CHAPTER I

FOREIGNERS, FEMALES AND DISCOURSES ON ISLAM

Greetings to the prophet Mohammed, may peace be upon him and on ʻAli and their companions until the Day of days. *Salaam ala ahbaab ar-rasul*, Greetings to the beloved of the prophet.

After the opening lines of the local *faqih* I quoted in the Introduction,¹ it is the popular committee’s turn to take the stage. The first of the five members, who is also a *faqih* begins, as is the custom at every sermon, with elaborate blessings related to the prophet Mohammed and other illustrious religious persons, using a microphone. The other four members are seated on a makeshift elevation, all of them bathed in generator-driven neon light, a rarity in a town such as Kebkabiya, which has no electricity.

During the speeches I sit with the other women behind a parked Land Rover, out of sight of the stage as if we do not really belong to the audience. It is probably just as well, for I have my tape recorder with me to record the speeches. Some teenage boys have gathered around some of the black sturdy bicycles. They joke and jest just out of hearing distance from the main audience. The men, who are slightly more numerous than the women, sit in the illuminated area in front of the stage, near the central entrance to the mosque. I will start this chapter by relating the subjects discussed in the speeches to the local context, as I understood it at the moment of recording, whilst listening to the addresses. Next, I will focus on the main subjects of these speeches, in particular on the way these were formulated and argued. In this way I want to gain an insight into the goal of the moral discourse. Moreover, these considerations will lead me to position my research and the biographic narratives of the women within its academic and political context.

¹ I pick up the speeches after the address of the *faqih* whom I quoted in the introduction when he was discussing greeting habits. These are the opening lines of the speech of the first speaker of the popular committee from Kutum.
The *faqih* has finished his speech on the correct Islamic greetings and now his colleague takes his place behind the microphone. His speech addresses the audience directly:

…Now the government has declared *shari’a* and where are we? Did the country declare it or we? The government will control with fixed punishments, but what about our souls, what about our behaviour? This depends on us; we have to raise our consciousness, in order to correct our behaviour, and that of our children, our families. This is what Mohammed our prophet told us. When a Muslim knows wine is *haraam*, forbidden on religious grounds, it means *shari’a*. When he knows that adultery is *haraam*, he knows that it is *shari’a* too. And if most people know these things, then only a few left will be punished, if the government catches them. If we follow the right and give up the bad, we will be the right nation, *al-umma al-islamiya*… And if we do not, that means our belief is still weak… This is a test for us, to see who are better in their deeds and lives. And we will know after we die. Did God create us and life and death for play? No! He created these as examinations for us. And if our lives are as bad as they are now, why don't we obey God honestly? Why don't we obey him wholeheartedly?

If we want to live like this, in a worldly way, not bothering about life and death, we can disobey Allah and be worldly, like the Europeans. If you believe in worldly things, not in death, and aspire to a life like that of the *khawadyaat* (the western foreigners), then after death you will go to hell. But in your worldly life you will be happy and have a high standard of life. If you don't want to go to hell, then follow the right way of Allah. Give up disobedience of God and follow His way correctly so. He will give us the good things in the world and we will go to heaven as well…

If we don’t believe and obey but follow the western foreigners because we see they make aeroplanes and bombing equipment and we return from their countries, saying ‘They are very happy in their countries, they have a high standard of life’, we will become preoccupied with their things. Our hearts might follow their lifestyle but we will not gain from it. Only if we believe and obey, we will be given as he gives them… But the happiness of life means little for in the life hereafter one day equals a thousand days in this life: if you live a hundred years, it means in the life hereafter, you will live two hours and 24 minutes…

I hear women around me snorting in disagreement; others giggle a bit while the speaker is comparing their standard of life with that of the foreigners from the West. Some women start talking to each other while others are bending over their babies, trying to feed them under their *tobes*, the typical Sudanese veil of a six to nine meter cloth about