THE PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. RODERICK LICAYAN @ RUDY, ROBERTO LARA @ TUNGKOY/UNYOK, PEDRO MABANSAG @ PUTOL (AT LARGE), ALEX PLACIO (AT LARGE), JOJO SAJ...

G.R. Nos. 140900 & 140911. August 15, 2001

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PER CURIAM:

This is an automatic review of the Consolidated Decision,[1] dated September 9, 1999, of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 272, Marikina City, finding accused-appellants Roderick Licayan and Roberto Lara guilty of Kidnapping for Ransom under Art. 267 of the Revised Penal Code, as amended, and sentencing them to suffer the penalty of death by lethal injection and to indemnify private complainants in the amount of P100,000.00, as moral and exemplary damages, and the additional amount of P20,000.00 for Private Complainant Joseph Co as actual damages. Accused-appellants were acquitted of the crime of Robbery.

The Information[2] for Kidnapping for Ransom against accused-appellants and their other co-accused charged -

> "That on or about August 10, 1998 at around 1:45 a.m., the above-named accused, conspiring, confederating and mutually helping one another, armed with a handgun and with evident premeditation, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously with the use of force and intimidation kidnap JOSEPH TOMAS CO and LINDA MANAYSAY for the purpose of extorting ransom in the amount of P10 million at Goodies Pares Mami House located at Loyola cor. Constancia St., Sampaloc, Manila, owned and managed by the aforementioned victim Co and thereafter took them with the use of Toyota Tamaraw FX likewise owned by Co as getaway vehicle to a house in Daang Bakal, Parang, Marikina and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court where they were kept under detention against their will until they were able to escape the following day at around 4:30 in the afternoon on August 11, 1998.
>
> "CONTRARY TO LAW."

The Information[3] for Robbery charged -

> "That on or about August 10 and 11, 1998 at Daang Bakal, Parang, Marikina City and within the jurisdiction of the Honorable Court, the above-named accused, armed with a handgun and with intent to gain, conspiring, confederating and mutually helping each other, by means of force and intimidation, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously take and divested JOSEPH TOMAS CO and LINDA MANAYSAY of the following personal properties after forcible taking them as hostages for ransom, to wit:
>
> "1. Wallet of Co containing his driver's license, original copy of official receipt (OR), certificate of registration (CR) of his two (2) L-300 vans;
>
> "2. Bank time deposit certificate at Metrobank, Valenzuela Branch;
>
> "3. Casio G-Shock watch;
>
> "4. Necklace and earrings of Manaysay; and

"5. P10,000.00 cash

"to the damage and prejudice of said victim as owners thereof against their will.

"CONTRARY TO LAW."

The facts are as follows:

Complainant Joseph Tomas Co owns a restaurant called Goodies Pares Mami House with branches in Valenzuela, Cubao, and Sampaloc.[4] Co's regular routine was for him and the other complainant, Linda Manaysay, the restaurant's cashier and accounting officer, to make the rounds of the three branches for inspection and collection of left-over food and cash sales. The rounds would normally begin late in the evening and last until early in the morning of the next day.[5] The prosecution evidence shows that on August 9, 1998, complainant went to the Goodies Valenzuela Branch where they stayed until midnight.[6] From there, they proceeded to the Cubao branch where they stayed until about 12:45a.m., August 10, 1998. Their last stop was at the Sampaloc branch which they visited at 1:30 a.m.[7]

While Co was at the Sampaloc branch, supervising the loading of left-over food into the back of his Tamaraw FX service vehicle, three men approached him from behind. When Co saw the men, he asked what they wanted. The men were armed with two caliber .45 pistols and a .38 revolver. None of the men wore any masks.[8]

Co told the men that if they wanted money, they could get it from the store. The men refused to get money from the store. Without any warning, one of the men's guns went off. When Manaysay heard the shot, she came out and asked the men what they wanted. She told them that they could get money from the store, but they refused to do so.[9] Instead, complainants were made to board the rear of the Tamaraw FX.[10] Two of the men's companions were already seated in the front seat. The man in the driver's seat asked Co for the key to the vehicle.[11] The three other men also boarded the vehicle with the complainants. Co identified accused-appellant Roderick Licayan as one of his five abductors.[12]

Co said their hands were tied and their eyes taped, and that they were made to wear caps over their heads as the vehicle reached Quezon Avenue in Quezon City.[13] After 45 minutes, Co said he felt the vehicle stop. The rear door was opened and he heard the voices of people approaching the vehicle.

