

Erin Braaksma
University of Montana (MSW student)
Summer 2017
Tenaganita, Malaysia

Question Set #1

1. First Impressions:

After spending a couple of days at my host organization, my first impression is that Tenaganita is full of passionate people who work incredibly hard because they care about what they do. Though they are small, they are also mighty, and are a force to be reckoned with, known throughout Malaysia for their tenacity. Because Tenaganita is a relatively small NGO, each person on the “team” (which feels like more of a family, really) brings a unique set of skills and something special to the work that Tenaganita does.

Although I have not officially begun working on any projects yet, I have begun to slowly dip my toes in. I had the opportunity to join the new batch of young lawyers in their Legal Aid Training Workshop, which provided me with an interesting legal framework to the approach that Tenaganita takes. This framework has helped me grasp a fuller picture of the multi-faceted and multidisciplinary approach that is taken by Tenaganita. I have been asked to join a project that I will take over from an intern who is leaving this week, and in doing so, I will be helping to create a manual about how to spot human trafficking, and how to intervene in those situations, which will be dispersed to various airlines throughout the region. I am also hoping to have the chance to work specifically on a few projects involving refugees, but at this point, I am willing and eager to work on projects where I am needed.

Because I have been in Malaysia and at Tenaganita for such a short amount of time, it is difficult to say exactly how the work I am doing matches my expectations and goals. One of my goals was to attend extra events/trainings if possible. I have already had that opportunity, with the Legal Aid Training Workshop and it surpassed what I had hoped for. Not only was it very comprehensive, it provided me with a basis for understanding the legal work that plays such a vital role in the representation of Tenaganita and their clients. I am eager to try and join as many other opportunities like that training as possible, to gain an even deeper understanding of the complexities of each case that Tenaganita takes and represents.

Another one of my goals is to gain an understanding of the power systems at play and how those systems impact Tenaganita’s work. Even a few days into my time at Tenaganita, I can see how incredibly complex the power systems at play are, and how those systems are made even more complex by the nature of dealing with not only Malaysia and its government, power systems, and politics, but also foreign governments and power systems as well. Because Tenaganita works with such a wide breadth of clientele, employees and team members at Tenaganita must be well-versed in domestic and international policy in order to best represent clients.

A third goal I had written down for my time here is to contribute to at least one important and meaningful project undertaken by Tenaganita. The manual will be one example, though I am confident that I will have the opportunity to be part of other projects as well.

2. What stood out to you the most regarding your arrival?

Coming from Montana, and then from East Java, I had become comfortably accustomed to seeing white people and then Javanese people. As I boarded the plane from Denpasar, Indonesia to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I was struck by the diversity of individuals simply boarding the plane. After arriving at KLIA Airport, which is more like a mall than any airport I’ve previously been to, the diversity of this metropolis still stood out to me. After arriving at my friend’s house, where I stayed for a few

evenings, we went to eat dinner. Again, I was struck by the diversity of food options made by a diverse group of people. In one area, I could have Indian, Chinese, and/or Malay cuisine. I don't know that I have yet become accustomed to the incredible diversity that I have seen in this country. Although I have lived in Seattle, the vibrancy of unity in diversity did not exist there the way that it does here.

That said, I was also struck by how efficient the train from the airport to KL Sentral is, and how user-friendly it was. Along with that, I am amazed at how many people rely on Grab and Uber to get around and how relatively inexpensive it is, especially using promos that seem to be going on almost all of the time. Public transportation is something that has always fascinated me, moving from Montana, where public transportation did not exist when I was living there, to Seattle, where the busses are useable, but could use a bit of a revamp, to Java, where I rode my bicycle for hours to reach a public bus that ran when it ran and didn't run when it didn't. Here in KL, there are light rails, commuter trains, busses, taxis, Grab cars, and Uber, yet a surprising number of people insist on driving because of the lack of accessibility and reliability of public transportation. I hope to continue to unearth how and why people travel in the ways that they do in KL throughout my time here.

