

**DELIA JAYME, FOR HERSELF AND AS ATTORNEY-IN-FACT OF
NENITA JAYME-ZAMORA, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEES, VS. SPOUSES
EDUARDO AND LOURDES JAYME LACHICA, PABLO T. JAYME,
MILAGROS S. DELA CRU...**

Ponente: INGLES, G. T., J.

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INGLES, G. T., J.:

THE CASE

For determination is an appeal[1] filed by defendant-appellants Spouses Eduardo and Lourdes Lachica, et al., from the Decision[2] of Branch 60, Regional Trial Court of Cadiz City, Negros Occidental where the case was disposed as follows, thus:

“WHEREFORE, in view of all the foregoing, judgment is hereby rendered as follows:

- Declaring the Deed of Donation (Exh. “F”) executed by defendant Pablo T. Jayme in favor of Lourdes Lachica null and void;
- Declaring the transfer of TCT No. T-45911 (Exh. “A”) into two sub-lots under TCT No. T-187589 (Exh. “B”) and TCT No. T- 187481 (Exh. “C”) by the Register of Deeds, null and void;
- Declaring TCT No. T-187590 (Exh. “D”) registered in the name of Lourdes Lachica null and void;
- Ordering the Register of Deeds of the Province of Negros Occidental to cancel the titles, bearing No. T-187589 and T- 187590 and re-instate TCT No. T-45911 in the name of Pablo T. Jayme and Maria Andraneda Jayme;
- Ordering the equal partition of the property covered by TCT No. T-45911 among the legitimate heirs of Spouses Pablo and Maria Jayme, namely: Lourdes Jayme Lachica, Delia A. Jayme, Nenita Jayme Zamora, Marlowe A. Jayme and to the heirs of the late Antonio Jayme represented by his surviving spouse, Teresita J. Polfer and his children;
- Ordering defendant Lourdes Lachica to pay the plaintiffs the amount of P500,000.00 by way of moral damages, P50,000.00 by way of attorney’s fees; and
- To pay the cost of suit

SO ORDERED.”

Plaintiff-appellees Delia Jayme, et al., filed a complaint, and later was amended, for Annulment of Donation, Annulment of Title and Partition[3] docketed as Civil Case No. 647-S with the court a quo. It prayed among others that the Deed of Donation[4] executed by deceased Pablo T. Jayme, who died last August 1, 2005[5], in favor of Lourdes Lachica be declared void ab initio for being inofficious and excessive; declaring the transfer of TCT-T45911[6] into two sublots namely TCT No. T-187589[7] and TCT No. T-187481[8] by the register of

deeds, null and void; ordering the annulment of title TCT No. T-187590[9] made in favor of Lourdes Jayme Lachica as being null and void and reinstating TCT-T45911 in the name of Pablo Jayme and Maria Andraneda; the partition of the property subject matter of the case of the one-half (½) share of Maria A. Jayme in TCT-T45911 among the legitimate heirs of Spouses Pablo and the late Maria A. Jayme namely, Lourdes Jayme Lachica, Delia A. Jayme, Nenita Jayme Zamora, Marlowe A. Jayme and the late Antonio Jayme represented by his surviving spouse Teresita J. Polfer and his children; and damages in the amount of P500,000.00, attorneys fees in the amount of P50,000.00, appearance fee of P1,500.00 per appearance and P5,000.00 for litigation expenses.

THE ANTECEDENT

The late Pablo T. Jayme and Maria Andraneda Jayme, who got married in the year 1937, purchased a parcel of lot located at Sagay, Negros Occidental which was covered by TCT-T45911. As per TCT-T45911[10], the property was transferred to the spouses on March 9, 1967.

