

REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES, PETITIONER, VS. COURT OF APPEALS AND MAXIMO WONG, RESPONDENTS.*G.R. No. 97906. May 21, 1992*

Ponente: REGALADO, J.

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Petitioner seeks to set aside the judgment of respondent Court of Appeals[1] in affirmance of the decision of the court a quo[2] granting the petition filed by herein private respondent Maximo Wong for the change of his name to Maximo Alcala, Jr. which was his name prior to his adoption by Hoong Wong and Concepcion Ty Wong.

The facts are undisputed. Private respondent Maximo Wong is the legitimate son of Maximo Alcala, Sr., and Segundina Y. Alcala. When he was but two and a half years old and then known as Maximo Alcala, Jr., and his sister Margaret Alcala, was then nine years old, they were, with the consent of their natural parents[3] and by order of the court in Special Case No. 593[4] issued on September 9, 1967, adopted by spouses Hoong Wong and Concepcion Ty Wong, both naturalized Filipinos. Hoong Wong, now deceased, was an insurance agent while Concepcion Ty Wong was a high school teacher. They decided to adopt the children as they remained childless after fifteen years of marriage. The couple showered their adopted children with parental love and reared them as their own children.

Upon reaching the age of twenty-two, herein private respondent, by then married and a junior Engineering student at Notre Dame University, Cotabato City, filed a petition to change his name to Maximo Alcala, Jr. It was averred that his use of the surname Wong embarrassed and isolated him from his relatives and friends, as the same suggests a Chinese ancestry when in truth and in fact he is a Muslim Filipino residing in a Muslim community, and he wants to erase any implication whatsoever of alien nationality; that he is being ridiculed for carrying a Chinese surname, thus hampering his business and social life; and that his adoptive mother does not oppose his desire to revert to his former surname.

As earlier stated, on July 2, 1986, the matter was resolved in favor of private respondent, the trial court decreeing that, the jurisdictional requirements having been fully complied with, petitioner's prayer to change his name from Maximo Wong to Maximo Alcala, Jr. was granted.[5] On appeal to respondent court, and over the opposition of petitioner Republic through the Solicitor General, the decision of the court below was affirmed in full, hence this petition for review on certiorari.

The lone issue to be settled is whether or not the reasons given by private respondent in his petition for change of name are valid, sufficient and proper to warrant the granting of said petition.

The Solicitor General contends that private respondent's allegations of ridicule and/or isolation from family and friends were unsubstantiated and cannot justify the petition for change of name. He claims that for private respondent to cast aside the name of his adoptive father is crass ingratitude to the memory of the latter and to his adoptive mother who is still alive, despite her consent to the petition for change of name. Further, the Solicitor General posits that the reversion of Maximo Wong to his old name violates Articles 341 and 365 of the Civil

Code, which requires an adopted child to use the surname of the adopter, and would identify him with his parents by nature, thus giving the impression that he has severed his relationship with his adoptive parents.[6]

In refutation, private respondent argues that he did as the law required, that is, upon adoption he used the surname of the adopter. However, being already emancipated, he can now decide what is best for and by himself. It is at this time that he realized that the Chinese name he carries causes him undue ridicule and embarrassment and affects his business and social life. In fact, his adoptive mother, being aware of his predicament, gave her consent to the petition for change of name, albeit making it clear that the same shall in no way affect the legal adoption, and even underwent the rigors of trial to substantiate her sworn statement. If his adoptive mother does not take offense nor feel any resentment, abhorrence or insecurity about his desire to change his name, private respondent avers that there can be no possible prejudice on her, much less the State.[7]

We feel that we should preface our review of this case with a clear comprehension of the legal significance of a person's name. For all practical and legal purposes, a man's name is the designation by which he is known and called in the community in which he lives and is best known. It is defined as the word or combination of words by which a person is distinguished from other individuals and, also, as the label or appellation which he bears for the convenience of the world at large addressing him, or in speaking of or dealing with him.[8] Names are used merely as one method of indicating the identity of persons; they are descriptive of persons for identification, since, the identity is the essential thing and it has frequently been held that, when identity is certain, a variance in, or misspelling of, the name is immaterial. [9]

