

REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES, PETITIONER, VS. FREDESVINDA ALMEDA CONSUNJI, RESPONDENT.

G.R. No. 158897. September 13, 2007

Ponente: AZCUNA, J.

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AZCUNA, J.:

This is a petition for review on certiorari under Rule 45 of the 1997 Rules of Civil Procedure, seeking the nullification of the July 1, 2003 Decision[1] of the Court of Appeals (CA) in CA-G.R. CV No. 68000, which affirmed the Decision[2] dated April 14, 2000 of the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Tanauan, Batangas, Branch 6, in Land Registration Case No. T-622 LRA Record No. N-69517. The RTC granted the application of respondent Fredesvinda Almeda Consunji for original registration of title over Lot Nos. 1399, 2232, and 2601, all of Cad-424, Sto. Tomas Cadastre.

As culled from the records of the case, the facts indicate that on April 19, 1999, respondent filed an application for the registration of Lot Nos. 1399, 2232, and 2601 — all of Cad-424, Sto. Tomas Cadastre before the RTC of Tanauan, Batangas, Branch 6. The case was docketed as Land Registration Case No. T-622 LRA Record No. N-69517. Lot No. 1399 is 4,490 square meters, Lot No. 2232 has an area of 3,649 sq. m., while Lot No. 2601 is 106,426 sq. m. big.

In her application, respondent declared, among other things, that she is the sole and exclusive owner in fee simple of the lands by virtue of inheritance and possession together with the improvements thereon; that the applicant had acquired the lands by inheritance from her deceased uncle, Claro T. Almeda, who, by his Last Will and Testament executed on March 22, 1975, bequeathed to her the three parcels of land; that she has been in possession of the lots as her paraphernal properties; that as exclusive owner of the properties, she has been in continuous, peaceful, exclusive, public, and adverse possession of the assets together with her predecessors-in-interest for more than 60 years.

After all the interested parties and appropriate government agencies had been notified of the application, the trial court issued a notice of initial hearing.[3] When the jurisdictional requirements for the application were ascertained, an Order[4] of General Default was issued by the trial court on October 15, 1999 against all persons with the exception of the Director of Lands.

At the trial on the merits, Andres Sanchez, an adjacent landowner and a retired farmer, testified that he was born on November 30, 1930 and owns properties adjacent to Lot Nos. 2601 and 1399.[5] Lot Nos. 1399 and 2601 are both located in San Antonio, Sto. Tomas, Batangas; Lot No. 2232 is in San Bartolome, Sto. Tomas, Batangas. Sanchez narrated that he knew Claro Almeda as the former owner of Lot Nos. 2601, 1399, and 2232 since he was ten years old. His father, Gregorio Sanchez, was a good friend of Almeda and about his age too. In 1940, Sanchez remembered that Lot Nos. 2601 and 1399 were planted with rice, corn, citrus, and coconut trees. Lot No. 2232 was likewise planted with coconut trees. Upon Almeda's death, respondent acquired the properties and would often visit the place. The witness stated that he had not known any other person claiming any interest over the

properties. At the time of Sanchez's testimony, he recounted that Lot No. 2232 had vegetables, coffee, mahogany and coconut trees; while Lot No. 1399 was planted with coconut and bananas.[6]

On cross-examination, Sanchez revealed that Lot Nos. 1399 and 2601 are about 200 meters away from his residence; while Lot No. 2232 was approximately farther by one kilometer. He described that Lot No. 2601 is delineated from Lot No. 1399 by barbed wire and ipil-ipil trees. Meanwhile, Lot No. 2232 was demarcated with kakawati and kaliyos trees to separate it from the adjoining lands. The witness told the court that respondent inherited the properties from Almada as the latter had no children. He was aware that Almada had other siblings, which he even named except for the sister, but stated that no other heir is claiming an interest over the properties adverse to that of the respondent. Lastly, the witness averred that respondent's ownership and possession over the parcels of land in question are open, continuous, adverse, peaceful, and in the concept of an owner.[7]

