A man of many names: An archival insight into the life of the convict Sheik Brown

DANIEL MCKAY

Abstract

Sheik Brown was a man of many names; the legend of Sheik Brown, 'Black Jack', 'Jose Koondiana' and 'Marridaio' spread widely through early colonial Australia. Originally from India, Sheik Brown, a sailor by trade, was caught stealing at his lodgings in London and transported to Australia as a convict. But seemingly never wanting to linger in captivity, he became first a recidivist and then a notorious runaway, whose attempts at realising his freedom would define the rest of his life: from bamboozling the colonial authorities to living beyond the frontier with Indigenous people. Although evidence of his life is fragmentary, remarkably the ghostly footprints of his life can be found in archival holdings throughout Australia and the United Kingdom. His relationships with the colonial authorities, other convicts, free settlers and Aboriginal people provides a glimpse into the interactions, lives and experiences of the period. It illuminates not just a fascinating story about the early colonial era, but shows that Australian history is much more global, multicultural and interesting than is sometimes characterised. This research, charting the narrative of Sheik Brown, forms part of a larger team project investigating the multicultural history of early Queensland as part of a residence at the Queensland State Archives with the aid of a University of Queensland Summer Scholarship. The results and the process of this archival research were originally presented on an online blog (studentsatthearchives.wordpress.com).

Introduction

Of all the recidivist convicts that were sent to Moreton Bay, Sheik Brown, also known as 'Black Jack', 'Jose Koondiana' and 'Marridaio', would have to be one of the more unusual. A full-time adventurer, and part-time convict, he absconded on more than one occasion for lengths of time stretching anywhere between

a couple of days to several years. Although evidence of his life is fragmentary, it seems clear he was an intelligent, irrepressible and beguiling character, who defied and bamboozled the colonial authorities, striving to live a life of freedom. Sheik Brown's interactions with other convicts, colonists and Indigenous Australians also provide a fascinating glimpse into the foreign land that is early colonial Australia, which abounds with untold and forgotten stories of life in the burgeoning new society. The history of the transportation of convicts is not just Australian, or even British. The history of convicts is global, as it provides a somewhat surprising insight into the many intersections between cultures and peoples. The British practice of transporting its convicted criminals to its penal settlement in Australia is just one part of a wider story about the tumult of war, empire, colonisation and forced migration in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century worlds. Amongst all this upheaval and change lie millions of untold stories of individuals whose lives became embroiled in the great forces of their age. The story of the convict Sheik Brown is just one of these. But while other convicts began their journeys in London, Dublin or Edinburgh, the story of Sheik Brown begins much further afield, on the Indian subcontinent. Although Sheik Brown makes several anecdotal appearances in various historical studies, this is the first systematic study into the narrative of his life story. Connecting all these disparate strands and fragments together, however, has only been possible because of the remarkable recent advancements in the developing nexus of online archives, the digitisation of records, and online newspapers collections, all with search functionality. In this sense, the story of Sheik Brown is both old and modern at the same time – with the ghostly pattern of his footprints discernible only now through innovations in archival storage and access.

Sheik Brown's early life remains the most indistinct part of his story, but we do know he was born in India around 1802.¹ Where precisely is not so clear, however, indications point towards somewhere around Surat or Bombay (now known as Mumbai) on the west coast of the Indian subcontinent.² It is most likely that he was born into a Muslim family, as both his name and a surviving sample of his handwriting suggests.³ We know even less about his childhood and youth, except for the fact that some time before 1824 he made his way to London. This seems not to be too unusual, with several cases of Indian sailors, or 'lascars' as they were known, settling in London and turning up in the archives. In the case of Sheik, he appeared for the wrong reasons

1 Series 5653, Chronological Register of Convicts 1824–1839 (QSA).

2 Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, 'Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels: A New Approach to the Colonial Indian Labor Diaspora,' in Sukanya Banerjee, Aims McGuinness, and Steven C. McKay eds, *New Routes for Diaspora Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 67–92.