Complainants were brought inside a room of a house made of light materials and which had no ceiling.[14] They were made to sit on the floor.[15] Then, they were transferred to another room where the covers of their eyes were removed and their feet were tied. Manaysay testified that she saw accused-appellants in the house after the masking tape was removed from their eyes.[16] Co's wallet which contained P5,000.00 in cash and his watch and Manaysay's necklace and earrings were taken from them.[17] A person was left to guard them inside the room, whom both complainants identified as accused-appellant Roberto Lara.[18]

After about two hours, Manaysay told Co that she wanted to urinate. Hence, Co asked their guard if Manaysay could go outside to do it.[19] The guard left and came back with a half-gallon container which he gave Manaysay to urinate in.

Co tried talking to the guard and pleaded with him to let tem go. But the guard replied that he was just following orders. Co offered him some money which he had, but the guard did not accept the money and instead threw it away.[20]

The guard later fell asleep and Co and Manaysay somehow managed to escape without being noticed by the look-out outside their room.[21] After running for several meters, complainants took refuge in a house. An old woman living in the house allowed them to use the telephone from which Co was able to call the Marikina Police

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Headquarters.[22] The woman told them that they were in Kaolin St., Twinriver Subdivision, Parang, Marikina.[23] Two police officers from the Marikina police arrived, followed by a police SWAT team.[24] Complainants' case was later turned over to the Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Task Force (PAOCTF) for investigation.[25]

On August 11, 1998, at around 6:30 p.m., members of the PAOCTF raided the safehouse at Daang Bakal, Parang, Marikina where Co and Manaysay had been held captive.[26] A man seen running away was arrested by SPO3 Ismael Fajardo Jr.[27] Upon being questioned, the man identified himself as accused-appellant Roberto Lara.[28] SPO3 Fajardo identified accused-appellant Lara from photographs shown to him in court as the man he arrested.[29] Lara pointed to accused-appellant Licayan as one of his companions and told the PAOCTF members that Lara was hiding in his (Lara's) uncle's house at the back of the San Mateo Rizal Municipal Hall. The PAOCTF members thereafter proceeded to the house and were able to arrest accused-appellant Licayan.[30]

Lara and Licayan were thereafter brought to the PAOCTF headquarters in Camp Crame where they were identified by Co and Manaysay in a line-up consisting of Lara, Licayan, and eight PAOCTF members.[31]

Benjamin Co, complainant Joseph Thomas Co's brother, testified that he was twice called in his office by unidentified persons who demanded P10 million for the release of complainants.[32] The kidnappers were of course frustrated as complainants were able to escape.

Accused-appellants' defense is alibi. Accused-appellant Licayan claimed that on August 11, 1998, at around 7:00 p.m., he was at home in Sta. Cecilia Village, San Mateo Rizal, having dinner with Nicolas Salvivia, a dump truck driver;[33] that on the next day, August 12, 1998, he was arrested by members of the PAOCTF while he was having drinks with Salvivia and Salvivia's father at the latter's residence in Sta. Cecilia Village;[34] and that when he was arrested, he was not informed of the charges against him. He said he only learned that he was arrested for the kidnapping of complainants after he had been brought to Camp Crame.[35]

In Camp Crame, he and his co-accused were handcuffed and made to stand in a police-line up. They were not assisted by counsel.[36] The complainants pointed to him and Lara as part of the group who kidnapped complainants.[37] Licayan claimed he only saw complainant Co for the first time when he (Licayan) was brought to Camp Crame.[38]

