

**CORNELIO MOLINA, REPRESENTED BY KAREN JANE MOLINA AND
GLEN R. MOLINA, PLAINTIFFS-APPELLEES, VS. SPOUSES AGNES T.
ALVAREZ AND GILBERT G. ALVAREZ, DEFENDANTS,**

Ponente: ELBINIAS, J.

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ELBINIAS, J.:

Subject of this Appeal[1] under Rule 41 of the Rules of Court is the Decision[2] dated February 22, 2010 of the Regional Trial Court of Camiling, Tarlac, Branch 68 (“lower court” for brevity) in Civil Case No. 05-40 for “Annulment of Title, Partition, Reconveyance and Damages.”[3]

The salient facts are as follows:

Plaintiff-appellee Cornelio Molina (“plaintiff-appellee Cornelio” for brevity) was a legally adopted child of Genaro Molina (“Genaro” for brevity) and Elena Molina (“Elena” for brevity) by virtue of an Order of Adoption[4] dated January 4, 1971. On the other hand, defendant-appellant Gloria Molina (“defendant-appellant Gloria” for brevity) was treated by Cornelio and Elena as their “adopted” child without having undergone any legal process of adoption (taraken).

Genaro and Elena were the registered owners of a parcel of land located in Poblacion, Camiling, Tarlac, which was registered with the Registry of Deeds of Tarlac and which was covered by Transfer Certificate of Title No. 341265 (“subject property” for brevity).[5]

On September 3, 2001, Genaro died.[6]

On January 20, 2005, Elena and defendant-appellant Gloria sold the subject property to defendants Agnes Alvarez and Gilbert Alvarez (“defendants Agnes and Gilbert” for brevity) by virtue of a “DEED OF EXTRA-JUDICIAL PARTITION with ABSOLUTE SALE”[7] (“Deed of Partition with Sale” for brevity).

On January 31, 2005, or ten (10) days after the execution of the Deed, Elena died.[8]

On July 8, 2005 plaintiff-appellee Cornelio, represented by his children Karen Jane and Glen Molina, filed a Complaint[9] for “Annulment of Title, Partition, Reconveyance and Damages” against defendant-appellant Gloria and defendants Agnes and Gilbert.

The other facts were as stated in the lower court's assailed Decision[10] dated February 22, 2010, as follows:

“In the Complaint, plaintiff xxx prayed for the declaration of nullity of the Extra-Judicial Partition with Sale dated January 20, 2005 executed by the late Elena Molina and Gloria Molina in favor of defendant Agnes Alvarez married to Gilbert Alvarez. In the Answer of defendant Gloria Molina, she prayed for the dismissal of the complaint for lack of merit as she is a legitimate daughter of the spouses Genaro Molina and Elena Baduyan and that plaintiff Cornelio Molina is not an adopted son [of] the said spouses Genaro Molina and Elena Baduyan. In the Answer of defendants-spouses Alvarez, they also prayed for the dismissal of the complaint for lack of cause of action against them as they are purchasers in good faith.”[11]

On February 22, 2010, the lower court rendered its assailed Decision[12] declaring the Deed of Partition with Sale[13] dated January 20, 2005 null and void. The dispositive portion of the Decision stated:

“WHEREFORE, premises considered, judgment is hereby rendered, as follows:

- 1]. Declaring the Deed of Extra-judicial Partition with Absolute Sale dated January 20, 2005 over lot no. 2922-B-2-B executed by defendant Gloria Molina and Elena Molina in favor of the other defendant Agnes Alvarez married to Gilbert Alvarez as null and void;
- 2]. Declaring Transfer Certificate of Title No. 391962 in the name of Agnes Alvarez married to Gilbert Alvarez as null and void;
- 3]. Ordering the Register of Deeds of the province of Tarlac to restore Transfer Certificate of Title No. 341265 in the name of Genaro Molina married to Elena Molina;
- 4]. Ordering defendant Gloria Molina to pay the plaintiff through his attorneys-in-fact the amount of P15,000.00 as moral damages;
- 5]. Ordering defendants-spouses Agnes Alvarez and Gilbert Alvarez to pay the plaintiff through his attorneys-in-fact the amount of P15,000.00 as moral damages.

