

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. TEODORO MIRANDA ALIAS "BONG," LUISITO TOLENTINO AND DANIEL E. PALAFOX, ACCUSED-APPELLANTS.

G.R. No. 92369, August 10, 1994

Ponente: VITUG, J.

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VITUG, J.:

This appeal[1] assails the decision,[2] in Criminal Case No. 88-0543-M of the Regional Trial Court of Pampanga, Branch 55 at Macabebe, convicting Teodoro Miranda alias "Bong," Luisito Tolentino and Daniel E. Palafox of the crime of robbery with rape and imposing on them the penalty of "life imprisonment or reclusion perpetua," as well as ordering said accused to pay Mercedita Chan, by way of indemnity, the sum of Seven Hundred Sixteen Thousand Four Hundred Fifty Pesos (P716,450.00).

Appellants were charged, along with one Tony Rojo and a certain Dante Cerdeña, in an information, dated 01 September 1993, as follows:

"That on or about the 26th day of July, 1988, at nighttime purposely sought, in Barangay San Roque, Municipality of Macabebe, Province of Pampanga, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the above-named accused, conspiring together, confederating with and mutually helping one another, with intent of gain and by means of violence and intimidation of persons, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously rob the residence of one Mercedita C. Chan, an inhabited house located in Barangay San Roque, Municipality of Macabebe, Province of Pampanga, in the manner as follows: on the date and at the place abovementioned, the said accused pursuant to their conspiracy, went to the residence of the said Mercedita C. Chan and upon arrival thereat, entered the main entrance of said house except Luisito Tolentino who remained in the car and acted as lookout, and once inside the house, all the other five (5) accused all armed with 38 Caliber revolver, by means of violence and intimidation, robbed, took and carted away the following personal properties belonging to the said Mercedita C. Chan:

- "1. One Tiffany lady's ring with diamond 2.56k valued at P270,000.00
- "2. One lady's ring with diamond 1k valued at P36,000.00
- "3. Four golden necklaces with 22k .70 grams each valued at P120,000.00
- "4. Three golden necklaces with 22k .14 grams each valued at P9,000.00
- "5. One golden bracelet 22k with diamond 1.68k valued at P55,000.00
- "6. One solid gold bracelet 22k .55 grams valued at P25,000.00
- "7. One Christian Dior bracelet with diamond .42k valued at P36,000.00
- "8. One set (ring, earring and bracelet) with diamond 10k valued at P15,000.00
- "9. Five pairs of earring with diamonds 22k valued at P25,000.00

- “10. One gold coin 50 c Queen Elizabeth valued at P10,000.00
- “11. One lady's ring 18k with 14 diamonds valued at P10,000.00
- “12. Two golden baby bracelet valued at P8,000.00
- “13. One college ring valued at P3,000.00
- “14. One solid gold bangle ring valued at P8,000.00
- “15. One ring solid gold with gold design valued at P1,200.00
- “16. One solid gold style bracelet valued at P6,400.00
- “17. One tiffany lady's ring with diamonds 0.38k and 5 titos valued at P3,500.00
- “18. One tiffany with diamond 0.65k with flower design valued at P8,000.00
- “19. Nikon Camera valued at P18,000.00
- “20. Yashika Camera valued at P4,000.00
- “21. 500 Singaporean dollar valued at P5,000.00
- “22. 1000 Arabian Rials valued at P5,000.00
- “23. 100 Hongkong dollar valued at P350.00
- “24. Cash money valued at P30,000.00
- "25. One Cal. 22 Llama Pistol with license valued at P5,000.00

totally valued at SEVEN HUNDRED SIXTEEN THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED FIFTY PESOS (P716,450.00), Philippine Currency, that on the occasion of said robbery, all the above-named accused, conspiring together, confederating with and mutually helping one another, by means of force and intimidation, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously have carnal knowledge on the person of Mercedita C. Chan, inside her room, by then and there tying her mouth, arms and feet, after which Dante Cerdeña had carnal knowledge on her person, against her will and consent to her damage and prejudice; that thereafter all the accused fled away with their loots in the car valued at P716,450.00 of said Mercedita C. Chan, to the damage and prejudice of said owner thereof, in the total amount of P716,450.00, Philippine Currency.

