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Beyond Heritage Month

Why Cultural Heritage and Cultural Competency Matter More Than Ever.

By Nina Hashim Corder, Ed.D.
2026

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Beyond Heritage Month: Why Cultural Heritage and Cultural Competency Matter More Than Ever.

By Nina Hashim-Corder, Ed.D., The Human Leader™, 2026

Culture is often discussed through the things we can easily see, for example food, clothing, language, celebrations, music, religious traditions, and holidays. These expressions matter. They connect us to family, history, geography, and generations that came before us. But culture is much more than what is visible.

Culture shapes how people communicate, build relationships, understand authority, navigate conflict, care for family, approach education, participate in institutions, and define belonging. It influences how we interpret the world and how the world interprets us. That is why preserving cultural heritage should not be treated simply as an act of nostalgia. It is an investment in human understanding.

And in an increasingly interconnected and culturally complex society, cultural competency cannot be relegated to a heritage-month celebration or an occasional diversity workshop. It is becoming a core competency for leadership, education, healthcare, workforce development, public service, and community building.

My own experience illustrates why.

Growing Up at the Intersection of Cultures
I was born in Malacca, Malaysia, one of Southeast Asia's historic trading centers along the Strait of Malacca. I grew up within a family whose heritage reflects some of the cultural intersections that have shaped Malaysia itself.

My father came from the east coast of Malaysia and carried Malay and Siamese ancestry. My mother's family includes Malay and Portuguese heritage. My education introduced another layer to my cultural identity. Malaysia is a Commonwealth country, meaning it is part of the Commonwealth of Nations, an association that includes many countries with historical ties to the former British Empire. Malaysia gained independence from British colonial rule in 1957, but elements of British influence remained embedded in institutions such as education, law, government, and language.

As a result, my early education was shaped significantly by the British educational system. I attended British schools during my early years, followed by an all-girls Methodist school through elementary and middle school. Like many children growing up in an Asian household, education extended well beyond the classroom. My extracurricular activities included music lessons, swimming, and dance, with traditional Malay dance becoming an especially meaningful part of my childhood.

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From an early age, I developed a deep appreciation for traditional Malay dance not simply as a form of performance, but as an expression of culture, history, and identity. That passion eventually gave me opportunities to perform publicly through Malaysia's tourism-related cultural programs and to travel throughout Southeast Asia as part of cultural performances. Looking back, these experiences were some of my earliest forms of cultural exchange. Long before I understood concepts such as **cultural diplomacy** or **cultural competency**, I was learning how heritage could be communicated across languages and borders through movement, music, clothing, and storytelling.

My secondary and early college education added another dimension to that experience. I attended a private school affiliated with MARA (Majlis Amanah Rakyat), a Malaysian institution established to expand educational and economic opportunities for Bumiputera communities. MARA played an important role in creating pathways for Malaysian students to pursue advanced education, including opportunities connected to international study. Through that educational environment, I was increasingly exposed to the idea that education could serve as a bridge not only to professional mobility, but also to the wider world.

My cultural education also extended beyond Malaysia. During my young adult years, I spent many of my summers in the United Kingdom while my older sister pursued her higher education at Coventry University in England. Living there, even for extended periods rather than permanently, gave me another perspective on British society beyond the educational system I had experienced in Malaysia. I was able to observe everyday life, interact with students from different parts of the world, and participate informally in university and international student activities.

One experience remains particularly meaningful. Through Coventry University's international student community, I had an opportunity to teach and share traditional Malaysian dance for an International Students Association cultural night. In Malaysia, traditional dance had connected me to my own heritage; in the United Kingdom, it became a way of introducing that heritage to others. The same tradition took on a different purpose: it became a bridge between cultures.

In retrospect, these experiences formed an early foundation for much of the work I would eventually pursue professionally. I did not yet have the language for cross-cultural engagement, cultural competency, global citizenship, or cultural diplomacy. I simply understood the value of **being curious** about other people while remaining connected to my own roots. Moving between Malaysian and British educational and cultural environments, and later into an American higher-education system taught me that cultural identity does not have to become smaller when we encounter other cultures. It can become deeper, more nuanced, and more capable of connecting us to others.

