HEIRS OF JOAQUIN TEVES: RICARDO TEVES, ARCADIA TEVES, TOM AS ZAMORA, FELICIA TEVES, HELEN TEVES, ALFREDO OSMEÑA, ROBERTO TEVES, JOAQUIN TEVES, III, PETER TEVES, MILDRED TEVES, ...

G.R. No. 109963. October 13, 1999

Ponente: GONZAGA-REYES, J.

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GONZAGA-REYES, J.:

Before us is a petition for review on certiorari assailing the decision[1] of the Court of Appeals which was promulgated on August 18, 1992 affirming the July 11, 1991 decision[2] of Branch 38 of the Regional Trial Court of Negros Oriental in favor of defendants-appellees.

The facts, as culled from the pleadings of the parties herein and the decision of the lower courts, are as follows:

Marcelina Cimafranca and Joaquin Teves had nine children, namely Teotimo, Felicia, Pedro, Andres, Asuncion, Gorgonio, Cresenciano, Arcadia and Maria. Andres, however, predeceased both his parents and died without issue. After Marcelina Cimafranca and Joaquin Teves died, intestate and without debts, in 1943 and 1953, respectively, their children executed extrajudicial settlements purporting to adjudicate unto themselves the ownership over two parcels of land belonging to their deceased parents and to alienate their shares thereto in favor of their sister Asuncion Teves. The validity of these settlements executed pursuant to section 1 of Rule 74 of the Rules of Court is the primary issue in the present case.

On May 9, 1984, plaintiffs-appellants Ricardo and Arcadia Teves filed a complaint with the Regional Trial Court of Negros Oriental for the partition and reconveyance of two parcels of land located in Dumaguete, designated as Lots 769-A and 6409, against the heirs of Asuncion Teves. The complaint was subsequently amended to include Maria Teves and the heirs of Teotimo, Felicia, Pedro, and Gorgonio Teves as plaintiffs and the spouses Lucresio Baylosis and Pacita Nocete, and Cecilia Cimafranca-Gamos and Cecilia Flor Cimafranca as defendants.[3] Plaintiffs-appellants alleged that defendants-appellees, without any justifiable reason, refused to partition the said parcels of land and to convey to plaintiffs their rightful shares.[4]

Lot 769, covered by Original Certificate of Title (OCT) No. 4682-A,[5] is registered in the names of Urbana Cimafranca, one-fourth (1/4) share, Marcelina Cimafranca, the wife of Joaquin Teves, one-fourth (1/4) share, Domingo Villahermosa, one-eighth (1/8) share, Antero Villahermosa, one-eighth (1/8) share, Cecilia Cimafranca, one-eighth (1/8) share and Julio Cimafranca, one-eighth (1/8) share. The present controversy involves only Marcelina Cimafranca’s one-fourth (1/4) share in the land, designated as Lot 769-A.

On June 13, 1956, Teotimo, Felicia, Pedro, Asuncion, Gorgonio and Arcadia Teves executed a document entitled "Settlement of Estate and Sale,"[6] adjudicating unto themselves, in equal shares, Lot 769-A and conveying their shares, interests and participations over the same in favor of Asuncion Teves for the consideration of P425.00. A similar deed denominated "Extrajudicial Settlement and Sale"[7] was signed by Maria Teves on April 21, 1959.

Under such deed, Maria conveys her own share over Lot 769-A in favor of Asuncion Teves for the consideration of P80.00. The two settlements were denounced by the plaintiffs as spurious. The trial court summarized the claims of the plaintiffs, viz –

