

'The Kibbo Kift must be seen and heard!'

The day starts with a single drum, pulsing. In course comes the morning cry from the Herald in his dramatic cloak: 'All who dwell within this camp, Awake! Arise!' The call to the ceremonial circle is marked by the ritual rhythm of the Tom-Tom Chief, leopard skin thrown over his shoulder, symbols old and new etched into his handmade instrument. Green pointed hoods are pulled up, and kinsfolk gather in silence, awaiting the day's direction. Peewits cry, a whipping wind tussles the trees and leather sandals squeak in the morning dew. Expectation is in the air as the beat marks the bounds of the site. The Headman's strident voice asserts: 'Give ear!'

'How!' Kibbo Kift are on the move; the hiking songs come thick and fast. Marching feet keep pace. One two, one two: a call-and-response pattern, a round, a shouted chorus. The tunes are ancient but the lyrics new; the language old but the message fresh. Through green lanes, they come: a wedge of kinsmen like flying geese, penetrating the landscape with protest song and cryptic banner. Away from industry, the massed bodies become a new machine, stomping out their intention, mile after mile. Spirits remain high as rucksacks become heavy. The road is long and onlookers giggle. But a mandolin leads and the refrain is a defiant retort: 'We are the Kibbo Kift! Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha!'

Back in camp, shadows fall. The central fire is crackling; tin cups of tea chink. Owls are hooting in the hedgerows and a kinsman brings out a gramophone. Kinswomen kick off their shoes and follow the folksong in time; a leap, a swoop, a contorted twist. Shapes from Grecian friezes mix with eurythmic flow in expressionist tension. A skaldic recital follows, with violin and bagpipe, marking the Slaying of Summer. Four attendees sing a dirge to the costumed character as she falls away, felled by Winter and his torch bearers into a blazing funeral pyre. A closing cry at midnight seals the mumming: 'It is done! I have spoken!'

A sharpened flint is found

In a glacial drift;

And the ghost of a voice goes wandering round:

'Kibbo Kift'.

Cries of the unknown past

*Through the tangled ages sift,
Silently echoing, first and last:
'Kibbo Kift'.*

Idealist and utopian, the interwar campers and campaigners who made up the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift left us with a spectacular body of visual material, from costume and carving to protest textiles and graphic propaganda. Yet the pacifist and primitivist action they proposed and practiced should include, according to their leader, *Colour, Shape, Sound and Movement*. Despite the recent revival of interest in the group, the latter forms have received less attention. Although Kibbo Kift meticulously recorded everything they did for the benefit of those who came after, there is a shortage of original sound recordings. Only one minute of silent film has survived. When we listen for Kibbo Kift now, what rings out?

For John Hargrave, Kibbo Kift's Headman, his group's communication should tap the earth's 'undersong'. He noted, 'While I stand on the roadway or on the pavements gray, I hear it in the deep heart's core.... The music, the lilt, is there dumbstruck.' This authentic, enduring message, once articulated, would right all that was wrong in a culture than had gone awry. As kinsman Rolf Gardiner put it:

Civilisation with its own mechanical tempo has no true reverence for the rhythmic mystery which pulses in the earth and the body of man. The alternating recurrence of the seasons, the wheeling of night into day and day into night, the rhythmic dance of the stars across the orchestra of space, the ebb and flow of energy and desire in man's body, and the systole diastole of his heart... The humans must either make peace with the Great Rhythm, or be destroyed; the heart of man must answer systole diastole to the vaster pulsing of the sun from solstice to solstice, the microcosm must reflect the macrocosm, the whole of creation must dance to the rhythm of the universe.

Kibbo Kift believed they had been called to bring a magical message of an enchanted earth to a mechanised age, and they wrote this into their pagan plans for original song and dance. The message – of the need for radical reform in all aspects of cultural life, from education to economics – was designed to be carried through modern methods of promotion, including

slogans, jingles and battle cries, in combination with ‘the time-throb and body-movement of the first primitive hand-clapping’. The Gleemaster, dunce-capped and robotic-shouldered, was the curator of this new form. He prescribed:

Kin Music should break away boldly on its own account. It should leap and laugh, surge, drop to a whispering lull, pick up again, swing round, thunder to its up-bringing climax – or sink, and drop, and fade, and – hold its breath – cry out, and run to earth... Kin Music must not be afraid to let go, to plunge. It must not fear to take on and use any form. It must not shy at syncopation. It must not hold back anywhere for fear of this or that accepted rule of harmony or technique. It must break all rules, its own tradition, its own form. We need the shout of trumpets, the deep grumble of the drums, the high thin voice of the reed, the quiet undersong running like water over rounded pebbles, and the sudden snort of some great saxophonic upheaval.

One hundred years on, the call has finally been answered. I thank the musicians for their creative response to Kibbo Kift’s unrealised promise.

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