Respondent herself testified that she became the owner and possessor of the properties in question when her uncle, Claro Almada, died on September 3, 1978. Among the properties she inherited from her uncle are the three lots which are the subject matter of this petition. The first one is 10.6 hectares located in Barrio San Antonio, Sto. Tomas, Batangas. Another land is 4.98 ha. situated in Bo. San Bartolome, Sto. Tomas, Batangas. The last property has an area of 3,649 sq. m. and located in Bo. San Antonio, Sto. Tomas, Batangas. Respondent even showed the court a quo a copy of the Last Will and Testament of Almada, as well as the Petition for the Probate of the Will filed before the Court of First Instance of Lipa City.[8] Aside from the proof of payment of the real estate taxes, respondent likewise presented certifications from the Municipal Assessor's Office of Sto. Tomas, Batangas showing the history of property ownership of the parcels of land in question. At the time she testified, the witness informed the court that Lot No. 2601 is devoted to vegetables and other fruit-bearing trees like avocado, jackfruit, and a few coconut trees. Lot No. 1399 is used as a passageway to Lot No. 2601 and is planted with some coconut trees; and Lot No. 2232 is laden with coconut trees.[9]

During cross-examination, respondent told the court that she does not know of any other person having a claim or right over the properties in question. When asked if she has a claim to a portion of a barangay road, which is along Lines 2 and 3 of Lot No. 1399, she answered in the negative.[10] Respondent recalled that she first became aware of Almada's ownership of the questioned properties when she was only 15 years old, or way back in 1938 and even before the Japanese occupation.[11]

Among the pertinent pieces of evidence presented were the following:

- a) Certifications from the Region IV Community Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO) stating that Lot Nos. 1399,[12] 2232,[13] and 2601[14] are not covered by any kind of public land application or patent;
- b) a Certification[15] from the Regional Technical Director of the CENRO verifying that Lot Nos. 2601, 2232, and 1399 are alienable and disposable lands;
- c) a Certification[16] from the Chief of the Surveys Division of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) certifying that per records of the office, Lot Nos. 1399 and 2232, Cad-424, Sto. Tomas Cadastre are not portions of nor identical to any previously approved isolated surveys, however, Lot No. 2601, Cad-424, Sto. Tomas Cadastre is identical to Psu-199323;
- d) Certifications from the Office of the Municipal Assessor of payment of real property taxes of Lot Nos. 2232,[17] 1399,[18] and 2601[19] all dating back to as early as 1955;
- e) a Letter[20] from the Chief of Legal Division of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) informing the court that the properties subject of this case are covered under Republic Act (R.A.) No. 6657 as they exceed the five ha. retention limit provided under the law; and

f) a Memorandum[21] from the Municipal Agrarian Reform Officer (MARO) stating that based on existing records and investigation undertaken on the properties, said landholdings are covered by the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program pursuant to R.A. No. 6657; however, the same are not subject of any land dispute or case nor covered by Presidential Decree (P.D.) No. 27.

On April 14, 2000, the court a quo granted the application for registration of respondent. The dispositive portion of the decision reads:

WHEREFORE, and upon previous confirmation of the Order of General Default, the Court hereby adjudicates and decrees: Lot 2232, Cad-424, Sto. Tomas Cadastre, on plan Ap-04-012267, situated in the Barangay of San Bartolome, Municipality of Sto. Tomas, Province of Batangas, with an area of 4,490 square meters; Lot 1399, Cad-424, Sto. Tomas Cadastre, on plan As-04-000008, situated in the Barrio of San Antonio, Municipality of Sto. Tomas, Province of Batangas with an area of 3,649 square meters; and Lot 2601, Cad-424, Sto. Tomas Cadastre, on plan Ap-04-012266, equivalent to Psu-199323, with an area of 106,426 square meters, situated in Barangay San Antonio, Municipality of Sto. Tomas, Province of Batangas, in favor of and in the name of Fredesvinda Almeda-Consunji, Filipino citizen, of legal age, married to David M. Consunji and a resident of 4688 Pasay Road, Dasmariñas Village, Makati City, subject to the provisions of Republic Act No. 6657 otherwise known as the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law.