> ...Maria Teves Ochotorena herself, denied having executed this Extrajudicial Settlement and Sale over her share or interest in Lot 769 claiming that her signature in said document is a forgery. She disowns her signature declaring that as a married woman she always signs a document in her husband's family name. Further, she declared that on the date she purportedly signed said document in Dumaguete City before the notary public, she was in her home in Katipunan, Zamboanga del Norte.
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> On Exhibit "G" which is likewise offered as Exhibit "3" for the defendants, plaintiffs hold that said document is spurious claiming that the signatures of Pedro Teves, Felicia Teves and Gorgonio Teves are all forgeries. To support this allegation, Helen T. Osmena, daughter of Felicia Teves and Erlinda Teves, daughter of Gorgonio Teves were presented as witnesses. Being allegedly familiar with the style and character of the handwriting of their parents these witnesses declared unequivocally that the signatures of their parents appearing on the document are forgeries.
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> In sum, plaintiffs argue that these fraudulent documents which defendants rely in claiming ownership to the disputed properties are all nullities and have no force in law and could not be used as basis for any legal title. Consequently, in their view, they are entitled to the reliefs demanded particularly, to their respective shares of the disputed properties.[8]

The other property in dispute is Lot 6409 which was originally covered by OCT No. 9091[9] and was registered in the name of Joaquin Teves and his two sisters, Matea and Candida Teves. However, Matea and Candida died without issue, causing the entire property to pass to Joaquin Teves. On December 14, 1971, Lot 6409 was adjudicated and divided in equal shares in a "Deed of Extrajudicial Settlement & Sale"[10] executed by Joaquin Teves' children - Asuncion, Teotimo, Felisia, Gorgonio, Arcadia and Maria Teves. In the same deed, the shares of these same heirs in Lot 6409 were sold to Asuncion Teves for P100.00. Asuncion Teves took possession of the land and acquired title[11] over the same on March 22, 1972. After her death in 1981, her children, defendants-appellees It-it herein, extrajudicially settled Asuncion Teves' property, adjudicating unto themselves Lot 6409.[12] On July 20, 1983 a new transfer certificate of title[13] was issued in the names of Asuncion Teves' children, namely Elisa, Susana, Norberto, Isaac, Jaime, Felicitas, Teresita, Corazon, and Danilo, all surnamed It-it. On July 2, 1984, the It-its sold Lot 6409 to defendants-appellees Lucrecio Baylosis, Sr. and Pacita Nocete-Baylosis for P20,000.00[14] and a transfer certificate of title[15] was issued in the name of the Baylosis couple.

Plaintiffs-appellants claim that the Deed of Extrajudicial Settlement & Sale covering Lot 6409 is also spurious. Their arguments were discussed in the trial court's decision as follows -

> Presented as Exhibit "D" and "1" for both the plaintiffs and defendants respectively, is a document denominated as "Extrajudicial Settlement and Sale" executed on December 4, 1971 by and among the heirs of Joaquin Teves and Marcelina Cimafranca. This document which gave birth to TCT No. 5761 over Lot 6409 registered in the name of Asuncion Teves It-it is questioned by the plaintiffs as spurious for the following reasons:
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> 1. Erasure of the word "quitclaim" is superimposed with the word "sale" in handwriting.
>
> 2. The consideration of "One peso" stated in the document is intercalated with the word "hundred" in handwriting.
>
> 3. The signature of Maria Teves Ochotorena, Pedro Teves and Felicia Teves are forgeries.

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> 4. The thumbmark imposed on the name of Gorgonio Teves does not actually belong to Gorgonio Teves who was an educated man and skilled in writing according to his daughter.

Aside from these defects which would make said document null and void, Arcadia Teves who is one of the living sisters of the mother of the principal defendants although confirming the authenticity of her signature averred that in reality no consideration was ever given to her and that her impression of the said document was that she was only giving her consent to sell her share of the land.

Plaintiffs likewise contend that as regards the share of Ricardo Teves, son of Crescenciano Teves who predeceased Joaquin and Marcelina, it was not at all affected in that extrajudicial settlement and sale since neither Crescenciano Teves nor his son Ricardo Teves participated in its execution.

