



Smithsonian Center for
Folklife and Cultural Heritage

Cultural Vitality Program

Annual Report | 2021-2022

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On cover: Dancers at the Gutan festival help preserve Armenian folk music and dances and pass it through generations.
Photo by Hrant Sahakyan, My Armenia Program

Understanding how communities adapt to a changing world



4 **Amplifying** traditional knowledge to build resilient futures

Cultivating cultural vitality to increase social and economic well-being

Introduction

The Cultural Vitality Program at the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage works in partnership with communities to build resilience in the face of immense changes. Because the Center and its Smithsonian Folklife Festival had collaborated with communities for more than fifty years, we knew that social, economic, and political forces—including climate change, armed conflict, genocide, oppression, urbanization, and the mass production of culture—were disrupting and devastating communities and traditional practice. When those communities requested assistance or partnership beyond the Folklife Festival, we had the will and the expertise to respond but often lacked the necessary resources.

Thanks to the founding sponsorship from Switzerland-based Ferring Pharmaceuticals, the Cultural Vitality Program, which officially launched in 2019, has created new avenues for sustained collaboration with our community partners. In our first two years, we built a strong team and together re-envisioned the work amid the crisis of the pandemic. In this third year, we have found our stride. With community partnerships now rooted in trust, together we celebrate our impact.

Championing initial success, Ferring has renewed the program for three more years, opening doors for additional impact and growth. In the pages that follow, we highlight our 2021-2022 work in cultural industries and language vitality—including engaging youth in language and cultural practices, training cultural heritage professionals, and cultivating new models of cultural heritage tourism. Through collaboration and innovation with our community partners, we aim to bring that spirit to the Center, to the broader Smithsonian, and to the world. Please join us!

Opposite: Kazakh artist Zeynelkhan Mukhamedjan displays one of his tapestries. Photo courtesy of the Union of Artisans Kazakhstan



A guide teaches a traditional method for baking bread in the sand, as part of a Visit Tunisia program on the nomadic culture of Beni Ghrib.
Photo by Raafet Khari

Cultural Industries

Cultural expression is essential to human well-being and community health. Through our Cultural Industries Initiative, we support community efforts to document, promote, and sustain their most cherished cultural practices while improving economic livelihoods. Without markets, musicians, artisans, and cooks shift away from traditional practices. As they find other work, they dedicate less time to these practices, decreasing the likelihood that future generations will carry on. Beyond markets, appreciation and understanding of cultural practices are essential to their continuity. Culture thrives when there are opportunities to share with others. The Cultural Industries Initiative creates opportunities for communities to grow and expand the appreciation, economic impact, and vitality of cultural practices.

Learning from the Founding Program in Armenia

The six-year, USAID-funded My Armenia Cultural Heritage Tourism Program laid the groundwork to pilot new activities to nurture cultural vitality and strengthen economic livelihoods. As the program ended in December 2021, we reflected on its continuing impact.

My Armenia tested a research-based approach for developing tourism experiences. Adapted from the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the method centers tradition bearers as tourism experience hosts. Dialogue with heritage researchers grounds their first-person narrative in the context of the cultural practice, resulting in a deeply enriching tourism experience. This approach not only drives tourism to communities, but also builds local appreciation of cultural practices, resulting in:

- 129 new community-based cultural tourism experiences
- Sixty-four local guides supported to build their skills, share personal stories, and connect with local experiences
- Thousands of pages of critical documentation of Armenia’s contemporary cultural practices archived at the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography at the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, part of the Center’s commitment to shared stewardship of collections

The program also provided the resources and time for full implementation and evaluation of our artisan initiative activities. Our research identified hundreds of artisans in Armenia’s regions. With local partner Teryan Cultural Center, we delivered training based on artisan-identified needs, created a new model for a crafts festival, and helped artisans connect their enterprises to local and tourism markets, including:

- Sixty-three new artisan enterprises
- Nationwide network of engagement and support
- Establishment of Union of Artisans of the Republic of Armenia
- Sustainable ownership of annual My Handmade Armenia Festival
- Connection to NOVICA online marketplace, and a new USAID project to establish NOVICA office in Yerevan and dramatically expand online markets for Armenian crafts

My Armenia culminated just as COVID shut down global travel. The country continues to suffer from attacks and threatened future attacks by Azerbaijan. Despite these immense challenges, our partners demonstrate tremendous resilience and cultural vitality.