SO ORDERED.[22]

The Republic of the Philippines appealed the case to the CA, contending that the court a quo erred in finding that respondent has established possession over the subject properties for the period required by law. In addition, it asseverated that respondent failed to overthrow the presumption that the questioned properties form part of the public domain.

Disposing of the appeal, the appellate court ruled thereon on July 1, 2003 and affirmed the decision of the RTC. The fallo of the decision reads:

WHEREFORE, in view of all the foregoing, the assailed decision dated April 14, 2000 of the Regional Trial Court of Tanauan, Batangas, Branch 6 is hereby AFFIRMED. No costs.

SO ORDERED.[23]

Hence, this petition.

Petitioner advances the following grounds:

I.

THE COURT OF APPEALS ERRED IN FINDING THAT THE RESPONDENT HAS ESTABLISHED POSSESSION OVER THE SUBJECT PROPERTIES FOR THE PERIOD REQUIRED BY LAW.

II.

THE COURT OF APPEALS ERRED IN CONSIDERING THE TAX DECLARATIONS AS EVIDENCE OF RESPONDENT'S POSSESSION.

III.

THE COURT OF APPEALS ERRED IN CONSIDERING THE CERTIFICATION BY THE CENRO AS PROOF OF ITS ALIENABLE AND DISPOSABLE CHARACTER.[24]

The petition fails.

Section 1 of Rule 45 of the Rules of Court states that only questions of law are entertained in appeals by certiorari

to this Court.[25] It is a well-entrenched rule that the findings of fact of the trial court and its conclusions are accorded by this Court high respect, if not conclusive effect, especially when affirmed by the appellate court. This is because of the unique advantage of the trial court of having been able to observe, at close range, the demeanor and behavior of the witnesses as they testified.[26] Furthermore, it is not the function of this Court to analyze and weigh evidence all over again, unless there is a showing that the findings of the lower court are totally devoid of support or are glaringly erroneous as to constitute palpable error or grave abuse of discretion.[27]

Even assuming that the Court may review findings of fact, the petition still lacks merit. Petitioner argues that respondent failed to testify on the specific acts of ownership exercised by her kin, Claro Almeda. It puts emphasis on the fact that neither the said kin nor any tenant or tiller of the vast tracts of land was presented to support respondent's claim of her predecessors-in-interest's "open, exclusive, notorious possession" of the land.

Respondent, on the other hand, contends that she was able to prove her title to the land in question through the clear, competent, and persuasive documentary evidence presented before the trial court as well as her testimony and that of the other witness, Andres Sanchez, who has been residing continuously in the area of San Antonio, Sto. Tomas, Batangas from 1930 up to the present.

Petitioner's contention is not tenable. Section 14 of Presidential Decree (P.D.) No. 1529, otherwise known as the Property Registration Decree, states:

SECTION 14. Who may apply.—The following persons may file in the proper Court of First Instance an application for registration of title to land, whether personally or through their duly authorized representatives:

(1) Those who by themselves or through their predecessors-in-interest have been in open, continuous, exclusive and notorious possession and occupation of alienable and disposable lands of the public domain under a bona fide claim of ownership since June 12, 1945, or earlier.

(2) Those who have acquired ownership of private lands by prescription under the provision of existing laws.

Similarly, Section 48 (b) of the Public Land Act (Commonwealth Act No. 141), as amended, provides:

SECTION 48. The following described citizens of the Philippines, occupying lands of public domain or claiming to own such lands or an interest therein, but whose titles have not been perfected or completed, may apply to the Court of First Instance of the province where the land is located for confirmation of their claims and the issuance of a certificate of title thereof, under the Land Registration Act, to wit:

x x x

(b) Those who by themselves or through their predecessors-in-interest have been in open, continuous, exclusive, and notorious possession and occupation of agricultural lands of the public dominion, under a bona fide claim of ownership, since June 12, 1945, or earlier, immediately preceding the filing of the application for confirmation of title except when prevented by war or force majeure. These shall be conclusively presumed to have performed all the conditions essential to a Government grant and shall be entitled to a certificate of title under the provisions of this chapter.

