Qumbu Magqubu Ntombela died at his home near the entrance gate of Umfolozi Game Reserve on 21 October 1993 after a short illness. A most remarkable man has gone from the complex scene of wilderness and wildlife conservation. His knowledge of trees, birds, animals, the wild, and the oral history of the Zulus and their relationship to the land was phenomenal by any standards.

Born about 1900 in the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War with its violent upheavals, Magqubu remembered his mother carrying him to the waggon track leading from Nongoma to Somkele and pointing out King Dinuzulu being taken to Grey town for trial, accused of fomenting the Zulu or Bambatha rebellion. It was a sight that haunted Magqubu and he would describe in detail the uniforms of the troops who made the arrest, and the expression on the face of the king.

Magqubu grew up on the green hills of Ongeni that lie midway between Umfolozi and Hluhluwe Game Reserves. His father and the family were removed by the Department of Veterinary Services in 1945 during the tsetse fly campaign. They were promised they could return when the fly was eliminated.

As with many other promises to tribal people, this was not honoured.
As a young Zulu, Magqubu herded the goats and learnt his natural history from the men in the kraal. His extraordinary eyesight, athletic body, quick mind and his knowledge of wild animals made him a popular guide for the white hunters who came to shoot game in the buffer zones around the game reserves. At sixpence a week and at 12 years old, he led them to the big game.

His prowess reached the ears of Mali Mdhletshe, a senior game guard in the employ of Frederick Vaughan-Kirby, the chief game conservator appointed by the Natal Provincial Administration in 1911. Mali sought and obtained Magqubu's father's permission to employ the young boy and Magqubu began his career as an udibi or carrier, for Vaughan-Kirby in 1914. Mali and his brother Mankentshane and other guards broadened Magqubu's knowledge.

Formal schooling to teach even the rudiments was unavailable, but Magqubu was to say, 'My ears are my books, and my lips are my pen.' From udibi he graduated to labourer and then game guard and wilderness trail leader. He worked until 1989.

Magqubu's keen observational powers, his loyalty and his courage became a byword. Until he retired from the Natal Parks Board in 1954 he was in the front line of the conservation struggle, fighting poaching gangs, arresting illegal white hunters, and being trusted to carry the wages from Hluhluwe Game Reserve to Mkuze and Ndumu Game Reserves. Few men could keep up with him while he trotted and walked, covering the distance between the reserves in a day.

He worked with Roden Symons and then R. H. T. P. Harris who relied on Magqubu to lead the gang who checked the fly traps and brought the tsetse tlies back to the Makamisa research station overlooking the White Umfolozi river.

When Captain H. B. Potter was appointed chief conservator of the Zululand reserves, Magqubu became the senior game guard. In 1940 he was bitten by a boomslang and was unconscious for four days. During this time he had a vision of a journey, so vivid that he remembered every incident. He would recite it to anyone wanting to hear the fascinating story. It was this vision that led him to the Shembe Church where he became a much respected pastor in the Macibini area. Each year he went to the Shembe ceremonies at Inanda.

We met in 1952 when I made a brief visit to Umfolozi Game Reserve to prepare for the first aerial count of white rhino. His charisma, presence and physicial energy impressed me. I liked the way he sang and danced when he used a shovel or a wheelbarrow, or leading the gang of men repairing the old causeway over the Black Umfolozi river. His favourite little song when approaching the river was, 'Beware of the Black Umfolozi that carries those who cross it like pumpkins to the sea.' Magqubu had only a few days to live when the song became tragically true. The river drowned the experienced core of the game capture team who were crossing in a lorry. Magqubu heard about it and as he lay dying he recited me his little song.

In 1958 I was transferred to Umfolozi Game Reserve as the first resident ranger and Magqubu Ntombela was appointed sergeant of the game guard force. Until he died we worked together in one way or another, and I was always in his debt. The acquisition of adjoining crown lands, Operation Rhino, the prevention of illegal squatter occupation, and the initiation of the first wilderness trails were part of our duties in those turbulent years. I used to send him out on patrol with aspirant white rangers and when he returned and said a man was no good, he was never wrong. He could see through

anyone and spotted a flaw instantly. He knew the personal history of every game guard, had no favourites and was a severe disciplinarian, yet fought hard for his men.

We became particularly close after a confrontation with a black mamba while we were scouting for wilderness trail routes in October 1958. It was a turning point in our relationship because I had refused to follow his custom of honouring a cairn (Ukuhlonipha isivivane). He was right in his insistence and I became, psychologically, his pupil. No more patient teacher ever lived.

