

JUANITA A. AQUINO, PETITIONER, TERESITA B. PAISTE, RESPONDENT.

G.R. No. 147782. June 25, 2008

Ponente: VELASCO JR., J.

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VELASCO JR., J.:

Conspiracy may be deduced from the mode, method, and manner by which the offense was perpetuated, or inferred from the acts of the accused persons themselves when such acts point to a joint purpose and design, concerted action, and community of interests. In this case before us, a series of overt acts of a co-conspirator and her earlier admission of participation documented in an amicable settlement she signed in the presence of counsel, all lead to the conclusion that the co-accused conspired to commit estafa.

The Court of Appeals (CA) culled the facts this way, as established by the prosecution:

At about 9:00 o'clock in the morning of March 14, 1991, petitioner Juanita Aquino, Elizabeth Garganta, and another woman identified only as "Adeling," went to the house of respondent Teresita Paiste at 611 Peñalosa St., Tondo, Manila. The children of respondent and petitioner were grade school classmates. After the usual pleasantries, petitioner started to convince respondent to buy a gold bar owned by a certain Arnold, an Igorot. After respondent was shown a sample of the gold bar, she agreed to go with them to a pawnshop in Tondo to have it tested. She was told that it was genuine. However, she told the three that she had no money.

Regardless, petitioner and Garganta went back to the house of respondent the following day. The two convinced her to go with them to Angeles City, Pampanga to meet Arnold and see the gold bar. They reached Angeles City around 2:30 p.m. and met Arnold who showed them the gold bar. Arnold informed her that it was worth PhP 60,000. After respondent informed them again she had no money, petitioner continued to press her that buying the gold bar would be good investment. The three left and went home.

On March 16, 1991, petitioner, Garganta, and Adeling returned to the house of respondent. Again, they failed to convince her to buy the gold bar.

On the next day, the three returned, this time they told respondent that the price was reduced to PhP 10,000. She agreed to go with them to Angeles City to meet Arnold once more. Arnold pretended to refuse the PhP 10,000 offer and insisted on PhP 50,000.

On petitioner's insistence, on March 18, 1991, the two went to Angeles City and bought the gold bar for PhP 50,000.[1]

On March 19, 1991, respondent had the gold bar tested and she was informed that it was fake.[2] Respondent then proceeded to petitioner's house to inform the latter that the gold bar was fake. Petitioner replied that they had to see Garganta, and that she had nothing to do with the transaction.[3]

On March 27, 1991, respondent brought petitioner to the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI)-NCR in the

presence of a certain Atty. Tolentino where petitioner amicably promised respondent they would locate Garganta, and the document they both signed would be disregarded should they locate Garganta. The amicable settlement reads:

In view of the acceptance of fault by MRS. JUANITA ASIO-AQUINO of the case/complaint filed by MRS. TERESITA PAISTE before the NBI-National Capital Region for Swindling, Mrs. J. Aquino agreed to pay the complainant half the amount swindled from the latter. Said P25,000.00 offered by Mrs. J. Aquino as settlement for the case of Estafa will be paid by her through installment scheme in the amount of P1,000.00 per month beginning from the month of March, 1991 until fully paid.

In witness whereof, the parties hereunto set their hands this 27[th] day of March 1991 at NBI-NCR, Taft Avenue, Manila.

(Sgd.) MRS. JUANITA ASIO-AQUINO

Respondent

(Sgd.) MRS. TERESITA PAISTE

Complainant

Witnesses:

- Signed (Illegible)

WAIVER OF RIGHT TO COUNSEL

The undersigned accused/respondent hereby waives her right to counsel despite the recital of her constitutional rights made by NBI agent Ely Tolentino in the presence of a lawyer Gordon S. Uy.

(Sgd.) MRS. JUANITA ASIO-AQUINO

(Sgd.) MRS. TERESITA PAISTE[4]

On April 6, 1991, petitioner brought Garganta to the house of respondent. In the presence of Barangay Chairperson Pablo Atayde and a police officer, respondent pointed to Garganta as the person who sold the fake gold bar. Garganta was brought to the police station where there was a demand against Garganta alone.