It is evident from the above-cited provisions that an application for land registration must conform to three requisites: (1) the land is alienable public land; (2) the applicant's open, continuous, exclusive, and notorious possession and occupation thereof must be since June 12, 1945, or earlier; and (3) it is under a bona fide claim of ownership.[28]

Section 48 (b) of the Public Land Act, as amended by P.D. No. 1073, requires for judicial confirmation of an imperfect or incomplete title, possession and occupation of the piece of land by the applicants, by themselves or through their predecessors-in-interest, since June 12, 1945 or earlier. This provision is in total conformity with

Section 14 (1) of P.D. No. 1529 heretofore cited.[29]

Respondent has been in possession of the lands since 1978 when they were bequeathed to her by her uncle, Claro Almeda. She filed her application in 1999. To comply with the requirements of the law, respondent proceeded to tack her possession to that of her uncle. As respondent could not present her uncle to substantiate the claim that she and her predecessor-in-interest have possessed the land since June 12, 1945 and even earlier, the testimony of Sanchez, who was born on November 30, 1930,[30] is noteworthy:

Q

You mentioned that [the] three lots you identified were formerly owned by Claro Almeda. Since when did you come to know this Claro Almeda?

A

I was ten (10) years old when I came to know him, sir.

Q

And are you familiar with him since you were 10 year[s] old?

A

Yes, sir, because he is the adjoining owner of the lot farmed by my father, sir.

Q

How is [sic] old is your father, Gregorio Sanchez, at that time?

A

More or less, 40 years old, sir.

Q

Is that about the age of Claro Almeda also?

A

The same age, sir.

Q

And how are they related to each other?

A

They were good friends being adjoining owners, sir.

Q

Do you know what were planted in Lot No. 2601 and Lot No. 1399 when you first came to know these lots?

A

Rice, corn and citrus, sir.

Q

What year was that?

A

When I was ten years old, sir

Q

When did you reach the age of ten?

A

1940, sir.

Q

Are they the same crops planted to those two parcels of land?

A

Yes, sir.

Q

Are there also coconut trees on this land?

A

Yes, sir.

Q

Do you know up to when was this Claro Almeda the owner of these two lots?

A

Until his death, sir.

Q

Do you know how long ago he died?

A

More or less about 20 years back, sir.

Q

Do you know who succeeded to be the owner and possessor of these properties?

A

His niece named Freddie Almeda, sir.

Q

Why do you know that she is the present owner?

A

She is the one visiting the place after the demise of Claro Almeda, sir.

Q

So, since 20 years ago, you have already seen Fredesvinda Almeda already coming to this property?

Court:

Who is this Freddie Almeda? What is her relationship to the applicant?

A

She is one [and] the same person, your Honor.

Q

And she is the applicant in this registration case?

A

Yes, sir.

Q

Then she was [sic] the one whom you see now taking care and visiting this land?

A

Yes, sir.

Q

Since the time you came to know about this property when you were 10 years old up to now, do you know if there are other person [sic] claiming interest in this property?

A

None that I know of, sir.

Q

In other words, since then up to now, all you know is that this was owned and possessed by Claro Almeda and presently by Fredesvinda Almeda, the applicant?

A

Yes, sir.

Q

Then she was the one whom you see now taking care and visiting this land?

A

Yes, sir.

Q

Since the time you came to know about this property when you were 10 years old up to now, do you know if there are other person [sic] claiming interest in this property.

A

None that I know of, sir.

Q

In other words, since then up to now, all you know is that this was owned and possessed by Claro Almeda and presently by Fredesvinda Almeda, the applicant?

A

Yes, sir.

Q

We now come to the third Lot 2232, where is the lot situated?

A

San Bartolome, Sto. Tomas, Batangas, sir.

Q

You testified already that as early as your [sic] were ten year [sic] old, you were also going to this property owned by Claro Almeda containing half a hectare and you already mentioned the boundary owners. Can you tell us what are the crops planted during your early days when you come [sic] to know about this land?

A

Coconut trees, sir.

Q

According to you, up to when did Claro Almeda own and possess this property?

A

Until his death, sir.

Q

And nobody is claiming this property during his lifetime?

A

No, sir.

Q

What happened to this property after his death?