3. Greatest Anxiety & Feelings Now

Prior to arriving, my greatest anxiety was easily my housing situation. Not having internet access for a month prior to my arrival was stressful in its own right, and when I did gain internet access, I received an email saying that the Tenaganita team was looking for housing, still one day before arrival. In contact with a staff member the day I was arriving, there was still no set plan of where I would be staying. I spoke briefly with a friend of my aunt from Idaho, who recently moved to KL, and she offered me a room in her home for two nights. After relaying this information to the Tenaganita staff member, I was asked if there was any way that I could stay at that friend's house for three nights. Luckily, my friend obliged. On Monday I brought my things to the Tenaganita office and was driven to Subang to stay with Tania, for a week or more, depending on if anything else opened up.

At this point in time, I cannot honestly say that my anxiety about the housing situation has been entirely alleviated. Not knowing if I am going to continue to stay at Tania's, or move closer to Petaling Jaya, hasn't allowed me to properly settle into my present accommodation. I still feel as though I am in limbo, a transitory period. I'm sure it will all work out in due time, and if nothing opens up, and Tania allows me to stay, the room I am renting from her is sufficient.

Question Set #2

1. Professional Goals:

Feeling settled makes all the difference in the world when embarking upon new adventures, learning opportunities, and projects. For me, feeling settled allows me the stability that I need to work effectively. Settling in here has meant deciding to stay with Tania throughout my time in Malaysia, hashing out details of projects that I'll be working on with the point people and supervisors I'll be working with, and having my bearings enough to get to and from places without anxiety. That being said, I feel incredibly optimistic about the projects that I am working on and the potential outcome of those projects, especially an anti-trafficking manual and training module that I will be working on in collaboration with Malaysia Airlines. It is a really big project for such a short time frame, but Glorene feels optimistic that with hard work and discipline, it is possible to complete.

One of the professional goals that I set for myself was to contribute to one important project in the office and produce a tangible product by the end of my time at Tenaganita this summer. This anti-trafficking project will do just that: contribute to an important project that Tenaganita is undertaking as well as facilitate the production of a manual and training module. Another one of my professional goals

was to attend at least one extra event beyond the usual office day work routine. Although I was able to attend Legal Aid Training, and found it incredibly helpful, I also hope to attend more trainings and events as they present themselves.

Another goal that I had written down before arriving in Malaysia was to gain a deeper understanding of the power systems and systemic inequalities at play in Malaysia and specific to the populations that Tenaganita serves. While I feel that I have already begun to recognize subtleties and have been able to ask Tenaganita staff members questions regarding systemic issues, I also hope to continue to gain an even deeper and more concrete understanding of the complexities, through continued research and exposure.

2. Personal Goals:

My personal goals include: using all forms of public transportation, eating at least one meal out alone every two days, making at least two friends, and generally being brave. I am on my way to meeting these goals. I have not yet used all forms of public transit, but I am very well acquainted with the LRT (Light Rail Transit), and have used both the KTM (Commuter Train) and the Monorail. I still have to learn to use the busses. The day that I purchased a “Grab N Go” card, I felt like I belonged on public transport here, just swiping my card to get onto whatever transport I was taking. That day was a huge success. Grab and Uber have also been quite helpful in getting me from point A to point B if I am either lost or too far from an LRT or KTM station. With the constant Ramadan promos, Uber and Grab rides have been practically free.

Eating meals out by myself was a goal because I believe it will help me to explore new places and restaurants, try new foods, and meet new people when I go by myself and speak to whoever is working at the place I eat. This has so far worked in my favor. I have been able to frequently venture out to eat dinner at new spots around my house on my own. I have discovered some wonderful noodles, among other things.

Most of my time has been spent alone or in the office. I don't mind being alone; in fact, I rather enjoy it. That is why my goal was to make some new friends. While I haven't done any real “hanging out” with them, I have gotten to know a couple of the Legal Aid Team and I think we are well on our way to becoming friends. I also count Tania and the Tenaganita team to be my friends. For the remainder of my time, however, I want to continue to pursue community with others and continue to foster new friendships.

