ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Painted Prayers: Kolam as a Global South Indian Indigenous Method for Research with Indian Immigrant Women

Lydia VK Pandian*
Assistant Professor, Department of Social Science, Faculty of Arts, University of New Brunswick Saint John, Saint John, NB, Canada
Hazen Hall 343, 100 Tucker Park Road, P.O. Box 5050, Saint John, NB E2L 4L5, Canada
ORCID: 0000-0003-2041-4588
E-mail: lydia.p@unb.ca

** Corresponding author*

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ABSTRACT

Research on racialized immigrant women often uses methods that miss their own ways of understanding and describing their experiences. This can reinforce colonial and patriarchal ideas about race, gender, and migration. This article introduces Kolam, a traditional floor art practiced by Indian women, as a Global South Indian Indigenous, arts-based method to explore immigrant mothers' experiences of migration and settlement. Drawing on Critical Race Feminism's focus on counter-storytelling and Indigenous and Global South ways of knowing, the article shows how Kolam fits the culture of Indian immigrant mothers (IIM) and lets participants take an active role in the research, rather than just being subjects. The study involved 20 IIM in the Greater Toronto Area who made Kolam and discussed their work in interviews and group conversations. The article explains the method's design, how it was analyzed using narrative thematic analysis and art-verbal triangulation, and how ethical issues around insider-outsider roles were handled. Two participant artworks are shared to show how the method brings out themes like precarity, aspiration, faith, and identity through colour and line. The article ends by reflecting on collaborative knowledge-making and ongoing power dynamics in participatory research, arguing that arts-based methods rooted in culture can help recognize more kinds of knowledge in research.

Keywords *Kolam, arts-based research, Global South Indian Indigenous methodology, counter-storytelling, Critical Race Feminism, decolonial methods, epistemic justice, immigrant women*

1. Introduction

Research on racialized immigrant women has often used extractive, positivist approaches that see the researcher as the expert and the participants as 'the other.' This can lead to accounts that oversimplify their experiences and reinforce existing inequalities (Cannella & Manuelito, 2008; Smith, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). For example, Indian immigrant mothers (IIM) in this study are often grouped into broad categories like 'women of colour' or 'South Asian women,' which ignores the unique cultural, religious, and socioeconomic parts of their lives and misses their real experiences.

To fill this gap, the article uses Kolam, a traditional floor art made by Indian women, as a Global South Indian Indigenous, arts-based method to study immigrant women's emotional experiences of migration and settlement. Emotional experiences here refer to how mothers see and navigate the challenges,

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uncertainties, and opportunities of migration. Rather than using an outside method, this approach starts with a cultural practice participants already know and explores what can be learned when research is grounded in their traditions. Guided by Critical Race Feminism's idea of counter-storytelling and Indigenous and Global South ways of knowing, the article argues that Kolam fits IIM culture and shows a non-extractive way to do research, or 'knowing with' (Santos, 2015), by working together with participants instead of just studying them.

This article is based on a qualitative study with twenty IIM in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) who made Kolam and discussed their work in interviews and group discussions. The main findings about poverty, exclusion from the job market, ongoing patriarchy, and loss of self are discussed in detail elsewhere (Pandian, in press, in review). Here, the focus is on what Kolam brings to research. Since the method itself is the main contribution, it deserves special attention. This article offers three main contributions: (1) it introduces Kolam as a culturally grounded qualitative research methodology rather than a cultural practice used merely to facilitate discussion; (2) it demonstrates how participant-created artwork can function effectively as data, interpretation, and counter-storytelling simultaneously (3) finally, it expands discussions of arts-based and decolonial methodologies by developing a Global South Indian Indigenous approach rooted in participants' own traditions.