SO ORDERED.”[14]

Thus, defendant-appellant Gloria filed the Appeal[15] at bench praying that:

“WHEREFORE, the undersigned prays to the Honorable Court that the Decision of the trial court be reversed and enter a judgment dismissing the complaint for estoppel and/or laches.

Other reliefs which are just and equitable under the premises are likewise prayed for.”[16]

Defendant-appellant Gloria raised the following issues:

- “1. Whether or not the plaintiff sufficiently proved that Elena Molina's consent was vitiated on the ground that she was seriously ill at the time of the execution of the Deed.
2. Whether or not Gloria Molina is the child of the deceased Genaro Molina and Elena Molina.
3. Whether or not the plaintiffs are guilty of estoppel or laches”[17] (Italics made in the original)

At the outset, the instant Appeal is dismissible because of defendant-appellant Gloria's failure to include a subject index, page references, and an assignment of errors in her Appeal Brief.[18] Such subject index, page references, and assignment of errors are required under Section 13, Rule 44 of the Rules of Court, to wit:

“SEC.13. Contents of appellant’s brief.—The appellant’s brief shall contain, in the order herein indicated, the following:

- (a) A subject index of the matter in the brief with a digest of the arguments and page references, and a table of cases alphabetically arranged, textbooks and statutes cited with references to the pages where they are cited;
- (b) An assignment of errors intended to be urged, which errors shall be separately, distinctly and concisely stated without repetition and numbered consecutively; xxx” (Emphasis supplied)

The absence of a subject index, page references, and of an assignment of errors is fatal to the Appeal, warranting its dismissal pursuant to Section 1(f), Rule 50 of the Rules of Court, which provides:

“SEC. 1. Grounds for dismissal of Appeal. - An appeal may be dismissed by the Court of Appeals, on its own motion or on that of the appellee, on the following grounds:

(f) Absence of specific assignment of errors in the appellant's brief, or of page references to the record as required in section 13, paragraphs (a), (c), (d) and (f) of Rule 44;" (Emphasis supplied)

That defendant-appellant Gloria's failure to include a subject index and page references in her Appeal Brief[19] warrants the dismissal of her Appeal is pursuant to the following declaration of the Supreme Court in *Adelia C. Mendoza and as Attorney-in-Fact of Alice Malleta vs. United Coconut Planters Bank, Inc.*, G.R. No. 165575, February 2, 2011:

"In this case, the Appellants' Brief of petitioners did not have a subject index. The importance of a subject index should not be underestimated. *De Liano v. Court of Appeals* declared that the subject index functions like a table of contents, facilitating the review of appeals by providing ready reference. It held that:

[t]he first requirement of an appellant's brief is a subject index. The index is intended to facilitate the review of appeals by providing ready reference, functioning much like a table of contents. xxx The subject index makes readily available at one's fingertips the subject of the contents of the brief so that the need to thumb through the brief page after page to locate a party's arguments, or a particular citation, or whatever else needs to be found and considered, is obviated." (Emphasis supplied)

Defendant-appellant Gloria's "ISSUES" could not be considered as a proper replacement for the required "Assignment of Errors" because a statement of issues is different from an assignment of errors. This was as discussed by the Supreme Court in the earlier cited case of *Adelia Mendoza and as Attorney-in-Fact of Alice Malleta v. United Coconut Planter's Bank*, G.R. No. 165575, February 2, 2011, to wit:

"The statement of issues is not to be confused with the assignment of errors, since they are not one and the same; otherwise, the rules would not require a separate statement for each. An assignment of errors is an enumeration by the appellant of the errors alleged to have been committed by the trial court for which he/she seeks to obtain a reversal of the judgment, while the statement of issues puts forth the questions of fact or law to be resolved by the appellate court." (Emphasis supplied)

But even if the Appeal could be considered to have complied with the proper contents of an Appellant's Brief, still, defendant-appellant Gloria's positions, after a careful study of the records, were revealed to be unmeritorious.