Subsequently, respondent filed a criminal complaint from which an Information against Garganta, petitioner, and three others for the crime of estafa in Criminal Case No. 92-99911 was filed before the Manila Regional Trial Court (RTC). The Information reads:

That on or about March 18, 1991, in the City of Manila, Philippines, the said accused conspiring and confederating together with three others, whose true names, real identities and present whereabouts are still unknown and helping one another, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously defraud Teresita B. Paiste in the following manner to wit: the said accused, by means of false manifestations and fraudulent representations which they made to the said Teresita B. Paiste to the effect that a certain Arnold, an Igorot is selling a gold bar for P50,000.00, and by means of other similar deceits, induced and succeeded in inducing the said Teresita B. Paiste to buy the said gold bar and to give and deliver to said accused the total amount of P50,000.00, the herein accused well knowing that their manifestations and representations were all false and untrue and were made only for the purpose of obtaining, as in fact they did obtain the said amount of P50,000.00, which once in their possession, they thereafter willfully, unlawfully and feloniously, with intent to defraud, misappropriated, misapplied and converted to their own personal use and benefit, to the damage and prejudice of the said Teresita B. Paiste in the aforesaid amount of P50,000.00, Philippine Currency.[5]

Accused Garganta and the others remained at large; only petitioner was arraigned and entered a plea of not guilty.

Trial ensued with the prosecution presenting the testimonial evidence of private complainant, herein respondent, Yolanda Pomer, and Ely Tolentino. For her defense, petitioner testified along with Barangay Chairperson Atayde, Jose Aquino, and SPO1 Roberto Cailan. The prosecution presented as documentary evidence three (3) documents, one of which is the amicable settlement signed in the NBI, while the defense relied solely on its testimonial evidence.

The Ruling of the Regional Trial Court

On July 16, 1998, the trial court rendered a Decision convicting petitioner of the crime charged, the dispositive portion of which reads:

WHEREFORE, the Court finds the accused Juanita Aquino guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of estafa and hereby sentences her to suffer the indeterminate penalty of FIVE (5) YEARS OF PRISION CORRECCIONAL as minimum to NINE (9) YEARS OF PRISION MAYOR as maximum, and to indemnify the complainant, Teresita B. Paiste the sum of P50,000.00 with 12% interest per annum counted from the filing of the Information until fully paid, and to pay the costs of suit.

SO ORDERED.[6]

The RTC found that petitioner conspired with Garganta, Adelino, and Arnold in committing the crime of estafa. The trial court likewise gave credence to the amicable settlement as additional proof of petitioner's guilt as an amicable settlement in criminal cases is an implied admission of guilt.

The Ruling of the Court of Appeals

Aggrieved, petitioner brought on appeal the above RTC decision before the CA, which was docketed as CA-G.R. CR No. 22511.

After the parties filed their respective briefs, on November 10, 2000, the appellate court rendered the assailed Decision which affirmed in toto[7] the July 16, 1998 RTC Decision.

In affirming the trial court's findings and conclusions of law, the CA found that from the tenor of the amicable settlement, the investigation before the NBI did not push through as both parties came to settle the matter amicably. Nonetheless, the CA pointed out that petitioner was assisted, although unnecessarily, by an independent counsel, a certain Atty. Gordon S. Uy, during the proceedings. The CA held that petitioner's mere bare allegation that she signed it under threat was insufficient for she presented no convincing evidence to bolster her claim. Consequently, the amicable settlement was admitted and appreciated as evidence against petitioner.

Nevertheless, the CA ruled that even if the amicable settlement was not admissible or was totally disregarded, the RTC still did not err in convicting petitioner as it was indubitably shown by the prosecution through convincing evidence replete in the records that respondent conspired with the other accused through active participation in the commission of the crime of estafa. In fine, the CA found that the prosecution had indeed established the guilt of petitioner beyond reasonable doubt.

Through the assailed April 6, 2001 Resolution, the appellate court denied petitioner's motion for reconsideration.

