

Chapter 4

Slave Redemption in the Sudan

Preparation. Review the chapter on demand and supply. If you wish, you can consult the Encyclopedia Britannica Online also for a very convenient compendium of information about what, at the time of the following discussion, was the Republic of the Sudan, a country that was beset by warfare and other terrible difficulties for at least the past two centuries. By most measures, for the time of our discussion the Sudan was the poorest country on our planet.

Motivation. What if somebody knocked on your door (this happened) and told you that people in the Republic of the Sudan are being sold into slavery, just like in the U.S. before the Civil War. They tell you of the horrors of enslavement in the Sudan. The person also tells you that the Sudanese market price for a human being is just U.S. \$15. Think about that - for about the price of a pizza you can own a person and do with him or her whatever you please. The person remarks that, if you contribute that amount of money, then it will be used to buy a person at a slave market and then that person will be set free. This is called “redemption” of the slave. Would you hand over the requested donation, or not? Clearly this is an emotional issue that provokes an immediate and angry response to the existence of such slavery. But set aside the emotion for now. Be logical. Think it through from the perspective of an economist. What would you do?

Background Information. For centuries raiding parties have assaulted villagers in different parts of Africa, harvesting all but the very young and the elderly as slaves. In recent times in some places in Africa the market for slaves has revived. One such place, during the 1990’s, was the Republic of the Sudan.

Where is the Sudan? As Figure 4.1¹ shows, during the 1990’s the Sudan is a large country in northeastern Africa. It was Africa’s largest country, occupying an area of 967,000 square miles, or about 8% of the African continent.

¹Source: Encyclopedia Britannica Online

African Political Systems

Figure 4.1: Where Is The Republic Of The Sudan?

Figure 4.2² is a map that displays the Sudan in more detail, as it was in the 1990's. The capital, Khartoum, is located near to the center of the country at the junction of the Blue Nile and White Nile rivers. These tributaries combine to form the Nile River, which then flows north into Egypt. The country is essentially a huge central plain that is drained by the Nile Rivers and is bordered by plateaus in the west, south and east. The northern part of the plain is desert while the central and southern parts have infertile clay soils.

The northern and central parts of the Sudan are populated for the most part by Muslims, many of whom consider themselves to be “Arabs” because their common language is Arabic. The majority population of the southern Sudan is a collection of black peoples. Many follow traditional African religions. Some are Christians. The Arabs comprise about 40% of the total population. The Dinka are the largest black group, making up about 12% of the total population. The remaining half of the population comprises a wide variety of black groups, some of whom are Muslim.

²Source: Encyclopedia Britannica Online



Figure 4.2: The Republic of the Sudan, prior to its division in 2011.

The distribution of this highly varied population is displayed in Figure 4.3³.

Since its independence in 1956 the Sudan has seen many changes in government. In the 1980's and 1990's the government based in Khartoum aggressively sought to impose unity on all groups in the country by insisting upon obedience to Islamic law and culture universally. Most southerners and some in the north of the country insisted upon a secular government. The outcome was two civil wars, the second of which began in 1983 and ended in 2005 with an agreement to hold a referendum in the south to determine if the south wished to secede from the north. This referendum was held in early 2011. The vote for secession was overwhelming so now there is a Southern Sudan and a Northern Sudan.

Economic mismanagement has been rife for a long time. In the 1970's there began a slide in real income levels that continued until recently. The Sudan became one of the poorest and least economically developed nations on our planet. Until recently the Sudan's main income source was agriculture. It produces cotton, peanuts, sesame,

³Source:Encyclopedia Britannica Online

gum arabic, some grains, sugarcane, coffee and dates. Animal husbandry is also important. Now the main source of income is oil. About three-quarters of the known oil reserves are located in the south, but the only delivery method at the moment is a pipeline that flows through the north (South Sudan has no seaport).



Figure 4.3: The Republic Of the Sudan, prior of its division into north and south.

Prior to its independence, the Sudan was ruled by a British and Egyptian coalition. During the period of British and Egyptian oversight the centuries old practice of raids on black southern villages for slaves was ruthlessly stamped out. However, in the late 1980's the central Sudanese government encouraged the recommencement of slave raids as part of its war on the southern rebels. The government reasoned that the raids would destroy villages and communities believed by the government to support

the rebels. In April 1996, UN Special Representative for the Sudan, Gaspar Biro, reported “an alarming increase ...in cases of slavery, servitude, slave trade, and forced labor.” In June 1996, two reporters from the Baltimore Sun illegally visited the Sudan and then wrote a series of articles for the Sun in which they documented slavery in the Sudan. In the June 1999 Atlantic Monthly, Joseph Miniter set out his experiences with slave markets in the Sudan.

