

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. RAMONITO SAURE A.K.A. “DODONG”, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

G.R. No. 135848. March 12, 2002

Ponente: PUNO, J.

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PUNO, J.:

What has been promised as a night of festivity and fun turned out to be Renato Lepasanda’s last dance. For his death, an Information for murder was filed against accused-appellant Ramonito Saure alias “Dodong” on October 17, 1996 with the Regional Trial Court of Maasin, Southern Leyte. Its accusatory portion reads:

“That on or about the 28[th] of July 1996 at around 1:30 o’clock a.m., in Barangay Basak, municipality of Maasin, province of Southern Leyte, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused with intent to kill, evident premeditation and treachery, and while armed with a fan knife known as “Batangas,” which said accused had provided himself for the purpose, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously attack, assault and stab one Renato Lepasanda, thereby inflicting upon the latter the following injuries:

- Stab wound 1 inch in length (L) chest penetrating to thoracic cavity;
- Stab wound (R) chest 1 cm. Level T6;
- Stab wound 1.5 inch in length (R) chest level T7 (R) posterior axillary line penetrating to thoracic cavity;
- Incised wound (R) wrist 1 in. in length muscle deep;
- Incised wound 1 inch in length (L) wrist;

which caused the instantaneous death of the said victim to the damage and prejudice of his heirs and of social order.

CONTRARY TO LAW.”[1]

The accused-appellant was arraigned on November 20, 1996 and entered a plea of not guilty.[2] On trial, the prosecution presented the testimonies of Eleno Alinsub and Ernesto Lacbayo. It also offered the “Batangas” knife[3] allegedly used by the accused and the victim’s Certificate of Death prepared by Dr. Reynaldo Tan who conducted the post-mortem examination.[4]

The accused-appellant testified on his own behalf along with three (3) corroborating witnesses, namely: (1) Matias Sumampong; (2) Remigio Lacerna; and (3) Relito Dagami.

Prosecution witness Eleno Alinsud testified that on the evening of July 27, 1996, the Barangay Council of Basak organized a benefit dance at the barangay auditorium. Being the chief barangay tanod, he was assigned to oversee the peaceful and orderly conduct of the event.[5]

At around 1:30 am the following day, Alinsub saw accused-appellant Ramonito “Dodong” Saure stab Renato

Lepasanda using a “Batangas” knife. He opined that the stabbing must have been related with the previous verbal altercation between the two, wherein the same reprimanded Lepasanda for forcing one Arlene Lacbayo, alleged niece of the latter, to dance against her wishes.[6]

After Lepasanda’s reprimand, accused-appellant went to the side of the dance hall, pulled his “Batangas” knife, rushed towards the victim who was then sitting in an oblique position, and attacked him from the backside. The accused-appellant’s first thrust landed on the victim’s upper left chest. Attempting to defend himself, Lepasanda picked up a stool. But as he was raising the stool, the accused-appellant stabbed him again several times, hitting different parts of his upper chest.[7] Alinsub, who was three (3) meters away from the scene, shouted at the accused-appellant to avoid any untoward incident. He was hardly heard, though, because the music was still playing.[8]

While the victim was being attacked, Alinsub rushed towards the accused-appellant, and hit him on the head with a stool. He shoved the victim away to avoid further harm. The accused-appellant, meanwhile, thrust his knife at Alinsub three times but was unable to injure him because the latter was already on guard.[9]

Upon seeing the incident, Emie Lacerna (also referred to as Remegio Lacerna), a councilman of barangay Canyuom and a companion of the accused-appellant, instructed the latter to board a motorcycle and surrender himself to the authorities. Lacerna’s son drove the motorcycle and accompanied the accused to the Maasin Police Station. For his part, Alinsub proceeded to the barangay captain of Basak to report the incident.[10]

Alinsub further testified that the accused-appellant, who was bigger and taller than the victim, appeared to be intoxicated when the incident took place.[11]

