Discourses and power relations are constitutive of people and places, but are also constituted by these and as such are part of everyday life. Consequently, as an anthropologist I became part of the discursive dynamics while taking part in Kebkabiya daily life and while I was positioned in these discourses I, similar to the other working women, had to come to terms with that subject position in turn. In this chapter I will clarify to what extent the position of the ‘other’ of the foreigner and the female came together during the research period in Kebkabiya town; and how Johan, but predominantly Yasmin, and I became part of that local context and negotiated our positioning during the course of our stay.

Getting Settled in the Town of Kebkabiya

Johan and I fly from Khartoum to the capital of Northern Darfur, Al-Fasher at the beginning of November 1991. From there, Yasmin arranges a lift with a Land Rover of one of the local development organisations. We drive through the dry, stony landscape, interspersed with trees bordering the banks of dry rivers, and mighty mountain ridges simmering in the late afternoon heat. For decades, traders, slaves, armies and pilgrims took the trans-African trade route from West Africa, either bending off here in North-Darfur to the northeast to Egypt, following the darb al-arba’iin, the forty-days road, or going straight

1 The name of the town is taken from al-fashir, the encampment of the Fur sultan whenever he went on a tour or military campaign. It developed into a more fixed location and became the indication for the permanent royal court at Lake Tendelti, which now is the town of Al-Fasher (O’Fahey 1980: 24–26).

2 The place where the darb al-arba’iin, the forty-day road to Cairo started was called Kobbei. It was located near current Al-Fasher. It functioned as a boarding place as well as the main administrative and trading post where the Sultan could exert his monopoly on trading the rare items of the caravans against cloth, salt, wheat and other local
east, via Suakin, to Mecca, and vice versa: there were also those who
stayed. Lorries and Land Rovers have for the most part replaced the
camels and horses of the caravans since colonial times. Ever since
Italian donors built an all-weather road in 1989, even a bus service
has been set up which connects the market and administrative centre
Kebkabiya to Al-Fasher, shortening the trip of about twelve to only six
hours.

The green we detected from afar comes from trees growing along
the wadi, the dry riverbed along which Kebkabiya stretches. The town
itself is not so green and extends over an enormous area with sandy
streets, walled compounds and low, one-story wattle-and-daub and mud
brick houses with an occasional acacia tree. As soon as we are well into
town, the driver tells us that we have been lucky: one week ago bandits
stopped a bus at one of the dry river crossings on the way. Two people
were killed in the ambush; all the others were robbed.

It proves difficult to find a place to live. The stationing of a large
army division in Kebkabiya one month before our arrival, in order
to halt the so-called ‘tribal’ clashes in Darfur has taken up all vacant
rooms in government buildings. There is also a constant stream of peo-
ple who migrate to Kebkabiya because of these conflicts and because
the drought of 1990, the second in a row. In the area around Kebkabi-
ya, ethnic clashes aggravate the effects of the drought, which prevents
people from growing their food at places outside the boundaries of their
villages. The newly arrived hope to find work, food, safety, or at least
help from their relatives and they have taken up most of the cheaper
places in town. There are even two small sections to the northwest
of Kebkabiya called ‘jimjabá’ and ‘kalashjabá’, ‘we came because of the
jims/kalashnikovs’, both referring to automatic guns used in the ethnic
conflicts (cf. Flint and De Waal 2005: 54).

After one month, we find ourselves a newly built house in ‘the new
extension’, one of the recently established segments of Kebkabiya town.
It is located near the girls’ intermediary school and the houses of the
government officials and teachers. The rent is outrageous, even for a
stone built house. Also, it is quite a distance from the centre of town
where the older quarters are built around the central mosque, hospital

products. Many of these caravans also visited Kebkabiya itself (see preface). See for
more details Hassan (1977); La Rue (1984); Nachtigal (1879–1889); O’Fahey (1980: 139).

3 Flint and De Waal give a similar account for displaced who settled around Nyala,
who were called jimjabuu ‘the rifle brought them’.