

Dreaming in Thread

From Ritual to Art and Property(s) Between

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Abstract

This chapter draws on an indigenous Australian case study concerning Bardi people of northwest West Australia. The discussion focuses on *ilma*, a genre of public ritual, and one Bardi man's transformation of one of the component parts of this genre into artworks. An important dimension of the ritual is that its intersubjective constitution as a form of property emerges from within Bardi social relations, and these reflect a relational form of personhood. I explore whether the (apparent) transition from rights embedded in a 'society' to those exercised by the 'individual' entail other kinds of transformation. A closer examination of these issues illuminates the relationship between property, persons and intersubjectivity, and the property(s) between, and reveals that transformations in both property and persons appear to be taking place in this context.

Introduction

In June 2006 a group of Bardi singers and dancers from the remote community of One Arm Point in Western Australia became the first indigenous Australians to perform at the historic site of Stonehenge, England. They performed *ilma*, a genre of public performance that involves three elements: song, dance and ritual objects the dancers carry, all of which are separately called *ilma*, as is the genre of 'open', unrestricted performance they collectively make. The use of the one term to refer to the different elements as well as to the whole performance is one indication that the elements of *ilma* in important senses represent the other elements: they belong together, and in this sense, are 'the same' (see Morphy, this volume).

Ilma are understood as being revealed by spirit beings in dreams rather than being the individual creation of the person who dreams them. In some cases a dream may be corroborated by others who have had the same dream or who have dreamt complementary elements of the overall *ilma* (so it is possible for one person

to 'get' the design in a dream, while another receives the accompanying song). The dreaming of ritual elements, the wider group validation of this as ancestral revelation, and the subsequent incorporation of dreamt material into ritual has been widely reported in Australian ethnography (e.g. see Dussart 2000:139–76; Glaskin 2005; Kaberry 1939:257; Keen 2003; Keogh 1989; Marett 2005; Myers 1986; Poirier 2005; Tonkinson 1970). With respect to *ilma*, the individual is not seen as responsible for creating the 'new' ritual nor its constitutive elements, but they do retain important responsibilities for the dreamt ritual, including oversight of its performance. In terms of 'ownership' some ambiguity is created by the simultaneous denial of agency/authorship on the one hand, and responsibilities held towards the ritual on the other. This ambiguity is also connected with the main issue on which I focus in this chapter: the transformation in property relations that occurs when one element of a ritual genre undergoes commodification separately to the other elements of that ritual form, and separately to most persons within whose society that ritual is generated and performed. In considering the processual elements of this, I am interested in thinking through the intersubjective dimensions of property and the relationship between property and personhood that may be co-implicated in this transition.

In this I begin from the basis that property is inherently relational, that it involves a person or persons exercising rights and obligations with respect to things in relation to others. Thus we can talk about property as 'a form of sociality', as Harrison (1992:235) does, and highlight the interrelational and intersubjective dimensions of property thus understood (Durie's chapter in this volume similarly underscores these relational dimensions of property with respect to Maori lands and resources). Harrison argues that intellectual property is particularly 'distinctive' in terms of its social dimensions, since 'its objects have no existence except on the plane of intersubjectivity. They presuppose a shared universe of information and meaning, and depend on that universe not only for their value, but for their very reality' (1992:235). Thus one of my arguments here is that when those things that are constituted intersubjectively as a form of property are removed from one social context into another, the property(s) of the thing itself is transformed.

Scholars differ about what constitutes property and persons, and about the relationship between property and personhood (e.g. see Humphrey and Verdery 2004 and Radin 1982 for some overviews). If property is understood as rights that certain persons hold over things in relation to other persons, then, as Radin says, this 'necessarily implicates the nature of the entity to which they accrue' (1982:957). The development of Western capitalism coincided with the development of the modern notion of the individual in Western society (Lindholm 2007[2001]:19–41), and the possessive individualism that followed (Macpherson 1962) is symptomatic of this market economy. Broadly speaking,

such 'individual' personhood contrasts with a 'relational' personhood, which itself has different forms and emphases (see, for example, Conklin and Morgan's (1996:667) distinction between 'structural-relational' and 'processual-relational' forms). In thinking about property in terms of a subject-object (or person-thing) orientation (Humphrey and Verdery 2004:6), we need to keep in mind that the distinction between persons and things is not necessarily apparent in all contexts (Glaskin 2009), and that 'both things and people undergo constant change' (Strang, this volume). I remain mindful that ideas concerning "person," "thing," and "relation" vary (Humphrey and Verdery 2004:6), as do the relations that give rise to rights in 'things', both material and immaterial, corporeal and incorporeal, that may be understood as relations of property. Here I take the view that an important dimension of *ilma* prior to their commodification is that their intersubjective constitution as a form of property emerges from within Bardi social relations, and that these reflect a relational form of personhood.