The devastation wrought on the south of the Sudan during the civil wars was enormous. Starvation, displaced refugees, death from war and disease and lost agricultural production reduced much of the south of the country to being dependent on foreign assistance for survival. Most estimates place the loss of life over the seventeen years of the most recent civil war at about two million persons, with many more injured.

Into this complex mixture entered a new small collection of people. These were foreigners who came with money collected from various sources with the purpose of purchasing slaves and then setting them free. This is “slave redemption.” The goal of the redeemers was to release from bondage as many slaves as their funds permitted. However, as Miniter chronicled in his article, some of the very people you might expect to be grateful for this initiative were strongly against it. In these notes we will use supply and demand analysis to figure out what was happening.

It should be noted that the Sudanese market for new slaves had largely vanished at the time that the redeemers appeared in the Sudan. But during the prior years of its operation thousands of hapless individuals were purchased as slaves in this market. The collapse of the market for new slaves was not accompanied by the emancipation of those already enslaved.

The Effects of Slave Redemption. The Dinka people in the southern Sudan were the primary targets of the Arabic Sudanese slavers, a collection of individuals called *janjaweed*, a colloquial word meaning “a man with a gun on a horse”. The Sudanese government permitted slave markets to reopen in several cities that it controlled, including Khartoum. Despite its persistent denials, the government assisted the slavers by paying a monthly salary of about US\$110 to each of the *janjaweed*, and by providing weapons and other equipment, transport and other logistical support. Incentive bonuses were paid from monies received from sales of stolen livestock and humans. Many thousands of Dinka, mainly women, were enslaved. Slaves are often very badly treated. When slaving raids recommenced in the late 1980’s the price fetched by a slave was about US\$300. By 1995 the price of a slave had fallen to about US\$100 and by 1997 the price had fallen to about US\$15. Slave redemption efforts commenced in about 1995. In the period from 1995 to 1997 redeemers found themselves paying between US\$50 and US\$100 for each slave. Since then redeemers have paid about US\$50 per slave. Several thousand slaves were purchased and then set free. To understand that these are high prices in the Sudan you should note that in 1999 the average per capita income was about US\$500. Another change of note is that, in the late 1990’s, the size of a typical slave raiding party grew from about 400 attackers to

about 2,500. Representatives of the populations being raided asked the redeemers to stop their efforts, even though the goal of the redeemers was to return to these same populations people, family members, who had been kidnapped and sold. What was going on? Was slave redemption an effective weapon against slavery?

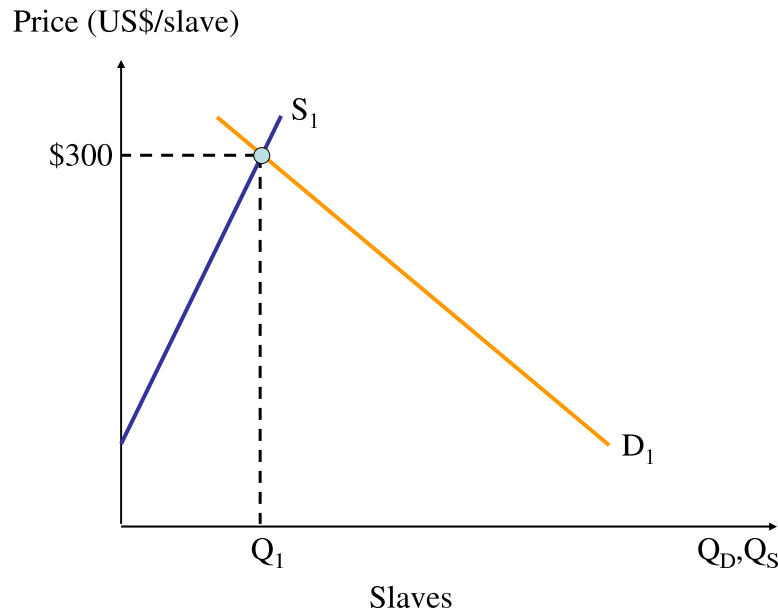


Figure 4.4: The slave market in the late 1980's.

Consider what was happening in the late 1980's. This situation is depicted in Figure 4.4. At that time there were only a few slave raids so the market supply of slaves was small, as is depicted in the figure by the supply curve S_1 . Once it became known that slaves could once again be purchased, there was a large demand. This is depicted by the demand curve D_1 . Consequently the market-clearing price for a slave was

Q.4.1 _____

and the quantity of Dinka being newly placed into slavery was

Q.4.2 _____

The high price made the profit per slave sold high. This encouraged

Q.4.3 _____

causing the market supply curve for slaves to

Q.4.4 _____

As a consequence the market-clearing price for slaves

Q.4.5 _____

and the quantity traded of slaves

Q.4.6 _____

This is depicted in Figure 4.5 where the market supply has changed from S_1 to S_2 . The number of Dinka being newly enslaved has increased due to an increase in the number of raids on Dinka settlements. At the same time the number of Dinka already enslaved has continued to rise. Since the price received for a new slave has fallen, the profit per slave earned by a slaver declines but is still substantial.