3 CS Ref 33/07365S A28 223–226 (SLQ).

in court records.⁴ We can, however, speculate that he was involved in some way in the Napoleonic Wars, as some years later as part of testimony given to support an alias he was using, it was revealed he could speak some French and had knowledge of the French-controlled Île Bourbon off the coast of Africa.⁵ Either way, the international maritime network in either a military or merchant context facilitated his arrival in London.

Sheik Brown's first appearance in the records dates from 1824. He was aged 22, and was arrested and convicted for theft at the Old Bailey criminal court in London.⁶ According to the Criminal Register, this was not the first time he had offended. A remark in the margin stating 'In Newgate before' indicates that he had already ended up in that most notorious of London prisons, described later that century by Charles Dickens as a 'gloomy depository of the guilt and misery of London'.⁷ According to the trial records, Sheik had been living in a 'depot for the reception of black men' run by a merchant named Francis Robinson who lived in an adjoining house. In testimony given by William Green, a clerk, to Francis Robinson, he accused Sheik Brown of having stolen from his room which was also located in the depot:

On the 5th of March there was nobody but the prisoner and one more man there, and about seven o'clock that morning I missed from my room a blue great coat, two coats, two pairs of trowsers, four waistcoats, a pair of breeches and gaiters, a towel, two black silk handkerchiefs, two pairs of white cotton stockings, five leather gloves, two sovereigns, and six shillings. I had seen them all safe the morning before, about twelve o'clock. I locked my door then, and found it locked in the evening when I went to bed, but the key went very hard. I did not then miss the things, as I did not look for them. About eight o'clock on the morning after I missed them, I saw the prisoner in the depot washing himself.⁸

While this was probably not enough to convict Sheik, the evidence given by the shopkeepers and pawnbroker who had bought Mr Green's clothing from Sheik settled the case. Mrs Douglas Towns, who lived in her tobacconist father's shop, told the court:

The prisoner used to come there to buy snuff, and on Thursday the 4th of March, between two and three o'clock, he came with a great coat and waistcoat to sell. I bought them of him for 7 s. I produce them. He came back again with some

4 Bates and Carter, 'Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels,' 67–92. Sheik himself was referred to years later as a 'lascar'.

5 'Interior Discovery,' *The Australian* (Sydney, NSW: 1824–1848) 19 July 1833, 1.

6 Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 4 November 2012), April 1824, Trial of SHEIK BROWNE (t18240407-72).

7 England & Wales, Criminal Registers, 1791–1892. Class: HO 26; Piece: 30; Page: 13 (NAUK); Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, Chapter XXV (ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/d/dickens/charles/d54sb/chapter32.html).

8 Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 4 November 2012), April 1824, Trial of SHEIK BROWNE (t18240407-72).

things in a towel, and asked if I could get them washed; he had a pair of breeches, a pair of gaiters, five gloves, and a towel. I said I would wash them for nothing, as I had bought the other things. I gave them to the officer on Friday.⁹

John Dawson, an apprentice pawnbroker, claimed to have ‘two coats which the prisoner pawned on the 4th of March in the evening for 8 s., in the name of Jack Brown’. Sheik tried to sell ‘three waistcoats and a pair of trowsers’ to David Gidgeon, and Gidgeon’s suspicions were raised when ‘he [Sheik] said he wanted money, and had no use for them’. Gidgeon handed them over to James Beechley, the man tracking down the stolen property, and who had already collected the stolen property from Mrs Towns. Beechley told the court, ‘When I apprehended the prisoner I found 17 s. 6 d. sewed up in his drawers. I had asked if he had any money – he said he had only 2 d.’. The combined value of all the items Sheik had stolen was 101 shillings, an estimated modern equivalent of £5,000.¹⁰ Indeed, the theft was deemed serious enough for Sheik, aged only 22, to be sentenced to death. This, along with the other court proceedings, was communicated to him via a translator, and no doubt came as a shock regardless of what language he understood. However, in this case being a ‘foreigner’ counted in his favour, with him ‘Recommended to Mercy’ on account of ‘being a foreigner’. Sheik was seemingly not yet out from the shadow of death, for the *London Times* on 15 April 1824 reported that Sheik and several other convicts were brought before a judge who sentenced them to death, issuing them a stern warning that not all their petitions for mercy could be agreed to and that ‘if any of them received a transmutation of their sentence, it would still be on the condition (which might be considered a hard one under other circumstances) of their final separation from their country and friends’. The judge recommended that:

Whatever might be the result of the petitions of their friends here, there was a throne at which petitions for mercy were never offered in vain. He therefore implored them to consider the awful situation in which they stood, having now forfeited their lives, and lose no time in making their peace with Heaven.¹¹

Sheik Brown was seemingly one of the lucky ones who was afforded mercy, as his sentence was, instead, reduced to transportation for life.

Aboard the convict ship *Asia*, Sheik left England behind, destined for New South Wales. Although he must have picked up at least some rudimentary English, it is easy to imagine the whole thing must have been confusing and terrifying. Arriving in April 1825, Sheik Brown landed in Sydney just over a year after his original conviction. Once Sheik and the other convicts landed they were posted out on assignment, probably ending up as personal servants.

9 Ibid.

10 Bates and Carter, ‘Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels,’ 67–92.

11 *The Times* (London, England) Friday 16 April 1824, 3, Issue 12314.

The next record puts him in the household of Mr George Tomlins, by whom he was accused of 'stealing various articles of wearing apparel, a brace of pistols, and an umbrella'.¹² An early Sydney paper, *The Australian*, reported the case:

The prisoner had been left in charge of prosecutor's house on the 16th of November last, and took that opportunity to carry off the property in question. When apprehended some of the clothes were found on his person, the remainder had been left at the house of Clara Parsons, in Phillip-street.¹³

As a result of this new colonial conviction, Sheik was 'transported' for another seven years and, as a reoffender or recidivist, sent to Moreton Bay, in what would later become the state of Queensland.¹⁴ Sheik Brown, as prisoner number 757, next makes an appearance in the Chronological Register of Convicts in June 1826.¹⁵ The Chronological Register of Convicts described him as a man of a fraction over 5 feet tall, with a 'copper colour' complexion and black hair.

A frequent absconder, Sheik Brown certainly seems to have done his very best to avoid the penal settlement at Moreton Bay. Within only a few days he had run away, living in the bush surrounding the settlement for eight days.¹⁶ The punishment for absconding was flogging, with some prisoners receiving over 200 lashes, as recorded in the Book of Trials kept by the officials of the settlement.¹⁷ This punishment and the hardships of his experience of the bush seem to have initially, at least, warded Sheik off any another immediate attempts at absconding. His next recorded escape was in not until 1828, when he disappeared for over six months.¹⁸ In 1829 he disappeared for 12 days, and in 1830 left the settlement for over two years, living in an area called 'Big River'.¹⁹ Sheik later reported that this large river where he principally stopped was 'called by the natives Brimbo, and by some Berin'.²⁰ Reports came back from other runaways that Sheik, now known by reputation as 'Black Jack', had provided them hospitality. One such report was from runaway convict James McCarnie, who recounted how he discovered Black Jack in an Aboriginal camp and stayed with him for a week, learning that Jack was planning on returning to Moreton Bay after he believed his sentence had expired.²¹

12 'Criminal Court. (Friday),' *The Australian* (Sydney, NSW: 1824–1848) 26 January 1826, 3.

13 TRIAL R v Sheik Brown [1826] NSWSupC8, Macquarie University Law School (www.law.mq.edu.au/research/colonial_case_law/nsw/cases/case_index/1826/r_v_sheik_brown/).

14 'Supreme Criminal Court,' *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* (NSW: 1803–1842) 11 February 1826, 3.