Ernesto Lacbayo, brother of Arlene Lacbayo, corroborated the material allegations of Alinsub. He testified that on July 27, 1996 at about 11:30 in the evening, he was at the barangay auditorium of Basak to attend the benefit dance.[12] He was occupying a table with Renato Lepasanda who was seated in front of him. His sister was seated at another table, roughly three (3) open arms stretch from them. He clarified that Lepasanda was not related by blood to him nor to his sister.[13]

At about 1:30 in the early morning of July 28, 1996, Lepasanda approached the accused-appellant and reprimanded him for forcing Arlene to dance with him. The two had an exchange of words but were pacified by Eleno Alinsub. Lepasanda returned to his seat but moments later, the accused-appellant appeared with a “Batangas” knife and immediately stabbed him in his left chest.[14]

Lacbayo declared that the victim was not able to defend himself. After hitting the victim on the left chest, the accused-appellant continuously and successively struck the victim for around five (5) times more while the victim was picking up a stool to parry the blows. Lacbayo tried to help the victim but Remegio Lacerna prevented him from doing so. Lacerna grabbed the wooden bench which Lacbayo intended to use against the accused-appellant. The two of them grappled for possession of the bench.[15]

As this was happening, Eleno Alinsub instructed the victim to run. The accused-appellant, however, pursued him. Because of the accused-appellant’s persistent pursuit, Alinsub struck him with a bench, hitting him on the forehead. The accused-appellant directed his attack against Alinsub but his attempts were unsuccessful. At this point, Lacerna embraced the accused and ordered him to board a motorcycle.[16]

Taking the witness stand, accused-appellant belied the foregoing testimonies of the prosecution and interposed the justifying circumstance of self-defense.

Hailing from the nearby Barangay Canyuom, accused-appellant testified that he was in Barangay Basak on the

night of July 27, 1996 to attend the benefit dance.[17] With him were Remegio Lacerna, Matias Sumampong,[18] and Melovino Bonote.[19] They were occupying a table just across that of Arlene Lacbayo, Ernesto Lacbayo and Renato Lepasanda. The three were seated beside the entrance door.[20] Prior to the incident, the accused was not acquainted with either the victim Lepasanda or the Lacbayo siblings.[21]

At about 1:30 in the morning the following day, he approached Arlene Lacbayo for a special dance. Lepasanda, whom the accused-appellant later learned to be the boyfriend of Arlene, stood up and admonished him. The accused-appellant assured Lepasanda that he would not mind if Arlene would refuse to dance with him. Despite this assurance, however, Lepasanda flared up and a verbal confrontation ensued between them. At this point, Alinsub, a barangay tanod, came and pacified them. Recognizing Alinsub's authority, and considering that he was not from Barangay Basak, accused listened to Alinsub's admonition and went back to his seat. He danced for a while and later on, told his companions that he will urinate.[22]

On his way to the comfort room, he passed by Lepasanda's table. Without provocation, Lepasanda struck him with a stool, hitting him on the forehead. Lepasanda kept on hitting him for some time. Feeling dizzy, he drew his "Batangas" knife to parry the blows. Alinsub also struck him with a stool, hitting his nape.[23]

Because of the commotion, he was unsure whether he hurt anyone with his "Batangas" knife. He had a feeling, though, that he might have wounded somebody. So when Lacerna embraced him and told him to surrender, he immediately obliged and went to the Maasin Police Station.[24] He told the authorities that he might have wounded somebody and surrendered the "Batangas" knife.[25]

Suffering from swelling, contusion and hematoma, the accused-appellant went to the hospital for medical treatment.[26] He was accompanied by two policemen whom he identified as Lito and a certain Dumaguit.[27] The hospital personnel, however, refused to give him a medical certificate. He was instructed to go to the dispensary, instead. When he arrived at the dispensary, he was told that the doctor was in Tacloban so he went back to the municipal building.[28]

Matias Sumampong, a cousin of both the witness and the accused-appellant, corroborated the accused-appellant's testimony.[29] He testified that on July 27, 1996, he was with Ramonito Saure and Ruby Bonote in Barangay Basak auditorium to attend the benefit dance. They occupied a table and the three of them had a drink. They consumed one (1) pocket-size Tanduay Rhum and one (1) family-size Coke.