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I later continued my studies through an American higher-education pathway, creating another cultural and educational transition that eventually brought me to the United States as an international student. By then, moving between cultures had become a familiar part of my life. I was Malaysian in identity, influenced by British educational traditions, exposed to international communities from a young age, and eventually immersed in an American higher-education environment.

But my understanding of culture did not come only from schools, travel, or formal cultural experiences. Some of my most enduring lessons about culture happened much closer to home, **in ordinary family life**.

Culture was present in the languages and expressions around me, in expectations about education and family, in religion and traditions, in the way we welcomed people into our homes, and especially in the food we prepared and shared. Looking back, I can see that culture was never singular in my life. It was layered, lived, and constantly intersecting.

Culture Around the Table

One of the most powerful places where I experienced those intersections was around the table. I love food, but my relationship with food is much more than eating. Growing up in Malaysia, food was one of the ways I learned about people.

Food was hospitality. It was storytelling. It was memory. It was family. It was how we welcomed guests, celebrated occasions, gathered across generations, and maintained connections to where we came from.

That experience was especially significant growing up in Malaysia because Malaysian food itself tells a story of cultural intersection. At a single table, I could experience the influences of my own Malay, Siamese, and Portuguese heritage alongside the Chinese and Indian traditions that are deeply woven into Malaysian society. Different spices, preparation methods, languages, customs, and histories could coexist without any one of them needing to erase the others.

What traditional dance has taught me through performance, food taught me through everyday human connection: **culture becomes meaningful when it is shared.**

Long before I had the language for cultural competency, intersectionality, or community building, I was experiencing those ideas in practice. I was learning that understanding another culture does not always begin in a classroom. Sometimes it begins by accepting an invitation, sitting at someone's table, tasting something unfamiliar, listening to the story behind it, and becoming curious about the person who prepared it.

Perhaps that is why food continues to be important to me today. A shared meal can create a remarkably democratic space. People with different histories, educations, religions, nationalities, and lived experiences can sit at the same table.

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They do not have to surrender those differences in order to connect. The differences do not have to disappear for belonging to occur. And that may have been one of my earliest lessons in cultural competency.

Immigration Changes the Meaning of Culture
My relationship with cultural heritage changed when I became an immigrant.
I came to the United States through an international education pathway and eventually built my life here. As I moved from international student to permanent resident and ultimately naturalized U.S. citizen, I learned to navigate systems that were unfamiliar to me: employment, healthcare, education, immigration, government, and community institutions.

At the same time, I became a mother at 23.

Suddenly, culture was no longer only something I had inherited. It became something I had to decide how to transmit.

Which traditions would continue?
Which values would cross generations?
What would change?
What would my daughter understand about where her mother came from while growing into her own American and multicultural identity?

These are not questions unique to my family. They are questions being negotiated every day in immigrant and multicultural households across the United States. And the demographic landscape makes these questions increasingly relevant to the institutions serving those families.

America Is Becoming More Culturally Complex
The scale and diversity of Asian America alone illustrate why cultural understanding matters. The 2020 Census counted approximately 19.9 million people identifying as Asian alone, an increase of 35.5% from 2010. When people identifying as Asian in combination with another race are included, the population reached approximately 24 million people, or 7.2% of the U.S. population. But even those numbers can obscure tremendous diversity. The Census Bureau reports dozens of detailed Asian population groups, with significant communities identifying as Chinese, Asian Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, and many others. Some communities experienced extraordinary growth between 2010 and 2020; for example, the Nepalese population was among the fastest-growing detailed Asian groups during that decade.

The broader lesson is important: **“Asian American” is an umbrella, not a single cultural experience.**

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A Malaysian American experience is not interchangeable with a Japanese American, Indian American, Filipino American, Vietnamese American, Korean American, Chinese American, Hmong American, or Nepalese American experience. Even within each of those communities are differences in language, religion, migration history, generation, socioeconomic status, geography, and family structure. This complexity challenges organizations to move beyond demographic representation toward cultural understanding.

From Cultural Awareness to Cultural Competency
There is an important distinction between **cultural awareness** and **cultural competency**. Awareness begins with recognizing differences. Competency requires learning how to work effectively and respectfully across those differences. That distinction matters.

