

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. ISIDRO RAMIREZ Y BALLAD, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

Ponente: TIJAM, J.

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TIJAM, J.:

Before this Court is an Appeal[1] interposed by Accused-Appellant Isidro Ramirez y Ballad (Ramirez), assailing the Decision[2] dated February 23, 2011, of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Tuguegarao City, Branch 03 in Criminal Case No. 12145, which found Ramirez, as well as co-accused Melanio Furigay y Suyu (Furigay), guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the felony of murder, and sentenced them to suffer the penalty of imprisonment of reclusion perpetua.

The facts pertinent to the resolution of this case are as follows:

On June 29, 2006, an Information[3] was filed by the Provincial Prosecutor charging Ramirez and Furigay of Murder as defined and penalized under Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code, as amended by Republic Act 7659, alleging the following:

"That on or about JANUARY 26, 2003 in the Municipality of Penablanca, Province of Cagayan and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the said accused ISIDRO RAMIREZ Y BALLAD and SP01 MELANIO FURIGAY Y SUYU armed with a knife and M16 Assault Rifle, conspiring together and helping each other, with intent to kill, treachery and with evident premeditation, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously attack, assault and stab MANUEL BUGAO, inflicting upon him stab wound on his body which caused his death.

CONTRARY TO LAW."

Upon his arraignment on May 20, 2008, Ramirez pleaded "not guilty"[4] to the charge against him. Furigay likewise entered a plea of "not guilty" during his arraignment on June 23, 2008.[5]

Ramirez and Furigay filed a Petition for Bail,[6] but was denied in a Resolution dated June 3, 2009[7]. Forthwith, trial on the merits ensued.

The version of the prosecution:

On January 26, 2003, at 10:00 o'clock in the morning, the victim Manuel Bugao (Manuel), Virgilio Suyat, Jr.(Virgilio), Roniel Bugao (Roniel), Rollan Bugao (Rollan) and Benito Malaggay (Benito), (hereinafter referred to as "Bugao's group") were making farm huts situated in Sitio Caronsi, Alimannao, Penablanca, Cagayan, in the land of Mr. Aledgundo Cayosa (Aledgundo). Consequently, Ramirez (who was armed with a .45 caliber pistol), with Furigay, in a police uniform and armed with an armalite [M16][8], together with his companions, armed with bolos, arrived and surrounded Bugao's group.[9]

Manuel told Ramirez that they were not going to fight. When he was about to show a map of Aledgundo's land, Ramirez boxed Manuel and thereafter stabbed him. Rollan asked help from Furigay, but the latter ignored his plea. Instead, Furigay pushed Rollan and pointed his gun at him.[10]

One of the witnesses, Romeo Ballad (Romeo), testified that he accompanied Ramirez's group to drive away Bugao's group. He was more or less a meter away when Ramirez stabbed Manuel. He related that Manuel did not fight with Ramirez and was even asking for mercy.[11]

After the stabbing, members of Bugao's group asked Furigay to rush Manuel to the hospital but Furigay neither helped Manuel nor arrested anyone from the group.[12]

Ramirez pressured Romeo to confess to the killing of Manuel. They went directly to the police station after the incident, where Ramirez let Romeo sign a document[13] written in English, which he did not understand and was not explained to him in Itawes dialect. Out of fear of Ramirez, Romeo signed the same.[14]

Another witness, Virgilio testified that two days before the incident, Ramirez went to the same area where they were making a farm hut. Ramirez told Manuel that he owns the land. Bugao's group told Ramirez that Aledgundo permitted them to build a farm hut.[15] Nevertheless, Ramirez told the group to remove the fence or else he will come back and kill them.[16]

Two days after Manuel's death, police authorities informed the deceased's family's lawyer that they arrested the person who killed their father. When they went to the police station, Romeo was presented as the one who killed Manuel. Upon seeing Ramirez, who came out from one of the rooms, Rollan shouted to their lawyer that it was Ramirez who killed their father.[17]