The Issues

Hence, we have the instant petition under Rule 45 of the 1997 Rules of Civil Procedure, ascribing the following errors, which are essentially the same ones raised before the CA:

I

THE COURT A QUO ERRED IN NOT DECLARING AS UNCONSTITUTIONAL AND LACKING IN CERTAIN PRESCRIBED REQUIREMENTS THE INVESTIGATION CONDUCTED BY THE INVESTIGATOR OF THE NATIONAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION (NBI), OF ACCUSED-APPELLANT AND COROLLARY THERETO, TO CONSIDER ANY AND ALL EVIDENCE PROCURED THEREBY TO BE INADMISSIBLE AS AGAINST ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

II

THE COURT A QUO ERRED IN NOT DECLARING AS UNCONSTITUTIONAL AND LACKING IN CERTAIN POSITIVE PARTICULARS AND STRICT COMPLIANCE THE MANNER IN WHICH THE WAIVER OF RIGHT TO COUNSEL HAD BEEN ASKED TO BE EXECUTED AND SUBSCRIBED BY ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

III

THE COURT A QUO ERRED IN FINDING THAT THE ACCUSED-APPELLANT TOOK AN ACTIVE PART IN THE COMMISSION OF THE FELONY IMPUTED TO HER AND IN DECLARING HER GUILTY THEREFOR BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT.

IV

THE COURT A QUO ERRED IN FINDING THAT CONSPIRACY EXISTED BETWEEN HEREIN ACCUSED-APPELLANT AND HER CO-ACCUSED, ELIZABETH GARGANTA DELA CRUZ.[8]

The Court's Ruling

In gist, the instant petition proffers the twin issues on (1) whether the amicable settlement executed in the NBI is admissible as evidence, and (2) whether conspiracy has indeed been proven to convict petitioner of the crime of estafa.

The instant petition hinges on the issue of the assessment of evidence and their admissibility. As consistently ruled in innumerable cases, this Court is not a trier of facts. The trial court is best equipped to make the assessment on said issues and, therefore, its factual findings are generally not disturbed on appeal unless the courts a quo are perceived to have overlooked, misunderstood, or misinterpreted certain facts or circumstances of weight, which, if properly considered, would affect the result of the case and warrant a reversal of the decision involved. We do not find in the instant case any such reason to depart from this general principle. However, in the interest of substantial justice, we shall deal with the issues raised by petitioner.

First Core Issue: Admissibility of amicable instrument

Petitioner ascribes error to the CA when it gave due weight and consideration to the amicable settlement with waiver of right to counsel that she signed in the NBI during the custodial investigation. She claims she executed the agreement under threat and not freely and voluntarily, in violation of Sec. 12(1)[9] of the Constitution which guarantees her rights under the Miranda Rule.

We are not convinced.

Custodial investigation involves any questioning initiated by law enforcement officers after a person has been taken into custody or otherwise deprived of his freedom of action in any significant way. It is only after the investigation ceases to be a general inquiry into an unsolved crime and begins to focus on a particular suspect, the suspect is taken into custody, and the police carries out a process of interrogations that lend itself to eliciting

incriminating statements, that the rule begins to operate.[10] Republic Act No. (RA) 7438[11] has extended this constitutional guarantee to situations in which an individual has not been formally arrested but has merely been "invited" for questioning.[12] Specifically, Sec. 2 of RA 7438 provides that "custodial investigation shall include the practice of issuing an invitation to a person who is investigated in connection with an offense he is suspected to have committed x x x."

It is evident that when petitioner was brought by respondent before the NBI-NCR on March 27, 1991 to be investigated, she was already under custodial investigation and the constitutional guarantee for her rights under the Miranda Rule has set in. Since she did not have a lawyer then, she was provided with one in the person of Atty. Uy, which fact is undisputed.

However, it can be gleaned from the amicable agreement, as aptly pointed out by the CA, that the custodial investigation on the inquiry or investigation for the crime was either aborted or did not push through as the parties, petitioner, and respondent agreed to amicably settle. Thus, the amicable settlement with a waiver of right to counsel appended was executed with both parties affixing their signatures on it in the presence of Atty. Uy and NBI agent Atty. Ely Tolentino.