A

As far as I know, Claro Almeda was succeeded in the possession and ownership by the applicant Fredesvinda Almeda, sir.[31]

Sanchez had resided in and frequented the areas since he was a child. Clearly, therefore, his testimony was significant and he was able to prove his familiarity with Almeda and respondent's ownership and possession of the subject lots. He sufficiently provided direct and categorical testimony consisting of specific acts of ownership to substantiate respondent's claim that she and her predecessor-in-interest have possessed and occupied the challenged lots even before June 12, 1945. Notwithstanding the fact that no tenant was presented as a witness to prove at least 30 years of possession by respondent, this, still, does not destroy the credibility of Sanchez.

Moreover, respondent herself corroborated the testimony of Sanchez. She testified in this manner.

Q

Since when did you become owner and possessor of these properties?

A

Since my uncle, Claro Almeda, died on September 3, 1978, sir.

x x x

Q

In other words, your possession as owner of these lands began only in 1978 when your uncle died?

A

Yes, sir.

Q

And what is the character of your possession?

A

Continuous, open and without any other claimants, sir.

Q

And your possession is in what concept?

A

With a concept as an owner, sir.[32]

During cross-examination, respondent was unwavering:

Q

As far as your recollection is concerned, can you testify before the this Court when was the first time you became aware that Claro T. Almeda is the owner and possessor's [sic] of the parcels of land in question?

A

When I was still young about 15 years old, sir.

Q

When were you born?

A

October 19, 1923, sir.

Q

Where?

A

Tanauan, Batangas, sir

Q

So you were 15 years old then, that was 1938?

A

Yes, sir.

Q

Do you mean to tell the Court that prior to the Japanese occupation, it was already your uncle in possession [sic] of these parcels of land?

A

Yes, sir.

Q

So, how would you characterize his possession and ownership over these parcels of land at that time?

A

Open, continuous, adverse and with a concept of an owner, sir.

Q

As far as you can remember, Mrs. Witness, how did your uncle utilize these parcels of land during his time [of] ownership from 1938 until his death on September 3, 1978?

A

Yes, sir, he used to plant citrus, rice, corn and coconut trees.

Q

At what particular lot?

A

Lots 2601 and 1399, sir.

Q

How about with respect to Lot 2232?

A

Coconut trees and vegetables, sir.[33]

Petitioner, however, contends that the appellate court erred in considering the tax declarations as evidence of respondent's possession of the questioned lands given that the tax receipts were all relatively recent, the oldest of which only dates back to 1975.

Although tax declarations, as a rule, are not conclusive evidence of ownership, they are proof that the holder has a claim of title over the property and serve as sufficient basis for inferring possession. These tax declarations bolster the respondent's claim that her predecessor-in-interest possessed and occupied the lots even before the period prescribed by law.[34] The fact that the earliest tax declarations of the lots were for the year 1955 will not mitigate against respondent. In *Recto v. Republic*,[35] it was held that:

x x x the belated declaration of the lot for tax purposes does not necessarily mean that possession by the previous owners thereof did not commence in 1945 or earlier. As long as the testimony supporting possession for the required period is credible, the court will grant the petition for registration.[36]

Petitioner asserts that reliance on the certification issued by the CENRO, officially stating that the properties are alienable, is incorrect inasmuch as the issuing officer did not testify in court; therefore, such evidence "in point of strict law" may be "constitutive of hearsay."

A review of the records would reveal that respondent presented several documents to prove that the subject lots are alienable public land. This Court found out that respondent offered in evidence a Certification[37] from the DENR dated October 11, 1999, containing the following statements:

FOR Fredesvinda Almeda Consunji
Sto. Tomas, Batangas
FROM The Regional Technical Director
Forest Management Service

SUBJECT VERIFICATION OF STATUS OF LAND

Lots 2601, 2232 and 1399 of San Antonio &
San Bartolome, Sto. Tomas, Batangas

In Connection with your request for verification of status of above noted lots dated October 6, 1999 please be informed that the subject area falls within Alienable and Disposable Proj. No. 30 of Sto. Tomas, Batangas per L.C. Map 582 cert. December 25, 1925.[38]

It is therefore undisputed that the subject lots have been declared as alienable and disposable by a positive government act.[39] The certification itself is sufficient to establish the true nature and character of the subject properties. Similarly, it enjoys a presumption of regularity in the absence of contradictory evidence.[40]

The only plausible conclusion then is that respondent has acquired a registrable title over the subject lots anchored on her predecessor-in-interest's possession tracked down from even before the Japanese occupation, and her own

possession of more than 20 years, reckoned from the death of her uncle on September 3, 1978 to the filing of the application of registration on April 19, 1999.

