

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. MELCHOR DELA IGLESIA, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

G.R. Nos. 110991-92. February 24, 1995

Ponente: PADILLA, J.

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PADILLA, J.:

This is an appeal from the judgment* of the Regional Trial Court of Tuao, Cagayan, Branch XI, which found accused-appellant Melchor dela Iglesia guilty of the crime of murder on two (2) counts for the alleged brutal killing of Manuel P. Baquiran and his son Johnson Baquiran.

The two (2) informations docketed as Crim. Case No. 330-T and Crim. Case No. 331-T, respectively, read as follows:

Crim. Case No. 330-T -

"That on or about November 2, 1990, in the municipality of Sto. Nino, province of Cagayan, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the said accused, Melchor dela Iglesia together with three (3) John Does who were not identified, armed with guns, conspiring together and helping one another, with intent to kill, with evident premeditation and with treachery, did then and there wilfully, unlawfully and feloniously attack assault and shoot one, Manuel P. Baquiran, inflicting upon him gunshot wounds on the different parts of his body which caused his death.

Contrary to law."

Crim. Case No. 331-T -

"That on or about November 2, 1990, in the municipality of Sto. Nino, province of Cagayan and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the said accused Melchor dela Iglesia, together with three (3) John Does who were not identified, armed with guns, conspiring together and helping one another, with intent to kill, with evident premeditation and with treachery, did then and there wilfully, unlawfully and feloniously attack, assault and shoot one, Johnson Baquiran, inflicting upon him gunshot wounds on the different parts of his body which caused his death.

Contrary to law." [1]

Upon arraignment, accused-appellant pleaded not guilty in both cases. He waived pre-trial and the trial court heard both cases jointly inasmuch as they arose from the same incident and involved the same witnesses.

The prosecution's case revolved mainly on the testimonies of alleged eyewitness, Bartolome Baquiran and his mother Rosalinda Baquiran, together with the stipulated evidence with respect to the cause of death of the victims Manuel Baquiran and Johnson Baquiran. The prosecution's version may be synthesized as follows:

On 2 November 1990, at around nine o'clock in the evening, Manuel Baquiran and his two (2) children, namely, Johnson Baquiran and Bartolome Baquiran, together with a relative named Nelson Panaga were at Barangay

Cabayu, Sto. Nino, Cagayan. They were then staying in the farm owned by Manuel to guard their harvested palay stored inside a small nipa hut in the farm.

At that time, the Baquirans and Panaga were already inside the hut when armed men appeared from nowhere and surrounded the hut. One of the armed men shouted, "Umulug cayo" and thereupon, Manuel Baquiran came out of the hut followed by Johnson and Bartolome Baquiran as well as by Nelson Panaga.

According to Bartolome, his father (Manuel) noticed the presence of accused-appellant outside the hut which prompted Manuel to come out of the hut and face the unexpected visitors.

Once outside the hut, Bartolome claimed that he saw accused-appellant carrying a rifle over his left shoulder. He did not recognize the other armed men dressed in military uniforms who by then surrounded the place.

Bartolome averred that accused-appellant did not say anything to his father nor did his father ask what brought accused-appellant to their place. Rather, Bartolome observed that accused-appellant and the armed men called his uncle, Nelson Panaga, and brought the latter beyond hearing distance and he (Nelson) and the armed men started conversing among themselves for about thirty (30) minutes.

Nelson Panaga was eventually escorted back inside the hut after which, accused-appellant allegedly ordered his (Bartolome's) father and elder brother (Johnson) to come and follow him (accused-appellant). Bartolome further related that he did not observe any adverse reaction from his father nor brother as they were taken along by accused-appellant and his companions. He (Bartolome) and Nelson Panaga were left behind in the hut. [2]

Manuel and Johnson Baquiran (father and son) did not return to their hut on the same night nor did they return to their house in Cabayu, Sto. Nino, Cagayan. Three (3) days later, their decomposing bodies were found floating on a distant river. Their bodies were later examined at the Piat District Hospital by Dr. Silverio Salvanera. The autopsy revealed that Manuel and Johnson sustained multiple gunshot wounds as they were both shot at the abdomen. [3]

Rosalinda Baquiran, widow of the deceased Manuel Baquiran, testified that her son Bartolome went home to tell her that his father and brother were taken away by armed men from their hut in Cabayu, and they had not returned ever since. Bartolome also told her that accused-appellant was among the armed men who took away his father and brother and that it was the accused-appellant who killed the two (2) Baquirans.