Maria A. Jayme died intestate on October 22, 1993. She was survived by her husband Pablo Jayme and their legitimate children, among whom are appellees Delia Jayme and Nenita J. Zamora and appellant Lourdes J. Lachica.[11]

Since the subject property was about to be foreclosed by the bank, Pablo Jayme approached appellee Nenita Zamora and asked the latter to redeem the above-mentioned property.[12] With the help of appellee Delia Jayme and their brother Antonio, they pooled their money together and were able to redeem the property and caused the cancellation of the mortgage. The title of the lot was recovered and kept by Delia Jayme.[13]

On July 8, 1996, just five (5) days after the appellees and their brother Antonio had retrieved the title from the Rural bank of Sagay, Pablo Jayme allegedly executed an “Affidavit of Loss”[14] which claimed that the owner's duplicate copy of TCT-T45911 could no longer be found.[15]

On December 17, 1996, defendant-appellant Registrar of Deeds, on the basis of the Affidavit of Loss executed by Pablo Jayme, issued two (2) certificates of title, splitting the subject parcel of land into “Lot 1-A” and “Lot 1-B” with a corresponding certificate of title TCT No. T-187589 and TCT No. T-187481 respectively in the name of Pablo Jayme as the sole owner.

Thereafter, by virtue of a Deed of Donation[16], Pablo Jayme transferred ownership over Lot 1-A on April 2, 1997 in favor of the herein appellant Lourdes Jayme Lachica. Consequently, the Register of Deeds issued a new title over the same bearing TCT No. T-187590[17] under her name. Simultaneous with the execution of the Deed of Donation, Pablo Jayme likewise executed a “Special Power of Attorney”[18] in favor of Lourdes Lachica authorizing her to transact and obtain a loan using Lot 1-B as collateral. Purportedly, as the supposed registered owner of Lot 1-A, she later leased the property to the Mercury Drug Corporation and to the Ocana Photocopying Services.[19]

On the other hand, defendant-appellants Sps. Eduardo and Lourdes Lachica, et al., posited that the property subject of the instant case is a separate property of Pablo Jayme; that the subdividing of TCT-T45911 into two sublots: TCT No. T-187589 and TCT No. T-187481 was valid and sanctioned by existing laws; that the donation made by Pablo Jayme to Lourdes Lachica was valid and subsisting. Appellants likewise denied the claim of appellees that the property was conjugal in nature and maintained that it was a separate property of Pablo Jayme.[20] He further argued that more than four (4) years had passed from the issuance of the title to Lourdes Jayme Lachica when the complaint was filed against her by the appellees and never in any moment that appellees' names were included as registered owners of the subject properties.[21]

The court a quo decided the case in favor of plaintiff-appellees; hence, this appeal. Defendant-appellants imputed

to the court below the following assigned errors, to wit:

I.

THE COURT ERRED IN FINDING THAT THE PROPERTY IN QUESTION IS COMMUNITY PROPERTY.

II.

THE COURT ERRED IN DECLARING THE TRANSFER OF TCT- T45911 INTO TWO SUBLOTS UNDER TCT NO. 187589 AND TCT NO. T-187481 NULL AND VOID.

III.

THE COURT ERRED IN DECLARING THE DEED OF DONATION NULL AND VOID AND IN DECLARING TCT NO. T-187590 REGISTERED IN THE NAME OF LOURDES LACHICA NULL AND VOID.

IV.

THE COURT ERRED IN ORDERING THE REGISTER OF DEEDS OF THE PROVINCE OF NEGROS OCCIDENTAL TO CANCEL THE TITLES BEARING TCT NO. 187589 AND TCT NO. T-187590 AND REINSTATE TCT-T45911 IN THE NAME OF PABLO JAYME AND MARIA ANDRANEDA JAYME.

V.

THE COURT ERRED IN ORDERING THE EQUAL PARTITION OF THE PROPERTY COVERED BY TCT-T45911 AMONG THE HEIRS OF PABLO AND MARIA JAYME.

VI.

THE COURT ERRED IN ORDERING DEFENDANT LOURDES LACHICA TO PAY PLAINTIFFS THE AMOUNT OF P500,000.00 AS MORAL DAMAGES, P50,000.00 AS ATTORNEYS FEES AND TO PAY THE COST OF THE SUIT.

OUR RULING

First and foremost, the key issue in this case is whether or not the subject lot is a separate property of the late Pablo Jayme or a conjugal property between him and his spouse Maria Andraneda Jayme. For, if the subject lot was his separate property, it would render the other issues merely academic.