On the other hand, accused-appellant Lara, a construction worker, testified that from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. of August 10, 1998, he was in his place of work in Antipolo.[39] At 7:00 a.m. of August 11, 1999, he went home to Novaliches, stopping by the house of his uncle, Pedro Mabansag, in Parang, Marikina. Mabansag had driven Lara's family out of his house and Lara had gone there to get his child's belongings.[40] However, before he could do so, he was arrested by the Marikina Police at Greenheights.[41]

Lara wanted to ask his cousin Nicolas Salvivia for help.[42] The police beat him up and told him that they would go to Salvivia's house. He was made to board a van where his head was covered with a plastic bag and he was again beaten up.[43] The police found Salvivia and Licayan in Salvivia's house and ordered the two to drop to the ground.[44] The police poked a gun to Lara's head and told him to identify his companions, otherwise he would be killed. Thus, according to Lara, he pointed to Licayan.[45]

Lara claimed that at Camp Crame, after he and Licayan were identified by complainants in a police line-up, they were forced to sign a statement.[46] They were not informed of their right to remain silent and to be assisted by counsel.[47] Lara denied that Atty. Confesor B. Sansano, who appeared to have assisted him in making his statement, actually assisted him.[48]

After trial, the Regional Trial Court, Branch 272, Marikina City, rendered its decision acquitting

accused-appellants of robbery but convicting them of kidnapping and sentencing them to death and to pay damages to complainants. The dispositive portion of its decision states:

> "WHEREFORE, judgment is hereby rendered finding RODERICK LICAYAN and ROBERTO LARA GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt for the crime of Kidnapping for Ransom penalized under Article 267 of the Revised Penal Code in relation to R.A. 7659, and imposing upon both of them the penalty of death by lethal injection and the solidary payment to each of the victims the amount of One Hundred Thousand (P100,000.00) Pesos as moral and exemplary damages and an additional amount of Twenty Thousand (P20,000.00) Pesos for Joseph Co as actual damages for the valuables taken from him. However, both accused are acquitted for the crime of robbery for the reasons previously discussed in keeping with the constitutional presumption of innocence of any man whose guilt is not within the standard of moral certainty. The cases against the other accused Pedro Mabansag @ Tata Pandak, Jose Sajorgo, Allan Placio, Noel Delos Reyes, Dodong Adolfo and Benjie Mabansag who all remain at large are ordered archived and let alias warrants for their arrest be issued."

Hence, this appeal. Accused-appellants contend that -

> "I.
>
> THE COURT A QUO GRAVELY ERRED IN GIVING FULL CREDENCE TO THE TESTIMONIES OF PROSECUTION WITNESSES DESPITE THE MANIFEST INCONSISTENCIES IN THEIR TESTIMONIES.
>
> "II.
>
> THE COURT A QUO GRAVELY ERRED IN NOT RULING THAT THE ACCUSED APPELLANTS WERE ILLEGALLY ARRESTED, AND THE CIRCUMSTANCES UNDER WHICH THEY WERE ARRESTED DO NOT FALL UNDER THE WARRANTLESS ARREST.
>
> "III.
>
> ASSUMING IN ARGUENDO THAT THE ACCUSED-APPELLANTS ARE GUILTY, THE COURT A QUO GRAVELY ERRED IN FINDING THAT THE ACCUSED-APPELLANTS ACTED IN CONSPIRACY WITH THE OTHER CO-ACCUSED AND IN NOT FINDING THAT THE ACCUSED-APPELLANTS' PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMISSION OF THE CRIME AS MERE ACCOMPLICES."

The Court finds the appeal to be without merit.