Contrary to defendant-appellant Gloria's allegations in her first issue, Elena's consent was shown to have been vitiated when she executed the Deed of Partition with Sale[20].

Defendant-appellant Gloria had stated that:

"First and foremost, the assailed Deed was duly notarized by a notary public. The allegations of the plaintiff in his complaint that Elena Molina was 'seriously ill' were not proved by competent and preponderant evidence. In the absence of proof, the notarial acknowledgment prevails over the bare allegations of the plaintiff.

Based on the Certificate of Death of Elena Molina containing the cause of her death on February 5, 2005 as 'A. CRA B. Septicemia C. Bedsores Buttocks', this does not show that Elena Molina was of unsound mind. She was 76 years old only at the time of her death. In fact, Elena Molina was still able to travel on January 20, 2005 from Camiling, Tarlac to Mangatarem, Pangasinan where the office of the notary public was located which is about 25 kilometers away.

Another thing is no physician was ever presented by the plaintiff that Elena Molina was of unsound mind or an expert witness in the field of medicine to prove that her sickness made her of unsound mind. The plaintiff has the burden to prove that Elena Molina was of unsound mind but plaintiff was not able to overcome this burden.

On the sheer exigency of the plaintiff of claiming that Elena Molina was seriously ill, the trial court concluded without sufficient evidence that Elena Molina was of unsound mind. xxx

There is no evidence offered by the plaintiff to debunk the certification of the notary public. Assuming that Gloria Molina has no right to participate in the [partition] and that Cornelio was excluded, it is only the latter's participation be set aside. xxx.”[21] (Emphasis supplied)

Defeating defendant-appellant Gloria's arguments however, is that the circumstances surrounding the execution of the Deed of Partition with Sale[22] revealed that Elena's consent was vitiated at the time of its execution.

These circumstances were that: a) Elena was seriously ill when she executed the Deed because she suffered from stroke on January 17, 2005 or three (3) days before the execution of the Deed;[23] b) Elena died ten (10) days after the execution of the Deed;[24] c) Elena had no other companion except defendant-appellant Gloria,[25] and; d) defendant-appellant Gloria was the only one who negotiated with defendants Agnes and Gilbert.[26] All of these were as also found by the lower court in its Decision[27] appealed from, as follows:

“Third, the circumstances surrounding the execution of the deed of extra-judicial partition with sale manifest a vitiated consent on the part of Elena Molina. First, Elena Molina was in sick bed during that time due to failing health and advanced age. Second, Elena Molina was only living with defendant Gloria Molina during that time. Third, defendant Gloria Molina was the one negotiating with defendant Alvarez regarding the sale of the subject property. Given the obtaining circumstances coupled with the testimony of Karen Jane Molina and her father Cornelio Molina that due to the seriousness of the sickness of Elena Molina, the latter could not recognize them anymore, it is likely that Elena Molina could not handle her affairs anymore and that she was an easy prey to deceit and exploitation. Verily, the presumption that a person is presumed to be of sound mind at any particular time and the condition is presumed to continue to exist in the absence of proof to the contrary is rebutted in this case. xxx

Article 24 of the Civil Code enjoins courts to be vigilant for the protection of a party to a contract who is placed at a disadvantage on account of his ignorance, mental weakness or other handicap, like Elena Molina in this case.”[28] (Emphasis supplied)

If a party, like Elena here, was seriously ill when she entered into a contract, then any such contract could be annulled on ground of causal fraud. This being so, is in accordance with the pronouncement of the Supreme Court in *Tongson, et al. v. Emergency Pawnshop Bula, Inc. and Napala*, G.R. No. 167874, January 15, 2010, to wit:

“Under Article 1338 of the Civil Code, there is fraud when, through insidious words or machinations of one of the contracting parties, the other is induced to enter into a contract which, without them, he would not have agreed to. In order that fraud may vitiate consent, it must be the causal (*dolo causante*), not merely the incidental (*dolo incidente*), inducement to the making of the contract. Additionally, the fraud must be serious.

