

**NORA T. JIMENEZ, JOSEFINA T. GAVINO, LIBRADA T. DINO AND
SUSAN T. JOVEN, PETITIONERS, VS. COMMISSION ON ECUMENICAL
MISSION AND RELATIONS OF THE UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN THE...**

G.R. No. 140472. June 10, 2002

Ponente: PANGANIBAN, J.

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PANGANIBAN, J.:

The well-settled rule that factual findings of trial courts deserve respect, sometimes even finality, is based on the postulate that they had the distinct opportunity, not available to the reviewing courts, to hear the testimonies of witnesses and to observe their conduct and demeanor on the stand. But where the factual assessments refer to documents that are available to the scrutiny of appellate courts in the same manner that they were to the lower courts, this reliance does not apply. In the present case, the controversy revolves around the allegedly forged signatures on documents that could be examined by the Court of Appeals (CA). In any event, since there was a conflict in the factual assessments made by the trial and the appellate courts, we have opted to pass upon the issue as an exception to the general rule.

The Case

Before us is a Petition for Review on Certiorari under Rule 45, challenging the January 29, 1999 Decision and the September 7, 1999 Resolution the Court of Appeals[1] in CA-GR CV No. 48877. The assailed Decision disposed as follows:

“WHEREFORE, the appealed Decision dated September 20, 1994 is REVERSED and SET ASIDE, and another is entered sustaining the validity of the Deed of Sale dated July 7, 1936 and of TCT No. 90689 issued in the name of UCCP as owner thereof, and DISMISSING the Complaint.” [2]

The assailed Resolution denied reconsideration.[3]

The Facts

The facts of the case are summarized by the CA in this wise:

“The [petitioners] are sisters and the children of x x x Nicanor Teodoro and Francisca Ciriaco. They filed their complaint in 1982 alleging that their mother was the owner of the subject property which was titled in her name under OCT No. 11757. Said property is now covered by TCT No. 90689 in the name of [respondent] United Church of Christ in the Philippines (or UCCP) for this was donated to it by the Commission on Ecumenical Mission in that Deed of Donation dated July 1, 1977. [Petitioners] claim that their parents never sold the lot to the Board of Foreign Missions nor any one else, and that their purported signatures on the impugned Deed of Sale have been found to be forgeries by government handwriting experts. Relying on this [respondents] filed this suit [imputing] the fraudulent act upon [respondents] and thus asked for the declaration of nullity of the subject deed and of TCT No. 90689 issued in the name of UCCP, the reconveyance of the

subject property in their favor, and for the award of damages.

“In their answer, [respondents] denied that there was forgery and insisted that the said spouses legally conveyed their property under a valid deed of sale. They likewise averred that the action was already barred by prescription and/or laches for [petitioners] filed this suit after sleeping on their alleged rights for forty-five (45) years.

“At the trial [petitioners] submitted various exhibits as documentary evidences and presented five (5) witnesses, namely: [petitioners] Susan T. Joven and Nora T. Jimenez, handwriting experts Arcadio Ramos of the National Bureau of Investigation and Francisco Cruz, Jr., of PC Crime Laboratory, and [respondent] pastor Policarpio Carungin. On the other hand, [respondents] proffered as their evidences four (4) documents and the testimonies of [Respondent] Pastor Policarpio Carungin and that of his wife Felicula.