Petitioner's contention that her constitutional rights were breached and she signed the document under duress falls flat for the following reasons:

First, it is undisputed that she was provided with counsel, in the person of Atty. Uy. The presumption that Atty. Uy is a competent and independent counsel whose interests are not adverse to petitioner has not been overturned. Petitioner has merely posed before the CA and now this Court that Atty. Uy may not be an independent and competent counsel. Without any shred of evidence to bolster such claim, it cannot be entertained.

Second, petitioner made much of the fact that Atty. Uy was not presented as witness by the prosecution and that what petitioner and Atty. Uy supposedly conferred about was likewise not presented. Basic is the principle that consultation and information between counsel and client is privileged communication and the counsel may not divulge these without the consent of the client. Besides, a party in a case has full discretion to choose whoever it wants as testimonial witnesses to bolster its case. We cannot second guess the reason of the prosecution in not presenting Atty. Uy's testimony, more so on account of the counsel-client privileged communication. Furthermore, petitioner could have asserted its right "to have compulsory process to secure the attendance of witnesses,"[13] for which she could have compelled Atty. Uy to testify. She did not.

Third, petitioner never raised any objection against Atty. Gordon Uy's appointment during the time she was in the NBI and thereafter, when she signed the amicable settlement. As this Court aptly held in *People v. Jerez*, when "the accused never raised any objection against the lawyer's appointment during the course of the investigation and the accused thereafter subscribes to the veracity of his statement before the swearing officer"[14] the accused is deemed to have engaged such lawyer. Verily, in the instant case, petitioner is deemed to have engaged Atty. Uy when she conferred with him and thereafter signed the amicable settlement with waiver of right to counsel in his presence. We do not see how the answer of NBI agent Atty. Tolentino upon cross-examination about the petitioner's counsel in the NBI, could be evasive when the NBI agent merely stated the fact that an independent counsel, Atty. Uy, was provided petitioner.

Fourth, when petitioner engaged Atty. Uy as her lawyer, she undoubtedly executed the amicable settlement. Verily, she was provided with an independent counsel and such "right to counsel is intended to preclude the slightest coercion as would lead the accused to admit something false. The lawyer, however, should never prevent an accused from freely and voluntarily telling the truth."[15] An amicable settlement is not and does not partake of the nature of an extrajudicial confession or admission but is a contract between the parties within the

parameters of their mutually recognized and admitted rights and obligations. Thus, the presence of Atty. Uy safeguarded petitioner's rights even if the custodial investigation did not push through and precluded any threat of violence, coercion, or intimidation.

Moreover, while we hold in this case that petitioner's Miranda rights were not violated, still we will not be remiss to reiterate what we held in *People v. Malimit* that the infractions of the so-called Miranda rights render inadmissible "only the extrajudicial confession or admission made during custodial investigation. The admissibility of other evidence, provided they are relevant to the issue and is not otherwise excluded by law or rules, is not affected even if obtained or taken in the course of custodial investigation."^[16] An admission is an act, declaration or omission of a party as to a relevant fact,^[17] while confession is a declaration of an accused acknowledging his guilt of the offense charged, or of any offense necessarily included therein.^[18]

Fifth, even granting *arguendo* that the amicable settlement is in the nature of an admission, the document petitioner signed would still be admissible since none of her constitutional rights were violated. Petitioner's allegations of threat, violence, and intimidation remain but bare allegations. Allegations are not proof. Pertinently, this Court ruled in *People v. Calvo*:

A confession is not rendered involuntary merely because defendant was told that he should tell the truth or that it would be better for him to tell the truth. Stated otherwise, telling the accused that it would be better for him to speak or tell the truth does not furnish any inducement, or a sufficient inducement, to render objectionable a confession thereby obtained, unless threats or promises are applied. These threats or promises which the accused must successfully prove in order to make his confession inadmissible, must take the form of violence, intimidation, a promise of reward or leniency.^[19]

In fine, we agree with the courts *a quo* that even assuming *arguendo* that the amicable settlement is not admissible, still the conviction of petitioner would be affirmed as conspiracy was duly proven by other pieces of evidence.