That evening, Renato Lepasanda was with some lady-companions. They were occupying a table about three (3) meters from that of the accused-appellant. Sumampong and the accused-appellant had a dance with Lepasanda's companions. After some time, the accused-appellant requested Arlene Lacbayo to dance with him again. He likewise sought the permission of Lepasanda who reluctantly acceded to the request. The two danced for a while but sensing Lepasanda's reluctance, the accused-appellant escorted Arlene back to her seat.[30]

At about 1:30 am the following day, he saw Renato Lepasanda strike the accused-appellant on the face with a stool. The accused-appellant drew his "Batangas" knife, parrying the blows inflicted by Lepasanda. In the process, the accused-appellant wounded Lepasanda on the right chest. The accused-appellant and the victim were facing each other when the former inflicted injury on the latter.[31]

Seized by fear, Sumampong was unable to do anything. He did not want to get involved with his cousins' quarrel. He finally regained his composure and asked the accused-appellant to stop thrusting his knife at Lepasanda. By then, several people started ganging up on the accused-appellant.[32]

Defense also presented Remigio Lacerna, a barangay kagawad of Barangay Canyuom. Lacerna testified that he was in Barangay Basak on July 27, 1996, to attend the benefit dance. He arrived at the barangay auditorium at

about 10:00 pm. The accused-appellant joined him at his table an hour later.[33]

Later that night, Lacerna paid one hundred pesos (P100.00) to the organizer of the benefit dance for five (5) musical pieces and asked a lady to dance with him. Accused-appellant also danced but after the first piece, he approached Arlene Lacbayo, presumably to invite her to dance. Lacerna, however, noticed that the accused-appellant did not dance when the second piece was played.[34]

At about 1:30 am the following day, Lacerna saw Lepasana hit the accused-appellant with a stool. As the lights were dim, he barely saw what was happening. He thought that the accused-appellant retaliated by boxing Lepasana only.[35] It was only later that he realized that the accused-appellant had stabbed Lepasana.[36] Nonetheless, he saw Alinsub hit the accused-appellant on the nape using a stool. Seeing this, he embraced the accused-appellant and told him to ride the motorcycle driven by his son, and surrender to police authorities.[37] He went home to Canyuom right after the incident. Only then did he learn that the victim was his grandson.[38]

Lacerna claimed that he was not aware of any verbal altercation between the accused-appellant and the victim before the incident.[39] Although he is acquainted with Matias Sumampong and Ruby Rabonete, did not notice their presence at the benefit dance.[40]

Finally, defense presented SPO3 Relito Dagami, assigned with the General Assignment Services of the Philippine National Police. He testified that on July 28, 1996, at about 9:00 am, the accused-appellant, who was then detained at the Maasin Police Station, requested a medical examination for the injuries he sustained. With a patrol car, he accompanied the accused to the Integrated Provincial Health Office. The accused-appellant, however, was not given a medical certificate. He was instructed to secure the medical certificate from the Rural Health Unit but when they arrived there, they were informed that the doctor was in Tacloban.[41] Thus, they went back to the municipal building.[42] Dagami attested that the face of the accused-appellant was indeed swollen.[43]

Giving credence to the witnesses for the prosecution, the trial court disregarded the accused-appellant's claim of self-defense, viz:.

“Accused denied the murder charge and invokes self-defense anchored mainly on his self-serving testimony, and pleading a mitigation, tried to establish the circumstance of voluntary surrender. His testimony tried to obtain corroboration from witnesses Matias Sumampong and Remigio Lacerna. But to no avail. They were not able to overcome the positive and straightforward declarations of the prosecution witnesses.

Accused attempts to lay the blame on victim Renato as the one who first assaulted him by striking him with a stool, and to defend himself, he took hold of his fan knife and did not realize that he was able to hit Renato on the chest. This is specious. Between him and Renato he has more teeth to grit, or axe to grind, or hatred to harbor because Renato prevented him from forcing his way on Renato's niece, Arlene. The rancor was more in his heart. He had more motive to do harm.