Upon Romeo's release from detention, he went to the deceased's family's lawyer's house and through an affidavit, gave his own version of what transpired[18] during the incident. He recanted an earlier affidavit[19] stating that he killed Manuel. He claimed that he was unable to give his testimony earlier because he was in the BJMP and he was afraid of Ramirez.[20]

The Version of the Defense

Defense witness, Melanio Ballad (Melanio) testified that in the morning of January 26, 2003, he was with Ramirez and Furigay, along with other companions, to confirm that there were Kalingas who erected their houses on their lot.[21] He had earlier sought the assistance of Ramirez, who in turn asked for the assistance of Furigay, to drive out the Kalingas from their lot.[22]

Ramirez denied the allegations that it was he who stabbed and killed Manuel.[23] He testified that he talked to one member of Bugao's group to inquire on why they were constructing a hut considering they were not the land owners. Bugao's group told him that the land where they were erecting the bunk house is owned by Aledgundo. Ramirez advised them to stop constructing the house. Since the person he was talking to was furious, he tried talking to another person who seemed to be their leader. He was suddenly surprised when he heard a shout that a person was stabbed. He saw a person sprawled on the ground and Romeo admitted that he was the one who stabbed the person.[24]

Furigay then apprehended Romeo, got the knife used to stab Manuel and together with Ramirez, brought Romeo to the police station, where Furigay entered the incident in the police blotter.[25]

During the trial, the RTC of Tuguegarao City learned of a civil action for damages arising from the same incident, that was currently pending before the RTC of Tabuk, Kalinga. As a result of which, the private prosecutor was no longer allowed to prosecute the case.[26]

After trial on the merits, the RTC of Tuguegarao City rendered a Decision[27] dated February 23, 2011 convicting Ramirez and Furigay of the crime of Murder. The dispositive portion of the decision reads:

"WHEREFORE, in view of all the foregoing, the Court finds accused ISIDRO RAMIREZ y Ballad and

MELANIO FURIGAY y Suyu GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt of the felony of MURDER, defined and penalized under Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code, as amended by Republic Act No. 7659, and hereby sentences them to suffer imprisonment of reclusion perpetua.

SO ORDERED."[28]

The RTC of Tuguegarao City did not decide on the aspect of damages:

"As to damages, the private complainant filed a separate action for damages before the Regional Trial Court in Tabuk, Kalinga."[29]

Aggrieved by his conviction, Ramirez filed a Notice of Appeal[30] on March 9, 2011, which was given due course by the RTC of Tuguegarao City in an Order dated June 8, 2011.[31]

Furigay, on the other hand, filed a Motion for Reconsideration on March 10, 2011[32], but the same was denied by the RTC of Tuguegarao City in an Order dated June 8, 2011[33].

Furigay filed with Us a Motion to Defer Decision-Making[34] on October 29, 2013, alleging that the Order of the denial of the Motion for Reconsideration appears to have not been served on his counsel, Atty. Bonifacio Albino B. Pattaguan, Jr., (Atty. Pattaguan, Jr.) and that Furigay received the Order only on October 21, 2011. He then filed a Notice of Appeal on October 24, 2011[35], but it was neither given due course nor elevated to the Court of Appeals.

The Branch Clerk of Court (BCC) of the RTC of Tuguegarao City filed a Comment and Compliance[36] and averred that the June 8, 2011 Order denying Furigay's Motion for Reconsideration was properly served[37] on Atty. Carmelo Z. Lasam, the counsel of record of Furigay. The BCC likewise pointed out that Atty. Pattaguan, Jr. signed the Motion for Reconsideration as "Collaborating Counsel for Accused Furigay".

In a January 10, 2014 Order[38], the RTC of Tuguegarao City neither gave due course to Furigay's notice of appeal nor did it elevate the same to the Court of Appeals.

Ramirez interposed the present appeal raising the following issues:

"I. WHETHER OR NOT THE ACCUSED ARE GUILTY BEYOND MORAL CERTAINTY FOR THE CRIME OF MURDER.