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> Likewise, plaintiffs offered TCT No. 5761 for Lot 6409 registered in the name of Asuncion Teves It-it as Exhibit "B" as proof that said property was later titled in trust for all the heirs of Joaquin Teves and which was used later as basis in effecting a deed of sale in favor of co-defendant Lucresio Baylosis. In this light, the plaintiffs argue that the sale of said property is a nullity for it was not only attended with bad faith on the part of both the vendor and the vendee but primarily the vendor had no right at all to part with said property which is legally owned by others.[16]

In answer to plaintiffs-appellants' charges of fraud, defendants-appellees maintained that the assailed documents were executed with all the formalities required by law and are therefore binding and legally effective as bases for acquiring ownership or legal title over the lots in question. Furthermore, it is contended that plaintiffs-appellants have slept on their rights and should now be deemed to have abandoned such rights.[17]

The trial court ruled in favor of defendants-appellees and rendered judgment dismissing the complaint with costs against plaintiffs-appellants. As regards Lot 6409, the court declared that the Extrajudicial Settlement and Sale executed by the heirs of Joaquin Teves and Marcelina Cimafranca was duly executed with all the formalities required by law, thus, validly conveying Lot 6409 in favor of Asuncion Teves. Moreover, it stated that, even granting the truth of the imputed infirmities in the deed, the right of plaintiffs-appellants to bring an action for partition and reconveyance was already barred by prescription. An action for the annulment of a partition must be brought within four years from the discovery of the fraud, while an action for the reconveyance of land based upon an implied or constructive trust prescribes after ten years from the registration of the deed or from the issuance of the title. The complaint in this case was filed on May 9, 1984, exactly 12 years, 1 month and 17 days after the issuance of the transfer certificate of title in the name of Asuncion Teves on March 22, 1972. Thus, ownership over Lot 6409 rightfully belonged to defendants-appellees It-it.

Moreover, the trial court held that the extrajudicial settlements over both Lots 6409 and 769, having been prepared and acknowledged before a notary public, are public documents, vested with public interest, the sanctity of which deserves to be upheld unless overwhelmed by clear and convincing evidence. The evidence presented by the plaintiffs to support their charges of forgery was considered by the court insufficient to rebut the legal presumption of validity accorded to such documents.[18]

The Court of Appeals upheld the trial court's decision affirming the validity of the extrajudicial statements, with a slight modification. It disposed of the case, thus -

> WHEREFORE, premises considered, the decision appealed from is AFFIRMED with the modification in that herein defendant-appellees are hereby ORDERED to partition Lot 769-A and deliver to plaintiff-appellant Ricardo Teves one-eight (sic) (1/8) portion thereof corresponding to the share of his deceased father Cresenciano Teves. No costs.

The appellate court said that plaintiffs-appellants' biased and interested testimonial evidence consisting of mere denials of their signatures in the disputed instruments is insufficient to prove the alleged forgery and to overcome the evidentiary force of the notarial documents. It also ruled that the plaintiffs-appellants' claim over Lot 6409 was barred by prescription after the lapse of ten years from the issuance of title in favor of Asuncion Teves, while their claim over Lot 769-A is barred by laches since more than 25 years has intervened between the sale to Asuncion Teves and the filing of the present case in 1984.

The appellate court noted that the conveyance of Lot 769-A in favor of Asuncion Teves did not affect the share of Cresenciano Teves as he was not a signatory to the settlements. It also found that Ricardo Teves, Cresenciano's heir, is in possession of a portion of Lot 769-A and that defendants-appellees do no not claim ownership over such portion. Thus, the defendants-appellees It-it were ordered to partition and convey to Ricardo Teves his one-eighth share over Lot 769-A.

As regards the extrajudicial settlement involving Lot 6409, although it was found by the appellate court that Cresenciano Teves was also not a signatory thereto, it held that it could not order the reconveyance of the latter's share in such land in favor of his heir Ricardo Teves because Cresenciano had predeceased Joaqin Teves. Moreover, Ricardo Teves, by a deed simply denominated as "Agreement" executed on September 13, 1955 wherein he was represented by his mother, authorized the heirs of Joaquin Teves to sell his share in Lot 6409.[19]

Plaintiffs-appellants assailed the appellate court's decision upon the following grounds -