“According to [petitioners], their father and mother died respectively on September 30, 1979 and April 3, 1943, and they were then only minors when their mother died. In 1975 they learned for the first time about the subject property from Irene Cruz, their aunt and the caretaker of their mother’s said property. They had no copy of the original title to the property and the only documents they possessed proving their mother’s ownership were the Application for Registration of Title filed by their mother in 1929 docketed as G.L.R.O. Rec. No. 35469 and the Court Order for the issuance of Decree No. 381166 in 1930 commanding the registration of the subject property in their mother’s name. With these papers on hand, [petitioners] then filed a petition for reconstitution of original certificate of title in 1977. This was opposed by UCCP arguing that it owned the property by virtue of a valid deed of sale signed by their parents. [Petitioners] also discovered that a petition for reconstitution of transfer of certificate of title involving the same property had been filed way back in 1975 by the UCCP, and in fact, in 1979 this petition of UCCP was granted and TCT No. 90689 was issued in its name. Entertaining doubts as to the truthfulness of the deed of sale, [petitioners] secured a copy of it and showed it to their father who denied having signed the deed. Consequently they asked for signature verification of the said deed of sale by the NBI and the PC. In its ‘Questioned Document Report No. 241-780’ the NBI made the finding that the sample and questioned signatures of Francisca were not written by the same person, while no definite opinion was given as to Nicanor’s signatures because of the insufficiency in numbers of his sample signatures. The PC Crime Laboratory examination came to the conclusion that the signatures of both Francisca and Nicanor were written by persons other than the said spouses.

“On the other hand, the evidence of [respondents] shows that the Board of Foreign Missions (now the Commission on Ecumenical Mission) bought the subject property from the Teodoro spouses in 1936. A church building was constructed on it that same year by the Presbyterian Protestant Church which was then under the ecclesiastical auspices of the Board of Foreign Missions. From then on, the church has remained on the property and has been regularly used for religious worship by its members. Sometime in 1947, several protestant church bodies, including the Presbyterian Church, were merged into a one incorporated union - the UCCP. In order that the title to the subject property would be transferred in the name of UCCP, a deed of donation was executed by the Board of Foreign Missions in its favor in 1977. Way back in 1975, UCCP filed a petition for reconstitution of Transfer of Certificate of Title No. T-14785 of the subject lot in the name of the Board of Foreign Missions, which was granted in 1979. In 1980, the UCCP registered the lot in its name and TCT No. T-90689 was issued canceling TCT No. T-14785.

“On March 17, 1989, the court a quo rendered its first decision of the case dismissing the complaint of [petitioners] on the grounds of prescription and laches, and as such it did not anymore see it fit [to] resolve the other issues of the case, The pertinent portion of the judgment reads as follows:

‘[Petitioners’] claim being barred by prescription and laches, the other issues need no longer be discussed.

‘WHEREFORE, this case is hereby ordered DISMISSED.’

“Dissatisfied [petitioners] challenged the ruling by filing an appeal with this Court docketed as CA-G.R. No.

21704. On October 31, 1991, this Court rendered its decision reversing the lower court's judgment holding that the case had not been barred by laches or prescription, and thereupon:

'PREMISES CONSIDERED, this Court hereby resolves to remand the instant action to the court a quo for the said court to dispose of the undisposed issues specified in its Order dated January 4, 1983, such disposition to be made on the basis of the evidence on record.'

The said undisposed issues were (a) the validity of the subject deed of sale, (b) the nature of the subject property, whether it be conjugal or paraphernal, and (c) the liability for damages.

"This ruling was not appealed to the Supreme Court. Upon remand, the court a quo required the parties to submit their respective memoranda concerning the three unresolved issues, and on September 20, 1994 rendered the herein assailed judgment in favor of [petitioners] declaring the nullity of the deed of sale and the TCT No. 90689 due to forgery but finding [respondents] builders in good faith so no damages was awarded. x x x.

'WHEREFORE, PREMISED ON THE FOREGOING CONSIDERATIONS, Judgment is hereby rendered in the following manner:

1.

Declaring the nullity of the Deed of Sale dated July 7, 1936 and supposedly executed by Spouses Nicanor Teodoro and Francisca Ciriaco over the lot in question in favor of the defendant Church;

2.

Declaring the nullity of TCT No. 90689 in the name of [respondent] Church;

3.

Declaring [petitioners] to be the rightful owners of the lot in question as the legal heirs of Francisca Ciriaco who is hereby declared to be the previous owner of said Lot as her paraphernal property;

4.

Declaring [respondents] to be a builder in good faith whose rights and obligations over the Church and improvements it had constructed on the lot in question should be governed by the provisions of Art. 448 of the Civil Code.

5.

