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**Utopian futures and imagined pasts
in the ambivalent modernism of the Kibbo Kift Kindred**

Annebella Pollen, University of Brighton, UK

As one of a number of progressive English open-air organisations founded in the 1920s, the little-remembered Kindred of the Kibbo Kift had radical ideas for the making of a new society, in their case, based on world peace, handicrafts and camping. Combining elements from an eclectic range of influences, from esoteric spirituality to back-to-the-land impulses, the organisation, under the director of its charismatic leader, artist and author John Hargrave, was more than just another manifestation of the 'simple life' movement. With wide-ranging ambitions including extensive educational and economic reform, Kinsfolk committed themselves to the creation of a new world, combining historical enthusiasms with a notable modernist aesthetic. For the purposes of this chapter, the group's particular entanglement in the complex temporalities of modernity

forms a central focus for analysis. Described as both modernist and antimodernist in retrospective appraisals, Kibbo Kift were themselves split between yearnings for primitive experience – always rooted in a static sense of frozen time past – and the various utopian futures that they desired to bring into being. With H.G. Wells on the advisory committee, and as self-styled “Intellectual Barbarians”¹, Kibbo Kift were equally backwards-looking and forward-thinking, combining imagined histories with futurist fantasies.

Kibbo Kift’s historicism drew freely from the chivalry of Arthurian legend, Anglo-Saxon myth and prehistoric religion, and manifested itself in the use of Old English terminology, the reinterpretation of folkloric traditions from handicraft to mumming, and the veneration of archaeological sites. These historical compass points simultaneously coexisted with a palpable hunger for new directions; as Hargrave put it, “The Kin is always experimenting with new ideas because it considers this civilisation to be past its zenith and on the decline”.² As will be discussed, the group’s futurism was most visible in their distinctive material culture, which reveals an eclectic range of aesthetic influences informed by Hargrave’s personal taste in avant-garde art and his professional background in advertising. Across Kibbo Kift’s striking insignia, regalia and dress, styles borrowed from

¹ “Great Missenden: The 'Kibbo Kift'. Meeting of a new Kindred who aim at a race of Intellectual Barbarians”, *Daily Sketch Topical Budget Newsreel*, London 1923.

² Hargrave, John, *The Confession of the Kibbo Kift*, Glasgow 1979 [1925], 20.

cubism, constructivism and Vorticism interweave with mythological motifs and occult symbolism.

This chapter disentangles the temporal complexities of its case study through examining the contemporaneous cultural and theoretical ideas that underpinned the group's idealistic vision, and which were expressed in organisational literature, design, illustration and artefacts. From their adaptation of Ernst Haeckel's recapitulation theory to the application of ideas from utopian fiction and artistic primitivism, Kibbo Kift firstly offer a unique lens through which to view a period pressured with the urgent need to find new solutions following the demolition of the myth of progress brought by the Great War; secondly, they provide a dramatic illustration of the ways in which the conventions of time could be challenged and manipulated in the practice of everyday life within the crucible of (anti)modernism.

Origins and aims

The Kibbo Kift Kindred began as a splinter group of the British Boy Scouts in 1920. John Hargrave [1894-1982], the young, charismatic and autocratic founder of the group, had joined the Scouts in the year of their founding and quickly marked himself out as a striking talent, rising through the ranks and authoring illustrated books on the woodland tracking and trailing aspect of the organisation while still in his teens. Appointed as staff

artist at Scout headquarters by 1914, Hargrave was subsequently made Commissioner for Scouting and Woodcraft under Baden-Powell by the end of the war. Despite his youth, Hargrave achieved high status in the organisation but became increasingly disaffected by what he saw as the shift in scouting towards indoor, paramilitary training that left behind the naturalism, symbolism and adventure that had originally attracted him to join.