The Court finds the prosecution witnesses to be more credible than those of the accused no matter how the accused tried to cast doubt on the veracity of the testimonies of the witnesses for the prosecution. The latter's testimonies are eyeball testimonies and far from being perjured. No improper motives impelled the prosecution witnesses to testify as they did.”

Accordingly, the trial court found the accused guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime charged. Appreciating the mitigating circumstance of voluntary surrender, the trial court sentenced the accused to an imprisonment term of reclusion perpetua, including its accessory penalties and costs, viz:

“WHEREFORE, judgment is hereby rendered finding the accused RAMONITO SAURE @ Dodong GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt of the crime charged and sentences him to a determinate indivisible imprisonment term of RECLUSION PERPETUA, and its accessory penalties, and to pay the costs.

In death indemnity, accused Saure is ordered to pay the heirs of Renato Lepasanda death indemnity in the amount of P50,000.00 and moral damages of P10,000.00.

SO ORDERED.”[44]

The accused seasonably appealed to us contending that the trial court erred (1) in not appreciating his claim of self-defense; and (2) in holding the killing was attended by treachery and evident premeditation.[45]

It is hornbook doctrine that where self-defense is invoked, it is incumbent upon the accused-appellant to prove by clear and convincing evidence that [1] he is not the unlawful aggressor; [2] there was lack of sufficient provocation on his part; and [3] he employed reasonable means to prevent and repel an aggression.[46] The accused-appellant must also rely on the strength of his own evidence and not on the weakness of that of the prosecution, for even if the latter were weak, it would not be disbelieved after his open admission of responsibility for the killing. On appeal, this burden becomes even more difficult as the accused-appellant must show that the court below committed reversible error in appreciating the evidence.[47]

At the heart of the claim for self-defense is the presence of an unlawful aggression committed against the accused-appellant. Without unlawful aggression, self-defense will not have a leg to stand on and this justifying circumstance cannot and will not be appreciated, even if the other elements are present. Unlawful aggression presupposes an actual, sudden, and unexpected attack, or imminent danger thereof.[48] The person defending himself must have been attacked with actual physical force or with actual use of weapon.[49]

In the case at bar, the accused-appellant tried to prove that the unlawful aggression emanated from the victim who struck him with a stool, without any provocation on his part, and after their previous verbal altercation had already been settled. He further testified that he drew his knife to parry the blows but he was not aware that he had accidentally hit the victim, viz:

“Q:

When you returned to your respective table, what happened next, if any?

A:

Music were (sic) played and I dance and I asked permission from my companion that I will urinate.

Q.

Then what happened?

A:

When I passed by in front of their table, I was struck by a stool in (sic) my forehead and I was hit.

Q:

Who struck you with a stool?

A:

I was struck by Renato Lepasanda.

Q:

Were you hit?

A:

Yes, maam.

Q:

Where?

A:

Here.

Interpreter:

Witness is pointing his forehead.

COURT:

Where is the scar?

A:

No scar, Your Honor just a swell.

COURT:

What happened next?

A:

He kept on beating me and I was not anymore aware that I hit him because I used my fan knife or Batangas knife to parry his blows.”[50]

Upon his surrender at the police station, the accused maintained his evasive posture, viz:

“ATTY. LESIGUES:

When you surrender (sic) to the police authorities in Maasin, what did you tell them?

A:

I told them that I was attacked without provocation and I was asked who attacked me without provocation I told them I do not know the person.

COURT:

So you did not surrender because you stabbed somebody but because another person attacked you or gipareglahan ka?

A:

I surrendered because I told may be (sic) I wounded a person. Here is my fan knife you just verify the person whom I wounded and then they went to the hospital and when they returned I was told that the person was already dead and so they placed me in jail.”[51]

Moreover, SPO3 Relito Degami, who testified for the defense, declared that when he escorted the accused to obtain medical attendance, accused merely told him that he was involved in some trouble, viz:

“Q:

Did Ramonito Saure tell you how did he sustain that swollen face?