The names of individuals usually have two parts: the given name or proper name, and the surname or family name. The given or proper name is that which is given to the individual at birth or baptism, to distinguish him from other individuals. The name or family name is that which identifies the family to which he belongs and is continued from parent to child. The given name may be freely selected by the parents for the child; but the surname to which the child is entitled is fixed by law.[10]

A name is said to have the following characteristics: (1) It is absolute, intended to protect the individual from being confused with others. (2) It is obligatory in certain respects, for nobody can be without a name. (3) It is fixed, unchangeable, or immutable, at least at the start, and may be changed only for good cause and by judicial proceedings. (4) It is outside the commerce of man, and, therefore, inalienable and intransmissible by act inter vivos or mortis causa. (5) It is imprescriptible.[11]

Title XIII, Book I of the Civil Code, in Articles 364 to 380, provides the substantive rules which regulate the use of surnames. Considering the subject and personalities involved in this present review, particular attention must be called to Article 365 which mandates that "(a)n adopted child shall bear the surname of the adopter," in correlation with Article 341 on the effects of adoption, among which is to "(e)ntitle the adopted person to use the adopter's surname." This same entitlement of an adopted child is maintained in Article 39(3), Title II of Presidential Decree No. 603, otherwise known as the Child and Youth Welfare Code. More recently, Executive Order No. 209, as amended by Executive Order No. 227, or the Family Code, echoes the same statutory right of an adopted child to use the surname of the adopter.[12] Clearly, from the very wordings of the law, it may be inferred that the use of the surname of the adopter by the adopted child is both an obligation and a right.

Under Article 376 of the Civil Code, "(n)o person can change his name or surname without judicial authority." The application for change of name thereunder involves a special proceeding governed by and conducted under the strictures of Rule 103 of the Rules of Court and one which involves substantial changes, with the declared objective of such judicial proceedings being the prevention of fraud. The purpose of the statutory procedure authorizing a change of personal name is simply to have, wherever possible, a record of the change, and in

keeping with the object of the statute, a court to which application is made should normally make its decree recording such change of name.[13]

A change of name is a special proceeding to establish the status of a person involving his relation with others, that is, his legal position in, or with regard to, the rest of the community. It is a proceeding in rem[14] and, as such, strict compliance with all jurisdictional requirements, particularly on publication, is essential in order to vest the court with jurisdiction thereover.[15] For this purpose, the only name that may be changed is the true or official name recorded in the civil register.[16]

To digress a little for purposes of clarification, the change of name contemplated under Article 376 and reglementarily implemented by Rule 103 must not be confused with and cannot be effected through the summary proceeding proposed in Article 412 of the same Code, as procedurally regulated by Rule 108 of the Rules, which refers only to correction of clerical errors, such as those which are visible to the eye or obvious to the understanding, or an error made by a clerk or transcriber, or a mistake in copying or writing, or some harmless or innocuous change,[17] and not those which will involve substantial changes.[18]

Turning now to the case at bar, we are guided by the jurisprudential dictum that the State has an interest in the names borne by individuals and entities for the purpose of identification, and a change of name is not a matter of right but of sound judicial discretion, to be exercised in the light of reasons adduced and the consequences that will likely follow;[19] it is a privilege which may be granted only upon a showing of a proper or reasonable cause or compelling reason therefor.[20]

We find unacceptable the assertion of the Solicitor General that private respondent's allegation of ridicule and embarrassment due to the use of his present surname is unsubstantiated.

The testimony of private respondent in the lower court bears out the existence of valid cause in his bid for change of name:

"ATTY. DUMAMBA:

Q Now, after adoption, when you went to school, what did you use as your surname?

A 'Wong,' sir.

Q Now, after you adopted the surname 'Wong' in your studies, what did you observe?

A I observed that 'Wong' as a surname embarrassed me to my friends and when I go with Chinese friends I cannot talk Chinese. I am living in Campo Muslim, a Muslim community but no one can believe that I am Muslim. I have a little business of Furniture but I have little (sic) customer because no one believes me that I am Muslim.

Q You want to inform this Honorable Court that this family name you are using which is 'Wong' embarrassed you from (sic) your friends and relatives and also cause(d) damage to your business?

