

You must also understand that when I say I didn't like to get into mischief, I don't mean I was a "goody-goody" or that we as children were little saints. We were up to mischief quite often.

I can still vividly remember one day I was sitting outside in the yard with my friend, and we got very hungry and decided to steal some eggs. My mother was cooking "samp" outside. She used dried cow dung as coal. We looked around the cattle enclosure to find some fresh (wet) cow dung and wrapped it around the eggs and stuck them into the fire. My egg was ready earlier because I had put it at the centre of the fire. We divided it between the two of us and ate it. I then took my friend's one and put it at the centre. But just before it got done my mother showed up and caught us red handed. "Oh" she said "Is this the reason why you are so mindful of the fire?" We didn't wait for the rest we just ran away. She started shouting at us and another man nearby tried to get hold of us but to no avail.

We crossed the Welakabili River, ran through the maize fields. We ran until we reached a field of sweet potatoes. We forgot that we were being chased and that the shouts were coming from a man chasing us to take us to my mother. Rather, we looked around for some digging objects, got a stick and helped ourselves after a bit of digging to some sweet potatoes. The man who was chasing us just stood there laughing uncontrollably and holding his sides. He could not believe his eyes that the kids he was

chasing for stealing eggs were now stealing again. This was ridiculous, he said and left us there.

We roamed about until late in the afternoon. We got hungry and went to my friend's house. We were given food and we ate there. He had to walk me home. Now there was a problem, I had done something wrong so I knew the stick was awaiting me. My mother refused to give us food saying that she hoped we are still full from the meal of eggs and potatoes we stole. We promised never to steal again so she forgave us, gave us supper and warned us that should we ever do this again she was going to call the police to catch us. We did not tell her that we already had food at my friend's place.

The following day, as we were driving the cows from the kraal to the meadows we saw a policeman! Horror-struck, we ran for our lives thinking they had come for us. Seeing us running like that made him follow: he dropped from his van, and started chasing us. We hid in the thicket panting. He spent about 15 minutes looking for us until he eventually gave up the search and went. Life was back to normal. I didn't imagine then that such chases would be part of my normal adult life later.

To be truthful about our childhood, mischief and nonsense followed us most of the time. I remember how one day in winter we were playing at building sledge hammers from dry maize-stocks. Something fell on one of my friend's head. He fainted. We suspected that someone threw a stone at him. We ran away and left him there. His mother and his granny fetched him and took him to an Inyanga. He stayed there for quite some time, until he got well. But I still feel guilty whenever I remember our leaving him there to die.

One of the most thrilling places of childhood was the forest, or better the forests, around our area. They were places of games and danger, places that were reputed to have supernatural and real forces which terrified you. They were the homes of pythons and adders and of wild beasts. They were the places inhabited by all the dreadful creatures your grandmothers spoke of in their stories. But to a child they were also places of learning: to survive by watching the birds, eating their berries, or following the honey-bird to lead you to honey, or hunting the birds to eat. When the Pondoland "rebels" were being hunted and our lives were in danger, we

sought refuge in the forest. We could survive in it because it was marked by the paths and the hunts of our childhood.

We used to do a lot of bird hunting when we were young. We collected a lot of stones, and armed with our slings, we would start at a forest called Zintwala and then go to a small thicket called Ezinqayini. In this thicket there was an enormous tree. At the trunk of this tree there was an enormous groove. On one of those expeditions I peeped into this groove and inside I saw a calabash covered by an enamel plate. I got very suspicious and half-frightened: could this be a human being's meal or was it a trap set up by ogres? But still I was curious to see what was inside the calabash, despite my fears; despite also the old women's tales. I took heart and drew closer to the pot.

I first removed the wooden spoon on the plate, then the plate. It was full of amasi (sourmilk). I stirred the content with the wooden spoon and found that the sourmilk had ground cornmeal in it. I felt the pangs of hunger there and then I wondered: "What must I do?" I asked myself: "Should I eat it?" But then again: "Who put the calabash there? Could it be that it was left there by some spirits? What curse could befall us?"

