

Title: Delfin Lamsis et al. vs. Margarita Semon Dong-E

Facts:

The conflict at the heart of this case centers around an untitled piece of land, Lot No. 1, measuring approximately 80,736 square meters along Km. 5 Asin Road, Baguio City. The land in question was part of a larger parcel amounting to 186,090 square meters. The petitioners, consisting of Delfin Lamsis, Maynard Mondiguin, Jose Valdez, Jr., and the Heirs of Agustin Kitma represented by Eugene Kitma (collectively referred to as the Lamsis Group), occupied this land, but Margarita Semon Dong-E claimed ownership through her ancestral rights.

According to Margarita, the property ownership dates back to her grandfather, Ap-ap, in 1922. Upon his death, it passed to his children who declared it for taxation in 1964 under the name “The Heirs of Ap-ap” and obtained a survey plan during the same year. The heir Gilbert Semon, Margarita’s father, gained possession of the land through a Deed of Quitclaim dated February 26, 1964. Between 1976 and 1978, Gilbert Semon allowed his in-laws to construct homes and introduce improvements on Lot No. 1. After their passing in the 1980s, their children took over different portions of the property. The respondent claimed that it was a relationship of tolerance until the Lamsis group’s actions led to expanding their occupation and selling parts of the lot.

The dispute escalated, leading Margarita to file a complaint for recovery, reconveyance, and damages against the occupants in Civil Case No. 4140-R. Margarita aimed to nullify the sales made by Delfin and Agustin to Maynard and Jose, as she was open to donating parts of the land to her cousins but wished to demarcate those areas herself.

Petitioners challenged Margarita’s claims, asserting the land was public and initially occupied with permission from the Smith heirs. They questioned the legitimacy of Margarita’s documents, including the quitclaim, by presenting testimonies that her documentation was fabricated.

The dispute advanced through judicial processes, culminating in a ruling by the Regional Trial Court favorable to Margarita. The Lamsis Group appealed to the Court of Appeals, which affirmed the trial court’s decision, prompting the current review petition to the Supreme Court.

Issues:

1. Whether the appellate court erred by affirming the trial court’s decision that favored

Margarita based on a preponderance of evidence.

2. Whether the petitioners have acquired prescriptive rights over the land.
3. Whether the trial court had jurisdiction in light of the Indigenous People's Rights Act of 1997 when the complaint was filed.
4. Whether the case pending before the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) should take precedence over the current reivindicatory action.

Court's Decision:

The Supreme Court denied the petitioners' claims, affirming the lower court's verdict that Margarita adequately proved her ownership via a preponderance of evidence. The ruling maintained the consistency of evidential and testimonial strength, as two courts arrived at the same conclusion, thereby barring a factual review under Rule 45.

1. Regarding prescriptive rights, the Court found against the petitioners as their possession was deemed purely permissive or by tolerance, lacking acts of repudiation necessary for adverse possession.
2. On jurisdiction, the petitioners raised this issue belatedly. Citing the doctrine of laches, the Court held that even though jurisdictional objections could be introduced at any point, the petitioners' delay in raising this defense was unreasonable and detrimental to their position.
3. Concerning the precedence of the NCIP case, the Court noted that the issuance of a Certificate of Ancestral Land Title (CALT) is akin to registration proceedings concerning title recognition and not a definitive adjudication of ownership conflicting with the reivindicatory action.

Doctrine:

This case emphasized the concept of laches, where delay bars a claim despite existing jurisdictional objections. It reiterated that permissive possession cannot ripen into ownership sans express repudiation, aligning with dominant property doctrines.

Class Notes:

- Laches: Inaction over an extended period can preclude jurisdictional challenges.
- Prescription: Without repudiation, possession by tolerance does not evolve into ownership.
- Jurisdiction: Once missed, raising this late can be barred by laches.
- Ancestral Lands: CALT proceedings and actions to recover ownership fundamentally differ in purpose and effect, preventing *litis pendentia*.

Historical Background:

The case occurs in the evolving context of indigenous land rights in the Philippines, post-enactment of the Indigenous People's Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997. The IPRA aimed to secure indigenous communities' titles, leading to overlaps between traditional jurisdictional issues and modern statutory provisions, highlighting the ongoing discourse on ancestral lands within the nation's legal landscape.