II. WHETHER OR NOT THE KILLING WAS COMMITTED WITH TEACHERY (sic), EVIDENT PREMEDITATION AND CONSPIRACY."[39]

Ramirez imputes error upon the RTC of Tuguegarao City positing that it erred when he was not acquitted based on the voluntary confession of Romeo, and that his recantation should not be given merit. He also points out that the RTC of Tuguegarao City erred in finding that the offense was committed with treachery and conspiracy.

The Office of the Solicitor General is of the opinion that the voluntary surrender and confession of Romeo was obtained in violation of his constitutional rights, therefore the RTC of Tuguegarao City correctly disregarded the same. It also posits that treachery and conspiracy were proven by the prosecution.

The Appeal has no merit.

Ramirez would have Us first focus on the confession made by Romeo, and that his recanting of the same deserves scant consideration. We, however, are not persuaded.

Confession to be admissible must be a) voluntary; b) made with the assistance of a competent and independent counsel; c) express; and, d) in writing.[40] These were not met in this case.

We note that Romeo's supposed confession or admission was made without the assistance of a competent and independent counsel:

"Q While at the police station what happened?

A When we were at the police station they let me signed (sic) a document, sir.

Q Who let you signed (sic) a document?

A Bgy. Captain Ramirez, sir.

Q Was this document written in English or Tagalog or Itawes?

A It was written in English, sir.

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Q Mr. Witness when they asked you to sign this affidavit at the police station, did you have a counsel?

xxx

A None, your Honor.

Q Mr. Witness you said that you can't understand and don't read English by the way what is your academic background?

A Grade VI, sir.

Q You mentioned that you don't know how to read English and you can't understand, did the contents of the affidavit explained to you in Itawes dialect?

A No, sir.

Q Even you (sic) don't understand English and have no counsel to explain, why did you sign it?

A Because of fear that's why I signed it, sir.

Q What are you afraid of?

A I am afraid to (sic) Bgy. Captain Isidro Ramirez, sir.

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Q It Appear (sic) on your affidavit that it was subscribed and sworn to before a certain Pablo Agustin, do you know who (sic) is this Pablo Agustin? Do you know Pablo Agustin who subscribed your statement?

A No, sir. I signed a document in the police station.

Q Do you personally know this Pablo Agustin?

A No, sir.

xxx"[41](Emphasis Ours)

People vs. Janson[42] is instructive on the inadmissibility of a confession made without counsel:

"It is well-settled that the Constitution abhors an uncounselled confession or admission and whatever information is derived therefrom shall be regarded as inadmissible in evidence against the confessant.

As provided for in Article III, Section 12 of the 1987 Constitution, (1) Any person under investigation for the commission of an offense shall have the right to be informed of his right to remain silent and to have competent and independent counsel preferably of his own choice. If the person cannot afford the services of counsel, he must be provided with one. These rights cannot be waived except in writing and in the presence of counsel.

xxx xxx xxx

(3) Any confession or admission obtained in violation of this or the preceding section shall be inadmissible against him.

In *People v. Javar*, this Court was clear in pronouncing that any statement obtained in violation of the Constitution, whether exculpatory or inculpatory, in whole or in part, shall be inadmissible in evidence. Even if the confession contains a grain of truth, if it was made without the assistance of counsel, it becomes inadmissible in evidence, regardless of the absence of coercion or even if it had been voluntarily given. In *People v. Gomez*, citing *People v. Rodriguez*, this Court held that Section 12(1), Article III of the Constitution requires the assistance of counsel to a person under custody even when he waives the right to counsel.

Under the Constitution and existing law as well as jurisprudence, a confession to be admissible must satisfy the following requirements: (1) it must be voluntary; (2) it must be made with the assistance of competent and independent counsel; (3) it must be express; and (4) it must be in writing.

The purpose of providing counsel to a person under custodial investigation is to curb the uncivilized practice of extracting confession by coercion no matter how slight, as would lead the accused to admit something false. What is sought to be avoided is the evil of extorting from the very mouth of the person undergoing interrogation for the commission of an offense, the very evidence with which to prosecute and thereafter convict him. These constitutional guarantees have been made available to protect him from the inherently coercive psychological, if not physical, atmosphere of such investigation.