The RTC found that “the property subject matter of the case is actually a conjugal property of defendant Pablo Jayme (now deceased) and the latter's deceased wife, Maria Opao Andraneda Jayme since the said property was acquired and registered in their names on March 9, 1967 (as what governs the property relation of the spouses at that time is the conjugal partnership of gains) during the subsistence of their marriage as both entered into a contract of marriage in 1937 and Maria Opao Andraneda Jayme who died on October 1993 (TSN-Onates, July 14,

2004, pp. 7-8) and this fact of marriage of the parents of the parties are expressly and impliedly admitted by the pleadings.”[22]

This Court agrees with the RTC's finding that the subject lot is a conjugal property of the late Pablo Jayme and his wife. Article 116 of the Family Code provides that “All property acquired during the marriage, whether the acquisition appears to have been made, contracted or registered in the name of one or both spouses, is presumed to be conjugal unless the contrary is proved.”[23]

For the presumption to arise, it is not, as Sps. Lita De Leon, et al. vs. Anita B. De Leon, et al.[24] teaches, even necessary to prove that the property was acquired with funds of the partnership. Only proof of acquisition during the marriage is needed to raise the presumption that the property is conjugal. In fact, even when the manner in which the properties were acquired does not appear, the presumption will still apply, and the properties will still be considered conjugal.

In the case at bar, Pablo Jayme and Maria Andraneda Jayme, as admitted by the parties, entered into a contract of marriage in 1937 while the subject property was registered in the name of “Pablo Jayme, married to Maria Andraneda” on March 9, 1967. Thus, TCT-T45911 over the subject lot is presumed conjugal.

Besides, it is well-settled that there must be clear evidence of the exclusive ownership of one of the spouses and the burden of proof rests upon the party asserting it. In this case, as aptly put by the court a quo, not a scintilla of evidence was introduced by the appellants to support their claim. Hence, the land covered by TCT-T45911 is indisputably a conjugal property.

As if to rub salt into the wound, appellants frantically argued in its Brief[25] that “granting arguendo that the property regime is conjugal partnership of gains, no evidence on record is presented in order for the presumption to apply.” Such argument is pointless. Appellants may have forgotten the basic rule, to the point of being elementary, that the presentation of evidence is dispensed with in favor of a party whose presumption lies. The burden of proof is shifted to the other who wants to overcome such presumption which, in this case, appellants have miserably failed to do.

Appellants further espoused that TCT-T45911 is exclusively owned by Pablo Jayme since the registered name, as appearing in the face of the said title, “PABLO JAYME, married to Maria Andraneda Jayme”[26] is no proof that the properties were acquired during the spouses' coverture and are merely descriptive of the marital status of the person indicated therein as enunciated in the case of Jugalbot vs. Court of Appeals[27]. Appellants also stressed that the name Pablo Jayme is in capital letters indicating that he is the registered owner of the said property and not both Pablo Jayme and Maria Andraneda.

Such contentions are unavailing. For one and as rightly argued by the appellees, “their stance that the property was conjugal was never based on the phrase “married to”. Rather, they relied on the fact that Pablo Jayme and Maria Andraneda Jayme were already thirty (30) years married when they bought TCT-T45911, a fact that appellants themselves cannot and do not deny”.[28] Moreso, it is jurisprudentially well-settled that “the fact that the transfer certificate of title was in the name of one spouse alone did not change the conjugal nature of the property. The mere registration of a property in the name of one spouse does not destroy its conjugal nature. What is material is the time when the property was acquired.”[29]

Second, taking into account then that the subject lot is a conjugal property of Pablo and Maria Jayme, the splitting of TCT-T45911 made by Pablo Jayme during his lifetime into two sublots namely, TCT No. T-187589 and TCT No. T-187481 under his name is null and void.

Upon Maria Jayme's demise on 1993, Pablo Jayme was supposedly entitled only to one-half (½) of the said

property being his own portion and the other half shall be divided among him and his children pro indiviso who are considered by law as compulsory heirs of Maria Jayme. The law pertinent on this matter is Article 888 and 892 of the Civil Code which provides as follows:

“Art. 888. The legitime of legitimate children and descendants consists of one-half of the hereditary estate of the father and of the mother.

