

THE PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. WILSON RONAS, ACCUSED-APPELLANT.

G.R. Nos. 128088 & 146639. January 31, 2001

Ponente: MENDOZA, J.

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MENDOZA, J.:

This is an appeal from the decision[1] of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 23, Isabela, finding accused-appellant Wilson Ronas guilty of murder for the death of Mariano Buenaventura and frustrated murder for the wounding of Mariano's brother, Santiago Buenaventura, in San Manuel, Isabela, on December 10, 1991.

The information[2] for murder alleged ¾

That on or about the 10th day of December 1991, in the municipality of San Manuel, province of Isabela, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the said accused, with evident premeditation and treachery, did then and there, willfully, unlawfully and feloniously, with intent to kill suddenly and unexpectedly and without giving him chance to defend himself, assault, attack and shoot for several times with a firearm one Mariano Buenaventura Jr., inflicting upon him gunshot wounds on the different parts of his body, which directly caused his death.

CONTRARY TO LAW.

On the other hand, the information[3] for frustrated murder alleged ¾

That on or about the 10th day of December 1991, in the municipality of San Manuel, province of Isabela, Philippines and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the said accused, with evident premeditation and treachery, did then and there, willfully, unlawfully and feloniously, with intent to kill, suddenly and unexpectedly and without giving him chance to defend himself, assault, attack and shoot with a firearm one Santiago Buenaventura, thus performing all the acts of execution which should have produced the crime of murder as a consequence, but nevertheless, did not produce it, by reason of causes independent of his will, that is, by the timely and able medical assistance rendered to the said Santiago Buenaventura, which prevented his death.

CONTRARY TO LAW.

Accused-appellant pleaded not guilty, whereupon he was tried. The evidence for the prosecution consisted of the testimonies of Santiago Buenaventura, Jose Buenaventura, Dr. Harry Soller, and Dr. Maximino Picio.

Santiago Buenaventura, who survived the attack, testified that he, the deceased, who was his brother, and a certain Rolando Espiritu were raising ducks, owned by his other brother, Jose Buenaventura, in San Manuel, Isabela. To keep watch of the duck farm, they built a tent where they slept at night. The tent had canvass sidings on the northern and southern side, while its western side was covered with a sack which did not touch the ground but allowed a view of the outside. The eastern side was open and served as the entrance to the tent.[4]

Santiago Buenaventura testified that at midnight on December 9, 1991, he, his brother Mariano, and Rolando

were awakened by the noise and movements of the ducks. When they looked through the opening between the hanging sack and the ground on the western side, they saw four men, each one holding a lighted flashlight. About six meters away from their tent the four stopped. They were talking to each other, but Santiago could not understand what they were saying.[5]

Santiago testified that one of the men was accused-appellant. He recognized him because of the illumination provided by their flashlights. He knew accused-appellant because the latter had asked them several times for duck eggs. On three occasions, Santiago and his group obliged accused-appellant but, when he asked for the fourth time, he was told that there was none to give as the owner of the farm, Jose Buenaventura, had taken everything. This angered accused-appellant, who told Santiago and his group, "Matatapang na kayo, tingnan natin." Santiago said that he did not know who the others were.[6]

According to Santiago, after briefly talking to each other, accused-appellant and his companions resumed walking toward the tent and, when they were two meters from the tent, the group shouted at them, "Hoy gising, matatapang." Then the group started firing their guns at Santiago and his companions. Santiago said accused-appellant fired at him and his brother Mariano with a 22 cal. gun. The record does not show whether Santiago's other companion, Rolando, was hurt. Then the assailants fled.