The article explains the study's theoretical background, then describes the Kolam method and how it was analyzed, shows what knowledge it produces through two participant artworks, and ends by reflecting on the art-making process, power dynamics in shared knowledge, and the wider impact of this approach on feminist and participatory research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Critical Race Feminism

Critical Race Feminism (CRF) argues that race, gender, class, and other identities never operate alone. Instead, these identities intersect and create forms of disadvantage that cannot be understood by analyzing these categories in isolation (Crenshaw, 1991; Wing, 2003). Three tenets of CRF guide this study: (1) anti-essentialism, which rejects a singular women's experience and emphasizes within-group heterogeneity (Harris, 1990); (2) intersectionality, which considers gender only in conjunction with race, migration status, and class (Crenshaw, 1991; Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008); and (3) counter-storytelling, which foregrounds the voices of women of colour in opposition to dominant master narratives. CRF also recognizes non-traditional forms of data, such as life narratives, poetry, and art forms central to women of colour, as legitimate sources of knowledge (Collins, 2000; Wing, 2000). In line with this scholarship, the present study treats an art practice not merely as artwork but as a mode of inquiry.

2.2 Indigenous and Global South methodologies

Indigenous methodologies understand knowledge as embodied and relational, grounded in community relationships (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2001; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Global South Scholars also vehemently echo this sentiment and increasingly emphasize participatory, decolonial, and culturally responsive approaches that prioritize reciprocity, reflexivity, and participant involvement in knowledge production (Lenette, 2022b; Santos, 2015). On the contrary, Colonial/Positivist research historically constructed the colonized woman as an exotic object of study through the accounts of unqualified "research travellers," whose inferences excluded the woman's own voices (Cannella & Manuelito, 2008; Smith, 2012). Acknowledging racialized women's narratives as legitimate sources of knowledge holds both political and scholarly significance (Razack, 1998).

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2.3 Gender and Knowledge

IRM and CRF converge on decolonization, self-determination, and the significance of women narrating their own experiences- both place accountability with the community. However, IRM has been critiqued for insufficiently theorizing gender (Smith, 2012); CRF equips this study with an explicit intersectional and anti-colonial framework that centers gender. By drawing on arts-based research methods and feminist and decolonial perspectives, this study positions Kolam as a research methodology.

2.4 Terminological clarification for the Methodological approach

Before moving on, terminological clarification is needed and critical. Drawing on Indigenous methodology, this study does not equate the diasporic Indian women involved, or a tribal art, with Indigenous peoples in the settler-colonial context, whose methodologies are closely tied to sovereignty, land, and treaty. Agreeing with Global South and decolonial scholarship (Santos, 2015; Smith, 2012), the approach draws on Indigenous methodological principles of relational and embodied knowledge, self-determination in knowledge production, and resistance to extractivist positivist research. The term 'Global South Indian Indigenous methodology' is used here deliberately to indicate that 'Global South' and 'Indian' specify the cultural context and Kolam form. At the same time, 'Indigenous' refers to methodological commitments rather than Indigeneity in the settler-colonial sense, aligning more closely with the original meaning of a practice native to a people's own cultural world. The term is employed with caution, recognizing the limitations of the analogy and the importance of not conflating 'Global South,' 'diasporic,' and 'Indigenous' identities.

3. Kolam as Method

3.1 History

Kolam (Rangoli in Maharashtra or Alpana in Bengal) is an ephemeral floor art drawn with rice powder, created only by Indian women every morning, traditionally (Mitter, 2001; Nagarajan, 2019). Mitter (2001) documents that this floor-painting tradition predates colonial rule and survived it as one of the few women's ritual arts, and that it has long been a specifically women's practice. Kolam is not institutionalized: it is decentered, learned informally through watching and doing, and passed between women throughout generations, from mother to daughter, aunt to niece, grandmother to granddaughter, and older woman to young girl (Nagarajan, 2019). Colour, too, carries cultural and religious resonance and offers a spontaneous, everyday vocabulary of emotion.

3.2 Kolam through an Indigenous epistemic lens

Kolam, as a practice, rooted in everyday experience, relationships, and visual art, aligns closely with Indigenous epistemology. Nagarajan (2019) describes it as a "painted prayer" through which women communicate their own and their family's well-being and emotional state to the land and community. Because participants were already familiar with Kolam despite their diverse backgrounds, the method draws on their existing cultural knowledge, fosters active engagement, and grants participants greater agency in representing their experiences. As an art form that predates and survived colonial rule (Mitter, 2001), Kolam resists colonial research dynamics.

