

FIRST DIVISION

[G.R. No. 150707, April 14, 2004]

APOLONIA LL. OCAMPO NOW SUBSTITUTED BY MARIANO O. QUIEN, AMELITA Q. TAN, MILOVAN O. QUIEN, LUISA OCAMPO-LLORIN, MELITA F. OCAMPO, FELIX OCAMPO JR., RAMON OCAMPO, MIGUEL OCAMPO, JUANA OCAMPO, ANDRES OCAMPO SR., VIOLETA OCAMPO, MERCEDITA OCAMPO, ANTONIA OCAMPO, ELISA OCAMPO, BEATRIZ OCAMPO, JUAN JOHNNY OCAMPO, JONAS OCAMPO, MARIA DOLORES OCAMPO, REBECCA OCAMPO, FIDELA OCAMPO, LUIS OCAMPO JR. AND ERNESTO O. FORTUNO, PETITIONERS, VS. FIDELA LL. OCAMPO, FELICIDAD LL. OCAMPO, BELEN OCAMPO-BARRITO, VICENTE BARRITO, NEMESIO LL. OCAMPO, IMELDA OCAMPO AND JOSE OCAMPO, RESPONDENTS.

D E C I S I O N

PANGANIBAN, J.:

Basic is the rule that the party making an allegation in a civil case has the burden of proving it by a preponderance of evidence. In an action involving property, petitioners should rely on the strength of their own title and not on the alleged weakness of respondents' claim.

The Case

Before this Court is a Petition for Review^[1] under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court, assailing the October 31, 2001 Decision^[2] of the Court of Appeals (CA) in CA-GR CV No. 56941. The decretal portion of the Decision reads as follows:

"WHEREFORE, with the sole modification that the awards for damages and attorney's fees are hereby deleted, the judgment appealed from is, in all other respects, **AFFIRMED.** Without costs."^[3]

The CA affirmed the Regional Trial Court (RTC) Decision,^[4] rendered on October 30, 1996, which decreed thus:

"WHEREFORE, premises considered, the Court finds, holds and declares that defendant Belen Ocampo-Barrito, married to Vicente Barrito, are the true and lawful exclusive owners of the following properties, namely:

- (a) A parcel of residential/commercial land situated in the poblacion of Nabua, Camarines Sur, bounded on the NE by Carmen Ocampo and Alberto Espiritu, on the SE by the Burgos Street, on the SW by a street, and on the NW by Julian Ocampo and Carmen Ocampo, containing an area of 1,119 square meters, more or less, presently covered by TCT No.

13654 in the name of Belen Ocampo-Barrito, married to Vicente Barrito and previously covered by TCT No. RT-4389(983) in the name of Fidela Ocampo, declared under TD No. 18856 and assessed at P17,240.00.

(b) A parcel of residential land situated at San Luis, Nabua, Camarines Sur, bounded on the North and East by a barrio road, on the South by a creek, and on the West by Lot 237, with an area of about 300 square meters, declared under TD No. 19639 with an assessed value of P6,240.00.

(c) A parcel of land situated at Sto. Domingo, Nabua, Camarines Sur, bounded on the North by Lot 10323, on the East by Lot 9543, on the South by Lot 10325, and on the West by Lot 10322, with an area of about 4884 square meters, declared under TD No. 35122 and assessed at P6780.00

as described and referred to in paragraph 9, sub-paragraphs (a), (b) and (c) of the original complaint and it is hereby ordered that:

1. The complaint and supplemental complaint are dismissed for failure of the plaintiffs to prove their cause/causes of action by preponderance of evidence and on the added ground of prescription;
2. The plaintiffs are ordered to pay as their joint and several obligation, to defendants Fidela Ll. Ocampo, Belen Ocampo-Barrito and Vicente Barrito, the total sum of P15,000.00 for attorney's fees and other expenses of litigation and P50,000.00 for moral damages;
3. The plaintiffs jointly and severally pay the cost of this suit.
4. Upon the finality of this decision, the notice of lis pendens annotated at plaintiffs' behest in the Certificates of Title covering the properties in question, of defendants be cancelled; and the plaintiffs, their agents and representatives as well as successors-in-interest are ordered to respect the right of ownership of said defendants thereto, and to vacate and restore the lawful possession of all portions of said properties to herein defendants, their agents, representatives and successors-in-interest."^[5]

The Facts

The CA adopted the RTC's summation of facts as follows:

"Notwithstanding its somewhat deficient grammar and syntax, the following summation of the relevant and material antecedents of the case by the court a quo, is substantially correct --

'This is a civil suit for partition and damages filed by plaintiffs against the defendants.

