

Global Voices, Local Choices

In 2022 the Causeway Multicultural Forum took part in Global Voices, Local Choices, a programme which aims to bring diverse cultures and perspectives into Northern Irish local and national museums by empowering people to make choices relating to the World Cultures collections and how they are interpreted.

The group visited Ulster Museum's Inclusive Global Histories gallery and picked a Muslim prayer mat from the national collection to be exhibited in Coleraine. They discussed the Northern Irish experiences of ethnic minority communities with Esther Ogunleye from the African Caribbean Support Organisation NI, and took part in creative workshops with Nandi Jola, focused on re-interpreting the Ulster Museum prayer mat. The creative writing pieces on display were inspired by the prayer mat and reflect on issues of identity, belonging, decolonisation, inclusion and diversity.

Global Voices, Local Choices is a partnership project between National Museums NI, the African Caribbean Support Organisation NI, Northern Ireland Museums Council, and five local museum services, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund.

Participants:

Ahmed, Anjana, Colum, Fozia, Indu, Kuldip, Margarita, Mohamed, Naresh, Susan

Prayer mats are used by different religions around the world; among Muslims they are known as a *sajjādat as-salāt* in Arabic, *namazlik* in Turkish, or *janamaz* in Urdu and Farsi.

Traditionally made from cotton, wool and silk, Muslim prayer mats, are placed on the ground to provide a clean space to perform the Islamic prayer known as *Salah*.

This contemporary prayer mat from the National Museums NI World Cultures collection was made in Türkiye. ©NMNI BELUM.W2022.74



Performing Salah

Salah (prayer) is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Ideally performed five times daily, each Salah consists of two or more stages, known as *Raka'at*. Before performing Salah, the prayer mat is placed on the ground, with the top - normally indicated by a niche - facing towards the sacred Kaaba in Mecca. Facing the the Kaaba, the intention to pray is spoken.

1) Raising hands to earlobes (or men) or shoulders (for women) whilst saying "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great) begins the sacred state of *ihram*.