3.3 Kolam as counter-storytelling methodology

Examined through the CRF lens, Kolam functions as counter-storytelling, offering a way to narrate experiences that may be difficult to articulate verbally (Leavy, 2015; Mikkonen et al., 2020; Sinding et al., 2014; Wing, 2000). Art conveys complexities and lived experience in ways that structured questioning fails to capture. For example, Chilean 'arpilleras', North American 'quilts', and 'body-

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mapping' are arts-based research forms that are increasingly recognized (Clover, 2011; Leavy, 2015; O'Neill, 2017; Seppälä et al., 2021). In this respect, Kolam aligns with a broader tradition of women's art as knowledge and testimony. The closest study is Redwood, Gale, and Greenfield's (2012) use of a Rangoli-making activity using lentils with South Asian women in the United Kingdom to generate conversation within health-services research. However, in that study, the artwork was incidental, a tool to elicit discussion rather than data in its own right and not as a decolonial methodology. The present approach differs in several respects. Redwood and colleagues used dried pulses, grains, and spices glued onto boards, materials selected to represent food preparation for a study of diet and diabetes, so the medium and its colours lacked symbolic significance. In contrast, this study employs the traditional powdered medium of Kolam, where each colour carries cultural and religious meaning and serves as a vocabulary of emotion, rendering material and colour choices analyzable data. More fundamentally, Kolam is treated as analyzed knowledge and counternarrative, not as an incidental by-product, and the practice is theorized through CRF and Global South Indian Indigenous epistemology as a research method.

4. The Method

4.1 Participants and setting

In this study, twenty pregnant and parenting Indian immigrant mothers aged 20 to 45 participated. All the participating mothers had one or more children under four and had immigrated to Canada between 2017 and 2024. They lived in Oshawa, Brampton, or Hamilton in the GTA, as these sites had a high concentration of Indian immigrant communities and were accessible to participants. The participant sample was diverse, with five from North India who speak English or Hindi and fifteen from South India who speak English, Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu. Community translators were engaged when needed with participant consent. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling via peer networks and online communities as they are close-knit. They were compensated with gift cards of their choice toward participation, travel, and childcare. In keeping with the study's CRF commitments, a demographic instrument was restructured to let participants self-define (identify) rather than accept imposed categories.

4.2 The Research Design

Data were generated across four sessions. Session 1 focused on establishing a safe and informed space. After a shared cultural ritual (the lighting of the kuthuvilakku, or oil lamp), participants received full information about the study, provided consent, and collaboratively brainstormed colour meanings and prompts. This brainstorming produced a shared working lexicon of colour associations (Appendix B) that participants drew on, and departed from, as they wished, so that the colour code was co-defined with the community rather than imposed from a fixed cultural key (Lenette, 2022b). Several colours carried more than one association, which participants disambiguated when narrating their finished work in the interviews. Session 2 was the art-making session, in which participants created Kolam expressing their socioeconomic experiences of migration. Working in the traditional coloured powders of the form, each participant received twelve shades of Rangoli/Kolam powder that could be mixed to obtain the colours they needed, together with pencils and markers for drafting symbols and a small notebook for practising and reflecting at home. The traditional floor practice was adapted to canvas, and a light spray fixative set the powder, so that the otherwise ephemeral work could be retained and analyzed (a full list of materials is provided in Appendix A). Those needing more time completed their work at home, and a short group discussion enabled collective comparison across the three sites. Session 3 comprised individual, semi-structured interviews (mostly by Zoom, some in person), audio-recorded with consent and transcribed, in

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which participants elaborated the meanings of their art. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded with participant consent and transcribed by the researcher. A planned Session 4 offered participants an oral summary of findings. Initially, the art sessions were planned to be held in a rented hall; however, at participating mothers' request, sessions were held in community members' homes, with childcare provided by elders. This fostered an organic formation of a supportive micro-community across religious, caste, and linguistic differences that extends to even today.

Before the study began, participating mothers received an information letter describing the study purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality protections, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants also signed an informed consent form before participating in the art workshops and interviews. Consent was also obtained for the reproduction and publication of participant artwork.

