PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS.ABUNDIO ALBARIDO AND BENEDICTO IGDOY, ACCUSED-APPELLANTS.

G.R. No. 102367. October 25, 2001

Ponente: SANDOVAL-GUTIERREZ, J.

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SANDOVAL-GUTIERREZ, J.:

Before us is the appeal from the decision[1] of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 12, Ormoc City, in Criminal Case No. 3138-0, "People of the Philippines vs. Abundio Albarido and Benedicto Igdoy" finding them guilty beyond reasonable doubt of multiple murder.

The information against the accused reads:

> "That on or about the 15[th] day of June, 1987, in the Municipality of Kananga, Province of Leyte, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, conspiring and confederating with one another, with treachery and evident premeditation, with intent to kill, and of nighttime and abuse of superior strength, did, then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously attack, assault, stab, hack, shot and wound CELSO LARBO, DANILO PALACIO and LAURO PALACIO, with the use of guns and bolos, which the accused had provided themselves for the purpose, thereby inflicting various gunshot, stabbing and hacking wounds on the different parts of the victims' bodies (please see attached medical certificates), which caused their death.
>
> CONTRARY TO LAW."

Only accused Abundio Albarido and Benedicto Igdoy, now appellants, were apprehended. When arraigned, they entered a plea of not guilty.

The version of the prosecution, as narrated by the Solicitor General in the appellee's brief,[2] is as follows:

> "At about 7:00 p.m. on June 15, 1987, a group of men composed of Celso Larbo, Danilo Palacio, and Lauro Palacio, together with Maximo Peña, Melchor Palacio and Jose Palacio, were walking single file on a trail measuring about fifteen (15) inches wide in Sitio Bislog, Barangay Sto. Domingo, Kananga, Leyte (tsn, pp. 7, 8, 10, 34, Peña, October 17, 1988; tsn, pp. 8, 9, Jose Palacio, June 13, 1989; tsn, pp. 7-9, Melchor Palacio, June 15, 1989).
>
> Without warning, all of them were waylaid by another group composed of Aquilino Canaway, Elias Merced and appellants (tsn, pp. 9, 10, Pena, October 17, 1988). They were recognized by Maximo Peña and Jose Palacio because Lauro Palacio was able to focus the flashlight he was then holding on the faces of appellants (tsn, pp. 10, 30, Peña, October 17, 1988; tsn, p. 13, Jose Palacio, June 13, 1989; tsn, p. 11, Melchor Palacio, June 15, 1989).
>
> Guns were fired. Among those hit in the first volley were Celso Larbo (tsn, p. 35, Peña, October 17, 1988; tsn, p.12, Jose Palacio, June 13, 1989; tsn, p. 9, Melchor Palacio, June 15, 1989). The other men scampered for safety in the tall grasses nearby (tsn, p. 11, Peña, October 17, 1988; tsn, p. 10, Jose Palacio, June 13, 1989). After the shooting, appellants approached Celso Larbo and mercilessly hacked him with bolos many times (tsn,

> p. 11, Peña, October 17, 1988).
>
> Danilo Palacio and Lauro Palacio were likewise attacked by appellants who mercilessly hacked and stabbed them (tsn, p. 11, Peña, October 17, 1988; tsn, pp. 12, 13, 15, Jose Palacio, June 13, 1989). Appellants' companions, Aquilino Canaway and Elias Merced, on the other hand, acted as guards to head off any attempt by anyone minded to come to the aid of the victims (tsn, p. 12, Peña, October 17, 1988).
>
> All the injured victims subsequently died (tsn, pp. 16, 17, Melchor Palacio, June 15, 1989; tsn, pp. 7, 25, 26, 30, Cam, June 3, 1988)."