Santiago went to town for help. He and his brother Mariano were taken to the hospital but the latter died an hour later.[7]

Santiago was treated for his injuries by Dr. Harry Soller of the Manuel A. Roxas District Hospital who found that the former had sustained gunshot wounds on the left thigh and an exit wound at the left buttock. Dr. Soller testified that Santiago's wounds could not have caused his immediate death. With respect to Mariano Buenaventura, Dr. Soller testified that the former died because of massive brain injury and multiple gunshot wounds.[8] Dr. Maximino Picio, the Municipal Health Officer of Isabela, performed an autopsy on the body of Mariano. His findings showed that the fatal wounds sustained by the victim, Mariano, were those on the left parietal bone which penetrated his skull and those on the left parietal lobe of the brain.[9]

The last witness for the prosecution, Jose Buenaventura, testified that, on account of the death of Mariano, he incurred expenses amounting to more or less P100,000.00. He claimed that he had lost the receipts for his expenses.[10]

Accused-appellant testified in his defense. He denied the allegations against him, claiming that from 7:00 in the evening of December 9, 1991 until 5:00 in the morning of December 10, 1991, he was at his grandmother's wake at District 2, San Manuel, Isabela, about one kilometer away from the place where the shooting incident occurred. He said that he played a card game, locally known as "tong-its," at the wake and that, among others, he saw barangay kagawad Larry Laureta.[11] Another defense witness, Josefino Calacam, corroborated accused-appellant. He said that he was also at the wake and that he saw accused-appellant there. Calacam stated, however, that accused-appellant left between 4:30 a.m. to 5:00 a.m. of December 10, 1991.[12]

Accused-appellant was arrested at around 7:00 a.m. of December 10, 1991 and brought to the Municipal Hall of San Manuel, Isabela for investigation. He denied any knowledge of the shooting of the Buenaventuras. Accused-appellant said he could not remember if he signed any affidavit or statement. According to him, he was kept in the municipal jail until January 8, 1992 when he was released on recognizance. Two years later, on March 8, 1994, he was arrested for the killing of Mariano and the wounding of Santiago.[13]

Another defense witness was Alfred Bernardo, barangay captain of San Manuel, Isabela, at the time of the incident, and the then Barangay Councilman Felino Baldoz. Bernardo testified that the Peace and Order

Committee of District 2, San Manuel, headed by Baldoz, conducted an investigation of the shooting incident,[14] but found that accused-appellant had no participation in the crime because he was at the wake of his grandmother at the time. On the other hand, Baldoz testified that a certain Juan Cabanilla said he had seen Boy Madrid, Nilo Cuanan, and Gil Matias having a drinking spree on the day of the incident.[15] The three, according to Baldoz, were notorious characters in the barangay. The three were hunted by the police. Matias and Cuanan were killed, but Madrid was able to escape.[16]

On the same day of December 11, 1991, Baldoz relayed the results of their investigation to Brgy. Capt. Bernardo, who in turn orally reported their findings to the police authorities.[17] Bernardo said he later accompanied accused-appellant to Camp Melchor, Echague, Isabela where the latter was given a paraffin test and found negative for gunpowder nitrates.[18]

On the basis of the evidence presented by the prosecution and the defense, the trial court rendered its decision on April 1, 1996, the dispositive portion of which reads:[19]

AS A CONSEQUENCE OF ALL THE FOREGOING, the Court finds Wilson Ronas guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of Murder provided for and penalized under Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code and hereby sentences [him] to suffer the penalty of Reclusion Perpetua; to indemnify the heirs of the victim Fifty Thousand (P50,000.00) Pesos for life and One Hundred Thousand (P100,000.00) Pesos for expenses incurred during the wake, burial and coffin of the late Mariano Buenaventura, without however subsidiary imprisonment in case of insolvency; and to pay the cost.

Likewise, the Court finds him guilty of the crime of Frustrated Murder beyond reasonable doubt provided for and penalized by Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code in relation to Article 50 of the same code. Applying in his favor the indeterminate sentence law, the Court condemns him to suffer imprisonment ranging from six (6) years, one (1) month and eleven (11) days of prision mayor as minimum, to twelve (12) years, five (5) months and eleven (11) days of Reclusion Temporal as maximum; to indemnify the complaining witness the sum of Twenty Five (P25, 000.00) Pesos as actual expenses in the treatment of his injury without subsidiary imprisonment in case of insolvency; and to pay the cost.

The accused, being a detention prisoner, is accredited the full term of his detention relative to the Frustrated Murder case only.

SO ORDERED.