Before I leave Malaysia, I hope to be able to look back on my time and see it as a rich time of learning and personal growth. I hope to continue to build relationships with people I meet and contribute to the meaningful work that Tenaganita does. I also hope to continue to explore until the very last day that I am here, while also taking into account, that as an introvert, it's okay to take a day here and there to decompress and reset.

3. Cross-Cultural Goals:

Some of my cross-cultural goals included trying to use Bahasa Melayu in conversation, joining any cultural events if they are happening, and record foods that I have really enjoyed or not enjoyed, as well as journaling about my days. Yesterday I joined buka puasa and broke fast for Ramadan with Tenaganita staff and the women from Tenaganita's shelter. It was an incredible experience. I've broken fast with Muslim friends in other settings and countries, but breaking fast as a true family with the women from the shelter was incredibly powerful. As we all gathered to share the wonderful food that had taken hours to prepare, I couldn't help but realize what an incredibly strong, brave, and resilient

group of women I was lucky enough to be sitting alongside. It is something that I will never forget. I would count this as a cultural event, as well as the Ramadan bazars that I have explored.

Journaling my experiences and recording foods that I like and dislike has also been something that I have successfully been doing since my arrival. Further, I have been trying to utilize Bahasa Melayu to the best of my ability, although my accent remains too Indonesian and people can rarely understand what I am saying, though I can often understand what is being said around me in Bahasa Melayu. I hope to continue to work on discerning my Indonesian and Melayu accents in order to better communicate in a language other than English.

A goal that I hadn't previously recorded, but is something that I would like to experience before leaving, is seeing other parts of the country. Before I leave, I would like to visit Penang, Melaka, and at least one of Malaysia's famed islands. This seems like a lot to squeeze in, but I have been told repeatedly that those were places I had to visit, for both the culture and the food.

Question Set 3

Describe a day in your life:

A typical day begins around 6:30 am. I like to wake up as the sun begins to rise and try to spend time doing yoga, running, or writing in my journal. After exercising and taking some time to reflect on the previous day and prepare for the day ahead, I get ready to go to the office and have a piece of toast with peanut butter, gather my things, and begin the trip into work. About 10 minutes from the place where I stay is the nearest train (LRT) station, so I walk there around 8:30. Around 8:45, I board the LRT with many other people making the commute from Subang Jaya into Petaling Jaya or into the heart of Kuala Lumpur. My LRT ride ends at the Taman Jaya station in Petaling Jaya, or PJ, as the locals say. From Taman Jaya, I have a 20-minute walk to the office. If I am running late or it is a very hot day, I will sometimes take a Grab Car or Uber from the LRT station to the office, but I usually walk. I reach the office between 9:30 and 9:45 every day, just as the legal action team and Tenaganita employees begin to arrive.

My workday begins with a cup of tea and a "good morning" exchange with others in the office. On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday mornings at 10, I teach a young refugee girl English until 12. Because she is a refugee, she is not legally allowed to enter the school system here in Malaysia, and although her English is already quite good (she acted as a translator for her Farsi-speaking mother on their journey here at the ripe age of 8), she is learning how to read and write in English. She is full of spunk and excitement and it is always a pleasure giving her English lessons. When the lessons end, she always requests homework that she can be working on at the shelter before we meet again. If I am not teaching here, there are sometimes either meetings that I join with staff members or tasks that I will join with the legal aid team.

Lunch time comes between 12 and 2, depending on how busy the office is and how many things are happening at a given time. Most days, I tag along with some friends from the legal aid team to go and buy lunch together somewhere near the office. After lunch, on a typical day, I will spend time at my desk working on projects that the staff have given me (which is often new components of the anti-trafficking on airlines initiative) or going to serve papers or go to court with the legal aid team. Everyone leaves the office around 5:30. Some days, there are team members from the legal aid team who are going either near an LRT station or all the way to Subang and I will tag along and get a ride to either the train or my house. If those options are unavailable, I will walk back to the LRT and join fellow commuters on the way to Subang or beyond.

