

CULTURAL VITALITY PROGRAM

Annual Report | 2022-2023

SMITHSONIAN
CENTER FOR
FOLKLIFE
& CULTURAL
HERITAGE



Welcome

People thrive through strong connections to community, place, and cultural heritage, and yet the number of forcibly displaced individuals has increased consistently over the last decade. In 2022 alone, over 108 million people fled their homes due to global challenges like climate change, violent conflict, and economic instability.

The Cultural Vitality Program at the Smithsonian’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage supports cultures that face these and other hardships, bolstering community efforts to maintain their languages and cultural practices in the face of immense change.

In Tunisia, where economic hardship is a major threat, we explore how cultural heritage tourism can enhance livelihoods, strengthen community, and maintain connection to place. Across Central Asia, Mexico, and the United States, we foster artisan enterprise, recognizing the significance of local and regional markets in ensuring economic resilience. In the United States and Europe, we develop language revitalization efforts, strengthening networks and sharing best practices. We also address these themes in public programming, connecting diaspora and source communities through *Soul of Tengri* at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and exploring the theme of *Coming Home* at the Mother Tongue Film Festival.

The Cultural Vitality Program thrives thanks to the generous foundational support of Ferring Pharmaceuticals. Each year, we leverage Ferring’s investment, building relationships with a diverse pool of donors and partners. Contact us to learn how you can contribute to amplifying our efforts to support cultural vitality in the United States and around the world.



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Leila Aitmukhanova displays traditional Kazakh jewelry at the Union of Artisans fashion show as part of the *Soul of Tengri* program.
Photo by Sonya Pencheva

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Cover: A banga musician group performs at the International Oasis Festival in Tozeur, Tunisia, during the team’s visit for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival Incubator. *Photo by Raafet Khiari, courtesy of USAID Visit Tunisia*

Projects by Region



Cultural Industries

Culture flourishes when shared. The Cultural Industries Initiative creates opportunities for communities to enhance the appreciation, economic impact, and vitality of their cherished cultural practices.

Artisan Initiative | We aim to reposition artisans as leaders of the creative economy and sustain craft traditions through research and documentation, product and design development, enterprise training, and a suite of tools artisans can use to unlock access to markets.

Folklife Festival Incubator | We support and engage the field in sharing festival practice through workshops, mentorship, and exchange experiences.

Cultural Heritage Tourism Initiative | We draw on research and presentation methods from the Smithsonian Folklife Festival to create engaging, inclusive, and sustainable community-based tourism experiences.

-  **10 projects across 10 countries**
-  **85 artists promoted through public programs and publications**
-  **280 culture bearers learned how to create tourism experiences**
-  **150 festival organizers participated in Smithsonian Folklife Festival Incubator**
-  **14 peer culture workers participated in exchanges**

Artisan Initiative

African American Craft Initiative

The African American Craft Initiative (AACI) network, now comprising over 500 craft artists and organizations, continues to expand. The monthly Makers Bulletin, distributed to this network, highlights craft artists and disseminates resources, news, and opportunities.

This year, we launched two new projects. First, in collaboration with the Folk School Alliance and John C. Campbell Folk School, we joined a participatory action research project to enhance the visibility and engagement of African American craft artists in folk schools. The second project, funded by the Craft Emergency Relief Fund (CERF+), leverages our expertise in storytelling, archiving, and documentation.

We hosted a training-of-trainers workshop series for four Smithsonian Affiliate museums, empowering them to implement workshops in their own communities and collaborate on projects with local African American craft artists.

The African American Craft Initiative is made possible with additional support from AmeriCorps and CERF+.

“AACI provides a bridge and tools that teach, encourage, and enable African American Artists to exchange ideas, work together, to grow and take advantage of opportunities we would not otherwise have been aware of. I am stronger for the connections I have made.”

- Elaine Robnett Moore, jewelry artist and participant in John C. Campbell Folk School research project
Photo by Diana N’Diaye



Artisan Initiative

Soul of Tengri: Kazakh Traditions and Rituals

Soul of Tengri brought ten Kazakh artisans to Washington, D.C., for a ten-day program, highlighted by the inaugural [Smithsonian Artisan Initiative pop-up](#) at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. During this event, participating artisans engaged in discussions about preserving and passing on their crafts across generations, both within their homeland and among the Kazakh diaspora in the United States. Through engaging demonstrations and hands-on workshops, visitors immersed themselves in craft practices, ranging from traditional embroidery, felting, and weaving to wood carving and musical instrument making.