I ended up eating the food. I felt courageous for I decided that if I was to die, then I was to die and so be it. It would be a solitary death and would affect no-one else. I promised that I would not lift a finger from my coffin, it will be just the death of a single child. I took a deep breath and ate hastily, looking left and right, to and fro just in case the owner of the calabash arrived. But there was too much food there, so as I had my fill, I started calling my friends: I whistled, they whistled back. They came and asked where I got the calabash from. However before I could answer them and explain to them the dangers involved they leapt at the calabash and with their hands working at great speed they finished all the food.

As they wiped their faces and were ready to go a huge boulder crashed in front of us. We started running out of the forest, with a volley of rocks and stones following on our heels. Fortunately none of us got hit. We couldn't, however, make out our assailant. We went back where the cattle were grazing, stunned by the strange episode. I requested that we stop talking about this calabash story lest it will end up in the ears of the elders. I had this picture of all the elders in our village placing their sticks

on our backsides. Frightened, we gathered the cattle and drove them back home. It was already getting dark

Three days later my parents asked me to tell them all about the amasi-in-the-calabash-story. There followed sharp reprimands about touching strange food.

But you never learn: you move through your childhood years feeling constantly hungry, so you move like a locust. Soon after the incident while looking after the sheep and the goats, we went to a waterhole to drink some water. When we got there we found the carcass of a sheep. We promptly decided to eat it. I immediately set to work to make a makeshift knife out of a piece of tin. We skinned it after great effort and started to cut and work on its intestines. Most of the inside parts were braaiied immediately. We then decided to equip ourselves better for the next day's feast: we were to bring a big tin to cook in, salt, a box of matches, a stack of firewood and knives. We then took the rest of the carcass and hid it behind a bush somewhere around.

By then my little brother who was tugging along for the day became tired and homesick and demanded to return home. We pulled him by the ears, warning him never to say anything about the meat to my mother.

The problem started when my mother wanted to give him food. He declined to eat, saying he was full from the braai from the carcass of a sheep. I returned home that evening, locked the sheep and the goats in their respective kraals, and carefree I entered the door. I could instantly detect that the atmosphere was tense. I surmised that the cat was out of the bag. I was ready for anything.

I was given supper, and I ate my fill. My mother began asking me why I did not tell her about the braai in the veld. She told me never ever to eat meat from a dead animal if we don't know what killed it. It might as well be that it was poisoned, she said, in which case I would be poisoned as well. I was lucky once more to escape the stick.

Despite hardships my childhood and youth were full of adventures and challenges at school, in the veld, everywhere, where we used to get up to fights for no reason at all. What the problem or the cause of any fight was, nobody could tell. There was a time when we fought the boys from

Gabheni. It was a long feud, an almost traditional war of the boys. Sometimes we would quarrel over the use of a river, each group wanting only its flock to drink from the river. Sometimes we would demand that they do not swim before us since they would spoil the water for us. They never used to take that lying down and everything would end in a fight.

But such fights could become very serious: one day while we were swimming these boys were crawling behind the bush stalking us, as it were. We only saw them when they were very close to us but we managed to grab our sticks, and the fight lasted for hours, literally until the cows had to come home. We defeated them and scattered them in all directions. But the next day they came back with more boys from Mthwaku. That day some of us got injured. Even then we managed to chase them and got hold of three of them and did everything we wanted with them, beating them up with sticks, we did this till the elders came and took them. For quite some time they avoided our river and used others elsewhere. The feud amongst the boys continued until the early 1960s. As a boy you were born into one of the groups.

It's over now because many people were resettled during the establishment of the so-called betterment schemes and trusts. A lot of people moved from Bhalasi to Sigubudwini River. Some moved to Gabajani, some to Mthwaku. Now people have fenced paddocks where they all take their livestock. It's quite different from the olden days. It was fun to be a herdboys, we loved the fights and the adventures in the wild. That is where we got to know the heroes of childhood. We used to know that so and so is an expert at stickfighting, so and so is a coward, and so and so can't defend himself.