The importance of kinship in indigenous Australian societies is well established. Classificatory kinship (the extension of kinship terminology and associated behaviour to non-biological kin) means that everybody in the known social universe is classed as a 'relative' of some kind and treated accordingly, although some relatives are closer than others. The extent to which a person's life is co-constituted through their relationships with others within these dense social networks of kinship obligations has led some anthropologists to describe indigenous Australian personhood in terms similar to those that have been used in Melanesia, in which persons are described as 'dividuals' rather than individuals (e.g. Redmond 2005). While I have reservations about the use of the term 'dividual' in the Australian context, indigenous Australian forms of personhood are aptly described as relational, in contrast to the individual model of personhood that is now prevalent in Western societies (Glaskin 2008a). Austin-Broos (2009) has appropriately described the situation that many indigenous Australians in remote regions currently experience as one in which the colonial process involves a transition from a kinship-based economy to a market-based economy. She argues that this is a process which itself involves an 'ontological shift': 'the passage from which the human subject is first and foremost a relative (kin) to one in which the subject becomes a market individual' (2009:6). As *ilma* enter into a market economy, and as Bardi are drawn more intensively into these economic relations, a question that similarly emerges is whether this shift in property relations is accompanied by shifts in concepts of personhood. I am thus interested in exploring whether the (apparent) transition from rights embedded in a 'society' to those exercised by the 'individual' entail other kinds of transformation, and I argue that a closer examination of these issues can reveal a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between property, persons and intersubjectivity – and of the property(s) between.

Ilma as Property

Ilma are a public genre of dreamt ritual, meaning that there are no restrictions concerning who may see the *ilma* performed (in terms of gender or age). As already noted, an important aspect of *ilma* is that they are considered to have their genesis in dreams. This understanding of *ilma* provenance is intimately related to Bardi conceptions of personhood. Like many indigenous Australians, Bardi hold that before birth, they exist as pre-existing spirit-beings emplaced in country, called *raya*, that may become instantiated as persons. Other spirit beings inhabit country too: *ingarda*, which are similar to *raya*, but inhabit different locations; important creator beings, who made the country and gave humans laws to follow; dangerous spirit beings of various kinds; and the spirits of the old people who have passed away and returned to their country. In this cosmology Bardi persons exist as spirits before birth and continue to exist as spirits after death. One of the important ways through which these various spirits are understood to communicate with people is in dreams; hence the appearance of a deceased person or a *raya* in a dream is understood as an actual visitation by that spirit being (see Glaskin 2005, 2006, for further discussion of this). Generally speaking, though, it is only *jarlngunggurr*, those persons who are considered to have extraordinary powers, who have ceremonies or ceremonial elements revealed to them in dreams. This revelation may occur in dreams through dream travel, being taken to a metaphysical location by a *raya* or other spirit being and 'shown' what is emplaced there, or through the appearance of a *raya*, a deceased person or other spirit being in the dream. Revelation from named deceased persons implies something about the relationship between the living person and the deceased person that is not immediately evident in revelations from less personalized categories of beings, and this is something that I explore further as my discussion progresses. For expedience I refer to nocturnal revelation by spirit beings, which includes deceased persons, as ancestral revelation, since deceased persons are ultimately assimilated into country as unnamed spirit beings, the 'old people' who inhabit the country (Glaskin 2006; see Munn 1970).

It is significant that because of their ancestral origins *ilma* are not thought of as having been individually 'created'. This contrasts with other Bardi song genres, in which individual creativity and authorship is recognized (Glaskin in press). In cases where deceased persons reveal *ilma* in dreams, the deceased persons are considered as metaphysical agents of revelation, rather than authors or creators of the *ilma*, in my understanding. In the case of Billy Ah Choo's *ilma*, discussed below, what is revealed through the *ilma*, and through the metaphysical agency of the deceased man old Wiggan, are significant aspects of Wiggan's life and his experiences after death. Old Wiggan himself is not considered to have 'made' the *ilma*, rather to have 'shown' them to the dreamer, Ah Choo.

