

THE PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. ROMEO BECHAYDA, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

G.R. No. 72001. August 07, 1992

Ponente: GUTIERREZ, JR., J.

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GUTIERREZ, JR., J.:

The accused-appellant, claiming that reasonable doubt exists in his favor, appeals the decision of the Regional Trial Court of Legazpi City, Branch X dated June 28, 1985 which convicted him of the crime of murder instead of robbery with homicide after having discounted the crime of robbery for lack of sufficient proof. The dispositive portion of the assailed judgment reads:

"In view of the foregoing consideration, this Court is convinced beyond doubt of the guilt of the accused of the crime of murder, four (4) counts and for each of which the accused is hereby sentenced to Reclusion Perpetua and to indemnify the heirs of the four (4) victims the amount of P25,000.00 each as damages and to pay the costs." (RTC Decision, p. 6; Rollo, p. 21).

In Criminal Case No. 2719, the information which charged the accused-appellant with robbery with homicide alleges:

That on or about the 6th day of January, 1981, at about 8:00 o'clock P.M., at sitio Dinanglayan, Barangay Buhatan, Municipality of Rapu-Rapu, Province of Albay, Philippines, above-named accused together with Rodolfo Bilon and Rogelio Vergara, who are still at large, conspiring and confederating together and mutually helping each other, with treachery and evident premeditation, at nighttime, taking advantage of superior strength, with intent to kill, and with the intent of gain, entered the dwelling of Eleuterio Bilon and once inside, did then and there wilfully and feloniously attack, assault, hack and stab the occupants thereof, namely: ELEUTERIO BILON, MARIA ESCASA, AURELIO ESCASA and NORRIS MARQUEZ, inflicting upon them mortal wounds which resulted to their deaths, and thereafter above-named accused, take, steal, and carry away (sic) from said dwelling cash money and other valuables in the total sum of Two Thousand Pesos (P2,000.00), Philippine Currency, owned and belonging to said Eleuterio Bilon.

ACTS CONTRARY TO LAW.

Legazpi City, July 29, 1983." (Rollo, p. 15)

Upon arraignment on August 29, 1983, a plea of not guilty was entered by the accused-appellant with the assistance of his counsel de parte.

The Solicitor-General in his brief gives a vivid picture of the antecedent facts of this case, to wit:

"On the fateful day of January 6, 1981 at about 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon, Divina Barcelon, a resident of Nagkaubas, Rapu-Rapu, Albay, was on her way to the house of Percivando Barcelon located in sitio Galicia to buy fish when she passed by the house of a certain Gomez. There she saw the appellant, Rodolfo Bilon and Rogelio Vergara, who were then armed with bolos, drinking gin. About half an hour later, while she was returning home, she again saw the trio in the said place still drinking. (pp. 10-13, TSN, March 8, 1984)

At around 8:00 o'clock in the evening of the same date, Jaime Bertis went to the house of Eleuterio Bilon situated at sitio Dinanglayan of the same municipality, to buy cigarettes. (pp. 8-9, TSN, November 28, 1983) Upon reaching the place, he saw the same trio having a drink in the kitchen of the house of Eleuterio while the latter and the three (3) other occupants of the house, namely, Maria Escasa, Norris Marquez and Aurelio Escasa, were already sleeping. (pp. 10-12, TSN, Ibid.) The kitchen was lighted by the illumination of the light coming from the sala. (p. 18, TSB, Ibid.) He heard Rodolfo telling his two (2) companions that he would be the one to kill first. (pp. 12-13, TSN, Ibid.) Rodolfo suddenly stood up and went straight near Eleuterio, with the two (2) following him, and with a bolo hacked Eleuterio while he was sleeping. Frightened by the startling incident, Jaime ran away from the place. As he was running away from the place, he was met by Miguel Avila who was then going to the house of Eleuterio. He was asked by Miguel why he was in a hurry but he did not bother to answer because he was then so afraid that he wanted to get away from the place as fast as he could. (pp. 18-22, TSN, Ibid.)

