At issue in this volume are three critical identities in Africa: nationality, ethnicity and citizenship. In this chapter, I wish to explore them in comparative perspective, and to examine their interaction with a pair of defining processes of recent years, democratisation and civil disorder. The intertwined selfhoods of nationality, ethnicity and citizenship frame much of political agency. The moment of political opening which swept over the continent at the end of the 1980s, however uneven and incomplete, altered the parameters of politics and the interplay of these three identities. The hopes aroused by the wave of democratisation mingled with the apprehensions triggered by a wave of civil disorder afflicting broad swathes of Africa in the 1990s.

The idea of ‘nation’ in Africa, often dismissed by students of comparative nationalism as entirely artificial and ahistorical (for example, Oomen 1997: 42–43), exhibits surprising staying power. A remarkable contemporary paradox is the persistence of an affective attachment to a territorial nationality even when the state institutions are derelict. The trauma of the 1990s shows that states may entirely collapse without disappearing as nations from the social imaginary.

Weaving Together Three Identities and Two Processes

However contested the authenticity of African nationalisms may be, few debate today the vitality of ethnic attachments. Long vanished is the equation of ethnicity with traditionality that permitted some scholars and nationalist leaders of the independence generation to imagine its possible erasure once overwritten by modernity (Touré 1959). Still, the African itineraries of ethnicity, and the scope of the claims based upon it, differ in important respects from patterns in other world regions.

Citizenship has acquired new saliency in many countries in recent years, in Africa and throughout the world (Oomen 1997; Rosaldo 2003; Miller 2000; Dunkerly et al. 2002; Nanes 2003). With African
independence the colonial subject silently became nominal citizen, but during the authoritarian years this was a distinction without a difference. Democratisation, even partial, dramatically raised the stakes of citizenship; authenticity of citizen claims of some residents became sharply contested in a number of countries.

The euphoria associated with the democratic opening sweeping many countries at the beginning of the 1990s has long subsided (Ottaway 2003; Joseph 1999). However, partial restoration of authoritarian practice in a number of instances left in place important alteration in political patterns. New space for civil society continued to exist, within which issues of identity and citizenship could percolate.

At the same time, the weakened condition of many states opened the door for novel forms of armed challenge. Two large, interpenetrated arcs of conflict appeared, one stretching from the Horn of Africa south-westward to Angola and both Congos, and the other from Ivory Coast to Senegal. Zones of prolonged disorder became a basic element in the political landscape.

The challenge of this chapter is to ‘connect the dots’ between these three identities and two processes. To do so on a continental scale in brief compass inevitably entails broad analytical strokes, without the full opportunity to sketch in all the nuances. Let me simply acknowledge that a fuller analysis would take more ample note of the range of variation surrounding the generalisations advanced.

Naturalisation of the Territorial Nation

The history of territoriality in Africa invites the scepticism about the depth of national attachments noted above. Although some African states can invoke an historical narrative extending beyond the colonial partition (Swaziland, Botswana, Lesotho, Tunisia, perhaps Madagascar, for example), only Morocco, Egypt and Ethiopia can construct a mythology of nationhood with any time depth. The present map of Africa was entirely constructed by colonial cartography, thus bearing the original sin of alien origin and artificiality. But one is immediately confronted with the paradox of the resiliency of an attachment to the territorial units of the colonial partition that persists even in the face of state collapse.

This bizarre fact is most apparent in some of the more extreme instances of state failure. More than a dozen years have transpired since