

SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT OF MAINE

John P. Moyant v. Regina Petit et al.

2021 ME 13 (2021) · No. Pen-20-190 · Decided March 23, 2021

SUMMARY

The Maine Supreme Judicial Court affirmed dismissal of John P. Moyant’s complaint for lack of subject matter jurisdiction. The court held that the dispute involving a tribal member, the Passamaquoddy Tribe, and tribal land was an internal tribal matter under the Maine Implementing Act, applying the nonexclusive Akins factors. The court therefore did not reach the alternative tribal exhaustion issue.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Judicial Court of Maine
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Jabar, J.; Mead, J.; Gorman, J.; Humphrey, J.; Horton, J.
JURISDICTION	Maine
DECIDED	March 23, 2021
DOCKET	Pen-20-190
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Moyant appealed from the Superior Court's dismissal of his complaint for lack of subject matter jurisdiction under M.R. Civ. P. 12(b).
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviewed de novo the issue of statutory interpretation and the dismissal for lack of subject matter jurisdiction. In assessing subject matter jurisdiction, the court made no favorable inferences in favor of the plaintiff.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published precedential opinion
PARTIES	John P. Moyant v. Regina Petit, Passamaquoddy Tribe

TOPICS

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PRACTICE AREAS

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the dispute was an internal tribal matter within the tribal court's jurisdiction under 30 M.R.S. § 6206(1).
2. Whether the Akins factors should be applied when a dispute does not fit squarely within one of the examples of an internal tribal matter listed in section 6206(1).
3. Whether the Superior Court properly dismissed the complaint for lack of subject matter jurisdiction.

HOLDINGS

1. The dispute did not fit squarely within the section 6206(1) example concerning the right to reside because Moyant sought contractual, compensatory, equitable, and punitive damages, and resolution of the case did not require determining whether he could reside on tribal land.
2. The dispute was an internal tribal matter within the jurisdiction of the tribal court because, although Moyant's nonmember status weighed slightly against that conclusion, the remaining nonexclusive and nondispositive Akins factors supported it.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“These factors, “which are nonexclusive and nondispositive, include: (1) the effect on nontribal members, (2) & (3) the subject matter of the dispute, particularly when related to Indian lands or the harvesting of natural resources on Indian lands, (4) the interest of the State of Maine, and (5) prior legal understandings.”” (¶ 12)

“Tribal jurisdiction does not disappear simply because a person who is not a member of the Tribe is involved in a dispute, especially when the action is against the Tribe and a tribal member concerning tribal land.” (¶ 14)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Harry Fry, a nonmember of the Passamaquoddy Tribe, entered into a one-year campsite lease for property on tribal land in 1983. Fry transferred the lease to Regina Petit, a tribal member, in 2011, and the Tribe formally approved the transfer in 2012. John Moyant, a nonmember, had visited the property, made improvements, and stored belongings there, but Petit later told him he could not return. After Moyant threatened to break into the camp, the Passamaquoddy Tribal Police Chief served him with a no-trespass notice.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Moyant filed a four-count complaint in the Penobscot County Superior Court against Regina Petit and the Passamaquoddy Tribe, asserting claims involving an alleged lease interest, misrepresentation, conversion, and unjust enrichment. The defendants moved to dismiss for lack of subject matter jurisdiction, arguing that the dispute was an internal tribal matter and, alternatively, that tribal exhaustion applied. The Superior Court concluded that the dispute was an internal tribal matter under the Akins factors, dismissed the complaint, and did not reach tribal exhaustion. The Supreme Judicial Court of Maine affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Davric Me. Corp. v. Bangor Historic Track, Inc., 2000 ME 102, ¶ 6, 751 A.2d 1024
- Tomer v. Me. Hum. Rts. Comm'n, 2008 ME 190, ¶ 9, 962 A.2d 335
- Akins v. Penobscot Nation, 130 F.3d 482, 486-87 (1st Cir. 1997)
- National Farmers Union Insurance Cos. v. Crow Tribe of Indians, 471 U.S. 845, 856-57 (1985)
- Mutty v. Department of Corrections, 2017 ME 7, ¶ 9, 153 A.3d 775
- Great Northern Paper, Inc. v. Penobscot Nation, 2001 ME 68, ¶ 14, 770 A.2d 574
- Francis v. Dana-Cummings, 2008 ME 184, ¶¶ 13-14, 962 A.2d 944
- In re Children of Mary J., 2019 ME 2, ¶¶ 11-15, 199 A.3d 231
- Francis v. Pleasant Point Passamaquoddy Housing Authority, 1999 ME 164, ¶ 8, 740 A.2d 575
- Santa Clara Pueblo v. Martinez, 436 U.S. 49, 65 (1978)
- Iowa Mutual Insurance Co. v. LaPlante, 480 U.S. 9, 18 (1987)
- Holland v. Sebunya, 2000 ME 160, ¶ 9 n.6, 759 A.2d 205