Miguel proceeded to the house of Eleuterio to buy cigarettes. As he reached the place, he stood right at the door which was partly open and while he was peeping through the door, he saw Eleuterio inside the house, lying down with a wound on the neck. He also saw Maria Escasa weeping while embracing the right leg of the appellant who kicked her and, as soon as she fell from such hold, fatally wounded her with a bladed weapon. Norris Marquez, a ten (10) year-old boy, woke up from his sleep beside Maria and upon seeing her condition, he embraced her but while thus embracing Maria, he was also hacked to death by the appellant. Also awakened from sleep was an old man named Aurelio Escasa who came out of the bedroom and tried to find out what was happening when he was suddenly stabbed on the abdomen by Rodolfo (pp. 10-14, TSN, September 22, 1983)

As Miguel was about to leave the place, he was seen by a person standing outside the house who at once called on the appellant and Rodolfo and informed them of Miguel's presence. Confronted by the group, he explained to them that he was there merely to buy cigarettes and a bottle of gin. Miguel was allowed to leave but with a warning not to tell anybody whatever he may have seen, otherwise, even members of his family would also be killed. (pp. 14-15, TSN, Ibid.)

As he was not able to sleep that night, Miguel went home to Legazpi City the following day and remained silent about the incident. But on January 8, 1981, or two (2) days after the incident, when his conscience could no longer bear it, Miguel sent a PLECS message to the Rapu-Rapu Police Station, thru the Legazpi City Police Station, informing them of the incident. He also disclosed the incident to his wife that same day. (pp. 16-17, TSN, Ibid.)

Earlier in the morning of said date, at about 5:00 o'clock, Jaime Bertis went to the house of Divina, a daughter of Eleuterio, informed her about the incident and revealed to her who were those responsible therefor. (p. 35, TSN, October 17, 1983) Divina and her group immediately proceeded to the house of her father and when they arrived at the place, the house was still closed with some people around. A few moments later, some members of the Civil Home Defense Force arrived and opened the house. (pp. 40-42, TSN, Ibid.)

Meanwhile, Sgt. Rolando Victoria, the Rapu-Rapu Police Station Commander, upon receipt of the report about the incident, organized a team of policemen. He dispatched them to the place of the incident that same day. He later followed them in the afternoon and upon his arrival, he and his men conducted their investigation. They found the bodies of the victims in the house already in the state of decomposition. They also took photographs of the bodies of the victims. (pp. 12-16, TSN, December 9, 1983)

Lourdes Balute, a daughter of Eleuterio, was also at the scene of the incident that day and noticed that the things in the house were scattered and certain valuables such as wrist watches, radio, cash, cigarettes, canned goods, rice, and other grocery items were missing. (pp. 4-5, TSN, Ibid.) Upon the request of the victim's relatives, Dr. Erlandino Albaytar, the Municipal Health Officer of Rapu-Rapu, Albay, conducted an autopsy on the cadavers of the four (4) victims and issued the corresponding autopsy reports (Exhs. A, B, C and D) on the same date. (p. 10, TSN, November 14, 1983)" (Appellee's Brief, pp. 3-7; Rollo, p. 24)

The autopsy reports aforementioned contain the following findings:

Re: NORRIS MARQUEZ Y UY, around 10 years old

- "1. The corpse was already at the state of putrefaction.
2. With hacked wound at the base of the neck, posterior cutting the cervical bones and major blood vessels.
3. Lacerated wound (R) leg lateral portion

CAUSE OF DEATH:

Acute hypovolimia 20 degrees to hacked wound over the posterior portion of the neck." (Exhibit "A")

Re: MARIA LAUDE ESCASA, around 57 years old

- "1. The corpse was already at the state of putrefaction.
2. The head was almost totally severed from the body except for a small strand of skin connecting it to the body.
3. Amputated (L) phalanges middle portion.
4. Amputated (R) thumb.

CAUSE OF DEATH:

Acute hypovolimia 20 degrees to hacked wound" (Exhibit "B")

Re: ELEUTERIO BILON, 61 years old

- "1. The corpse was already at the state of putrefaction.
2. The head was almost totally severed from the body except for a small strand of skin connecting it to the body.

CAUSE OF DEATH: Acute hypovolimia 20 degrees to hacked wound" (Exhibit "C")

Re: AURELIO ESCASA, around 81 years old

- "1. The corpse was already in a state of putrefaction.
2. Stabbed wound 3 inches in length (L) upper abdominal wall gapping (sic) with intestinal contents coming out.

