

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, APPELLEE, VS. RONALDO DE GUZMAN Y DANZIL, APPELLANT.*G.R. No. 186498. March 26, 2010*

Ponente: NACHURA, J.

Read online (full-text search, related cases, audio case brief): <https://batas.org/library/g-r-no-186498/>**NACHURA, J.:**

Before this Court is an appeal by Ronaldo de Guzman y Danzil, accused in Criminal Case No. V-1118, filed before the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Villasis, Pangasinan. He was charged with Illegal Sale of Dangerous Drugs, punishable under Republic Act (R.A.) No. 9165.[1] In a decision[2] dated December 5, 2006, the trial court found De Guzman guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime charged. His conviction was affirmed by the Court of Appeals (CA) in a Decision[3] dated June 26, 2008.

On June 10, 2003, a confidential informant reported De Guzman's drug pushing activities to Alcala, Pangasinan's Chief of Police, Sotero Soriano, Jr. Soriano immediately formed a team to conduct a buy-bust operation.[4] After a short briefing, the team proceeded to De Guzman's house. Once there, the confidential informant introduced appellant to Senior Police Officer (SPO)1 Daniel Llanillo, who was designated as poseur-buyer. Llanillo tried to buy P200 worth of shabu. He handed two marked P100 bills to De Guzman, and the latter, in turn, gave him two heat-sealed transparent plastic sachets containing what was suspected as shabu. Thereafter, Llanillo gave the prearranged signal to the rest of the team. Appellant was arrested and frisked. The team recovered from De Guzman two packs of empty transparent sachets, three disposable lighters, and P3,380.00 in cash, which included the marked money paid by SPO1 Llanillo. The team then brought De Guzman to the police station in Alcala, Pangasinan.[5]

At the police station, De Guzman and the items seized during the buy-bust operation were turned over to the police investigator, SPO3 Eduardo Yadao. SPO3 Yadao entered the incident in the police blotter. He then placed his initials on the packets of suspected shabu, which were later submitted to the Philippine National Police (PNP) Crime Laboratory in Urdaneta City.[6] Confirmatory tests revealed that the substance in the packets that appellant handed to SPO1 Llanillo was indeed shabu.[7]

At the trial, appellant denied the charges against him. He claimed that, on the morning of June 10, 2003, he was on the second floor of his house watching television when he was informed by his wife that police officers were looking for him. He claimed that SPO1 Llanillo informed him about a report that he (De Guzman) was repacking shabu, which he denied. Thereafter, the police officers frisked him and took the P3,000.00 from his pocket. The police officers also searched the cabinet, where his television was, and found a lighter. Then, he was handcuffed and brought to the police station.[8]

After trial, the RTC rendered a decision, finding De Guzman guilty beyond reasonable doubt of violating R.A. No. 9165. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and to pay a fine of P500,000.00.[9]

De Guzman appealed his conviction to the CA, which affirmed the RTC decision in toto.[10]

De Guzman now comes to this Court on a Petition for Review. He argues that the prosecution failed to show that the police officers complied with the mandatory procedures under R.A. No. 9165.[11] In particular, he points to the fact that the seized items were not marked immediately after his arrest; that the police officers failed to make an inventory of the seized items in his presence or in the presence of his counsel and of a representative from the media and from the Department of Justice (DOJ); and that no photographs were taken of the seized items and of appellant.[12] Appellant also claims that the unbroken chain of custody of the evidence was not established.[13] Further, appellant contends that the failure of the police officers to enter the buy-bust operation in the police blotter before the said operation, the lack of coordination with the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA), and the failure to observe the requirements of R.A. No. 9165 have effectively overturned the presumption of regularity in the performance of the police officers' duties.[14]

The findings of fact of the trial court are accorded great respect, even finality when affirmed by the CA, in the absence of any clear showing that some facts and circumstances of weight or substance that could have affected the result of the case have been overlooked, misunderstood, or misapplied.[15]

Although the question of whether the degree of proof has been met is largely left for the trial courts to determine, an appeal throws the whole case open for review.[16] Thus, the factual findings of the trial court may be reversed if, by the evidence or the lack of it, it appears that the trial court erred.[17]

A review of the records of this case reveals that circumstances warrant a reversal of the trial court's decision.