Keogh described *ilma* as a cognate of the *nurlu* song genre of the West Kimberley. He says that within this genre the person who receives the songs in dreams "'owns" those songs, dances and dance paraphernalia' (Keogh 1989:3). He explains what is meant by 'ownership' in this context, as meaning that the person who dreams the *ilma* 'has rights over their use and display, and performances cannot be staged without his permission and participation' (1989:3). The person who dreams the *ilma* has the initial responsibility to 'bring them out' – to publicly reveal these to other Bardi people – the means through which such dreamt material ultimately enters a broader communal domain. Dreamt material is tested, as is the right of the person to 'bring them out' (Metcalf 1970–1). While the person who dreams the *ilma* has responsibilities towards that dreamt material, their authentication as ancestral revelation is intersubjectively constituted, and this also means that the broader community retains a certain interest in these and in their performance, transmission and reproduction over time.

Thus the apparent paradox – that *ilma* remain associated with the name of the person who dreamt them long after that person dies, even as individual creativity is denied in the act of jural authentication of their other-than-human origins – is not such a paradox after all. Rather it reflects the ambiguities that arise from the intersubjective dimensions of *ilma* in their constitution as a form of intellectual property, and the responsibilities held by the person who dreams them. Here we begin to get at something of the property(s) *between* kinds of property that are often characterized either as 'communal' or 'individual'. People speak of 'Billy Ah Choo's *ilma*', 'old Muju's *ilma*' or 'old Ruby's *ilma*' (and see Robinson 1973:221), but there is necessarily a wider social dimension to them being regarded as *ilma*, as ancestrally revealed, in the first place. This is evident in the 'testing' of newly dreamt *ilma*, which is part of the process of constituting them as a form of property. In Kopytoff's (2007[1986]) terms, we can think of the *ilma* as having a cultural biography that begins with an individual's dream, but the dreamt *ilma* at this stage is perhaps not even then a 'thing'. Through memory, a person's perception of their subjective nocturnal experience is translated into something that others can apprehend. Since memory is itself both biologically and culturally formed (Solms and Turnbull 2002:140,146), what is dreamt and remembered is understood as an *ilma* and rendered recognizably as such (to those others who validate it). Its emergence as a perceptual category '*ilma*' is already intersubjective.

When the person who dreamt the *ilma* dies, someone else 'takes them over', assuming the responsibility for their performance, and it is in such cases that issues may arise as to who has rights in relation to the *ilma*. Among Bardi primary rights in country are typically gained through patrification, with secondary rights gained through matrification, marriage and through *nimalj*, in which patrification grant usufructuary rights to resources in their own estate to specific persons. In

contrast rights to *ilma* do not appear to be predictably inherited through descent from the person who dreamt them, although an ideology of patrification or of close genealogical reckoning informs people's claims to rights over *ilma* once the person who has dreamt them passes away. I say 'appear' because, at the time of my research, only three sets of *ilma* were contemporarily being performed: Ah Choo's *ilma*, which I discuss further below; a set that was 'new' and had not been fully accepted and incorporated by broader Bardi society; and a set for which responsibility had been taken after death by the dreamer's sister's son. There were older sets of *ilma*, sets remembered by the name of those who dreamt and managed them, that were no longer performed. In one such case a brother had taken over the responsibility of the *ilma*. I suspect that the apparent lack of unambiguous rules about inheritance of the *ilma* is associated with the fact that *ilma* are mainly dreamt by *jarlngungurr* (persons having supernatural powers to heal or perform sorcery) rather than by *umbarda* (ordinary persons) (Glaskin 2008b). Since only a small number of people are considered to have these powers, there are not usually many people at any given time dreaming new *ilma*, and sets of *ilma* over time are clearly identified with a limited number of people who have dreamt them. As far as the postcolonial ethnographic record and oral history reveals, many *ilma* have a fairly ephemeral quality, reflected in an apparently limited inheritable trajectory of *ilma* custodianship following the death of the person who dreamt them. This may be related in part to the suspension of certain *ilma* performances following the death of persons who become particularly identified with their performance (as has occurred in one case at least). That individual *ilma* do not seem to persist for that long through time – the oldest set of *ilma* at this stage probably being Bill Ah Choo's, dreamt in the late 1960s and early 1970s – is likely to be a refraction of their intersubjective constitution as 'things' of value in the first place, of the temporal contexts in which they socially emerged and in which they are enacted.

