

Chapter I: The story of Ismaël

This is the incredible story of how the “black cloud” was expelled from a remote area of modern Cairo, by a young boy, Ismaël.

Ismaël was a boy of about 12 years old who lived with his parents and his grandmother in a small village in Upper Egypt (the south of the country). They were Coptic Christians. Egyptian Christians. The biggest part of Egypt’s population is Muslim, but there is a large minority of Coptic Christians. They form 10 to 15 per cent of the population. As you may imagine and as you probably have seen in the news repeatedly, the relationship between the two communities has never been an easy one.

There are those who say that everything what happened to Ismaël actually came from the ritual his community performed at Easter. In the Christian Coptic Orthodox Church, the night before Easter culminates in a ritual symbolizing resurrection. So all the lights in the church are put out and there is silence, deadly silence. This lasts for quite some time. And then suddenly the lights come back on, but brighter and stronger than before. The whole assembly starts to chant and dance – and they go on for hours and hours. And – just to let you know what some Muslims think about this ritual – they say that strange things take place during this moment in the dark: big sex orgies. It’s probably not true but I thought it was worth mentioning.

But let’s get back to Ismaël. He was brought up in a very religious family. Their traditional devotion was hiding some big problems in the family. The father was an alcoholic. He would be violent, beating his wife and Ismaël. The mother couldn’t cope with the situation anymore. She was looking for a way out. She wanted to divorce. But Coptic Christian women aren’t allowed to divorce. It was like that before and it is still a fact. It’s in the law. In Egypt, the only way for a Christian woman to divorce is to become a Muslim. So she went to the authorities declaring that she wanted to convert to Islam. She was standing there in front of these men. It is enough to say once the Shahada, the declaration of belief. So she said: *There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God.* And there she was, she had officially converted to Islam. Of course this was going to have big consequences on her future life: first of all it would lead to her being banished from the Coptic community but she could also be held captive by them or even lapidated.

Perhaps you remember it was a few years ago, it was before the fall of the Mubarak regime: two women who allegedly wanted to, or did, convert to Islam were held captive by Coptic Christians in a church in Cairo. A group of Salafists tried to enter into the church and liberate them. It led to street fights. Five dead and 75 wounded.

So the mother of Ismaël had to be very careful. After her conversion, in the middle of the night she fled the village with her only child and her elderly mother. They fled to Cairo.

There they were entrusted to a sheikh, an Islamic teacher. They were Muslim now. And they suddenly had to cope with life in this huge metropolis. They ended up in an area in the north of the city that was surrounded on all sides by very busy highways. It was like an island in the middle of a sea of cars. This was Bolak El Dakror, an area where the city's pollution problems had taken on dramatic proportions.

Indeed, the area had become famous for its black cloud. When it was hot, the whole area was plunged into a cloud of airborne particles emitted by traffic, industry and crop burning. On bad days it was like the sun hadn't come up as if it would remain as dark as the night all day. The whole city was suffering from this phenomenon but it was in Bolak El Dakror that the black cloud was thickest and most cruel to its inhabitants – they suffered chronic illnesses: children were born with asthma and the cancer rate was alarmingly high.

Let's imagine what a shock it must have been for the three newcomers coming straight from their fields and their tribal society. Ismaël's grandmother became ill almost instantly and had to remain in bed. And a few months after their arrival, his mother was run over by a car and killed. So there was Ismaël, alone in the big city with a sick grandmother. The sheikh had helped him a lot and was doing his best to complete the boy's Islamic education. Ismaël was a good student. He would perform his five daily prayers with fervour, slowly coming into the daily rhythm of each and every Muslim. He accepted all this, just as he'd accepted all the other events that had changed his life so drastically. But, at night, his grandmother would devote all her remaining energy to undoing the teachings the sheik had performed in daylight. She would tell him about the miracles of the many Coptic saints: about the martyrdom of saint Menas, about Antonius the Great, about Paul of Thebes, the first hermit. Secretly she was trying that Ismaël would remain a Christian, for her – the one and only true religion. Ismaël listened to both. He was now 13 years old and not in a position to choose for one religion or the other.