4.3 Data Analysis

Verbal data were analyzed using narrative thematic analysis. Here, the narratives were treated as holistic stories before identifying emerging themes across the dataset (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Ross & Green, 2011). Participants' artworks were analyzed through compositional analysis of colour symbolism, spatial arrangement, scale, and the inclusion or omission of elements (Bauer & Sippel, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2018; Rose, 2016). Only after this initial analysis were the visual and verbal interpretations integrated, ensuring that the image was not merely a supplement to the interview. Art and verbal accounts were triangulated for completeness, so that artistic insights addressed gaps in verbal data and confirmed themes across group discussions, interviews, and Kolam produced in three settings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin, 1978). Preliminary analysis of integrated verbal data and the artwork was returned to appropriate participants for verification. This acknowledged that participants controlled data interpretation, recognizing that interpretation occurred through active dialogue and remained open to revision until the end of the study (Byrne, 2015). Interviews were also conducted in the participant's preferred (comfortable) language, and a community translator was present when required, only with participant consent. In this study, translation was treated as interpretive with attention to conceptual equivalence and meanings that resisted direct translation.

4.4 Ethics and the insider-outsider position

Drawing on Wilkinson (1988) and Lenette (2022a), as a first-generation Indian immigrant mother and researcher who shares the participants' cultural background, I maintained reflexivity regarding my insider-outsider position throughout the study. I recognized that our shared history, culture, language, and tradition can lead to assumptions; hence, I guarded against over-identification with the study's participants, verified my interpretations with participants, and returned analyses for their approval. Honoring shared cultural practices, such as shared meals on the floor and opening rituals that echoed participants' tradition, was essential for dissolving researcher-participant hierarchies and building trust within an over-researched, research-fatigued community. Participants came from a small, close-knit community; therefore, privacy was prioritized and actively encouraged throughout the study. Participant recording in any form (audio/video/photographs) was actively prohibited; the use of pseudonyms was offered, and data were securely stored. Mothers who wished to use their own names were fully informed about knowledge dissemination approaches. The McMaster University Research Ethics Board approved the study.

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5. Two Demonstrations of the Method

The two artworks below show the kind of knowledge the method brings out: embodied, metaphorical, and counter-narrative, and anchored in the participants' own interpretations. I chose these two because they show, more clearly than most, themes that ran across the twenty works: aspiration and its deferral, faith, precarity, and the decline of self. They are presented to illustrate the method rather than to develop the substantive claims set out elsewhere (Pandian, in press, in review). Artworks are reproduced with permission.



Figure 1. Intersection of Unrealized Dreams and Religious Refuge

Source: Artwork created by a study participant during a Kolam workshop (Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area).

> *"The orange bubble indicates the dreams and hopes I had when I came to Canada. ... Everything I drew in the bubble still remains a dream even after six years. ... I wasn't very religious, but when everything failed, I had to have hope, and I held on to my religion, which is the yellow. I know it's a bubble that can break, but for now, it protects me."*

This method reveals more than a list of stressors: through colour and shape, the orange bubble , the participant shows aspiration. She highlights her ongoing worries (arrows across the scene), and faith as a refuge (the yellow). The colours have both shared and personal meanings: yellow stands for religious devotion, while orange represents unfulfilled dreams for this participant, showing that colour meanings can be both collective and individual. This artwork highlights the tensions and uncertainties that might not come up in regular conversations about coping. Interestingly, the visual and spoken stories do not completely match. While the participant talked about courage, strength, and hope, the image—with tired eyes and a delicate bubble of faith- shows exhaustion and insecurity that were less obvious in her words. Looking at both the art and the interview together gives a deeper understanding of her experience.

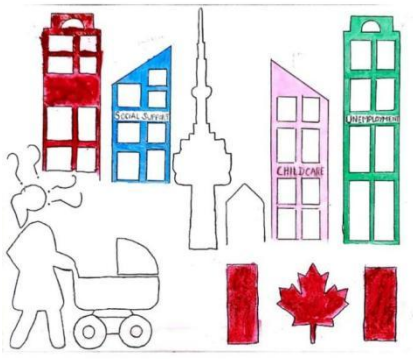


Figure 2. The Vanishing Act: Negotiating the Elusive Support Systems

Source: Artwork created by a study participant during a Kolam workshop (Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area).