From Ritual to Art and Transitions Between

The *ilma* performed at Stonehenge belong to a canon that is well known amongst Bardi and Jawi peoples. These *ilma* were dreamt by Billy Ah Choo, and concern the life and death of the Bardi man, Henry Wiggan. Although there are *ilma* in existence other than these, Ah Choo's *ilma* hold a special place for Bardi people. Billy Ah Choo's *ilma* were dreamt during a time of rapid social transition and upheaval. The mission on Sunday Island to which many Bardi people had been drawn from 1899 onwards was closed down in 1962, after which most of the Bardi (and Jawi) people from the mission were relocated to Derby. Bardi and Jawi who were relocated during that time lived in town camps on the edge of the marsh at Derby, and oral history accounts indicate that this was also a time of considerable

social dislocation. By these accounts people were deeply unhappy living in Derby, and they sought to return to their own country (Robinson 1973:191–2; Glaskin 2002:97–9). In the movement to return to their own country, people who are today referred to as 'leaders' of Bardi people emerged, and these included Billy Ah Choo and Tommy Thomas who were also ritual leaders (Robinson 1973:257). It was during this period that Billy Ah Choo dreamt the *ilma*, saying that Wiggan had brought them to him in dreams. Robinson says that it was in 1967 that 'the old man came to Billy in a dream' (1973:221–2), some four years after old Wiggan's death in December 1963. Robinson says that 'by September 1968, the *ilma* were made up of nine segments, most of which were accompanied by dance sequences' (1973:222). (A more recent – although still provisional – count of Billy Ah Choo's *ilma* during my fieldwork identified some twenty-six or twenty-seven different segments). Billy Ah Choo and Tommy Thomas began the larger Bardi movement to return to their own country in 1969, and in 1972 the Bardi and Jawi community on the Bardi mainland at One Arm Point was formed.

The commercial performance of *ilma* can be dated to 1969 when Billy Ah Choo and others performed them at the Derby Boab festival with the encouragement of the then Department of Native Welfare, which supported the performance of traditional dances during this celebration (Robinson 1973:224). Robinson reports that 'they later took the ceremony to Broome, where they organized their own performances with Broome Aborigines, charging admission fees to tourists from the "Centaur" which was returning from a voyage to Singapore' (1973:224). These early performances evidently fostered the view that *ilma* had value, not just to other Bardi and Jawi, but also to non-indigenous others. Unlike the Yolngu art context that Morphy discusses in his paper (this volume), it was a considerable time after colonization before Bardi performed *ilma* commercially; similarly to the Yolngu case it is clear that Bardi also see these performances as an important means of communicating their culture to others. *Ilma* have been commercially performed since the late 1960s in numerous contexts, though not always without issue amongst Bardi people themselves.

In 1997 the performance of Billy Ah Choo's *ilma* at an indigenous cultural festival held in Bardi country at One Arm Point elicited a number of contentions over who had the rights to perform these *ilma*. The primary contentions were between descendants of the man who had dreamt them (Ah Choo's descendants), and the descendants of the man who, when deceased, was said to have revealed these *ilma* in dreams to him (old Wiggan's descendants). This opposition was rooted in an ontology in which persons have an existence prior to human instantiation and after physical death, and thus it was that serious questions could be raised about whose descendants had rights to the *ilma*. The descendants of old Wiggan felt themselves to be the rightful 'owners' of the *ilma*, which concerned events in Wiggan's life, and they felt that the members of Ah Choo's family, who performed

the *ilma*, should have sought their permission to perform them at this event. There were also tensions amongst different branches of Ah Choo's descendants about rights to perform the *ilma* and about whose permission was required to do so, and these also drew on issues concerning who had the closest genealogical links to Billy Ah Choo and who were the better and most consistent performers of the *ilma*, thus upholding Bardi tradition. These contentions over who has rights to perform the *ilma* are indicative of their status as property. Alongside these issues there were also tensions surrounding Roy Wiggan's production of *ilma* as stand-alone artworks for the commercial art market.

In the distant past *ilma* were made of natural materials such as vines, bark, feathers and native cotton. Sometime during the mission days at Sunday Island (from 1899 to 1962), and certainly by the late 1940s, these 'totems' (as they are often referred to in English) were being made from tin (Glaskin in press). Contemporary *ilma* are made from lightweight plywood, which is cut into various shaped pieces, painted and affixed to a wooden cross, allowing the dancer to hold the *ilma* at the cross's join, so that it faces outwards to the audience during the performance. Long nails are hammered into the board at intervals and threaded with different coloured wools or cotton string; many *ilma* are completed with the addition of tufts of cotton wool around the perimeter.