Rosalinda further asserted that only the accused-appellant had the strong motive to kill her husband. This was allegedly brought about by accused-appellant's claim of ownership over a parcel of land in Cabayu, Sto. Nino, Cagayan - the same land where her husband and son were abducted on 2 November 1990. This land dispute resulted in bad blood between the parties even as her husband sought legal means to have the dispute adjudicated before the barangay hall until it finally reached the PAO office in Tuao, Cagayan. [4]

The prosecution also presented Recto Baquiran, another son of the deceased Manuel, to corroborate Rosalinda's claim of accused-appellant's strong motive for killing his father. He testified that sometime in May 1990, while he and his father were busy preparing their ricefield in Cabayu for the planting season, he saw accused-appellant together with five (5) other men arrive and confront his father on whether they could plow in the said field. While he was not able to overhear the exact exchange of words between his father and accused-appellant, he noticed that his father became very angry with accused-appellant because of the latter's claim of ownership over the said land.

The last time Recto saw accused-appellant was on 28 October 1990, when they were in the PAO office to discuss the land dispute. Accused-appellant allegedly wanted an amicable settlement but his father did not agree, so nothing was settled. Five (5) days later, or on 2 November 1990, his father and brother Johnson were killed. [5]

On the other hand, the defense anchored its case on denial and alibi.

Nelson Panaga, who was with Manuel, Johnson and Bartolome Baquiran on the night of the alleged abduction, testified that he was already asleep when Johnson Baquiran woke him up because of the orders for them to go down, and thereafter Manuel and Johnson were investigated by a part of the group outside of the hut. While this was going on, some armed men also approached him and allegedly asked for the direction in going to Minanga, Cagayan, to which he replied that he did not know. He also testified that there were additional armed men in the vicinity but that only five (5) armed men approached them. He alleged that he did not recognize any of the five (5) armed men who approached them.

Subsequently, Manuel and Johnson Baquiran were taken by the armed group who allegedly told Nelson not to worry for they (Manuel and Johnson) would come back after a while. They however, never did.

Nelson Panaga alleged that he executed an affidavit on 4 November 1990 before a certain SPO3 Domingo Ruiz, wherein he stated that he did not recognize any of the armed men. However, said document was not subscribed nor sworn to before any officer authorized by law to administer oaths. He was never subpoenaed during the preliminary investigation of the case. He admitted though that it was accused-appellant who requested him to testify in his favor. [6]

The next defense witness, Mateo Relos, testified that on 2 November 1990, he and accused-appellant were at the Iglesia ni Kristo chapel in Tabang, Sto. Nino, Cagayan where both rendered guard duty. He averred that he never left the chapel while on duty. He averred further that he never left the chapel the whole night of 2 November 1990, until the following morning when he and accused-appellant went home at about 5:00 a.m. When questioned by the court, he stated that there was no logbook to record those who rendered guard duty at the chapel. [7]

Vioquelin Villena, deacon (pangulong diakono) of the Iglesia ni Kristo at Sto. Nino, Cagayan, testified that a logbook was kept inside the said INK chapel to record the attendance of members rendering guard duty. He maintained that on 2 November 1990, he personally went to the INK chapel at around 6:00 p.m. and noted the presence of accused-appellant and Mateo Relos. He left before 7:00 p.m. and came back at 5:00 a.m. the following day to check on the two (2) guards whom he found to be on their assigned posts. [8]

Accused-appellant reiterated the deacon's story when he testified in his own behalf. He stated that 2 November 1990, was his assigned "guard day and prayer day", so that he rendered guard duty from 6:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. of the next day (3 November 1990) together with his companion, Mateo Relos. Thereafter, they turned over the premises to KA Vioquelin (Villena).