The culmination of *Soul of Tengri* was marked by a reception and fashion show at the National Museum of Asian Art. This showcase featured traditional and contemporary fashion designed and crafted by the visiting artisans. Almost entirely modeled by local diaspora volunteers, the fashion show demonstrated a blend of heritage and modernity. The success of the event underscored the enduring legacy and evolving creativity inherent in Kazakh craft traditions and emphasized the impact of connecting diaspora and source communities through a shared cultural heritage.

Soul of Tengri was made possible through support from Chevron and implemented in partnership with the Union of Artisans Kazakhstan.



Participants engage in and learn about traditional felting at the Folklife Festival program, *Soul of Tengri*.
Photo by Sonya Pencheva



An artisan walks down the aisle during the *Soul of Tengri* fashion show, during which Central Asian artisans displayed their fashion ensembles and pieces.
Photo by Sonya Pencheva



Artisan Initiative

Heritage & Handicrafts: Oaxaca

Heritage & Handicrafts: Oaxaca is [a community-based project](#) in collaboration with the Facultad de Bellas Artes–Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca. Our joint efforts focus on developing activities to support the craft community in Zaachila by improving local market access and global awareness. The project encompasses research, documentation, and a workshop series addressing artisan enterprise and storytelling. Crucially, it explores the interplay between tangible and intangible cultural heritage, evaluating how increased economic activity and educational initiatives can help mitigate illicit trafficking of cultural artifacts.

Heritage & Handicrafts: Oaxaca is made possible with supported from the U.S. State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Cultural Heritage Center.

Royal Textile Academy of Bhutan: Research & Exchange

For several years, we have collaborated with the Royal Textile Academy of Bhutan (RTA) on comprehensive research studies to understand the context of traditional weaving in the country. In late 2022, we published [two reports: Youth Attitudinal Survey on Weaving, Designing, and Textile Culture in Bhutan](#) and [Bhutan National Textiles Purchase and Consumption](#). These reports provide unprecedented insights into the understanding, appreciation, and demand for Bhutan’s hand-loomed textiles, providing valuable guidance for nurturing and sustaining the sector. In conjunction with these reports, we supported the publication of the bilingual booklet Theory of Colour, offering a Bhutanese perspective to color theory principles to enhance the design skills of local weavers.

In July 2023, we organized a research and exchange visit for colleagues from the RTA, including visits to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, museums, and the International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Each visit focused on partnership development and research on merchandising and sales strategies for handmade artisan products.

An artisan teaches feather headdress making at Buidoo Xtera Duu during the team’s visit to Oaxaca.
Photo by Sabrina Motley

Artisan Initiative

Documentation and Training for Women Artisans of Central Asia

Over the past year, our team collaborated with local partners to document the craft practices of fifty women-run artisan enterprises across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The result is the [Women Artisans of Central Asia: A Lookbook Journey](#), a bilingual print and digital resource available in English and [Russian](#) that showcases the knowledge and skills of women artisans, fostering a deeper awareness and appreciation of their crafts for both local and global audiences. In addition, we conducted virtual and in-person training, focusing on developing tailored marketing strategies for artisan enterprises. These sessions emphasized utilizing the lookbook and self-documentation as effective tools for promoting their craft practices and enterprises.

Women Artisans of Central Asia: A Lookbook Journey was made possible through support from the USAID Trade Central Asia Activity and the Commercial Law Development Project at the U.S. Department of Commerce.

National Museum of Asian Art: Artisan in Residence Program



This year, in pursuit of expanded opportunities for artisan-focused public programming, we collaborated the National Museum of Asian Art to launch an [Artisan in Residence Program](#). This monthly initiative facilitates artisans from our projects to travel to Washington, D.C., for a week of tailored programming and exchange. Participants share their stories and practices through hands-on workshops, demonstrations, artist talks, and presentations. During their residency, we arrange activities such as studio visits and meetings with local peer artisans to enrich their experience.

The Artisan in Residence Program is made possible by support from the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art.