A cultural celebration may introduce someone to Malaysian food. Cultural competency asks whether a healthcare provider understands how cultural beliefs might influence a Malaysian immigrant's interaction with the healthcare system.

A heritage event may teach employees about another country's traditions. Cultural competency asks whether managers recognize that assumptions about hierarchy, communication, disagreement, or self-advocacy may differ across cultures.

A school may celebrate the diversity of its students. Cultural competency asks whether families with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds can actually understand, access, and participate in the institution.

In other words, **representation asks who is in the room. Cultural competency asks whether the room knows how to engage the people who are there.**

Why Cultural Competency Is an Organizational Capability
This is where cultural competency moves from a social concept into an operational one. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) describes cultural and linguistic competence in healthcare as the ability to understand, respect, and respond effectively to people's cultural backgrounds, economic circumstances, beliefs, languages, and values. HHS connects these capabilities to stronger trust and relationships, better understanding and safety, and fewer errors caused by miscommunication.

The federal National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) go further. Their 15 standards address organizational leadership, workforce development, language assistance, community engagement, accountability, and continuous improvement. Importantly, **one standard specifically calls for organizations to regularly educate and train governance, leadership, and workforce members in culturally and linguistically appropriate practices**. Although CLAS was developed for health and healthcare organizations, the underlying principle has much wider relevance.

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Organizations cannot serve communities effectively if they do not understand the communities they serve. This applies to schools, universities, employers, nonprofits, businesses, government agencies, economic-development organizations, workforce systems, and civic institutions. Cultural competency is therefore not simply about avoiding offense. It is about **organizational effectiveness**.

Why workshops still matter, especially if we design them differently
This also makes a case for cultural competency workshops and learning programs but not as isolated compliance exercises. A single presentation cannot make an organization culturally competent. A well-designed program can, however, create vocabulary, curiosity, self-awareness, and practical tools that begin changing behavior.

Effective cultural competency learning should move through a progression:

Awareness → Understanding → Interaction → Practice → Institutional Change

Participants first recognize their own cultural frameworks and assumptions. They then learn about other perspectives not through stereotypes, but through history, lived experience, demographic context, and dialogue. Learning must eventually move into practice:

How do we communicate across cultural differences?
How do we respond when values conflict?
How do we design programs for communities whose experiences differ from our own?
Whose voices are absent when decisions are made?
What barriers have we unintentionally embedded into our policies, services, hiring processes, communications, or leadership practices?

And perhaps the most important question: **Are we asking communities what they need, or assuming that we already know?**

That final shift transforms cultural competency from a workshop into an organizational discipline.

Cultural Heritage Is Also Knowledge Infrastructure
There is another reason preservation matters. When cultural heritage disappears, communities do not lose only traditions. They can also lose forms of knowledge.

Stories disappear.
Languages disappear.
Recipes disappear.
Migration histories disappear.
Community practices disappear.
Ways of caring for one another disappear.

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And eventually, younger generations may inherit a name or ethnicity without understanding the experiences that produced it.

Preservation therefore requires more than annual celebrations. Families and institutions can document oral histories, archive photographs, preserve recipes and languages, record migration stories, support cultural organizations, mentor younger generations, and create spaces where elders and young people exchange knowledge.

Technology creates enormous possibilities for this work. Digital archives, podcasts, oral-history projects, community mapping, storytelling platforms, and AI-supported preservation tools can help communities capture knowledge that historically existed primarily through person-to-person transmission.

But preservation should not freeze culture in the past. **Culture evolves**. The goal is not to require the next generation to reproduce our identities exactly. It is to give them enough history and context to understand where they came from and enough freedom to determine what that heritage means in their own lives.

Belonging Does Not Require Sameness
After years of working across communities and countries, one lesson continues to surface for me: **people do not need to become the same in order to belong together**.

My professional work eventually expanded from my own immigrant experience into community building, women's economic empowerment, leadership development, human rights, workforce initiatives, public policy, and international engagement. Across those environments, I repeatedly encountered people separated by geography, language, religion, nationality, socioeconomic status, and political systems. Yet, underneath those differences were remarkably familiar human aspirations.

Dignity.
Opportunity.
Contribution.
Connection.
Belonging.