First. As in all criminal cases where conviction or acquittal depends almost entirely on the victim's positive identification of the culprit, the basic issue presented in the case at bar deals with the credibility of the complainants. For this purpose, the assessment of the evidence by the trial court is given the highest degree of respect because of the judge's opportunity to observe directly the demeanor of the witnesses on the stand.[49]

Accused-appellants make much of complainants' failure to remember the physical features and characteristics of their abductors. The following testimony on cross-examination of complainant Joseph Tomas Co is cited:

> "ATTY. LARACAS:
>
> You were not able... Mr. Witness, the person who investigated you did not require you to prepare any sketch of these three persons who were in front of you at the FX?
>
> WITNESS:
>
> No ma'am.
>
> ATTY. LARACAS:

Because you cannot very recall what their faces?

WITNESS:

No ma'am.

xx xx xx xx

ATTY. LARACAS:

Now, Mr. Witness, you were seated at the rar (rear[sic]) portion of the FX, you cannot see the faces of the person driving the FX and that man seated at the front portion.

WITNESS:

Yes ma'am."[50]

With respect to complainant Manaysay, the following portion of her answer on cross-examination is cited:

"ATTY. LARRACAS:

Of course, Madam Witness when you were seated at the place where you said you were seated, you cannot see the faces of the persons at the two section of the FX?

A:

The person in front of us I was able to see, ma'am.

Q:

The person who you saw which you said was seated in front of at the back of FX is not of the two persons who are inside the courtroom?

A:

None, ma'am.

xx xx xx xx

Q:

So Madam Witness, you said that there was a curtain which separates the room and the curtain was always spread out during that time that you were inside?

A:

Yes, ma'am.

ATTY. LARRACAS:

Q:

So you did not see the faces of the persons outside that curtain?

A:

Just their feet ma'am."[51]

Whether or nor complainants saw the faces of any or all the abductors while they were inside the vehicle is immaterial. What is important is that complainants positively identified accused-appellants as among those who

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abducted them on August 10, 1998. Complainant Co said that accused-appellant Lara guarded them in the kidnappers' safehouse on August 10, 1998, while Licayan guarded them the next day, August 11, 1998.[52] In the police line-up conducted on the same day that complainants escaped, complainant Co was able to identify and point to accused-appellants as part of the group of men who took part in their kidnapping.[53] On the other hand, complainant Manaysay positively identified accused-appellant Licayan as one of two persons she saw when the tapes placed over their eyes were removed in the safehouse.[54] Like Co, she identified accused-appellant Lara as the person who guarded them in their room when they first arrived there and as the person who brought her a half-gallon container in response to her request to go out so she could urinate.[55] She said she and Co tried to offer accused-appellant Lara money to help them escape, but he refused the money and threw it away.[56] And like Co, Linda Manaysay was also able to identify and point to accused-appellants during the police line-up in Camp Crame as their abductors.[57]

Having heard the witnesses themselves and observed their deportment and manner of testifying,[58] the trial court had reason to declare:

> "[Complainants'] assertions as to the identities of the accused were made in a clear straightforward and frank manner and their testimonies are compatible on material points and should be respected considering the lengthy visible exposure of the accused to the victims from the time of the kidnapping and up to the time of their escape x x x"[59]

In the light of complainants' positive identification of accused-appellants, the latter's defense of alibi must fail. Alibi is an inherently weak defense and must be rejected when the accused's identity is satisfactorily and categorically established by the eyewitnesses to the offense,[60] especially when there is no showing that such eyewitnesses had any improper motive to testify falsely.[61] In the case at bar, the defense failed to show that Co and Manaysay were motivated by ill will in testifying against accused-appellants. It is noteworthy that accused-appellants' self-serving testimonies were not corroborated by other witnesses.

Second. Accused-appellants contend that their arrest was illegal because the arresting officers had no personal knowledge that accused-appellants had committed a crime. Their arrest, according to accused-appellants, was based only on the information given by complainants.[62] Accused-appellants argue that their warrantless arrest does not fall under any of the cases enumerated in Section 5, Rule 113 of the Revised Rules of Criminal Procedure under which warrantless arrests may validly be made. In addition, accused-appellants claim that after their arrest, they were already under custodial investigation and, therefore, should have been informed of their constitutional rights, which the arresting officers did not do.

We likewise find no merit in this contention.