"That the crime of Rape was committed with the following aggravating circumstances:

- “1. By taking advantage of superior strength;
- “2. That the crime was committed in the dwelling of the offended party;
- “3. That means was employed to weaken the defense.

to the damage and prejudice of said Mercedita C. Chan in such amount as may be awarded to her under the provision of law.

"All contrary to law."

Of the five persons accused in the information, Rojo and Cerdeña remain at-large.

On 27 July 1993, a day after the commission of the crime, Tolentino and Miranda were separately apprehended by the authorities. On the same day, Palafox, a Constable First Class of the Criminal Investigation Service, was summoned by his commanding officer. Detained since then, Palafox, on 07 September 1988, filed an urgent

ex-parte motion for his release on the ground that being a member of the military, he should be transferred to the custody of the military authorities under Presidential Decree No. 1850.[3] The trial court granted the motion. Palafox was immediately turned over to the Judge Advocate General for detention at the PC-INP jail in Camp Crame, Quezon City. On 20 October 1988, however, President Corazon C. Aquino waived court martial jurisdiction over Palafox in favor of a trial by a civilian court.[4]

Upon their arraignment, Tolentino, Miranda and Palafox pleaded "not guilty" to the offense charged.

The prosecution presented its evidence thusly:

Between eight and nine o'clock in the evening of 26 July 1988, Mercedita Chan, an attractive 33-year old woman, was walking on her way home, along with her uncle, Fermin Ocampo, from her hatchery ("balut" factory) which was about ten houses away from her residence in San Roque, Macabebe, Pampanga. Mercedita's attention was called to a green Galant car parked in front of the house of a neighbor, Lolita Laxamana. At the driver's seat was a man, rather dark, with protruding eyes, and sporting a moustache. When Mercedita tried to take a good look at the man, the latter sought to cover his face. The man, eventually, was identified to be Tolentino.

Reaching her house, Mercedita noticed that her room was lighted; she wondered because she knew that hours before she had the door locked when she left the house. Before approaching the main door of the house, she first peeped through the window and saw a tall man wearing an "acid-washed clothing." Suddenly, this man went out of the house, got behind her and told her that he was with the military. He held Mercedita's hands, pulled out a gun and then announced the "hold-up."

He pushed Mercedita inside the house and promptly divested her of all the pieces of jewelry she was wearing. The man, who turned out to be Cerdeña, later focused his attention on Fermin, removed Fermin's necklace and took him inside a room with his hands tied. Mercedita's parents, two children, a nephew and two maids had by then also been herded and locked inside the room.

Cerdeña forced Mercedita to go upstairs to her bedroom. There, she saw a thin man, later identified to be Palafox, holding a gun. Her room was in disarray with the cabinets and her jewelry box forcibly opened. Cerdeña ordered Palafox to tie Mercedita. Palafox used a bra in tying her hands, an aerobic costume in covering her mouth, and a child binder in tying her knees. Palafox went downstairs after telling Cerdeña not to take too long in sexually satisfying himself.

Cerdeña, a tall, dark, curly-haired man, pushed Mercedita towards her bed and pulled down her panty. Mercedita tried to somehow cover herself but he hit her on her right arm, poked his gun at her face and told her "to give him a chance" if she did not want to be "killed." [5] He untied her feet (knees), took off his pants, placed himself on top of her, and started kissing her. Mercedita tried to push him away but he placed his arm on her chest rendering her immobile. He forcibly separated her thighs with his hands and inserted his thigh between her legs pushing them apart. Then he inserted his penis into her vagina and performed the coital movements. Moments later, Mercedita heard someone say, "Let's go." Palafox went upstairs to the bedroom and told Cerdeña that it was time for them to depart. Cerdeña got up, put on his pants, and hurried down the stairs with Palafox.