The Constitution mandates that an accused in a criminal case shall be presumed innocent until the contrary is proven beyond reasonable doubt. The prosecution is laden with the burden to overcome such presumption of innocence by presenting the quantum of evidence required.

Consequently, courts are required to put the prosecution evidence through the crucible of a severe testing, and the constitutional right to presumption of innocence requires them to take a more than casual consideration of every circumstance or doubt favoring the innocence of the accused.[18]

When the circumstances are capable of two or more inferences, as in this case, one of which is consistent with innocence and the other is compatible with guilt, the presumption of innocence must prevail, and the court must acquit.[19]

The duty to prove the guilt of an accused is reposed in the State. Law enforcers and public officers have the duty to preserve the chain of custody over the seized drugs. This guarantee of the integrity of the evidence to be used against an accused goes to the very heart of his fundamental rights.[20]

In a prosecution for illegal sale of dangerous drugs, the following elements must be proven: (1) that the transaction or sale took place; (2) that the corpus delicti or the illicit drug was presented as evidence; and (3) that the buyer and seller were identified.[21] What is material is the proof that the transaction or sale actually took place, coupled with the presentation in court of the prohibited or regulated drug. The delivery of the contraband to the poseur-buyer and the receipt of the marked money consummate the buy-bust transaction between the entrapping officers and the accused.[22] The presentation in court of the corpus delicti -- the body or the substance of the crime - establishes the fact that a crime has actually been committed.[23]

Contrary to De Guzman's contention, the trial court correctly found that the buy-bust transaction took place. The buyer (SPO1 Llanillo) and seller (De Guzman) were both identified and the circumstances of how the purported sale of the illegal drugs took place were clearly demonstrated. Thus, the prosecution successfully established the first and third elements of the crime. However, there is a problem in the prosecution's effort to establish the integrity of the corpus delicti.

In a prosecution for violation of the Dangerous Drugs Act, the existence of the dangerous drug is a condition sine qua non for conviction. The dangerous drug is the very corpus delicti of the crime.[24]

The identity of the prohibited drug must be established with moral certainty. Apart from showing that the elements of possession or sale are present, the fact that the substance illegally possessed and sold in the first place is the same substance offered in court as exhibit must likewise be established with the same degree of certitude as that needed to sustain a guilty verdict.[25] The corpus delicti should be identified with unwavering exactitude.[26]

The chain of custody requirement performs this function in that it ensures that unnecessary doubts concerning the identity of the evidence are removed.[27] Section 21 of R.A. No. 9165 states:

Section 21. Custody and Disposition of Confiscated, Seized, and/or Surrendered Dangerous Drugs, Plant Sources of Dangerous Drugs, Controlled Precursors and Essential Chemicals, Instruments/Paraphernalia and/or Laboratory Equipment. - The PDEA shall take charge and have custody of all dangerous drugs, plant sources of dangerous drugs, controlled precursors and essential chemicals, as well as instruments/paraphernalia and/or laboratory equipment so confiscated, seized and/or surrendered, for proper disposition in the following manner:

(1) The apprehending team having initial custody and control of the drugs shall, immediately after seizure and confiscation, physically inventory and photograph the same in the presence of the accused or the person/s from whom such items were confiscated and/or seized, or his/her representative or counsel, a representative from the media and the Department of Justice (DOJ), and any elected public official who shall be required to sign the copies of the inventory and be given a copy thereof.