After arriving in Subang, I usually either get dinner on my walk back from the LRT or drop my things off and then venture out to find dinner. I have a favorite noodle place near my house and I am constantly telling myself that I do not need to go there every single day. Occasionally, I will go for a walk

or a run in Subang Ria Recreational Park to walk around the pond before the sun sets. Otherwise, I usually sit on my porch and read a book or work on coursework for school. I try my best to not work on Tenaganita tasks at home unless I absolutely have to, in an effort to keep a work-life balance. Some nights, I will eat with or go shopping with two of the legal aid team, who have become my friends. Otherwise, I am usually in bed and sleeping by 9:30 or 10 pm.

I try to balance my time between work and exploring life outside of work by dedicating the working office hours for work and non-office hours to spend time exploring or relaxing and recharging/resetting as part of my self-care. For the first month I was here, I chose to stay in the Kuala Lumpur area in order to get a good feel for the area in which I am living for the time being. I did this because I think that Ramadan is a special and fascinating time to spend in a Muslim country and wanted to experience that here in Malaysia. During those weekends I spent in the KL area, I usually spent one day exploring or doing something more “touristy” and then another day relaxing and finding a yoga studio or a café or coffee shop to do some work. To commemorate a month of being in Malaysia, I took my first in-country trip to Penang this weekend and it was wonderful. Penang is somewhere that every single person I’ve met, whether Malaysian or not, has said must be visited. It was everything that I had hoped for and more – the food and the beautiful landscape, the architecture and the slower pace of life – was all so different from the “Malaysia” that I know, which is Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. I look forward to visiting other parts of Malaysia before I leave, as well as showing my brother, sister-in-law, and parents Kuala Lumpur, and visiting Cambodia and Singapore for brief regional trips. There is so much to see and experience and three months seems much too short!

Housing:

I am living in a classic terrace home in Subang (SS15). I rent an upstairs bedroom from the daughter of Irene Fernandez, the late founder of Tenaganita. There are no other tenants in the house – just me and my landlord. She and I get along quite well, although she has been hospitalized and recuperating at her aunt’s house for much of the time that I have been in Malaysia, so for weeks at a time I have been the only one in the large 2-story, 4-bedroom house. My housing arrangement is suitable and I have decided to stay for the remainder of my time in Malaysia. If I were here for anything beyond 3 months, I would opt for somewhere else. It would probably cost more for rent, but is a cost I would be happily willing to spend. I would either choose something more centrally located to either the office or to KL Sentral for the sake of saving time going between home and the office. Hours of my day are taken up by commuting, which I understand is something that much of the world faces, however, it makes me feel as though I’m losing precious time in which I could be exploring or spending time with friends. I would also note that if I were to relocate, I would probably choose somewhere with air conditioning. That is a choice that reflects my privilege and I am well aware of that. The heat is brutal, and after living in it throughout my Peace Corps service in Indonesia, it has been difficult for my body to adjust back to the heat, mostly in terms of my ability to sleep at night.

Finances:

It is always difficult to budget for life in an area that you have never been before. The budget that I had set before arriving is sufficient. I had purposely budgeted high “just in case,” and I am very glad that I did because I am spending much more than what I expected. The rent that I’m paying is around \$175 USD/month, which is what I had expected, but food and transport are costing much more than I anticipated. Living quite far from Petaling Jaya and Kuala Lumpur is nice for the sake of it being quiet and monthly rent being cheaper, but transportation can cost \$5+/day, depending on whether travel is happening at peak hours. The cost of travel is about what I had expected and the same is true for recreation. Knowing what I do now, I think that I would spend more on nicer/more convenient

housing in order to spend less money on transportation costs and less time out of my day walking to and from the train (LRT) and squished in between other commuters on the train.