The latter may freely dispose of the remaining half, subject to the rights of illegitimate children and of the surviving spouse as hereinafter provided.

Art. 892. If only one legitimate child or descendant of the deceased survives, the widow or widower shall be entitled to one fourth of the hereditary estate. In case of legal separation, the surviving spouse may inherit if it was the deceased who had given cause for the same.

If there are two or more legitimate children or descendants, the surviving spouse shall be entitled to a portion equal to the legitime of each of the legitimate children or descendants.

In both cases, the legitime of the surviving spouse shall be taken from the portion that can be freely disposed of by the testator.”

Thus, the court a quo correctly ruled that “since no evidence was ever presented that the subject lot has been judicially or extra-judicially settled and partitioned by the heirs of Maria Jayme, then, the conjugal one-half (½) share of Pablo Jayme and the share of each heir are still indefinite portions and could not be determined yet in what specific portion of the said property may each heir be entitled to ownership and possession.”[30]

Accordingly, the unilateral act of the late Pablo Jayme in subdividing the subject lot into two halves was null and void because there was no judicial or extra-judicial settlement of the estate of Maria Jayme and the partition initiated by Pablo Jayme was not authorized by the other heirs either.

While it is true that the rights to succession are transmitted from the moment of the death of the decedent, it is equally true that the heirs cannot claim a specific portion of the property until and unless it has been judicially or extra-judicially settled.

As emphatically provided under Article 130 of the Family Code:

“Upon the termination of the marriage by death, the conjugal partnership property shall be liquidated in the same proceeding for the settlement of the estate of the deceased.

If no judicial proceeding is instituted, the surviving spouse shall liquidate the conjugal partnership property either judicially or extra-judicially within one year from the death of the deceased spouse. If upon the lapse of the six-month period no liquidation is made, any disposition or encumbrance involving the conjugal partnership property of the terminated marriage shall be void.”

The nullity of Pablo Jayme's act, as We have explained, proceeds from the fact that the unilateral splitting of TCT-T45911 by him, a conjugal property, is in contravention of the mandatory requirement of Article 130 of the Family Code. Since the code requires a judicial or extra-judicial settlement before the property can be disposed of or encumbered, it follows that the acts or transactions executed against this mandatory provision is void except when the law itself authorized its validity. Thus, the splitting of TCT-T45911 into TCT No. T-187589 and TCT No. T-187481 is void.

Consequently, since the partition made by Pablo Jayme was void, the donation made in favor of appellant Lourdes Lachica and the subsequent issuance of TCT No. T-187590 in the latter's name were likewise void. Prior to the liquidation of the conjugal partnership, the interest of each spouse in the conjugal assets is inchoate or a mere

expectancy. It constitutes neither a legal nor an equitable estate, and does not ripen into a title until it appears that there are assets in the community as a result of the liquidation and settlement.[31] “The right of the husband or wife to one-half of the conjugal assets does not vest until the dissolution and liquidation of the conjugal partnership, or after dissolution of the marriage, when it is finally determined that, after settlement of conjugal obligations, there are net assets left which can be divided between the spouses or their respective heirs.”[32]

From this cardinal postulate, it follows that the Deed of Donation he executed in favor of defendant-appellant Lourdes Lachica and the subsequent issuance of TCT No. T-187590 in the latter's name are null and void since the right of Pablo Jayme to one-half (½) of the conjugal assets does not vest until the liquidation of the conjugal partnership.

Third, appellants propounded further that the act of the court a quo in reinstating TCT-T45911 in the name of Pablo Jayme and Maria Andraneda instead of “PABLO JAYME, married to Maria Andraneda”, the original entry thereof, would be an indirect attack on TCT-T45911 and thus a collateral attack that is prohibited considering the indefeasibility of our Torrens system of land registration.[33]

Again, this Court disagrees because the Decision[34] of the court a quo in ordering the reinstatement of TCT-T45911 is just merely an affirmation that, indeed, the subject property is conjugal. The issue subject of the instant case is the ownership of the subject lot. There is no dispute that a Torrens certificate of title cannot be collaterally attacked. What cannot be collaterally attacked is the certificate of title and not the title itself.