On the other hand, the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of R.A. No. 9165 provides:

SECTION 21. Custody and Disposition of Confiscated, Seized and/or Surrendered Dangerous Drugs, Plant Sources of Dangerous Drugs, Controlled Precursors and Essential Chemicals, Instruments/Paraphernalia and/or Laboratory Equipment. - The PDEA shall take charge and have custody of all dangerous drugs, plant sources of dangerous drugs, controlled precursors and essential chemicals, as well as instruments/paraphernalia and/or laboratory equipment so confiscated, seized and/or surrendered, for proper disposition in the following manner:

(a) The apprehending officer/team having initial custody and control of the drugs shall, immediately after seizure and confiscation, physically inventory and photograph the same in the presence of the accused or the person/s from whom such items were confiscated and/or seized, or his/her representative or counsel, a representative from the media and the Department of Justice (DOJ), and any elected public official who shall be required to sign the copies of the inventory and be given a copy thereof: Provided, that the physical inventory and photograph shall be conducted at the place where the search warrant is served; or at the nearest police station or at the nearest office of the apprehending officer/team, whichever is practicable, in case of warrantless seizures; Provided, further, that non-compliance with these requirements under justifiable grounds, as long as the integrity and the evidentiary value of the seized items are properly preserved by the apprehending officer/team, shall not render void and invalid such seizures of and custody over said items.

The Court finds that the apprehending officers failed to comply with the guidelines set under R.A. No. 9165 and its IRR.

SPO1 Llanillo himself admitted that the marking of the seized items was done in the police station and not immediately after the buy-bust operation. He testified:

Q:

What did you do after you said you bought P200.00 worth of shabu?

A:

In return, he handed to me two (2) heat sealed transparent plastic sachet containing a suspected methamphetamine hydrochloride (shabu), sir.

Q:

After that what did you do next?

A:

The team made a frisking on [Ronaldo] de Guzman to see if there are other things he is keeping in his body, sir.

Q:

And what was the result of your frisking [Ronaldo] de Guzman?

A:

We recovered from him 2 packs of empty transparent plastic sachets, 3 disposable lighters, sir.

Q:

Aside from those items, what else did you recover from [Ronaldo] de Guzman?

A:

Money, sir, amounting to P3,380.00 including the marked money.

Q:

What did you do with those things that you were able to confiscate from [Ronaldo] de Guzman?

A:

We brought it to the police station for investigation and the specimen were (sic) brought to the crime laboratory for examination, sir.[28]

It is true that the IRR of R.A. No. 9165 provides that the physical inventory of the seized items may be done at the nearest police station, if the same cannot be done at the place where the items were seized. However, it must be emphasized that the IRR also provides that "non-compliance with these requirements under justifiable grounds, as long as the integrity and the evidentiary value of the seized items are properly preserved by the apprehending officer/team, shall not render void and invalid such seizures of and custody over said items." [29]

The failure to follow the procedure mandated under R.A. No. 9165 and its IRR must be adequately explained. The justifiable ground for non-compliance must be proven as a fact. The court cannot presume what these grounds are or that they even exist.

Accordingly, non-compliance with the procedure shall not render void and invalid the seizure and custody of the drugs only when: (1) such non-compliance is attended by justifiable grounds; and (2) the integrity and the evidentiary value of the seized items are properly preserved by the apprehending team. There must be proof that these two (2) requirements were met before such non-compliance may be said to fall within the scope of the proviso.[30]

In this case, it was admitted that it was SPO3 Yadao, the assigned investigator, who marked the seized items, and only upon seeing the items for the first time at the police station. Moreover, there was no physical inventory made

or photographs of the seized items taken under the circumstances required by R.A. No. 9165 and its IRR. There was also no mention that representatives from the media and from the DOJ, and any elected official, were present during this inventory. The prosecution never explained the reasons for these lapses. On cross-examination, SPO1 Llanillo admitted:

Q:

Do you know if your team or any member of your team issued an Inventory receipt of those confiscated items?

A:

I could not remember, sir.

Q:

And you have not seen any, right?

A:

Yes, sir.

Q:

Do you know if there were pictures taken on (sic) the confiscated items?

A:

I don't know, sir.

Q:

And you have not seen pictures taken?

A:

Yes, sir.[31]

Thus, we find no justifiable ground for such non-compliance.