Travel and Transportation:

I typically get around by foot and train (LRT). If I am doing more exploring, I will take the commuter train (KTM) or the monorail. If I am traveling after the sun has set, I always take Grab Car or Uber. I am very satisfied by the LRT and with the ease of using Grab Car or Uber. I would certainly recommend the LRT to others, as it is much easier and more efficient than the KTM or monorail and much more reliable than the busses.

I have a bit of time to explore the surrounding area on my time off, although it is very dependent on distance, hours of daylight, weather, and accessibility by public transport. I would recommend exploring the different neighborhoods of Kuala Lumpur, as Bangsar has a much different feel from KL Sentral, which has a different feel than Bukit Bintang, and so on and so forth. On my first month of weekends, I took the LRT and got off at random stops to simply walk around and explore different areas. I know that I have been told by many to take advantage of my time in Malaysia by traveling as much as possible to see as much as I can of the country, but I have quite enjoyed giving myself a whole month to really get a good feel for where I am spending most of my time and I would recommend not using every spare moment to travel outside of Kuala Lumpur, but also getting well acquainted with Kuala Lumpur itself.

Question Set #4

Professional Learning:

a. Describe the workplace culture at your host organization. How does your personal cultural lens work within the culture of the host organization?

The first day I arrived at Tenaganita, I was told that I was entering into a family. I perceive Tenaganita as one big family, and that has been my perception from the start. To me, family means something authentic, genuine, and real, and that means that family can sometimes be messy. Both of those aspects are true of the staff at Tenaganita. Staff members have big personalities and boundless passion. They work well together because each team member cares deeply for the work that they do and the clients that they serve. Like any family and like most work teams, there are interesting power dynamics at play that have been coming to my attention more recently. They are hidden and deep below the surface, but while it initially looks as though the team is seamless, conflicts do exist. The office has a very different feel each day due to different staff members being in the office or in the field as well as the 4-6 young lawyers who work one day each week, as part of a larger legal team, serving on a rotating basis.

My cultural lens is a complex one – formed through my initial 18 years in small town Montana, the following 4 years in Seattle, and 2 years after that in rural East Java, Indonesia. Throughout my life, I have spent extended amounts of time in Southeast Asia and in such, have been exposed to cultural norms in the workplace that are very different from those that may often exist in the United States. I think that this exposure to cultural difference has aided in my ability to understand and interact with the workplace culture at Tenaganita. While my American lens still struggles with loose deadlines, lulls in workload, and last minute projects, my Indonesian lens better helps me understand that these things are the norm in Malaysia and at Tenaganita. Culture is complex and understanding the culture that I am living in and working in is crucial in being successful in (and out of) the workplace.

b. What parts of your work have you enjoyed the most? Is there any part of your work that you find particularly challenging?

Without a doubt, my favorite part of being at Tenaganita has been getting to know the other staff members. Each member of the Tenaganita staff brings something unique to the office and to the work they do. They are all very passionate about the work that they do, and it is incredibly inspiring to see day in and day out.

Although I understand the difference in cultural norms, it is still difficult for me to receive last minute projects and information about events. This results in my inability to attend events if I have previously made other plans, and the inability to produce my best work when I do not have adequate time to do so. As a perfectionist and someone who cares deeply about not only the work that I am doing, but about the people I am working with, I always hope to perform as well as I can and attend as many events as possible.

c. Describe a professional accomplishment that you are proud of – be specific.

Although the training manual that I created will likely not be used due to the changing wants and needs of Malaysia Airlines, I am proud of the manual that I created using a framework that my superior and I designed. Many days and hours went into the production of the manual and the subsequent materials to accompany the training modules. Research was crucial in the creation of the training manual, and the research associated with the manual helped to give me a better grasp of other little projects that I have been working on in the office.

Cross Cultural Learning:

a. Describe an event where you misunderstood something due to cultural differences.

