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AFRICA/NIGERIA - The deep roots of the Boko Haram sect

Abuja (Agenzia Fides) - The Boko Haram sect, author of numerous attacks that have recently caused deaths and injuries in Nigeria, has its origins in the colonial and post-colonial history of the North African nation.
"Boko Haram" is translated as "Western education is prohibited". However, it is interesting to note that even within the Muslim community itself, there are conflicting notions as to what the word "Boko" means. Boko in fact was often used in relation to a second noun, Ilimi, meaning education. Thus, the full expression Ilimin Boko, was used to derogatorily refer to Western education as distinct from what the Muslim community, understood as the only form of education, namely, Ilimin Islamiyya, that is, Islamic education. Ilimin Islamiyya is a form of catechesis focused on the teachings of the Holy Quran, its recitation and memory, and is the entry point for children into the faith of Islam. Courses are taught in Arabic.
With the arrival of British colonization and the introduction of a Western educational system, a contrast between Ilimin Islamiyya and Ilimin Boko was created. The latter was considered inferior and suspect, because it did not teach about the Koran or Islam. Its teachers, alphabets and language of instruction was English. For the local Muslim elites therefore white people and their seemingly incomprehensible ways were often associated with witchcraft, Boka.
When the missionaries and the colonial state started a programme of education in northern Nigeria, the Muslim ruling classes remained restrained and suspicious of the intentions. For this reason they decided to experiment sending the children of the slaves and lower classes within their communities. It took a while before the ruling classes of the north began to appreciate the values of education as a tool of modernization and began to send their children to school. But the children of the first generation of Muslim elites who attended Western school, were often the object of derision by their own mates and friends.
This prejudice has persisted and for this is why Western education is categorized as Haram (forbidden). The suspicion of Western education is shown by the miserably low and embarrassing statistics of school enrolment all over the Northern states. Today, well over 80% of Muslim parents in the rural areas but also urban Northern states, still refuse to send their children to school to acquire western education. The situation of the girls is worse, perhaps, registering less than 10% of children of school age. Hordes of Muslim children who today roam the streets of Nigeria are graduates of the Islamiyya schools, under the tutlage of an itinerant teacher, Mallam. These children, with no job, are the lifeblood that feeds sects like the Boko Haram and other similar millenarian movements, occasionally popping in northern Nigeria.
Today, ordinary Muslims feel overwhelmed by the tornado of changes around them. Unable to access the tools of modernization, they have remained largely outside the loop of power. In the major cities of their states, almost all forms of activities are conducted by people they consider foreigners, almost all southern traders are almost all Christians. Their habits of alcohol intake, Christian festivals and adoption of a life style, has made ordinary Muslims nervous for the future of their families and their faith. The leader of Boko Haram took advantage of this situation by arguing that turning inwards away from external "contamination", and that we must return to a fully Islamic society, in order to face the weaknesses of the Nigerian state. (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 29/12/2011)

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