> I. IN CONSIDERING RICARDO TEVES AS BOUND BY THE SIGNATURE OF HIS MOTHER, INSPITE OF DEATH OF CRESENCIANO TEVES IN 1944; AND UNDER THE OLD CIVIL CODE THE SPOUSE CANNOT INHERIT EXCEPT THE USUFRUCT;
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> II. IN UPHOLDING SWEEPINGLY THE PRESUMPTION OF REGULARITY OF NOTARIZED DEED, DESPITE CLEAR, CONVINCING, SUBSTANTIAL AND SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE THAT MARIA OCHOTORENA WAS IN MINDANAO; THE NOTARY PULIC DID NOT KNOW MARIA OCHOTORENA AND THE SIGNATURES OF THE OTHER HEIRS IN THE QUESTIONED DOCUMENT ARE BELIED BY COMPARISON WITH THE GENUINE SIGNATURE IN EXH. "E";
>
> III. IN VALIDATING THE ONE PESO CONSIDERATION, INSPITE OF NO OTHER VALUABLE CONSIDERATION, THE SUPERIMPOSED P100 WAS UNILATERALLY INSERTED, SHOWING FICTITIOUS AND SIMULATED CONSIDERATION; AND
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> IV. PRESCRIPTION DOES NOT START FROM A VOID CONTRACT.[20]

We affirm that the extrajudicial settlements executed by the heirs of Joaquin Teves and Marcelina Cimafranca are legally valid and binding.

The extrajudicial settlement of a decedent's estate is authorized by section 1 of Rule 74 of the Rules of Court, which provides in pertinent part that -

> If the decedent left no will and no debts and the heirs are all of age, or the minors are represented by their judicial or legal representatives duly authorized for the purpose, the parties may, without securing letters of administration, divide the estate among themselves as they see fit by means of a public instrument filed in the office of the register of deeds, ...

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Thus, for a partition pursuant to section 1 of Rule 74 to be valid, the following conditions must concur: (1) the decedent left no will; (2) the decedent left no debts, or if there were debts left, all had been paid; (3) the heirs are all of age, or if they are minors, the latter are represented by their judicial guardian or legal representatives; (4) the

partition was made by means of a public instrument or affidavit duly filed with the Register of Deeds.[21]

We uphold, finding no cogent reason to reverse, the trial and appellate courts' factual finding that the evidence presented by plaintiffs-appellants is insufficient to overcome the evidentiary value of the extrajudicial settlements. The deeds are public documents and it has been held by this Court that a public document executed with all the legal formalities is entitled to a presumption of truth as to the recitals contained therein.[22] In order to overthrow a certificate of a notary public to the effect that the grantor executed a certain document and acknowledged the fact of its execution before him, mere preponderance of evidence will not suffice. Rather, the evidence must be so clear, strong and convincing as to exclude all reasonable dispute as to the falsity of the certificate. When the evidence is conflicting, the certificate will be upheld.[23] The appellate court's ruling that the evidence presented by plaintiffs-appellants does not constitute the clear, strong, and convincing evidence necessary to overcome the positive value of the extrajudicial settlements executed by the parties, all of which are public documents, being essentially a finding of fact, is entitled to great respect by the appellate court and should not be disturbed on appeal.[24]

It is noted that the Deed of Extrajudicial Settlement & Sale covering Lot 6409 purports to divide Joaquin Teves' estate among only six of his heirs, namely Asuncion, Teotimo, Felisia, Gorgonio, Arcadia and Maria Teves.[25] It does not mention nor bear the signatures of either Pedro or Cresenciano Teves although they are both intestate heirs of Joaquin Teves and as such, are entitled to a proportionate share of the decedent's estate. Contrary to the ruling of the appellate court, the fact that Cresenciano predeceased Joaquin Teves does not mean that he or, more accurately, his heirs, lose the right to share in the partition of the property for this is a proper case for representation, wherein the representative is raised to the place and degree of the person represented and acquires the rights which the latter would have if he were living.[26]