Burul Zhakypova, an artisan featured in the *Women Artisans of Central Asia: A Lookbook Journey*, creates shyrdaks, felted two-layer carpets. Photo by Salkyn Adysheva



Left Image: Master artisan Han Soo from South Korea working with his mother, Gook Hee, creating a traditional gat during the May Artisan in Residence Program. Photo by Sloane Keller

Smithsonian Folklife Festival Incubator

Festivals, gatherings, and cultural events are important for community well-being. When festival organization is inclusive, it can strengthen community relationships and foster a sense of belonging. Festivals contribute to the economic health of communities. Their ephemeral nature brings together groups of people to spend time in a particular place, boosting spending at local businesses. Festivals are also essential to the health and continuity of folk and traditional arts, serving an important role in the transmission of knowledge within a community. They provide a platform for performance, a marketplace for traditional craft and foods, and a

space for convening and learning. Despite their important contributions to community well-being and resilience, festivals are invariably organized by community-based groups and organizations with severely limited resources and staffing capacity. Across the globe, festivals are fueled by volunteerism and care.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival Incubator supports and engages the field in sharing experiences from more than fifty years of festival practice. Activities include training workshops, exchange visits to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and site visits to our partner festivals in their communities.

Musicians perform at the International Oasis Festival in Tozeur, Tunisia, during the team's visit. Photo by Raafet Khiari



North Carolina

In July 2023, we [initiated a partnership](#) with UPLIFT North Carolina to bolster rural community-driven tourism efforts. In August, we conducted workshops for 145 local festival organizers. These one-day workshops incorporated participatory research methods and drew inspiration from the modes of presentation used at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, emphasizing the significance of community engagement. Participants were provided a digital toolkit containing templates, examples, and other resources to aid in festival design and management. Follow up virtual Q&A sessions featured additional staff from both Smithsonian and beyond, offering further insights and tips on fundraising, community engagement, and festival and event design.

Our work in North Carolina is made possible with support from UPLIFT NC.

Tunisia

Since 2022, we have collaborated with USAID Visit Tunisia to deliver activities in support of cultural heritage tourism development, including trainings for festival organizers and an exchange visit for six festival organizers to the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. After visits to the Festival, our Tunisian partner festivals laid out plans for improving their festival experience. Over the past year, we created tailored virtual exchanges, bringing in Smithsonian colleagues to talk about site design, fundraising, marketing and more. Our team then traveled to Tunisia to conduct site visits and draft assessment reports with short-, medium- and long-term goals for organization, cultural heritage representation, and event design.

Read about the team's visits to Tunisia through the Folklife Magazine articles, [Sufi Dance: Mouled, Music, and Cultural Memory in a Tunisian Festival \(Arabic\)](#) and [By Quad, Carriage, or Car: Journeying to the International Oasis Festival in Tozeur, Tunisia \(Arabic\)](#).

Our work in Tunisia is made possible with support from USAID and the U.S. Department of State.

Cultural Heritage Tourism Initiative

We employ [Smithsonian Folklife Festival](#) research and presentation methods in our cultural heritage tourism product development. Collaborating with communities, we assist hosts in creating engaging, inclusive, and sustainable tourism experiences that showcase their heritage in immersive formats—covering gastronomy, craft, agriculture, music, and dance. This process enhances existing enterprises and introduces new ones to the tourism value chain fostering deeper community connections to heritage and place. Engaging with local researchers strengthens participants’ understanding and commitment to sustaining cultural heritage, a vital source of community well-being and resilience.

Tunisia’s Living Culture

Tunisia’s Living Culture, an initiative developed in partnership with USAID Visit Tunisia, focuses on tourism experience development. Despite Tunisia’s diverse cultural heritage and numerous heritage sites, its living culture remains largely untapped in the current tourism offerings. In January 2023, our “Creating Tourism Experiences” workshops attracted nearly 300 tradition bearers, researchers, and community scholars. They developed concepts for tourism experiences centered on gastronomy, craft, music, dance, and storytelling.