Accused-appellant admitted that there was an existing land dispute between him and Manuel involving the land on which Baquiran was then farming. Hence, he engaged the services of a lawyer who advised him that he had a meritorious claim. Thereafter, he brought the matter to Manuel Baquiran's attention who however refused to amicably settle with him despite the intercession of their relatives. Eventually, he brought the problem before the PAO office, where he and Manuel Baquiran both appeared, but to no avail.

Accused-appellant denied that he attempted to plow in the disputed land in May 1990 although this happened way back in May 1987. He was also seriously considering filing a formal complaint against Manuel Baquiran to recover part of the land when he learned that Manuel and his son Johnson were abducted and murdered on 2 November 1990.

Accused-appellant categorically professed his innocence in regard to the charges against him and claimed that he was being implicated in the crime solely because of the aforesaid land dispute. Beyond that, no other motive could be ascribed to him. Besides, accused-appellant contended, how could he be at the crime scene when he

stayed and guarded the INK chapel the whole night of 2 November 1990? [9]

On 13 April 1993, the court a quo rendered its judgment, the dispositive part of which states:

"WHEREFORE, finding the accused Melchor dela Iglesia guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the offense of Murder (2 counts), in Criminal Case No. 330-T for the death of Manuel Baquiran and in Criminal Case No. 331-T for the death of Johnson (Jenison) Baquiran, he is hereby sentenced to suffer two (2) life imprisonments.

He is further sentenced to indemnify the heirs of Manuel Baquiran in the amount of Fifty Thousand (P50,000.00) Pesos and the heirs of Johnson (Jenison) Baquiran in the amount of Fifty Thousand (P50,000.00) Pesos, and to pay the costs.

SO ORDERED." [10]

Before this Court, accused-appellant assigns the following errors allegedly committed by the lower court:

I

THE TRIAL COURT ERRED IN NOT APPRECIATING THE TESTIMONY OF NELSON PANAGA.

II

THE TRIAL COURT ERRED IN HOLDING THAT NELSON PANAGA IS A BROTHER-IN-LAW OF THE ACCUSED-APPELLANT WHEN NOTHING APPEARS TO BE SO IN THE RECORDS OF THE CASE.

III

THE TRIAL COURT ERRED IN CONVICTING ACCUSED-APPELLANT OF THE CRIME CHARGED BASED IN EFFECT IN (SIC) CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE. [11]

The trial court's ratio decidendi focused on the well-entrenched principle that the defense of alibi is a weak defense that can easily be fabricated and cannot prevail over the positive identification of the accused. It found no unworthy motive on the part of prosecution witness Bartolome Baquiran to falsely testify against the accused, rationalizing that a thirteen (13) year old boy would not deliberately concoct a tale and falsely charge an innocent person with so heinous a crime as double murder. Bartolome Baquiran's consistency, according to the trial court, in pointing to his uncle (accused-appellant) as being with the armed group that took away his father and brother on the night of 2 November 1990, both in the preliminary investigation and more so during the trial of the case, led it (the trial court) to conclude that accused-appellant "presumably killed his father and brother" and that he knew his uncle (accused-appellant) very well as not to have mistaken him for another person.

On the other hand, the trial court evaluated the evidence for the defense in this wise:

"One factor which militates against the alibi of the accused is the fact that, admittedly, Tabang, Sto. Nino where the accused claims to have been present the whole night of November 2, 1990 is, by his own admission, only three kilometers away from Cabayu, Sto. Nino. It is not enough to prove that the accused was not at the scene where the crime was committed, he must also prove that it was physically impossible for him to be at the scene of the crime at such time (People vs. Martinez, 127 SCRA page 260; People v. Beneraba, 129 SCRA 266.)