Readily apparent in the prosecution's evidence, likewise, is a gaping hole in the chain of custody of the seized illegal drugs. SPO3 Yadao, in his testimony, narrated how the evidence was handled, thus:

Q:

You did not place or put your initials on the buy-bust money, the 2 pieces of P100.00 bil (sic) that was used in the buy-bust operation, you did not (sic)?

A:

I did not maam (sic).

Q:

Is it not that this is the standard operating procedure (SOP) as police investigator that after your receipt of the specimens or items allegedly confiscated in the buy-bust operation that you should place your initials after you signed the same?

A:

Unless there is a directive from our Chief of Police, maam (sic).

Q:

So you are telling this Court that it is not your SOP, you should wait for your Chief of Police to direct you to place your initials on the specimens you received in the buy-bust operation, is that what you mean?

A:

Yes, maam (sic).

Q:

So you are telling us now that there was no instruction from your Chief of Police in this particular case that you will place your initials on the 2 pieces of P100.00 bill, that's why you did not put your initials thereof (sic), is that what you mean?

A:

Yes, maam (sic).

Q:

Likewise, you did not place your initials on the transparent plastic sachets, disposable lighters and the P3,380.00 that were allegedly confiscated from the accused?

A:

I was directed to place my initials before submitting it to the PNP Crime Laboratory, Urdaneta City.

Q:

So the directive in this particular case is only limited or focused on the suspected plastic sachets containing shabu, is that what you mean?

A:

Yes, maam (sic).

Q:

But you submitted likewise to the PNP Crime Laboratory, Urdaneta City, the empty transparent plastic sachets and disposable lighters, is it not, Mr. Witness?

A:

Yes maam (sic).

Q:

For laboratory examination?

A:

Yes, maam (sic).

Q:

But there was no instruction from your Chief of Police to place your initials on the specimens?

A:

There was instruction maam (sic).

Q:

But you did not place your initials on the disposable lighters and transparent plastic sachets?

A:

I don't know if I put my initials on the disposables lighters maam (sic).

Q:

You are now certain that you placed your initials on the suspected shabu but you are not sure if you placed your initials on the transparent plastic sachets and the disposable lighters?

A:

Yes, maam (sic).

Q:

What time on June 10, 2003 did you receive the specimens allegedly confiscated from the accused?

A:

On the same date maam.

Q:

You earlier said that at around 10:35 a.m. you conducted a buy bust operation and the specimens were turned over to you by your Chief of Police. My question is, what time did your Chief of Police turn over to you the specimens that were allegedly confiscated from the accused?

A:

2:00 p.m. when I recorded the incident in the police blotter.

Q:

My question is, what time did the Chief of Police turn over to you the alleged specimens or items?

A:

2:00 p.m. on June 10, 2003 and that was the time I immediately recorded the incident in the police blotter.

Q:

And you immediately prepared a request for laboratory examination?

A:

Yes, maam (sic).

Q:

What time did you finish preparing the request?

A:

I can't remember, maam (sic).

Q:

You said that you immediately prepared it, how long did you prepare that request for laboratory examination?

A:

Until the following day because it was on the following day that the specimens were submitted.

Q:

What was submitted the following morning?

A:

If I remember it right, it was on June 11, 2003 when we submitted and received by (sic) the PNP Crime Laboratory and that was on June 11, 2003.[32]

The length of time that lapsed from the seizure of the items from De Guzman until they were given to the investigating officer for marking is too long to be inconsequential. The buy-bust operation took place at about 10:30 a.m. From the accounts of SPO1 Llanillo and another member of the buy-bust team, SPO1 Romeo Manzano, De Guzman's house was very near the police station and the team could easily walk to it. Likewise, the transaction took place rather quickly and appellant was brought to the police station immediately thereafter. All told, it should not have taken 3 1/2 hours, or until 2:00 p.m., for the seized items to be turned over to the investigating officer. There was no explanation why it took the Chief of Police that long to turn over the seized items.

From the time SPO3 Yadao took custody of the seized items, it took yet more time before the same were submitted to the PNP Crime Laboratory, and without any clear explanation on who had custody in the meantime. This vacuum in the chain of custody of the seized items cannot simply be brushed aside.

