Thousands of Sudanese have participated in mass marriages since their introduction by the government not long after the 1989 coup that brought President Omar Hassan El-Beshir to power. The move came at the behest of the National Islamic Front, which forms the backbone of the government. General El-Beshir himself officiates at most of the state-sponsored weddings, which he describes as an important step in the drive to increase the population of Africa’s largest country: Sudan has an area of just over 2.5 million square kilometres for a population estimated of about 29 million.

(Bol, 1996: 2)¹

This quotation, taken from an article by the Sudanese journalist Nhial Bol (1996), indicates that the so-called ‘marriage problem’ was taken up as a national issue by the Islamist government.² One of the most conspicuous ways of stimulating single Sudanese to marry was by launching the so-called zowag al-korā³ or ‘mass-weddings’. Large numbers of couples were married at the same time during a ceremony organized and orchestrated by the government. From the perspective of the government, the bride price was one of the main reasons, which prohibited especially young professionals to get married since an educated woman required a high bride price. Thus the government tried to alleviate this problem by sponsoring the weddings: it donated part of the dowry (beds, furniture, pots and pans), and the bride price (up to 10,000 £S).

¹ This excerpt and others in this paragraph were presumably in Arabic. I quote them from an article by Bol (1996: 2) written in English (Nhial Bol “Managing Their Lives for Them”, IPS, published on the Internet 20-9-1996—SudanList@emuv1.id/1.7f.—subject ‘official marriages’: accessed 2-9-1997.


³ Literally this means ‘putting all the people in a bowl and marrying them’ (cf. Hale 1997: 208).
In the case of high government officials, they were offered a plot of land to build a house on as well.\(^4\)

The weddings were broadcast in order to advertise the government-subsidized marriages. As this proved insufficient to attract the desired number of couples, the possibilities to facilitate marriages were brought to the attention of young unmarried professionals working in the bureaucracy or (para-) statal organizations by circulars.\(^5\) One such circular addressed employees of the Sudan broadcasting station. It opened with an encouragement by El-Tayeb Mustafa, the Director General:\(^6\)

Dear brothers, sisters and colleagues, on behalf of the [Sudan TV] trade union and board of directors, I call upon all staffs to make up their minds and get married... Those interested will apply within three months... with incentives for those who do so. They will be married en masse at a ceremony organized and financed by the institution. We would like to assure those who will join this blessed occasion, even by marrying for the second time, that they will receive considerable assistance that will help, Allah willing, in their future life... Allah has blessed marriage and in Islam marriage is considered the completion of the second half of the Muslim faith... The prophet said: 'The worst among Muslims, if any, are those yet unmarried'. Islam also calls on us to marry and have children in order to populate the earth with good citizens.

As is to be expected the advice to marry within the following three months is legitimated with reference to religious credos and hadith. In the media and religious addresses, marriage was cast as the duty of a good Muslim. In order to attain a society of ‘good citizens’, men and women who were single, needed to marry and procreate. The ‘right’ subject positions for women and men were thus to be wives and mothers, husbands and fathers.

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\(^4\) Hale (1997: 193) comes with a different perspective: that it was predominantly the poor who were targeted by these mass wedding ceremonies. I think the poor were those who might have made most use of it, but that the government was in particular addressing its 'own' employees. This will become clear when I discuss the article of Bol. See also Gruenbaum (1992: 29–32).

\(^5\) As Umm Kalthoum indicated, an additional problem especially for highly educated women and men might be the fact that they are exposed on television since the mass-weddings are broadcast live. Most people I discussed the phenomenon with were therefore not surprised the project was not a success, since it would expose one’s family not being able or prepared to pay for wedding expenses.

\(^6\) It concerns comments on a circular of Sudan TV directed at the 170 unmarried employees of 204 of the Sudan broadcasting station. See for example the religious speeches party quoted in Chapter 1.