CAUSE OF DEATH:

Acute hypovolimia 20 degrees to stabbed wound." (Exhibit "D").

The evidence for the defense which rests on alibi and denial is summarized by the trial court as follows:

"xxx that the accused and his companion, Roman Bolante, were asked to work in the construction of the house at Mancao, Rapu-Rapu, Albay of Ruben Bechayda, the brother of the accused Romeo Bechayda; that on the date of the incident of January 6, 1981 the accused was working on the house of his brother; that he arrived at that place almost three days before January 6, 1981; that he (the accused) and his helper, Roman Bolante started working there on January 6, 1981 at about 6:00 o'clock in the morning continuously up to about 6:00 o'clock in the evening of the same day though they took a break at noon for lunch; that they never left that place during that period as they were hurrying up to finish the construction immediately; that after the day's work, the accused took a rest and after eating his supper he went to sleep; that he slept with his brother, Ruben Bechayda; that the accused knows the house of Eleuterio Bilon which is situated at Dinanglayan, barangay Buhatan, Rapu-Rapu, Albay; that Dinanglayan can be reached by walking or by motor banca from Mancao

where he was working then on January 6, 1981 in the house of his brother, Ruben Bechayda; that it will only take more than one (1) hour to walk at fast pace to reach Dinanglayan from Mancao and only ten (10) minutes by 'kumpit' or motor banca; that he denies knowledge of, much less admit participation in the killings complained of; that he knows personally Eleuterio Bilon being the 'compadre' of his father; that the accused stayed at Mancao for two weeks and after that he went home to Tabaco, Albay; that accused was apprehended only sometime on June 12, 1983." (RTC Decision, p. 4; Rollo, p. 20)

The trial court rejected the defense version hence, its verdict of conviction is now before us. The accused-appellant in this appeal which was assigned to this ponente on March 2, 1992 interposes the following assignment of errors:

"The lower court erred in:

I

GIVING CREDENCE AND RELYING ON THE TESTIMONY OF THE TWO ALLEGED EYEWITNESSES WHICH TESTIMONIES APPEAR INCONSISTENT WITH OTHER EVIDENCE AND ARE CONTRARY TO HUMAN EXPERIENCE.

II

CONVICTING ACCUSED-APPELLANT FOR MURDER ON FOUR COUNTS DESPITE UNCLEAR SHOWING OF CONSPIRACY.

III

NOT GIVING CREDENCE TO THE TESTIMONY OF ACCUSED-APPELLANT AS CORROBORATED BY HIS WITNESS." (Appellant's Brief, p. 6; Rollo, p. 101)

Anent the first assigned error, the accused-appellant contends that the testimonies of the two eyewitnesses are replete with inconsistencies and defy human experience. The testimonies which allegedly appear inconsistent with the other evidence as pointed out by the accused-appellant are as follows: (1) prosecution eyewitness Miguel Avila testified on direct examination that the accused-appellant hacked the victim Maria Escasa on the leg while on cross examination the same witness stated that the said victim was hit in the neck (Appellant's Brief, p. 7); (2) prosecution eyewitness Avila declared in open court that the young boy Norris Marquez was hacked at the back while the autopsy report which pertained to the said boy showed that the cause of death was acute hypovolemia two degrees hacked wound over the posterior portion of the neck (Ibid. pp. 7-8); (3) according to prosecution eyewitness Avila the deceased Maria Escasa was lying down when hacked while according to another prosecution witness Sgt. Rolando Victoria who conducted the investigation in this case, Escasa was sitting on a mat with her neck cut off on a bench (Ibid., p. 8); (4) in his testimony, prosecution eyewitness Avila did not mention having seen any blanket while the other prosecution witness Sgt. Victoria described that both Escasa and the boy Marquez were covered with a blanket; and (5) according to another prosecution eyewitness Jaime Bertis, he found the three assailants in this case which included the accused-appellant drinking in the kitchen of the slain Eleuterio Bilon while the photograph exhibit of Bilon's kitchen during the investigation contained only two opened bottles of beer atop the kitchen table (Ibid., p. 10).