Hargrave's harrowing experiences as a stretcher-bearer in the First World War, coupled with his Quaker background, further accelerated his desire to found a alternative group based on pacifist principles and he made concerted efforts to orchestrate a schism to separate those with interests in the rustic, woodcraft side of scouting from the imperialist and militarist ideas of the organisation. Rewarded with expulsion on the grounds of disloyalty, in 1920, Hargrave departed with a group of like-minded individuals in tow to start a new movement with a new direction.³

Aiming for world peace through a somewhat eccentric combination of rambling, camping and arts and crafts, Kibbo Kift took its name from an archaic Cheshire term meaning

³ Previous studies provide useful overviews of the group's founding and aims; these include Drakeford, Mark, *Social Movements and their Supporters: The Green Shirts in England*, Basingstoke 1997; Craven, J. F. C. *Redskins in Epping Forest: John Hargrave, the Kibbo Kift and the Woodcraft Experience*, Unpublished PhD thesis, London 1998; De Abaitua, Matthew, *The Art of Camping: The History and Practice of Sleeping under the Stars*, London 2012.

proof of strength. As an all-ages and notably co-educational organisation, Kibbo Kift was immediately radical and attracted to it a range of notable progressives from its inception. Although its total membership may never have swelled much above a thousand (despite prolific exaggerations to the contrary), well-known novelists, scientists and reformers including Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, Mary Neal, H. G. Wells and D. H. Lawrence, Havelock Ellis, Patrick Geddes and Julian Huxley were amongst its members, sympathisers and advisory council. Kibbo Kift's purposes and interests were eclectic – even bewilderingly wide-ranging - but through a mixture of ambitions for open-air education, world disarmament, social justice, cultural development and spiritual ritual, the organisation aimed to fashion “a new human instrument”, capable of resisting and reforming the ills of an excessively urban “Charlie Chaplin civilisation”.⁴

The models and motifs adopted by the organisation were in part informed by the original inspirations for the scouts – the Red Indianism of Ernest Thompson Seton in particular – but were also inspired by a wider and rather pick-and mix-selection of so-called savage and primitive inspirations inspired by Hargrave's amateur interests in anthropology. These co-existed with a desire to return to a non-specified and somewhat imagined past, inspired by the chivalry of Arthurian legend and Anglo-Saxon myth, ancient Egypt and prehistoric religion. The language of the organisation was steeped in Old English, and the

⁴ Hargrave, *Confession*, 99.

reinterpretation of folkloric traditions from handicraft and mumming to seasonal rituals was core to the group's social reform project.

Backward-looking or forward-thinking?

Given these points of reference, Kibbo Kift could be (and has been) described as antimodern,⁵ for modernism has often been characterised as precisely *not* historicist or embracing of tradition.⁶ T. J. Jackson Lears' use of the term antimodernism posits it a "recoil from an 'overcivilised' modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual existence",⁷ which would fit the organisation very well. It is also true that some elements of Kibbo Kift share characteristics with the rural revival, where a sentimental or spiritual attitude to Old England is seen as a healing antidote to an increasingly urbanised and mechanised life. Reading recommendations for Kibbo Kift members include works by

⁵ Trentmann, Frank, "Civilization and Its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-Century Western Culture", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29, 1994, 583-625.

⁶ See, for example, Wilk, Christopher, "Introduction: What was Modernism?" in Christopher Wilk (Ed.), *Modernism: Designing a New World*, London 2006, 12.

⁷ Lears, T. J. Jackson, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, New York 1981, xv.

Edward Carpenter, Richard Jeffries and Henry David Thoreau that fit with this nature-mystic tradition.

Yet, antimodernism, as Lynda Jessup conceptualises it, encapsulates “the pervasive sense of loss that often coexisted in the decades around the turn of the century along with an enthusiasm for modernization and material progress”. As she puts it, antimodernism is “often ambivalent and Janus-faced [...]. It describes what was in effect a critique of the modern, a perceived lack in the present manifesting itself not only in a sense of alienation, but also in a longing for the types of physical or spiritual experience embodied in utopian futures and imagined pasts”.⁸ Tim Armstrong perhaps encapsulates it best when he notes, “Modernism is in fact characterised by a series of seeming contradictions: both a rejection of the past and a fetishisation of certain earlier periods; both primitivism and a defence of civilisation against the barbarians; both enthusiasm for the technological and fear of it”.⁹ In a pertinent statement that can be productively applied to Kibbo Kift’s ambivalent Carpenteresque attitudes to civilisation as disease, Armstrong

⁸ Jessup, Lynda, “Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: An Introduction”, in Lynda Jessup (Ed.), *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity*, Toronto 2001, 3.