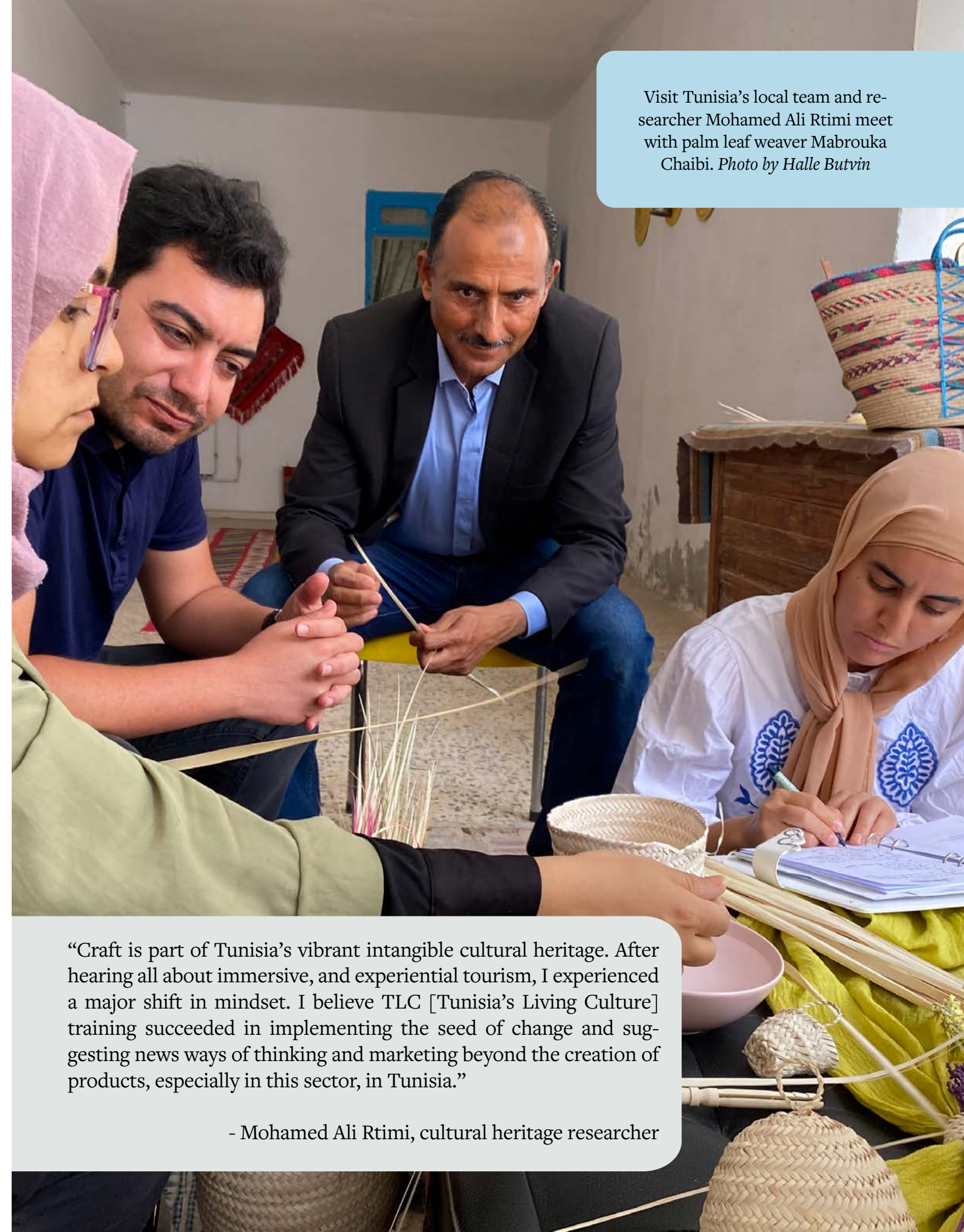
A scientific committee of Tunisian scholars led a selection process, choosing thirty experiences for one-on-one mentorship and support as a pilot cohort. Working alongside local researchers and the USAID Visit Tunisia team, we conducted site visits to ensure hosts have the tools and skills necessary to successfully present their heritage to visitors.

Our work in Tunisia is made possible with support from USAID.