Dr. Roland Cam, resident physician of the Ormoc District Hospital, testified that he conducted a post-mortem examination on the bodies of Celso Larbo, Danilo Palacio and Lauro Palacio. The examination disclosed that Celso Larbo sustained "gunshot and hacking wounds," probably caused by a sharp instrument, causing his death. Danilo and Lauro Palacio suffered from "multiple stab and hacking wounds," possibly caused by a sharp instrument, which also caused their death.[3]

In his defense, Benedicto Igdoy claimed that at the time the incident took place, he was at Hibucawon, Jaro, Leyte where he resides with his family. He insisted that he has never been to Barangay Sto. Domingo, Kananga, Leyte, the place where the crime took place, and that he only goes to the Municipality of Kananga twice a year to visit his parents-in-law in Lonoy. He does not know the victims, or Maximo Peña and Jose Palacio who both testified against him.[4]

For his part, Abundio Albarido likewise denied the crime imputed against him. He testified that he was at his house approximately three (3) kilometers away from the scene of the crime at the time it happened. When presented with his affidavit where he stated that he was with Benedicto Igdoy on June 15, 1987, he refuted the same, saying he was only forced to sign it because Romy Tauy, a policeman, threatened to kill him if he refuse to do so.[5]

After trial, the lower court rendered judgment finding Abundio Albarido and Benedicto Igdoy guilty beyond reasonable doubt of three (3) counts of murder, thus:

> "WHEREFORE, decision is hereby rendered finding both accused ABUNDIO ALBARIDO and BENEDICTO IGDOY guilty beyond reasonable doubt as principals of three counts of murder defined and penalized under Art. 248 of the Revised Penal Code. Appreciating the aggravating circumstance of nighttime with no mitigating circumstance to offset the same, the proper penalty imposable is three death penalties for each accused. For reason, however, that the present constitution prohibits the imposition of the death penalty, this Court, accordingly sentences both accused ABUNDIO ALBARIDO and BENEDICTO IGDOY to suffer an imprisonment of RECLUSION PERPETUA for the death of Celso Larbo; another RECLUSION PERPETUA for the death of Danilo Palacio; another RECLUSION PERPETUA for the death of Lauro Palacio. Further, accused ABUNDIO ALBARIDO is ordered to indemnify the heirs of Celso Larbo the sum of FIFTY THOUSAND PESOS (P 50,000.00); the heirs of Danilo and Lauro Palacio the sum of FIFTY THOUSAND PESOS (P 50,000.00) for the death of Danilo Palacio and another sum of FIFTY THOUSAND PESOS (P 50,000.00) for the death of Lauro Palacio. Also, BENEDICTO IGDOY is ordered to indemnify the heirs of Celso Larbo the sum of FIFTY THOUSAND PESOS (P 50,000.00); the heirs of Danilo and Lauro Palacio the sum of FIFTY THOUSAND PESOS (P 50,000.00) for the death of Danilo Palacio and another sum of FIFTY THOUSAND PESOS (P 50,000.00) for the death of Lauro Palacio. And finally, both accused are ordered to pay the costs.
>
> SO ORDERED."[6]

In the instant appeal, Albarido and Igdoy ascribe to the trial court the following errors:

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I

"THE TRIAL COURT ERRED IN GIVING `FULL FAITH AND CREDIT' TO THE TESTIMONIES OF TWO ALLEGED EYEWITNESSES TO THE MULTIPLE MURDER DESPITE THE FACT THAT SAID TESTIMONIES (A) ARE RIDDLED WITH INCONSISTENCIES, CONTRADICTIONS AND IMPROBABILITIES AND (B) WERE NOT CORROBORATED BY ANOTHER ALLEGED EYEWITNESS.

II

THE TRIAL COURT ERRED IN ENGAGING IN CONJECTURE AND/OR SPECULATION REGARDING THE TESTIMONY OF PROSECUTION WITNESS MELCHOR PALACIO.

III

THE TRIAL COURT ERRED IN BASING ITS JUDGMENT OF CONVICTION ON THE TESTIMONIES OF TWO WITNESSES WHICH ARE FLAWED WITH INCONSISTENCIES, CONTRADICTIONS AND IMPROBABILITIES AND HENCE, DO NOT CONSTITUTE PROOF OF GUILT BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT."[7]

Appellants, in seeking the reversal of the challenged decision, rely principally on the inconsistencies in the testimonies and affidavits of the prosecution witnesses.