⁹ Armstrong, Tim, *Modernism: A Cultural History*, Cambridge 2005, 5.

argues that “modernity and anti-modernity as pathology and cure are bound together *within* the field of the modern”.¹⁰

Utopian futurism

As well as being backwards-looking, Kibbo Kift was also hungry for the new. Due to its dynamic coexistence with its historical enthusiasms, the organisation’s utopian futurism is one of its most intriguing aspects. “The aim of the Kibbo Kift Kindred, expressed in a phrase”, as one member put it, “is to bring about Utopian conditions upon earth”.¹¹ As such, the group felt strong connections to utopian writings. Hargrave’s novels are often framed as fictional searches for solutions to social problems that map closely onto Kibbo Kift thinking. In 1927’s *The Pfenniger Failing*, for example, the protagonist explores historical utopias as models for new societies and thus reveals Hargrave’s extensive knowledge of the literature, from Plato and Bacon to Campanella and More.¹² These contexts were applied to Kibbo Kift publications, where direct comparisons were drawn between the organisation and imagined futures, such as William Morris’ *News from Nowhere*. The 1890 book’s English utopia was described by Hargrave as “a far off dream

¹⁰ Armstrong, *Modernism*, 4.

¹¹ Blue Swift [I. O. Evans], “Book Here: Books for a Kibbo Kift Library. ‘Men Like Gods’ by H. G. Wells”, *The Nomad*, September 1923, 45.

¹² Hargrave, John, *The Pfenniger Failing*, London 1927.

to William Morris, and it is still a far off dream, but it is a dream that is slowly and painfully coming true.” In a temporally complex claim, he stated in 1923, “William Morris, in the vivid vision of his imagination, foresaw the coming of the Kibbo Kift”.¹³

Perhaps the utopian futurist author of most significance to Kibbo Kift was H. G. Wells, as both the most popular novelist in Britain in the 1920s and the biggest name on the group’s advisory committee. Reviews of his works regularly appeared in the pages of the organisation’s magazines, including *Men like Gods*, where Kinsman I. O. Evans, under his Kin name Blue Swift,¹⁴ noted that the world Wells described “is, in short, the kind of world we of the Kibbo Kift are trying to create. [...] certainly it corresponds to the ideal of life of an earthling Kibbo Kifter”.¹⁵ Much the same is suggested of Wells’ *The Dream* of 1924. Members are told to be encouraged by “the resemblance between the characteristics that he attributes to those Citizens of the Future and the methods of the Kibbo Kift of to-day”:

¹³ White Fox [John Hargrave], “William Morris foretells The Kibbo Kift”, *The Nomad*, March 1923, 129-130.

¹⁴ Members of the Kibbo Kift adopted ‘Kin names’ to be used in place of legal names, often drawn from myth or natural history, as part of their ambitions for a more picturesque and egalitarian society.

¹⁵ Blue Swift, “Books”, 45.

They live in that state of world peace and brotherhood which it is our aim to create. Even in details the resemblance holds, for these Folk of To-morrow abjure clothing, and, so far as Mrs. Grundy [figurative term for conventional manners] will allow, do we. The very names given by Mr. Wells to his heroes are like unto ours – Sunray, Radiant, Starlight, Willow, Firefly, are names that would appear appropriate on the Great Roll of the Kin. Let the hard-worked Kinsman therefore read ‘The Dream,’ and so obtain renewed energy in his unwearied struggle from this world to that which is to come.¹⁶

The link to Wells was also exploited for the purposes of recruitment; letters to the press, for example, riding on the back of Wells’ publications, suggested Kibbo Kift as the means by which such dreams could be brought to life. One such example, following the publication of *The Open Conspiracy*, reads:

I wonder how many of your readers who, like me, are stirred by his utterances to a desire for action, know of the movement called the 'Kindred of the Kibbo Kift'? [...] its object is, roughly, to weld its members, by self-training, into a human

¹⁶ Blue Swift, “The Dream”, *The Nomad*, September 1924, 191-2.

instrument towards just such a 'World Revolution' as Mr. Wells's 'Blue Prints' outline.¹⁷

The Pfenniger Failing is run through with references to a wide range of Wells' novels, showing Hargrave's extensive familiarity with his oeuvre. Of all Wells' fictional works, however, the strongest model for Kibbo Kift ideals can be found in the New Samurai of Wells' *A Modern Utopia* of 1905. Various described by critics at its reception and after as the most plausible and most important of utopias, its vision has also been described as "quintessentially modern".¹⁸ Its popularity was broad-ranging and a number of progressive groups in the early years of the 20th century sought to fit themselves into the philosophical model of its fictional "voluntary elite" as thinking persons, committed to hardihood, teetotalism and austerity, in pursuit of their "better selves". Yet in their withdrawal from civilisation on a regular basis for the purposes of renewal armed only with a backpack, the New Samurai share particularly striking parallels with Kibbo Kift, not least to their camping practices.