While the Constitution sanctions the waiver of the right to counsel, it must, however, be voluntary, knowing, and intelligent, made in the presence and with the assistance of counsel, and it must be in writing. Indeed, any waiver of the right to counsel without the assistance of counsel has no evidentiary value." (Emphasis Ours)

The alleged confession, not being made with the assistance of counsel, is not admissible and was correctly disregarded by the RTC of Tuguegarao City.

Under Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code, murder is committed by any person who, not falling within the provisions of Article 246, shall kill another with any of the enumerated qualifying circumstances — including treachery and conspiracy. In a litany of cases, the Supreme Court has consistently explained that there is treachery when the offender commits any of the crimes against persons, employing means, methods or forms in the execution thereof, which tend directly and specially to ensure its execution without risk to himself arising from the defense that the offended party might make. In *People v. Barde*, the High Court stated that the essence of treachery is that the attack is deliberate and without warning, done swiftly and unexpectedly, affording the hapless, unarmed and unsuspecting victim no chance to resist or escape.[43]

Manuel's killing was done clearly without warning, swiftly and unexpectedly. The prosecution's witnesses testified that Ramirez, Furigay and their companions, who were all armed, surrounded Bugao's group; and that Ramirez boxed Manuel Bugao and then stabbed him:

"Q – Let's go back to that morning of January 26, 2003 you said that you were in sitio Caronsi and you were tilling the land at 10:00 o'clock at that time and place what happened?

A – On January 26, 2003 at 10:00 o'clock we were at sitio Caronsi making farm hut when Isidro Ramirez and companions arrived and immediately surrounded us and our companions ran away. My uncle Manuel Bugao who was standing, raised his hand and pleaded to them not to hurt us but Isidro Ramirez boxed my uncle and then he stabbed him." [44]

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"Q – Mr. Witness, you mentioned that in the morning of January 26, 2003, Mr. Isidro Ramirez and Melanio Furigay and other persons boxed your group and killed your father, will you please tell this Court how they attacked and hacked your group?

A – That morning of January 26, 2003, Isidro Ramirez and Melanio Furigay and other companions came and attacked us, they chased my cousin, my brother and two (2) other companions from Apayao, myself, my

grandfather and my father was not able to run because we were surrounded by the companions of Isidro Ramirez and Melanio Furigay holding bolos. My father told Isidro Ramirez that they were not going to fight, however, Isidro Ramirez boxed my father and stabbed him, we tried to cover the wounds of my father to stop the blood, but we were not able to stop the blood oozing from his wounds, sir."[45]

xxx

"Q – And there was a discussion between your father and Isidro Ramirez regarding the ownership of the land?

A – No sir, my father humbled himself.

Q – Yes, but he also answered that Mr. Cayosa who (sic) owned the land?

A – He did not answer, but he let them see the map, sir.

Q – So there was a lot of discussion before Isidro Ramirez alleged (sic) boxed your father because your father showed the map?

A – No sir, when my father about (sic) to show the map, Isidro Ramirez box (sic) my father, sir.

Q – Are we made to understand that when your father (sic) confronted by Isidro Ramirez, he was already (sic) the map with him?

A – Yes, sir.

Q – And that's the map of the Lagandao estate, is it not?

A – It is the map of the property of Mr. Cayosa, sir.

Q – About how many minutes lapsed when you father was allegedly confronted by Isidro Ramirez boxed (sic) your father?

A – It was on January 24, 2003 that Isidro Ramirez informed my father that he owns the property, on January 26, 2003, he did not tell my father that he owns the property but he suddenly box (sic) my father, sir.

Q – Are you trying to tell the Court that without any provocation Isidro Ramirez boxed your father?

A – Yes, sir.

Q – In your direct testimony, you said that Isidro Ramirez boxed your father?