The appeal has no merit.

Appellants contend that the testimonies of Maximo Peña and Jose Palacio on material details of the incident conflict with their allegations in their affidavits executed before the trial. For instance, while Peña stated in his affidavit that only Elias Merced was holding a revolver, however, during the hearing, he testified that all the four (4) accused were armed, three with handguns and one with a long gun. Peña likewise stated in his affidavit that after the first gunshot, victim Lauro Palacio focused his flashlight on the four accused. But during the trial, Peña declared that Lauro Palacio had focused the flashlight on the accused prior to the first gunshot.

For his part, Jose Palacio testified that appellant Abundio Albarido and Elias Merced were armed with guns, while appellant Benedicto Igdoy and Aquilino Canaway were carrying bolos. However, in his sworn statement, he stated that Merced was carrying a gun and the other three (3) accused had bolos. Also, Palacio's statement in his affidavit that it was Merced who fired at him and his companions is inconsistent with his testimony that he did not know who fired the shots.

Appellants likewise argue that the testimonies of the three (3) prosecution witnesses are inconsistent with each other. Peña's account that all the four accused had guns is contradicted by Jose Palacio's testimony that only two accused were carrying guns, while the other two had bolos. Likewise, Peña testified that appellant Albarido fired the first gunshot, but Palacio declared it was Merced who first fired his gun. Lastly, Peña's version that before the first gunshot, Lauro Palacio's flashlight was already focused on the four accused is contradicted by Palacio's testimony that he did not see any person before they heard any gunshot.

Concerning the discrepancies between the affidavits and testimonies of the prosecution witnesses, suffice it to say that time and again, this Court has held that when there is an inconsistency between the affidavit and the testimony of a witness in court, the testimony commands greater weight.[8] For, oftentimes, affidavits taken ex parte, are considered inaccurate as they are prepared by other persons who use their own language in writing the affiant's statements.[9] Omissions and misunderstandings by the writer are not infrequent, particularly under circumstances of haste or impatience.[10] Thus, more often than not, affidavits do not reflect precisely what the declarant wants to impart.[11]

A careful scrutiny of the inconsistencies relied upon by the appellants shows that they refer only to minor details in the commission of the crime and do not affect at all the credibility of the prosecution witnesses. It is elementary in the rule of evidence that inconsistencies in the testimonies of prosecution witnesses with respect to minor details and collateral matters do not affect the substance of their declaration nor the veracity or weight of their testimony.[12] In fact, these minor inconsistencies enhance the credibility of the witnesses, for they remove any suspicion that their testimonies were contrived or rehearsed.[13] In People vs. Maglente,[14] this Court ruled that inconsistencies in details which are irrelevant to the elements of the crime are not grounds for acquittal. Besides, both Peña and Palacio were consistent in identifying herein appellants as the perpetrators of the crime and in narrating how the victims died.

Indeed, the fact that the statements of the two prosecution witnesses differ on some minor details, does not in any way affect their credibility. This is in accord with ordinary human experience that persons who witness an event perceive the same from their respective points of reference. Therefore, almost always, they have different accounts of how it happened. Certainly, we cannot expect the testimony of witnesses to a crime to be consistent in all aspects because different persons have different impressions and recollections of the same incident.[15] What is significant is that the trial court had the opportunity to observe the demeanor of the prosecution witnesses and found them to be telling the truth. It is axiomatic that findings of the trial court on the credibility of witnesses are entitled to great respect and will not be disturbed on appeal, absent any showing of palpable mistake or grave abuse of discretion which is not present in this case.[16]

Appellants assailed the prosecution evidence, stating that Melchor Palacio, the father of the two (2) victims, failed to corroborate the testimonies of Maximo Pena and Jose Palacio. Melchor categorically declared on the witness stand that due to the darkness of the night and the suddenness of the attack, he did not see the assailants.

