

## AN APPRAISAL OF THE CHILD RIGHTS ACT 2003 FROM THE SHARI'AH PERSPECTIVE

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### Introduction

The welfare of Nigerian children took a different dimension on 31<sup>st</sup> of July, 2003 when the then Nigeria President signed the Child Rights Act into law. The Child Rights Act, 2003 is an adopted baby of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter referred to as CRC) which came into force on November, 1989 (Augie, 1998). The CRC was brought within the scope of the peculiarity of African Child by virtue of The African Charter on The Rights & Welfare of The Child (hereafter referred to as CRWC) which was adopted by the African Union (then Organization of African Unity) in Ethiopia in July, 1990 (Augie, 1998).

Meanwhile, Nigeria as a State Party to the CRC ratified it on the 21<sup>st</sup> March, 1991, the CRWC in the year 2000 (Ladan, 2004) and finally made it an indigenous law on 31<sup>st</sup> of July, 2003 (UNICEF, no date).

It has however been touted since the passage of this legislative instruments that this would be the first time that the minors' are adequately recognized and sufficiently protected by the law.

Thus the aim of this paper is to examine and identify the core principles upon which the Child Rights Act 2003 was promulgated and swiftly appraise them using the microscopic view of the Shari'ah principles in order to show that the rights of the children nay human beings generally have been adequately provided for by the Shari'ah.

It is worthy of mention that space constraint did not allow us to write the Arabic text of our references.

### What is Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)?

The CRC is an international human rights treaty, which provides for universally accepted standards in relation to children's rights. This Convention was the result of extensive negotiations between the member states of the United Nations (UN) which took about 10 years to draft but was finally

unanimously accepted by the member states of the UN (UNICEF, no date).

According to the UNICEF (no date), the CRC has the goal of giving special attention to children and it operates as an umbrella for certain four (4) sets of rules on the protection of the rights of young persons:

- i. **The Beijing Rules:** adopted by the UN in China, in 1995. It was the first set of international rules to comprehensively detail standards for separate and specialized systems of juvenile justice administration.
- ii. **The Riyadh Guidelines:** adopted by the UN in order to provide a holistic approach to the prevention of juvenile delinquency.
- iii. **The Rules for the protection of juvenile deprived of their liberty:** adopted by the UN to counteract the detrimental effects of deprivation of liberty by ensuring respect for the rights of detainees particularly the young persons.
- iv. **The U.N. Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of prisoners:** This connection to the four sets of rules is very important since it lends weight to the rules which do not have the same binding status as the CRC.

Generally the key principles of the CRC are to protect the following rights of a child: (UNICEF, no date)

- i. Right to life
- ii. Right to survival and development
- iii. Right to protection and participation.

### The Child Rights Act, 2003

As a result of the various inadequacies found in the Children and Young Person Laws of various states and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 and other existing legal frameworks on the rights of the minors (UNICEF and FGN, 2001), the Nigerian Government was looking for a way to bring the Nigerian legislations into line with the CRC and

CRWC, hence, the accession to and passage of the Child Rights Act 2003 (Ladan, 2004).

This Act is a comprehensive legislation which, whilst enacting the principles of the CRC and the CRWC, also seeks to consolidate all laws relating to children and juveniles in Nigeria.

It should be noted that the Act is purposely aimed at (UNICEF, no date):

- i. Protection and promoting the well being of all children
- ii. Improving the quality of relationships between children and their families and communities.
- iii. Establishing, promoting and coordinating the use of services and facilities to improve the quality of children's lives.

Generally, the Child Rights Act, 2003 broadly covers the rights, duties and responsibilities of the child thus:

- i. It guarantees the best interest of the child to be the paramount consideration in all actions concerning the child (sections 1-2).
- ii. Provides for the parents, guardians etc to provide the necessary guidance, education and training for children in their care (sections 19 – 20).
- iii. It entrenches the fundamental rights of the child such as:
  - (a) survival and development (section 4)
  - (b) a name and registration at birth (section 5)
  - (c) freedom of association and peaceful assembly (section 6)
  - (d) freedom of thought, conscience and religion (section 7)
  - (e) private and family life (section 8)
  - (f) freedom of movement (section 9)
  - (g) freedom from discrimination (section 10)
  - (h) dignity of the child (section 11)
  - (i) leisure, recreation and cultural activities (section 12)
  - (j) health and health services (section 13)
  - (k) parental care, protection and maintenance (section 14)
  - (l) free, compulsory and universal basic education (section 15)
  - (m) protection of life, health and welfare of unborn child (section 17)

The Act further provides for and guarantees the protection of the children from:

- i. Children marriage (sections 21 – 23)
- ii. Infliction of tattoos and skin marks (section 24)

- iii. Exposure to use, production, trafficking, etc of drugs and psychotropic substances (section 25).
- iv. Use of children in criminal activities (section 26)
- v. Being bought, sold hired or otherwise dealt with for purpose of begging, prostitution or any other unlawful purpose (section 30).
- vi. Unlawful sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual abuse (sections 31 – 32)
- vii. Other forms of exploitation (section 33)
- viii. Recruitment into Army (section 34)

It has however been posited that the goal for promulgating the Child Rights Act is to improve the child's relationships with his/her family and community (Ladan, 2004) and to uphold Nigeria's commitment to the CRC, other international standards and its own constitution.

### Child Rights under Shari'ah

The ideals of child rights constitute one of the fundamental values of Islamic human rights. Generally speaking, the central elements of Islamic values are to protect human freedom against slavery and other forms of exploitation (Alanamu, 2009). According to Hassan (1996), the Qur'an is the Magna Carta of human rights and that a large part of its concern is to free human beings from the bondage of traditionalism, authoritarianism, tribalism, racism, sexism, or any thing that prohibits or inhibits human beings from actualizing the Qur'anic vision of human destiny embodied in the classic proclamation: "Towards Allah is thy limit" (Suratun-Najm, 53: 42).

Shari'ah recognizes the family as one of the most potent institution that enhances the Islamic ummah (community/society). Shari'ah as a comprehensive legal code addresses the issue of protection of children as well as the responsibility on the FAMILY, GOVERNMENT and SOCIETY. This responsibility is virtually synonymous from one arm to the other.

However, for the purpose of this paper, the rights of the child shall be discussed under four major groups thus:

1. Right to survival
2. Right to protection
3. Developmental Right
4. Participatory Right

**1) Right to survival:** These are the rights that ensure that the child is allowed to live and in a conducive livable environment. These rights include:

a) **The Right to life:** By virtue of section 4 of the CRA, the child has the right to live and survive in

order to enable him participate actively in the promotion of his rights. The section enjoins the Government to recognize this inherent right and develop policies/programmes for the child's survival and also protect this inalienable right of the child from harmful practices that may affect his life and growth (FMWYD, 1995).

Shari'ah is actually on all fours with this right as there are provisions in the Qur'an which provide for measures that ensure that the right of the child to live is duly guaranteed. Allah (Mighty be His name) said in the Qur'an thus:

*"Indeed lost are they who slay their children, from folly, without knowledge....They have indeed gone astray and heeded no guidance" (Suratul-An'am, 6 vs. 140).*

Allah also said in another verse thus:

*"Kill not your children because of poverty, we provide sustenance for you and for them..." (Suratul-An'am, 6:151).*

The same is also decreed in the Qur'an, suratul-Isrā'i, 17 vs 31.

All these are direct pointers to how much Shari'ah holds the sanctity of the child's life in the ultimate esteem and thus guarantees the right of the child to live.

#### b) Right to Health and Health Services:

According to the section 13 of the CRA, every child is entitled to enjoy good health by being protected from disease and given proper medical care for survival and growth. In pursuance of this, the government is enjoined to roll out measures by which this right can be effectively guaranteed. The parents are also enjoined to ensure that the child is given adequate medical attention which includes giving the child nutritious food, adequate breast feeding etc. They are also enjoined to avoid any traditional practices that may be harmful to the health of the child e.g. Tribal Marks. It also enjoins parents to practice family planning among others (FMWYD, 1995).

Shari'ah is also concordance with this aspect of right because it has been provided in the Qur'an that mothers must adequately breast feed their children. Allah said:

*"The mother shall give suck to their offspring for two whole years, for him who desires to complete the term...." (suratul-Baqarah, 2 vs. 233).*

However, under this right is also the right to protection of life, health and welfare of unborn child. And according to Zubair (1995) while enjoining the parents to avoid practices that will be harmful to the health of the child, the Prophet (S.A.W) was reported to have said:

*"Verily, Allah prohibited for you disobedience of mothers; infanticide of small girls...."*

The Islamic Fiqh Academy, an affiliate of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), while tackling the subject of the rights of the children made the following recommendations that are apposite to our present discourse. The Council of the Academy (Islamic Fiqh Academy, 2000) observed that:

- i. The Shari'ah dictates that it a duty (upon society and parents) to protect the foetus against any harm that may afflict it or its mother.
- ii. The child has the right to survival from the moment of conception; this right must not be abused by abortion.

