table. Then we were taken to Brecon Cathedral and the regimental chapel, where row upon row of names of men killed at Isandlwana were engraved on the walls. Magqubu knelt in a front pew and prayed aloud to the spirits of the old Zulu kings, to Queen Victoria and her descendants, and to his father and the men his father had killed on that hot summer's day. Magqubu asked for peace and forgiveness and prayed that never again would the Zulus and the British be involved in war.

As we left Brecon that afternoon, Magqubu reminded me of a trek we had taken with leading blacks, Indians, Afrikaners and English-speaking South Africans into the bush. "Do you remember," he said, "I told those men that when the lion attacks or the black rhino charges, they do not care whether you are black or white. And when you are dead and buried, the worms do not care about the colour of your skin."

That night on the train back to London, I thought about how Magqubu's life had been intertwined with mine. No man has had a greater influence on me. Through his example of Zulu dignity, his sense of humour, application to duty, personal loyalty and courage, the barrier between us — the traditional apartheid between white and black — had slowly broken down until we had become simply two men, two friends.

REPRINTED FROM THE JANUARY 1989 ISSUE OF READER'S DIGEST  
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On that fateful day, he demanded that I perform an ancient Zulu ritual — an event that would affect us for the rest of our lives

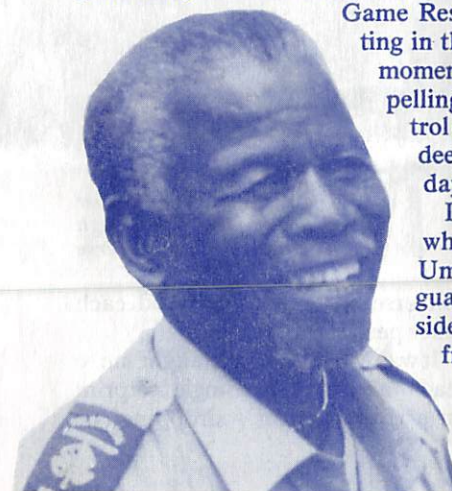
## UNFORGETTABLE MAGQUBU NTOMBELA

BY IAN PLAYER

**T**HE SOUTH AFRICA in which I was born in 1927 was the world of master and servant. For me, that world was to change because of Magqubu Ntombela.

We met in 1952, just after I had joined the Natal Parks Board as a game ranger and had been sent on an anti-poaching mission to the Umfolozi Game Reserve. Magqubu, then a guide, was sitting in the shade of a marula tree, and from the moment he greeted me, I noticed something compelling about him. Here was a man in full control of himself, and his confidence came from deep within. I had an intuition that someday we would work together.

I saw him only periodically until 1958, when I became the senior ranger at Umfolozi and he the sergeant of the game guards. From that time we worked side by side, and each day I learnt something from him. Born at the turn of the century, he had grown up in Zululand, and as a young boy had taken white men



PHOTOGRAPHS: CHESTER DENT

out hunting. In the Zulu tradition, he had three wives, who had borne him 18 children, and lived in a kraal near the reserve. He could not read or write and knew only a few English words, while my knowledge of Zulu hardly enabled us to



Above: On trail, Ian Player follows Magqubu through the Umfolozi Game Reserve

converse, but we understood each other perfectly.

It was Magqubu who taught me to read the bush. From a single footprint on a river bank or a dropping, he

would imitate the gestures or call of the animal that had left it. Walking across an open plain, he once picked up a single feather and showed it to me. First he made a cooing sound, indicating that it was from a dove. Then he imitated the cry and lightning



flight of a hawk attacking the dove and their plummeting to the ground, where the hawk consumed its prey. Finally, Magqubu crouched on all fours to mime tiny ants consuming the carcass. At last came the wind, leaving only this single feather.

The Umfolozi Game Reserve was

under great threat in the late 1950s. Displaced tribal people were settling around its perimeter, and poaching was serious. For days Magqubu and I, with other game guards, were on patrol, arresting men who came in with dogs, spears and rifles to hunt the impala, warthog, kudu and bushbuck. Magqubu had an intuitive sense of which area the poachers were likely to raid. He would position us, and at the giveaway sound of a dog barking or the bleat of a wounded buck, we would charge in, Magqubu fearlessly leading the way.

It was late in the summer of 1958 that the decisive event in our relationship occurred. Magqubu and I were on our way back to Mpila, the main tourist rest camp of the game reserve. We had spent a week looking for camping sites for people who would be coming the following year to trek wilderness trails under our guidance. I was hot, tired, dusty and anxious to get home to my wife and our newborn first child. Walking ahead of him, I passed a small cairn of stones. When I was about 100 metres beyond it, he called out, "You have passed an *isivivane*."

Isivivanes are old piles of stones that no Zulu traveller should pass without picking up a stone, spitting on it and then throwing it on to the cairn. "You must come back and respect the law, or something bad will happen to you," he insisted. I refused. "Those are your beliefs, Magqubu, not mine," I replied.

Magqubu looked me in the eye and repeated that I was to return, pick up

a stone, spit on it and throw it on to the cairn. I stared back at him. He was directly responsible to me as warden of the reserve. In paramilitary terms, I was his senior officer. In the black-white terms of the time, I was master, he was servant. Then he said "*Awuthi dgqi!* (Come right here at once!)" a peremptory phrase a subordinate would never use. I was shocked, and we argued heatedly before I gave in. Then he simply said, "Let us go."

**Deadly Foe.** We followed a rietbok path through short grass, with Magqubu now in front. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the tip of a snake's tail just as Magqubu's boot touched it. Instantly, it reared up. It was a dreaded *indhlonahlo*, or crested mamba, one of the most dangerous African snakes. About four metres long and as thick as my forearm, it drew itself up nearly two metres off the ground to hover over us within arm's reach, swaying slightly and making a high-pitched tsi-tsi-tsi sound. I was paralyzed with fear.

We stood dead still. It was capable of striking both of us in quick succession. We would live for an hour — if its fangs did not penetrate a vein or an artery. But at last it dropped and glided rhythmically back into the grass. When it was gone, Magqubu continued down the trail. But after a hundred metres, he stopped. If I hadn't honoured the cairn, he said, we'd have died.

Looking back, I realize that from that day my life began a great change. No more was Magqubu just an outstanding black game guard and I his

white superior warden. His ritual the *isivivane*, I realized, honoured not only the lore of his people but the whole order of life. It included mankind, irrespective of colour. It included me. What I thought in my ignorance was merely an ancient myth was in fact a vital affirmation of the oneness of the natural world and man's relationship to it.

This understanding marked the beginning of the end of apartheid between us. In the following months and years, Magqubu became a friend, teacher and brother to me. I've come to see that he lives his life as an example to others, and that he imparts wisdom through his acts.

On March 18, 1959, Magqubu and I led the first group of six hikers in Umfolozi's newly proclaimed wilderness area. Ranger Jim Feely and I had persuaded our superiors to establish it as a completely new way of seeing Africa. Rather than observing game through the windows of a motorcar we would trek on foot through the bushland to let people experience what we as rangers knew to be the continent's soul.

The first trek, however, was a natural disaster. We were walking to our camp when a black rhino burst from a water hole and made straight for our group. At a critical moment in the rhino's charge, Magqubu roared "*Hamba, betjane!*" ("Go, black rhino!"), threw his hat, distracting its attention, and at the same instant fired a shot into the ground. This was much for the rhino, and it veered into the bush, snorting and puffing.