The process of creating the training manual was wrought with cultural misunderstanding. I was asked by one of my superiors to sit down with another superior and create a framework by which I could begin creating three training manuals for Malaysia Airlines and to do so as quickly and thoroughly as possible. The first superior told me that it would likely take the whole summer to create these manuals, and I agreed, knowing that there was a lot of research involved. The second superior and I sat down and created a framework for the project. A week later, the first superior told me that she would like to see a draft of the first manual the following week. I worked incredibly long hours to try and complete the manual in time for our meeting. When we did meet, I came prepared with a draft of a training manual, a PowerPoint to accompany the manual, and the materials that would accompany each module. At the meeting, the first superior asked if I had been working on the manual and I said I had, but the second superior said that we couldn't begin the actual manual until we created a framework with Malaysia Airlines. I was left utterly confused because I was under the impression that when the second superior and I sat down to create the framework, I assumed that we were doing so with the information she would have received from Malaysia Airlines. As it turns out, the first superior did not care to see what I had been working on, so I am relatively sure that no one will ever see the manual that I worked so hard on, but I am still proud of the product that I was able to produce.

b. What did you do? What would you do next time?

I sat back and listened, realizing that I had clearly not asked enough clarifying questions, while also realizing that there had been miscommunications between the two superiors as well. Next time, I would

ask clarifying questions from both parties, make sure that both are on the same track, and ask for updates and feedback frequently throughout the process. I would try to make no assumptions.

Personal Growth:

a. What are the most important things you have learned about yourself thus far through this experience?

My time as a Peace Corps Volunteer was perhaps the most formative period of growth in my adult years. These last few months in Malaysia and at Tenaganita have reaffirmed many of the things that I learned about myself during my time in Peace Corps. I have learned that I really value my independence – I like to have control over my living situation and transportation. I do not like to have to be dependent on others or feel like I am a burden to anyone. Further, I have reaffirmed that I love to learn. Whether I am doing a specific task or doing nothing at all, I always try to soak in as much as I can about the culture of the people that I am surrounded by and understand historical background and implications. So, even on days when the workload might be light, there are always books to be read about migrant issues and conversations to be had with experts on the issues. Finally, I have learned that I still am incredibly passionate about working with individuals who are in the margins of society and individuals who do not feel as though they have a voice. The exposure to immigration and refugee issues throughout my time at Tenaganita has confirmed that I want to continue working with and serving marginalized populations in the future, and after graduate school.

b. What has been the greatest personal challenge? What has been the greatest reward?

The greatest personal challenge that I have faced is the lack of direction and instruction, which is exacerbated by my personal concern over the limited time that I am in Malaysia. I often feel as though I have fallen through the cracks because the staff is so busy. The individuals in the office who are overseeing me are often doing work in the field or attending events outside of the office, city, and even country, so it makes receiving feedback surprisingly difficult. It is hard for me to feel like I don't have any direction. Because 12 weeks is quite short, I do not want any time to feel as though it is being wasted, or that I am not using my time to the fullest.

The greatest reward has been getting to know the other staff members, the legal aid team, and the other interns. It has been an absolute pleasure working with individuals on all levels, getting to know people personally as well as professionally. I feel lucky to have the opportunity to work alongside some incredible, powerful, and passionate people.

Question Set #5

1. Professional Learning:

- **Have you learned about any new possibilities for career paths?**

People. For as long as I can remember, people have been the source of my drive and the crux of my passions. I have always wanted to work with people and for people, particularly in a field where I could advocate for those who are marginalized and voiceless. This internship at Tenaganita has provided me with the phenomenal opportunity to learn about and be exposed to multiple particularly vulnerable populations with whom I haven't had previous work experience or exposure. I hope to continue working with vulnerable populations in a social work-specific capacity. I will be working for the

International Rescue Committee (IRC) when I return to the U.S., and I am excited to continue to serve refugees in my home country and state.