Since 1991 Roy Wiggan, old Henry Wiggan's son, has been making and selling *ilma* as artworks. As an artist, he has achieved significant success, contributing works to eighteen exhibitions (including some solo exhibitions); his work is represented in fifteen major Australian art collections (Short Street Gallery 2009). The initial momentum for the commodification of the *ilma* came from Lord Alistair McAlpine, who commissioned Roy to make *ilma* for tourist performances in Broome and Kooljaman (Cape Leveque). In 2000–2001 Australian City Properties Pty Ltd donated this collection of *ilma* – some 1016 objects which had been made by Roy (with assistance from his sons) – to the National Maritime Museum of Australia (Commonwealth of Australia 2001). These are described by the Museum as 'multimedia polychrome works of wood and dyed yarns' (ibid.); elsewhere they are described as string sculptures. Roy has continued to produce *ilma* since, all the while maintaining that these new *ilma* are revealed to him in dreams, usually (although not always) by his father, old Wiggan, the same deceased man who revealed *ilma* in dreams to Billy Ah Choo.

Roy has long been critical of the commercial *ilma* performances mounted by other Bardi people on the grounds that those who perform them only do so when there is monetary recompense to be gained, and he contrasts this with the old days when *ilma* were regularly performed for the community, arguing that other Bardi have 'lost their culture'. Information concerning Roy and the *ilma*, which is fairly regularly reproduced on various websites with little variation, has it that it is *because* of this abrogation of culture by his own people that Roy

himself decided to sell the *ilma* as artworks, so as to promote and make his culture known.¹ Thus Roy's own commodification of *ilma* is intimately associated in his own accounts of why he began to make and sell *ilma*, with his own sense of individual isolation: as he would render this, the lone upholder of an authentic tradition amidst general cultural decay, as clearly articulated in his interview with journalist Philip Adams (Australia Adlib 2003). Notwithstanding these criticisms of other Bardi people, during the period 1994–9 (at least) I also heard a number of Bardi people discuss Roy's production of *ilma* for the commercial market in critical terms. While economic jealousy associated with how much money was made from the *ilma* cannot be discounted, there was a more pressing issue for the senior people who spoke to me about this. Many of them felt that if these *ilma* were being revealed to Roy in dreams, then his responsibility was to 'bring them out' properly to the rest of the Bardi community with all three components – the material representation (the 'totem'), the dance and the song. The material *ilma* were not, in the first instance, conceptually considered as being dissociable from other constituent parts.

Roy's criticisms of Bardi who perform *ilma* commercially, and other Bardi people's concerns over his production of *ilma* for the commercial art market, have a long and complex interpersonal provenance. This is an apt point to consider the issue of intersubjectivity and its relationship to intellectual property in the context of what was occurring when Billy Ah Choo dreamt his *ilma*, and the relationship between him and old Wiggan, who revealed the *ilma* to him in dreams.

In her discussion of Voloshinov's (1973) inquiry into the 'basic reality of language', Merlan says that 'he eventually concludes that its basic nature lies in verbal interaction' (2005:176). Voloshinov's point, as Merlan describes it, is that 'basic orientation of subjects towards interaction ... [is] its basic starting point' (2005:177). Subjectivity similarly implies interaction and intersubjectivity: that 'the social self is a subject to others and a subject to himself only through others' (Rorty 2007:43). Our subjectivity is formed experientially, in relation to others who also experience themselves as subjects. Regardless of whether the societies in which we live emphasize individual or relational forms of personhood, intersubjectivity is an essential component of our identity and experience.

Leaving aside emic explanations about dream visitations at this point, I would like to suggest that Billy Ah Choo's experiences of old Wiggan coming to him in dreams can be understood in terms of the relationship between the two men. Amidst the social grounding of people's lives, some social relations are more significant than others in a subject's formation. Amongst indigenous Australians growing up in remote communities, these are likely to be related to significant kin relations and to persons who are important processually through one's life-cycle, and this is evident in the relationship between the two men considered here. Old Henry Wiggan was Billy Ah Choo's *gara* (mother's brother) (Robinson 1973:221,

313);² he was also Billy Ah Choo's *jawul*, responsible for putting Billy Ah Choo through Law (male initiation rituals). *Jawul* is a term used reciprocally between the person going through Law and his ritual guardian who is often his mother's brother. Throughout his life the young man has reciprocal responsibilities towards his *jawul*, which include, among other things, providing him with his favoured portions of any turtles and dugongs caught. As I was told, Billy Ah Choo was 'Henry Wiggan's nephew and *jawul*, he was looking after Billy Ah Choo and so when Henry Wiggan died all those *ilma* went back to Billy Ah Choo'.³ Arguably as Billy Ah Choo's *jawul*, old Wiggan played an important relational role in the constitution of Billy Ah Choo's identity in life, and through the dreams of Wiggan coming to Ah Choo and revealing *ilma*, continued to do so after his death. Additionally the ongoing reproduction of this canon of *ilma* continues to commemorate the relationship between the two men, even as their descendants contest who has primary rights to these *ilma* after their death.