A Yes sir.

x x x

ATTY. DUMAMBA:

Q Now, considering that according to you, you are embarrassed because of the family name you are using, your friends shy away from you and it is a handicap in your business, what is your desire for the Court to do in order to help you?

A Change my family name.

Q From 'Wong' to what do you want your surname changed?

A 'Alcala, Jr.', sir.

x x x

COURT:

Q What is your purpose in changing your family name from Maximo Wong to Maximo Alcala, Jr.?

A I feel embarrassed to my friends and also to my relatives and as I said I have a little business of furniture and only a few customers buying for the fact that they don't believe I am Muslim.

Cross.

ATTY. SERO:

With the permission of the Honorable Court.

Q Your father's name is Maximo Alcala, Sr., is he still alive?

A Yes, sir.

Q And what does your father say to this proposed changed (sic) of your name, your family name to your real family name given to you?

A Yes, sir,

Q They have no objection to it?

A No, sir.

Q Stated before this Honorable Court, the purpose why you wanted to change your name from 'Wong' to 'Alcala' is so that to avoid embarrassment because you are a Muslim and your Muslim relatives think that you are Chinese.

A Yes, sir.

Q Not for the purpose to hide anything or what not?

A No, sir."[21]

The foregoing testimony of private respondent is materially corroborated by the testimony of private respondent's adoptive mother:

"Q Now, what did you observe to (sic) your son Maximo Wong after you and your husband adopted him?

A When I adopted him and he used the surname 'Wong' I observed that some of his relatives, cousins and friends seem to shy away from him and despise him in school that is why I agreed to change his name."[22]

We uphold these observations in the decision of respondent appellate court:

"The purpose of the law in allowing a change of name as contemplated by the provisions of Rule 103 of the Rules of Court is to give a person an opportunity to improve his personality and to provide his best interest (Calderon vs. Republic, 19 SCRA 721). In granting or denying the petition for change of name, the question of proper and reasonable cause is left to the discretion of the court. The evidence presented need only be satisfactory to the court and not all the best evidence available is required. (Uy vs. Republic, L-22712, Nov. 25,

1965; *Nacionales vs. Republic*, L-18067, April 29, 1966; both cases cited in 1 SCRA 843). In the present case, We believe that the court a quo had exercised its discretion judiciously when it granted the petition.

"From the testimony of petitioner-appellee and of his adopter mother Concepcion Ty-Wong, We discern that said appellee was prompted to file the petition for change of name because of the embarrassment and ridicule his family name 'Wong' brings in his dealings with his relatives and friends, he being a Muslim Filipino and living in a Muslim community. Another cause is his desire to improve his social and business life. It has been held that in the absence of prejudice to the state or any individual, a sincere desire to adopt a Filipino name to erase signs of a former alien nationality which only hamper(s) social and business life, is a proper and reasonable cause for change of name (*Uy vs. Republic*, L-22712, Nov. 25, 1965, *Que Liong Sian vs. Republic*, L-23167, Aug. 17, 1967, 20 SCRA 1074). Justice dictates that a person should be allowed to improve his social standing as long as in doing so, he does not cause prejudice or injury to the interest of the State or other persons (*Calderon vs. Republic*, supra). Nothing whatsoever is shown in the record of this case that such prejudice or injury to the interest of the state or of other persons would result in the change of petitioner's name." [23]

It bears stressing at this point that to justify a request for change of name, petitioner must show not only some proper or compelling reason therefor but also that he will be prejudiced by the use of his true and official name. [24] Among the grounds for change of name which have been held valid are: (a) When the name is ridiculous, dishonorable or extremely difficult to write or pronounce; (b) When the change results as a legal consequence, as in legitimation; (c) When the change will avoid confusion; [25] (d) Having continuously used and been known since childhood by a Filipino name, unaware of her alien parentage; [26] (e) A sincere desire to adopt a Filipino name to erase signs of former alienage, all in good faith and without prejudicing anybody; [27] and (f) When the surname causes embarrassment and there is no showing that the desired change of name was for a fraudulent purpose or that the change of name would prejudice public interest. [28]

In granting or denying petitions for change of name, the question of proper and reasonable cause is left to the sound discretion of the court. The evidence presented need only be satisfactory to the court and not all the best evidence available. [29] Summarizing, in special proceedings for change of name, what is involved is not a mere matter of allowance or disallowance of the request, but a judicious evaluation of the sufficiency and propriety of the justifications advanced in support thereof, mindful of the consequent results in the event of its grant and with the sole prerogative for making such determination being lodged in the courts.