- **Have you done any informational interviews (formal or informal) to learn about the field?**

I have spent any free time that I have talking to others in the office, learning as much as I can from them, gleaned knowledge from their practice wisdom. In that sense, I have conducted many informal interviews to learn about the field, both about fieldwork and about research. Some of the most valuable things that I have learned about Tenaganita, the client populations, and about Malaysia, have been through informal interviews and conversations with co-workers. I have always been interested in how research and social work in the field co-exist in a healthy and productive way, and I have learned about how that works at Tenaganita and I have seen it in action here. These informal interviews have helped me shape new learning goals for my academic year ahead, and my final two semesters before I graduate next year.

2. Cross Cultural:

- **Looking back at your pre-departure journal or notes, how have your impressions of the host culture changed?**

Having spent time in Southeast Asia before, I had a picture of what I thought life in Malaysia would look like. I tried to not have any expectations, but realized that as I settled into life in KL and PJ, I inevitably did have expectations. Before arriving, it was impossible for me to picture life in such a large and diverse metropolitan area.

Shortly after I arrived, I thought I saw a perfectly meshed diverse community, coexisting in harmony. The longer I am here, the more clearly I can see the underlying racial tensions that are a result of a long and complex history of this peninsula. Now, I have a more complex impression and understanding of the ways in which history, migration patterns, and colonization have shaped Malaysian culture and the specific cultures of KL and PJ. My understanding of my host culture has grown more nuanced as I have learned more about the history of the indigenous and Malay populations (the bumiputera), the Indian population, and the Chinese population in Malaysia, as well as the large influx of migrants from other ASEAN populations.

- **What is the most frustrating aspect of your host culture? What is the most rewarding aspect?**

The most frustrating aspect of my host culture is the inconsistency in the workload at my internship. The workload oscillates between incredibly heavy and unbelievably light (sometimes non-existent).

The most rewarding aspect of my host culture has been getting to know and build relationships with diverse Malaysian colleagues and friends.

- 3. Your Cultural Curve: The period of cultural adjustment is often represented by a “W” curve with various peaks and valleys: Honeymoon (peak); Initial Culture Shock (valley); Cultural Adjustment (peak); Further Culture Shock (valley); Further Adjustment (peak); Re-entry Shock (valley). Outline your personal W Curve or cultural adjustments starting from when you arrived in your host country to the present-marking the highs and lows with approximate dates and descriptions of events that represent some of these phases (recognizing of course, that you are still in the process of adapting to life back home).**

Honeymoon (peak): I came to Malaysia directly from a month in Indonesia. Because Indonesia has been home to me, leaving was difficult and because I was mourning the end of my visit to Indonesia while also celebrating my arrival in Malaysia, I believe I had an atypical initial adjustment. Thus, I cannot identify an obvious peak or honeymoon phase as I arrived. Grateful to have arrived, but overwhelmed by leaving Indonesia, my initial time in Malaysia was neither a peak nor a valley.

Initial Culture Shock (valley): I had envisioned being picked up from the airport by coworkers from Tenaganita. Instead, a few hours before arriving, I was told that there was no plan in place and that my housing had not yet been secured. In a panic, I asked a family friend if she had a place where I could stay while things were sorted out with Tenaganita. As though breathing a sigh of relief, they asked if I could stay for three more days while they tried to secure something. I felt incredibly overwhelmed by all of this and I believe it was my first bout of culture shock.

Cultural Adjustment (peak): Ramadan is such a special time in Muslim cultures. Although most of my coworkers at Tenaganita are not Muslims, many of the clients are. Near the end of Ramadan, the office held "buka puasa," where we all broke fast together, as one big family, employees of Tenaganita alongside the women who stay at the Tenaganita shelter. I felt like I was truly part of the team/family during buka puasa, which was my first massive peak.

Further Culture Shock (valley): After feeling like I had my bearings at the office and with the work I was doing, I faced long bouts of a non-existent workload. These bouts were usually points of discouragement or frustration, which I would classify as valleys.