“What the My Armenia program gave us is indescribable, from consulting to even improving the design of our products, marketing support, branding, with which we now present ourselves to the world...Through the program we had a chance to participate in the Folklife Festival, which already brought us international recognition.”

—Vahagn, *Sisian Ceramics (Syunik destination)*

Creating Cultural Tourism Experiences

Our research-based approach to developing tourism experiences successfully drives tourism revenue to culture bearers and their communities. In 2022, in partnership with USAID-funded Turizam, we shared our approach through workshops for more than 100 tradition bearers and tourism enterprises in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In partnership with USAID Visit Tunisia, we launched

Visitors at Under the Walnut Tree, a guesthouse and food experience in Vayots Dzor get a hands-on demonstration from a local baker. Photo by Karen Nersisyan, My Armenia Program



Tunisia’s Living Culture, a year-long intensive program that will build on My Armenia’s product development model, working with local researchers and creating thirty new tourism experiences with communities across Tunisia.

“We got an idea of how to organize festivals in the future and involve the community and volunteers more in the organization...we noticed where we made mistakes.”

— Festivals training participant in BiH

Cultural Festival Exchanges

When planned well and organized in collaboration with community, local festivals may contribute to both economic growth and cultural vitality. Drawing on more than fifty years of producing the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, we created a one- or two-day

training curriculum to share our experiences with peer festival organizers around the world. Through our partnerships with USAID Turizam in Bosnia and Herzegovina and USAID Visit Tunisia, we delivered in-person workshops for more than 240 cultural festival organizers. With funding from the U.S. Embassy in Tunis, we created a learning lab at the 2022 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, hosting an exchange visit for six Tunisian festival organizers and government representatives.

“It was so interesting and useful to meet a fellow artist from the United States, who shares the same values and vision.”

—Gulmira Ualikhan, *artist exchange participant*

Youth and Artisans Engagement

Youth engagement is critical to carry traditions forward. In Kazakhstan, we continued our collaborative efforts with the Union of Artisans, creating programming to introduce youth to cultural industries. In 2021, we received a new award from the U.S. Embassy as part of its Makerspace Expands! Program in Almaty. We produced three virtual artisan exchanges, connecting pairs of makers from the United States and Kazakhstan for demonstrations and Q&A sessions. Approximately 100 youth participated in each online session.

Strengthening African American Craft

We are also active in the United States, with the African American Craft Initiative driving change in the craft sector. For this work, the American Craft Council recognized lead curator Diane N’Diaye as a *Visionary in Craft*.

Following the 2020 African American Craft Maker Summit and the African American Craft Organization Think Tank, we hosted the Craft Institution Consortium in July 2021. The event brought

together forty-four representatives from American craft organizations, museums, galleries, and funding organizations. After reviewing the findings from the Maker Summit and Think Tank, participants focused their discussions on organizational collaboration and identifying long-term goals for strengthening representation and access to resources for the Black craft community. The [Craft Institution Consortium Report](#) includes a summary, recommendations, and next steps.

Chanel Thervil participates in the Craft Institution Consortium through her artist residency at the Eliot School of Fine & Applied Arts in summer 2021.
Photo by Craig Bailey/Perspective





The Wolf Who Walks in Two Worlds, a free guide to better equip language revitalization practitioners with self-reflection, features this front cover. Illustration by Sarah General

Language Vitality

Nearly eighty percent of the world’s languages are Indigenous, and/or minoritized. Social, economic, and political forces increasingly pressure these languages and cultures to assimilate. It is through language that we pass down traditional knowledge and skills—the very foundation for who we are and our shared futures. The Language Vitality Initiative joins the thousands of communities, governments, and civil society organizations worldwide that have committed to language reclamation and maintenance efforts. We work through partnerships to bolster training, networking, innovative projects, and advocacy for language vitality.

TRAIN

The Language Vitality Initiative partners with organizations to offer training that is scalable and may serve as adaptable models

for local educational needs. The following activities support minority language speakers in China.