Again, appellants' contention must fail. There is no hard and fast rule requiring a number of witnesses to a crime to positively identify the perpetrators thereof. In numerous instances, the testimony of a single witness, if positive and credible, is sufficient to convict an accused.[17] Here, there were two eyewitnesses who positively identified the appellants as the perpetrators of the crime. Moreover, the fact that the crime took place in a dark place does not mean that the assailants could not be identified. Both declared that they used a flashlight in lighting their path that fateful night. Consequently, it cannot be said that the crime took place on an entirely dark night which made it impossible for those witnesses to identify the assailants.

Lastly, appellants insist that the infirmities in the testimonies of Maximo Pena and Jose Palacio cast grave and serious doubt on their trustworthiness. They further emphasize that no evidence was presented by the prosecution to prove that they were ill motivated in committing the crime.

We are not persuaded. As mentioned earlier, the trial court did not err in giving full faith and credit to the testimonies of Maximo Pena and Jose Palacio quoted below:

Testimony of Maximo Peña:

> "Q: Now, at about 7:00 o'clock while on your way at So. Bislog, do you recall of any unusual incident that took place?
>
> A: We were waylaid.
>
> Q: Now, what happened when you were waylaid?
>
> A: We were shot.
>
> Q: You mentioned of the pronoun "we," whom are you referring to?

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A: We- I, Melchor Palacio, Jose Palacio, Danilo Palacio, Celso Larbo and Lauro Palacio.

Q: Do you recall in what particular place in Sitio Bislog you were waylaid?

A: At the crossing.

Q: How far is that crossing to your sitio at Baganatad, Brgy. Sto. Domingo, Kananga, Leyte?

A: More than one-half kilometer.

Q: Did you recognize the persons who waylaid you, while you were on your way to So. Baganatad of Sto. Domingo?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: Look around the courtroom if you could see these persons?

A: Those two, Abundio Albarido and Benedicto Igdoy (witness pointing to the two accused who when asked gave their names as ABUNDIO ALBARIDO and BENEDICTO IGDOY, respectively).

Q: Aside from these accused whom you have pointed to as Benedicto Indoy and Abundio Albarido, were there other persons whom you recognized in the company of these accused, Abundio Albarido and Benedicto Igdoy?

A: Yes, sir, there were two others.

Q: What are their names?

A: Aquilino Canaway and Elias Merced.

Q: Why do you know these people, accused Abundio Albarido, Benedicto Indoy, Aquilino Canaway and Elias Merced?

A: Because they were lighted by the flashlight.

Q: Who was holding the flashlight, while you were on your way to Sitio Baganatad from So. Bislog?

A: It was a child named Lauro.

Q: By the way, what was your position in going to Bislog, were you walking side by side or in a single file?

A: We were walking one after the other.

Q: Could you recall who was ahead of the group?

A: Lauro, Danilo, Celso, Jose Palacio, Melchor Palacio and I was the last.

Q: Now, you said you heard a gun report. What happened after you heard a gun report?

A: When we heard the gunshot, we immediately covered ourselves at the grasses.

Q: What transpired after that

A: After the gunshot, Bonding and Benny approached Celso Larbo and hacked him many times.

Q: Now, after how many gun reports did you hear, that you saw the accused go to Celso Larbo and hacked him many times?

A: Four gunshots.

Q: Now, what happened to Lauro Palacio and Danilo Palacio?

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A: Danilo Palacio and Lauro Palacio were hacked. After that, they also stabbed Danilo and Lauro at their chest.."[18]

Testimony of Jose Palacio:

"Q: While proceeding from Sitio Bislog to the house of Simeon Almendras on June 15, 1987 at about 7:00 o'clock together with your companions, what transpired?

A: We were shot.

Q: How did you know you were shot?

A: Because we heard a gun report.

Q: Now, how many gin reports did you hear in the first instance?

A: Only one.

Q: What did you do when you head (sic) the first gun report?

A: I rolled at the cogon grasses.

Q: Why did you roll at the cogon grass after you heard the first gun report?

