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.
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 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 lighting a stone, he spoke on it and threw it on to the caim. I started 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 "Aawu! ddug! (Come right here at once!)," a peremptory phrase a subordinate sense of which the poachers were likely to raid him. He would position us, and at the giveaway sound of a dog parting the beer of a wounded buck, we would charge in, Magqubu fearlessly leading the way.

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

The first trek, however, was a disaster. We were walking to a camp when a black rhino burst from a water hole and made straight for the group. At a critical moment in their no's charge, Magqubu roared aloud, "Hamba, bejeelene!" ("Go, black son!), threw his hat, distracting their attention, and at the same instant, fired a shot into the ground. This was much for the rhino, and we veered into the bush, snorting and puffing.

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