However, notwithstanding their non-inclusion in the settlement, the action which Pedro and Cresenciano might have brought for the reconveyance of their shares in the property has already prescribed. An action for reconveyance based upon an implied trust pursuant to article 1456 of the Civil Code prescribes in ten years from the registration of the deed or from the issuance of the title.[27] Asuncion Teves acquired title over Lot 6409 in 1972, but the present case was only filed by plaintiffs-appellants in 1984, which is more than 10 years from the issuance of title.[28]

The division of Lot 769-A, on the other hand, was embodied in two deeds. The first extrajudicial settlement was entered into by Teotimo, Felicia, Pedro, Gorgonio, Arcadia and Asuncion Teves in 1956[29] , while the second deed was executed in 1959 by Maria Teves.[30] Cresenciano was not a signatory to either settlement. However, in contrast to the extrajudicial settlement covering Lot 6409, the two extrajudicial settlements involving Lot 769-A do not purport to exclude Cresenciano from his participation in Lot 769-A or to cede his share therein in favor of Asuncion. The settlement clearly adjudicated the property in equal shares in favor of the eight heirs of Marcelina Cimafranca. Moreover, the deeds were intended to convey to Asuncion Teves only the shares of those heirs who affixed their signatures in the two documents. The pertinent portions of the extrajudicial settlement executed in 1956, of which substantively identical provisions are included in the 1959 deed, provide -

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> 5. That by virtue of the right of succession the eight heirs above mentioned inherit and adjudicate unto themselves in equal shares Lot No. 769-A and our title thereto is evidenced by the O.C. of Title No. 4682-A of the Land Records of Negros Oriental.
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> THAT FOR AND IN CONSIDERATION of the sum of FOUR HUNDRED TWENTY-FIVE (P425.00) PESOS, Philippine Currency which we have received from ASUNCION TEVES; WE, Teotimo, Felicia,

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> Pedro, Gorgonio and Arcadia, all surnamed Teves, do hereby sell, transfer and convey unto Asuncion Teves, married to Isaac Itit, Filipino, of legal age and resident of and with postal address in the City of Dumaguete, all our shares, interests and participations over Lot 769-A of the subdivision plan, Psd, being a portion of Lot No. 769 of the Cadastral Survey of Dumaguete, her heirs, successors and assigns, together with all the improvements thereon.

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It has even been admitted by both parties that Ricardo Teves is in possession of an undetermined portion of Lot 769-A and defendants-appellees It-it do not claim ownership over his share in the land.[31] Thus, contrary to the appellate court's ruling, there is no basis for an action for reconveyance of Ricardo Teves' share since, in the first place, there has been no conveyance. Ricardo Teves is entitled to the ownership and possession of one-eighth of Lot 769-A.

Neither does Ricardo Teves have a right to demand partition of Lot 769-A because the two extrajudicial settlements have already effectively partitioned such property. Every act which is intended to put an end to indivision among co-heirs and legatees or devisees is deemed to be a partition, although it should purport to be a sale, an exchange, a compromise, or any other transaction.[32] The extrajudicial settlements executed in 1956 and 1959 adjudicated Lot 769-A in equal shares unto the eight heirs of Marcelina Cimafranca. Such a partition, which was legally made, confers upon each heir the exclusive ownership of the property adjudicated to him.[33] Although Cresenciano, Ricardo's predecessor-in-interest, was not a signatory to the extrajudicial settlements, the partition of Lot 769-A among the heirs was made in accordance with their intestate shares under the law.[34]

With regards to the requisite of registration of extrajudicial settlements, it is noted that the extrajudicial settlements covering Lot 769-A were never registered. However, in the case of Vda. de Reyes vs. CA,[35] the Court, interpreting section 1 of Rule 74 of the Rules of Court, upheld the validity of an oral partition of the decedent's estate and declared that the non-registration of an extrajudicial settlement does not affect its intrinsic validity. It was held in this case that –

> [t]he requirement that a partition be put in a public document and registered has for its purpose the protection of creditors and at the same time the protection of the heirs themselves against tardy claims. The object of registration is to serve as constructive notice to others. It follows then that the intrinsic validity of partition not executed with the prescribed formalities does not come into play when there are no creditors or the rights of creditors are not affected. Where no such rights are involved, it is competent for the heirs of an estate to enter into an agreement for distribution in a manner and upon a plan different from those provided by law.