Second Core Issue: Conspiracy duly proven

It is petitioner's strong contention in her last two assigned errors that conspiracy has not been proven to convict her of estafa. She asserts that there was no strong showing of any convincing and solidly conclusive proof that she took an active part in any phase of the transaction concerning the overt acts constituting estafa that has been imputed to her. She argues that whatever act that might have been imputed to her has always been through the request or insistence of either Garganta or respondent as the transcript of stenographic notes reveals. She points out that after she introduced Garganta to respondent in the morning of March 14, 1991, she almost immediately left them and she did not accompany Garganta when the latter went back to respondent's house in the afternoon of March 14, 1991. And she avers that significantly, she did not remain in Pampanga after the completion of the transaction on March 18, 1991, but came to Manila with respondent. According to her, her non-participation in these two crucial meetings shows she was not part of any conspiracy to defraud respondent.

We are not persuaded.

Conspiracy is deemed to arise when two or more persons come to an agreement concerning the commission of a felony and decide to commit it. Conspiracy need not be proven by direct evidence of prior agreement to commit the crime.^[20] In criminal law, where the quantum of evidence required is proof beyond reasonable doubt, direct proof is not essential to show conspiracy--it may be deduced from the mode, method, and manner by which the offense was perpetrated, or inferred from the acts of the accused themselves when such acts point to a joint purpose and design, concerted action, and community of interest.^[21]

It is common design which is the essence of conspiracy--conspirators may act separately or together, in different manners but always leading to the same unlawful result. The character and effect of conspiracy are not to be adjudged by dismembering it and viewing its separate parts but only by looking at it as a whole--acts done to give effect to conspiracy may be, in fact, wholly innocent acts.[22] Once proved, the act of one becomes the act of all. All the conspirators are answerable as co-principals regardless of the extent or degree of their participation.

To be held guilty as a co-principal by reason of conspiracy, the accused must be shown to have performed an overt act in pursuance or furtherance of the complicity. Mere presence when the transaction was made does not necessarily lead to an inference of concurrence with the criminal design to commit the crime of estafa. Even knowledge, acquiescence, or agreement to cooperate is not enough to constitute one as a party to a conspiracy because the rule is that neither joint nor simultaneous action is per se sufficient proof of conspiracy.[23]

In the instant case, the courts a quo unanimously held that conspiracy was duly proven. As aptly observed by the CA, the records are replete with instances to show that petitioner actively participated to defraud respondent. The following instances all point to the conclusion that petitioner conspired with others to commit the crime:

First, petitioner was with her co-accused Garganta and Adeling when they went to respondent's house on March 14, 1991 to tell her of the existence of a gold bar, showed her a sample, tried to convince respondent to buy one, and went to a pawnshop in Tondo to have the sample gold bar tested.

Second, the following day, March 15, petitioner was again with her co-accused when they went to Angeles City to view the gold bar in the residence of Arnold, and participated in convincing respondent to raise PhP 50,000 for the purchase of the gold bar, and if respondent did not have money, to find a buyer.

Third, on March 16, petitioner was again with her co-accused when they returned to the house of respondent to ask if she had found a buyer. Since she had not, they again pressed her to look for one.

Fourth, on March 17, she with her co-accused again accompanied respondent to Angeles City and met with Arnold to convince him to accept PhP 10,000 as deposit, but were refused.

Fifth, on March 18, respondent again pressed respondent to buy the gold bar until the latter finally succumbed and paid PhP 50,000. Petitioner even re-counted the cash payment, wrapped it in newspaper, and handed the money herself to Arnold.

It is unquestionable that petitioner was not a passive observer in the five days from March 14 to 18, 1991; she was an active participant in inducing respondent to buy the gold bar. We find no cogent reason to alter the conclusions of the CA. Indeed, the records bear out that conspiracy was duly proven by the coordinated actions of petitioner and her companions.