The above inconsistencies are inadequate to overturn the positive and straightforward declarations of the prosecution witnesses who recounted the tragic and gruesome killings and who identified the accused-appellant as one of the authors. Hence, the accused-appellant must fail in his attempt to discredit the prosecution eyewitnesses.

Besides, the alleged inconsistencies can be readily dismissed for the following reasons:

(1) The apparent discrepancy with reference to the location of the hacked wound as regards the victim Escasa in the testimonies of Avila on direct and cross-examinations is a mere oversight either on the part of the court stenographer or the court interpreter inasmuch as Avila used the word "also" in reference to the hacked wound inflicted on Escasa. The use of the said word strongly indicates that Escasa's hacked wound was similarly located at the neck (not the leg) where Bilon's wound was as previously related by Avila. Thus, on direct examination he testified that:

xxx xxx xxx

"Q. Now, please relate to this Court how these two persons, Romeo Bechayda and Rodolfo Bilan, hacked Eleuterio Bilon, Maria Escasa, Morris (should be Norris) Marquez and Aurelio Escasa?

A. When I was right at the door I saw Eleuterio Bilon already having a wound by the neck (witness by an action indicates the wound in the neck) and which was already bleeding and said person, Eleuterio, was already lying down or had already fallen.

Q. What else did you see inside that room?

A. Maria Escasa was crying

ATTY. BASE

I would like the answer of the witness "Madarasta", which means stepmother, be put on record, "my Madarasta Maria."

COURT

Alright. Put in on record.

COURT INTERPRETER (continuing the interpretation).

A. My stepmother Maria Escasa was weeping and embracing the leg of Romeo Bechayda.

Q. Which leg of Romeo Bechayda was being embraced by Maria Escasa?

A. Right leg.

Q. What else did you see?

A. He kicked her and when she fell he hacked her also on the leg.

Q. When you refer he you mean Romeo Bechayda?

A. Yes, Romeo.

Q. When you mentioned her you refer to Maria Escasa?

ATTY. BASE

Leading

COURT

Sustained.

Q. When you refer to Maria Escasa to whom are you referring?

A. Maria Escasa, Your Honor. (Underlining supplied) (TSN, September 22, 1983, pp. 10-12);

(2) there is no substantial difference between the declaration made by Avila in court that Norris' hacked wound was at the back and the autopsy report indicating the hacked wound at the posterior portion of the neck as both locate the mortal wound at the back portion of the body with the autopsy report having been more specific by its reference to the neck's posterior part;

(3) the alleged discrepancy as regards Maria Escasa's position when she expired bears no significance inasmuch as the victim's body was in a supine position, i.e., lying down with her face upwards, and since her head which was almost totally severed from her body as per autopsy report was elevated on a bench, it is understandable why another eyewitness would describe Maria Escasa's position as "sitting" and not "lying down";

(4) the fact that prosecution eyewitness Avila omitted mentioning the presence of a blanket when he gave a picture of the crime scenario does not affect his credibility considering that his omission pertained to a very minor detail which jurisprudence regards as ineffective to taint one's credibility as a witness; and

(5) human experience shows that when one sees a group gathered around a table with beer bottles on top thereof, the said group, more often than not, would be construed as having a drinking spree regardless of whether one or two of them would actually not be drinking beer, thus, prosecution eyewitness Bertis did not commit any serious error in stating that he found the accused-appellant and two assailants in this case drinking in the kitchen of the slain Bilon when only two bottles of beer were captured in the photograph exhibit.

Once again, we rule that:

"x x x The averred inconsistency in the testimony of the prosecution witness on minor details reinforces rather than weaken his credibility for it is usual that witnesses to a stirring event should see differently some details of a startling occurrence. This has been taken judicial notice of by the Court. (People v. Obando, et al., 182 SCRA 95 [1990]). Discrepancies in minor details are to be expected from an uncoached witness, (People v. Noguerras, 181 SCRA 19 [1990]) and will not impair the veracity of the evidence. (People v. Manalansan, 189 SCRA 619 [1990])." (See People v. Puloc, 202 SCRA 179; 189-190 [1991])