These circumstances cast a strong shadow of doubt on the identity and integrity of the evidence presented before the court.

As a method of authenticating evidence, the chain of custody rule requires that the admission of an exhibit be preceded by evidence sufficient to support a finding that the matter in question is what the proponent claims it to be.[33] It would include testimony about every link in the chain, from the moment the item was picked up to the time it is offered in evidence, in such a way that every person who touched the exhibit would describe how and from whom it was received, where it was and what happened to it while in the witness' possession, the condition in which it was received and the condition in which it was delivered to the next link in the chain. These witnesses would then describe the precautions taken to ensure that there had been no change in the condition of the item and no opportunity for someone not in the chain to have possession of the same.[34] Indeed, it is from the testimony of every witness who handled the evidence that a reliable assurance can be derived that the evidence presented in court and that seized from the accused are one and the same.[35]

While testimony about a perfect chain is not always the standard, because it is almost always impossible to obtain, an unbroken chain of custody becomes indispensable and essential when the item of real evidence is not distinctive and is not readily identifiable, or when its condition at the time of testing or trial is critical, or when a witness has failed to observe its uniqueness. The same standard likewise obtains in case the evidence is susceptible to alteration, tampering, contamination, and even substitution and exchange.[36]

A unique characteristic of narcotic substances is that they are not readily identifiable as, in fact, they are subject to scientific analysis to determine their composition and nature. The Court cannot simply close its eyes to the

likelihood, or at least to the possibility, that, at any point in the chain of custody, there could have been tampering, alteration or substitution of substances from other cases--by accident or otherwise--in which similar evidence was seized or in which similar evidence was submitted for laboratory testing. Hence, in authenticating the same, a standard more stringent than that applied to cases involving objects that are readily identifiable must be applied, a more exacting standard that entails establishing a chain of custody of the item with sufficient completeness, if only to make it improbable that the original item has either been exchanged with another or been contaminated or tampered with.[37]

Accordingly, the failure to establish, through convincing proof, that the integrity of the seized items has been adequately preserved through an unbroken chain of custody is enough to engender reasonable doubt on the guilt of an accused. Reasonable doubt is that doubt engendered by an investigation of the whole proof and an inability after such investigation to let the mind rest upon the certainty of guilt. Absolute certainty of guilt is not demanded by the law to convict a person charged with a crime, but moral certainty is required as to every proposition of proof requisite to constitute the offense.[38] A conviction cannot be sustained if there is a persistent doubt on the identity of the drug.[39]

Indeed, the prosecution's failure to prove that the specimen submitted for laboratory examination was the same one allegedly seized from appellant is fatal to the prosecution's case.[40]

Finally, the prosecution cannot find solace in its invocation of the presumption of regularity in the apprehending officers' performance of official duty.

The presumption of regularity in the performance of official duty cannot by itself overcome the presumption of innocence nor constitute proof beyond reasonable doubt.[41] Moreover, the failure to observe the proper procedure negates the operation of the presumption of regularity accorded to police officers. As a general rule, the testimonies of the police officers who apprehended the accused are accorded full faith and credit because of the presumption that they have performed their duties regularly. But when the performance of their duties is tainted with failure to comply with the procedure and guidelines prescribed, the presumption is effectively destroyed.[42]

Thus, even if the defense evidence is weak, the prosecution's whole case still falls. The evidence for the prosecution must stand or fall on its own weight and cannot be allowed to draw strength from the weakness of the defense.[43]

WHEREFORE, the foregoing premises considered, appellant RONALDO DE GUZMAN y DANZIL is hereby ACQUITTED of the crime charged. The Director of the Bureau of Prisons is ordered to cause the IMMEDIATE RELEASE of appellant from confinement, unless he is being held for some other lawful cause, and to REPORT to this Court compliance herewith within five (5) days from receipt of this Decision.

SO ORDERED.

Corona, (Chairperson), Velasco, Jr., Peralta, and Mendoza, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 2-3.

[2] Penned by Judge Manuel F. Pastor, Jr.; CA rollo, pp. 63-75.

