

***Bushido, Genro* and Murayama: Japanese Influences on a Philippine Strategic Thinker**

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Photo taken during interviews for the book, 2013 and early 2014 (Photo by Riziel Cabreros)

When Jose Almonte, a retired general, was national security adviser to President Fidel Ramos, among the gifts he received was a Japanese knife used for ritual suicide. Some Japanese friends gave it to him as a souvenir. Almonte took a liking to it; he displayed it in his office, behind his large desk, greeting guests as they met with him. John McBeth, a reporter from the *Far Eastern Economic Review* who interviewed him at the time, saw it “sitting incongruously among three painted portraits of Jesus Christ.” McBeth apparently asked him about the distinct gift and Almonte laughed and said he could “not imagine the circumstances that might tempt him to turn the exquisitely crafted knife on himself.” Almonte, after all, is a Catholic, far from being a nominal one, and a deeply spiritual person.

The Japanese knife is only the glistening tip of the iceberg. Almonte’s life philosophy and thinking have been shaped, to a certain degree, by the ideas of Inazo Nitobe, in his book, *Bushido, The Soul of Japan* and the vision of Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama for a “human-centered society.” He was also inspired by the Meiji Restoration and how sweeping changes washed over Japan during that epic period and started the Asian country’s path to modernization.

During the six years that he was in office, from 1992 to 1998, Almonte was the architect of strategic reforms that targeted the Philippine oligarchy, the few families and members of the business elite that controlled the economy and invested in national poli-

tics—by bankrolling election campaigns of presidents and lawmakers—to keep the status quo. The Ramos government pried open business monopolies, from telecommunications to inter-island shipping and liberalized trade, among others.

Since Almonte was the leader of Ramos’s brain trust, the President’s closest adviser, and since he spoke openly against the “irresponsible elite” and the oligarchs, he was a favorite target of criticism. He was the most controversial public official of the Ramos administration and the most demonized by the media, many of which were owned by big business, threatened by the changes.

My research project at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, from April to September 2014 focused on the life of Almonte. I have completed the manuscript on his memoirs as told to me, a journalist. The book is scheduled to be published in the Philippines early next year. In this project, I sought to answer questions on what led Almonte, a soldier, an unlikely policy-maker and reformer, to become a strategic thinker committed to building a nation of Filipinos who pride themselves in having dignity and, among others, strong institutions.

In this essay, I will share a fragment of the influences on Almonte’s mind, centered on Japan, mostly in his own words, from his own perspective. My stay here in Kyoto has made me take notice of this. Perhaps if I were writing this book in Manila, Almonte’s connection to Japan would not have pre-

sented itself as sharply as it did in Kyoto.

A Few Words on Methodology for the Book

Together with my researcher, I interviewed Almonte 17 times. These are all recorded on video, each lasting about three hours and all have been transcribed. Fortunately, Almonte's memory is still sharp. Ninety percent of what he has told us checked out. Whenever he said something which I thought was significant, we looked for news clippings and researches to corroborate his statements, gather more details, and provide context. We looked for reports quoting him to check for consistency. We also interviewed people he had worked with closely to add more substance and color.

Almonte has a long history in government. Before he became national security adviser, he was in the Army. He was first assigned to the Sierra Madre, fighting the Huk communist guerillas in the late 1950s. In the 1960s, he was sent to Vietnam as member of the Philippine Civic Action Group. In between these, he worked out of Fort Bonifacio as an Army instructor and in Malacañang as aide to President Diosdado Magapagal and later, in the Marcos years, as assistant to Executive Secretary Alejandro Melchor. After Vietnam, he went on to the University of the Philippines where he headed a think tank that worked for President Ferdinand Marcos, got disillusioned and actively planned and mobilized groups to oust him in what became an unexpected people power revolt in 1986 that caught the world's attention. Almonte joined the government of President Corazon Aquino as head of an anti-smuggling office, and then returned to the Palace where he was national security adviser of President Ramos. In all, he has worked with four presidents.

Spiritual Guide

Bushido is one of three books that have served as Almonte's spiritual guideposts in his years in public service. The two others are *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, a former atheist, and *Confessions of St. Augustine* by St. Augustine. Now in his 80s, he still refers to these books.

Talking fondly about *Bushido*, he said:

The search for solutions, both in thought and deed, has defined my life, guided by my Christian faith and the *Bushido* code—knowing what is right and standing by it, knowing how to live and die, with honor. I did things by instinct, what I believed was right and I was always ready to accept the consequences.

The book, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, has inspired me with a perspective that everything is defined by only one value: what is right. Courage, for instance, is giving one's life if necessary to a cause that is right. Loyalty is attachment to something, to a vision that is right.