With respect to the testimonies that allegedly defy human experience, the accused-appellant argues that the following circumstances are not credible for being contrary to human experience: (1) prosecution witness Avila works in Galicia, Rapu-Rapu making abaca strips; on the day of the killings in question, he testified that he worked all day in Galicia but he went to Dinanglayan, Rapu-Rapu in the evening to buy cigarettes (Appellants Brief, p. 7); (2) Avila was the son-in-law of the victim Eleuterio Bilon, yet, he did not inform anyone including his wife about the killings he had witnessed until two (2) days had elapsed after the incident (Ibid, p. 9); (3) Avila declared in court that he was only asked by the accused-appellant and one Rodolfo Bilon where he was going when they saw him at the crime scene and he was merely warned not to tell any body what he saw when normally perpetrators of heinous crimes do not spare material witnesses thereto (Ibid); (4) prosecution witness Bertis, in his testimony in court described that a Coleman lamp illuminated the sala where the victims Maria Escasa, Eleuterio Bilon and Norris Marquez were sleeping while the kitchen where alleged assailants were drinking was not (Ibid., p. 10); (5) Bertis' declarations that the four occupants of the place where the killings transpired remained asleep while the accused-appellant and his two other companions were drinking and talking therein and that the hacking of the deceased Eleuterio Bilon while on supine position which could have produced a thudding sound did not awaken the three other occupants of the house do not conform to the normal standards of human behavior (Ibid., pp. 10-11); and (6) Divina Barcelon, daughter of the victim Eleuterio Bilon, averred that both Avila and Bertis were contracted to strip abaca on Eleuterio's land at the time of the incident in question; being close relatives, it was not natural for them to flee from Dinanglayan and remain silent about the killings if, indeed, they witnessed the same (Ibid., p. 11).

We are not persuaded by the accused-appellant's suppositions.

The trial court has weighed the evidence and has ruled on the issue of credibility in favor of the prosecution. There are no cogent reasons for us to reverse the findings affected and the conclusions reached by the trial court. Hence:

"The oft-repeated aphorism that the appellate court will not disturb the factual findings of the trial court especially as to credibility of witnesses, as the latter is in a better position to decide said question, having heard the witnesses themselves and having observed their demeanor and manner of testifying during the trial, unless it has plainly overlooked certain facts of substance and value which, if considered might affect the result of the case (People v. Adones, 144 SCRA 364 [1986]; People v. Patog, 144 SCRA 429 [1986]; People v. Veloso, 148 SCRA 60 [1987]; People v. Acelajado, 148 SCRA 142 [1987]; People v. Alcid, 135 SCRA 280 [1985]; People v. Lopez, 132 SCRA 188 [1984] deserves reiteration" (People v. Joselito Villalobos, et al., G.R. No. 71526, May 27, 1992; see also People v. Rafael Acuram, G.R. Nos. 98423-24, May 22, 1992 citing People v. Lati, 184 SCRA 336 [1990] and People v. Payumo, 187 SCRA 64 [1990]).

On the alleged failure of the prosecution's eyewitnesses to immediately report the killings in question, it is a fact of life that each person is so unique that different people register a variety of reactions when subjected to the same types of situations. (See People v. Biago, 182 SCRA 411 [1990], citing People v. Niebres, 178 SCRA 114 [1989]). Moreover, it is a matter of judicial notice that there is no standard form of behavior when one is confronted by a shocking occurrence like the hacking incident in the instant case which even included a four-year old boy and an eighty-one year old man to whom marked sympathy is generally afforded on account of the former's very tender age and the latter's far advanced age. (see People v. Ponce, 197 SCRA 746 [1991]) citing People v. Salufrania, 159 SCRA 401 [1988]).

As regards the second assigned error, the accused-appellant impugns the holding made by the trial court that conspiracy exists in the case at bar.

We see no error in the trial court's finding that conspiracy is present. As submitted by the Solicitor General in his brief, conspiracy as shown by the prosecution evidence is indicated from the following circumstances, to wit:

"a) Few hours before the incident, appellant and his two (2) companions were seen by Divina Barcelon in the house of a certain Gomez drinking gin while armed with bolos;

"b) Eyewitness Bertis saw the same trio in the kitchen of Eleuterio drinking and shortly afterwards, Bertis overheard Rodolfo Bilon telling the group that he would be the one to kill first;

"c) When Rodolfo Belan stood up and went near Eleuterio who was sleeping in the sala, appellant and Rogelio Vergara followed him;