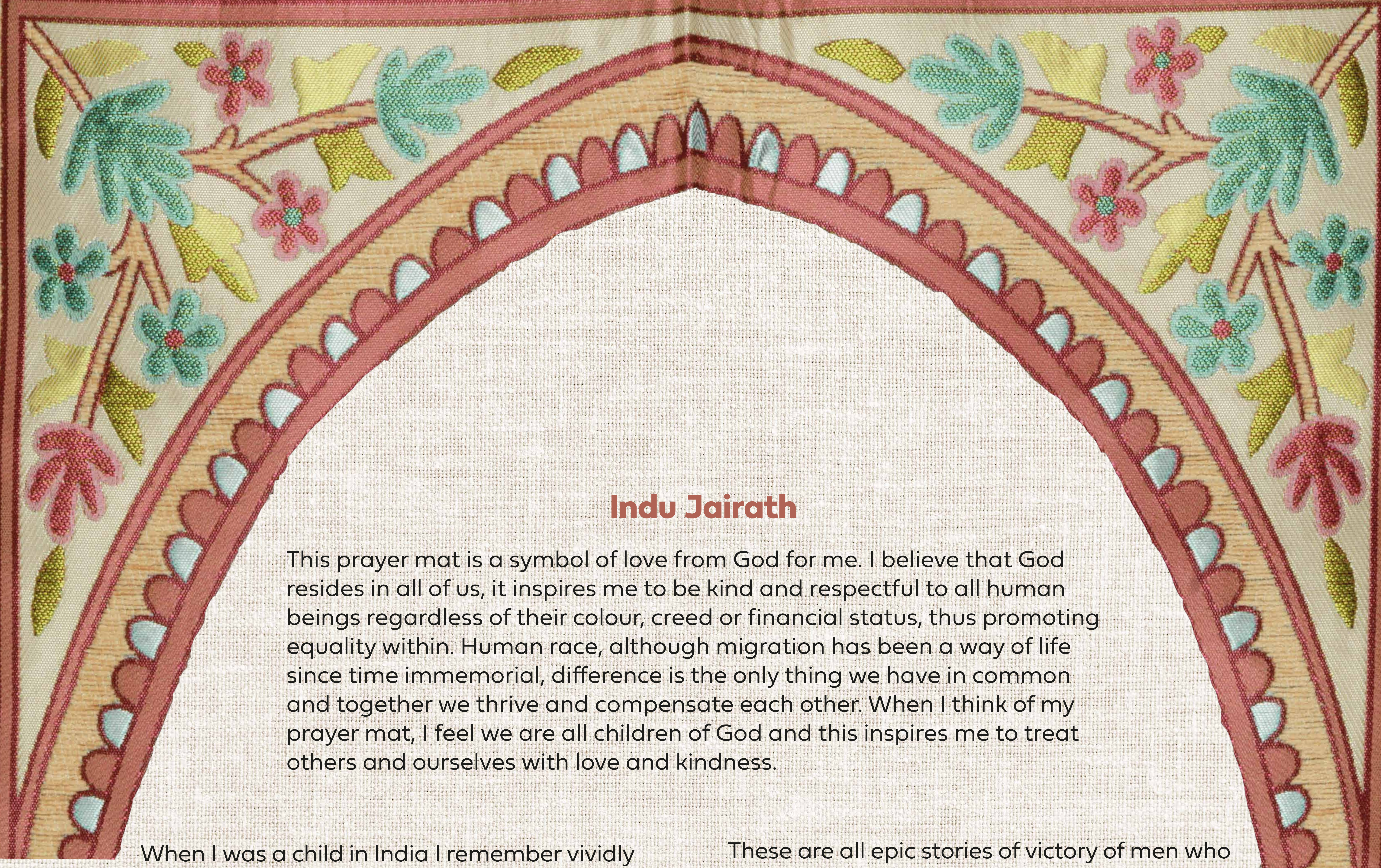


2) Hands are placed over the naval (for men), or chest (for women) and a *dua* or invocation is spoken, followed two *surahs*, chapters of the Koran.



3) Bowing down (known as *ruku*), "Allahu Akbar" is spoken and praise is given to the glory of God.





Indu Jairath

This prayer mat is a symbol of love from God for me. I believe that God resides in all of us, it inspires me to be kind and respectful to all human beings regardless of their colour, creed or financial status, thus promoting equality within. Human race, although migration has been a way of life since time immemorial, difference is the only thing we have in common and together we thrive and compensate each other. When I think of my prayer mat, I feel we are all children of God and this inspires me to treat others and ourselves with love and kindness.

When I was a child in India I remember vividly both my parents started their day with prayers before the sunrise. This practice has stayed with me throughout. We have tradition of praying here and whenever there is special day like Diwali we go to Temple in Belfast which is also a community centre. We invite local people as well if they want to join in for prayers or entertainment and Indian and other cuisines for everyone who visits the temple. In Hinduism, which is considered the world's oldest living religion, dating back to the second millennium BC, there are several versions of the Diwali story that vary among geographical communities.



Global Voices, Local Choices participants and staff from National Museums NI visiting the Inclusive Global Histories exhibition at the Ulster Museum.

These are all epic stories of victory of men who were incarnations of God Vishnu, regarded as the sustainer of the universe and whose role is restore the balance of good and evil in times of trouble. Just as the legends of Diwali differ from region to region, so, too the holiday rituals. What most have in common though, are the abundance of sweets, family gatherings, and the lighting of candles that symbolise the inner light that protects each household from spiritual darkness.