Thus, despite its non-registration, the extrajudicial settlements involving Lot 769-A are legally effective and binding among the heirs of Marcelina Cimafranca since their mother had no creditors at the time of her death.

Except for the portion of Lot 769-A occupied by Ricardo Teves, both parcels of land have been and continue to be in the possession of Asuncion Teves and her successors-in-interest.[36] Despite this, no explanation was offered by plaintiffs-appellants as to why they instituted the present action questioning the extrajudicial settlements only in 1984, which is more than 25 years after the assailed conveyance of Lot 769-A and more than 10 years after the issuance of a transfer certificate of title over Lot 6409, both in favor of Asuncion Teves. Such tardiness indubitably constitutes laches, which is the negligence or omission to assert a right within a reasonable time, warranting a presumption that the party entitled to assert it either has abandoned it or declined to assert it.[37] Thus, even assuming that plaintiffs-appellants had a defensible cause of action, they are barred from pursuing the same by reason of their long and inexcusable inaction.

An extrajudicial settlement is a contract and it is a well-entrenched doctrine that the law does not relieve a party

from the effects of a contract, entered into with all the required formalities and with full awareness of what he was doing, simply because the contract turned out to be a foolish or unwise investment.[38] Therefore, although plaintiffs-appellants may regret having alienated their hereditary shares in favor of their sister Asuncion, they must now be considered bound by their own contractual acts.

WHEREFORE, the August 18, 1992 decision of the Court of Appeals is hereby AFFIRMED. No pronouncements as to costs.

SO ORDERED.

Melo, (Acting C.J.), Vitug, Panganiban, and Purisima, JJ., concur.

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[1] The decision in the case docketed as CA-G.R. CV No. 3373 was promulgated by the fourteenth division composed of Justices Luis L.Victor (ponente), Ricardo L. Pronove and Eduardo G. Montenegro.

[2] The case was docketed as Civil Case No. 8400 and was decided by Judge Enrique B. Inting.

[3] RTC Records, 332-339.

[4] Ibid., 337.

[5] Exhibit C.

[6] Exhibit G.

[7] Exhibit F.

[8] RTC Records, 1-2.

[9] Exhibit 1 for defendants Baylosis.

[10] Exhibit D.

[11] TCT No. 5761, Exhibit 2 for defendants Baylosis.

[12] Exhibit 6 for defendants Baylosis.

[13] TCT No. 14548, Exhibit 3 for defendants It-it.

[14] Exhibit 7 for defendants Baylosis.

[15] TCT No. 15430, Exhibit 8 for defendants Baylosis.

[16] RTC Decision, 1-2.

[17] Ibid., 3.

[18] Ibid., 8-10.

[19] CA Decision, 6-10.

[20] Rollo, 4.

[21] Sanchez vs. CA, 279 SCRA 647 (1997).

[22] People vs. Fabro, 277 SCRA 19 (1997).

[23] Bunyi vs. Reyes, 39 SCRA 504 (1971).

[24] People vs. Cahindo, 266 SCRA 554 (1997).

[25] Exhibit D.

[26] Civil Code, arts. 970, 972.

[27] Vda. de Cabrera vs. CA, 267 SCRA 339 (1997).

[28] CA Decision, 8.

[29] Exhibit G.

[30] Exhibit F.

[31] RTC Records, 360.

[32] Civil Code, art. 1082.

[33] Id., art. 1091.

[34] Id., ART. 980. The children of the deceased shall always inherit from him in their own right, dividing the inheritance in equal shares.

[35] 199 SCRA 646 (1991).

[36] CA Records, 25, 101.

[37] Vda. de Cabrera vs. CA, 267 SCRA 339 (1997).

[38] Divina vs. CA, 220 SCRA 597 (1993); Sanchez vs. CA, 279 SCRA 647 (1997).

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