Upon hearing the opening and closing sounds of the ground floor sliding door, Mercedita stood up and peeped through the window. She saw the four armed men just as they were getting into the green Galant car. She recognized two of them, Teodoro Miranda and Tony Rojo, to be her barriomates.

Mercedita found her father and mother, her two children, uncle, nephew and two maids still locked inside one of the rooms. She learned from them that the intruders arrived at the house while she was still away. Her maid, Corazon de la Cruz, related that Palafox poked a gun at her and instructed her to accompany him and Cerdeña to

the master's bedroom. The two men forced open the door and ransacked the bedroom. The duo took various pieces of jewelry, two cameras, Singapore and Hongkong dollars, Arabian money and one American Express gold card. During all the time, the other men, whom she identified as Miranda and Rojo, hid behind the door of the terrace and acted as lookouts.

Lolita Laxamana, who lived one house away from Mercedita, was on board her own car on her way home from San Fernando, Pampanga, when she noticed the green Galant car parked in front of her house. She alighted and went near the parked car to see if anyone was inside. She saw a man, with a big-body build, evidently attempting to hide his face. The man had a moustache and was wearing a printed polo shirt. Seeing that he was acting rather strangely, Lolita took the car's plate number, NGH-612, before going inside her house. Shortly thereafter, she went out again and saw the car, with people on board, speed away towards the plaza. A few minutes later, the father of Mercedita came out of their house shouting for help. It was then that Lolita learned that Mercedita had been robbed.

The crime was immediately reported to the police. Upon being informed by Lolita Laxamana of the description and plate number of the Galant car, the police promptly established checkpoints and blockades along all possible exit points in Macabebe. Ultimately, the car was intercepted with Tolentino on board.

Sgt. Donato Laquindanum, who was assigned to investigate the incident, conducted an on-the-spot investigation and prepared the corresponding police report. The report was so entered in the police blotter naming Palafox, Miranda, Tolentino, Rojo and one John Doe as perpetrators of the crime.

Mercedita had herself examined by Dr. Leonardo B. Manabat of the Manabat Maternity and General Hospital on 30 July 1988. Dr. Manabat made the following findings:

"1. Tenderness, Nape

"2. Contusion, hematoma (bluish at the center and slightly blue outside) 5 x 3 cm. lateral aspect of middle 3rd arm right.

"3. Tenderness lateral middle 3rd thigh lateral aspect.

"4. Perineum

- a. pubic hair mod, in amount, the longest is about 3 in.
- b. labia majora and labia minora well co-aptated.
- c. fourchette - acute.
- d. hymen - presence of old healed, incomplete laceration at 9 and 3 o'clock.
- e. hymenal opening - admits 1 finger easily, 2 fingers with resistance, 3 fingers could not be inserted.
- f. vaginal canal with moderate amount of fresh blood.
- g. cervix - smooth, presence of blood coming from external os.
- h. uterus and adnexa negative." (Exh. E)

The defense presented accused Miranda, Tolentino and Palafox who, denying any participation in the crime, put up their respective alibis.

According to Miranda, he was a resident of San Roque, Macabebe, Pampanga, for fifteen years. He said that he never knew his co-accused Tolentino and Palafox until he met them while they were all detained in jail in

connection with the case. Miranda, however, admitted having known Rojo who had a stepfather in San Roque. He also knew Mercedita for he used to frequent her "balut" factory which was just a few houses away from his house.

Miranda testified that on the day and hour of the robbery with rape, he was at the Caltex Canteen in Sta. Maria partaking of beer with friends Marlon Urbina, Elpidio Sunga, Jovito Ceralde and Obet Enriquez. He went to the canteen at about 5:30 p.m. and stayed there until 10:00 in the evening. There, he chanced upon Dr. Polanka Urbina, Boyet Bautista, Lito Manabat and Ely Musni who were also having some drinks. It was while they were on their way home to San Roque, which was about five minutes' drive from the Caltex Canteen, that Miranda and Urbina met Nicolas Isip and Omar Duenas who informed them that Mercedita's house had been robbed. Miranda then directly went home where he spent the night. The following day, 27 July 1988, Marlon asked him to accompany him to San Fernando, Pampanga, to have the urine of Marlon's father examined. They arrived at the Central Luzon General Hospital at around 8:30 a.m. and left the capital at 10:00 p.m. It was shortly after arriving from San Fernando that policeman Lagman invited him to the police station where he was informed that he was one of the suspects in the robbery.