Upon arraignment, accused-appellants pleaded not guilty without moving to quash the information on the ground that their arrest was invalid. Accused-appellants are, therefore, estopped from questioning the legality of their arrest. Any irregularity attendant to accused-appellants' arrest was cured when they voluntarily submitted to the jurisdiction of the trial court by entering a plea of not guilty and participating in the trial.[63]

Anent the claim that they were not assisted by counsel during their custodial investigation, suffice it to say that the trial court held:

> "Further, the admission of participation in the commission of the crime by accused Roberto Lara was made voluntarily, as attested by counsel de officio who legally assisted him in giving his sworn statement at the office of the latter, has shown compliance with the constitutional requirements on pre-interrogation advisories. Albeit an extra-judicial confession is admissible only against the confessant, jurisprudence makes it admissible as corroborative evidence of other facts that tend to establish the guilt of the co-accused (People vs. Suarez,

267 SCRA 119).”[64]

Third. Accused-appellants contend that even assuming that the prosecution’s version of the facts is true, they can only be found guilty as accomplices to the crime[65] because the record does not clearly show that they acted in conspiracy with the other accused. They maintain that it was never shown that they directly conspired in abducting the complainants nor that they were the ones who called and demanded ransom from Benjamin Co. Accused-appellants assert that, if at all, their participation was limited only to their act of guarding the victims in the safehouse. They are mere accomplices since there is no showing that they knew beforehand the criminal design of their co-accused.

This argument must be rejected.

Conspiracy can be inferred from and proven by acts of the accused themselves when said acts point to a joint purpose and design, concerted action, and community of interests.[66] Although the same degree of proof required for establishing the crime is required to support a finding of the presence of conspiracy, it need not be proven by direct evidence. Conspiracy may be deduced from the mode and manner in which the offense was perpetrated.[67] In the instant case, the trial court correctly held that conspiracy can be deduced from the acts of accused-appellant and their co-accused which show a concerted action and community of interest. By guarding Co and Manaysay and preventing their escape, accused-appellants exhibited not only their knowledge of the criminal design of their co-conspirators but also their participation in its execution.

Article 267 of the Revised Penal Code, as amended by R.A. 7659, imposes the penalty of death if the person kidnapped is a female or if the crime was committed for the purpose of extorting ransom from the victim or any other person. These circumstances being present in this case, the crime proven to have been committed by accused-appellants is kidnapping for ransom.

Four (4) Justices of the Court maintain their position that R.A. 7659 is unconstitutional insofar as it prescribes the death penalty; nevertheless, they submit to the ruling of the majority that the law is constitutional and the death penalty can be lawfully imposed in the case at bar.

As already stated, the trial court ordered accused-appellants to pay jointly and severally each of the complainants the amount of P100,000.00 as moral and exemplary damages without specifying the amount of each item of damages.

An award in the amount of P50,000.00 as moral damages to each of the complainants is proper, consistent with the current case law.[68] However, no award of exemplary damages can be made considering the absence of aggravating circumstances.[69] Under Art. 2230 of the Civil Code, exemplary damages in criminal offenses may be made only when the crime is committed with one or more aggravating circumstances. The award of actual damages in this case should likewise be disallowed. Actual damages must be proved with certainty and cannot be presumed. No evidence to sustain this award has been presented in this case.

WHEREFORE, the decision of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 272, Marikina City finding accused-appellant RODERICK LICAYAN and ROBERTO LARA guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of Kidnapping for Ransom and sentencing each of them to death is AFFIRMED with the MODIFICATION that each of the accused-appellants is ORDERED to pay P50,000.00 as moral damages to each of the complainants. The award of P20,000.00 as actual damages made in favor of complainant Joseph Co is deleted. Costs against accused-appellants.

In accordance with Section 25 of R.A. 7659, amending Art. 83 of the Revised Penal Code, upon the finality of this decision, let the records of this case be forthwith forwarded to the President of the Philippines for the possible

exercise of the pardoning power.

SO ORDERED.