Mukhrani Village Experience

Over the last year, our team has worked together with the Foundation for the Regional Economic Development of Mukhrani to design a village-based cultural heritage tourism project. Recent and planned investments in cultural restoration projects at Chateau Mukhrani, the citadel in the village, and nearby Dzalisa archaeological site serve as critical cultural heritage anchors in the region. The Mukhrani Village Project will apply our research-based approach to tourism experience development to benefit the surrounding community. The project will kick-off in late 2023, with a team of Georgian researchers and local students conducting oral history interviews in the community.

Our work in Georgia is implemented in partnership with the Foundation for the Regional Economic Development of Mukhrani.



Visit Tunisia’s local team and researcher Mohamed Ali Rtimi meet with palm leaf weaver Mabrouka Chaibi. Photo by Halle Butvin


“Craft is part of Tunisia’s vibrant intangible cultural heritage. After hearing all about immersive, and experiential tourism, I experienced a major shift in mindset. I believe TLC [Tunisia’s Living Culture] training succeeded in implementing the seed of change and suggesting new ways of thinking and marketing beyond the creation of products, especially in this sector, in Tunisia.”


- Mohamed Ali Rtimi, cultural heritage researcher


Language Vitality Initiative


The Language Vitality Initiative supports Indigenous and minority language communities to strengthen their languages through research, education, and program development. We recognize that reclamation is a long-term and often painful process that encompasses community strengthening and wellness rooted in traditional ways of knowing and learning. We are dedicated to collaborating with language communities in ways that respect their ethical principles and cultural norms and that support their language and cultural goals.

- Train** | We conduct training sessions on skill transfer for language vitality
- Innovate** | We encourage innovative approaches to language adaptation in a changing world
- Network** | We foster networking among individuals and organizations to facilitate knowledge sharing
- Advocate** | We advocate for collaborative efforts to create an environment conducive to additive bilingualism in the United States

**7 Indigenous and minority language interns guided through the Language and Archives Mentorship Program**

**17 classes, lectures, and workshops produced**

**626 workshop and training participants supported**

**81 languages engaged**

Sustaining Minoritized Languages in Europe Case Studies

In 2015, we initiated an interdisciplinary and international research program, “Sustaining Minoritized Languages in Europe” (SMiLE). Examining minoritized language communities and their revitalization initiatives, the SMiLE project produced [community language case studies](#), released in December 2022. These seven case studies focus on how language revitalization programs sustain and build on their achievements over time. Investigating programs at different life cycle stages, the studies explore responses to internal and external factors, including social cultural, economic, and political influences. They also delve into the connections between language revitalization, cultural heritage, and traditional cultural transmission.



Dancing at the Fering Inj (or “Frisian Evening,” loosely translated) of the Föhr Association in February 2018.
Photo courtesy of Nils Langer

Language Reclamation Landscapes

The Administration for Native Americans (ANA) promotes self-sufficiency through grant funding for community projects, and training for eligible tribes and organizations. This year, we collaborated with ANA on [Language Reclamation Landscapes](#), a virtual workshop series covering key topics in language revitalization. Each workshop, led by expert practitioners, delved into topics like language acquisition and community surveys. Participants engaged in presentations and direct Q&A sessions, addressing project-specific inquiries.

Learning objectives for the series included building concrete skills (organizing language materials, conducting surveys), teaching and leadership, understanding language acquisition, and community advocacy. The series not only facilitated professional development but also fostered connections among language reclamation efforts nationwide.

Language and Archives Mentorship Program

In its second year, the [Language and Archives Mentorship Program](#) (LAMP) offers 3–4-month internships to assist language professionals in leveraging Smithsonian resources for community-based work. This year, we hosted six interns, addressing their work challenges and facilitating connections to solutions. This program seeks to aid communities while enhancing the Smithsonian’s understanding of the needs and expectations of the language reclamation community. The insights gathered inform advocacy efforts within the Smithsonian to improve search interfaces, clarify archival processes, and design more effective programs.

To further support our partners in their work, we secured a grant for documentation kits. Each kit includes durable, lightweight recording accessories like tripods, lighting, and adapters. Tailored for various scenarios, these kits facilitate in-home audio and visual digitization, step-by-step documentation of tangible heritage practice, multi-person long conversations, and formal documentation of significant social gatherings.