Hence, this appeal. Accused-appellant contends that ¾

- THE COURT A QUO GRAVELY ERRED IN FINDING THE ACCUSED-APPELLANT GUILTY BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT OF THE CRIME OF MURDER AND FRUSTRATED MURDER.
- THE COURT A QUO GRAVELY ERRED IN NOT GIVING WEIGHT AND CREDENCE TO ACCUSED-APPELLANT'S ALIBI.

Accused-appellant's contentions have no merit.

First. Accused-appellant contends that the prosecution failed to establish the identity of the assailants. He claims that it was dark on the night of the incident and that the alleged assailants, who were carrying flashlights, focused them on the victims, so that when they were fired upon, Santiago and his companions could not have seen the faces of the assailants nor the type of firearms they were carrying. In addition, it is alleged that Santiago and his companions could not have seen the assailants through the gap between the hanging sack covering one side of the tent and the ground.

These contentions are without merit. The trial court correctly relied on the following testimony of the surviving

victim, Santiago Buenaventura, in finding that accused-appellant was one of the three men who had attacked them in the early morning of December 10, 1991:[20]

COURT:

Q:

You said there were 4 persons who went to your camp that night. From what direction did they come from?

A: They came from the west sir.

Q:

According to you, you were lying down when those 4 men arrived. Will you describe to the court how were your beds or mats were arranged at that time?

A: We were side by side sir.

Q: To what direction was your head pointed?

A: Our head were pointed to the west sir.

Q: When you noticed that your herds consisting of ducks were becoming noisy what did you do?

A: We just observed sir.

....

ATTY. ALBANO:

Q: By the way, what you mean is your tent is made of a tolda canvass, is that right?

A: Yes sir.

Q:

And the canvass is nailed, all the sides of the canvass is nailed to the ground where you erected your tent, is that correct?

A: Only both sides were nailed sir, camarin type.

Q: And the other sides, opposite two sides are open, is that correct?

A:

On the west of our tent we placed some sacks but it does not touch the ground. There is some space. (Witness demonstrating one foot).

....

ATTY. ALBANO:

Q:

Now in other words you did not notice their whereabouts immediately because your sight is being obstructed by the canvass?

A: Because the sacks that we covered do not touch the ground sir.

COURT:

Q: How far were the accused from you when you first noticed their presence?

A: They were quite far from us but they were already near the ducks we herd sir.

Q:

And when you noticed their presence when according to you they were very near already, what did they say or what did they do?

A: I did not hear their conversation sir. When we saw the men nearing use we just kept on observing sir.

Q: Who was holding the flashlight?

A: All of them have flashlights sir.

Q: The four of them were holding flashlights?

A: Yes sir.

....

ATTY. ALBANO:

Q:

Now when you noticed the presence of these people, what did you do? Is it not a fact that your brother and Espiritu were both asleep?

A: We were being awakened sir.

Q: Who awakened your brother and Espiritu?

A: When we heard the noise of our ducks and they are coming from the west, we simultaneously awoke sir.

Q:

Despite the fact that you were awakened you were still lying down?

A: Yes sir we were lying down and observing.

Q: Is it not a fact that on that night it was very dark night on December 10, 1991?

A: Yes sir.

Q: When you were awakened you did not light any lamp or candle inside your tent?

A: No sir because we kept on observing.

....

ATTY. ALBANO:

Q: Is it not a fact that they also focused their flashlights inside your tent?

A: Yes sir when they fired at us that was the time they focused their flashlights to us.

Q:

And that was the first time that you noticed that they have a flashlight?

A:

When they were coming to us and stopped sir I know that they have already flashlights and that was the time I recognized Wilson Ronas.

....

ATTY. ALBANO:

Q: What I mean when you first saw them, is it not a fact that they were positioned in scattered places?

A: No sir they were together.

Q: They were not sporting their flashlights at the time? They were not lighting their flashlights?

A: heir flashlights were on before sir.

Q: And the direction of the flashlight was towards your tent, is that correct?

A: When they were having their conversation, not yet focused to us sir.

Q: Could you tell more or less their exact position when they were conversing?

A: They were together in circle sir.