15 Series 5653, Chronological Register of Convicts 1824–1839 (QSA).

16 Maimie O'Keefe, 'The Runaway Convicts of Moreton Bay,' *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland* 10:1 1976: 67.

17 Item ID 1137540, Convict book of trials (1835–1842). Commandant's Office, Moreton Bay (QSA).

18 O'Keefe, 'The Runaway Convicts of Moreton Bay,' 67.

19 Ibid.

20 'Colonial Politics,' *The Colonist* (Sydney, NSW: 1835–1840) 17 December 1835, 2.

21 Ibid., 1.

But it was not just Sheik who had been extending hospitality. During his time away, he seems to have been befriended by the local Aboriginal people. Unlike other runaway convicts whom the Aborigines often returned to the penal settlement in exchange for rewards like blankets and axes, Sheik seems to have been more successful in forming an enduring relationship with them, cohabiting with them in their camps for long periods of time. It appears that both Sheik and another absconder, George Brown, who was from Ceylon, had Aboriginal wives with whom they had families.²²

By 1832, the colonial authorities were unhappy that 'Black Jack' continued to evade his punishment. In August, William Dalton, himself a Moreton Bay absconder, was sent from Port Macquarie with the task of bringing in Black Jack.²³ Dalton seems to have done his job, because two days after his return, Sheik turned himself in at Port Macquarie.²⁴ His useful information about the abundance of raw materials like wood, salt, stone and food seems to have calmed the wrath of the Chief Magistrate, who made him one of his servants.²⁵ In writing to the Governor, he stated that Sheik had returned voluntarily, in exchange for a promise that he would not be returned to Moreton Bay 'in consequence of the Prisoner being an unfortunate Black from Bombay and unaccustomed to mess with Europeans'.²⁶ The Governor took a dim view of this, responding to the Chief Magistrate that he should act in the same way he would treat any absconder.²⁷ By this point, however, it was already too late, as Sheik had already fled once more from the colony.

Sheik Brown, meanwhile, planned a cunning return, taking on a new persona in an attempt to avoid capture. Picked up near Port Stevens by a passing schooner, he pretended to be a shipwrecked sailor by the name of Jose Koondiana, who professed to have travelled with the aid of Aborigines across the continent from New Holland (Western Australia) where his ship, *The Fanny*, had been wrecked. Sheik's thoroughly detailed, if slightly fanciful tales of his travels, based mainly on his experiences living around 'Big River', managed to convince lots of people, including the Bench of Magistrates in Newcastle, that he really was who he claimed to be. Communicating through French and a translator understanding 'hindustanee', Sheik seems to have taken in one 'gentleman at Newcastle' in particular, who in a letter published by *The Sydney Herald*, proclaimed the 'interior discovery' of the big river by Koondiana. He also wrote that he had satisfied himself in the belief that 'he has no desire to mislead,

22 Ray Evans, *Fighting Words: Writing About Race* (St Lucia, QLD: Queensland University Press, 1999), 74–75.

23 O'Keefe, 'The Runaway Convicts of Moreton Bay,' 67.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid. No citation given, but most likely in Colonial Secretaries correspondence.

27 Ibid.

nor any pre-conceived fancies or schemes to uphold by the information he gives'.²⁸ The *Herald's* editorial seemed far more sceptical, noting the odd stories coming out of the area.²⁹ Though the name of the letter's author was withheld, a likely contender would be one of the magistrates, Dr Brooks, who not only took in Sheik as a servant, but also refused to give credence to suggestions that Koondiana was not who he said he was. But the game was well and truly given up when Mark Fletcher, a servant of the Australian Agricultural Company who had worked for some time in Moreton Bay, positively identified Koondiana as the absconding convict Sheik Brown.³⁰ From Newcastle, Sheik was sent to Sydney where he awaited judgment in the prison hulk *Phoenix*.³¹

Brown's case was not straightforward as there were arguments made that his sentence had expired, while others, who were no doubt embarrassed, advocated for plans to send him to Norfolk Island. In the end, however, a petition signed in Brown's own hand, addressed to the Governor, was successful, to the extent that in May 1834 it was decided by the authorities to return him to Moreton Bay.³² It is not quite clear why this happened, but the legal discussions held between the Colonial Secretary, the Governor and the Attorney-General all seem to suggest that there were conflicting views over the status of his ongoing sentence – and this seemed the best solution.