While it is true that the statutory fiat under Article 365 of the Civil Code is to the effect that an adopted child shall bear the surname of the adopter, it must nevertheless be borne in mind that the change of the surname of the adopted child is more an incident rather than the object of adoption proceedings. [30] The act of adoption fixes a status, viz., that of parent and child. More technically, it is an act by which relations of paternity and affiliation are recognized as legally existing between persons not so related by nature. It has been defined as the taking into one's family of the child of another as son or daughter and heir and conferring on it a title to the rights and privileges of such. The purpose of an adoption proceeding is to effect this new status of relationship between the child and its adoptive parents, the change of name which frequently accompanies adoption being more an incident than the object of the proceeding. [31] The welfare of the child is the primary consideration in the determination of an application for adoption. On this point, there is unanimous agreement. [32]

It is the usual effect of a decree of adoption to transfer from the natural parents to the adoptive parents the custody of the child's person, the duty of obedience owing by the child, and all other legal consequences and incidents of the natural relation, in the same manner as if the child had been born of such adoptive parents in lawful wedlock, subject, however, to such limitations and restrictions as may be by statute imposed. [33] More specifically under the present state of our law, the Family Code, superseding the pertinent provisions of the Civil Code and of the

Child and Youth Welfare Code on the matter,[34] relevantly provides in this wise with regard to the issue involved in this case:

"Art. 189. Adoption shall have the following effects:

(1) For civil purposes, the adopted shall be deemed to be the legitimate child of the adopters and both shall acquire the reciprocal rights and obligations arising from the relationship of parent and child, including the right of the adopted to use the surname of the adopters;" (Emphasis supplied.)

x x x

The Solicitor General maintains the position that to sustain the change of name would run counter to the behest of Article 365 of the Civil Code and the ruling in *Manuel vs. Republic*[35] that "one should not be allowed to use a surname which otherwise he is not permitted to employ under the law," and would set a bad example to other persons who might also seek a change of their surnames on lame excuses.[36]

While we appreciate the Solicitor General's apprehensions and concern, we find the same to be unfounded. We do not believe that by reverting to his old name, private respondent would then be using a name which he is prohibited by law from using. True, the law prescribes the surname that a person may employ; but the law does not go so far as to unqualifiedly prohibit the use of any other surname, and only subjects such recourse to the obtention of the requisite judicial sanction. What the law does not prohibit, it permits.

If we were to follow the argument of the Solicitor General to its conclusion, then there will never be any possibility or occasion for any person, regardless of status, to change his name, in view of the supposed subsequent violation of the legal imperative on the use of surnames in the event that the petition is granted. Rule 103 of the Rules of Court would then be rendered inutile. This could hardly have been the intendment of the law.

A petition for change of name is a remedy allowed under our law only by way of exception to the mandatory provisions of the Civil Code on the use of surname. The law fixes the surname that may be used by a person, at least inceptively, and it may be changed only upon judicial permission granted in the exercise of sound discretion. Section 1 of Rule 103, in specifying the parties who may avail of said remedy, uses the generic term "persons" to signify all natural persons regardless of status. If a legitimate person may, under certain judicially accepted exceptional circumstances, petition the court for a change of name, we do not see any legal basis or logic in discriminating against the availment of such a remedy by an adopted child. In other words, Article 365 is not an exception, much less can it bar resort, to Rule 103.