For his part, Tolentino, a former member of the Presidential Security Command, averred that he did not know his co-accused prior to his detention with them on account of the crime. On 26 July 1988, he narrated, he was in Barrio Sto. Niño, Macabebe, Pampanga, at the house of his aunt, Josefina Tolentino Ibay. He had come from Manila to get the identification card of his nephew, who was then studying at the Far Eastern University, and to fetch his other nephew, Dante, who was studying at the PMI Colleges of Manila. He arrived at around 6:30 p.m. and stayed at his aunt's house where he spent the entire evening watching the PBA games on television.

Tolentino claimed that he was not apprehended by the police. He averred that on 27 July 1988, while he was in front of the municipal building talking to his cousin, Councilor Ibay, the police approached and invited him for questioning on suspicion that his car had been used in the commission of the robbery. During the investigation, he was asked to produce his driver's license and the registration papers of the car. A pair of Rayban eyeglasses, two polo shirts and one "maong" pants were taken from him by the police. When asked whether or not he knew Laurence Lai, whose name appeared in the registration papers of the car, he explained that it was his friend, one Sgt. Nagu, himself a Presidential Security guard, who merely entrusted to him the car before Sgt. Nagu went to the United States following the Edsa revolution. Tolentino said that Sgt. Nagu had once mentioned to him that the car was pledged by its owner who lost in a "casino."

According to Tolentino, when he was brought to face Mercedita, the latter declared that he was not one of the culprits. Mercedita supposedly asked him to be a state witness and to pinpoint Teodoro Miranda to be the perpetrator of the crime. Claiming that he was not assisted by counsel when he was investigated by the police at the municipal building, Tolentino denied having then said that Palafox was the owner of the car and that, together with the police, he went to Palafox's house in Guadalupe, Makati, on 27 July 1988.

Palafox, the next accused to testify, stated that he was a resident of Guadalupe Nuevo, Makati, and a member of the Criminal Investigation Service. He denied having known before any of his co-accused or Mercedita Chan. According to Palafox, on 26 July 1988, between the hours of eight and nine in the evening, he was at his residence watching the PBA games with his family. He went out of the house briefly to buy cigarettes at Delia Serrano's store which was about three meters away from his house. In going to the store, he chanced upon his neighbor, Maximiliano Pasiqui, who tried to offer him a drink. He turned down the invitation and then went back home where he stayed the whole night.

The following day, 27 July 1988, Palafox reported for work at Camp Crame, Quezon City. Upon returning home in the afternoon, he saw two of his officemates, Constable First Class Aguilar and Fontanilla, waiting for him by

the door. The two intimated that their commanding officer, Captain Godofredo Ignacio, wanted to talk to him. When brought to Captain Ignacio, the latter informed him that he was being implicated in a robbery incident in Macabebe, Pampanga.

The trial court discredited the denials of the accused and their defense of alibi, which, in its view, "failed to overcome the clear and convincing evidence showing the commission of the offense of robbery with rape, with the attendant aggravating circumstances of taking advantage of superior strength and (of having been) committed in the dwelling of the offended party," and clearly establishing the identities and concerted actions of the accused in the commission of the offense. The court observed that the accused failed to show any ill motive on the part of the prosecution witnesses in so pinpointing to the accused as the perpetrators of the crime.[6] The trial court rendered its judgment, thus:

"WHEREFORE, the Court finds the accused Teodoro Miranda, Luisito Tolentino, and Daniel Palafox guilty beyond reasonable doubt of Robbery with Rape defined and penalized under Article 294, Section 2 of the Revised Penal Code, as amended. They are hereby sentenced each to suffer Life Imprisonment or Reclusion Perpetua, and to indemnify the offended party (Mercedita Chan) in the amount of SEVEN HUNDRED SIXTEEN THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED FIFTY PESOS (P716,450.00) and to pay the cost of the proceedings.