As explicated in *Lachayan vs. Samoy, Jr.*[35], the Court categorically pronounced that “a resolution on the issue of ownership does not subject the Torrens title issued over the disputed realties to a collateral attack. It must be borne in mind that what cannot be collaterally attacked is the certificate of title and not the title itself. The certificate referred to is that document issued by the Register of Deeds known as the TCT. In contrast, the title referred to by law means ownership which is, more often than not, represented by that document. Petitioner apparently confuses title with the certificate of title. Title as a concept of ownership should not be confused with the certificate of title as evidence of such ownership although both are interchangeably used.”

Thus, appellants erroneously argued that it constituted a collateral attack considering that the lower court's order merely affirms Pablo and Maria Jayme's conjugal title over the subject lot and not any Torrens certificate of title over the same.

On the sidenote, the issuance of TCT No. T-187589 and TCT No. T-187481 on the basis alone of Affidavit of Loss[36] purportedly executed by Pablo Jayme is patently illegal because the issuance was made without a court order.

The pertinent laws on the matter are R.A. No. 26 or the judicial reconstitution of lost or destroyed title and R.A. No. 6732 otherwise known as the administrative reconstitution of lost or destroyed title due to fire, flood and other force majeure on the condition that the number of title lost or damaged should be at least ten percent (10%) of the total number in the possession of the office of the Register of Deeds but in no case shall the number of certificates be less than five hundred (500).

In the case at bar, neither law has been complied with by the appellants in securing their reconstituted titles because judicial reconstitution undoubtedly requires the filing of petition by the applicant, hearing and a court order as provided for under R.A. 26. Obviously, appellants' case does not likewise fall on administrative reconstitution of title governed by R.A. No. 6732.

Hence, to recapitulate, appellants' failure to comply with the aforementioned procedural requisites for reconstitution of lost or destroyed title renders the issuance of TCT No. T-187589 and TCT No. T-187481 in the

name of Pablo Jayme null and void. On the same vein, the subsequent donation made by Pablo Jayme to Lourdes Jayme Lachica and the eventual registration of such under her name bearing TCT No. T-187590 are likewise a patent nullity and of no effect. As laid down by the age-old adage, “a spring cannot rise higher than its source.”

Assuming, for argument's sake, that the issuance of TCT No. T-187589 and TCT No. T-187481 was valid, the fact that TCT-T45911 has not been lost but is in the possession of appellee Delia Jayme renders the reconstituted title void and susceptible to attack at any time.

From the foregoing disquisitions, the lower court's order of equal partition of the property covered by TCT-T45911 among the heirs of Pablo Jayme and Maria Andraneda was proper since it is a necessary consequence in the resolution of this case after a finding that the subject lot is a conjugal property of both spouses.

Insofar as the issue of damages is concerned, the court a quo asseverated, thus:

“The evidence in the records of this case likewise disclose that the plaintiff Delia Jayme suffered mental anguish which had affected her both physically, emotionally and psychologically as the record shows that she was in fact physically abused by the defendants when she tried to visit her ailing father who was in the custody of the other defendants (Tsn-Cerbo, July 21, 2004, pp. 29-31) and this fact was not rebutted nor refuted by the defendants thru satisfactory and competent evidence.

Finally, it appearing that defendant Pablo T. Jayme per his Manifestation dated August 5, 2005 filed by Atty. Leonardo B. Facultad, Jr., defendant Eduardo Lachica has no participation affecting the properties and as agreed likewise by the parties (Pre-Trial Order, page 2, par. 7 dated October 2, 2003), and defendant Milagros S. dela Cruz being only a nominal party as the Registrar of the Registry of Deeds of Negros Occidental, the only defendant thus liable for damages is defendant Lourdes J. Lachica.”[37]

The manifestation, as above-mentioned, of Pablo Jayme that he has no participation affecting the property, coupled with the following testimony by appellee Delia Jayme, which remained uncontroverted by appellants, fortifies the fact that appellant Lourdes Lachica had all the motive to inveigle the aging Pablo Jayme to sign documents without knowing or realizing what he was signing, thus:

“Q:

What about your sister the defendant Lourdes Lachica, was there any indication that she knew that you had the title?