We are of the view that the circumstances herein obtaining are within the ambit of the established exceptions and find merit in private respondent's submission:

"Rule 103 of the Rules of Court has its primordial purpose which (State) is to give a person an opportunity to improve his personality and provide his best interest (*Calderon vs. Republic*, 19 SCRA 721). In the instant case, the court a quo found the petition of Maximo Wong for change of name justifiable after due hearing, thus its 'factual findings and appreciation of testimonies count heavily and need not be disturbed unless for strong and cogent reasons because the trial court is in a better position to examine real evidence as well as to observe the demeanor of the witnesses while testifying in the case (*Baliwag Transit, Inc. vs. CA*, 147 SCRA 82). Moreover, the trial court could take judicial notice of other existing factors in the community where herein respondent which it considers material in its judicious determination of the case. x x x.

"Additionally, herein respondent is already of age and as such he can decide what is best for him. His experience with regards (sic) his social and business dealings is personal and it is only him (sic) who can attest to the same. Finding his predicament's proper remedy is solely through legal process, herein respondent accordingly filed a petition pursuant to Rule 103 of the Rules of Court which was granted by the Court a

quo."[37]

Besides, we have faith in the circumspection of our lower courts and that, in the exercise of their discretion, said courts shall consider petitions for change of name only on cogent and meritorious grounds as would justify the granting of such applications. We do not expect our trial courts to cater or give in to the whim or caprice of an applicant, aside from the fact that there is always the safeguard and corrective interdiction of appellate review.

It is not fair to construe the desired reversion of private respondent to the use of the name of his parents by nature as crass ingratitude. To go by the Solicitor General's suggestion that private respondent should have his adoption revoked if he wants to use the surname of his natural father would be to exact too dear a toll for making use of an appropriate and valid remedy available under the law.

Herein private respondent, before he filed the petition for change of name, asked for his adoptive mother's permission to do so:

"Q Now, in filing this petition for change of surname, you had talked with your adopted mother?

A Yes, sir.

Q Did you ask permission from her whether she wants you to change the surname?

A Yes, sir."[38]

True enough, the above testimony of private respondent was confirmed by his adoptive mother in this manner:

"Q How are you related to Maximo Wong?

A My adopted son.

Q He is your adopted son, did your son talk to you when he filed this petition for change of his surname?

A Yes, he even tried to ask me and I said, alright if you want to change.

x x x

Q Now, when you agreed to the filing of this petition for change of name, did you reduce your consent in writing?

A Yes, sir, I agreed also so that his business will prosper because he is already Alcala and not Wong because Wong they said is Chinese."[39]

As proof of her assent to the filing of said petition (her husband having already passed away), Concepcion Ty Vda. de Wong executed an affidavit in Cotabato City on May 27, 1985, with these textual declarations:

"That I am the same and identical person, who is the surviving adapted (sic) parent of Maximo Wong;

"That I personally discovered it myself from the time my adapted (sic) son Maximo used the surname of my late husband Wong, his relatives and childhood friends shy away from him because he is branded as a son of a chinese which is different from them whose parents are muslim Filipinos;

"That pity my son who is often ridiculed (sic) by his friends and relatives because of his family name Wong, hence, in order not to humper (sic) his social and business life the future, I am voluntarily and of my own free will without being forced, coerced, or intimidated give (sic) my consent to his desire to change his surname without affecting however the legal adoption granted by the Court on September 9, 1967, making him as one of my legal and compulsory heir (sic).

"That I am executing this affidavit to attest to the truth of all the above mentioned facts and for all legal intent

(sic) and purposes." [40]

There could be no other plausible reason for private respondent to first secure his adoptive mother's consent before resorting to the questioned legal recourse other than the parental respect and reverence which is owed by and to be expected of a dutiful child. If private respondent was such an ingrate, as the Solicitor General would have us believe, he would not have bothered to seek his adoptive mother's counsel. In the same breath, had his adoptive mother regarded him as an ungrateful adoptee, she would not have executed the affidavit above quoted, much less testify in his behalf at the hearing of his petition.

Moreover, worthy of note is the fact that private respondent's adoptive mother emphasized that she executed the above affidavit "without affecting the legal adoption granted by the Court on September 9, 1967, making him as one of my legal and compulsory heir(s)." This is incontrovertible proof that she never entertained any misgivings or reservations with respect to her consent to his petition. This likewise dispels any possible confusion as to private respondent's legal status or adoptive paternity and his successional rights. Concordantly, we have heretofore held that change of name does not define or effect a change in one's existing family relations or in the rights and duties flowing therefrom. It does not alter one's legal capacity, civil status or citizenship: what is altered is only the name. [41]

WHEREFORE, the petition is DENIED and the decision of respondent Court of Appeals is hereby AFFIRMED in toto.