So Ismaël had lost his mother. He was in the big city alone with the sheik who was teaching him virtue and the fear of God during the day and his grandmother who was teaching him the examples of Jesus Christ. And everything started to get confused in his mind: the memories of his father beating him; his mother; the voice of the sheik; the sound of all the cars in the big city; his grandmother's voice; the black cloud enveloping everything....

He started to have confusing experiences: he would hear voices in his dreams. But he was afraid to tell his grandmother or the sheik about it because he was not sure which God was addressing him.

And then, one night, he heard a voice. The voice told him: *"Ismaël! Ismaël! Tomorrow when the sun has been down for one hour, switch all the lights off! Stay for a while in darkness, Ismaël! And do nothing, Ismaël, do nothing! Just stay in the dark, Ismaël. And you will see the light coming out of the darkness! You will see the light, Ismaël!"*

Ismaël woke up in the morning deeply troubled. What was this all supposed to mean? “Stay in the dark...”? He just didn’t understand what it all meant. But he didn’t say anything to anyone. In a state of great anticipation, he waited for night to come. After the evening prayer, he went home and closed all the curtains. By chance, his grandmother had fallen asleep very early that evening, so he had no need to explain. He went to sit and as the voice had told him he switched off the lights.

...

We don’t know exactly what happened in the dark. After a while he switched on the light again... and went to sleep – or, well, he switched the light off again before he went to sleep of course... you’d guessed that I suppose.

But the next morning he was woken up by what sounded like a crowd outside his window. And his grandmother was calling out from her bed as well: “Ismaël! Ismaël! What is happening?” He went out. Everyone in the area seemed to have assembled in front of their house. When they saw Ismaël they stopped talking at once: everyone was looking at him. Ismaël didn’t understand what was going on until he stepped back and looked behind him and saw what the people saw.

It was as if the house and its immediate surroundings had become brighter, more colourful. It was as if the house was in a cloud of fresh, bright air isolated from the rest. As a matter of fact it was now like a bright cloud inside the black cloud. People were testing the difference. They were stepping into the cloud of fresh air and out of it into the black cloud. And Ismaël understood. This was the light that had been promised to him! He fell on his knees full of gratitude. But he didn’t know who to thank, so he just stayed there, full of grace. Some people looked at him with fear. Some people looked at him with admiration. Some people looked at him with envy. From that moment on, Ismaël was the centre of a lot of attention. He was interrogated by representatives of various authorities. But he said nothing.

When he went home at night there was still a small crowd around the house. And as night fell, the house remained in this strange aura of bright light. When he entered the house he saw some twenty people conversing with his grandmother. They all fell silent when they saw him entering. One of them asked him: “How can we help you?” Ismaël was very confused about everything and he really didn’t know anymore who to trust and who not to trust. Who was a Christian? Who was a Muslim? What should he do? He looked at his grandmother. It seemed to him that she had never looked at him in such a peaceful way. This gave him confidence in the situation – in these people. He got an idea: *If this is what happens when I am alone in the dark, then what will happen if there are more of us?*

He wanted to try it out immediately, this very night, with these strangers who had – God knows how – suddenly appeared in his home. They were men and women, elderly people and children, Copts and Muslims. We don’t know what he told them. But they have switched off the lights and they have spent some time in darkness together, doing nothing. It was like being in a grave the eyes wide open.

The next morning the black cloud had disappeared from Bolak El Dakror.

The area was clean and clear. It caught the attention of the whole country. It was a time of great confusion: scientists gave contradicting explanations; prophets sprang

up out of nothing. People wondered: “Where is this bright light coming from? What is this fresh air?”

People were looking for Ismaël. Where was the young boy everybody was talking about? But Ismaël had disappeared. And so had his grandmother and the twenty people that had spent some time in their house: the ones that later became famous as ‘the people of the cloud’. What had happened to them? The craziest rumours started to circulate. The Copts accused the Muslims. The Muslims accused the Copts. There was trouble on the streets, and the army intervened to bring peace to the situation.

Now Ismaël is a saint for the Christians and he is seen as a great example by the Muslims. He, his grandmother and “the people of the cloud” are the subject of many fantastic tales. Some say they are preparing something new. But the Black Cloud is back over Bolak El Dakror. And the city is back how it always was.