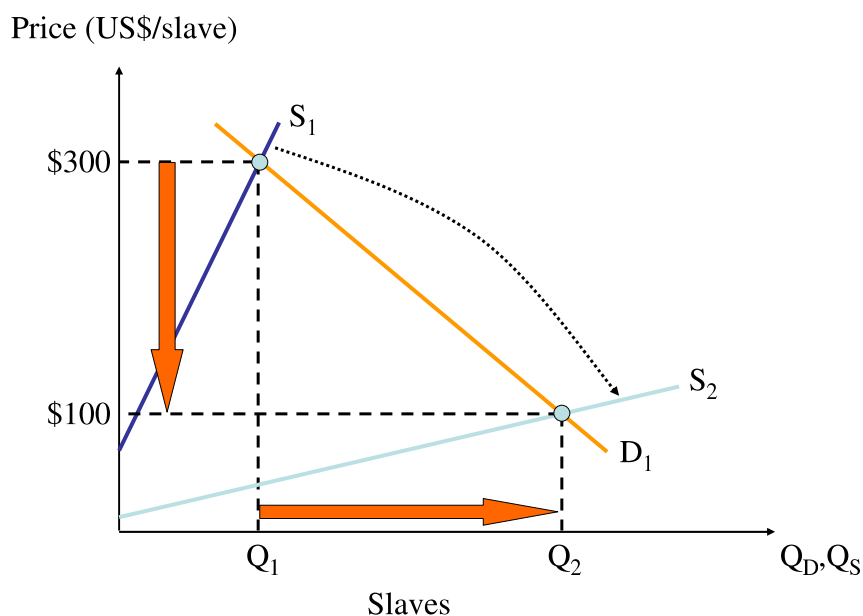


Figure 4.5: The slave market at about 1995.

After a few years, by about 1997, many potential purchasers of slaves had bought most of the slaves that they wanted and so the market demand for slaves decreased. That is, the market demand curve shifted inwards. Consequently, as Figure 4.6 depicts, the market-clearing price for a new slave

Q.4.7 _____

and the quantity of slaves traded

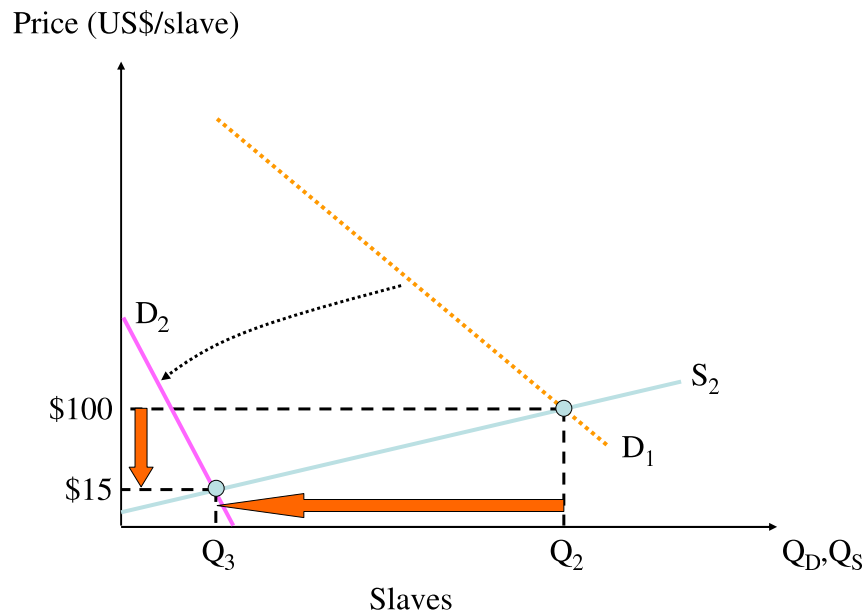


Figure 4.6: The slave market at about 1997.

Q.4.8 _____

By 1997 the number of Dinka already enslaved had become large and the new low market-clearing price for a slave made the profit per new slave captured very small. Unless something happened to increase the price of slaves, some slavers would exit the market and consequently the number of raids for new slaves would fall.