"d) After Rodolfo hacked Eleuterio with a bolo, the appellant in turn fatally wounded Maria and Norris;

"e) When Avila's presence at the scene of the incident was discovered by the third companion of the appellant, the latter and Rodolfo came out and confronted Avila. The trio even warned Avila not to tell anyone what he may have witnessed, otherwise, even members of his family would also be killed." (Appellee's Brief, p. 17)

As we have held in the case of People v. Lorenzo, et al., (200 SCRA 201, 217 [1991]):

"x x x To prove conspiracy, the prosecution need not establish that all the parties thereto agreed to every detail in the execution of the crime or that they were actually together at all the stages of the conspiracy. It is enough that, from the individual acts of each accused, it may reasonably be deduced that they had a common plan to commit the felony (People v. Caitor, et al., 137 SCRA 761 [1985])

Consequently, there is conspiracy as the evidence by the prosecution clearly indicates that the acts and

behavior of the accused reveal their common purpose to assault and inflict harm upon the deceased and that there was a concerted execution of that common purpose (People v. Batas, et al., 176 SCRA 46 [1989])."

With respect to the third assigned error, the accused-appellant insists that he was already sleeping with his brother, Ruben Bechayda, at the latter's house in Mancao, Rapu-Rapu, Albay when the incident occurred. Considering that the accused-appellant was positively identified by the prosecution eyewitnesses as one of the assailants responsible for the slaying of the four victims in this case, the defense of alibi becomes futile for it is a settled rule that such defense cannot prevail over the positive identification of the accused by the prosecution eyewitness against whom no motive to falsely testify against the accused can be established. (People v. Francisco C. Ventura, G.R. No. 90015, April 10, 1992; People v. Pedro Canciller y Balua, G.R. No. 97296, March 4, 1992; People v. Desiderio Salazar y Dacanay, et al., G.R. No. 88665, January 23, 1992).

Moreover, our pronouncement in the case of People v. Carlos Villanueva (G.R. No. 94133, May 8, 1992) bears reiteration:

"x x x it is important to stress that courts always receive with caution, if not suspicion, evidence of alibi, not only because it is inherently weak and unreliable, but also because of its easy fabrication. To overcome the evidence of the prosecution, an alibi, must satisfy the test of full, clear, and satisfactory evidence. This test requires not only proof that the accused was somewhere else other than the scene of the crime, but clear and convincing proof of physical impossibility for him to have been at the place of the commission of the crime. (People v. Baring, 187 SCRA 629 [1990] citing People v. Gaddi y Catubay, 170 SCRA 649 [1990])."

According to the accused-appellant in his direct testimony, in order that one can cover the distance between Mancao (where he had been allegedly sleeping at the time of the incident in question) and Sitio Dinanglayan (where the crime under consideration occurred) by walking, it will take more than an hour but by "kumpit" or motorized banca, it will only take about ten to twenty minutes (TSN, August 10, 1984, pp. 7-8). Thus, right from the horse's mouth, as the old adage goes, the element of physical impossibility is wanting in this case. Besides, the accused-appellant did not present his brother Ruben in court to bolster his claim that he was sleeping in Ruben's house and in the company of Ruben himself. Hence, the defense of alibi becomes unavailing.

Finally, we are in accord with the trial court's findings that save for evident premeditation, the aggravating circumstances of treachery, nighttime and taking advantage of superior strength are present in this case and that treachery absorbs both nighttime and taking advantage of superior strength in the light of the circumstances of the case at bar (see People v. Pacris, 194 SCRA 654 [1991] citing People v. Ramillano, 133 SCRA 201 [1984] and People v. Rosario, 134 SCRA 496 [1985]). Considering that treachery qualifies the killing of the four victims in this case, the accused appellant is guilty of four counts of murder, in the absence of proof to sustain a conviction for robbery with homicide as charged in the information.

WHEREFORE, IN VIEW OF THE FOREGOING, the appealed decision dated June 28, 1985 is hereby AFFIRMED with the MODIFICATION that the amount of indemnification to the heirs of the four (4) victims is increased to FIFTY THOUSAND PESOS P50,000.00 each pursuant to prevailing jurisprudence.

SO ORDERED.

Feliciano, Bidin, Davide, Jr., and Romero, JJ., concur.

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