xxx xxx xxx

The testimony of the defense witness Nelson Panaga does not persuade the Court as to its reliability and truth for the reason that the said witness is the brother-in-law of the accused, his wife being the sister of the accused. While the relationship is not necessarily a ground to disregard the testimony of the witness, in this case, the Court finds

the testimony of Nelson Panaga to be unreliable. If indeed he denied before the police investigator that the accused was one of the armed men who took away the victims from Cabayu, Sto. Nino, Cagayan, why is it that he did not immediately do so and why did he not see to it that the same be subscribed and sworn to before a duly authorized officer? As to the testimony of Mateo Relos, the Court is not likewise convinced that it is sufficient to establish the alibi of the accused for the reason that when subjected to clarificatory questions by the Court, he gave conflicting answers. Neither could he categorically state that he was awake the whole night of November 2, 1990. He never stated that Melchor dela Iglesia did not leave the vicinity of the INC Chapel the whole night. In fact the said witness admits that he and Melchor dela Iglesia does (sic) not always sleep whenever they both performed guard duty in the chapel. Nor can the Court accept the testimony of witness Vioquelin Villena. He only identified the alleged logbook (Exhibit "2"). The Court however observes that the entries for the month of November are topsyturvy and some portions thereof, particularly those referring to November 11 up to November 30 are inserted after the entries for the month of August and before the entries for the month of September while those pertaining to November 1 to November 10 are found after October, 1990 and January, 1991. The said log book is not a very reliable document. Another reason why the Court has decided to disregard the said log book (Exhibit 2--a) is the fact that the said document contains spaces where the absent guard did not sign. The accused could very well have signed the empty spaces after his name long after November 2, 1990. At any rate, witness Mateo Relos himself testified that there was no such log book." [12]

Notably absent from the above-quoted discussion of the court a quo is a categorical pronouncement that on the strength of the evidence presented by the prosecution, it was rendering a judgment of conviction based purely on circumstantial evidence.

One thing is certain in this case. No one among the prosecution witnesses had actually witnessed the killing of the two (2) victims. While Bartolome Baquiran maintained that he identified accused-appellant as one of the armed men who "ordered" his father and older brother to follow them, Nelson Panaga, the other eyewitness, declared that he did not recognize any of the five (5) armed men who came to the nipa hut.

The trial court gave no weight or credence to the testimony of Nelson Panaga based on the following reasons: (1) that Nelson is the brother-in-law of the accused; and (2) that Nelson's statement before the police investigator wherein he denied that the accused was one of the armed men was not subscribed and sworn to before an officer duly authorized to administer oaths.

In his brief, accused-appellant maintains that "there is nothing in the records which showed that Nelson Panaga is the brother-in-law of the accused-appellant." [13] While ordinarily, this Court defers to the findings of fact of the trial court, a careful examination of the transcripts of stenographic notes reveals that indeed, Nelson's relationship with accused-appellant has not been duly established during the trial. Instead, we find that such alleged "relationship" was averred by witness Rosalinda Baquiran during the preliminary investigation of the case. [14]

Corollarily, we find no order of the court a quo, whether on its own motion, or by positive move on the part of the prosecution, to introduce such testimony of Rosalinda during the preliminary investigation as evidence, in order that such "fact" may form part of the record of the case. [15]

But, even assuming that Nelson Panaga is indeed related to accused-appellant, the records also indicate that he is a relative of the victims. In fact, in his testimony, witness Bartolome referred to him (Nelson) as his "uncle." [16]

Be that as it may, the office of the Solicitor General argues that Nelson Panaga's testimony does not contradict that of Bartolome Baquiran's positive identification of accused-appellant since the former "simply declared that he did not recognize the armed men, but he did not categorically state that appellant was not one of them." [17]

On this matter, we quote Nelson Panaga's testimony:

Q -

How about those armed men do (sic) you recognize these people?

Fiscal - Objection, leading your honor.

Court -

Witness may answer.

A -

NO.

Q -

All of them?

A -

Yes. [18] (Underscoring supplied)

Nelson Pagana's negative answer may have been equivocal if one assumes that what the question wanted to elicit was whether or not accused-appellant was one of the armed men. But that would be bordering on conjecture. After all, it would be equally logical to argue that his negative answer meant that he did not know the identities of the armed men, and that accused-appellant was not there, consistent with the purpose for which his testimony was being offered.