#### 2) Right to Protection

These are the rights that ensure that the child is protected from being exposed or subjected to any activity or treatment that may be iniquitous to his well being and proper survival in life. These rights include the following:

a) **Protection against inhuman treatments:** Pursuant to the provisions of the CRA 2003, every child must be protected against all form of exploitation, indecent or degrading treatment including child labour, abuse and torture, sexual exploitation, sale, abduction and drug abuse etc. In a nutshell, the child must be guaranteed his right to dignity. It is therefore, the responsibility of the government to set out machineries that will prevent the child from being subjected to any of the above treatments. Meanwhile, it is the duty of the parents to monitor their children and protect those children from undergoing any form of exploitation or inhuman treatment either from themselves or any other persons.

These rights have already been catered for under the Shari'ah. This is because Allah has said:

*"Verily, We hath honoured the sons of Adam....and conferred on them special favours, above a great part of our creation" (suratul-Isrā'i, 17:70).*

This shows that the child's right to dignity is inherent and must not be deprived. Allah has provided in the Qur'an thus:

*"And give unto orphans their property and do not exchange (your) bad things for their good ones; and devour not their substance (by adding it) to your substance. Surely, this is a great sin" (suratun-Nisaa, 4:2).*

This is certainly admonition against exploiting the child particularly the orphans. But to adequately effect the sustenance of the child's right against exploitation, Allah then decreed thus:

*"Verily, those who unjustly eat up and property of orphans, they eat up only fire into their bellies, and they will be burnt in the blazing fire" (suratun-Nisaa, 4:10).*

Furthermore, the child must be protected against any indecent or degrading treatment. And this right has been distinctly safeguard in Shari'ah in different ways.

Firstly, Allah guides the sexual exploitation of a child by providing in the Qur'an that:

*"Nor come near to the unlawful sexual intercourse for it is an indecent deed and evil way" (suratul-Israi, 17:32).*

But to actually guard against this, Allah ordained that both believing man and woman

*"should lower their gaze and guard their modesty..." (suratun-Nur, 24:30-31).*

He however ordered in the same surah that:

*"The woman and the man guilty of illegal sexual intercourse, flog each of them with a hundred stripes..." (suratun-Nur, 24:2)*

Secondly, in guarding against child labour, abuse and torture, Shari'ah has vehemently kicked against recruiting children into Army. Allah said in the Qur'an that:

*"There is no blame for the blind, nor is there for the lame, nor is there blame for the sick (that they go not forth to war)" (suratul-Fath, 48:17).*

This verse by way of extensive application applies also to the young persons who fall in the same degree of incapability.

Thirdly, the child must be protected against drug abuse. That is why Allah has provided that:

*"...intoxicants and gambling...are an abomination of Satan's handwork: eschew such, that ye may prosper" (suratul-Maidah, 5:90).*

According to Al-Qardawi (2005) this verse was expatiated by the Prophet (S.A.W) when he said in his hadith that:

*Every intoxicant is khamr, and every khamr is haram (Sahih Muslim).*

He also admonished in another hadith that:

*"Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day must not sit at table which khamr (intoxicant) is consumed" (Ahmad and Tirmidhi)*

All these are targeted at protecting the child from being exposed to drug abuse.

Finally, Islam as a civilized religion frowns at the act of abducting and sale of children as slaves. Thus historically, Islam does not allow children to be attacked and taken as prisoners of war in any way. However, in protecting the best interest of the children, Islam provides that even where such children have been captured alongside their parents, necessary steps must be taken to quickly release them. Where a master fails to release them, Islam itself had laid down measures for their quick release, for example, as an atonement for accidental killing (suratun-Nisaa, 4:92); as one of the best form of charity (suratul-Balad, 90:12-13); as the first alternative for the payments of Zakat (suratul-Mujadilah, 58:3); marrying and emancipating female slaves and their off-spring (suratun-Nisaa, 4:3 and suratul-Muminun, 23:6) and an atonement for deliberate breaking of Ramadan fast (Bukhari 30:30). Also the Sunnah takes the act of child slavery as a prohibited act. While reiterating this position, the Islamic Council of United Kingdom (1981) made a Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights where in Article II, it declared that:

*"a) Man is born free. No inroads shall be made on his right to liberty except under the authority and in due process of the Law*

*b) Every individual and every people has the inalienable right to freedom in all its forms - physical, cultural, economic and political..."*

This declaration was made in accordance with the sayings of Caliph Umar as narrated by Bukhari and Muslim.

All these are to rid the human race of the menace of man owning man (including children) as slaves (Ambali, 2003).

### 3) Development Rights

These are the rights that positively develop the children and prepare them for a responsible life in the society and also to promote and develop their personality, talents, mental and physical potentials to the maximum for a positive enhancement of the societal norms and traditional values. These rights include the right to leisure and recreation and also right to education.