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the petition is DENIED. The Court AFFIRMS the July 1, 2003 Decision of the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. CV No. 68000, as well as the Decision dated April 14, 2000 of the Regional Trial Court of Tanauan, Batangas, Branch 6, in Land Registration Case No. T-622 LRA Record No. N-69517, granting respondent's application for original registration of title over Lot Nos. 1399, 2232 and 2601, all of Cad-424, Sto. Tomas Cadastre.

No costs.

SO ORDERED.

Puno, C.J., (Chairperson), Sandoval-Gutierrez, Corona, and Garcia, JJ., concur.

[1] Penned by Associate Justice Jose L. Sabio with Associate Justices B.A. Adefuin-De La Cruz and Hakim S. Abdulwahid, concurring; rollo, pp. 31-38.

[2] Penned by Judge Flordelis Ozaeta Navarro, records, pp. 232-236.

[3] Id. at 37-39.

[4] Id. at 76.

[5] TSN, October 28, 1999, p. 2.

[6] Id. at 3-5.

[7] Id. at 6-7.

[8] TSN, November 15, 1999, pp. 2-3.

[9] Id. at 5-6.

[10] Id. at 6.

[11] Id. at 7-8.

[12] Records, Exhibit "J," p. 82.

[13] Id., Exhibit "K," p. 83.

[14] Id., Exhibit "L," p. 84.

[15] Id., Exhibit "M," p. 86.

[16] Id., Exhibit "Z," p. 132.

[17] Id., Exhibit "U," p. 133.

[18] Id., Exhibits "V" and "W," pp. 141 and 151.

[19] Id., Exhibit "X," p. 165.

[20] Id., Exhibit "Ba," p. 214.

[21] Id., Exhibit "Ba-1," p. 227.

- [22] Id. at 236.
- [23] Rollo, p. 38.
- [24] Id. at 13-14.
- [25] Pamplona Plantation Company, Inc. v. Tinghil, G.R. No. 159121, February 3, 2005, 450 SCRA 421, 427.
- [26] Rabanal v. People of the Philippines, G.R. No. 160858, February 28, 2006, 483 SCRA 601, 608, citing Senoja v. People of the Philippines, G.R. No. 160341, October 19, 2004, 440 SCRA 695.
- [27] EJR Crafts Corporation v. Court of Appeals, G.R. No. 154101, March 10, 2006, 484 SCRA 340, 349, citing Potenciano v. Reynoso, 449 Phil. 396, 405 (2003), Fortune Guarantee and Insurance Corporation v. Court of Appeals, 428 Phil. 783, 797 (2002).
- [28] Vernon T. Reyes v. Republic of the Philippines, G.R. No. 141924, January 23, 2007; underscoring supplied.
- [29] Del Rosario-Igtiben v. Republic, G.R. No. 158449, October 22, 2004, 441 SCRA 188, 194.
- [30] TSN, October 28, 1999, p. 2.
- [31] Id. at 3-5; underscoring supplied.
- [32] TSN, November 15, 1999, pp. 2-3; underscoring supplied.
- [33] Id. at 7-8; underscoring supplied.
- [34] Limcoma Multi-Purpose Cooperative v. Republic, G.R. No. 167652, July 10, 2007.
- [35] G.R. No. 160421, October 4, 2004, 440 SCRA 79.
- [36] Id. at 85.
- [37] Exhibit "M," records, p. 86.
- [38] Id., underscoring supplied.
- [39] Republic v. Bibonia, G.R. No. 157466, June 21, 2007.
- [40] Buenaventura v. Republic, G.R. No. 166865, March 2, 2007.

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