

May 2010

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Recommended Citation

Vance, Christine (2010) "Culture Shock in a Japanese Firm: Amélie Nothomb's *Stupeur et Tremblements*," *Global Business Languages*: Vol. 6, Article 7.

Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol6/iss1/7>

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CULTURE SHOCK IN A JAPANESE FIRM:
AMÉLIE NOTHOMB'S *STUPEUR ET TREMBLEMENTS*

The age-old Nippon imperial protocol stipulates that the Emperor shall be addressed with fear and trembling....

So I put on a mask of stupor and started to tremble. I stared at her with an awe stricken look and I stammered:

—Do you think they might hire me as garbage collector?

—Yes! said she, with an enthusiasm somewhat excessive. (127)²⁵

Our interest focuses on *Stupeur et tremblements* (*Fear and Trembling*) published in August 1999 as a novel by Albin Michel, one of Paris' major editing firms. In the Fall of 1999 it was nominated for several prestigious French literary awards, including the greatest of all, the *Prix Goncourt*. In October it received the *Grand Prix de l'Académie Française*, which practically eliminated all chances to be awarded the Goncourt (on November 2, 1999).

Since its publication, the book has been very successful. As early as September 10, 1999, one month after publication it had already been reprinted twice, and had sold 60,000 copies. Over twenty countries, including the United States (St. Martin's Press) and Japan, have purchased the rights to publish it.

The author, Amélie Nothomb, a thirty-two year old Belgian, was born near Kobe, Japan, and speaks Japanese fluently. She writes in French about her one-year experience in Tokyo as an employee in a major Japanese-based international corporation. Her numerous *faux pas* caused her demotion from a decent job to the most humbling.

Teachers of foreign languages and cultures for use in international business will find that Amélie Nothomb's book can bring new light to arguments in favor of the importance of foreign language proficiency and

²⁵Amélie Nothomb, *Stupeur et tremblements* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999). Following a quotation, page numbers in parentheses refer to this book. The English translation is ours.

cross-cultural awareness, and constitute a valuable component in a course of international business.

We shall first present the author's background and qualifications. Most of the information has been collected in the book itself, and confirmed or completed by the numerous articles and interviews available in the media upon the publication of the book. Then we shall outline her "international business career" and often refer to elementary principles taught to Westerners about to visit or work with Japanese nationals. We find these, for instance, in the famous *Culturgrams*, issued by the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in Sixty Countries*, by Morrison, Connaway, and Borden, or textbooks required in specific International Business Courses, such as *Japan as It Is*, or Chie Nakane's *Japanese Society*.²⁶ Finally we shall see if our remarks apply only to working in Japan, or can be extended to our global society.

Amélie Nothomb was born in 1968, in the province of Kansai, not far from the legendary town of Kobe, and the beautiful city of Nara. From a prominent Belgian family, her father was, at the time, ambassador to Japan.²⁷ She was five years old when they moved to China. Later, the family accompanied the diplomat in Laos, Thailand, Bangladesh.²⁸

In 1990, she was twenty-two, very young and intelligent. In love with beauty and the humanities, she knew her classics thoroughly. Very enthusiastic and high-spirited,²⁹ she treasured friendship and honor, and

²⁶Morrison, Connaway, and Borden, *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: How to Do Business in Sixty Countries* (Midland, MI, 1995). *Japan as It Is* (Tokyo: Gakken, 1990). Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley: U of C Press, 1972).

²⁷"My father, she says, is more Japanese than the Japanese. In that country they call him 'the blue-eyed Nô singer': He is the only Westerner who can sing Japanese medieval opera; as a child, I heard it all the time" (Sylvie Santini, "Amélie Nothomb: 'Au Japon, mieux vaut rester le brave étranger un peu débile,'" *Paris-Match*, 20 Sept. 1999: 22). The English translation is ours.