It is provided in section 15 of the CRA that every child is entitled to receive free and compulsory basic education and equal opportunity ability.

This is in accordance with the dictates of Shari'ah on the right of the child to education. Islam values education most that there are various authorities to the fact that the believers are enjoined to seek knowledge particularly at the younger age. The prophet was once reported to have said that educating a young person is like engraving a mark on a rock, that will remain indelible thereon forever.

Islam considers education as the greatest gift to a child. A hadith was reported in Madani's (1999) book thus:

*"No father has given his child a better gift than good morals"*  
(Tirmidhi; Ulwan, 2001).

Another hadith was reported in the same book thus:

*"It is undoubtedly better for a man to teach morals to his child than to give a measure of corn in charity."*

It should be noted that children are like clean slates, if they are not educated and trained in good morals, they only appear like human beings but their morals and habits are those of the brutes. As a result of this, Islam made it compulsory to educate all children thus:

*"Seeking knowledge is compulsory for all Muslim men and women."*

The importance of educating a child was captured in a hadith narrated by Imam Malik bn Anas in his Muwattaa:

*"Yahya related to me from Malik that he heard that Luqman al-Hakim made his will and counseled his son, saying, 'My son!*

*Sit with the learned men and keep close to them. Allah gives life to the hearts with the light of wisdom as Allah gives life to the dead earth with abundant rain of the sky'"* (Bewley, 1989).

All these show the esteem position in which Islam holds education. Islam considers right to education as the fulcrum for all other rights because it is the only one that would sensitize the children towards their rights, duties and responsibilities in the society.

It should be noted that the best education that could be given to the child is to educate him on the creed of Islam and good morals. Since the *Kalimatul shahadah* is the creed of Islam, then once a small child learns to speak, teach him to pronounce it even though the child has not yet reach the age of understanding (Ulwan, 2001). Also, as the child advances to the age of discretion, continue to instruct him in the beliefs of Islam. The reason for these is that if a child is not acquainted with the religious belief from childhood, he might adopt a different way when he grows up. The basis for this is found in a hadith cited by Madani (1999) that said:

*"It was a custom with the messenger of Allah (SAW) that whenever a child of the progeny of AbdulMuttalib started speaking, the Prophet (SAW) used to teach him the following verses: 'Say: Praise be to Allah, who begets no son, and has no partner in (His) dominion nor (needs) He any to protect Him from humiliation: Yea, magnify Him for His greatness and glory" (Abu Dawud).*

All these show how Islam extols education and holds it in high esteem that all other rights hinge on it.

Furthermore, the CRA provides that every child is entitled to adequate rest, recreation (leisure and play) appropriate to his/her age and culture. It further provides that the government should promote programmes that encourage the free and full participation of children in recreational activities. And the parents are also enjoined to encourage the children to participate in recreation and cultural activities and provide facilities for children to enjoy those rights.

Islam however also recognizes these rights in the sense that it gives time for each activity and in the course gives room for rest.

Islam has stated that no one should or would be overburdened with any work except there is a provision for rest. This can be inferred from the words of Almighty Allah in the Qur'an that:

*"On no soul doth Allah place a burden greater than it can bear..."*  
(suratul-Baqarah, 2 vs 286)

This is an indication that Islam will not apportion anybody with any assignment without a period of respite to enable the person engage in other activities that will be beneficial to his well being. Islam further still makes express provision for resting. An official period of rest is provided for us. Allah said;

*"And made your sleep for rest, and made the Night as a covering."*  
(suratun-Naba'a, 78 vs 9-10)

According to Ulwan (2001), it is known that the child grows up fond of playing, so, the parents must prepare places for him to play in and have fun, and give him access to sports clubs and swimming pools. If this is not done, the child would mix with bad peers and may go through a path of misery and perversion.

#### 4) Participatory Rights

These are the rights that enable the child relate with other members of the society, and at the same time allow the child partake in any decision making that will affect the child. These rights include his **right to parental care; right to identity and right to communicate.**

a) **Right to Identity:** This is one of the most important rights accruable to a child. It is the first right to which the child is entitled. It is the procurement of this right that integrates the child into the society and makes him identifiable there with. This is the right of the child to be given a befitting name and everything that goes with it. According to section 5 of the CRA, every child is entitled to a *Name, a Family and a Nationality*. This is hinged on the belief that a child can not just drop from heaven but must come through certain process. Also, every child has to be cared for by his/her parents.