As a mimic he had no peer. He often used this gift to great effect whenever I was irritable or behaved badly. He would wait until I calmed down, then mimic my behaviour, accurately but without malice. People on wilderness trails would roll around laughing hysterically, pleading with him to stop.

In 1969 we moved from Zululand to our smallholding, Phuzamoya, in the Karkloof. Magqubu came to live on the farm and in 1974 when I retired from the Natal Parks Board we ran trails for the Wilderness Leadership School. Including the Natal Parks Board trails, we took over 3 000 people into the wilderness. Magqubu's personality, knowledge and skill made a deep impression upon the trailists. Only once did he use his rifle in self-defence, when we were attacked by lions.

In 1977 I organised the First World Wilderness Congress in Johannesburg and Magqubu took his place on the main platform amongst cabinet ministers, scientists and international luminaries such as Sir Laurens van der Post. Magqubu's address on the Zulu calendar was a highlight of the congress.

In 1987 we went to America together to speak at the Fourth World Wilderness Congress in Denver, Colorado. Magqubu's oratory, his presence and sense of humour made him the favourite of everyone, and Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Prime Minister of Norway, was enchanted by his stories. One of his admirers from the First World Wilderness Congress was Finlay MacRae of Scotland who later accompanied us on trails into Umfolozi Game Reserve.

Magqubu called Finlay 'iScot', and I treasure a memory of Magqubu dancing on the banks of the Black Umfolozi river to Finlay's bagpipe chanter.

Magqubu's grasp of the Highland rhythm was faultless. When we passed through the United Kingdom we visited the headquarters of the Royal Regiment of Wales at Brecon. Magqubu's father (the head of the muzi) had fought with the Ngobamakosi regiment at Isandlwana in 1879 and claimed to have killed four redcoats. Magqubu wished to propitiate their spirits. Major Bob Smith, curator of the regimental museum, said in a recent letter that Magqubu's visit was the highlight of his term of office. We were entertained to a formal luncheon in the mess and I sat with tears in my eyes, watching my old friend handle the luncheon, the officers and the media with the aplomb of a trained ambassador. For Magqubu it was an experience he deeply valued and he recalled it with warmth and affection. His not being able to speak English made no difference to the liveliness of the luncheon.

Later he prayed aloud in Brecon Cathedral within view of the regimental colours recovered from the Buffalo River in 1879. Zulu praise names rang out against the stone walls. For two days he was on the front page of newspapers in Britain. He took it all in his stride.

In late 1993 he had to have a small prostate operation. He went to hospital and caught jaundice. He insisted on going home. When he knew that death was near he told his devoted wife Tabete to send for Madolo (lan Player).

My wife and I arrived at his muzi two days before he went into the next world. He kept control of himself and as I sat holding his hand and weeping, his grandchildren walked in and out of his room and a group of Shembe churchwomen sang in the adjoining room. Rain was coming on the south wind and I heard thejukwe (coucal) calling, bubbling down the scale. We had heard it many times together while lying in wait for poachers. Now the greatest poacher of all was coming to take my friend. Nick Steele (Malamba) came to say goodbye and even ill extremis Magqubu sang out Nick's praise names.

In the final moments of Magqubu's life the Shembe women sang his spirit away. I know it would have pleased him because he was a wonderful singer himself and he was immersed in the Shembe Church.

Since his death, letters continue to arrive from all over the world, from people distressed at his departure, and in praise of him. Finlay MacRae wrote to say how much he would have liked to pipe a lament at the grave, and he will do so on his next visit. Another person who went on trail with him wrote: 'I remember his unflagging vitality, the tight musculature of the

backs of his legs as he walked ahead of us. The total absorption in his surroundings seemed to border on the mysterious. I remember the communion between the two of you that went beyond any facility of language, beyond the bonds of time and comradeship into the realm of faith and trust that come only from the deepest of mutual respect'.

Magqubu taught me the true meaning of hlonipho and ubuntu - respect and compassion. He was a whole man.

The traditional heifer skin that covered him in the grave came from two admiring friends in England, Sir Laurens van der Post and RonaId Cohen. As the first handfuls of earth were cast into the grave and rain was coming, all I could think of were the words of Rudyard Kipling: 'You're a better man that I am, Gunga Din'.

Magqubu was always the pathfinder and now he has gone ahead and I know he will be waiting to guide me when my time comes. Hamba kahle Qumbu Magqubu. We salute and thank you for all you did for people, the wilderness, wildlife and wild lands. Those who knew you will never forget you, and the others who come later will learn of and honour your contribution.

Dr Ian Player