"The motor vehicle, which is considered an instrument of the crime and which up to this day has no claimant, is hereby ordered confiscated in favor of the State.[7]

"SO ORDERED."

In their appeal, appellants Miranda and Palafox question the sufficiency of the prosecution's evidence and the trial court's finding of guilt beyond reasonable doubt.[8] Assailing the trial court's finding of conspiracy, they contend that the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses, particularly in the latter's identification of the accused, lack credibility. Tolentino, in his own brief, additionally argues that even if it were to be remotely assumed that his guilt has been proven beyond reasonable doubt, he could only be adjudged guilty of the crime of robbery, he being unaware of the act of rape by his co-accused Cerdeña at the time of the incident.[9]

Unfortunately for the appellants, the issue on credibility of witnesses is almost invariably within the exclusive province of a trial court to determine. It is before that court that testimonies are first hand given, received, assessed and evaluated. The well established rule is that an appellate tribunal must defer, and accord the highest degree of respect, to the findings of a trial court.[10] Repeatedly said is that a trial court, which itself hears the witnesses and observes their deportment and manner of testifying,[11] would be in the best position to weigh conflicting testimonies presented to it.

In this case, there is nothing on record that can justify our deviation from the rule. The corpus delicti has been undisputed. The identities of the appellants have been ascertained.

Mercedita Chan, the victim of the robbery and rape, positively identified the accused. From her bedroom window, she again had a good look at the appellants when they were about to leave the scene.[12] Corazon de la Cruz, the househelp who showed the appellants into the house, identified Miranda and Palafox.[13] Tolentino was positively identified by Fermin Ocampo to be the man at the driver's seat of the Galant car.[14] Two of the malefactors, Tony Rojo and Miranda, were barriomates. Between these categorical statements, on the one hand, and bare denials of the accused, on the other hand, the former must perforce prevail.[15] Moreover, the early identification of the accused by the victims and the witnesses, during the police investigation that was forthwith conducted, signified spontaneity and veracity.[16]

Appellants, in an attempt to discredit the prosecution witnesses, particularly Mercedita, argue that some of the

facts testified to by her on the witness stand were not mentioned in her affidavit before the police.¹ Predictably, testimonies given during trials are much more exact and elaborate than those stated in sworn statements. Ex-parte affidavits are almost always incomplete and often inaccurate for varied reasons, at times because of partial and innocent suggestions or for want of specific inquiries. Witnesses cannot be expected everytime, except when told, to distinguish between what may be consequential and what may be mere insignificant details.

The contention that appellants had not known each other before their detention was totally shattered by the prosecution evidence on rebuttal which was hardly refuted. For instance, according to Romeo Guevarra, a member of the Macabebe police force, he was one of the twelve persons who accompanied Tolentino in going to the residence of Palafox in Guadalupe Nuevo, Makati, Metro Manila.² The group first sought the assistance of the Makati police. At Guadalupe, Tolentino pointed to the police officers the house of Palafox. To verify, the party, upon its inquiry from the owner of a store nearby, were told that the house did belong to Palafox but that he was not yet at home at the time. The police, nonetheless, went to the house where they were able to converse with a young lady who identified herself to be the daughter of Palafox. When she saw Tolentino in the car, she remarked that Tolentino was the driver of her father, Palafox.¹⁹

Conspiracy is a common design to commit a felony. Once established, evidence of participation by an accused in each and every aspect of the crime is not indispensable. All those who, in one manner or another, took part in the consummation of the offense are considered co-principals,²⁰ each of them being held liable for the criminal deed executed by the other or others in its perpetration.²¹

The record is replete with facts showing that conspiracy did exist among the appellants: One remained in the get-away car; the rest entered the house and ransacked it after herding the occupants in one of the rooms. Palafox and Cerdeña forcibly entered the bedroom of Mercedita, taking whatever valuables they could get their hands on while Miranda and Rojo acted as look-outs on the terrace. Palafox allowed Cerdeña to satisfy his lustful desires on Mercedita.