¹⁷ Mrs. C. S. Chapman, Undated newspaper cutting, 1928, cuttings file, Kibbo Kift collections, Museum of London.

¹⁸ Kumar, Krishan, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, Oxford 1987, 192. See Kumar also for an account of the book's critical reception.

Of all attempts to apply Wells' vision, Kibbo Kift appear the most comprehensive in its embodiment; their utopian vision was so total that all aspects of life were redrawn in pursuit of its achievement, even down to their striking clothing styles, an aspect of the group which has received surprisingly little attention to date.¹⁹ The costume of the Utopians of Wells' world are said to evoke the Knights Templar;²⁰ even outside of "the radiated influence of the uniform of the samurai", dress was dominated by woollen tunics and robes in bright colours and simple shapes, or "costumes of rough woven cloth, dyed an unobtrusive brown or green".²¹ Both these aspects of attire (or 'habit', as they preferred to call it) appear in Kibbo Kift modes of dress. The varied camp, council, ceremonial and exercise costumes of the Kin betray too eclectic a range of stylistic influences - from Sherwood Forest hooded jerkins and Valkyrie headdresses to Constructivist sportswear - to be read as a straight transposition. Nonetheless, a Wellsian aesthetic as well as a philosophy forms a key part of Kibbo Kift's visual repertoire.

The next stage of history

¹⁹ A section of one chapter provides the only illustrated assessment of Kibbo Kift's artistic output in Ross, Cathy, *Twenties London: A City in the Jazz Age*, London 2003.

²⁰ Wells, H. G., *A Modern Utopia*, London 2005 [1905], 110.

²¹ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 208-9.

Idrisyn Oliver Evans was a particularly vocal exponent of Kibbo Kift's utopian potential. As an amateur geologist and historian, Evans was keenly interested in the long view of the past but he combined these interests with a professional interest in scientific romances and technological predictions.²² In his insightful overview of the woodcraft movement, published in 1930, he explained the centrality of both history and futurism to the Kibbo Kift:

In the early days of the Kindred the *Outline of History* [by H. G. Wells] was just appearing, with its new vision of human development as one great inter-related process. A little later appeared *Men Like Gods*, that best and most convincing Utopia that has ever been written. With the inspiration drawn from these two books the first Kinsmen set about their work. We tried to spread and to live in the light of the World Ideal, to make ourselves citizens of the 'Next Stage in History' [the title of Wells' last chapter in *Outline*].²³

²² I. O. Evans was later to become the principal translator of Jules Verne's scientific romances into English.

²³ Evans, I. O., *Woodcraft and World Service*, London 1930, 70-1.

Wells' potted world history was "immediately and overwhelmingly successful" on its first publication in 1919 and by 1922 had sold over a million copies.²⁴ Its broad sweep of time and international outlook provided a companion for Kibbo Kift's historical enthusiasms, at each stage justified by Wells' evolutionary biology. His popular teleological account – written as much for the understanding of the present-day of 1922 as it was an account of the past - repeatedly emphasises the transformational role of 'the nomad' in shaping world history, and concludes:

Our history has told of a repeated overrunning and refreshment of the originally brunet civilisations by these hardier, bolder, free-spirited peoples of the steppes and desert. We have pointed out how these constantly recurring nomadic injections have steadily altered the primordial civilisations both in blood and spirit; and how the world religions of to-day, and what we now call democracy, the boldness of modern scientific enquiry and a universal restlessness, are to this 'nomadization' of civilisation. The old civilisations created tradition and lived by tradition. To-day the power of tradition is destroyed. The body of our state is civilisation still, but its spirit is the spirit of the nomadic world.²⁵

²⁴ Ross, William T., *H. G. Wells's World Reborn: The Outline of History and its Companions*, Selinsgrove 2002, 13.

²⁵ Wells, H. G., *The Outline of History*, New York 1922 [1920].