A – Yes, sir."[46] (Emphasis Ours)

The RTC of Tuguegarao City was correct in noting:

"In this case, the prosecution sufficiently proved treachery. While the incident happened at broad daylight, the group of accused Ramirez went to confront the victim and his group two (2) days before his death, and the attack was frontal, the evidence of the prosecution established that there was a conversation between accused Ramirez and the victim when said accused boxed the victim. When the victim was getting up, said accused stabbed him. In boxing the victim and stabbing him while he was getting up, accused Ramirez disabled the victim from defending himself or from retaliating."[47]

There is no evidence that Manuel was armed. The victim was utterly defenseless, unarmed and taken by surprise by the sudden and unexpected attack from Ramirez.

The denial of Ramirez cannot overcome the clear and unequivocal identification of the prosecution's witnesses. It has been held in a number of cases that denial and alibi are weak defenses, which cannot prevail against positive identification. Positive identification where categorical and consistent and without any showing of ill motive on the part of the eyewitness testifying on the matter prevails over a denial which, if not substantiated by clear and convincing evidence is negative and self-serving evidence undeserving of weight in law. They cannot be given greater evidentiary value over the testimony of credible witnesses who testify on affirmative matters.[48]

Furthermore, the witnesses were found to be credible by the RTC of Tuguegarao City:

"The Court finds the testimony of prosecution eye witness Rollan Bugao spontaneous, positive, credible and unequivocal. While he testified, he cried incessantly as he recalled the incident. It was corroborated by other prosecution witness Virgilio Suyat and not inconsistent with the stipulations between the defense and the prosecution during the pre-trial. The mere denial of accused Ramirez cannot prevail over the testimony of Rollan Bugao."[49]

The Supreme Court has time and again explained why the determination of a witness' credibility appropriately pertains to the trial court, to wit:

"It is well settled that the evaluation of the credibility of witnesses and their testimonies is a matter best undertaken by the trial court because of its unique opportunity to observe the witnesses firsthand and to note their demeanor, conduct, and attitude under grilling examination. These are important in determining the truthfulness of witnesses and in unearthing the truth, especially in the face of conflicting testimonies. For, indeed, the emphasis, gesture, and inflection of the voice are potent aids in ascertaining the witness' credibility, and the trial court has the opportunity and can take advantage of these aids. These cannot be incorporated in the record so that all that the appellate court can see are the cold words of the witness contained in transcript of testimonies with the risk that some of what the witness actually said may have been lost in the process of transcribing. As correctly stated by an American court, "[t]here is an inherent impossibility of determining with any degree of accuracy what credit is justly due to a witness from merely reading the words spoken by him, even if there were no doubt as to the identity of the words. However artful a corrupt witness may be, there is generally, under the pressure of a skillful cross-examination, something in his manner or bearing on the stand that betrays him, and thereby destroys the force of his testimony. Many of the real tests of truth by which the artful witness is exposed in the very nature of things cannot be transcribed upon the record, and hence they can never be considered by the appellate court."[50] (Emphasis Ours)

The testimonies prove the clear and unequivocal identification of Ramirez by the prosecution's witnesses. The finding of the RTC of Tuguegarao City that their testimonies were spontaneous, positive, credible and unequivocal further bolsters their version as opposed to the bare denial of Ramirez.

The conspiracy was likewise proven in the circumstances surrounding the killing, as enunciated by the RTC of Tuguegarao City:

"It was also stipulated during the pre-trial that both accused were at the crime scene, that they knew each other, and that accused Furigay was in uniform and armed with an M16 rifle. Accused Furigay was within view of the stabbing incident and yet he did not do anything. In fact, accused Furigay did not do anything as a police officer to prevent the incident without any reasonable explanation. He did not also help the victim after he was already stabbed despite the pleas of Rollan Bugao as he left together with his co-accused and his companions after the victim lay on the ground. According to accused Furigay, he told Rollan Bugao to wait because he would go and get a vehicle and bring Romeo Ballad to the police station. There is no showing that he went back or that he sent any help to the victim thereafter. It cannot be inferred that a conspiratorial undertaking animated the acts of both accused. Thus, although it was not accused Ramirez who actually shot the victim, accused Furigay is equally liable for the crime. When there is conspiracy, the act of one is the act of all."[51]