My experience building Women of Toledo reinforced this at the local level. What began in 2013 as what I considered a grassroots experiment in connection became an ecosystem supporting women and girls through leadership, workforce development, entrepreneurship, mentorship, and economic empowerment. The original insight behind that work was simple: **barriers are often created not because people lack talent or ambition, but because systems, resources, relationships, and opportunities are disconnected**. Cultural competency helps us reconnect with them.

From Heritage to Human Leadership
For me, preserving cultural heritage ultimately comes down to responsibility. I inherited stories, traditions, educational opportunities, sacrifices, and pathways created by generations before me. My responsibility is not merely to remember them. It is to carry forward what remains valuable while helping create wider pathways for the people who come after me.

That includes my daughter, Isabella, whose own multicultural journey represents another generation negotiating heritage, education, identity, and belonging. It also includes young professionals, immigrants, emerging leaders, and communities whose voices have yet to be fully represented within the institutions shaping their lives.

This is why cultural competency matters now and why it will matter even more in the future. It should not be confined to AAPI Heritage Month, Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, Women's History Month, or any other designated moment of recognition.

Those observances give us an important opportunity to remember. But cultural competency asks us to do something more difficult: **to understand.** To listen before assuming, to recognize difference without turning it into distance, and to understand how history travels with people into our workplaces, classrooms, hospitals, neighborhoods, and institutions.

And then, to design systems capable of serving the human beings who inhabit them. Perhaps that is the deeper purpose of preserving cultural heritage. We preserve the past not simply so we can remember where we came from, but so that we become better equipped to understand one another and build what comes next.

Conclusion: The Courage to Belong
When I began writing this essay, I thought I was writing about cultural heritage and cultural competency. Somewhere along the way, I realized I was also writing about resilience.

My life has taken me across countries, cultures, identities, institutions, and different versions of myself. I have been a daughter growing up in Malaysia, a student navigating different educational systems, an international student arriving in America, an immigrant learning systems I did not fully understand, a young mother trying to build a life while still discovering who I was, and eventually a community builder and leader entrusted with helping create opportunities for others.

There were moments when those transitions felt exciting and full of possibility. There were also moments when they felt lonely.

Immigration, in particular, teaches you something complicated about belonging. You can love the place you came from and still build a life somewhere else. You can become deeply rooted in a new community while still missing the sounds, food, language, people, and familiarity of home. You can learn how to function successfully within another culture while privately carrying parts of yourself that other people may never completely see or understand.

For many years, I learned to adapt.

Adaptation is often celebrated as resilience, and sometimes it is. But **adaptation can also be exhausting**. There is a difference between learning how to navigate another culture and believing you must continuously reshape yourself in order to be accepted by it.

That distinction took me years to understand.

I have experienced seasons when I felt deeply connected and seasons when I had to find my footing again. I have experienced achievement alongside uncertainty, opportunity alongside sacrifice, and leadership alongside moments when I questioned what would come next. Some of the most important chapters of my life were not the ones in which everything went according to plan. They were the chapters that required me to **rebuild.**

And each time, I returned to something familiar: **people,** their humanity, and the connections that remind us we do not have to navigate life alone.

Someone opened the door.
Someone shared knowledge.
Someone invited me to a table.
Someone believed I belonged in a room before I was completely certain that I did.
Someone listened.
Someone simply stayed.

Those experiences changed the way I understand leadership. They taught me that sometimes what changes the trajectory of a person's life is not another program, policy, credential, or institution. Sometimes it is a human being who recognizes another human being and communicates, through words or actions: **I see you. You matter here.**

Perhaps this is why belonging has become so central to my work.

I know what it feels like to enter unfamiliar spaces. I know the vulnerability of asking questions when everyone else seems to understand the system. I know what it means to carry an accent, a history, traditions, expectations, and ways of seeing the world into environments that were not necessarily designed with those experiences in mind.

But I have also learned that difference can become a source of strength.

The cultures I have moved between did not leave me fragmented. Over time, they expanded me. Malaysia gave me my roots. My family gave me values, traditions, and a sense of responsibility to others. British education influenced how I learned. International experiences taught me curiosity. America challenged me to adapt, rebuild, and find my own voice. Motherhood transformed my understanding of responsibility and legacy. Community taught me that none of us becomes who we are entirely on our own.

And resilience taught me something else: belonging is not always a place we find. Sometimes it is a place we help create.

