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# Smart, Gumbu

(1750–1820),

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runaway slave and slave-raiding warlord, was born with the name Koko around 1750 in the town of Kalangba, later located in the Gbendembu-Gowahun chiefdom in the Sierra Leonean district of Bombali. He belonged to the Loko ethnic community.

According to oral and written accounts, Smart accidentally killed one of his brothers and had to flee from Kalangba as a result. A group of raiders seized the young man and sold him off to British traders based at Bunce Island on the coast of Sierra Leone. Instead of being sold to the Americas like so many unfortunate Africans who were kept in bondage on Bunce Island, Gumbu ended up working for British traders. His English masters were so impressed by his trading skills that they dubbed him “Smart,” and he used this name for the rest of his life. The English traders regularly advanced Smart trade goods such as cloth and distilled alcohol to purchase slaves in the interior. Smart became affluent enough to create a large community, and the British traders on Bunce Island eventually realized that they lacked the force to compel Smart to return the goods they had given him. He slowly moved up the Rockel River and set up his camp near Foredugu before he moved further inland.

Smart developed a range of alliances to promote his political and commercial ambitions. He hired an itinerant Fula Muslim, Mori Bundu, who provided the warlord with “power objects” believed to contain great spiritual power. He joined the powerful Wunde power association, open only to men. The Wunde organization provided Smart with military training. He took on the name Gumbu (Fire in the Mende language) as the result of his initiation. He also hired himself out as a mercenary. He backed the Temne community of Masimera against their rivals in Marampa after the latter stole some power objects and received Masimera support for his own commercial operations as a result.

Smart took advantage of his agreement with the British by using some of the goods to purchase Loko people like himself. Instead of treating them as common slaves, he offered his new purchases their freedom as long they stayed loyal to him. With this growing entourage, Smart established a new headquarters in what had been a tiny village on the middle course of the Rockel River, Rokon, around 1788. Over the course of the 1790s, Smart generally supported the small British enclave of Sierra Leone based in the city of Freetown. In 1806, a British employee at Bunce Island visited Rokon and praised Smart as an intelligent leader. Rokon became a major trade center thanks to Smart, and its wide streets, high palisade, and well-built homes testified to its wealth. Smart thus became one of the most powerful slave-traders on the coast of Sierra Leone.

Smart’s father learned of his son’s survival and arranged that Smart should marry a Loko woman. Smart thus reestablished his Loko lineage. Several Temne chiefs finally united against Smart and killed him around 1820. His life and death demonstrate the dangers and opportunities of slave trading in Sierra Leone.

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