A:

Yes, one of my sisters Mrs. Lachica tried and asked for the title.

Q:

For what purpose why she ask you for the title?

A:

She said she could have the title, she could have some business over it.

Q:

And more or less when was this, if you can recall?

A:

To be honest, I could not recall exactly when.

Q:

What about the year, was it before or after your mother died?

A:

I did not know about it but she called me in North America twice.

Q:

You mean at the time you were in North America?

A:

Yes sir.

Q:

When she called you up and trying to borrow the title, what was your reaction?

A:

I told her “Inday” we cannot give you the title any more because that is our only remembrance of “Mamang” and “Papang” and if we give it back to you for any mortgage, we cannot afford to redeem it anymore. I have no money. Mrs. Zamora has no money and has four (4) College students and my brother died in 1994, Antonio Jayme. I was raising my two (2) kids alone.”[38]

It is well-settled that moral damages should be reasonably approximate to the extent of the hurt caused and the gravity of the wrong done, thus, the court a quo is correct when it held appellants liable for moral damages in the amount of P500,000.00 since appellants unjustly enriched themselves at the expense of appellees by securing loans using Lots 1-A and 1-B as collateral[39], for taking advantage of Pablo Jayme because of his advanced age, for depriving the appellees of their rightful share of their deceased mother, for physically and verbally abusing appellee Delia Jayme every time she attempted to talk to her father[40]. These testimonies have remained unrefuted by appellants.

Also, the court a quo is correct when it granted the awards of attorney's fees and costs of suit since Article 2208 of the Civil Code provides, among others, that attorney's fees and expenses of litigation may be recovered in cases where the court deems it just and equitable. This court finds the award reasonable, just and equitable.

WHEREFORE, the Court DENIES the appeal and AFFIRMS in toto the Decision of the Regional Trial Court in Civil Case No. 647-S dated June 29, 2006.

SO ORDERED.

Maxino, P.A.A., and Francisco, R.C., JJ., concur.

- [*] Deceased with Notice of Death. Rollo. P. 58.
- [1] Rollo. P. 34.
- [2] RTC Decision. Original Records. P. 272.
- [3] Original Records. P. 86.
- [4] Annex “2”. Original Records. P. 35.
- [5] Notice of Death. Rollo. P. 58.
- [6] Annex “A”. Original Records. P.6.
- [7] Annex “C”. Original Records. P. 11.
- [8] Annex “B”. Original Records. P. 9.
- [9] Annex “D”. Original Records. P. 13.
- [10] Supra at note 5.
- [11] Plaintiff-Appellees Brief. Rollo. P. 65.
- [12] TSN. July 14, 2004. P. 12.
- [13] Supra at note 11.
- [14] Original Records. P. 8.
- [15] Id.
- [16] Supra at note 4.
- [17] Supra at note 8.
- [18] Memorandum of Encumbrances. Original Records. P. 12.
- [19] TSN. July 21, 2004. Pp. 28-29.
- [20] Defendant-appellants Brief. Rollo. P. 34.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Supra at note 2.
- [23] Family Code of the Philippines.
- [24] GR. No. 185063. July 23, 2009.
- [25] Supra at note 20.
- [26] Id.
- [27] GR No. 170346. March 12, 2007.
- [28] Supra at note 11.
- [29] Supra at note 24.
- [30] Supra at note 2.

[31] Abalos vs. Macatangay, Jr. GR. No. 155043. September 30, 2004.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Supra at note 20.

[34] Supra at note 2.

[35] GR. No. 165427. March 21, 2011.

[36] Supra at note 14.

[37] Supra at note 2.

[38] TSN. Original Records. July 14, 2004. Pp. 20-22.

[39] TSN. Original Records. P. 28.

[40] TSN. Original Records. P. 27.

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