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

MAINE SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT Reporter of Decisions Decision: 2021 ME 13 Docket: Pen-20-190 Argued: February 11, 2021 Decided: March 23, 2021 Panel: MEAD, GORMAN, JABAR, HUMPHREY, and HORTON, JJ. JOHN P. MOYANT v. REGINA PETIT et al. JABAR, J. [¶1] John P. Moyant appeals from the judgment dismissing his complaint for lack of subject matter jurisdiction entered by the Superior Court (Penobscot County, A. Murray, J.).

See M.R. Civ. P. 12(b). On appeal, Moyant argues that the court erred in determining that his dispute with Regina Petit and the Passamaquoddy Tribe was an “internal tribal matter.” We disagree and we affirm the court’s judgment.

I. BACKGROUND A. Factual Background [¶2] The following facts were found by the Superior Court and are taken from the pleadings and from “material outside the pleadings submitted by the pleader and the movant.” Davric Me. Corp. v. Bangor Historic Track, Inc., 2000 2 ME 102, ¶ 6, 751 A.2d 1024 (quotation marks omitted).

We make no favorable inference in favor of Moyant. Tomer v. Me. Hum. Rts. Comm’n, 2008 ME 190, ¶ 9, 962 A.2d 335 (“Whether subject matter jurisdiction exists is a question of law that we review de novo.... [W]e make no favorable inferences in favor of the plaintiff.” (citations omitted)). [¶3] On November 1, 1983, Harry Fry, who is not a member of the Tribe, entered into a one-year “Campsite Lease” with the Tribe.

The camp was on Junior Lake, which is located on tribal land.¹ In 2011, Fry transferred his lease to Regina Petit, a member of the Tribe, and stated that he had no future interest in the property. In 2012, the Tribe formally approved this transfer.² In 2015, Fry died. [¶4] John Moyant, a resident of Florida who is not a member of the Tribe, visited the property, made improvements to the property, and stored personal belongings at the property beginning while Fry was alive and continuing through June 2017.

At some point Petit told Moyant that he was not allowed back on the property. In May 2017, Moyant wrote Petit a letter stating that he The lease names only Fry as the lessee and states, “Lessee shall not sublet, assign or transfer this 1 Lease or give or surrender possession of the leased premises without the prior written consent of Lessor.” ² In 1985, the Tribe passed a referendum that prohibited leasing of its tribal land to non-Indians.

³ would break into the camp if he was unable to get into the camp. In June 2017, Petit contacted the Chief of Police for the Passamaquoddy Tribe and caused Moyant to be served with a no-trespass notice. B. Procedural History [¶5] On February 8, 2019, Moyant filed a complaint in the Superior Court against Petit and the Tribe.³ Petit and the Tribe filed an answer alleging lack of subject matter jurisdiction because it was an “internal tribal matter,” and for Moyant’s failure to exhaust the tribal remedies. [¶6] On October 28, 2019, Petit and the Tribe filed a motion to dismiss the complaint for lack of subject matter jurisdiction, and filed affidavits and exhibits with the motion.