Conspiracy exists when two or more persons come to an agreement concerning the commission of a felony and decide to commit it. Evidence need not establish the actual agreement among the conspirators showing a preconceived plan or motive for the commission of the crime. Proof of concerted action before, during and after the crime, which demonstrates their unity of design and objective, is sufficient. When conspiracy is established, the act of one is the act of all regardless of the degree of participation of each.[52]

Here, the actions of Furigay, or lack thereof, during the incident is indicative of their unity of design and objective. Had conspiracy been absent, Furigay would have found a way to placate the parties, or prevent the

stabbing, or at the very least, help the victim soon as he was stabbed.

Considering the foregoing, We find no cogent reason to reverse or set aside the decision rendered by the court a quo.

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the instant Appeal is hereby DISMISSED. Accordingly, the Decision dated February 23, 2011, of the Regional Trial Court of Tuguegarao City, Branch 03, in Criminal Case No. 12145, is hereby AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.

Baltazar-Padilla, and Reyes-Carpio, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 24-25, and pp. 31-46.

[2] Id., pp. 17-23.

[3] See Original Records, p. 1.

[4] Original Records, p. 103; See also p. 106.

[5] Ibid, p. 130; See also p. 134.

[6] Original Records, pp. 135-136.

[7] Original Records, pp. 246-250.

[8] TSN, September 12, 2008, p. 9.

[9] TSN, September 12, 2008, p.8

[10] Ibid, p. 9.

[11] TSN, January 19, 2009, pp. 7-8.

[12] TSN, January 19, 2009, p. 9.

[13] Original Records, p. 37.

[14] TSN, January 19, 2009, pp. 9-11.

[15] TSN, September 12, 2008, p. 21.

[16] TSN, October 20, 2008, p. 11.

[17] Ibid, pp. 14-15; see also TSN, January 19, 2009, pp. 15-16.

[18] Original Records, pp. 55-57.

[19] Original Records, p. 37.

[20] TSN, January 19, 2009, p. 21 and 29, see also Exhibit H, Original Records, pp. 55-57.

[21] TSN, October 28, 2009, pp. 7-10.

[22] TSN, February 3, 2010, pp. 6-7.

[23] TSN, February 3, 2010, p. 16.

- [24] TSN, February 3, 2010, pp. 10-13.
- [25] TSN, March 22, 2010, pp. 10 and 28.
- [26] Order dated June 3, 2009, Original Records, p. 254.
- [27] Rollo, pp. 17-23.
- [28] Ibid, p. 23.
- [29] Rollo, p. 22.
- [30] Rollo, pp. 24-25.
- [31] Rollo, p. 26.
- [32] Original Records, pp. 441-446.
- [33] Ibid, p. 459.
- [34] Rollo, pp. 96-98.
- [35] Rollo, p. 106.
- [36] Rollo, pp. 108-109.
- [37] Rollo, p. 114 (dorsal side).
- [38] Rollo, pp.120-122.
- [39] Rollo, p. 35.
- [40] People vs. Tuniaco, etc., G.R. No. 185710, January 19, 2010.
- [41] TSN, January 19, 2009, pp. 9-13.
- [42] G.R. No. 125938, April 4, 2003.
- [43] People vs. Villarnea, G.R. No. 200029, November 13, 2013.
- [44] TSN, September 12, 2008, p. 8.
- [45] TSN, October 20, 2008, pp. 6-7.
- [46] TSN, October 20, 2008, pp. 24-25.
- [47] Rollo, p. 22.
- [48] People vs. Agcanas, G.R. No. 174476, October 11, 2011.
- [49] Rollo, p. 21.
- [50] People vs. Abat, G.R. No. 202704, April 2, 2014.
- [51] Rollo, p. 21.
- [52] People vs. Carandang, et.al., G.R. No. 175926, July 6, 2011.

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