No pronouncements as to damages and costs."

x x x x x x x x [4] (Citations omitted)

Ruling of the Court of Appeals

The CA reversed the RTC, which had "placed unquestioning faith and reliance on the findings of the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) and the Philippine Constabulary (PC) Crime Laboratory Service." [5] The appellate court held that the trial court had misconstrued the former's Decision in CA-GR CV No. 21704. The CA denied having ever made a finding that the alleged forgery in the questioned Deed of Sale had never been rebutted by respondents when they failed to raise the matter in their Brief or Memorandum. Rather, the appellate court supposedly confined itself to determining whether petitioners' Complaint was barred by prescription and laches. "The case would not have been remanded to the court a quo if there ha[d] been a finding that [respondents] had indeed admitted the fact of forgery." [6]

The appellate court doubted the findings of the NBI and the PC handwriting experts, because “the documents from which the sample signatures were taken were either mere photocopies, or dated years away from the questioned Deed of Sale of 1936.”[7] The police findings were not conclusive upon the courts, which could totally disregard them and make their own separate finding for themselves. After examining and analyzing the subject signatures, the CA concluded: “We x x x found no substantial indicia or reason to suspect their authenticity. Contrary to the findings of the NBI and the PC, x x x we find resemblances but no stark and distinguishing difference. The slight dissimilarities do not indicate forgery for these are natural, expected and inevitable variations in genuine signatures made by one and the same person. x x x.” [8]

The CA relied on the validity of the Deed of Sale, because it was notarized. Moreover, Francisca Ciriaco, during her lifetime, never protested the building of the church in 1936. Her nonchalant attitude towards the “intrusion” on the subject property was likewise displayed by her husband and her sister who was the administrator/caretaker of her properties.

Hence, this recourse.[9]

The Issues

In their Memorandum,[10] petitioners raise the following issues:

“Whether in reversing the new Decision of the RTC dated September 20, 1994 and in rendering the questioned Decision dated January 29, 1999 and the questioned Resolution dated September 7, 1999, the Court of Appeals departed from the usual and accepted course of judicial proceedings and disregarded precedents and rulings of the Supreme Court, particularly - -

“I.

Whether the Court of Appeals defied the rule that findings of the trial court are conclusive on the appellate court when the Court of Appeals overturned the trial court’s finding of forgery despite the fact that the trial court was in a better position to resolve the issue of forgery and despite the fact that the evidence showing forgery is un rebutted, overwhelming and preponderant.

“II.

Whether the Court of Appeals disregarded the rule of preponderance of evidence applicable in civil cases.”
[11]

This Court’s Ruling

The Petition is not meritorious.

First Issue:

No Finding of Forgery

Petitioners claim that the CA erred when it disregarded the factual findings of the RTC which had given weight, credibility and reliability to the handwriting experts from both the NBI and the PC. These experts had declared the signatures of Francisca Ciriaco and Nicanor Teodoro in the 1936 Deed of Sale as forgeries.

We clarify. As a rule, this Court accords great weight and respect, sometimes even finality, to findings of fact of trial courts, especially when affirmed by the CA. However, where the factual findings of the courts a quo are contrary to each other, this Court may intervene to resolve the conflict.[12]

The reliance of appellate tribunals on the factual findings of the trial court is based on the postulate that the latter had firsthand opportunity to hear the witnesses and to observe their conduct and demeanor during the proceedings. However, when such findings are not anchored on their credibility and their testimonies, but on the assessment of documents that are available to appellate magistrates and subject to their scrutiny, reliance on trial courts finds no application. In the present case, the CA had the same opportunity as the RTC in examining and analyzing the questioned signatures.

In any event, since the CA reversed the RTC primarily because of their conflicting findings of fact, we now opt to pass upon the factual antecedents. [13] After a review of the records and the pleadings of the parties, we hold that the CA did not err in overturning the RTC.