Q: They were in circle position?

A: Yes sir.

Q:

So more or less what you could see were the back of their bodies because they were in circle?

A: Wilson Ronas was facing our tent before and their flashlights were on that is why I recognized Wilson Ronas.

Q:

But did you not say that they were in circle position and because of their position the physical appearance of one then is obstructed by the back of the body of the other member, is that correct?

A: Because the two had their back facing our tent while the other two were facing our tent sir.

Q:

In other words you want to tell the honorable court that they were focusing their flashlights between themselves?

A: Because the night was very dark their flashlights were open and it reflects their faces sir.

COURT:

Q: How far were these accused from you when you allegedly recognized Wilson Ronas?

A:

From the place where I am seated to the other side of that table sir. (Witness pointing to the table of the RTC Aide which is estimated to be more or less (6) meters away.)

Q:

You want the court to understand that at that distance of 6 meters before the accused attacked, they have a

conference yet?

A: They have a short conversation.

....

COURT:

Q:

Now according to you the 4 persons had a conference, two with their back at you and the two were facing you, did you come to know who were the two facing you direction?

A: One of the two sir.

Q: Why were you not able to recognize the other?

A: I am not familiar with the face of the other one sir.

Q:

Yes, but it was dark according to you. You want to tell the court that at that distance of 6 meters you were able to recognize one of them?

A: Because it was only he whom I know already sir that is why I recognized him.

....

ATTY ALBANO:

Q:

Is it not a fact that the ray of the flashlight is only visible from waist down of these 4 persons that you stated?

A:

No sir because not all the flashlights were focused downwards by the reflection of the light of the flashlight.

Q:

When you say reflection, does it mean a little light or ray coming from the back of the flashlight?

A:

It came in front of the flashlight sir.

The assailants stopped within six meters of the tent where Santiago and his companions stayed. While they may have trained their flashlights on the victims' tent, there was nonetheless illumination of the place which enabled the witness to recognize accused-appellant. Thus, it has been held that "Illumination produced by kerosene lamp or a flashlight is sufficient to allow identification of persons. Wicklamps, flashlights, even moonlight or starlight may, in proper situations, be considered sufficient illumination, making the attack on the credibility of witnesses solely on that ground unmeritorious." [21]

Indeed, accused-appellant was known to this witness. He had been demanding duck eggs from them, and he resented it when the victims did not give him any before the incident in question.

Second. The records disclose that the incident happened between the midnight of December 9, 1991 and the wee hours of December 10, 1991. Accused-appellant claims that at that time he was at his grandmother's wake. But, as

the trial court held, accused-appellant's alibi cannot prevail over his positive identification by Santiago Buenaventura. After all, the place where accused-appellant claimed to be at the time of the incident is just a kilometer away from the place of the crime and the distance could easily be negotiated by tricycle or bicycle. Alibi is an inherently weak defense. It cannot stand against the positive identification of accused-appellant. In this case, the weakness of accused-appellant's defense is compounded by the fact that it was not physically impossible for him to be present at the place where the crime was committed.

In a futile attempt to prove accused-appellant's defense of alibi, defense witness Calacam stated that he was also at the wake and that he saw accused-appellant there. However, Calacam admitted that he saw accused-appellant going from table to table between 8:00 p.m. until 11:00 p.m. of December 9, 1991. He did not know where accused-appellant went after the wake, although he said he knew that accused-appellant left between 4:30 a.m. to 5:00 a.m. of December 10, 1991. Thus, it is still possible for accused-appellant to sneak out to go to the place of the crime and afterward return to the wake or for him to commit the crime after leaving the wake. After all, the exact time of the incident cannot be determined. What is proven is that the shooting took place between midnight of December 9, 1991 and the early morning of the next day, December 10.

Third. Nor can credit be given to the testimonies of Bernardo and Baldoz that in the course of their investigation of the incident they found that the assailants were three notorious characters in the neighborhood, namely, Gil Matias, Boy Madrid, and Nilo Cuanan. Baldoz based his finding on the information allegedly given by a certain Juan Cabanilla that he saw the three suspects having a drinking spree and later on passing by his house just before the incident. This is too slender a ground on which to base a finding of liability. Not even the notoriety of the three suspects nor the fact that in a police encounter two of them were killed while one escaped prevail over the positive identification of accused-appellant as one of the assailants. Baldoz and Bernardo should have made a written report of their investigation. Their alleged oral report of the investigation to the authorities cannot be given weight.