In Evans' revisions to Wells' work, in his simplified and abbreviated 1932 *Junior Outline of History* for children, he takes the model of the nomad even further, and explicitly links it to woodcraft activities:

Throughout history, stagnant civilisations have been revived by nomad conquerors. The world community of the future, safe from outside raids, will have to become nomad itself to avoid the evils of stagnation. Already civilised folk are taking to the nomad life, wandering and exploring and seeing the world [...]. The people of a more advanced world will be civilised nomads, getting all the advantages of both the wandering and settled lives.²⁶

The final image in Evans' book is taken from *The Folk Trail*, written by former Kibbo Kift member (and founder of the seceding organisation, The Woodcraft Folk), Leslie Paul.²⁷ Entitled 'Hikers: The Nomads of the Modern World', the photograph depicts two figures, complete with backpack and staff, following a lane towards a wooded horizon. As this image and its positioning makes visual, the path to the future will be a trail laid by historically-informed progressives.

²⁶ Evans, I. O., *The Junior Outline of History*, London 1932, 260-261.

²⁷ Paul, Leslie A., *The Folk Trail: An Outline of the Philosophy and Activities of Woodcraft Fellowships*, London 1929.

Temporal complexities and aesthetics

In *The Confession of the Kibbo Kift*, perhaps the fullest elaboration of the organisation's philosophy, the group's distinctive temporal position is reinforced by Hargrave. Despite the popular conception of the press, Hargrave insisted, "The Kindred is certainly not a 'back to nature' movement"²⁸ and went on to argue, "It cannot look back for an historic counterpart, it is a new thing".²⁹ He describes the group as among those "innovators [who] proclaim themselves the guardians of an ancient tradition and are therefore acting as conservators of something good and right which has been lost. They do not wish to 'go back', but rather to reinterpret the spirit of the past in such a way as to bring it into line with modern conditions".³⁰ He goes on to explain that there are "Two tendencies [that] show themselves clearly in the civilised world today: a going back to Simple Things (a Tolstoy-Ruskin-Morris concept), and a going on to a Mechanised Simplicity (as advocated by Trotsky, and satirised by Capek). One school would have us a haymaker's wooden rake, and the other a 'clocking in' key."³¹ Kibbo Kift, however, suggested that a combination of the two was preferable, for mechanisation was, perhaps unexpectedly, part of their pastoral vision. For Hargrave, mass-electrification, the harnessing of

²⁸ Hargrave, *Confession*, 76.

²⁹ Hargrave, *Confession*, 51.

³⁰ Hargrave, *Confession*, 37.

³¹ Hargrave, *Confession*, 48-49.

mechanisation as a means of liberating workers from drudgery, and even a machine aesthetic co-existed fairly seamlessly with love for all things Arthurian and archaeological. Although its models were drawn from the past, they were always revisions: “a New Gulliver, a New Robinson Crusoe, a New Aesop, a New Don Quixote, a New Red Cross Knight”.³²

As I have indicated, this newness manifested itself most particularly in the group’s visual style, which encompassed an extraordinary wide range of media, from cartoons and printed posters and applied banners to totemic sculpture and painted tent decoration, alongside a diverse range of original costume and ceremonial regalia. Across this disparate material a distinctive aesthetic emerges, underpinned by an abstracted, futuristic vision that is recognisably modernist [Figure 1]. Hargrave was a talented artist. Describing himself as “born and bred in a studio”,³³ he was the son of a landscape painter and found his first employment selling cartoons and illustrations while barely into his teens. In addition to the income generated by the sale of his non-fiction and (sometimes

³² Hargrave, *Confession*, 50.

³³ Hargrave, John, *At Suvla Bay: Being the notes and sketches of scenes, characters and adventures of the Dardanelles Campaign*, London 1916, 13.

formally experimental) fiction writing,³⁴ Hargrave supported himself during the interwar period through his role as a commercial artist, including, notably, a longstanding appointment with Carlton, a large and innovative advertising agency who boasted an art gallery on the premises and sold their services under a self-consciously artistic and 'modern' claims.³⁵

³⁴ For analysis of Hargrave's fiction writing in the 1930s, when he had transformed Kibbo Kift into a political economic organisation, the Green Shirts, see Armstrong, Tim, "Social Credit Modernism", *Critical Quarterly*, 55, 2013, 2, 50-65.