Davide, Jr., C.J., Bellosillo, Melo, Puno, Vitug, Kapunan, Mendoza, Panganiban, Quisumbing, Pardo, Buena, Gonzaga-Reyes, Ynares-Santiago, De Leon, Jr., and Gutierrez, JJ., concur.

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[1] Per Judge Reuben P. De la Cruz.

[2] Rollo, pp. 4-5.

[3] Id. at 89.

[4] TSN, June 2, 1999, p. 5.

[5] Id. at 10

[6] Id. at 7.

[7] Id. at 7-9.

[8] Id. at 18-20.

[9] Id. at 21-24. Id. at 25.

[10] Id. at 25.

[11] Id. at 26.

[12] Id. at 30-32.

[13] Id. at 155; TSN, June 7, 1999, p. 85.

[14] TSN, June 2, 1999, p. 44.

[15] Id. at 37; TSN, June 7, 1999, p. 27.

[16] TSN, June 7, 1999, pp. 30-32.

[17] TSN, June 2, 1999, pp. 39-42; TSN, June 7, 1999, p. 28.

[18] Id. at pp. 50-56; Id. at 36-37.

[19] TSN, June 2, 1999, pp. 47-48.

[20] Id. at 61-64.

[21] Id. at 110-113.

[22] Id. at 116-117.

[23] Id. at 118.

[24] Id. at 118-120.

[25] TSN, June 2, 1999, p. 122.

[26] TSN, June 21, 1999, pp. 25-26.

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[27] Id. at 30.

[28] Id. at 38-39.

[29] Id. at 40-41.

[30] TSN, June 8, 1999, p. 14.

[31] Id. at 15-16.

[32] TSN, June 7, 1999, pp. 100-102, 104.

[33] TSN, June 23, 1999, pp. 5-6.

[34] Id. at 11.

[35] Id. at 14.

[36] Id. at 40-41; TSN, June 29, 1999, pp. 27, 29.

[37] TSN, June 29, 1999, pp. 30-31.

[38] Id. at 33-34.

[39] Id. at 8-9.

[40] Id. at 9-10.

[41] Id. at 12.

[42] Id. at 20-21.

[43] Id. at 13-14, 18-19.

[44] Id. at 22-23.

[45] Id. at 22-23.

[46] Id. at 46-47.

[47] Id. at 60-63.

[48] Id. at 59-60.

[49] People vs. Domasian, 219 SCRA 245 (1993).

[50] TSN, June 2, 1999, pp. 159-160.

[51] TSN, June 7, 1999, pp. 84, 87-88.

[52] Id. at 109-110.

[53] Id. at 132-134.

[54] TSN, June 7, 1999, pp. 32-34.

[55] Id. at 36-37, 30.

[56] Id. at 40, 43-44.

[57] TSN, June 8, 1999, p. 16.

[58] See People vs. Samson, 244 SCRA 146 (1995).

[59] Decision of the Trial Court, p. 25, Rollo, p. 113.

[60] People vs. Araneta, 298 SCRA 337 (1998).

[61] Id.

[62] Brief for the Accused-Appellants, p. 21; Rollo, p. 78.

[63] See People vs. De Guzman, 224 SCRA 93 (1993;) See also. People vs. Samson, 244 SCRA 147 1995).

[64] Decision, p. 25, Rollo, p. 112.

[65] Brief for Accused-Appellants, p. 28; Rollo, p. 83.

[66] People vs. Domasian, 219 SCRA 245, 254-255 (1993).

[67] People vs. De Guzman, 224 SCRA 93, 101-102 (1993) citing People vs. Oglipay, 66 SCRA 210 (1975) and People vs. Alonzo, 73 SCRA 484 (1976).

[68] People vs. Salido, 258 SCRA 291 (1996); People vs. Pavillare and Dantos, G.R. No. 129970, April 5, 2000.

[69] See People vs. Salimbago, 314 SCRA 282 (1999); People vs. Ramos, 297 SCRA 618 (1988).

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