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Some of the instances where this Court found the existence of causal fraud include: (1) when the seller, who had no intention to part with her property, was 'tricked into believing' that what she signed were papers pertinent to her application for the reconstitution of her burned certificate of title, not a deed of sale; (2) when the signature of the authorized corporate officer was forged; or (3) when the seller was seriously ill, and died a week after signing the deed of sale raising doubts on whether the seller could have read, or fully understood, the contents of the documents he signed or of the consequences of his act.” (Emphasis supplied)

Moreover, contrary to defendant-appellant Gloria's allegations in her second issue, defendant-appellant Gloria had no right to participate in the Extra-Judicial Partition of the property left by Genaro.

On this matter, defendant-appellant Elena had argued that:

“Gloria Molina was born on December 2, 1953. Deceased Genaro Molina per the Certificate of Live Birth caused the registration of her birth and certified Gloria Molina as his daughter with Elena Molina. Since its

registration as daughter of the spouses Genaro and Elena Molina up to the filing of the instant complaint, no one assails her being a daughter of the spouses. Not even the deceased Cornelio Molina who claims as adopted never assailed the status of Gloria Molina. During the lifetime of Genaro Molina and Elena Molina, they considered Gloria Molina as their daughter. It was only when Elena Molina died after how many decades that Cornelio Molina surfaced and assailed Gloria Molina's status.

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From the provisions of the law, Gloria Molina is the child of the spouses Genaro and Elena Molina. The only evidence of the plaintiff against the status of Gloria Molina is the result of the DNA. It is unfortunate for Gloria Molina to counter the findings of her DNA by hiring another DNA expert for hundreds of thousands of pesos as she can not produce the amount of money for DNA compared to Cornelio who worked in the USA.”[29] (Emphasis supplied)

Prevailing over defendant-appellant Gloria's allegations however, is that plaintiff-appellee Cornelio sufficiently proved that defendant-appellant Gloria was not a legal heir of Genaro and Elena. The declaration in defendant-appellant Gloria's Certificate of Live Birth that Genaro and Elena were her parents was negated by the DNA results[30] conducted, and which results were testified to by Dr. Ma. Corazon A. De Ungria of the DNA Analysis Laboratory, Natural Sciences Research Institute of the University of the Philippines. Defendant-appellant Gloria not being a legal heir of Genaro and Elena was as also found by the lower court in its assailed Decision,[31] to wit:

“Second, defendant Gloria Molina, one of the vendors in the questioned deed of extra-judicial partition with sale, has no legal right whatsoever to participate in the partition of the property left behind by the deceased Genaro Molina and to subsequently sell her alleged share because she is not the deceased-spouses' biological daughter but only their adopted daughter without legal adoption papers (taraken). Besides, based on the deposition of Cornelio Molina, his generous adoptive parents had already given defendant Gloria Molina a parcel of land.

Defendant Gloria Molina's birth certificate xxx showing that her parents are Genaro Molina and Elena Molina is unpersuasive. For one, said birth certificate was sufficiently rebutted by the findings of DNA testing expert Dr. Ma. Corazon A. De Ungria of the DNA Analysis Laboratory, Natural Sciences Research Institute, University of the Philippines. Based on her testimony, she found six (6) mismatches of the DNA of Francisca Domingo and Gloria Molina. She then concludes 'Based on the results of DNA analysis, there is no possibility that Ms. Francisca B. Domingo is a material relative of Ms. Gloria Molina.' xxx Considering that the DNA analysis was conducted by a well-known expert on DNA analysis, there is no reason to doubt her findings. In fact, all the counsels who happened to be present when Dr. Ungria testified were awed by her explanation on how she conducted the DNA test and on how her staff preserved the integrity of the blood samples taken from the parties involved in Camiling, Tarlac and transported to their laboratory. Given the uncontroverted fact that Elena Molina and Francisca Domingo are siblings, defendant Gloria Molina is therefore not maternally related to Elena Baduyan Molina. For another, while it is true that an official document such as defendant's birth certificate enjoys the presumption of regularity, the totality of the evidence presented during the trial, sufficiently negates such presumption. The circumstances surrounding the birth of defendant Gloria Molina show that there is no evidence of Elena Molina's pregnancy, such as medical records or doctors' prescriptions, other than the birth certificate itself. In fact, no witness was presented to attest to the pregnancy of Elena Molina during that time. Relying merely on the assumption of the validity of the birth certificate, defendant Molina has presented no other evidence other than the said document to show that she is really Elena Molina's child.”[32] (Emphasis supplied)