On the other hand, the negative result of the paraffin test conducted on accused-appellant is not conclusive proof that he did not fire a gun. It is possible for a person to fire a gun and yet not have traces of nitrates or gunpowder, because he may have washed his hands or his hands may have perspired and removed traces of gunpowder.[22]

Fourth. The two informations filed against accused-appellant alleged treachery in the commission of the crime. This qualifying circumstance was duly proved. Santiago Buenaventura testified that the shooting incident happened so fast that he and his companions had no chance to run away. The flashlights were focused on them. Even if the victims saw accused-appellant coming, they nonetheless had no chance to escape. They could only remain quiet inside the tent. Thus, the means consciously adopted by the assailants in this case directly and specially insured the execution of the crime.[23]

But evident premeditation, though also alleged in the two informations against accused-appellant, cannot be appreciated, as there was no evidence that the execution of the criminal act was preceded by thought and reflection upon the resolution to carry out the criminal intent for a period of time sufficient to arrive at a calm judgment.[24] Even if the assailants stopped within six meters of the place where the victims were and talked before executing their deed, this fact is insufficient to show premeditation.

For the foregoing reasons, we hold that accused-appellant is guilty of murder against Mariano Buenaventura. However, his conviction for frustrated murder for the wounding of Santiago Buenaventura could be sustained because the wounds suffered by Santiago were not fatal, and the lack of immediate medical attention would not have caused the victim's immediate death. Indeed, Santiago was even able to run to the town, about one kilometer away from the place of incident, to call for help. In the terminology of Art. 6 of the Revised Penal Code,

accused-appellant did not perform all the acts of execution which would have produced the felony.[25] Thus, in one case, where the victim sustained a stab wound at the right back portion of his body, this Court held:[26]

Although we affirm appellant's conviction of two counts of murder, we hold that under the third Information he is guilty of attempted, not frustrated, murder. While the prosecution established that there was intent to kill, it failed to present evidence showing that the wound inflicted on Cabactulan was fatal and would have caused his death had medical help not been provided. Where the wounds inflicted on the victim were not proven to be sufficient to cause his death, the crime is only attempted murder, as the accused has not performed all the acts of execution that would have brought about the victim's death.

Accordingly, the imposable penalty for the crime of attempted murder, following Art. 51 of the Revised Penal Code, is prision correccional in its maximum period to prision mayor in its medium period. Applying the Indeterminate Sentence Law, the minimum of the penalty to be imposed should be within the range of arresto mayor in its maximum period to prision correccional in its medium period, and the maximum of the penalty to be imposed should be within the range of prision correccional in its maximum period to prision mayor in its medium period. Since no generic aggravating nor mitigating circumstance attended the commission of the crime of attempted murder, the penalty should be 2 years and 4 months of prision correccional, as minimum, and 8 years of prision mayor, as maximum.

The award of damages should be modified. For the death of the victim Mariano Buenaventura, the trial court awarded P50,000.00 as indemnity and P100,000.00 as actual damages to the heirs of the victim. The award of P50,000.00 as indemnity is correct. But the award of P100,000.00 as actual damages must be deleted as there is no competent proof to support it, no receipts showing the expenses incurred during the wake and burial of the victim having been presented as required by Art. 2199 of the Civil Code.[27] Jose Buenaventura claimed that he lost the receipts for expenses in connection with Mariano's burial. Under Art. 2224, temperate damages may be recovered as it cannot be denied that the heirs suffered some pecuniary loss although the exact amount cannot be proved with certainty.[28] Hence, an award of P25,000.00 by way of temperate damages would be appropriate. In addition, the heirs of the victim are entitled to moral damages in the amount of P50,000.00.[29] The purpose of making such award is not to enrich the heirs of the victim but to compensate them for injuries to their feelings.[30] For the injuries sustained by Santiago Buenaventura, the trial court gave an award of P25,000.00 for actual damages. This should be deleted for lack of evidence to support it. However, the amount of P3,500.00 as temperate damages may be made in its place.