That realization changed the trajectory of my life.

When I could not always find the community I needed, I began building community. When I saw people disconnected from resources, relationships, and opportunities, I began asking how those connections could be created. When I encountered systems that did not fully understand the people moving through them, I became interested in how those systems could become more human.

In many ways, what became my professional work began as something deeply personal.

This is why cultural competency matters to me beyond theory, training, or organizational strategy. Behind every demographic category is a person carrying a story we cannot see. Behind every accent is history. Behind every tradition is a memory. Behind every immigrant journey are things that were carried, things that were left behind, and things that had to be rebuilt.

And behind every person trying to belong may be a question they never say aloud:

Is there room here for me as I am?

That is the question I want leaders and institutions to remember. Cultural competency is not about knowing everything about everyone. None of us ever will. It is about developing enough humility to recognize what we do not know, enough curiosity to ask, enough empathy to listen, and enough courage to change the systems within our influence when those systems unintentionally leave people outside.

My story began thousands of miles from where I live today. I could never have predicted all the places it would take me, the people I would meet, the challenges I would encounter, or the person I would become along the way.

But I remain deeply connected to the little girl who learned traditional Malay dance, to the young woman who crossed borders in pursuit of education, to the immigrant learning how to navigate America, to the mother raising a daughter between cultures, and to the woman who eventually understood that her experiences were not separate chapters at all.

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They were preparing me to understand people. And perhaps that is the most important lesson I can offer.

Our cultures may shape us differently. Our histories may begin in different places. Our languages, faiths, traditions, food, education, and experiences may distinguish us from one another. But underneath those differences lives something profoundly human: **the desire to be seen, respected, valued, connected, and given the opportunity to contribute.**

So, when we preserve cultural heritage, we are preserving more than history. When we practice cultural competency, we are doing more than learning about differences. And when we create belonging, we are doing more than making people feel welcome. **We are telling another human being: there is room for your story here.**

I have spent much of my life crossing cultures and learning how to belong within them. At this stage of my journey, I understand my responsibility differently.

It is no longer only about finding where I belong.

It is about using whatever influence, knowledge, access, and leadership I have to make the circle wider so someone else can belong, too. That, for me, is where cultural competency becomes humanity. And where humanity becomes leadership.

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This essay draws upon the author's lived experience as a Malaysian-born immigrant, community leader, educator, and practitioner working across cultural, organizational, civic, and international contexts. The personal narrative and professional reflections are informed by Corder's previous presentations and writings on cultural identity, belonging, human connection, leadership, and systems change, including *A Story of Belonging*, presented during AAPI Heritage Month at AWARE Ohio's Voices from Toledo's Asian American Community event in May 2026, and *Systems Change and the Power of Connection*, a keynote address delivered at the Helló Margit! All-Arts Festival in Budapest, Hungary, in May 2025.

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Suggested Citation for This Essay
Corder, Nina. (2026). Beyond Heritage Month: Why Cultural Heritage and Cultural Competency Matter More Than Ever. The Human Leader Library™.

About the Author

Nina Hashim-Corder is a Malaysian-born American organizational leader, systems thinker, community builder, and advocate whose work spans leadership development, women's economic empowerment, workforce development, human rights, inclusive entrepreneurship, and cross-cultural engagement.

Her work is grounded in a central belief that meaningful human connection is not peripheral to systems change. It is part of the infrastructure that makes sustainable change possible. Over more than a decade of community and organizational leadership, Corder has worked across public, private, nonprofit, educational, and international environments to strengthen access, belonging, leadership, and economic opportunity.

In 2013, she founded Women of Toledo, a grassroots initiative that evolved into a regional ecosystem serving thousands of women and girls through leadership development, mentorship, workforce initiatives, entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment. Her broader professional and global engagement has included work connected to the United Nations, international exchange and citizen diplomacy, higher education, human rights, community development, and cross-sector collaboration.

Drawing upon her experience as an immigrant, mother, practitioner, and leader working across cultures and systems, Corder explores the intersection of human leadership, connection, culture, belonging, and systems change. Her emerging body of thought leadership, The Human Leader Library™, translates lived experience, research, and practice into frameworks and tools designed to help leaders build more human-centered organizations and communities.

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