That was the story of Ismaël and the Black Cloud of Cairo.

Chapter 2 : Introduction to the action

I don't know if you know the german tabloid Bild Zeitung...?

You could compare it with *(name of the best selling local right wing populist paper)* here.

It is a real institution in Germany. As a matter of fact it is Germany's most popular and Europe's best selling newspaper.

You must wonder why I am suddenly speaking about a populist paper after this story of Ismaël...

(looks at the audience)

That's a good question. Just a few months after the events I just told you about took place, the Bild Zeitung came up with a campaign that had some odd similarities with them. How that came about, I don't know. I don't know if the people who came up with the campaign had heard about Ismaël. But the fact is that on December 8, 2007 the Bild Zeitung, proclaimed with big letters on the front page: "Tonight lights out, from 20:00 to 20:05!" This was the start of a big campaign to draw the attention of the whole country to the problem of climate change. The idea was that throughout the country people would switch off their lights and that for five minutes the whole country would be plunged into darkness. I don't know if you participated... No?! You don't care about climate change? Maybe you did?

But the Bild Zeitung was not alone in this campaign. Bund, Greenpeace and WWF also participated. The homepage of Google was all in dark the whole day (Google Black). ProSieben gave live coverage of the campaign from all corners of the country. And at precisely 8 in the evening they indeed broadcasted 5 minutes of complete darkness...

Can you imagine this: People at home in the dark staring at a dark screen...

The campaign deliberately had a tone of an order rather than an invitation. So it wasn't, "We kindly invite you to turn off the lights". It was, "Tonight, lights out!" Everybody had to participate! No questions. No objections.

And the consequence was that it was a huge success. I don't have the figures here but a lot of people participated. With this simple action they could show their concern for the climate. From the West to the East and from the South to the North they would switch off their lights and be united all together in darkness.

(Pause, looks at the public)

Listen! To be honest, I think it wasn't such a bad idea. It is a fantastic communal gesture to symbolically show solidarity with the planet and an effective way to bring about real change in mentalities. With this radical action, everybody was united in the darkness. And I think that there, in this darkness together and the silence that came with it, people really arrived to a very special introspection.

(ask a specific person in the public)

You don't think so?

You Madam?

(pause)

Ok. Not everybody was thinking this way. Some people saw through the campaign. They knew the Bild Zeitung for its world of scandals, campaigns against foreign minorities and melodramas from the world of glamour. They saw this unusual collaboration with ecological organization as cynical.

No, but really! What is it actually this action of switching off the lights?... If you really think about it is actually a cheap way to ease our conscience but in fact it doesn't change anything. It stands absolutely in the line of this kind of media: huge actions treating people like children...

(ask a specific person in the public)

What to do you think?

You?

(pause)

But People, you didn't come here tonight to take a position for or against the Bild Zeitung. You also didn't come here to take position for or against that kinds of campaigns. And of course we are not here to take position for or against climate change. We are here in Sophiensaele and if I look at all of you I see all I see perfectly politically correct people.

No. We are here because I have a proposition. Something I would like to try out with you, an experiment. Let's see what happens if we transfer the action of switching off the lights from the scale of an entire country to the here and now, to the enclosed space of this small space in Sophiensaele. Let's see what happens in this room if – all of us together – we turn out the lights and produce darkness together. Very simple!

Well simple...maybe not... Of course we all have to agree... And what really will happen then in the dark... and how long it will last...that I don't know...

OK! Of course you will have already noticed these wonderful politically incorrect light bulbs. And perhaps you have also noticed that there is a switch under your chairs. Well, you can take them out now. So you understand the principle. Everyone has one switch. Does everybody have one? Yes? And each switch is connected to one of the bulbs. So each of us is responsible for one lamp. We are going to switch them on just in a moment. But first I have to explain how it works. Because we did this performance in Holland and not everybody understood how a switch works.

Goes to a spectator.

You see, when the switch is like this it is "on" and when it is like this it is "off". On. Off. On. Off. Very simple. It is very important that you understand this. Does everybody understand? Yes? Ok. So Please put your switch in the "off" position. Is

everybody sure? Yes? You also? OK. If everything is right, if we switch on the installation, none of the bulbs should be illuminated.
Shall we do it? OK. I'm going to give a sign to Martin, the technician.