Discussing the idea of intellectual property (in her example, Malanggan carvings), Strathern has argued that 'there is nothing particularly "intellectual" about the fact that the image, like the words of a song or the design of an ornament, is a mental one' – arguing that such knowledge is embodied knowledge, that the distinction between the mind and body in this regard is artificial, and that 'the knowledge in question is the memory' (2005:151). It is memory that holds images and so on, in people's minds. She notes that 'the image that is eventually reproduced will be negotiated from various anticipated claims on it' (ibid.). This confirms the importance of considering the intersubjective dimensions of both mind and memory in the reproduction of property that is often referred to as 'intellectual property'. Since *ilma* as intellectual property are relationally constituted, they can be seen to reflect important elements of Bardi personhood. This is evident in terms of the understanding of their provenance (ancestral revelation through dreams), but also in terms of what they depict. Thus as I contend below, different *ilma* through time, examined in historical context, also provide an important opportunity to see changes in emphasis in personhood which might be understood as coinciding with some of the changes in property relations that the commodification of *ilma* as artworks also apparently signal.

Property and Persons

In general terms Billy Ah Choo's *ilma* are concerned with events that took place in old Wiggan's life, particularly those events that occurred when his raft drifted a long way out to sea. The *ngaarri ilma* is different in that it is also concerned with his experience after death. The term *ngaarri* is used to refer to spirits of the deceased, most usually to those who have recently died. The *ngaarri ilma* performances

vary according to who dance them, but have in common that they are performed by a lone male who portrays the role of a recently deceased person trying to learn the dances of the dead. However, because the *ngaarri* is only learning, he cannot keep time; the sticks he uses to dance with splay out at awkward angles, and threaten to trip him and make him fall over. This *ilma* is danced in an extremely humorous manner to elicit maximum audience amusement.

The *ngaarri ilma* is different to others I have seen performed in a number of respects. It is the only *ilma* that is not accompanied by a 'totem', a design; the *ngaarri*'s hands are necessarily occupied with the thin sticks with which he must learn to dance. Principally this is a performance in which the dancer's individuality is displayed in a focused way. Other *ilma* are all performed by a number of dancers: three, four or more dancers all perform similar movements in time together. The *ngaarri* alone is covered in white ochre, signifying his ghostly status. This is the only *ilma* that is overtly humorous. Finally this is the only *ilma* I know of that represents, in some way, the experiences of the deceased.⁴

As the *ngaarri ilma* shows, *ilma* reflect aspects of Bardi personhood and can, I think, also reveal something of changing emphases in this over time. An interesting juxtaposition in this regard is between the *ngaarri ilma* and an *ilma* that Roy Wiggan's father, old Wiggan, himself dreamt when he was still alive.⁵ This latter *ilma* concerned Roy's brother, in his existence as a *raya* (spirit child) prior to his birth. In this *ilma* the *raya* who are not incarnated as humans, who still exist only as spirit children, miss Roy's brother, who has left them in order to be instantiated as a human. Roy has commented on this, saying that: 'those *raya* that he left behind they sort of, they really missed him... We danced that when I was a young boy. That was that *raya*, saying they were sad that he's gone'.⁶ This *ilma* mirrors the human collective experience of death: the loss of one of the group's members and the experience of that loss. In this *ilma*, though, the absence of the individual is marked *in comparison to* the community of spirit beings (and from their perspective). Conversely, the *ngaarri ilma*, while referencing the communal – the community of spirits into which the deceased is not yet integrated – highlights the lone individual, and it is the individual's perspective that is accentuated.

These two *ilma* could be taken as simply having different emphases that accord with Bardi understandings of the processes of becoming and un-becoming human, of the transitions between spirit and human realms. Equally, I argue, the *ngaarri ilma* could also be seen as reflecting a transition correlating with the time in which the Sunday Island mission was closed and Bardi came to live in the town of Derby – a place unfamiliar to them that was not their country, and where the psycho-social stability of the community was arguably disrupted (Robinson 1973; Glaskin 2002). The lone figure of the *ngaarri* trying to learn the dances of the dead highlights individual experiences. Although the *ilma* performance in itself can be masterfully funny, I suggest that part of what makes this *ilma*

so humorous, too, is that it strikes a deep experiential chord associated with the dislocation people felt when they were exiled in Derby. The *ngaarri* – a ghostly figure uncertain of his moves – dances alone. Thus one reading of this lone figure is that it suggests (or intimates) the beginnings of an intercultural constitution of a differently oriented form of personhood, one that begins to shift in emphasis from the relational towards the ‘individual’.