Back in Moreton Bay in 1836, however, Sheik was soon back to his old tricks, as he absconded in June.³³ The following year, he absconded twice, once in January by himself and again in April, this time with George Brown.³⁴ In a letter to the Colonial Secretary, the new commandant, Captain Foster Fyans, noted that he had taken a far more proactive approach to the 'apprehension of the runaways', including the likes of Sheik Brown, writing:

I promised the Natives some reward, if they would accompany any Leut. Officer in the Boat on the same way that Offer and Mr Whyte to with the Boats Crew, left this and proceeded round Bribey Island, directed by the Natives, after a direction of some form, with considerable difficulty and fatigue, I am happy to say, the party fully succeeded in securing the four Runaways from this settlement.³⁵

The archives regarding Sheik go quiet after this, until 1842, when he was issued with a ticket of leave in Parramatta, NSW. Initially, the ticket of leave only gave him permission to remain in the district of Parramatta. It was later altered

28 'Interior Discovery,' *The Sydney Herald* (NSW: 1831–1842) 18 July 1833, 2.

29 Ibid.

30 CS Ref 33/05498 and O'Keefe, 'The Runaway Convicts of Moreton Bay,' 68.

31 CS Ref 33/06659 A2.8 227–228 (SLQ).

32 CS Ref 33/07365S A28 223–226 (SLQ).

33 Reel A2.8 page 227–228 (SLQ).

34 Item ID869688, Book of Returns – Prisoners (QSA).

35 Reel A2.9 pages 491–492 (SLQ) 37/5416 13th June 1837 – From Commandants Office.

by the magistrates to extend to Moreton Bay in 1844.³⁶ Having spent so much time in the area, possibly because of family connections, it seems natural that Sheik Brown would want to return to Moreton Bay. The next reference to Sheik appears in February 1844, when he was hired by the pastoralist George Gummie at the rate of £15 per annum for a contract of two years.³⁷

The last and final newspaper reference made about Sheik is fleeting and macabre. In a letter to *The Moreton Bay Courier*, it was grimly revealed that 'Sheik Brown and a bullock-driver were killed by the natives within thirty miles of the settlement' and that their 'bones are now bleaching near the road to Messrs. Joyner and Masons station on the Pine River'.³⁸ There the story would probably have ended, if it was not for *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland*.³⁹ Written by his daughter Constance from his stories, Tom Petrie's *Reminiscences* were published in 1904, and later serialised in *The Queenslander*. After emigrating with his family from Edinburgh as a child, Tom Petrie grew up with and played with the local Aboriginal children, eventually learning the language of Turrabul and participating in their Turrabul traditional customs, including going on a 'walkabout' aged only 14.⁴⁰ As a result of his close relationship with the Moreton Bay Aboriginal people, he came to know many of their stories, including the story of Sheik Brown. According to Petrie, he learnt the story of 'Shake Brown', or Marridaio as he was known to Aboriginal people, during a corroboree of the Turrabul people.⁴¹ Through song and dance they told the story of Marridaio, who had stolen away one of their young women Kulkarawa:

A prisoner, a coloured man (an Indian), Shake Brown by name, stole a boat, and making off down the bay, took with him this Kulkarawa, without her people's immediate knowledge or consent. The boat was blown out to sea, and eventually the pair were washed ashore at Noosa Head — or as the blacks called it then, 'Wantima', which meant 'rising up', or 'climbing up'. They got ashore all right with just a few bruises, though the boat was broken to pieces. After rambling about for a couple of days, they came across a camp of blacks, and these latter took Kulkarawa from Shake Brown, saying that he must give her up, as she was a relative of theirs; but he might stop with them and they would feed him.⁴²

36 Series: NRS 12202; Item: [4/4165]; Reel: 945 (NSWSA).

37 Maurice French, *A Pastoral Romance: The Tribulation and Triumph of Squatterdom* (Toowoomba, Queensland: USQ Press, 1990), vol. 2, 36.

