

**\*\*Title:\*\*** In the Matter of the Testate Estate of Edward E. Christensen, Deceased (Aznar v. Garcia)

**\*\*Facts:\*\*** This case involves the testate estate of the late Edward E. Christensen. The deceased was a citizen of the United States and the State of California, however, at the time of his death he was domiciled in the Philippines. Edward E. Christensen left behind a last will and testament executed in Manila on March 5, 1951. In it, he bequeathed a sum to a certain Maria Helen Christensen, whom he explicitly stated was not related to him by blood nor had been adopted by him. The main beneficiary of his will was his acknowledged daughter, Maria Lucy Christensen Daney, to whom the rest, remainder, and residue of his property were left.

The dispute arose when Maria Helen Christensen Garcia, an acknowledged natural child of the deceased, opposed the executor's final account and project of partition. She claimed a right to her legitime as an acknowledged natural child of the deceased, as previously established by the Philippine Supreme Court in G.R. Nos. L-11483-84. The Court of First Instance of Davao ruled that the decedent being a citizen of California, the successional rights to his estate should be governed by California law, not Philippine law, as argued by Maria Helen Christensen Garcia.

**\*\*Issues:\*\***

1. Should the succession to Edward E. Christensen's estate be governed by the laws of the Philippines or by those of California?
2. Is Helen Christensen Garcia entitled to a legitime as an acknowledged natural child under Philippine law?
3. Does the renvoi doctrine apply in this case, referring the matter back to Philippine law from California law?

**\*\*Court's Decision:\*\***

The Supreme Court reversed the lower court's decision, ruling that the distribution of the estate of Edward E. Christensen should be adjudicated under Philippine law. The Court determined that though Christensen was a citizen of California, his domicile was in the Philippines, and thus, the Philippines was the forum for the settlement of his estate. Moreover, the Court found that under the conflict of laws rule in California (Article 946 of the California Civil Code), the question of testamentary capacity and the intrinsic validity of testamentary provisions should be referred back to the law of the domicile of the decedent. Given the circumstance that the decedent was domiciled in the Philippines at the time of

death, the Philippine law on succession, which provides for legitimes, should apply. Thus, Maria Helen Christensen Garcia is entitled to a legitime per Philippine law.

**\*\*Doctrine:\*\***

The case establishes the doctrine that when a conflict-of-law situation arises, the law of the decedent's domicile at the time of death shall apply with regard to the intrinsic validity of testamentary provisions. This is in line with the renvoi doctrine, which allows courts to refer to the whole law of the foreign country, including its conflict-of-law rules. The Court held that where a conflict-of-law rule of another jurisdiction refers a matter back to Philippine law, the intrinsic validity of testamentary provisions shall be governed by Philippine law.

**\*\*Class Notes:\*\***

- Citizenship: The citizenship of an individual does not necessarily determine the applicable law for succession; domicile is the crucial factor.
- Domicile vs. Residence: Domicile requires bodily presence and an intention to make it one's permanent home, while residence simply requires bodily presence as an inhabitant.
- Intrinsic Validity of Testamentary Provisions: Governed by the national law of the decedent, which may refer back to the law of domicile through the renvoi doctrine in cases where the decedent was not domiciled in his country of citizenship.
- Renvoi Doctrine: The theory allowing the referral of a case back to the law of the domicile from the law indicated by the conflict rules of the country of which the decedent was a citizen.
- Legitimes: The Philippine law on succession provides for mandatory shares (legitimes) to certain heirs, which cannot be deprived by testamentary dispositions.

**\*\*Historical Background:\*\***

The Christensen case is positioned within the larger context of private international law, which governs the choice of law to apply when a legal case presents connections with more than one jurisdiction. The conflict arose from the interplay between the testamentary freedom espoused by California law and the Philippine law's protection of legitimate heirs' inheritance rights. This case is illustrative of the application of the renvoi doctrine which, although complicated and not uniformly applied worldwide, is designed to achieve unity in private international law and aims to prevent the denial of a party's inheritance rights due to differences in national legal systems.