Any presumption of a party, like defendant-appellant Gloria, as being the heir to another, such as to Genaro and Elena, is defeated by contrary results of DNA testing. Such DNA testing, in turn, is considered as a dependable

and an authoritative form of gathering evidence of parentage, as is pursuant to the following pronouncement of the Supreme Court in *Agustin v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 162571, June 15, 2005:

“In 2001, however, we opened the possibility of admitting DNA as evidence of parentage, as enunciated in *Tijing v. Court of Appeals*:

A final note. Parentage will still be resolved using conventional methods unless we adopt the modern and scientific ways available. Fortunately, we have now the facility and expertise in using DNA test for identification and parentage testing. The University of the Philippines Natural Science Research Institute (UP-NSRI) DNA Analysis Laboratory has now the capability to conduct DNA typing using short tandem repeat (STR) analysis. The analysis is based on the fact that the DNA of a child/person has two (2) copies, one copy from the mother and the other from the father. The DNA from the mother, the alleged father and child are analyzed to establish parentage. Of course, being a novel scientific technique, the use of DNA test as evidence is still open to challenge. Eventually, as the appropriate case comes, courts should not hesitate to rule on the admissibility of DNA evidence. For it was said, that courts should apply the results of science when competently obtained in aid of situations presented, since to reject said result is to deny progress.

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Significantly, we upheld the constitutionality of compulsory DNA testing and the admissibility of the results thereof as evidence.

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For too long, illegitimate children have been marginalized by fathers who choose to deny their existence. The growing sophistication of DNA testing technology finally provides a much needed equalizer for such ostracized and abandoned progeny. We have long believed in the merits of DNA testing and have repeatedly expressed as much in the past. This case comes at a perfect time when DNA testing has finally evolved into a dependable and authoritative form of evidence gathering. We therefore take this opportunity to forcefully reiterate our stand that DNA testing is a valid means of determining paternity.” (Emphasis supplied; Underlining and Italics were made in the original)

Defendant-appellant Gloria could not also claim in her third issue that plaintiff-appellee Cornelio was already barred by estoppel and laches from questioning defendant-appellant Gloria's parentage.

Defendant-appellant Gloria had argued that:

“In the testimonies of Cornelio Molina and his daughter Karen Molina as found in the narration of facts in the Decision by the trial court, indeed, Gloria Molina was conferred since time immemorial the status of being a daughter of Genaro and Elena. They acknowledged this fact. On this alone, Cornelio and his heirs are guilty of estoppel or at least laches for not bringing action to impugn the legitimacy or filiation of Gloria Molina within reasonable time and during the lifetime of their parents who could have spoken. Cornelio brought the action in a collateral attack only in this complaint. In closing this brief, we invoke the equitable estoppel and laches against the plaintiff.”[33] (Emphasis supplied)

Defeating defendant-appellant Gloria's allegations however, is that the rule on prescription or estoppel and laches as provided for under Article 263 of the Civil Code can not be applied in this case. This is because Article 263 of the Civil Code applies only in cases where the legitimacy or filiation of a child was being questioned. Article 263 provides:

“Art. 263. The action to impugn the legitimacy of the child shall be brought within one year from the recording of the birth in the Civil Register, if the husband should be in the same place, or in a proper case, any of his heirs.

If he or his heirs are absent, the period shall be eighteen months if they should reside in the Philippines; and two years if abroad. If the birth of the child has been concealed, the term shall be counted from the discovery of the fraud.”

Here, the action filed by plaintiff-appellee Cornelio was for “Annulment of Title, Partition, Reconveyance and Damages,”[34] which is therefore not subject to the prescriptive periods in impugning the legitimacy of a child under Article 263.

Besides, Article 263 involves a situation where a husband or his heirs questioned the filiation of a child, particularly, that the child was not the husband's child with his wife. Article 263 does not apply to the situation here where plaintiff-appellee Cornelio alleged in his Complaint[35] that defendant-appellant Gloria was not the child of Genaro and Elena whatsoever.