A:

I was told by him that he was involved in a trouble.

Q:

Did he tell you that he killed a certain Renato Lepasanda?

A.:

No, sir.

Q:

Did he tell you that he killed the one who caused injuries to him?

A:

No, sir.

Q:

So, all that Ramonito Saure told you is that he was involved in a trouble?

A:

Yes, sir.”[52]

We have ruled that the failure on the part of the accused to inform the police upon his surrender that he acted in self-defense in committing the crime charged is fatal to his defense.[53] His testimony to the effect that he does not remember having stabbed the victim is inconsistent with self-defense, which in essence is an admission of the killing in order to preserve one’s life or limb. Being evasive, such testimony does not help at all in establishing self-defense.[54]

Moreover, the defense admitted, without qualification, the victim’s death certificate, which was offered to prove that the victim died of cardio-respiratory arrest resulting from massive blood loss due to multiple stab wounds. Oft-repeated is the rule that the presence of a large number of wounds, five (5) in this case, negates self-defense and indicates a determined effort to kill the victim.[55]

Finally, the accused-appellant tried to obtain corroboration from two of his companions that night. Remigio Lacerna, however, testified that he was not able to witness the entire incident because the lights were dim, and from his distance, he could only see an image of the actual events. While insisting that he saw the victim strike the accused-appellant first using a stool, Lacerna thought that the accused-appellant merely boxed the victim in retaliation. He did not see him stab the victim.

Just like Lacerna, Matias Sumampong claimed that he saw the victim strike the accused-appellant with the stool and that the latter stabbed the former only once. Seeing everything that transpired, Sumampong was struck by fear and did not bother to do anything despite the fact that both the accused and the victim are his relatives.

The trial court found the testimonies of Lacerna and Sumampong incredible and not worthy of belief. We reiterate that when the issue is one of credibility of witnesses, appellate courts will generally not disturb the finding of the trial court, unless it has plainly overlooked certain facts of substance and value that, if considered, might affect the result of the case.[56] This is so because the latter is in a better position to decide the question, having heard the witnesses and observed their deportment and manner of testifying during trial. We have carefully examined the records and the accused has failed to convince us that there is room in this appeal for the application of the exception.

Moreover, the accused-appellant has not shown that the witnesses for the prosecution had any ill-motive against him which would have moved them to falsely implicate him in the death of Renato Lepasanda. It is settled that where there is nothing to indicate that the principal witnesses for the prosecution were actuated by improper motive, the presumption is that they were not so actuated and their testimony are entitled to full faith and credit.[57]

All told, the plea of self-defense cannot be justifiably entertained. Accused-appellant having failed to discharge the burden proving his defense, his conviction necessarily follows, on the basis of his admission to the killing.

The lower court also held that the accused-appellant committed the crime of murder, as qualified by the treachery, which was specifically alleged in the information. There is treachery when the offender commits any of the crimes against persons, employing means, methods or forms in the execution thereof which tend directly and specially to insure its execution, without risk to himself arising from any defense which the offended party may make.[58]

Treachery is evidently present in the instant case as the accused-appellant, stealthily and without warning, rushed towards the victim from behind and stabbed him in the chest. The victim, who was then seated, was not aware of any impending danger. Although there had been prior verbal altercation, the victim had reasons to believe that the matter has already been settled after Alinsub’s intervention. Considering the multitude of persons who participated in the benefit dance, he was totally devoid of any suspicion that the accused-appellant, who was not a

resident of Barangay Basak, would perform such a dastardly act. When the victim was trying to run away, the accused-appellant even pursued him and stabbed him repeatedly while trying to defend himself.

Although the information also specifically alleged evident premeditation as a qualifying circumstance to the offense charged, the lower court did not rely upon this circumstance to sustain a conviction of murder. Neither was evident premeditation appreciated as a general aggravating circumstance. The lower court explicitly stated that there was no other aggravating circumstance attendant to the commission of the offense.[59]

At the time of the commission of the crime, R. A. No. 7659 was already in effect. Thus, the applicable penalty for murder is reclusion perpetua to death. There being no aggravating circumstance but with one generic mitigating circumstance of voluntary surrender, the penalty imposable to the accused-appellant, in accordance with article 64 (2) of the Revised Penal Code should be the minimum period, which is reclusion perpetua.