This is common factor in all religions in the world, showing the similarities within the human race rather than differences. The spirit of Diwali is universal - the belief that, eventually, light will triumph over darkness. Also in this context when people migrate for different reasons, which has been the case for many years as a way of life, its so lovely to connect with each other with different foods, religions and values. Difference is the only thing in common and together we thrive, enjoy the beauty in diversity, at the same time, learn from each other, widening our horizons. I enjoy meeting with people from different cultures, however I get a thrill if I meet people from India when I go abroad for holidays. Also food is kind of a common factor, like language and social currency, showing care, and culture.

Naresh Jairath

When I was seven
My father took me to holy temples
I remember I sat on in back seat of the bike
I remember my father's friends went with us
I remember if my father did not go no one went that year
I remember my mother cooked lots of chapattis at 4 in the morning
I remember halfway we all shared everyones' food
I remember when we reached the temple we all stayed at the cottage
I remember my father took me to the temple in the morning
I remember there were lots of people, all chanting the prayers
I remember always holding my father's hand
I remember we were all back at home.
Such was a memory still hold in my life.



Global Voices, Local Choices participants and staff from National Museums NI and Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services at the Ulster Museum exploring the World Cultures collection.

4) Standing straight, further praises are given to God.

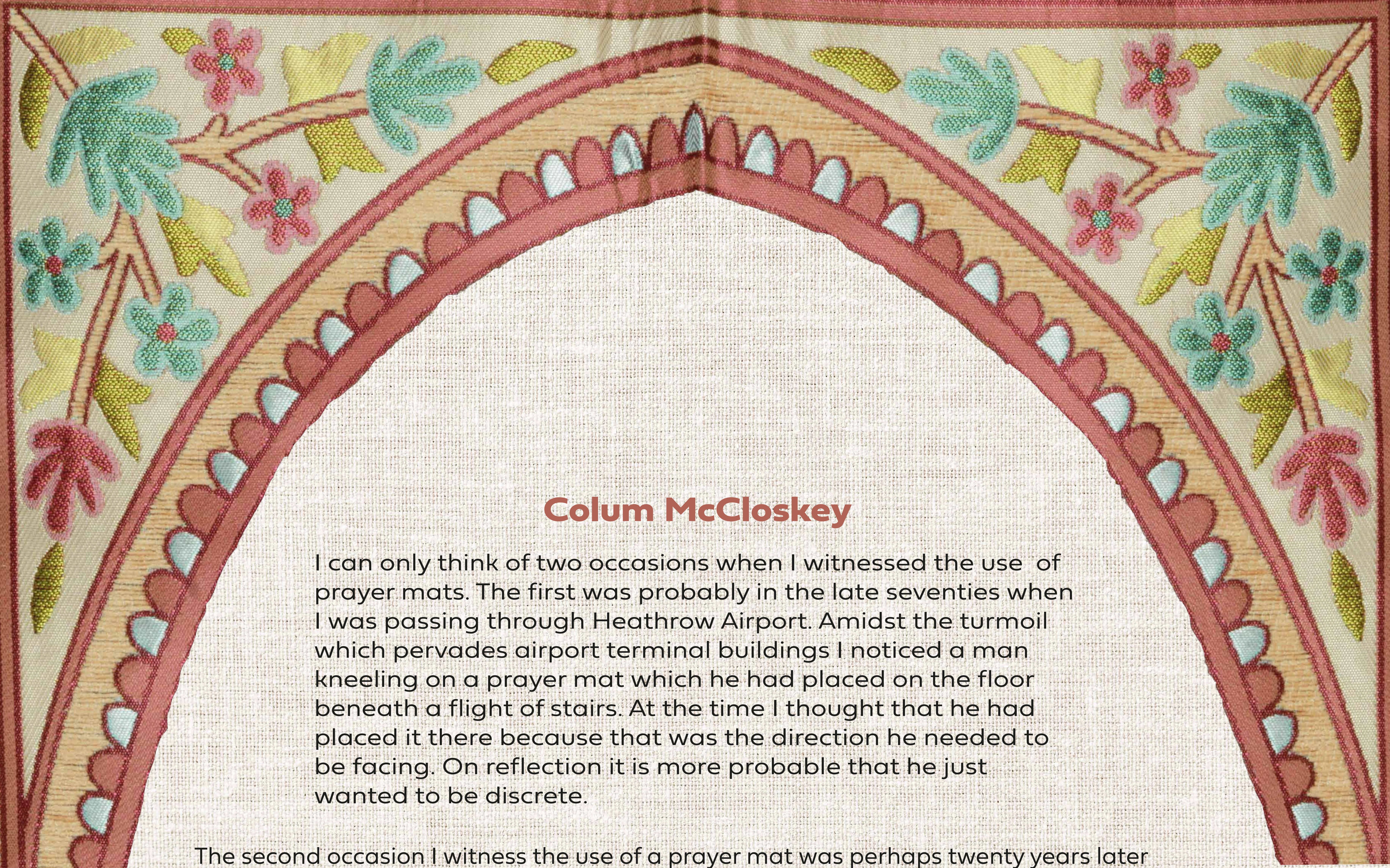


5) Prostrating (known as sujood), with forehead, nose, palms of both hands, knees and toes pointing forward, another "Allahu Akbar" is spoken followed by praises to God.



6) Sitting up on the flat of the left foot, whilst keeping the toes of the right foot planted and pointing forward, "Allahu Akbar" is again spoken. Women lean on their left hip pointing the toes of both feet to the right side. After a few moments, prostration begins again. This completes a single Rak'ah.





Colum McCloskey

I can only think of two occasions when I witnessed the use of prayer mats. The first was probably in the late seventies when I was passing through Heathrow Airport. Amidst the turmoil which pervades airport terminal buildings I noticed a man kneeling on a prayer mat which he had placed on the floor beneath a flight of stairs. At the time I thought that he had placed it there because that was the direction he needed to be facing. On reflection it is more probable that he just wanted to be discrete.