'The complaint alleges that during the lifetime of the spouses Jose Ocampo and Juana Llander-Ocampo, they begot ten (10) children, namely: Fidela, Felix, Andres, Nemesio, Jose, Apolonia, Felicidad, Luisa, Rosario, and Luis. Of the aforementioned children, the following are already dead, namely: Felix, who is survived by his widow, Melita F. Ocampo and children Felix, Jr., Ramon and Miguel; Andres, who is survived by Juana Ocampo and children Jose, Andres, Imelda, Violeta and Mercedita; Jose, who is survived by his children Antonia, Elias and Juan (Johnny); Rosario, who is survived by Ernesto O. Fortuno; Luis, who is survived by his children Rose, Ricardo, Jonas, Maria Dolores, Rebecca, Fidela and Luis, Jr.; and Luisa, who is survived by Carlos Llorin and children Mecita, Manuel, Carlos, Jr., Carmelita and Marilou L. Arellano.

'The complaint further alleges that during the lifetime of the spouses Jose Ocampo and Luisa Llander-Ocampo, they acquired several parcels of land and, upon their death, left the following properties, namely:

(a) A parcel of residential/ commercial land situated in the poblacion of Nabua, Camarines Sur, bounded on the NE by Carmen Ocampo and Alberto Espiritu, on the SE by the Burgos Street, on the SW by a Street, and on the NW by Julian Ocampo and Carmen Ocampo, containing an area of 1,119 square meters, more or less, presently covered by TCT No. RT-4389(983) in the name of Fidela Ocampo, declared under TD No. 18856 and assessed at P17,240.00;

(b) A parcel of residential land situated at San Luis, Nabua, Camarines Sur, bounded on the North and East by a barrio road, on the South by a creek, and on the West by Lot 237, with an area of about 300 square meters, declared under TD No. 19639 with an assessed value of P6,240.00; and

(c) A parcel of land situated at Sto. Domingo, Nabua, Camarines Sur, bounded on the North by Lot 10323, on the East by Lot 9543, on the South by Lot 10325, and on the West by Lot 10322, with an area of about 4,884 square meters, declared under TD No. 35122 and assessed at P6,780.00.

'that all the above named parcels of land are actually owned in common by the children of the late spouses Jose Ocampo and Juana Llander Ocampo although the land denominated as parcel (a) of the complaint is ostensibly registered in the name of Fidela Ocampo alone but acknowledged by her as a property owned in common by all of them, brothers and sisters; that plaintiffs desire to partition said properties but defendants Fidela Ocampo and Felicidad unlawfully and unreasonably refuse to do so and moved by a common purpose, both of them mortgaged to the PNB the land denominated as parcel (a) of the complaint to secure the payment of a P110,000.00 loan, the proceeds of which were x x x exclusively to the benefit of said defendants only; that the same defendants Fidela Ocampo and Felicidad Ocampo have been receiving the fruits of the properties to the exclusion of their co-heirs amounting to not less than P2,000.00 a year; and, that because of their

relationship, they undertook earnest efforts to amicably settle this controversy but because of defendants Fidela Ocampo and Felicidad Ocampo[’s] utterly unreasonable and unjustified actuations, the same failed.

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’In their complaint, plaintiffs pray that judgment be rendered ordering the partition of the properties described in paragraph 9 of the complaint; ordering defendants Fidela Ocampo and Felicidad Ocampo, to release or otherwise cancel any and all encumbrances on TCT No. RT-4389(983) which they had caused to be annotated thereon, particularly, the mortgage in favor of the PNB; requiring Fidela Ocampo and Felicidad Ocampo to refrain from further encumbering said properties or otherwise subjecting the same to any lien and for that purpose, a writ of preliminary injunction to be issued against them to enjoin the commission of such acts; ordering defendants Fidela Ocampo and Felicidad Ocampo to submit an accounting of the fruits and other produce they had received from said properties; further ordering Fidela Ocampo and Felicidad Ocampo to indemnify plaintiffs the sum of not less than P15,000.00 by way of attorney’s fees and related expenses of litigation, plus the costs of the suit; and, further granting plaintiffs such other remedies as may be just and equitable in the premises.