This is an apt point at which to return to Roy’s production and commodification of the *ilma* as artworks, in which this transition towards an individual orientation can arguably be seen: the production of only a part of the genre separated from its other parts, the separation of the *ilma* from a communal performative dimension, and the separation of Roy himself in certain ways from other Bardi people. As he becomes the individual artist, both for himself and for the artworld, this distancing is reflected in his criticisms of other Bardi people who perform the *ilma*, which are also extended to Bardi culture more generally. I suggest that what is occurring here is the emergence of a kind of possessive individualism, in which Roy assumes the moral grounds for his own actions (Robbins 2007:302), in which he represents his production of *ilma* as exerting ‘a sense of responsibility for trying to change and author new forms of representations’ (Hirsch 2007:236), emerging as a self-conscious possessor of his own culture, monitoring others’ deportment (to paraphrase Sykes 2007:222).

The Property(s) Between

Lord Alistair McAlpine’s commissioning was an important impetus for Roy’s initial production of a large number of *ilma*, arguably launching him on the pathway to his artistic career. Thus, it is interesting to briefly consider the fate of these commissioned *ilma*, which is somewhat different to those specifically produced for the art market and which are unambiguously collected as such. Unlike the commercial artworks produced since, the one thousand *ilma* held by the National Maritime Museum of Australia arrived without documentation of the ‘stories’ associated with them. This has been an ongoing issue for the museum, which has sought to rectify this through various means, and it is still actively working on trying to have these *ilma* documented. Documenting mainly relies on Roy’s information as the producer of them: unlike *ilma* that are brought out among the community and embodied performatively, the ‘stories’ for these *ilma* remained ‘unknown’ to most other members of the Bardi community. The implication is that Roy is getting older, and should he die without the ‘stories’ for these *ilma* having been recorded, then they may remain ‘lost’.

A contrary perspective to the view that Roy alone can provide the ‘stories’ for these *ilma* emerged in relation to a mooted project concerning an appraisal of

these in heritage terms. At that time Roy had declined to be involved, but some other Bardi people had reportedly asserted that they could provide the details of the *ilma* as required for documentation.⁷ This can be understood as meaning at least two things: firstly, that *ilma* iconography, even that which may be comprised of apparently ‘new’ elements, remains interpretable to other Bardi people. Secondly, and as its corollary, the idea of ‘speaking for’ these can be understood in an indigenous context such as this as an evident assertion of some kind of proprietary rights over these *ilma*. In this sense it is clear that it is not the material artefacts that are claimed as property, but the intellectual property in *ilma* as a genre. These particular *ilma* (as material artefacts), then, have a complex social history, moving as they have out of the ambit of wider Bardi involvement in them, but with an apparent potential to be brought back in. This reflects a Bardi reassertion of these *ilma*’s missing dimensions, wider community involvement in the constitution of their meaning. Morphy (this volume) writes that in Yolngu artworks the addition of figurative images ‘fill[s] in a gap in interpretation of the images that in Yolngu ceremonial contexts is performed in dance and song’. In the case of these *ilma*, this ‘gap in interpretation’ is yet to be filled and will rely on documentation in order to do so.

Earlier I argued that the removal of things that are constituted intersubjectively as a form of property from the social context in which they are generated transforms the property(s) of the thing itself. By ‘property’ here I mean the attributes of the thing, but these attributes are fundamentally related to the thing as a form of property: on who has claims to it, in what contexts, and from what basis. Roy’s creation of the material *ilma* separate to the other elements of their genre excludes other Bardi from the grounds of their production. As Bardi assertions concerning possible documentation of the one thousand *ilma* reveals, though, this exclusion remains contested, as does Roy’s autonomy in his production of them, and the autonomy of those ‘things’ that he made, the *ilma* themselves. Their properties, in that sense, remain contingent on the relational contexts in which they are embedded: as ritual, as art or as stored museum piece. It is to the context of their commodification as artworks, though, to which I lastly return.