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> *"I drew each thing as tall buildings to say that even though it is there, it is still unreachable. I didn't colour the CN tower … it means they call us, promising a better life, but once we land, all the promises just disappear in the background. … I didn't colour myself or my baby girl … we are also disappearing."*

This second artwork demonstrates the method's capacity for counter-storytelling. The intentional decision to leave the CN Tower, the home, and the mother and child uncoloured shows how the method supports counter-storytelling. She chose to leave the CN Tower, the home, and herself (the mother) and child uncoloured to indicate the availability of hard-to-reach services and fading selfhood, in a visual message aimed at 'the community and the politicians.' Here, meaning comes from what is left out: the empty, uncoloured shapes show disappearance in a way that words cannot, making the absence of colour a central part of the participant's message. The artwork communicates the participant's perspective that challenges dominant stories from the maker's point of view, rather than being analyzed by others. In both examples, Kolam brings out metaphor, colour symbolism, and lived testimony, letting participants be creators and owners of knowledge. study, knowledge did not come from the finished artworks and interviews alone. It also came from the art-making process itself: the interactions among the maker, the other mothers, the materials, the space, and me as researcher. Three contextual dimensions were especially telling. In terms of time, the sessions offered a rare reconnection with a tradition left behind and with a community of women; one mother reflected, "I used to do this with my amma … I never had time or thought of doing this here, so far away from home," while another described the work as therapeutic. Space mattered: these sessions were held in an elder's home, or a mother's own, and some participants asked to sit on the floor so that their Kolam could be sent "as prayers to Bhumadevi (Mother Earth)."

On the other hand, some participants picked neutral locations so their art and words would not be seen by family, showing how space can be used to protect privacy and manage power. The materials also played a role: from lighting the kuthuvilakku and sharing food to moving the art from floor to canvas, each influenced what could be expressed. As one mother said, "I usually do it on a floor … this is on a canvas; I am just letting this take over." Paying attention to time, space, and materials means seeing the process of making art, not just the finished piece, as a source of knowledge.

6. Discussion

6.1 The art-making process as a site of knowledge

In this study, knowledge did not come from the finished artworks and interviews alone. It also came from the art-making process itself: the interactions among the maker, the other mothers, the materials, the space, and me as researcher. Three contextual dimensions were especially telling. In terms of time, the sessions offered a rare reconnection with a tradition left behind and with a community of women; one mother reflected, "I used to do this with my amma … I never had time or thought of doing this here, so far away from home," while another described the work as therapeutic. That time was also pressured by childcare and by the risk of becoming visible, and vulnerable, to spouses and in-laws. Space mattered too: sessions were held in an elder's home or a mother's own, and some participants asked to sit on the floor so that their Kolam could be sent "as prayers to Bhumadevi (Mother Earth)," while others chose more neutral venues precisely to keep their art and words from being witnessed by family, a spatial negotiation of privacy and power. Materials carried their own agency: opened with the lighting of the kuthuvilakku and the sharing of food, and adapted from floor to canvas, they shaped what could be expressed. As one mother put it, "I usually do it on a floor … this is on a canvas; I am just letting this take over." Considering time, space, and materials highlights the importance of the creative process as well as the final artwork.

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6.2 Knowledge co-production and the persistence of power

Even though culture-based methods can help participants become more involved, they do not remove all power differences between researchers and participants. It is important to keep noticing how power works during the research. In this study, both obvious power (e.g., institutional and funding rules) and hidden power (e.g., who sets the agenda, language, and timing) were still present. Due to Covid 19 restrictions, moving some sessions online or to less private homes also made it harder for some mothers to speak freely. As Foucault (1975) and Kesby (2005) argue, in these scenarios, 'empowerment through participation' can sometimes become another form of control. For example, one participant, juggling childcare and household responsibilities, had very little time to meet this study's demands and was clearly stressed by the study's schedule. When I realized my institutional and funding agency deadlines were affecting this participant, I tailored the pace and expectations. Also, being aware of my own position helped me manage these issues, though I could not remove or fully mitigate them. While Kolam does not erase the gap between researcher and participant, it does give participants more say in how their experiences are shown and understood (Lenette, 2022b).