As to the reason why Panaga's alleged affidavit was not subscribed before an officer duly authorized to administer oaths, the Court finds no immediate relevance of such circumstance considering that Nelson Panaga was presented as an eyewitness by the defense and was available for cross examination by the prosecution. The relevant inquiry should have been as to the credibility of his allegation vis-a-vis that of prosecution eyewitness Bartolome Baquiran. It is also a curious circumstance why, as the other key eyewitness, he (Nelson) was never subpoenaed by the investigating judge during the preliminary investigation. [19]

With respect to the trial court's appreciation of accused-appellant's alibi, the Court agrees with the trial court's observation that it was not physically impossible for accused-appellant to be at the crime scene when the crime was committed, considering that by his own admission, the said place is only about three (3) kilometers away from the Iglesia ni Kristo chapel where supposedly accused-appellant stayed as guard from 6:00 p.m. of 2 November 1990 up to 5:00 a.m. of 3 November 1990.

Similarly, the testimonies of Mateo Relos and Vioquelin Villena may have been equivocal to the point that accused-appellant could have left the chapel for some time on the night of 2 November 1990 and come back the following morning when Villanueva noted his presence. The alleged logbook (Exhibit 2-A; defense) offers no clue whether or not such is the case, save for the fact that it corroborates to a limited extent the fact of accused-appellant's presence at the chapel at 6:00 p.m. of 2 November 1990.

According to the trial court, since Mateo Relos could not categorically state that he was awake the whole night of 2 November 1990 and that he was not really sure whether accused-appellant never left the premises of the chapel, therefore, accused-appellant could have really left the chapel to perpetrate the heinous crimes some time during the evening of 2 November 1990.

Accused-appellant may not have presented an air-tight alibi. Nevertheless, the more important consideration in the case at bench is whether accused-appellant could have left the chapel in Tabang, Sto. Nino not the whole night of 2 November 1990 but sometime between 6:00-9:00 p.m. of that day in order that he could physically be at Cabayu at about 9:00 p.m. on 2 November 1990, as alleged.

The testimony of Vioquelin Villena established that he left the chapel after noting the presence of accused-appellant and Mateo Relos sometime at 7:00 p.m. of 2 November 1990. Hence, the relevant inquiry which the trial court failed to appreciate was whether there was proof that accused-appellant left the chapel at such time, leaving Mateo Relos alone, then proceeded to Cabayu with armed companions to abduct Manuel and Johnson Baquiran, in plain sight of eyewitness Bartolome and Nelson Panaga, kill Manuel and Johnson, dump their bodies in a distant river, then return to the chapel where he was again seen by Vioquelin Villena at 5:00 a.m. of 3 November 1990. It appears that there is no such proof.

In the case at bench, the only other circumstance that could link accused-appellant as the perpetrator of the crimes is the alleged existing land dispute between him and Manuel Baquiran. This land dispute, as admitted and established by both parties, had even reached the mediation stage wherein no amicable settlement was reached. To the mind of the prosecution, this circumstance furnishes enough strong motive for accused-appellant to kill. This Court notes however, that prior to the killing, there is no evidence on record that accused-appellant had made threats on the life of Manuel or his family or similar manifestations to the effect that he was so desperate to recover an alleged successional right to the land, so as to eventually hatch a murder plot against his relative. [20]

All that was established is a bare allegation that Manuel Baquiran had no "known enemy except (that of) accused-appellant." [21] Hence, not only is there a marked absence of an unbroken chain of circumstances, but that in essence, there is only one circumstance to speak of - and that is, accused-appellant's alleged positive identification by witness Bartolome Baquiran, which is in turn negated by the testimony of Nelson Panaga. The Court is not unmindful of the rule that the issue of assigning values and weight to the testimonies of witnesses is at best the province of the trial court. However, the exception should be applied to this case where certain facts of substance have been overlooked and misappreciated and which have given rise to a hypothesis inconsistent with the guilt of the accused. Moreover, when the alleged eyewitnesses contradict themselves, then the element of reasonable doubt is injected and cannot be lightly disregarded. [22]