Gell says that ‘artworks are never just singular entities; they are members of categories of artworks, and their significance is affected by the relations that exist between them’ (1998:153). *Ilma* as stand-alone artworks are not, at this point, completely disembedded from *ilma* as a genre of ‘open’ ritual: it is this ‘tradition’ which vests the artworks with something of their value and meaning. Significantly, though, they are not authenticated as ancestral revelations by the Bardi jural public, who are excluded from their co-production; rather, their ‘authentication’ comes from within the framework of the Western art market, which construes these as desirable artworks. Part of this desirability, beyond the aesthetic value they might otherwise immediately hold for a non-Bardi viewer, is arguably the attachment of

significant value to the ancestrally revealed origins the artist claims for the *ilma*. After all, this makes them 'traditional'. This commercial orientation on behalf of the artist also signifies a different emphasis in relationality, one which emphasizes the individual and individual action over the jural public, and shifts towards a differently constituted intersubjectivity in which non-indigenous persons, who buy and promote the *ilma*, play an important symbolic and constitutive role – implicitly and at times explicitly 'authenticating' them as having dreamt ancestral provenance. The *ilma* can thus be mapped over time as having different relational emphases reflective of intersubjective and intercultural engagements, some of which may dialogically shift the grounds of being over time.

The performance of *ilma* as public ritual suggests a communal dimension – rights embedded in a society – and Roy's production of *ilma* as artworks with an individual dimension. Further examination of these issues has revealed that ownership is not so clearly vested in the society or the individual in these different contexts. The cosmological authentication of *ilma* provenance relies on the intersubjectively constituted agreement of others that this is indeed the case. Even as it is the individual who dreams the *ilma*, *ilma* necessarily have a corporate dimension that is implicated not just in their ritual performance, but in their status and acceptance as *ilma* in the first instance. In Annette Weiner's terms the cosmological authentication of dreamt innovative material serves to 'link individuals and groups with an authority that transcends present social and political action' (1992:4). Thus *ilma* become property – a valuable and contested property – by virtue of the relations through which they are constituted. Dussart has similarly argued in the Warlpiri context that dreamt material that becomes incorporated into a ritual context is 'a commodity jointly held, if not jointly controlled' (2000:173). Taking dreamt *ilma* out of the context of becoming ritual takes them also out of the ambit of being a 'commodity jointly held'. Yet in the case of Roy's production of *ilma* for the art market, I would argue that an important intersubjective element to their overall constitution and acceptance remains. This is oriented differently vis-à-vis a Western art world and purchasing public that implicitly accepts the ancestral provenance of the *ilma*, reading value into these origins. This in turn reflects a different orientation towards others and towards being-in-the-world. If we understand personhood, like intellectual property, to be constituted intersubjectively, then transformations in both property and persons appear to be taking place in this context. Speaking of Kopytoff's work, Appadurai says that 'the commodity is not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of some things' (1986:17). The production of *ilma* as artworks may be understood as 'one phase' in the life of *ilma* as 'things', but insofar as it constitutes the *ilma* as a different kind of 'thing', it is arguably a phase that represents a 'longer term shift' in the 'social history' of *ilma* in general (Appadurai 1986:34). In my view this longer-term shift can also be understood as reflecting

some broader transitions amongst Bardi, an 'ontological shift' (Austin-Broos 2009) from a more relational form of personhood towards the kind of possessive individualism required to participate in the Australian market economy.

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Notes

1. It is noteworthy here that Roy has previously recorded at least one CD of sung *ilma* for commercial release.
2. MB here also being structurally equivalent to MMBS and MFZS.
3. Fieldnotes, 2/7/97.
4. This view is formed on the basis of the *ilma* contemporarily performed and those no longer performed but remembered, as well as on an analysis of the field tapes of *ilma* recorded by Toby Metcalfe in 1970 and 1971 (Metcalfe 1970–1), and those recorded by Ray Keogh in 1983 which are held at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra (Keogh 1983). There is just one *ilma* recorded by Ray Keogh in 1983, which 'belonged to' old Muju (preceding Billy Ah Choo's *ilma*), which is explained by Keogh's informant (on tape) as being 'Muju's first corroborree that he produced because of Sambo's spirit coming to him and singing to him, while he was dead, you know, he could hear this in the grave' (A13452, Field tape T83/47).
5. Ray Keogh recorded Roy singing this *ilma* in 1982; I have not heard of this *ilma* from other Bardi people.
6. Ray Keogh Field Recordings A13450, T83/45, recorded 7/6/83, held at AIATSIS.
7. A. de Hoog, pers. comm., 20 August 2009.

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