Islam strongly recognizes this right and it is ordained that the parents must religiously enforce the right. Thus, Islamically, it is an important duty of the parents to give good names to their offspring and it is the right of the offspring to receive auspicious names from their parents (IslamOnline.net, 2004). It is said in a hadith that; "On the day of judgment, you will be called by your own names and the names of your fathers, Hence, give yourselves good names" (Abu Dawud). It is also on record that

the Prophet (SAW) disapproved of inauspicious names. Ulwan (2001) cited a hadith where Aishah, the prophet's wife reported:

*"The messenger of Allah (SAW) used to change the inauspicious names" (Tirmidhi)*

This particular right spells out the role of the family as an agent of socialization. On this, Madani (1999) cited a hadith where the Prophet (SAW) was reported to have recommended the following:

*"By the 8<sup>th</sup> day, the child should be given a good and pleasant name. His hair should be shaved along with other hygienic measures required for healthy growth. He should be made a festive occasion marked with joy and charity, at least, a ram or a ewe should be sacrificed and distributed among the poor".*

As he continues to grow, the Prophet urged the parents to demand that their children begin practicing the daily prayer at the age of 10 (Ulwan, 2001).

b) **Right to Parental care:** This is another important right. It should be noted that even where the parents give their child a befitting name but do not adequately cater for him, the child would lack the requisite care to get him started in life and become a nuisance in the society because there is nobody there for him to guide him in his actions. Islam has mandated the parents to adequately care for their children. That is one of the main objectives for prescribing two years as the "weaning period". Also, the *Nafaqah* (maintenance) of the child is put on the parents particularly the father. This point is based on the position of the father in the family and also on the hadith:

*"The child belongs to one on whose bed it is born"*

However, in order to further ensure a better parental care in the best interest of the child, Islam decreed that where the father and mother separate, the custody of the child should be given to the mother who has more time to spend with the child and not the father who may marries another wife and strive to satisfy her thence depriving the child due parental care.

It merits mention that the right to parental care includes right to communicate. It is the duty of parents to get around their children and try to understand their feelings. Islam wants their views to also be sought

perhaps there may be some reasons therein. That is why Allah said in the Qur'an that:

*"And consult them in the affair.  
Then when you have taken a  
decision, put your trust in Allah"*  
(suratu al-Mā'idah, 3:159).

### Conclusion

It would be observed that the main objective of the CRA is to improve the quality of relationships between children, their families and communities. Hence, now that the rights of the child have been provided for, the CRA 2003 further provides for the responsibilities of the child to both the family and the community. And by virtue of S.19 (2) of the CRA, the responsibilities of the child include the following:

- i. To work towards the cohesion of his family and community.
- ii. Respect his parents, superiors and elders at all times and assist them in case of need.
- iii. To contribute to the moral well being of the society.

And all these are also in tandem with the dictates of Shari'ah on the responsibilities of the family and society towards the child. However, on the first responsibility of the child, Allah said in the Qur'an thus;

*"And hold fast all together, by the  
Rope of Allah and be not divided  
among yourselves..."* (suratu al-Imran, 3:103)

This shows that it is the responsibility of every child to ensure that the pivot of his family remains intact and firm as it has been before him. Allah also enjoined that: "And render to the kindred their due rights" (suratul-A'raf, 17:26).

Another responsibility of the child is to respect his parents, superiors and elders at all times and assist them in case of need. This is in line with Allah's injunction in suratul-Isrāa, 17:23 thus;

*"Thy Lord hath decreed that ye  
worship none but Him, and that  
ye be kind to parents. Whether  
one or both of them attain old  
age in thy life. Say not to them a  
word of contempt, nor repel  
them but address them, in terms  
of honour"*

However, from all that has been mentioned, it is safe to conclude here that Islam is a perfect religion which has handed down to

us, a law which is second to none in perfection as Allah has said in suratul-Mā'idah, 5:3 that:  
*"This day have I perfected your  
religion for you, complete my  
favour upon, and have chosen  
for you Islam as your religion..."*

It also shows that Shari'ah is a universally comprehensive law, which must be generally adhered to by men. Allah has said concerning this in suratus-Sabā, 34:28 thus:  
*"We have not sent thee but as a  
(messenger) to all mankind,  
giving them glad tiding and  
warning them (against sin)..."*

All these are the reasons why Islam has not left any stone unturned in providing for the rights and responsibilities of the child right from the foetus stage till he becomes divinely independent of his parents.

Finally, it is therefore not out of place to conclude that it would amount to a gainsaying that the welfare of the Nigerian child changed for the better with the emergence of the Child Rights Act 2003 as postulated by some occidentalists. Rather the rights of the children have been imbued in the principles of Shari'ah that have been in operation since the creation of Prophet Adam.

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