²⁸Philippe Cusin, "Amélie l'ironique et François le révolté," (*Le Figaro*, Oct. 29, 1999). The English translation is ours.

²⁹"When I was little, I wanted to become God. The Christian God, with a big G. Around age five, I understood that my ambition could not be realized. So I poured some water into my wine and decided to become Christ. I pictured my death on the cross in front of all mankind. At age seven, I became aware that this would not happen. I decided, more modestly, to become a martyr. I kept to this choice for several years. That did not work either." (75)

was always ready to play the part of the knight in shining armor who dashes at the rescue of the weak and under-privileged. She is extremely witty and a comedian at heart, with a good sense of humor, which she often displays when talking about herself.

She speaks Japanese fluently and is well steeped in Japanese literature.³⁰ She has studied at the university level and holds a French teacher's diploma. Very eager to work in Japan, she studied Japanese for Business, successfully passing the final exams. Although not gifted for numbers and arithmetic, as she herself admits, she could be a good candidate for a job abroad, in the Land of the Rising Sun.

In Tokyo she applied for employment as an interpreter in a very large international firm. She was hired for a year starting on January 7, 1990. In *Stupeur et tremblements*, the story starts on that very day.

As cleverly expressed by one of the literary critics, the work respects the great rule in French classical literature, the Three Unities. Unity of Place: The Yumimoto headquarters in Tokyo. Unity of time: one year. Unity of action: the failure of a foreign employee in a Japanese firm.

As soon as she passed the street entrance of the formidable forty-three story Yumimoto building, Amélie made her first mistake: she should have introduced herself at the reception desk on the ground-floor; instead she took the elevator directly to the top. Within minutes Mr. Saito, the head of General Accounting, was there and scolded her.³¹

Fortunately, she behaved properly: bending her head and shoulders she remained silent. She then followed the man through innumerable huge rooms and was introduced to crowds, "hordes" of people, she writes.³²

She soon realized the importance of hierarchy in Japan.³³ The striking formula at the very beginning of the book is the most frequently quoted:

Mr. Haneda was Mr. Omochi's boss, who was Mr. Saito's boss,
who was Ms Mori's boss, who was my boss. And I, I was no
one's boss. That could be said differently. I was at Ms Mori's

³⁰One of her favorites is the author Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadow* (14).

³¹"A small, thin, and ugly man, fiftyish, was looking at me disapprovingly:—why did you not warn the receptionist that you had arrived? he asked.... I bent my head and shoulders, noting that in about ten minutes, without uttering one single word, I had already made a bad impression." (8)

³²Nakane, *Japanese Society*, 36.

³³Nakane, *Japanese Society*, 35–38, and *Japan As It Is*, 217

orders, who was at Mr. Saito's orders, and so on, with the special mention that, going downstream, orders could skip the hierarchic steps. Therefore, at Yumimoto, I was at everyone's order. (7)

In the absence of her immediate boss, Amélie's first "challenge" was to write in English, for Mr. Saito, a letter accepting an invitation to play golf. She believed the task was easy, but she failed. "Do it over," said Mr. Saito each time she presented a new version.

Ms Mori arrived. Fascinated by her beauty, Amélie hardly paid attention to explanations given about the pile of documents placed in front of her; nevertheless she spent days reading those lists (company's rules, catalogs, employee rosters). Indeed she was not using any of the skills for which she believed she had been hired. She had not learned that, from the beginning, an employer, is employed not in a specific job but rather for whatever type of work the company shall determine a person, a principle emphasized in *Japan As It Is*.³⁴

She was immediately in charge of serving coffee or tea upon request: "nothing more normal, when beginning in a Nippon firm, than starting with *ôchakumi*—"service of the honorable tea" (17), she says—without adding "for a woman" to "nothing more normal..." She performed *ôchakumi* for a group of twenty guests. Very proud to have used the most refined Japanese formulas and traditional manners, she was brutally reprimanded by Mr. Saito:

Mr. Omochi is very unhappy. You created an extremely bad atmosphere in this morning's meeting: how could our partners feel at ease, with a white woman who understood their language. From now on, you will not speak Japanese. (20)³⁵

Forbidden to speak or claim to understand Japanese, she was not able to observe the rule of total silence and submissiveness:

—That is impossible. Nobody can obey such an order, she exclaimed.