The sixth Sino-Tibetan Language and Linguistic Research Methodology Workshop, a long-term partnership with Nankai University, supports language documentation and vitality training in Northern China. This year’s workshop took place online in August 2022, with forty students and fourteen instructors from four continents. Coursework included workshops on semantics, dictionary making and FieldWorks Language Explorer software, language and culture documentation, and phonetic/phonology fieldwork.

The Online Workshop for Speakers of Eastern Himalayan Languages of Sichuan equips young members of language communi-ties with skills required to plan and execute language-documentation projects within their communities. This year’s workshop, with sixty participants representing thirty-four languages, featured lectures from past successful project teams in 2020 and 2021.

In March 2022, we launched a new [trilingual digital lecture series](#) for Tibetan cultural heritage professionals. The self-paced series features the Center’s curators providing practical instruction on effective modes of cultural presentation, community engagement, language diversity, multigenerational education, and facilitating meaningful interaction with tradition bearers.

INNOVATE

The Language Vitality Initiative supports innovative, community-driven projects that strengthen engagement with language, often focusing on increasing youth involvement.

In partnership with the Next Steps Language Revitalization Project, in July 2022 we released [The Wolf Who Walks in Two Worlds](#), an Indigenous Language Advocate’s Guide to Reflection. The forty

-page illustrated digital guide aims to equip language-revitalization practitioners with self-reflection skills to build leadership capacity.

Work continued with the Sakha Media School this year, as we supported an online screening of six student-produced documentary shorts in April 2022. Students worked in small groups with Sakha film mentors to create films that feature the Sakha language and cover topics of environmental change, culinary traditions, and daily life. Students learned about producing documentary shorts, distributing their work, and submitting to film festivals. The documentaries will premiere at the Smithsonian's 2023 Mother Tongue Film Festival.

“I had a big change of attitude about my mother tongue as a result of this workshop. I am inspired to use, document, and describe my mother tongue. Since the workshop, I have started recording a folk-tale in Muya, with my grandmother.”

—Participant, *Sino-Tibetan Language and Linguistic Research Methodology Workshop*

NETWORK

The Language Vitality Initiative builds accessibility to emerging best practices in language reclamation by sharing research and collaborative methodologies in public and academic venues.

Archival materials are critical for language work but navigating systems for access may be complicated and intimidating. To address this issue, we established in January 2022 the Language and Archives Mentorship Program to increase confidence in database navigation, to build understanding of intellectual property rights and agreements, and to foster relationships between archives and heritage language communities. Since launching, we have hosted five interns representing three language communities in the United States.

The Institute for Collaborative Language Research (CoLang) provides training for community language activists and linguists in community-based language documentation and revitalization. We provided project management and instruction for the 2022 Institute, including workshops on project planning, grant writing, institutional collaborations, dictionary development, and impact assessment. Attending were 239 participants representing 196 languages.

In November 2021, we launched the [CoLang website](#). The site, which was designed through a collaborative process and established a CoLang web committee, provides open access to CoLang training materials and content. Our continued work with the CoLang web committee will focus on the site's sustainability and growth.

In partnership with Nankai University, in February 2022 we launched a web resource to highlight the ongoing work of the Sino-Tibetan Language and Linguistic Research Methodology Workshop. The site provides content developed over the past five years of training workshops and includes essential self-study educational materials for Tibetan community language practitioners in China.

ADVOCATE

The Language Vitality Initiative increases the visibility of language issues and uplifts the communities and practitioners who champion their languages through the Mother Tongue Film Festival, Smithsonian Folklife Festival, *Folklife Magazine*, and public talks.

In December 2021, we signed a memorandum of understanding with the First People's Cultural Council, a Crown Corporation in British Columbia. The agreement enabled us to provide communications support for the Festival of Indigenous Languages and to begin collaborating with its Endangered Language Project on a magazine series on language-vitality practitioners across the globe.



The documentary feature *Mashkawi-Manidoo Bimadziwin/Spirit to Soar* screens at the 2022 Mother Tongue Film Festival. Still courtesy of Makwa Creative

Mother Tongue Film Festival

Celebrating the United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), this year’s Mother Tongue Film Festival opened February 17 and closed March 4. Faced with the complexities of the ongoing pandemic, the festival remained virtual, presenting thirty-two films over sixteen days on our own dedicated streaming platform—enabling us to provide a seamless experience for our online audiences.