³⁵ Carlton ran advertisements emphasising their modern and artistic aspects throughout the 1920s in *The Advertising World* and *Advertisers Weekly*.

Fig. 1 Kindred of the Kibbo Kift members at camp, 1928. Image courtesy of Judge Smith, Kibbo Kift Foundation.

Despite Hargrave's vocal resistance to urban commercial culture – and his eagerness to bite the hand that fed him – the effects of his profession undoubtedly informed the methods of his organisation, from the incorporation of a range of propaganda techniques, including snappy verbal slogans and performance 'stunts', to the modernist elements in Kibbo Kift's visual style. Hargrave's writings demonstrate knowledge of and admiration for contemporaneous artistic movement and styles from Dada to the Ballet Russes alongside the commercial cubism of graphic designers such as Edward McKnight Kauffer. Echoes of artists including Jacob Epstein and Wyndham Lewis, whose work Hargrave knew and admired in the London Group, can be traced in the geometrical dynamism and aggressive abstractions of Kibbo Kift's striking illustrations and graphic design [Figs 2 and 3]. While never at the centre of an avant-garde artistic or modernist coterie – nor ever desiring to be – Hargrave's wide range of contacts meant that he came to the attention (even if not always favourably) of a range of writers and artists, from D. H. Lawrence, W. H. Auden and Augustus John, each of whom decisively fit modernist frames of reference.

Fig. 2 John Hargrave, Spring Festival Hike illustration, 1927. Image courtesy of London School of Economics Library and the Kibbo Kift Foundation.

Fig. 3 John Hargrave illustration of a kinsman for Kin Psalter, 1928. Image courtesy of Jon Tacey.

Within his own organisation, Hargrave was also surrounded by a range of talented, if lesser-known artists including Winifred Tuckfield, founder member of the Knox Guild of Design and Craft, and Angus McBean, the photographer who would later become celebrated for his surrealist theatre portraits. In particular, as one of several dress reformers in the organisation, Hargrave's designs for clothing display a desire for the theatrical cutting edge. Tall, conical hats, two-tone skirts split to the crotch, cubist volumes and geometrical patterning in bold colour blocks compete, in their uncompromising vision and execution, with contemporaneous costume design of European avant-gardes, from Oskar Schlemmer for the Bauhaus to Tullio Crali of the

Italian Futurists [Fig. 4]. Whether Kibbo Kift's artistic output can be considered as innovations, parallel practices or amateur adaptations of these better-known ideas merits further attention.³⁶ Certainly modernist elements represent only one ingredient of the group's visual style and purpose; overall the result is a hybrid aesthetic that draws from a broad range of historical and geographical inspirations.

³⁶ For further detail on the role of art and design in Kibbo Kift, see Pollen, Annebella, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians*, London, 2015.

Fig. 4 John Hargrave design for a Gleeman's surcoat in red, green, yellow and black, 1929.

Image courtesy of Jon Tacey.

Primitive occupations and tribal training

Art and design was important to Kibbo Kift not just because of Hargrave's professional background and his desire for eye-catching propaganda for an outlandish organisation. Handicraft, in particular, was given a central role in group policy and practices and was seen to offer a particular value as a so-called primitive occupation. For Hargrave, one of the central ways in which the problems of degenerate civilisation – as he described it – could be counteracted, was to adopt elements of what he imagined was savage life. He outlined the scheme he called Natural Reconstruction in a number of his early publications aimed at children and especially boys, with suggestive titles: *Wigwam Papers*, *Totem Talks*, and *Tribal Training*. Hargrave's educational programme was underpinned by the recapitulation theories of educational psychologist G. Stanley Hall. Hall applied an adaptation of Ernst Haeckel's biogenetic law, which proposed that ontogeny (organism growth) recapitulates phylogeny (evolutionary history of the species).³⁷ In Stanley Hall's popular theory, children needed to re-enact a sequence of stages of cultural evolution in order to become fully rounded beings; stages of child

³⁷ Gould, Stephen Jay, *Otogeny and Phylogeny*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1977, 135-147.

development were mapped neatly onto points on a linear understanding of cultural history from primitive to modern:

The child revels in savagery; and if its tribal, predatory, hunting, fishing, fighting, roving, idle, playing proclivities could be indulged in the country and under conditions that now, alas! seem hopelessly ideal, they could conceivably be so organized and directed as to be far more truly humanistic and liberal than all that the best modern school can provide. Rudimentary organs of the soul, now suppressed, perverted, or delayed, to crop out in menacing forms later, would be developed in their season so that we should be immune to them in maturer years³⁸

The application of recapitulation theory to youth training was not an innovation of Kibbo Kift; a number of outdoor and scouting groups in Britain and the US followed the theories for their younger members; indeed, Stephen Jay Gould has argued that recapitulation was pervasive across a range of different disciplines outside of biology, and it “intruded itself into every subject that offered even the remotest possibility of a connection between children of ‘higher’ races and the persistent habits of adult ‘savages’”.³⁹ What Hargrave added, however, was his own interest in artistic primitivism. Together, these

³⁸ Hall, G. Stanley, *Youth: Its Education, Regimen, and Hygiene*. New York 1906, 2.

³⁹ Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, 117.

elements were brought together into a practical method which was particularly visual; the performance that would be enacted would develop what Stanley Hall argued was inherent to the child: its “vivid visual imagination”. As such, “the child may enter upon his heritage from the past, live out each stage of life to its fullest and realize in himself all its manifold tendencies.”⁴⁰ Hargrave expanded on this core principle – “boy is a primitive man”⁴¹ - and used it to model a new solution to the perceived problems of modern life. As he put it, “Primitive man will out; and the mind of man still harks back to the natural and the free, even though the body be confined and crippled by the unnatural servitude of our civilisation.”⁴² The resulting encounter between a so-called ‘savage’ – interchangeable with a kind of prehistoric ‘sub-man’, as Wells would have put it - and Kibbo Kift members as forward-looking moderns was repeatedly visualised in a variety of forms in the group’s literature [Fig. 5].

⁴⁰ Hall, *Youth*, 3.

⁴¹ Hargrave, John, *The Great War Brings it Home: The Natural Reconstruction of an Unnatural Existence*, London 1919, 160.

⁴² Hargrave, John, *The Great War Brings it Home*, 305.

Fig. 5 Kibbo Kift cartoon by John Hargrave, 1927. Personal collection of Annebella Pollen.

Hargrave's primitivism has been described by Joel Kahn as a "primitive mania", to separate its idealising vision from the more common, denigrating position of "primitive-phobes".⁴³ However, Hargrave's attitude to the motif of the primitive – for that is what it

⁴³ Kahn, Joel S. *Modernity and Exclusion*, London 2001, 35.

is; these are not real people, after all – was ambivalent, to say the least. He noted in 1919:

I do not for a moment overlook the evils of the primitive or savage races of the earth; the disgusting practices of 'head-hunting', cannibalism, torture; their revolting rites and ceremonies; their dirtiness and slovenly ways. [...] I am not trying to uphold the savage as a model of virtue, nor do I advocate a system of slavish imitation. Let us rather evolve an outdoor life of our own, to suit higher conditions, our intellectual instincts, and our own country. [...] In the hope that we may recover something of the skill, cunning and stoic endurance of the savage – in the hope that our youths will fling off the enfeebling swaddling clothes of city habits and city life, the following scheme of Natural Reconstruction is suggested.⁴⁴

The primitivist aspect of Kibbo Kift is worth lingering over in the context of debates about modernist temporality because it is always understood by the group as part of its 'harking back'. As was typical in popular understandings of anthropology in the period, so-called primitive people were understood in parallel with the prehistoric. Such temporal distancing and denial of coevalness to those who are, in fact, contemporaries is of course deeply problematic and has been comprehensively critiqued by a generation of anthropologists following Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other*, yet Kibbo Kift's attitudes

⁴⁴ Hargrave, *The Great War Brings it Home*, 107-8.

to so-called savages were contemporary to their period even if their subjects were not permitted to be.