³⁴Nakane, p.38 and *Japan As It Is*, 217

³⁵"The worst is to be a foreigner who understands, who speaks Japanese and claims to be able to figure out the Nipponese mentality. The Japanese have such a feeling of superiority that they cannot imagine others could perceive their specificity" (*Paris Match*, 20 Sept 1999: 22).

—There always is a way to obey. This is what Western brains should understand. (20)

She resisted the temptation to resign: “In the eyes of a Westerner, that would not be shameful at all; in the eyes of a Japanese, it would be losing face” (21).

As the story develops, there are more and more ethnically oriented remarks. The Japanese are presented as convinced of their superiority in all domains, ethical and intellectual, as well as economical.

Terribly bored, Amélie decided, without consulting anyone, to distribute the mail on two floors. On her way she would friendly greet everybody—in Japanese, when she knew Mr. Saito could not hear her. She was soon stopped and accused of “stealing someone else’s work”. Thereupon she asked for permission to update all the calendars in the various offices. Her theatrical ways entertained and distracted her fellow employees: she was asked to behave and be more discrete; what she considered her “punishment” was to make thousands of copies, one at a time, without using the automatic feed device. She had to do this over and over again under the pretext that she never centered the pages perfectly.

While at the copier she met Mr. Tenshi, Mr. Saito’s homologue in the Dairy Products division. He offered her a dream assignment, which she immediately accepted: a marketing study for a new brand of Belgian low fat butter to be done in the absence of Mr. Saitama, usually in charge of this kind of work. She accomplished the task with supreme mastery and wrote “the Report of the Century”. Thereupon she and Mr. Tenshi were summoned to Mr. Omochi’s office. He called them all sorts of terrible names such as “traitors,” “snakes,” “hateful pragmatists,” and “individualists”, which is the worst label in a society where the group, not the individual, is the basic unit.³⁶

To Mr. Tenshi’s dismay, Amélie, loyal to a fault, could not help but defend her leader. Instead of humbly bending her head and shoulders, she started responding:

Mr. Tenshi had no intention to sabotage the company. I begged him to place a case in my charge. I am the only culprit. (43–46)

³⁶*Japan As It Is*, 63: “If the individual is the basic unit of Euroamerican society, in Japan it is this group.”

Her surprise reached a peak when she learned that the informer was Ms Mori, whom she admired, trusted, and believed to be a friend: “Ms Mori suffered for years before reaching the position she now holds. No doubt she found intolerable that you would get such a promotion after ten weeks at Yumimoto” (49). In spite of Mr. Tenshi’s advice, Amélie rushed to confront Fubuki. The subsequent scene emphasizes again the importance in Japan of ranking and seniority:

I am 29 years old, she said. You are twenty-two. I have had my position since last year, I had to fight for it for years. And you, you imagined you were going to reach the same rank within weeks? (53)

For Ms Mori, reporting an improper act was absolutely normal. It was in compliance with the company’s rules, and her honor was safe:

That is extraordinary, said Ms Mori. You behave as if you were the offended, when you committed a grave fault. (51)

Later on, Amélie would demonstrate her total incapacity to work with numbers, and her enormous mistakes considerably lengthened the work of her co-workers. The accounting tasks assigned to her by Ms Mori almost drove her mad. The author underlines the Japanese propensity to nervous breakdowns due to excessive stress at work. In her picturesque and lively style she describes the depressing routine of Japanese white collar employees. They work ten hours a day and sometimes stay overnight if a deadline needs to be met.