“I know only a few Chumash words, so [...] working with a mentor and accessing dictionaries and new language tools is a life-changing opportunity. My Grandmother, Linda Aguilar, is a [...] basket weaver who [...] is known for her horsehair baskets. [...] We frequently talk about the health of the land and the materials needed for weaving. [...] I hope to find more language on gathering and fire-keeping practices related to weaving.”

– 2023 LAMP Intern Maija



LAMP intern Maija Peterson and her sister visit their grandmother’s basket, an open-stitched coiled horsehair thread basket created by Chumash artist Linda Aguila in 1994 and held within the Smithsonian American Art Museum.
Photo by Maija Peterson

Himalayan Languages of Sichuan Online Workshop

This annual, free workshop serves college-age speakers of minoritized languages in Sichuan, a province in Southwestern China that is home to 31 languages, many of which have become threatened as speaker communities shift towards dominant languages like Standard Tibetan or Standard Chinese. This year’s workshop included lectures from a diverse group of regionally active linguists and scholars on topics like language endangerment, documentation, and conservation; balancing positionalities as a speaker and a researcher; ethnographic methods for life-history interviews; and grant writing for language-focused projects. Participants were invited to submit pilot project proposals on topics relevant to the documentation and preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity in Sichuan.



HLOS participant Bkra. shis Dar.Rgyas, a native speaker of Choyul, replays for his paternal grandmother, Skal.bzang Dbang. mo, a recording they made together and records her explanations in Lha Bzhes Township, Sa Mdo Village, Sichuan Province. *Photo by Tshering G.yang ‘dzom*

Language Vitality Incubator: Tús Maith Video Project

In close collaboration with Tús Maith, an initiative of Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne, we contributed to the development of the “Irish at Home” video series. This series supports families raising children in Irish and those aiming to incorporate more Irish in their daily lives. The dialogue videos complement Tús Maith’s Cuairteóirí Baile program, where language assistants visit families weekly to enhance home language use. Beyond in-person support, the videos provide an accessible resource for parents residing outside the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht.

A Stream of Voices

A [Stream of Voices](#) is a partnership with Endangered Languages Project to publish Folklife Magazine articles celebrating, exploring, and sharing methods and approaches used by communities to keep their languages vital and strong in the face of endangerment.



From the series’ first article, Mireille Mbango Sondo, a participant in the Iyasa Éboó project, presents Daniel Epengo a certificate at a closing ceremony. *Photo by Arnauld Djowe*

Mother Tongue Film Festival

The Smithsonian's Mother Tongue Film Festival is an annual free event celebrating cultural and linguistic diversity. It showcases films and filmmakers worldwide, emphasizing the vital role languages play in our lives. Through digital storytelling, the festival amplifies the work of diverse practitioners exploring the power of language to connect the past, present, and future.

This year's festival theme, "[Coming Home](#)," explored the warmth of home and the challenges of returning after an extended absence. The question of what home is and how we remain there guided the selections and reflection, with ten screenings at Smithsonian museums.

The Uptown Singerz opened the festival at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's Ring Auditorium, where two documentaries highlighted women confronting their pasts. In a new partnership with Planet Word, we showcased short films made by students at the Sakha Media School students and chilling films from the arctic regions of Canada, Siberia, and the Sakha Republic. The festival also welcomed Māori canoe carvers, screening films celebrating Oceania's enduring traditions.



A special program, Youth and Language Revitalization: Sakha Media School in Russia, showcased ongoing Sakha revitalization efforts and screened three youth-directed shorts and a Q&A. These short films were produced with the support of our Language Vitality Initiative, which funded online and in-person workshops for Sakha youth to develop digital documentation skills.

This year's programming aligned with InDigital IV: The Americas, Indigenous Peoples' Engagement with Digital and Electronic Media, a conference encouraging learning about indigenous media.

The Mother Tongue Film Festival is a collaboration between the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, and the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. Photo by Arnauld Djowe

Ho'omau shows a conflict that ensues after a mass migration of Pacific Islanders, in search of salvation, arrives in a new place and leads to a war between the inhabitants and the new arrivals.


Left Image: *Who We Are* remembers how a home can change in the context of climate change with the knowledge that some sacred places will be erased as oceans rise.

An embroidery piece by Botakoz Zeynelkhan, an artisan featured in the *Women Artisans of Central Asia: A Lookbook Journey*. Photo by Alexey Malchenko

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