The inference made by the trial court that Mateo Relos could have slept on the night in question or that accused could have left the Iglesia ni Kristo chapel the whole night, has lost sight of the fact that the crimes happened at 9:00 p.m. of 2 November 1990. Therefore, the inference should be obviously limited to between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. where the testimonies of Vioquelin Villena and Mateo Relos have established that accused-appellant was in the Iglesia ni Kristo chapel. To hold otherwise would logically infer either of two (2) things, that Mateo Relos slept even before 7:00 p.m. (the approximate time Villena left the premises), or that he lost visual contact with accused-appellant as early as that time - a fact that had not been duly proved by the prosecution.

It is axiomatic in criminal law that the quantum of evidence required for conviction of an accused is that which produces moral certainty in an unprejudiced mind that the accused is guilty beyond reasonable doubt. If the evidence is susceptible of two (2) interpretations, one inconsistent with the innocence of the accused and the other inconsistent with his guilt, the accused must be acquitted. [23]

Accordingly, circumstantial evidence would only be sufficient if there is a concurrence of the following elements: (a) there is more than one circumstance, (b) the facts from which the inference was derived are proven and (c) the combination of all the circumstances is such as to produce a conviction beyond reasonable doubt. The circumstances must be "an unbroken claim which leads to one fair and reasonable conclusion, which points to the

defendant, to the exclusion of all others, as the guilty person." [24] The Constitution demands no less than "proof beyond reasonable doubt", consistent with the demands of justice and due process.

In sum, we rule that while accused-appellant's alibi may have been weak, the evidence presented by the prosecution was much weaker. A broken chain of circumstances cannot overcome the constitutional presumption of innocence in favor of the accused which entitles him to an ACQUITTAL.

WHEREFORE, we REVERSE the judgment of conviction rendered by the trial court against accused-appellant. He is ACQUITTED of the crimes charged, based on reasonable doubt and the Court orders his RELEASE from detention unless he is held for some other legal cause or ground. Costs de oficio.

SO ORDERED.

Davide, Jr., Bellosillo, Quiason, and Kapunan, JJ., concur.

* Penned by Judge Orlando D. Beltran.

[1] Rollo, pp. 11-12.

[2] TSN, 21 April 1992, pp. 4-13.

[3] Exhs. "F" and "G" [Prosecution] Book I, p. 12, Original Records.

[4] TSN, 21 April 1992, pp. 15-17; 8 June 1992, pp. 5-8.

[5] TSN, 15 September 1992, pp. 3-8.

[6] TSN, 16 December 1992, pp. 3-10.

[7] TSN, 27 January 1993, pp. 3-7.

[8] TSN, 10 February 1993, pp. 3-6.

[9] TSN, 10 February 1993, pp. 7-11.

[10] Rollo, p. 16.

[11] Rollo, p. 30.

[12] Rollo, pp. 15-16.

[13] Rollo, p. 37.

[14] Preliminary investigation conducted by MCTC Judge Taguba on 8 November 1990, p. 19 attached to Original Records.

[15] See Sec. 8, Rule 112, Rules of Court.

[16] TSN, April 21, 1992 at p. 4, 5, 8, 10, on cross-examination cf. p. 13.

[17] Appellee's Brief, p. 6.

[18] TSN, 16 December 1992 at P. 4.

[19] All that the record suggests is that he was investigated by a certain Station Commander Henry Donato who manifested before the investigating judge that Nelson Panaga did not recognize the victims' abductors.

[20] See for instance *People vs. Ocampo*, G.R. No. 83436, 9 February 1993, 218 SCRA 609.

[21] Decision, p. 3; Rollo, p. 13.

[22] *People vs. Eroles*, G.R. No. 100455, 17 September 1993, 226 SCRA 554.

[23] *People vs. Argawamon*, G.R. No. 89543, 13 November 1992, 215 SCRA 652.

[24] *US. vs. Villos*, G.R. No. 2999, 6 Phil. 510, 25 October , 1906 at 512 citing *Commonwealth vs. Kirkpatrick*, 15 Leg. Int. 268 (Pa.), 1858.

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