A: Because I was afraid that I might be hit by the gun report.

Q: After the first gun report did you hear any further gun report?

A: Yes, sir, I heard another three successive gun reports.

Q: At that instance you were hiding at the gocon (sic) grass?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: Now, while you were in the cogon grass what did you observe?

A: I saw that the four (4) persons were carrying boloes (sic) and guns. (Witness pointing to the two accused.)

Q: Now, you were using the pronoun "they" who were these persons that were carrying guns and boloes (sic)?

COURT

And all of the four were carrying guns?

A: No, your Honor only two of them were carrying guns.

COURT

Who?

A: Banding or Abundio Albarido and Elias Merced were carrying guns.

COURT

Proceed.

ATTY. SALAZAR

Q: How about the other two?

A: They were carrying boloes (sic).

Q: Now, these two accused present in the courtroom now were the two of the persons whom you saw on June 15?

COURT

Already answered.

ATTY. SALAZAR

Q: What happened next after you saw these four accused armed with bolos and other with guns?

A: Celso Larbo was hit by the gun.

Q: What else did you observe?

A: Danilo Palacio and Lauro Palacio were hit by the boloes (sic).

Q: How are you related to Lauro Palacio and Danilo Palacio?

A: My brothers.

Q: What were the accused actually doing on the person of your two younger brothers, Danilo Palacio and Lauro Palacio?

A: They were hacked.

Q: Did you see who was hacking Danilo Palacio?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: Who?

A: He was hacked by Banding (Albarido) and Biri (Igdoy).

Q: How about Lauro Palacio?

A: Lauro Palacio was also hacked by Bonding and Biri.

Q: From where you were situated in that cogon grasses to the place where your two younger brothers, Danilo Palacio and Lauro Palacio were hacked, how far was that?

A: About three arms length.

Q: What parts of the body were your brothers hit by the hacking blows delivered by the accused?

A: Lauro Palacio was hit on his right foot and at his right side.

Q: And how about Danilo Palacio?

A: He was hit on his back.

Q: Now, considering that it was nighttime, how were you able to witness and observe the incident?

A: Because Lauro Palacio was carrying a flashlight and he was able to light them with the flashlight before he died."[19]

Motive becomes relevant only when there is doubt on the identity of the malefactors.[20] Hence, failure of the prosecution to show appellants' motive in committing the crime is immaterial. What is important is that they have been positively identified as the assailants.

We are not moved by appellants' uncorroborated defense of alibi. For the defense to prosper, the requirements of time and place (or distance) must be strictly met; it is not enough to prove that the accused was somewhere else when the crime was committed; he must also demonstrate by clear and convincing evidence that it was physically impossible for him to have been at the scene of the crime during its commission.[21] Appellant Igdoy himself testified that the distance between his residence at Hibucawon, Jaro, Leyte and Kananga, Leyte, the scene of the crime, can be negotiated by public transport within two and a half hours.[22] Appellant Albarido admitted that he was at his house during the commission of the crime, which is only more than three (3) kilometers away from Sto. Domingo, Kananga, Leyte where it happened.[23] These distances, as this Court has ruled in previous cases,[24] are not enough to prove that appellant could not have been at the crime scene when it was committed. Parenthetically, appellants' alibis are worthless in the face of their positive identification by the prosecution witnesses.[25]

We find that treachery and abuse of superior strength are present here. But abuse of superior strength is absorbed by treachery.[26] These circumstances qualified the killing to murder. The essence of treachery is that the attack comes without a warning and in a swift, deliberate and unexpected manner, affording the hapless, unarmed and unsuspecting victim no chance to resist or escape.[27] Celso Larbo, Danilo Palacio and Lauro Palacio were on their way home, unaware of the danger lurking in their path, when they were suddenly attacked by the appellants with the use of their guns and bolos. Thus, they had no opportunity to defend themselves. In fact, Maximo Peña testified that after Celso Larbo was rendered defenseless by the first gun shot,[28] appellants started hacking him with their bolos.[29] They also attacked Danilo and Lauro Palacio, then only 12 and 14 years old, who were unable to protect themselves from the aggression of grown men. As to the presence of abuse of superior strength, the same is proved by the fact that appellants and their two companions were armed, not only with guns, but with bolos tucked at their waist.[30]