Clearly, petitioner's contention that all she did was at the behest of either Garganta or respondent is belied by the fact that she took part in all the phases of the inducement right up to the purchase by respondent of the fake gold. If it was true that she had no part in the transaction, why would she still accompany Garganta to visit respondent on the 15th, 16th, 17th, and 18th of March 1991? Moreover, with trips to Pampanga made on the 15th, 17th, and 18th that take several hours, it is unfathomable that petitioner was only doing a favor to either Garganta or respondent, or to both.

Ineluctably, after having been introduced to respondent, Garganta could have made the visits to respondent without tagging along petitioner. Yet, the facts clearly show that respondent could not have been thereby induced without petitioner's active participation in encouraging respondent to buy the gold bar. Petitioner is the lynchpin upon whom respondent's interest was stoked, and ultimately to succumb to the lure of gaining a fat profit by

buying the gold bar.

Moreover, the fact that petitioner went back on the 18th with respondent to Manila instead of staying in Pampanga does not preclude her active participation in the conspiracy as shown by the foregoing narration. It would have been strange to respondent if petitioner stayed in Pampanga after the transaction. Thus, petitioner indeed took active part in the perpetration of estafa. And, petitioner has not shown any convincing proof that she was not part of the transaction given the undisputed factual milieu of the instant case.

Finally, it bears stressing that petitioner was the one who knows respondent. She introduced respondent to the other accused.

WHEREFORE, the petition is DENIED for lack of merit. The CA's November 10, 2000 Decision and April 6, 2001 Resolution in CA-G.R. CR No. 22511 are hereby AFFIRMED IN TOTO. Costs against petitioner.

SO ORDERED.

Quisumbing, (Chairperson), Carpio, Carpio Morales, and Tinga, JJ., concur.

[1] TSN, February 26, 1992, pp. 7-8.

[2] Id., September 7, 1992, p. 20.

[3] Id., August 19, 1993, p. 11.

[4] Rollo, p. 46.

[5] Id. at 41.

[6] Id. at 40.

[7] Id. at 50.

[8] Id. at 16-17.

[9] SEC. 12. (1) Any person under investigation for the commission of an offense shall have the right to be informed of his right to remain silent and to have competent and independent counsel preferably of his own choice. If the person cannot afford the services of counsel, he must be provided with one. These rights cannot be waived except in writing and in the presence of counsel.

[10] People v. Marra, G.R. No. 108494, September 20, 1994, 236 SCRA 565, 573.

[11] "An Act Defining Certain Rights of Person Arrested, Detained or under Custodial Investigation as well as the Duties of the Arresting, Detaining and Investigating Officers, and Providing Penalties for Violations Thereof" (1992).

[12] Cited in People v. Domantay, G.R. No. 130612, May 11, 1999, 307 SCRA 1.

[13] 1987 Constitution, Art. III, Sec. 14 (2).

[14] G.R. No. 114385, January 29, 1998, 285 SCRA 393, 401; citing People v. Suarez, G.R. No. 111193, January 28, 1997, 267 SCRA 119.

[15] People v. Layuso, G.R. No. 69210, July 5, 1989, 175 SCRA 47.

[16] G.R. No. 109775, November 14, 1996, 264 SCRA 167, 177.

[17] REVISED RULES ON EVIDENCE, Rule 130, Sec. 26.

[18] REVISED RULES ON EVIDENCE, Rule 130, Sec. 33.

[19] G.R. No. 91694, March 14, 1997, 269 SCRA 676, 683-684.

[20] *People v. Quirol*, G.R. No. 149259, October 20, 2005, 473 SCRA 509, 517.

[21] *Philippine Airlines, Inc. v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 159556, May 26, 2005, 459 SCRA 236, 258.

[22] *Preferred Home Specialties, Inc. v. Court of Appeals*, G.R. No. 163593, December 16, 2005, 478 SCRA 387, 415.

[23] *Ladonga v. People*, G.R. No. 141066, February 17, 2005, 451 SCRA 673, 685-686.

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