It is also hornbook doctrine that the opinions of handwriting experts, even those from the NBI and the PC, are not binding upon courts. This principle holds true especially when the question involved is mere handwriting similarity or dissimilarity, which can be determined by a visual comparison of specimens of the questioned signatures with those of the currently existing ones. [14]

Handwriting experts are usually helpful in the examination of forged documents because of the technical procedure involved in analyzing them. But resort to these experts is not mandatory or indispensable to the examination or the comparison of handwriting.[15] A finding of forgery does not depend entirely on the testimonies of handwriting experts, because the judge must conduct an independent examination of the questioned signature in order to arrive at a reasonable conclusion as to its authenticity. In an earlier case, this Court explained as follows:

“x x x. A finding of forgery does not depend entirely on the testimony of handwriting experts. Although such testimony may be useful, the judge still exercises independent judgment on the issue of authenticity of the signatures under scrutiny. The judge cannot rely on the mere testimony of the handwriting expert. In the case of Gamido vs. Court of Appeals (citing the case of Alcon vs. Intermediate Appellate Court, 162 SCRA 833), the Court held that the authenticity of signatures

‘x x x is not a highly technical issue in the same sense that questions concerning, e.g., quantum physics or topology or molecular biology, would constitute matters of a highly technical nature. The opinion of a handwriting expert on the genuineness of a questioned signature is certainly much less compelling upon a judge than an opinion rendered by a specialist on a highly technical issue.’

“A judge must therefore conduct an independent examination of the signature itself in order to arrive at a reasonable conclusion as to its authenticity x x x.” [16]

Moreover, Section 22 of Rule 132 of the Rules of Court explicitly authorizes the court, by itself, to make a comparison of the disputed handwriting “with writings admitted or treated as genuine by the party against whom the evidence is offered, or proved to be genuine to the satisfaction of the judge.”

In *Lorenzo v. Diaz*, [17] the factors involved in examining handwritings were identified and explained in these words:

“x x x [T]he authenticity of a questioned signature cannot be determined solely upon its general characteristics, similarities or dissimilarities with the genuine signature. Dissimilarities as regards spontaneity, rhythm, pressure of the pen, loops in the strokes, signs of stops, shades, etc., that may be found between the questioned signature and the genuine one are not decisive on the question of the former’s authenticity. The result of examinations of questioned handwriting, even with the benefit of aid of experts and scientific instruments, is, at best, inconclusive. There are other factors that must be taken into consideration. The position of the writer, the condition of the surface on which the paper where the questioned signature is written is placed, his state of mind, feelings and nerves, and the kind of pen and/or paper used, play an important role on the general

appearance of the signature. Unless, therefore, there is, in a given case, absolute absence, or manifest dearth, of direct or circumstantial competent evidence on the character of a questioned handwriting, much weight should not be given to characteristic similarities, or dissimilarities, between that questioned handwriting and an authentic one.”

Forgery cannot be presumed. It must be proved by clear, positive and convincing evidence. The burden of proof lies in the party alleging forgery. Did petitioners succeed in proving that the signatures of Francisca Ciriaco and Nicanor Teodoro had been forged?

After comparing the questioned signatures, the CA concluded that they were not forged. We affirm its finding. Indeed, the best evidence of a forged signature in an instrument is the instrument itself showing the alleged forgeries. The fact of forgery can be established by comparing the allegedly false signature with the authentic or genuine one.

This was exactly what the appellate court did. After comparing the allegedly forged signature of Francisca on the 1936 Deed of Sale with her authentic or genuine specimen, the CA made its independent conclusion that there was nothing irregular in the signature on the questioned document. This right -- nay, duty -- of the RTC judge was exercised by the justices of the appellate court when they overturned the former’s findings. In the words of the CA:

“The findings of the handwriting experts from the NBI and PC are of doubtful correctness because the documents from which the sample signatures were taken were either mere photocopies, or dated years away from the questioned deed of sale of 1936. In its ‘Questioned Document Report No. 241-780’ (Exh. ‘E’), the NBI concluded that the questioned signatures and sample ones of Francisca ‘were NOT WRITTEN by one and the same person’, but made no conclusion as to the signature of Nicanor due to the need for additional sample signatures as ‘the sample signatures submitted are in different style, which cannot be used as basis for a scientific analysis.’ The questioned signatures on the deed of sale were compared by NBI with the sample/standard signatures on three documents, to wit: 1) Exhibit ‘F’ (Kasulatan ng Bileng Mabibileng Muli dated April 15, 1932), 2) Exhibit ‘G’ (Kasulatan ng Bileng Mabibileng Muli dated April 23, 1933), and 3) Exhibit ‘H’ (Marriage Contract dated January 12, 1930). On the other hand, the PC Crime Laboratory in its ‘Questioned Document Report No. 196-84’ (Exh. ‘S’) found that the sample and questioned signatures of both spouses were written by two different persons. In its examination it used the standard signatures of Francisca on three documents, namely: Exhibits ‘F’, ‘G’, and ‘R-2’ (Contract of Surety dated March 16, 1933), while the sample signatures of Nicanor came from eight (8) documents, to wit: Exhibits ‘F’, ‘G’, ‘R-2’, ‘T’ (consisting of two pages from a book entitled ‘Yearbook of Agriculture, 1936’), ‘U’ (consisting of two pages from a book entitled ‘An Enumeration of Philippine Fungi’, printed in 1937), ‘V’ (Secondary Report Card for the school year 1946-1947), ‘W’ (An Order Blank of E.R. Moore Company dated February 11, 1949). In sum there were actually nine (9) documents (Exhs. ‘F’, ‘G’, ‘H’, ‘R-2’, ‘T’, ‘U’, ‘V’, ‘W’, and ‘X’) from which the standard signatures of both spouses came from. Three of these (Exhs. ‘R-2’, ‘T’ and ‘U’) however were but machine copies, and neither the originals nor the certified true copies were offered as evidence. As such no probative value should be accorded to them and they should be disregarded in the appreciation of signatures. While the remaining six (6) documents cannot be a good basis for accurate examination and comparison of signatures because these standard signatures were not close in point of time to the questioned signatures. Some of these documents were executed in 1930, 1932 and 1933 and the others in 1946 and 1949, apparently several years apart from the 1936 subject deed of sale. The passage of time and a person’s increase in age may have decisive influences in one’s (his) writing characteristics. Thus, authorities are of the opinion that in order to bring about an accurate comparison and analysis, the standards of comparison must be as close as possible in point of time to the suspected signature. (Causapin vs CA 233 SCRA 615)

“The findings of the handwriting experts are not conclusive upon the court. On the contrary, courts can totally

disregard them and make their own separate independent finding for themselves on the matter. As this Court has once observed, the authenticity of signatures is not a highly technical issue in the same sense that questions concerning, e.g., quantum physics or topology or molecular biology, would constitute matters of a highly technical nature. The opinion of a handwriting expert is certainly much less compelling upon a judge than an opinion rendered by a specialist of a highly technical issue. The signatures on a questioned document can be sighted by a judge who can and should exercise independent judgment on the issue of authenticity of such signatures (*Gamido vs. CA 251 SCRA 101*). And this exactly what we have done here. We have examined and analyzed the subject signatures, and have found no substantial indicia or reason to suspect their authenticity. Contrary to the findings of the NBI and PC, upon comparison of the questioned signature of Francisca with her sample signatures on Exh. “F”, ‘G’ and ‘H’ we find resemblances but no stark and distinguishing difference. The slight dissimilarities do not indicate forgery for these are natural, expected and inevitable variations in genuine signatures made by one and the same person. Even the sample signatures of Nicanor submitted by the appellees show clear variations in structure, flourish, and style. Those found in Exhibits ‘F’, ‘G’, ‘H’, ‘V’ and ‘W’ are markedly different from that in Exhibit ‘X’. It must be pointed out that the crux of the matter here is forgery and any positive assertion of it can not just be accepted blandly. Forgery cannot be presumed; it must be proved by clear and convincing evidence. Those who make the allegation of forgery have the burden of proving it since a mere allegation is not evidence (*Tenio-Obsequio vs. CA 230 SCRA 550*). The evidence of the appellees’ failed to prove the forgery they claim.” [18]

Second Issue:

Disregard of Evidence

Petitioners contend that the CA disregarded the doctrine in civil cases regarding preponderance of evidence, which allegedly weighed heavily in their favor. Supposedly, such inference can be drawn from the testimonies of their father and of the handwriting experts from both the NBI and the PC as well as from reports of their respective laboratories -- all of which far outweigh the testimonies of Respondent Carungin and his wife.