Makes a sign to Martin. Installation on. No lamp shines.

OK. Very good. Very good. Now we are masters of the light. Ok. And now you can all switch on the lights.

All light shine.

OK. Very nice. Did everybody switch it on? Yes? Now we can switch off the theatre lights.

Theatre lights are switched off.

Ok. People! In order to make this experiment work, you all need to know which lamp is your lamp. You can do this in a very simple way by applying a certain rhythm to your switch. I give you now 3 minutes just to check again what is your light. You will see it with the rhythm. We will put a little bit of music. You can just switch it on and off [*shows how to do it*] Because then you'll know where "you" are. You understand?

Everybody tries it. Maybe groups have to be formed.

Ok. You all have it? Yes? Good. Thank you – stop now please. That's enough. You can all switch on the lights again. Ok thank you. From now on we are all responsible for the lights for this evening. People, we have now officially started the experiment. That's why I want to ask you not to flicker your bulbs anymore. I'm not joking. [*Looks at the lamps*] But what we could do is change the atmosphere a little bit. What do you think? Maybe we could switch off some lights here. [*a few lights are switched off*]. Ok that's nice.

Chapter 3: LED

[*looks at the lamps*] They're nice don't you think? It seems like centuries ago that we could buy them.

I suppose that you are all using LED lamps at home...

Me, yes... I installed LED lamps everywhere. Everywhere but in one little room. There is only space for one chair in this room. And there I put one of these lamps. Because I've heard that they are programmed to burn for exactly 1000 hours. Not one minute more. (*kijkt de hele tijd naar die lamp*). And so sometimes I step into this room... I go and sit on the chair... I switch on the lamp... And I time it... I can stay hours and hours in the room... doing nothing but watching this lamp... I've spent 843 hours now... it's approaching... I want to see the lamp explode! That's why I step into the room and the first thing I do is sitting and only when I sit I switch on the light... I don't want to miss it...

Ok. If I keep on doing it should happen before Christmas!

Chapter 4: Rehearsal

Black out

Ok people. You can all switch on the lights again.

Before we go for the real darkness, we still need to practice a little bit. Let's carry out a few exercises, just to be sure that everything works fine and to see how we can work together. At first, let's try something easy: Let's try and see if we can all switch off these lights at once! A blackout. Okay? So when I go like this [*does the movement*] you all push the button. Okay.

Two lamps remain on (Maarten and David) but maybe more.

I see that all not all the lights are off now. [*points to his lamp*] This one is mine. I just left it on because we are still just rehearsing. But whose lamp is the other one? Did somebody forget? ...

Fade out

Let's all put our lights on again. Yes, everybody! Ok. We have just rehearsed a blackout. Let's try now something softer, more beautiful. Let's perform a fade-out. Let's try to find the right timing together and slowly, gently plunge into darkness. We're still just practicing. It is just a rehearsal.

So for now I'm going to be the conductor for, let's say, the ten first people, and then the rest can follow on their own. When I point to you, you push the button. Ok? Let's do it!

Maarten points out a few people. They switch off their lights. Then he let's the rest go on their on. When more than half of the lamps are shut off...

(In a gentle voice) Okay! Okay! Very nice, ladies and gentlemen! Let's light up the stage again.

Maarten make a sign to the audience that they understand they have to put the light on again: and then he says.

Okay, ladies and gentlemen. We are ready now. Let's do it!

I'm going to do sit next to you, madam. [*takes his chair and goes to sit to the right hand side at the end of the tribune.*] If anyone is scared of the dark they can always come and sit here, next to me. If you really think you're not going to be able to stand it, please don't feel ashamed to leave. We'll see each other later.

Let's try to do this as gently as we just did in the rehearsal. I'm going to be the first one to turn off my light. And then it's all in your hands. I hope we'll manage together. And I hope we'll let it last for a long time. And if, when it's dark, you think it's been long enough and you feel the urge to switch your light on again, then count to 60 or 70 or 80 and then count to 60 again. And if, for one reason somebody here doesn't want to participate then it his or her responsibility.

Is there someone who wants to day something at this point?
No?

Ladies and Gentlemen, let's start!