However, we disagree with the trial court's ruling that the crime was attended by the aggravating circumstance of nighttime. There is no evidence to show that the appellants and their companions purposely took advantage of the darkness of the night to insure the commission of the crime. It is basic that for nighttime to be appreciated as an aggravating circumstance there must be a showing that the accused purposely sought such time to facilitate the commission of the crime or to prevent its discovery.[31] Neither can we rule that there was evident premeditation on the part of herein appellants because the prosecution failed to establish the same.

The imposable penalty is reclusion perpetua under Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code considering that no ordinary aggravating circumstance attended the commission of the crime.

We sustain the trial court's award of P 50,000.00 as civil indemnity to the heirs of each of the three (3) victims. In line with existing jurisprudence,[32] since the qualifying aggravating circumstance of treachery was sufficiently proven, the award of exemplary damages of P 25,000.00 each to the same heirs is likewise in order.

WHEREFORE, the appealed decision of the trial court is hereby AFFIRMED, with MODIFICATION that each of the appellants is ordered to pay the heirs of each victim the sum of Twenty Five Thousand Pesos (P 25,000.00) as exemplary damages.

SO ORDERED.

Melo, (Chairman), and Panganiban, JJ., concur.
Vitug, J., on official leave.

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[1] Dated July 15, 1991, penned by Judge Francisco H. Escaño, Jr.

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[2] Rollo, p. 92.

[3] TSN, June 3, 1988, pp. 14-34.

[4] TSN, September 18, 1989, pp. 5-12.

[5] Ibid, pp. 52-61.

[6] Decision, pp. 11-12; Records, pp. 435-436.

[7] Brief for Accused-Appellants, p. 4; Rollo, p. 83.

[8] People v. Milliam, 324 SCRA 155, 165 (2000).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] People vs. Tahop, 315 SCRA 465 (1999); People vs. Rada, 308 SCRA 191 (1999).

[13] People vs. Realin, 301 SCRA 495 (1999); People vs. Sanchez, 302 SCRA 21 (1999); People vs. delos Santos, 315 SCRA 579 (1999).

[14] 306 SCRA 546 (1999).

[15] People vs. Real, 308 SCRA 244 (1999).

[16] People v. Lerio, 324 SCRA 76 (2000).

[17] People v. Javier, 122 SCRA 830; People v. Francia, 154 SCRA 495; People v. Martinez, 127 SCRA 260; People v. Aquino, 122 SCRA 797; People v. Salazar, 58 SCRA 467; People v. Argana, 10 SCRA 311).

[18] TSN, October 17, 1988, pp. 8-11.

[19] TSN, June 13, 1989, pp. 10-13.

[20] People vs. Lopez, 312 SCRA 684; People vs. Floro, 316 SCRA 304 (1999).

[21] People v. Dubria, G.R. No. 138887, September 26, 2000.

[22] TSN, September18, 1989, p. 8.

[23] Ibid, p. 57.

[24] People v. Cristobal, 252 SCRA 507; 517 (1996) and People vs. Molina, 312 SCRA 130, 135 (1999).

[25] People vs. Murillo, et al., G.R. Nos. 128851-56, February 19, 2001; Rivera vs. Court of Appeals, G.R. No. 125867, May 31, 2000.

[26] People vs. Lapay, 298 SCRA 62 (1998).

[27] People v. Francisco, 333 SCRA 725, 746 (2000).

[28] TSN, October 17, 1988, p. 34.

[29] Ibid, p. 39.

[30] People vs. Felix, 297 SCRA 12 (1998); TSN, October 17, 1988, p. 39.

[31] People v. Lumacang, 324 SCRA 254 (2000).

[32] People vs. Catubig, G.R. No. 137842, August 23, 2001.

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