Petit and the Tribe argued that the action squarely implicates the “right to reside” on the land, which is enumerated as an example of an “internal tribal matter” in 30 M.R.S. § 6206(1) (2020). They argued alternatively that even if this action does not implicate the “right to reside” on tribal land, application of the factors announced in *Akins v. Penobscot Nation*, 130 F.3d 482, 486-87 (1st Cir.

1997), would still lead to the conclusion that the The complaint alleged four counts against both parties. Count 1 alleged that Moyant “was the ³ intended beneficiary of a lease entered into by mutual consent that [Petit and the Tribe] breached”; Count 2 alleged that Petit and the Tribe “intentionally misrepresented a material fact relating to the terms of termination of the lease”; Count 3 alleged that Petit and the Tribe “converted property of [Moyant] for their own use”; and Count 4 alleged that Moyant “conferred a benefit to [Petit and the Tribe]” for which he was not compensated.

⁴ action concerned “internal tribal matters.” Additionally, Petit and the Tribe argued that if the court decided that the action did not concern an “internal tribal matter,” then the tribal exhaustion doctrine would apply. See *Nat’l Farmers Union Ins. Cos. v. Crow Tribe of Indians*, 471 U.S. 845, 856-57 (1985). Moyant filed a response to the motion to dismiss and filed exhibits with the motions.

Petit and the Tribe filed a reply with attached exhibits and affidavits. [¶7] On February 20, 2020, the court held a hearing on the motion to dismiss, and on March 10, 2020, issued a written order granting Petit and the Tribe’s motion to dismiss for lack of subject matter jurisdiction, stating that the dispute “does not fall squarely within any of the enumerated examples of an ‘internal tribal matter’ in section 6206(1),” but that it does involve an “internal tribal matter” under the Akins test.

The court concluded that it was unnecessary to address the tribal exhaustion doctrine.⁴ Moyant timely appealed. See M.R. App. P. 2B(c)(1); 14 M.R.S. § 1851 (2020). ⁴ Moyant filed a motion to reconsider with attached exhibits and affidavits. Petit and the Tribe filed a reply to the motion, and Moyant filed a response to this reply.

The court denied the motion, stating that the arguments and the “evidence” included in the motion were arguments that Moyant already made or could have previously presented to the court and, alternatively, that the arguments were not convincing. Moyant did not raise this issue on appeal, and therefore any objection to this decision is not preserved. See *Holland v. Sebunya*, 2000 ME 160, ¶ 9 n.6, 759 A.2d 205 (“The failure to mention an issue in the brief or at argument is construed as either an abandonment or a failure to preserve that issue.”).

5 II. DISCUSSION A. Standard of Review [¶8] “We review de novo an issue of statutory interpretation and a dismissal for lack of jurisdiction.” *Mutty v. Dep’t of Corr.*, 2017 ME 7, ¶ 9, 153 A.3d 775; see also *Great N. Paper, Inc. v. Penobscot Nation*, 2001 ME 68, ¶ 14, 770 A.2d 574 (“Statutory construction is a question of law, and we review the Superior Court’s interpretation of the...

Maine Implementing Act de novo.”). B. 30 M.R.S. § 6206(1) [¶9] The Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act, Pub. L. No. 96-420, 94 Stat. 1785, and the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Implementing Act, 30 M.R.S. §§ 6201-6214 (2020), resulted from a settlement between the Passamaquoddy Tribe, the Penobscot Nation, and the State of Maine that, among other provisions, delineates areas of authority over Indian affairs.

Great N. Paper, Inc., 2001 ME 68, ¶¶ 18-41, 770 A.2d 574. Section 6206(1) of the Maine Implementing Act provides that if a dispute is an “internal tribal matter,” then it is within the tribal court’s jurisdiction. 30 M.R.S. § 6206(1). [¶10] The statute does not provide a definition of “internal tribal matter,” but does include a nonexhaustive list: membership in the respective tribe or nation, the right to reside within the respective Indian territories, tribal organization, tribal government, tribal elections and the use or disposition of settlement fund income shall not be subject to regulation by the State.

Id. (emphasis added); *Francis v. Dana-Cummings*, 2008 ME 184, ¶ 13, 962 A.2d 944.⁵ [¶11] We have reasoned that if a matter does not fit “squarely” within one of the statutory examples, then additional analysis is needed. *Francis*, 2008 ME 184, ¶ 14, 962 A.2d 944.