That Article 263 does not apply to cases when the child was alleged not to be the child of a particular couple, as was the situation here, is pursuant to the following declaration of the Supreme Court in *Labagala v. Santiago, et. al.*, G.R. No. 132305, December 4, 2001:

“On the first issue, we find petitioner’s reliance on Article 263 of the Civil Code to be misplaced. xxx

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This article should be read in conjunction with the other articles in the same chapter on paternity and filiation in the Civil Code. A careful reading of said chapter would reveal that it contemplates situations where a doubt exists that a child is indeed a man’s child by his wife, and the husband (or, in proper cases, his heirs) denies the child’s filiation. It does not refer to situations where a child is alleged not to be the child at all of a particular couple.

Article 263 refers to an action to impugn the legitimacy of a child, to assert and prove that a person is not a man’s child by his wife. However, the present case is not one impugning petitioner’s legitimacy. Respondents are asserting not merely that petitioner is not a legitimate child of Jose, but that she is not a child of Jose at all. Moreover, the present action is one for recovery of title and possession, and thus outside the scope of Article 263 on prescriptive periods.” (Emphasis supplied)

Considering that defendant-appellant Gloria was not a child of Elena and Genaro, and could therefore neither inherit from, nor sell any property owned by Genaro and Elena, and considering further that Elena's consent in the execution of the questioned Deed of Partition with Sale[36] was vitiated, then, such Deed of Partition with Sale[37] executed by Elena and defendant-appellant Gloria in favor of defendants Agnes and Gilbert was invalid.

Indeed, the findings of the lower court are entitled to great weight and respect on appeal, and are in fact accorded finality when supported by sufficient evidence on the record,[38] as in this case. The lower court's conclusions and findings of fact should not be disturbed unless for strong and cogent reasons, because it is in a better position to examine real evidence, as well as observe the demeanor of the witnesses during trial.[39]

After careful consideration of all the facts, arguments, and issues appearing on the records as well as of the pertinent laws and jurisprudence, and, in accordance with what is best determined to be proper under the circumstances, the following disposition is therefore made on these matters.

GIVEN ALL THESE, the Appeal is DENIED.

SO ORDERED.

Didican, and Paredes, JJ., concur.

- [1] Rollo, pp. 19-26.
- [2] Rollo, pp. 30-40.
- [3] Records, pp. 1-5.
- [4] Records, pp. 446-448.
- [5] Records, p. 13.
- [6] Records, p. 8.
- [7] Records, pp. 14-15.
- [8] Records, p. 9.
- [9] Records, pp. 1-5.
- [10] Rollo, pp. 30-40.
- [11] Rollo, p. 30.
- [12] Rollo, pp. 30-40.
- [13] Records, pp. 14-15.
- [14] Rollo, p. 40.
- [15] Rollo, pp. 19-26.
- [16] Rollo, p. 26.
- [17] Rollo, p. 22.
- [18] Rollo, pp. 19-26.
- [19] Rollo, pp. 19-26.
- [20] Records, pp. 14-15.
- [21] Rollo, pp. 22-23.
- [22] Records, pp. 14-15.
- [23] Rollo, p. 38.
- [24] Records, p. 9.
- [25] Rollo, p. 38.
- [26] Rollo, p. 38.
- [27] Rollo, pp. 30-40.
- [28] Rollo, pp. 38-39.

[29] Rollo, pp. 23-25.

[30] Rollo, pp. 312-324.

[31] Rollo, pp. 30-40.

[32] Rollo, p. 37.

[33] Rollo, pp. 25-26.

[34] Records, pp. 1-5.

[35] Records, pp. 1-5.

[36] Records, pp. 14-15.

[37] Records, pp. 14-15.

[38] Spouses Patricio and Myrna Bernales vs. Heirs of Julian Sambaan, et al., G.R. No. 163271, January 15, 2010.

[39] Spouses Patricio vs. Heirs of Sambaan, G.R. No. 163271, January 15, 2010.

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