And outside the firm, what could be expected for the accountants, with their brains rinsed off by numbers? The mandatory beer with colleagues as brain-washed as they are, hours in overcrowded subway trains, a spouse dozing already, children already tired, sleep swallowing you as would an unplugged lavatory sink, rare holidays no one can enjoy: nothing deserving the name of life. (152)

For a while Amélie's occupations at Yumimoto were again reduced to serving coffee or tea.

It was as if I had been forgotten.... After all, I deserved my circumstances: I had tried very hard to prove to my superiors that my good will did not prevent me from being a disaster. Now they had understood.... Their silent policy must have been something like: 'Let that girl no longer touch anything'! (107)

She believes this could have lasted until the end of her contract, had she not "committed what must be called a super blunder" (107).

One day Mr. Omochi unleashed his fury against Ms Mori and chastised her verbally in the presence of all her colleagues. When the storm was finally over, Fubuki Mori left her desk and took refuge in the ladies room. Pushed by compassion, wishing to comfort her, Amélie followed her:

Fubuki had been thoroughly humiliated in the presence of her co-workers. The only thing she could hide from us, the last bastion of honor she could preserve, was her tears. She had the fortitude not to cry before us. And I—how clever!—had come to watch her sob in her retreat. (118)

This ended all possibility of clemency from Ms Mori's part. From then on Amélie would be working as "Madame Pipi", the colorful French noun designating the restroom attendant, in charge of cleaning the facilities and maintaining the supply of toilet paper throughout the day. She explains how she had to develop a new "mental strategy" allowing her to endure the seven months to come:

As soon as I received the incredible assignment, I entered a new dimension in life: the universe of pure and simple derision. In order to bear the seven months I was going to spend there, I had to change references, I had to invert the orders of what I had used as parameters until then.... Immediately, in my head, filth became spotlessness, shame became glory, the torturer became the victim, and squalid became comical. (127)

It was clear that Fubuki had counted on Amélie's resignation: "By staying, I was playing her a bad trick. Shame was thrown back to her in full face" (129).

The end of the year finally came and Amélie would at last be able to resign without losing face. Her story shows she knew well what to do:

In a country where, until recently, with or without a contract, you were hired forever, you could not quit a job without observing the proper form. By respect for tradition, I must present my resignation at each hierarchic level, that is four times, starting at the bottom of the pyramid. (153)

She prepared a short, excellent resignation speech in which, of course, she did not complain but assumed all blame (154).

My contract ends soon. I wanted to let you know, with deep regret, that I will not be able to renew it.... Yumimoto has given me many opportunities to prove myself. Alas, I have not been able to show I deserved the honor. (155)

The tale thus highlights the key principles of employment in Japan. One needs to be ready at any time for any type of work the company will need to be done and always be polite and humble. Tradition is all important. Individualism is a capital sin. One must act in the name of the group you belong to, for your group's sake, for your group's honor. One needs to respect hierarchy at all costs. People are hired for life to work, work, and work:

As noticed by the common man, restrooms are an ideal place for meditation. My being cloistered there, gave me the opportunity to think. And I understood one great truth there: in Japan the firm is your life.

Sure, this has already been written in a number of economics textbooks dealing with that country. But there is a wall of difference between reading a sentence in a textbook and experiencing it in real life. (151)

Stupeur et tremblements offers a compromise between textbooks and real life. It is a novel, but the tale is in great part autobiographic: “I invented nothing! ...I just changed the names. It all happened to me as described.”³⁷

In several instances the real life experienced in the Japanese enterprise is so extraordinary that it surpasses fiction. Of course a series of features, scenes, and episodes were selected for their picturesque or romanesque qualities.