6.3 Epistemic justice

By treating the participating women's cultural practices as valid sources of research knowledge, this method broadens what counts as knowledge and whose views matter in research. This is especially important for those studying gender, knowledge-making, and future social changes. In practice, it means doing research with marginalized and racialized women, not just about them, and seeing this change as key to making research more inclusive and better at reflecting the experiences of underrepresented groups (Lenette, 2022b; Seppälä et al., 2021).

6.4 Limitations

This study used a small, carefully chosen group from three different municipalities of the GTHA, and the short session schedule (one art session, one interview, and a quick follow-up), plus moving some sessions online, limited how deeply and openly people could share compared to longer, in-person sessions. Kolam is also specific to its culture and cannot be used everywhere. What can be shared is the main idea: research methods can be based on a community's own traditions, helping bring out knowledge that might otherwise stay hidden. Researchers working with other groups should find practices that fit those communities, instead of using Kolam as a one-size-fits-all method.

7. Conclusion

This article shows that Kolam, a Global South Indigenous art form, can function as a culturally grounded qualitative research method for studying the experiences of Indian immigrant mothers. The participating mothers' artworks generated understandings of aspiration, uncertainty, faith, social isolation, identity, and erasure of self, and settlement challenges that were not fully articulated during interviews. Methodologically, the study also demonstrates how Kolam can operate not only as a cultural practice but also as a tool for data generation, interpretation, and counter-storytelling against hegemonic patriarchal and colonial narratives. In doing so, it contributes to arts-based, feminist, and decolonial methodological scholarship by introducing a Global South Indian Indigenous approach based in participants' own traditions. The study is limited by its small purposive sample, focus on three municipalities within the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area, and the cultural specificity of Kolam. Regardless, it still adds to the developing literature on culturally grounded qualitative methods by demonstrating the importance of developing research approaches that build on participants' existing cultural practices, lived experiences, and knowledge systems.

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Ethics approval and consent

The McMaster University Research Ethics Board approved the study. All participants provided informed consent, including consent for the publication of their artwork.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no competing interests.

Data availability

While selected anonymized quotations and participant artworks are presented in the manuscript with participant consent, the full interview transcripts and complete dataset are not available for sharing. Participants were recruited from a small and well-interconnected community. Hence, the risk of re-identification cannot be fully eliminated even after anonymization. For this reason, the data cannot be shared beyond the research team.

Photograph and artwork permissions

Figures 1 and 2 were created by study participants during Kolam workshops conducted in community elders' homes and community settings in the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area. Copyright remains with the creators. Written consent for reproduction and publication was obtained from each participant prior to submission. The photograph presented in Appendix A was taken by the author, who retains copyright and grants permission for its publication

Author contributions

Dr. Lydia Pandian conceived and designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

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Appendix A. Workshop materials



Workshop materials used in the study. Photograph taken and owned by the author. Permission for publication is granted by the copyright holder.

Tools (per participant, per workshop): a six-piece canvas pack as the working surface; small containers for mixing and storing the coloured powders; permanent markers (thick and thin tips), pencils, erasers, a sharpener, and rulers for drafting symbols; a small notebook for reflection and at-home practice; spray fixative to set the powder; a plastic tablecloth and tape to protect and secure the working surface; cling film to cover open powder containers; scrap paper for practising; and cleaning supplies, gloves, and hand sanitizer. Powder colours (two 50 g pots of each, mixable): post-box red, royal blue, turquoise, primrose yellow, golden yellow, brown, orange, pink, light green, dark green, violet, and white.

Appendix B. Colour meanings

The following colour-to-meaning associations were brainstormed collaboratively with participants during Session 1 and used as a shared, non-binding reference during art-making and analysis; participants remained free to assign their own meanings.

Red: fertility, prosperity, fear. Golden yellow: purity, light, and sustaining religious values. Green: financial instability, happiness, unemployment. Blue: good emotional and physical health, bravery, determination. Black: negativity, evil, decline in health, stress, anxiety. White: sacrifice for family, and abstaining from luxury and pleasure. Pink: childcare, education, pregnancy difficulty. Navy (dark) blue: social support and personal development.

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