Although this dispute would not have originated if Moyant had not asserted that he had a “right to reside” on Passamaquoddy land, the relief he is seeking is “a judgment for contractual, compensatory, equitable and punitive damages.” Therefore, we agree with the trial court that this matter does not fit squarely within the “right to reside” on tribal land or any of the other examples in section 6206(1)’s list because this case does not require the court to determine if Moyant may reside on the land.

Id. (holding that when claims involved the “right to possession or ownership of a residence on tribal land, they [did] not involve [the plaintiff’s] right to reside within the Tribe’s territory”); *In re Children of Mary J.*, 2019 ME 2, ¶¶ 11-13, 199 A.3d 231. There are limits to this jurisdiction; for example, if the Tribe creates an entity pursuant to Maine state law, that business is not part of the Tribe as defined in the Implementing Act.

See *Francis v. Pleasant Point Passamaquoddy Hous. Auth.*, 1999 ME 164, ¶ 8, 740 A.2d 575. Contrary to Moyant’s assertions, however, this limitation is not applicable in this case. 7 (holding that when children were placed in a foster home outside the Tribe’s territory, the lower court and the Department of Health and Human services were not “attempting to regulate who may or may not reside within an Indian territory”).

We now determine whether the Akins factors apply to this dispute. C. Akins Factors [¶12] We have adopted the approach announced by the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit in *Akins* to determine if something is an “internal tribal matter” when a dispute does not fit squarely into section 6206(1)’s examples.

In re Children of Mary J., 2019 ME 2, ¶ 15, 199 A.3d 231; *Akins*, 130 F.3d at 486-87. These factors, “which are nonexclusive and nondispositive, include: (1) the effect on nontribal members, (2) & (3) the subject matter of the dispute, particularly when related to Indian lands or the harvesting of natural resources on Indian lands, (4) the interest of the State of Maine, and (5) prior legal understandings.” *In re Children of Mary J.*, 2019 ME 2, ¶ 15, 199 A.3d 231 (quotation marks omitted). [¶13] When the Akins factors are applied here, almost all of them support the determination that this dispute is an “internal tribal matter.” Although we agree with the court that Moyant’s status as a nonmember of the Tribe weighs 8 slightly toward a holding that the dispute is not an “internal tribal matter,” all other factors support the conclusion that it is an “internal tribal matter.” [¶14] Tribal jurisdiction does not disappear simply because a person who is not a member of the Tribe is involved in a dispute, especially when the action is against the Tribe and a tribal member concerning tribal land.

It is difficult to conceive of a more appropriate forum for this case than the tribal court. See *Santa Clara Pueblo v. Martinez*, 436 U.S. 49, 65 (1978) (“Tribal courts have repeatedly been recognized as appropriate forums for the exclusive adjudication of disputes affecting important personal and property interests of both Indians and non-Indians.”); *Iowa Mut.*

Ins. Co. v. LaPlante, 480 U.S. 9, 18 (1987) (“Tribal authority over the activities of non-Indians on reservation lands is an important part of tribal sovereignty.”). [¶15] The Superior Court did not err by determining that it lacked subject matter jurisdiction because the dispute was an “internal tribal matter.”⁶ The entry is: Judgment affirmed. ⁶ We do not need to address the tribal exhaustion doctrine because we are affirming the court’s decision to grant the motion to dismiss for lack of subject matter jurisdiction.

See Nat’l Farmers Union Ins. Cos. v. Crow Tribe of Indians, 471 U.S. 845, 857 (1985). ⁹ Eric G. Woodbury, Esq. (orally), Bucksport, and Bronson Stephens, Esq., Bucksport, for appellant John P. Moyant Kaighn Smith, Jr., Esq., and Michael-Corey F. Hinton, Esq. (orally), Drummond Woodsum, Portland, for appellees Regina Petit and the Passamaquoddy Tribe Penobscot County Superior Court docket number CV-2019-21 FOR CLERK REFERENCE ONLY