WHEREFORE, the decision of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 23, Isabela, is AFFIRMED with the following modifications:

- In G.R. No. 146639 (Crim. Case No. 23-555), for the death of Mariano Buenaventura, accused-appellant is ordered to pay the heirs of the victim, in addition to the award of P50,000.00 as civil indemnity, the amounts of P50,000.00 as moral damages and P25,000.00 as temperate damages. The award of P100,000.00 as actual damages is deleted.
- In G.R. No. 128088 (Crim. Case No. 23-554), for the injuries sustained by Santiago Buenaventura, accused-appellant is found guilty of attempted murder and is sentenced to 2 years and 4 months of prision correccional, as minimum, and 8 years of prision mayor, as maximum, and to pay Santiago Buenaventura the amount of P3,500.00 as temperate damages.

SO ORDERED.

Bellosillo, (Chairman), Quisumbing, Buena, and De Leon, Jr., JJ., concur.

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- [1] Per Judge Wilfredo Timaliuan.
- [2] Records (Crim. Case No. 23-555), p. 1
- [3] Records (Crim. Case No. 23-554), p. 1.
- [4] TSN (Santiago Buenaventura), pp. 3-4, 16-18, Oct. 24, 1994.
- [5] Id., pp. 4-5, 17, 20, 23 & 25.
- [6] Id., pp. 10-11, 25-26, 28-29.
- [7] Id., pp. 5-9, 21, 24, 27; TSN (Dr. Harry Soller), pp. 8-9, June 26, 1995.
- [8] TSN (Dr. Harry Soller), pp. 3-9, June 26, 1995; Death Certificate (Mariano Buenaventura) marked as Exh. B; Medical Certificate (Santiago Buenaventura) marked as Exh. C.
- [9] TSN (Dr. Maximino Picio), pp. 3-6, February 16, 1995; Autopsy Report (Mariano Buenaventura) marked as Exh. A.
- [10] TSN (Jose Buenaventura), p. 4, Jan. 6, 1995.
- [11] TSN (Wilson Ronas), pp. 3-7-10, Aug. 8, 1995.
- [12] TSN (Josefino Calacam), pp. 16-24, Aug. 11, 1995.
- [13] TSN (Wilson Ronas), pp. 3-7, 9-15, Aug. 8, 1995.
- [14] TSN (Alfred Bernardo), pp. 4, 6-7, Aug. 11, 1995; TSN (Felino Baldoz), pp. 3, 6, Sept. 18, 1995.
- [15] Id., p. 10; Id., pp. 5-6, 8-10.
- [16] Id., pp. 5-6, 13-15; Id., pp. 4, 7, 11.
- [17] Id., pp. 5, 11; Id., pp. 5, 11.
- [18] Id., pp. 3-4, 7-8; Exh. 1.
- [19] Rollo, pp. 32-33.
- [20] TSN, pp. 17-18, 20-29, Oct. 24, 1994.
- [21] People v. Adoviso, 309 SCRA 1, 11 (1999).
- [22] People v. Pagal, 272 SCRA 443 (1997).
- [23] People v. Adoviso, supra.
- [24] People v. Reduca, 301 SCRA 516 (1999).
- [25] People v. Pagal, supra.
- [26] People v. Reduca, supra.
- [27] People v. Vital, G.R. No. 130785, Sept. 29, 2000; People v. Gallo, 318 SCRA 157 (1999); People v. Lachica, 316 SCRA 443 (1999); People v. Apelado, 316 SCRA 422 (1999).
- [28] People v. Lopez, 312 SCRA 684 (1999).

[29] *People v. Ladit*, G.R. No. 127571, May 11, 2000; *People v. Orillo*, G.R. No. 125896, May 11, 2000; *People v. Espanola*, 271 SCRA 689 (1997).

[30] *People v. Verde*, 302 SCRA 690 (1999).

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