This year’s festival theme was inspired by the mother language of ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i: “I Ka Wā Ma Mua, I Ka Wā Ma Hope,” which translates as “Through the Past Is the Future.” The festival showcased the importance of traditions and offered viewers an opportunity to immerse themselves in multiple ways of being—in forty-two different languages from seventeen regions. Across the sixteen-day festival, we reached 1,754 film viewers and 1,645 event attendees from thirty-one countries. With a year of digital festival experience, we were able to continue to foster online spaces that uplift the importance of language.

“My film was originally intended for the Asian American diaspora, but throughout the screening, I’ve received many positive responses from people outside that community. It has made me realize the power of language can help us transcend individual culture or region and can help us realize our one humanity.”

—Eris Qian, *Mother Tongue Film Festival* participant

Cultural Vitality in *Folklife Magazine*

Across fifteen articles published throughout the past year, *Folklife Magazine* documented the activities of the Cultural Vitality Program, allowing us to share our work with a large audience—within the Smithsonian and beyond—and reaching thousands of readers.

November 1	<i>Center Assists the Institute for Collaborative Language Research with Development of New Website</i>
November 2	<i>Center Announces Curatorial Internship Opportunity</i>
November 9	<i>Center Releases Updated Video Production Handbook</i>
November 29	<i>Center Launches Archival Mentorship Program</i>
December 3	<i>Call for Craft Artists for Workshop with Kazakhstan</i>
February 3	<i>A Second Youth Workshop Opens to Develop Documentaries in the Sakha Language</i>
February 7	<i>Language Builds Legacies</i>
February 8	<i>Center Partners with Nankai University to Launch Web Resource</i>
March 2	<i>New Digital Lecture Series Offers Tools for Tibetan Cultural Heritage Professionals</i>
March 3	<i>Legacy through the Filmmaker's Lens</i>
March 18	<i>Connecting to the Past and Present through Film</i>
May 11	<i>Center Partners with USAID on Developing Sustainable Tourism in Tunisia</i>
July 21	<i>New Downloadable Guide Supports Community Language Practitioners</i>
July 28	<i>Language Vitality Initiative Seeks Irish Speakers for Family Video Project</i>
August 10	<i>Center Co-Hosts Intangible Cultural Heritage Symposium in Tunisia</i>



A guide teaches the traditional process of making couscous at the Musée Dar Khadja in Matmata, a small museum of Amazigh cultural heritage located in a cave house.
Photo by Raafet Khiali



Blueberry Festival visitors participate in the trekking tour around Margahovit village.
Photo by Hrant Sahakyan, My Armenia Program

Where We're Headed

Over the next three years, the Cultural Vitality Program will build on our foundational results, evaluating continuing impacts, and sharing models and tools with new community partners. As our long-term Cultural Industries work continues in Tunisia, Kazakhstan, and Bhutan, we will replicate and adapt our approach with local partners on newly awarded projects in Mexico, Moldova, Central Asia, and Georgia. Our Language Vitality Initiative's deep work in China will continue as we establish new relationships and projects with communities in North America and the Arctic, always aiming to connect, bolster, and promote existing language-vitality efforts.

At the Center, we will work with our Smithsonian Folklife Festival and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings colleagues, fully integrating Cultural Vitality-supported communities into Festival programming and creating new opportunities for musician exchange and recordings. Through new storytelling projects, we will share more first-person narratives from communities and culture bearers on *Folklife* magazine and www.smithsonianmag.com. Finally and critically, we will expand access to the Rinzler Archives by centering the needs of communities whose cultures we have documented and ensuring the digital return of materials. In particular, we will prioritize consultation with our partners in Indigenous communities to establish resource guides, an Ethical Stewardship Roadmap, and an Indigenous Fellowship and Internship Program.

Ferring's generous support for the Cultural Vitality Program primarily covers the salaries and benefits of our team, with a funding pool for travel and start-up of new activities. We leverage this by writing proposals with our community partners and fundraising to find long-term supporters to sustain our efforts. As we embark on this new chapter of Cultural Vitality, we've already matched Ferring's \$1.5 million contribution with \$1.5 million in grants for programming. This is just the beginning. Contact me to learn how you can amplify our efforts to support cultural vitality around the world.

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