[3] Penned by Associate Justice Rebecca de Guia-Salvador, with Associate Justices Vicente S.E. Veloso and Apolinario D. Bruselas, Jr., concurring; rollo, pp. 2-17.

[4] CA rollo, p. 63.

- [5] Id. at 64.
- [6] Id.
- [7] Id.
- [8] Id. at 64-65.
- [9] Id. at 75.
- [10] Rollo, p. 16.
- [11] Supplemental Brief; rollo, p. 30.
- [12] Id.
- [13] Id. at 32.
- [14] Id. at 34.
- [15] Valdez v. People, G.R. No. 170180, November 23, 2007, 538 SCRA 611, 621-622.
- [16] Zarraga v. People, G.R. No. 162064, March 14, 2006, 484 SCRA 639, 646, citing Eusebio-Calderon v. People, 441 SCRA 137 (2004).
- [17] People v. Santos, Jr., G.R. No. 175593, October 17, 2007, 536 SCRA 489, 500, citing People v. Tan, 432 Phil. 171, 182 (2002).
- [18] Id. at 504, citing People v. Tan, supra at 198.
- [19] Id. at 505-506, citing People v. Batoctoy, 449 Phil. 500, 521 (2003).
- [20] Valdez v. People, supra note 15, at 631.
- [21] People v. Orteza, G.R. No. 173051, July 31, 2007, 528 SCRA 750, 757, citing People v. Bandang, 430 SCRA 570, 579 (2004).
- [22] People v. Nazareno, G.R. No. 174771, September 11, 2007, 532 SCRA 630, 636-637; id. at 758.
- [23] People of the Philippines v. Nicolas Gutierrez Licuanan, G.R. No. 179213, September 3, 2009, citing People v. Del Mundo, 510 SCRA 554, 562 (2006).
- [24] People v. Kimura, 471 Phil. 895, 909 (2004).
- [25] People of the Philippines v. Elsie Barba y Biazon, G.R. No. 182420, July 23, 2009.
- [26] People v. Dela Cruz, G.R. No. 181545, October 8, 2008, 568 SCRA 273, 282.
- [27] People of the Philippines v. Rosemarie R. Salonga, G.R. No. 186390, October 2, 2009; Malillin v. People, G.R. No. 172953, April 30, 2008, 553 SCRA 619, 632.
- [28] TSN, May 4, 2004, p. 7; records, p. 68.
- [29] Section 21(a), Implementing Rules and Regulations of R.A. No. 9165. (Emphasis supplied.)
- [30] People v. Dela Cruz, G.R. No. 177222, October 29, 2008, 570 SCRA 273.
- [31] TSN, May 4, 2004, p. 18; records, p. 79.

[32] TSN, November 8, 2005, pp. 16-19; records, pp. 196-199.

[33] *Malillin v. People*, supra note 27, at 632.

[34] *Guido Catuiran y Nicudemus v. People of the Philippines*, G.R. No. 175647, May 8, 2009; id. at 632-633.

[35] *Guido Catuiran y Nicudemus v. People of the Philippines*, supra, citing *People v. Obmiranis*, 574 SCRA 140 (2008).

[36] *Malillin v. People*, supra note 27, at 633 (citations omitted); see also *People v. Dela Cruz*, supra note 26.

[37] *Malillin v. People*, supra note 27, at 633, 634; *Guido Catuiran y Nicudemus v. People of the Philippines*, supra note 34.

[38] *People v. Santos, Jr.*, supra note 17, at 499, citing *People v. Uy*, 392 Phil. 773, 782-783 (2000).

[39] *People of the Philippines v. Elsie Barba y Biazon*, supra note 25.

[40] See *Valdez v. People*, supra note 15.

[41] *People v. Santos, Jr.*, supra note 38, at 503.

[42] *People v. Dela Cruz*, supra note 30, citing *People v. Santos, Jr.*, supra note 38.

[43] *People v. Sanchez*, G.R. No. 175832, October 15, 2008, 569 SCRA 194, 222.

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