Fubuki Mori is the leading actress. In the enterprise, for a hundred men there must have been five women; of these Fubuki only had reached the rank of executive. We saw earlier the threat posed by this achievement. Many pages describe her exceptional beauty and Amélie’s fascination. “Fubuki was irreproachable. Her only flaw was that at age twenty-nine she had no husband (197).” This gives the author the opportunity to discuss at length the condition of the Japanese woman (86–98), leading to the conclusion that “Her whole existence is torture. There is no way out except suicide” (93). On a lighter mode it allows her to illustrate one of the Japanese hang-ups underlined in *Culturgrams*, which can be formulated as “Thou shalt not sweat” or “Thou shalt not blow thy nose in public,” in the tragi-comic example of “Miss Mori’s nuptial parade” (99), on the occasion of Piet Kramer’s visit, an eligible bachelor from Holland who unfortunately did not use antiperspirants. After Mr. Kramer left:

The department head, Mr. Saito, spoke first:

—I couldn’t have stood it one more minute.

—Do not those Whites ever realize that they smell like cadavers?

—If only we managed to make them understand how bad they stink, we’d get a fabulous market in the West for really efficient deodorants!

—We might be able to help them smell less bad, but we could not prevent them from sweating. That’s their race. (105)

As mentioned earlier Japanese chauvinism and xenophobia are often displayed in dialogues as well as direct remarks or warnings from the part of the author. Such notes are multi-sided however. Amélie the Westerner is not exempt from nationalistic bias. *Stupeur et tremblement*

³⁷*Paris-Match*, 20 Sept. 1999: 22.

quickness our awareness and encourages us to learn how to live with others from other nations, of other complexions.

The skillful portrayal of four different echelons of executives adds to the documentary aspect of the work. It is done in an entertaining variety of styles from epic (Mr. Tenshi), to dignified (Mr. Haneda), and burlesque (Mr. Omochi).

Finally Amélie's character typifies the young person, fresh out of graduate school, enthusiastic, somewhat cocky, ready to conquer the world. From this aspect, the story is related to the instructive literary genre of *Bildungsroman*. It cautions young candidates to employment abroad against an excessive self-confidence which may result in rudeness and insolence, unintentional yet detrimental to their beginning careers.

The literary presentation of so much data facilitates learning not only the foreign words and phrases of business, but also the different ways people work, act, think, and live, in other countries. And it is not new to suggest that literature encourages us to think for ourselves and improve our whole personalities. In addition, because of the author's wide cultural background, *Stupeur et tremblements* abounds with allusions to philosophy and rhetorics (in the original all-inclusive sense). For instance the "Memento mori [*Remember death*, in Latin, with the pun on Fubuki's surname](143)" Amélie refrained shouting in a moment of pure revolt against her immediate superior; or the colorful metaphor: "She walked straight to me, with Hiroshima in her right eye and Nagasaki in the left (107)." Such allusions are made at propitious moments and no doubt help increase the general culture of our future international businessmen and women, a valuable asset in terms of global, human relations.

In a basic Language for Business course the objectives are to improve communicative skills in business interactions, to increase awareness and the understanding of a given society, corporate culture, and business protocol. A recent article distinguished three major components:

- A. a communicative-skill building component (16 hrs/wk or 70%). This includes business conversation and composition classes.
- B. a cultural and societal component (4 hrs/wk or 17%). This includes corporate culture as well as language and society classes.

- C. a networking with business communities and volunteer groups component (3 hrs/wk or 13%). This includes plant/office visits, guest speakers, and cultural demonstrations by volunteers.”³⁸

Whereas *Stupeur et Tremblement* was published in French, it is now available in English ³⁹ and Japanese, and could be part of either component B or C, as capstone reading and base for discussion. The latter seems ideal given the somewhat provocative content of the work.

To use the book as a conclusion for the whole course should be avoided for the criticism against the Japanese corporate organization is strongly negative at times. It should be made clear that the ideas and reactions are those of an individual and should be discussed as such. The author has no sympathy for the Japanese business world and work ethic, but she is still in love with Japan’s cult of beauty.

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³⁹The American English translation has just appeared (March 2001).

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