It is at this time that the redeemers entered the market. The redeemers were new entrants into the slave market. Particularly, they were new buyers. Their entry into the market caused the market demand to

Q.4.9 _____

and so caused the market-clearing price for slaves

Q.4.10 _____

and the quantity of slaves traded to

Q.4.11 _____

This is illustrated in Figure 4.7. Thus redemption caused

Q.4.12 _____

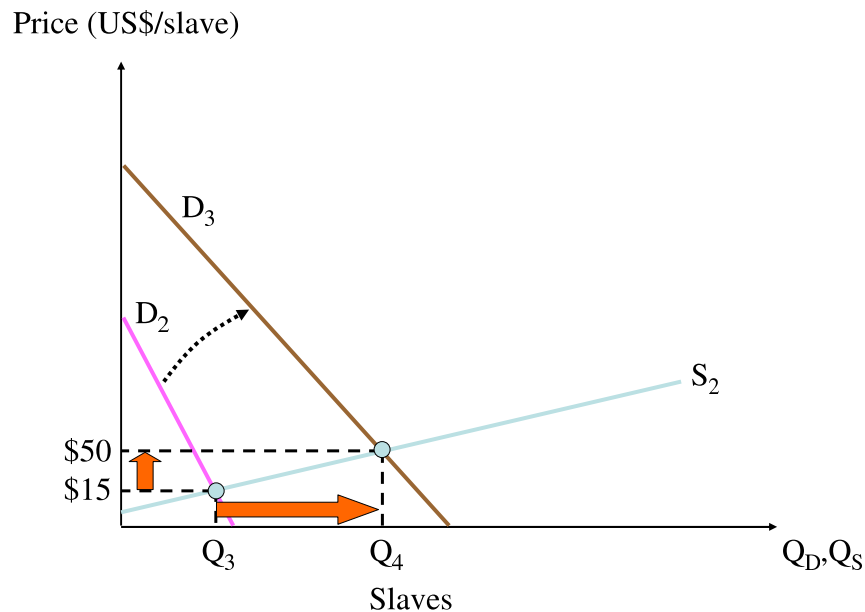


Figure 4.7: The slave market at about 1999.

What we have learned is that while slave redemption may have some small ability to reduce the number of Dinka already enslaved, it also encourages new slave raids, along with all of the robbery, death and destruction that accompanies each raid. This is why the targeted populations in the south of the Sudan asked that the redeemers stop their well-intentioned purchases of existing slaves. In effect redeemers' payments to slavers increased the slavers' incentives to enslave more Dinka. According to Mr. Miniter many of the slaves purchased by the redeemers were amongst the less productive of the enslaved. These were typically older slaves or very young slaves. There is also some evidence that a few of the people redeemed were not actually slaves.

What are truly effective weapons against slavery? There are just three kinds. One raises the cost to holding a person enslaved. Examples would be severe penalties for being a slave owner along with the means to implement effectively these penalties. Given that the Sudanese government encouraged the slave trade and that foreigners (except perhaps the Government of the Peoples' Republic of China) have almost no influence on the Sudan, it is not likely that any such weapon can be devised short of invasion (the old British solution) or of secession of the south from the north – the eventual outcome.

The second type of weapon raises the cost to slavers of acquiring new slaves. This effectively meant defending the slave populations with military means and improving

their warning systems. Since the raiders were heavily armed and very mobile, such an action required some form of military intervention by an outside power to equip and train the Dinka for their own defense. This was never likely. In 1997 the US and other countries imposed trade sanctions on the Sudan because of the renewal of the Sudanese slave trade. These sanctions had little impact on the Sudan and practically none on the slave trade. With secession, however, the south is an entire, new country that has managed to eradicating slave raids from the north.

The third type of weapon reduces the benefit of holding a person enslaved. Since the slave owner has various means (beatings, for example) to coerce a slave to produce it is unlikely that the productivity of a slave can be reduced while he or she is in captivity. However, if the period of captivity could be reduced then the potential value of any new slave would be less and so the demand for new slaves would be reduced. It is with this in mind that some slave redeemers began to pay only for slaves that had been rescued from their owners. Redeemers thereby began to create a risky industry in which some Sudanese seek out slaves whom they can steal away from owners and then sell to redeemers. Of course it is difficult for a foreign redeemer to be sure that the people he buys and then sets free are in fact slaves but such a policy cannot be more harmful than either buying slaves from people who clearly are slave owners or competing directly by bidding for slaves in the open slave markets of the Sudan.

You may believe that the sad case of the Sudan is isolated but the fact is that various forms of slavery and repression, especially of women, are commonplace around our planet. North American and Western European societies in which slavery is almost (but not entirely) eradicated are in the minority.