Article 294 of the Revised Penal Code prescribes the penalty reclusion perpetua to death when robbery accompanied with rape is committed with the use of a deadly weapon or by two or more persons. The commission of the crime was aggravated by superior strength and dwelling. Abuse of superior strength was exhibited by the fact that the four culprits who entered the house were armed with guns, that effectively deterred the victims from making any move to defend themselves.¹ Taken by surprise themselves, both Mercedita and Fermin were also in no position to stop the accused.

The presence of two aggravating circumstances, there being no mitigating circumstances to offset them, warrants the imposition of the maximum penalty under Article 63(1) of the Revised Penal Code. In view, however, of the proscription against the imposition of the death penalty at the time of commission of the crime, only the penalty of reclusion perpetua can legally be imposed.¹ In this regard, the trial court should, however, be reminded that "life imprisonment" is not to be likened to reclusion perpetua. The Court has already explained in Administrative Circular No. 6--A-92, dated 21 June 1993, and in a line of cases² that the two penalties are not interchangeable. Reclusion perpetua entails a definite period of incarceration and carries with it accessory penalties whereas life imprisonment has no fixed duration and provides no accessory penalties.

An award of moral damages for rape is also mandated under Article 2219 of the Civil Code, and it should likewise be awarded to Mercedita.³

WHEREFORE, the appealed Decision is hereby **AFFIRMED** insofar as it finds appellants guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of robbery with rape and imposes the penalty of reclusion perpetua on each of the appellants, and **MODIFIED** by hereby ordering the appellants, jointly and severally, in addition to the indemnity

of Seven Hundred Sixteen Thousand Four Hundred Fifty Pesos (P716,450.00), to pay Mercedita Chan the sum of Fifty Thousand Pesos (P50,000.00) by way of moral damages.

SO ORDERED.

Feliciano, (Chairman), Bidin, Romero, and Melo, JJ., concur.

[1] Atty. Ricardo Sagmit, Jr. for appellant Miranda; Atty. Bartolome P. Reus for appellant Palafox; Atty. Teresita de Guzman for appellant Tolentino, and the Solicitor General for the appellee.

[2] Penned by Reynaldo V. Roura.

[3] This decree provides for trial by courts-martial of members of the Integrated National Police who are charged with criminal offenses.

[4] Record, p. 45.

[5] TSN, October 11, 1988, p. 45.

[6] Decision, p. 6.

[7] Rollo, p. 66.

[8] Rollo, p. 79.

[9] Appellant Tolentino's Brief, p. 18.

[10] *Mendoza v. Court of Appeals*, 198 SCRA 312.

[11] *People v. Tismo*, 204 SCRA 535.

[12] TSN, October 11, 1988, pp. 55-59.

[13] TSN, January 19, 1988, pp. 10-13.

[14] TSN, January 13, 1989, pp. 27-28.

[15] *People v. Caballes*, 199 SCRA 152.

[16] *People v. De Mesa*, 188 SCRA 48 citing *People v. Chavez*, 117 SCRA 221.

1 Rollo, p. 138.

2 Tolentino indicated on testimony his address as 4465 Panay Street, Barrio Pitogo, Guadalupe Nuevo, Makati, Metro Manila (TSN, July 12, 1989, p. 8) while Palafox admitted that his address was 1706 Escuela Street, Guadalupe Nuevo, Makati, Metro Manila (TSN, May 15, 1989, p. 4).

19 TSN, September 19, 1989, pp. 25-32.

20 *Venturina v. Sandiganbayan*, 193 SCRA 40.

21 *People v. Punzalan*, 203 SCRA 364.

1 TSN, December 16, 1988, p. 7.

1 *People v. Badilla*, 185 SCRA 554.

2 People v. Marcelino, G.R. No. 85247, 30 July 1993; People v. Serdan, 213 SCRA 329; People v. Baguio, 196 SCRA 459.

3 People v. Magaluna, 205 SCRA 266; People v. Tismo, *supra*.

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