The second occasion I witness the use of a prayer mat was perhaps twenty years later while on holiday in Morocco. In Agadir, a small town on the Mediterranean coast, we hired a taxi for the day. The driver took us to a number of tourist attractions where he would leave us to explore what was on display. On one occasion, when we returned the driver was praying on his prayer mat which he promptly rolled up and placed in the boot before resuming our journey.

In both instances I was impressed that, almost regardless of the circumstances they found themselves in, both men found time and space in which to attend to religious observances.



Above and below: Global Voices, Local Choices participants and staff from National Museums NI and Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services at Ballymoney Museum during creative workshops with Nandi Jola.



Mohamed Edriss

For me the pray mat is the gateway through which I communicate with God and ask Him for everything I want and thank Him for everything He has given me.

As for the tree, it means to me this world with all its religions, beliefs, sects and societies, and everything that is beautiful and sacred. This tree means love, goodness and peace to me.

My mother, my family, my wife who suffered for many years because of my separation from her because of the war, my son and his children whom I have not seen for 12 years, this tree means to me the last smile of the child Marwa before I left the siege before she was killed by the criminal regime in Syria.

It means to me the children who suffered and are suffering because of wars, fear, hunger and cold everywhere in this world. This mat means to me this great country and the wonderful community that brought me together with my family and gave us protection, care and love.

Margarita Vidinova

I remember a cart drawn by oxen stuck in the mud and the people who tried desperately to pull it out; I was four
I remember my father trying to warm up my feet with his hands in a cold winter night; I was six
I remember the blue sky, the tall pine trees and the raging river when I was taken to the mountain for the first time
I remember the scent of lilac from the branches through the window of my granny's house
I remember the lightings and thunders above my head in a dark night in a mountain.

7-8) After the required number of Raka'at, the Salah is completed by turning the head over the right shoulder, saying "May peace, the mercy of Allah and His blessings be upon you", followed by turning over the left shoulder and repeating the blessing.