Fig. 6 Cover of *The Nomad*, Kibbo Kift magazine, 1923. Personal collection of Annebella Pollen

To Kibbo Kift, ancient ways of life were idealised and mythologised, and the reverence for ‘savage ceremony’ intermingled co-temporally with the veneration of sites from

Stonehenge to reputedly ancient English chalk hill figures and fascination with folklore as, after Tylor and Frazer, cultural “survivals”.⁴⁵ Yet what is important to the group as modernists is that this cultural and historical recapitulation was always future-directed. As was noted in an article in Kibbo Kift’s regular newsletter of the mid-1920s, fittingly entitled *The Nomad* [Fig. 6], “The Past is yet alive, and thrilling through us; the Past is not merely ‘at our doors,’ but in us; the Past has made us what we are, as we are making the Future”.⁴⁶ For all of its enthusiasm for the past, however, historical pastiche of any kind was strictly forbidden. As Hargrave put it, “Revival is taboo.”⁴⁷ All of Kibbo Kift’s historical engagement was a reinterpretation, and all their understandings of the past were informed by the latest thinking, whether this was mystical, scientific, or indeed, artistic. As Hargrave wrote in his reflection on modern culture and its antidote, *The Great War Brings it Home*:

Every effete civilisation must crumble away. The only hope is that a new and virile offshoot may arise to strike out a line of its own. [...] nowadays, owing to the fact

⁴⁵ Tylor, Edward B., *Primitive Culture*, London 1871; Frazer, James, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, London 1890.

⁴⁶ Ken-Ea [Mabel Barker], “Discovery. Prehistoric Remains”, *The Nomad*, December 1924, 227.

⁴⁷ Hargrave, John, “Letters to the Kindred”, *The Nomad*, October 1924, 200-201.

that modern civilisation has penetrated throughout the world, there are no 'Barbarians' to sweep us away.

Therefore the cure must be applied internally - and *we must produce the 'Barbarian' stock ourselves.*⁴⁸

To modernise, in Kibbo Kift, one needed nothing less than to go back to the beginnings of prehistoric settled culture, to perform cultural evolution and to re-circuit time.

Conclusion

Although there appears to be a contradiction between Kibbo Kift's desire, in the 1920s, for a Wellsian scientific-technological future and its simultaneous yearning for a primitive utopia, both positions are ultimately modernist. To describe Kibbo Kift's view in this way when it is inflected with a celebration of non-Western small-scale cultures and veneration of the ancient and folkloric - a position which is commonly characterised as anti-modernist - may seem to stretch the concept, not least when modernism is commonly understood as a rejection of the historical and as brought by the experience of Western, urban modernity. Modern and traditional, as relational concepts, are "mutually

⁴⁸ Hargrave, *The Great War Brings it Home*, 21.

constitutive and constituting”;⁴⁹ modernism and antimodernism can be understood as two sides of the same coin. In Kibbo Kift’s world view, the so-called primitive inhabits a culture that is believed to exist outside of modernity; such characterisation, positioning and conceptualisation of cultures is, nonetheless, quintessentially modern. Primitivism is never a simple ‘looking back’; it is only through a particular manipulation of time that contemporary ‘others’ can be made temporally distant and available as mythical motifs.

Fabian has argued, persuasively, that time is a politically and ideologically constructed instrument of power.⁵⁰ Elsewhere, Stephen Kern has used the global standardisation of time at the cusp of the twentieth century, and the related time-space compressions brought by simultaneity, as a heuristic device to encapsulate the experience of modernity. Time was also something of a plaything for Kibbo Kift. 1920 – the date of their founding - became a literal Year Zero in the group’s reworking of the Gregorian calendar, where BC was replaced with KK. Kibbo Kift also proclaimed, as part of their wider Wellsian ambitions for World Peace and World Unity under a World State, a complex system for their own World Time; they even invented and patented a new kind of watch which would tell it.

⁴⁹ Kelley, Robin, “Notes on Deconstructing 'The Folk'”, *American Historical Review* 97, December 1992, 1402.

⁵⁰ Fabian, Johannes, *Time and the Other*, New York 1983, 144.

The innovations that the group made, not least in art and design, but also in their enthusiastic adoption of a range of new ways of thinking, were typical of a period rich with utopian dreams and an urgent need to find new solutions following the post-war destabilisation of the myth of progress. Armstrong has argued that “the dynamization of temporality is one of the defining forms of modernism: past, present and future exist in a relationship of crisis”.⁵¹ Kibbo Kift’s sprawling, complex and paradoxical modernism was marked by dynamic, multiple chronicities as it simultaneously engaged with, rejected and embraced futures, presents and pasts. As such, for all of their future-leaning and past-yearning, their utopian reveries, cultural recapitulations and temporal ruptures, Kibbo Kift were very much of their time.

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⁵¹ Armstrong, *Modernism*, 9.

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