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’On 17 December 1987, counsel for plaintiffs filed a Motion to Admit Supplemental Complaint dated 2 December 1987 which was granted by the Court as there was no opposition to it.

’The Supplemental Complaint alleges that defendants Helen Ocampo-Barrito and Vicente Barrito are spouses; that on 30 September 1987, TCT No. RT-4389(983) in the name of defendant Fidela Ocampo and covering the lot described as parcel (a) in paragraph 9 of the original complaint was cancelled and, in lieu thereof, TCT No. 1364 was issued to defendant Belen Ocampo-Barrito, married to defendant Vicente Barrito, on the strength of an allege[d] Deed of Donation Inter Vivos ostensibly executed by defendant Fidela Ll. Ocampo in their favor on 13 January 1984; that at the time the Deed of Donation Inter Vivos was presented for registration and when TCT No. 1364, Registry of Camarines Sur, was issued to defendant Belen Ocampo-Barrito, both the donor and donees were notoriously aware that said parcel of land was among the lots subject of this Civil Case No. IR-1867 of which the donor Fidela Ll. Ocampo and the mother of the donees, Felicidad Ll. Ocampo, are defendants, that said properties were owned by the Ocampo brothers and sisters, and that the donor Fidela Ll. Ocampo was not the exclusive owner thereof; that the transfer of defendants Fidela Ll. Ocampo and Belen Ocampo-Barrito of the ownership over said property now subject of this partition is tainted with fraud, actual and deliberate, to deprive plaintiffs of their legitimate share therein, knowing as they do that the same are a co-ownership of the original parties plaintiffs and defendants herein; that defendants Fidela Ll. Ocampo and the spouses Belen

Ocampo-Barrito and Vicente Barrito have not acted in good faith, deliberately causing damage and injury to the plaintiffs by their avaricious desire to obtain sole ownership of said properties through dubious and illegal means that the defendant spouses Belen Ocampo-Barrito and Vicente Barrito, through dubious means and undue influence over Fidela Ll. Ocampo, a very old spinster whom they have lately taken into their custody, succeeded in having the latter execute this supposed deed of donation inter vivos; that defendants have not acted with justice, honesty and good faith, causing injury to plaintiffs' rights in a manner inconsistent with morals and good customs, hence, are liable for moral damages of not less than P50,000.00; and that to set an example for the public good and to deter others similarly minded from doing so, defendants should be assessed exemplary damages of not less than P50,000.00.

'Plaintiffs pray that judgment be rendered (a) declaring the Deed of Donation Inter Vivos allegedly executed by Fidela Ll. Ocampo in favor of Belen Ocampo-Barrito and Vicente Barrito be declare[d] null and void, (b) ordering defendants Belen Ocampo-Barrito and Vicente Barrito to reconvey so much of the property subject thereof as pertain to the plaintiffs, (c) directing defendants, jointly and severally, to indemnify plaintiffs such amounts as this Honorable Court may consider fair and reasonable by way of actual, moral and exemplary damages, inclusive of attorney's fees and related expenses of litigation, and (d) granting plaintiffs such other remedies as may be just and equitable in the premises.

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'As Special Defenses, defendant Belen Ocampo-Barrito allege that the original defendant Fidela Ll. Ocampo, her predecessor-in-interest, since 1949 has been the absolute owner in fee simple of the property by virtue of the issuance of the certificate of title in her name; that her predecessor-in-interest held the same certificate of title to the same parcel of land (TCT No. RT-4389(983) free of all encumbrances and adverse claims and was in notorious, public, and actual possession of the property in concept of absolute owner from 1949 until 13 January 1984, when said predecessor-in-interest validly conveyed the property by donation inter vivos which she accepted in the same public instrument; that TCT No. 1364 was issued to defendant Belen Ocampo-Barrito on the strength of the donation inter vivos executed in her favor by her predecessor-in-interest and has since 30 September 1987, been the absolute owner thereof; that since 1949 none of the plaintiffs ever questioned the absolute ownership and title of defendant Belen Ocampo-Barrito's predecessor-in-interest over the property making the decree of registration incontrovertible; that it is fatal for plaintiffs' cause of action to allege that defendants exerted 'undue influence over Fidela Ll. Ocampo' for the latter to 'execute the deed of donation' while clearly admitting in both the original and supplemental complaints that defendants are residents of Mindoro Occidental a far away place from Nabua, Camarines Sur, the place where the same predecessor-in-interest admittedly resides; and, that Belen Ocampo-Barrito's title cannot be