Anent the damages, the court was correct in ordering the accused-appellant to pay the heirs of the victim P50,000.00 as civil indemnity.

WHEREFORE, the impugned decision of the Regional Trial Court of Maasin, Southern Leyte, Branch 25 in Criminal Case No. 1959 finding accused-appellant Ramonito “Dodong” Saure guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of murder is affirmed. He is hereby sentenced to suffer the indivisible penalty of RECLUSION PERPETUA and to pay the heirs of the victim the amount of P50,000.00 as civil indemnity.

Costs against appellant.

SO ORDERED.

Davide, Jr., C.J., (Chairman), Kapunan, and Ynares-Santiago, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 1-2.

[2] Records, p. 14.

[3] Exhibit “A.”

[4] Exhibit “B.”

[5] TSN, January 24, 1997, p. 4.

[6] Id., pp. 5-6.

[7] Id., pp. 7-8.

[8] Id., p. 6.

[9] Id., p. 8.

[10] Id. p. 9

[11] Id., p. 10.

[12] TSN, March 13, 1997, pp. 2-3.

[13] Id., pp. 9-11.

[14] Id., pp. 3-4.

- [15] Id., pp. 4-6.
- [16] Id., pp. 6-7.
- [17] TSN, November 21, 1997, p. 4
- [18] Id., p. 6.
- [19] Id., p. 14. Levino Bonote is also referred to as “Ruby Bonote.”
- [20] Id., pp. 7-8.
- [21] Id., p. 5.
- [22] Id., pp. 5-8.
- [23] Id., pp. 7, 9-10.
- [24] Id., p. 10.
- [25] Id., p. 12.
- [26] Ibid.
- [27] Id., p. 22.
- [28] Id., 12-13.
- [29] TSN, February 6, 1998, p. 15.
- [30] Id., pp. 12-13.
- [31] Id., pp. 3-5.
- [32] Id., p. 15.
- [33] Id., p. 14.
- [34] Id., pp. 16-17.
- [35] Ibid., also p. 6.
- [36] Ibid.
- [37] Id., pp. 6-7.
- [38] Id., p. 3.
- [39] Id., p. 15
- [40] Id., p. 17.
- [41] Id., pp. 27-28.
- [42] Id., p. 3.
- [43] Id., pp. 29.
- [44] Decision dated August 3, 1998. Rollo, pp. 14-22.
- [45] Appellant’s Brief, Rollo, p. 34.

- [46] *People vs. Rabanal*, 349 SCRA 655, 659-660 (2001).
- [47] *Jacobo vs. Court of Appeals*, 270 SCRA 270, 273 (1997).
- [48] *People vs. Aguilar*, 292 SCRA 349 (1998).
- [49] *People vs. Caguing*, 347 SCRA 374, 380 (2000), citing *People vs. Cario*, 288 SCRA 404 (1998).
- [50] TSN, November 21, 1997, pp. 8-9.
- [51] *Id.*, pp. 11-12.
- [52] TSN, May 15, 1998, pp. 29-30.
- [53] *Ingles vs. Court of Appeals*, 269 SCRA 122, 129 (1997).
- [54] *Jacobo vs. Court of Appeals*, 270 SCRA 270, 286 (1997).
- [55] *People vs. Deopante*, 263 SCRA 691, 707 (1997).
- [56] *People vs. Hubilla*, 252 SCRA 471, 478 (1996).
- [57] *People vs. Rostata*, 218 SCRA 657 (1993); *People vs. Taneo*, 218 SCRA 494 (1993); *People vs. Tranca*, 235 SCRA 455 (1994).
- [58] Art. 14, par. 16, Revised Penal Code; *People vs. Tañedo*, 266 SCRA 34 (1997); *People vs. Nacario*, 346 SCRA 478 (2000).
- [59] Decision, p. 8.

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