Further Adjustment (peak): Lately, I've been invited to dinner and to different events with co-workers who have become my friends. Joining them for coffee and meals outside of working hours has been a high and sustained peak.

Re-entry Shock (valley): I have not re-entered the U.S. and American culture yet, but I anticipate that it will be a difficult transition back into both life in the U.S., as well as life as a graduate student.

4. Articulating your experience: Please write one paragraph to sum up your experience, touching on the professional, the cross-cultural and the personal. Discuss your learning, the rewards and maybe challenges of the program. (You may think of this as a summary you might give in an interview, or to a fellow student who was asking you about your internship.)

Working as a member on the collaborative Tenaganita team, I learned not only about the work that the NGO does and the social justice-oriented causes that the NGO addresses, but also about many current issues that Malaysia, ASEAN, and the world are facing. Working with various team members on multiple projects allowed me the opportunity to work with refugees, migrant workers, plantation workers, and trafficking victims. I was also given the opportunity to collaborate with Malaysia Airlines, working on an initiative to intervene on behalf of trafficking victims and train employees to identify trafficking victims and traffickers. As is true for most international work, there are cultural barriers that can cause confusion and make certain tasks and aspects of communication difficult, the cultural differences made my experience much richer, as those differences provide important opportunities for growth and learning.

Question Set 6

1. Looking back at your pre-departure journal or notes, how have your impressions of the host culture changed?

I expected Malaysia to be much more homogenous than it is. There is such vibrant and vivid diversity throughout Malaysia, and especially in Kuala Lumpur, that is hard to describe in words; it is almost something you must experience for yourself. I imagined eating rice every day for most of my meals, and although that is largely true, the variety of food options made by a variety of populations continues to astound and impress me. This vibrant diversity exists in clothing, skin tones, food, and religion. Hindu temples stand next to Buddhist temples, which stand next to Catholic churches and Protestant churches. In the last month, especially, I have come to have a deeper understanding of the conflict and the inequality that is often times coupled with such stark diversity. It is difficult to see the ugly side of diversity, but it also leaves room for potential and beauty. The people and cultures that make up Malaysia are beautiful. The beauty can be seen in the faces of my neighbors, the food from the nearest mamak stall, and the sweeping landscapes, whether they are skyscrapers, rolling hills, palm oil plantations, or deserted beaches.

Compared to my pre-departure thoughts about Malaysia, I have a deeper understanding now, an understanding that comes with knowing and living alongside of locals. I have a deep sense of appreciation for the beauty that Malaysia has shown me and for the things that the people here have taught me.

2. What words of advice do you have for future interns as they prepare for this internship and living in your host country/culture?

Expect the unexpected. This seems like cliché advice for anyone preparing to spend time abroad or work abroad, but prepare to be constantly surprised. These surprises may be pleasant, or at times frustrating, but you will meet many unexpected events. Meet them with grace, persistence, optimism, and joy. The unexpected moments are what make the experience deep and rich.

Take control of the things that you can. Living in a culture that is not your own, and one that you can never fully understand, many things will be out of your control. Sometimes that may leave you spinning and grasping for anything that you can control. Take control over the parts of your life abroad that you can, whether it is your eating routine, sleeping routine, exercise, living situation, or even work hours. Protect your mental and physical health, and wellbeing, with fierceness. You can't do your work well unless you are taking care of yourself.

Say yes. Try new things. Go new places. Make new friends. Travel on your own. This time abroad is not the time to hold back. Say yes to adventure and say yes to the unexpected. Say yes. But also, say no if you need to. If you are feeling overwhelmed and rundown, take care of yourself without feeling guilty. You know yourself better than anyone else. So, say yes when (and as often as) you can, but don't beat yourself up if you have to say no a couple of times too.

Enjoy. Time will fly. By the time you feel like you might be getting in the groove of things, you will be packing your things to go home. Try to enjoy it all as much as you can, because it will be over before you know it.