We are not persuaded. First, the 1936 Deed of Sale -- a notarized document -- carries the evidentiary weight conferred upon duly executed instruments provided by law.[19] As discussed earlier, petitioners did not succeed in assailing the authenticity of the signatures of their parents on the notarized Deed.

Second, the CA, which had the same opportunity as the RTC to decipher the signatures, found no reason to doubt their authenticity.

Third, it is the quality, not the number, of witnesses that will tilt the scale of evidence. Although the number of witnesses may be considered a factor in the appreciation of evidence, preponderance does not necessarily lie in the greatest number. [20]

Fourth, after reviewing the evidence on record, we hold that it sufficiently supports the CA Decision.

Finally, the fact that petitioners waited until 1982 to file their Complaint assailing the validity of the 1936 Deed of Sale detracts from their credibility. To repeat, petitioners’ mother, father or aunt (who was the administrator/caretaker of their mother’s properties) had not done anything to protest the building of the church on the subject property.

WHEREFORE, the Petition is DENIED and the assailed Decision AFFIRMED. Costs against petitioners.

SO ORDERED.

Sandoval-Gutierrez, and Carpio, JJ., concur.

Puno, J., (Chairman), abroad, on official leave.

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- [1] First Division. Penned by Justice Roberto A. Barrios with the concurrence of Justices Jorge S. Imperial (Division chairman) and Godardo A. Jacinto (member).
- [2] Assailed Decision, p. 9; rollo, p. 86.
- [3] Rollo, pp. 87-88.
- [4] CA Decision, pp. 1-5; rollo, pp. 78-82.
- [5] Ibid., pp. 5 & 82.
- [6] Id., pp. 6 & 83.
- [7] Id.
- [8] Id., pp. 8 & 85.
- [9] The case was deemed submitted for decision on September 29, 2000, upon the Court's receipt of both the Memorandum for Respondents, which was signed by Atty. Emilio C. Capulong Jr.; and that for the Petitioners, which was signed by Atty. Austreberto A. Navales.
- [10] Rollo, pp. 118-145.
- [11] Pages 7-8; rollo, pp. 124-125. Original in upper case.
- [12] *Fontanilla v. People*, 258 SCRA 460, July 5, 1996.
- [13] *Republic v. Court of Appeals*, 258 SCRA 223, July 5, 1996; *People v. Tadeje*, 310 SCRA 426, July 19, 1999.
- [14] *Punzalan v. COMELEC*, 289 SCRA 702, April 27, 1998, citing *People v. Agamata* [CA], 64 OG 2735, which was cited in *Regalado, Remedial Law*, Vol. 2, 1989 ed., p. 506.
- [15] *Heirs of Severa P. Gregorio v. Court of Appeals*, 300 SCRA 565, December 29, 1998.
- [16] Ibid., p. 575, per Purisima, J.
- [17] 53 OG, 4107, 4110-4111, July 15, 1957, per Natividad, J. Cited in *Punzalan v. Comelec*, supra, per Kapunan, J.; and in *Francisco, Evidence*, Vol. VII, Part I, 1997 ed., p. 674.
- [18] CA Decision, pp. 6-8; rollo, pp. 83-85.
- [19] §30, Rule 132 of the Rules of Court, reads: "SEC. 30. Proof of notarial documents. - Every instrument duly acknowledged or proved and certified as provided by law, may be presented in evidence without further proof, the certificate of acknowledgment being prima facie evidence of the execution of the instrument or document involved."
- [20] *People v. Cabote*, GR No. 136143, November 15, 2001; *People v. Barellano*, 319 SCRA 567, December 2, 1999; *People v. Mallari*, 310 SCRA 621, July 20, 1999; *People v. Hillado*, 307 SCRA 535, May 24, 1999; *People v. Tulop*, 289 SCRA 316, April 21, 1998.

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