It is not difficult to have a strong sense of what is wrong and what is right. Others say that what is right is relative. But I have always believed that when one makes a decision in favor of the people, the nation, that that is what's right. Anything that goes against the people is not right. One of my favorite passages from the *Bushido* is how it defined true courage: "to live when it is right to live and to die only when it is right to die."

Peoples 2000

The vision and reform program of the Ramos government, which Almonte and his team drafted, was called Philippines 2000. Put in the simplest terms possible, it had two main components: global competitiveness and people empowerment. He involved government officials as well as civil-society groups and those from the business community in shaping this platform.

The core group behind Philippines 2000 continued to meet even after it was launched. They promoted it through seminars in various government offices and in the private sector. They became its invisible champions, an informal network of leaders which spread the gospel of Philippines 2000 without calling attention to themselves or taking any credit. They were called Peoples 2000.

Almonte explained:

This idea of having champions of reform within government was inspired by the Meiji Restoration. Serafin Talisayon, my deputy, and I had studied this landmark period in the history of Japan when feudalism collapsed, leading the way to the country's modernization. The *genro*, a group of elder statesmen during the Meiji Restoration, played a leading role. They occupied important positions in the bureaucracy and worked with a wide network of alliances in various sectors to make their institutions work. Peoples 2000 was patterned after the *genro*.

Nations before us, like Japan, had demonstrated a way of developing themselves. For every generation, the challenges are different but each is guided by earlier models such as the Meiji Restoration. There really is no secret in nation-building.



With President Ramos, 1992–98 (Courtesy of Jose Almonte)

Human Security

Almonte presided over the most extensive remake of the office of the national security adviser. The concept of national security was expanded to include economic and social issues, away from the conventional and narrow thinking that it was only limited to defense and the military. Later, Almonte included human security in his framework but he did this quietly because of the opposition to what was perceived as his penchant to extend his military tentacles to the civilian government.

He was inspired by Japan Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, who in 1995, addressed the World Summit for Social Development and spoke on his vision of Japan as a “human-centered society.”

...in which each individual citizen is treated equally, endowed with opportunity to fully develop his or her potential, and enabled to utilize fully his or her capacity through employment and participation in society....

Murayama stressed this again in a statement during the 50th anniversary of the United Nations on the same year.

What is required of us if the United Nations is to play such a role is that we not limit our concern to the nation-state level, but that we also focus our efforts on the well-being of each and every one of “Earth’s citizens.”...Hence a new concept of “human security,” in addition to that of national security, has emerged as a major challenge for the United Nations. This concept, which embraces respect for the human rights of every citizen on this earth and protection of each of us from poverty, disease, ignorance, oppression and violence, is consonant with my own political principles....

Reflecting on this, Almonte said:

I salute Prime Minister Murayama for pushing this. I was not brave enough to put it in writing because I knew I would get so much flak. I could already hear

the critics saying that I was going to take over even the spiritual well-being of the country, that I was playing God. So when a Japanese leader said it, I seized the opportunity and added it to our program.

The fundamental assumption of human security is human dignity. We can never take this for granted. When human dignity is threatened, national security is threatened. When human dignity is transgressed by poverty, heinous crimes, disease, and human rights violations, national security becomes a common concern.

Valor is Universal

Almonte believes in the value of valor and respects an enemy who manifests this. He saw this up close in the case of Lt. Hiroo Onoda, the last hold-out of the former Japanese Imperial Army who surrendered in 1974 after 29 years of living in the jungle of Mindoro. Onoda kept faith with the final order given him in 1945 to fight the US forces however long it would take. Throughout this unimaginably long period, Onoda survived, kept his rifle intact and evaded the police and other search parties.

It was a big story and a planeload of Japanese reporters came to Manila. By accident, Almonte was the one designated to escort him to President Marcos in Malacañang. Onoda was wearing his tattered uniform and an old military cap. He was small and wiry and sported a wispy moustache and a rough beard. He handed his sword to Marcos who returned it and told him to keep it—to remind him of his loyalty and bravery. To finish with some closing words, Almonte narrated what he saw, which left a lasting impression:

President Marcos expounded on the theme that valor is universal. He cited Onoda as the “highest symbol of a Japanese soldier fighting for his emperor and the homeland.” Marcos also expressed admiration for the Japanese soldiers whom he had fought for four years.

In his eloquent manner, Marcos said he extended “full and complete pardon to Lt. Onoda for any violations he may have committed during and after the war, not only in recognition of his courage but also in the hope that the world will be able to ban wars completely and establish brotherhood among nations, especially those in Asia.” He congratulated the Japanese people and government for having such a gallant soldier.

This idea has stayed with me for many years as much as Onoda.

In building a nation, leaders and thinkers are shaped by other countries’ experiences. For Almonte, Japan loomed large as a source of ideas, a fountain of inspiration.