38 'Local Intelligence,' *Moreton Bay Courier* (Brisbane, Qld: 1846–1861) 6 February 1847, 2.

39 Tom and Constance Campbell Petrie, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland*, 1st ed. (Brisbane: Watson, Ferguson & Co., 1904).

40 Noeline V. Hall, 'Petrie, Thomas (Tom) (1831–1910),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/petrie-thomas-tom-4395/text7163, accessed 5 March 2013.

41 'Sketcher,' *The Queenslander* (Brisbane, Qld: 1866–1939) 18 Oct 1902: 847; Tom and Constance Campbell Petrie, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland*, 1st ed. (Brisbane: Watson, Ferguson & Co., 1904), 25–27.

42 Ibid.

When Sheik left this tribe and Kulkarawa behind, however, heading off to Brisbane, he got into trouble when he was confronted by members of the Turrabul tribe:

He got on to the old Northern Road going to Durundur, and followed it towards Brisbane. Coming at length to a creek which runs into the North Pine River, there, at the crossing, were a number of Turrabul blacks, who, recognising him, knew that he was the man who had stolen Kulkarawa. They asked what he had done with her, and he replied that the tribe of blacks he had fallen in with had taken her from him, and that she was now at the bon-yi gathering with them. But this, of course, did not satisfy the feeling for revenge that Shake Brown had roused when he took off the young gin from her people, and they turned on him and killed him, throwing his body into the bed of the creek at the crossing.⁴³

When people travelling on their way to Durundur came across Brown's body they reported their grim findings to Brisbane, and named the creek Brown's Creek. Located near Kurwongbah, Brown's Creek and the Brown's Creek Road still bear his name. Kulkarawa remained with the Noosa tribe, performing songs about how she missed her own tribe. Tom Petrie recounts how he was there when, after two years, Kulkarawa was brought home:

the parents of the young gin, and all her friends, started crying for joy when they saw her, keeping the cry going for some ten minutes in a chanting sort of fashion, even as they do when mourning for the dead. Then a regular talking match ensued, and Kulkarawa was told all that had happened during her absence, including the finding and murder of Shake Brown (or 'Marri-dai-o' the blacks called him), on his way to Brisbane. Then she told her news, and Father heard afterwards again from her own lips of her experiences.⁴⁴

From this remarkable record, we find the truly final reference made to Sheik Brown, who after all his years of friendly coexistence with the Aboriginal people, broke their customs and died at their hands after taking away one of their young women.

Despite being fragmentary, the archival records, particularly the rich digital archives of newspapers and other early materials, reveal the surprisingly varied and remarkable life of Sheik Brown – a character who by almost every measure effaces the stereotypical image of the Australian convict. Escaping death narrowly in London, he went on to lead the life of a convict and a runaway. Never settling in one place, he left traces of his life across early colonial Queensland and Australia. His relationships with the colonial authorities, other convicts, free settlers and Aboriginal people provide a fascinating glimpse into the interactions, lives and experiences of the period. Seen broadly, his story gives some illustration of the large complex tides of global history – which buffet narrow conceptions of our

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

history as just 'Australian' or 'British' in demonstrating the myriad intersections and movements of cultures and peoples. But for all of this, in spite of what we do know of this man of many names – Sheik Brown, Black Jack, Jose Koondiana and Marridaio – and apart from his yearning desire for freedom, there remain gaps and mysteries in the story of his life waiting to be uncovered.

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