IN NgânONOUS SOUTHERN AFRICANS AND COLONIALISM:
INTRODUCTION

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In the mid- to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African peoples responded in diverse ways to the furious winds of change sweeping through Southern Africa in the wake of wave after wave of European colonial intrusions. Chief Linchwe of the BaKgotla people in what is now Botswana, for instance, confronted by the destabilising onrush of colonial power and its impact on his people’s culture, at first resisted the introduction into his lands of symbols of white economic power such as the railway. Eventually, however, Linchwe realised that his sons must be prepared to face “this fearless and unconquerable beast the white man calls civilisation.” This book captures and explains such complex African responses to colonialism from the 1840s to the 1920s. Just as European colonisers thought they were subduing the “beast” of heathen, indigenous peoples for Civilisation, so Africans grappled with Imperial Beasts of great magnitude that denied them political rights and frequently closed off avenues to economic prosperity and free cultural expression. The ambiguity of colonialism’s impact is evident not just in this “taming” of indigenous people but also by the manner in which the African response, whether by open or subtle resistance or accommodation to colonial religion, politics and economies, grappled with and eventually “tamed” the harsher forms of colonial rule—something that would take many more decades but the foundations of which were tentatively laid in this period.1

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Unlike many collections, this volume did not arise from a conference or workshop. The contributors responded individually to an invitation from the editors to revisit a subject that many would have regarded as settled forty years ago. This reflects larger movements in scholarship. To the surprise of many observers, colonialism has seldom loomed so large in the minds of historians and literary scholars as at the dawn of the twenty-first century. This presents a paradox, given that the European empires died half a century ago or more, after giving painful birth to scores of independent successor regimes. No single explanation can account for the remarkable resurgence of imperial and colonial studies across the globe.

In the sphere of politics and international relations, an obvious object of study is the persistence of the borders fixed in the colonial era. Noting the apparent artificiality of the lines drawn on maps during the Scramble for Africa, it had been anticipated that they would be more rationally redrawn when former colonial subjects took charge of their own destinies. Pan-Africanists hoped that Africa would be united or reconstituted as a handful of countries. Others imagined that ethnicity would guide the remaking of maps. Defying all expectations, African borders remained surprisingly stable. Where they were redrawn, as in the Horn of Africa, conflict followed. Eritrea fought Ethiopia in a partially successful endeavour to re-establish the lines marked out by the Italian empire builders. Somalia fell apart as competing forces strove for power within the regions formerly parcelled out to Britain, France and Italy. Uniting the Sudan, which had been functionally divided between Egypt and Britain as the Anglo-Egyptian condominium, spawned a decades-long civil war between the Muslim north and the largely Christian south along the fault line laid down by the former colonial masters. Even where independence created economically dysfunctional states, as in the eastern Congo basin, the former borders of Rwanda, Burundi and Congo have held firm. This cannot be solely ascribed to the self-interest of ruling regimes in the post-independence era, as these have changed with alarming regularity. The same phenomena can be observed in Southeast Asia, while in South Asia, the partition of India at the end of British rule led to periodical wars and intractable problems along the borders of Bangladesh and Pakistan. In the 1980s Benedict Anderson called attention to the way imperial mapmakers had colonised the imaginations of subject peoples, creating ineradicable notions of