SO ORDERED.

Narvasa, C.J., (Chairman), Paras, Padilla, and Nocon, JJ., concur.

[1] C.A.-G.R. C.V. No. 12753; Per Justice Alfredo Marigomen, with Justices Lorna S. Lombos-De la Fuente and Jainal D. Rasul concurring.

[2] Special Proceeding No. 189, Regional Trial Court, Branch XIV, Cotabato City; Judge Eduardo B. Singayao, presiding.

[3] Exhibit A, 3; Original Record, 6.

[4] Per Judge David P. Avila of the Court of First Instance of Cotabato, Branch I, Cotabato City; Annex A, Petition; Rollo, 26.

[5] Original Record, 59.

[6] Rollo, 14.

[7] Comment of Private Respondent, 2-3; Rollo, 52-53.

[8] 38 Am. Jur., Name 594-595.

[9] 65 C.J.S., Names 2.

[10] I Tolentino, A., Commentaries and Jurisprudence on the Civil Code of the Philippines (1987 ed.), 721.

[11] Op. cit.

[12] Art. 189, *infra*.

[13] *Re Ross*, 8 Cal 2d 608, 67 P2d 94, 110 ALR 217.

- [14] Ong Huang Tin vs. Republic, 19 SCRA 9 (1967).
- [15] See Tan vs. Republic, 4 SCRA 1128 (1962).
- [16] Chomi vs. Local Civil Registrar of Manila, 99 Phil. 1004 (1956); Ng Yao Sing vs. Republic, 16 SCRA 483 (1966).
- [17] Ansaldo vs. Republic, 102 Phil. 104 (1958); Beduya, et al. vs. Republic, 115 SCRA 109 (1964); Chua Wee, et al. vs. Republic, 38 SCRA 409 (1971); Vda. de Castro vs. Republic, 134 SCRA 12 (1985).
- [18] See Baybayan vs. Republic, 16 SCRA 403 (196); San Roque vs. Republic, 23 SCRA 444 (1968).
- [19] Ong Peng Oan vs. Republic, 102 Phil. 48 (1957); Nacionales vs. Republic, 1 SCRA 366 (1966); Chiu Hap Chiu vs. Republic, 16 SCRA 864 (19).
- [20] Yu Chi Han vs. Republic, 15 SCRA 454 (1965).
- [21] TSN, June 24, 1986, 4, 5, 6-7.
- [22] Ibid., id., 8.
- [23] Annex E, Petition; Rollo, 46-47.
- [24] Chiu Hap Chiu vs. Republic, supra, Fn. 19.
- [25] Haw Liong vs. Republic, 1 SCRA 677 (1966); Republic vs. Tañada, etc., et al., 42 SCRA 419 (1971); Alfon vs. Republic, 97 SCRA 858 (1980).
- [26] Ang Chay vs. Republic, 34 SCRA 224 (1970).
- [27] Uy vs. Republic, 15 SCRA 457 (1965).
- [28] Oshita vs. Republic, 19 SCRA 700 (1967).
- [29] Ching vs. Republic, 98 Phil. 1012 (1956); Uy vs. Republic, supra; Oshita vs. Republic, supra.
- [30] 2 Am. Jur. 2d, Adoption 914.
- [31] 1 Am. Jur., Adoption of Children 621-622.
- [32] Op. cit., 623.
- [33] Op. cit., 651.
- [34] Article 253, Family Code.

[35] 1 SCRA 836 (1961).

- [36] Rollo, 11-12, 15.
- [37] Memorandum for Private Respondent; Rollo, 71-72.
- [38] TSN, June 24, 1986, 4.
- [39] Ibid., id., 8.
- [40] Affidavit of Consent, Exhibit B; Original Record, 9; Rollo, 47-48.
- [41] Yu vs. Republic, 17 SCRA 253 (1966); Calderon vs. Republic, 19 SCRA 721 (1967).

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