

THE KINDRED OF THE KIBBO KIFT

In 1920, a group of disaffected scoutmasters formed an organisation marked by bizarre costumes, esoteric ceremonies and leaders with names like 'Blue Falcon' and 'Deathwatch'. Its mission was to rescue the Western world from its industrialised modern nightmare through a regime of rambling, camping and mysticism. **ANNEBELLA POLLEN** uncovers the weird world of the Kibbo Kift...

If you had happened through the woods and country lanes of the south east of England on any weekend in the 1920s, you could easily have chanced upon a striking group of hikers marching in triangular formation, dressed in hooded cloaks and jerkins in shades of green, brown and grey, singing songs of their own composition under cryptic, colourful banners of abstract design. If you stopped to find out more, you might have been astonished to receive salutations in Anglo-Saxon and the new international language of Esperanto, and to be introduced to men and women with names like Blue Falcon and Batwing. While open-air pursuits such as rambling and camping grew dramatically in popularity in the interwar period, such an encounter would have been as arresting in its own time as it would be in ours, for the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift were no ordinary outdoor enthusiasts. If you were invited back to camp, the sight of members arrayed in futuristic ceremonial garb, alongside the enigmatic symbolism of their hand-decorated tents and their crudely carved totems might have finally convinced you that this was – in the group's own words – a “confraternity” of elites and not “a tennis club”.

What was the Kibbo Kift? John Hargrave, the group's founder-leader, asserted in typically flamboyant style that such a question was ultimately unanswerable, yet



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it was one that needed to be asked again and again by group members as well as strangers. Beginning with the challenge of their unfamiliar name – taken from an antiquarian dictionary of colloquial Cheshire terminology, and meaning ‘proof of strength’ – and continuing into their outlandish visual style and remarkably diverse and ever-shifting purposes and practices, Kibbo Kift's sometimes bewildering aims and methods ranged across health and handicraft, pacifism and propaganda, myth and magic, education and economics. Kibbo Kift was far more than an all-ages, co-educational alternative to the Scouts; the wide range of their interests and the large scale of their ambitions were necessitated, they believed, by the peculiar conditions of their time: so-called civilisation had been corrupted and was on the brink of collapse; the mass ‘mechanised death’ of the Great War had demonstrated the logical outcome of industrial modernisation; dynamic new dreams were needed to overcome the nightmares of early 20th century existence.

While Kibbo Kift was undoubtedly highly idiosyncratic and its numbers relatively small – never rising to many more than a thousand members in total, and never more

LEFT: ‘Diagram Symbolising Thought of Trained Mind’ by John Hargrave, c.1924. FACING PAGE: The ‘Slaying of Summer’ seasonal ceremony, c.1928.





ABOVE LEFT: Ruth Hargrave (Minobi) in Camp Fire dress, in front of a tent bearing an Aleister Crowley inscription. ABOVE CENTRE: Cecil Watt Paul Jones (Old Mole) consecrating Old Sarum banner on the Wessex Pilgrimage, 1929. ABOVE RIGHT: Kinsman with rucksack, c.1928. BELOW: Kibbo Kift Easter Hike through the Home Counties, 1931.

than a few hundred at any one time – the group made a distinctive contribution to English oppositional culture in the heady moment of the 1920s between world war and economic crisis, where radical change was called for and radical experiments were welcomed. Kibbo Kift's offer, however marginal it may seem in retrospect, attracted the attention and support of an impressive range of high-profile campaigners, writers, politicians and visionaries, from HG Wells to DH Lawrence, who lent their endorsement, if not their membership, to the group. While Kibbo Kift's unique revivalist-futurist Utopia never came to pass, it nonetheless offered a comprehensive vision for designing social change, and one that has some remarkable resonances with present-day concerns, nearly 100 years after Kibbo Kift's founding.

Among Kibbo Kift's characteristically sweeping aims was nothing less than the restoration of spiritual values to a material world. The regular calendar activities of the group, from council meetings to camps and hikes, were each imbued with an elevated, sanctified quality through the group's innovative use of woodcraft ceremony. On a practical level this offered a disciplined mode of outdoor operation that opposed military organisational tactics, but at a more profound level it expressed Kibbo Kift's deep-rooted interest in comparative religion, its pantheistic belief in the spiritual immanence of all things – not least in the ancient rural English landscape – and a modern world infused with the myths and mysteries of an earlier, more 'primitive', age. Kibbo Kift's membership of "more than usually conscious individuals" comprised a range of seekers of spiritual as well as social solutions to contemporary problems and



these included mystics of various stripes. Kibbo Kift's 'inner aspect' has been very little examined – indeed, as hidden knowledge, it was sometimes intentionally concealed from prying eyes – but investigation of the group's occult character reveals a great deal of Kibbo Kift's intellectual influences and core spiritual purpose.

THE WORLD CRUSADE

In his 1927 book *The Confession of the Kibbo Kift*, Hargrave argued: "In every country, folklore and myth abound in references to groups of god-heroes which, in many cases, represent deified men". Hargrave positioned Kibbo Kift among them. He also listed the various traditions from which, he admitted,

Kibbo Kift had "stolen the magic":

The narrow feudalism of Japan's ancient Samurai caste may be totally out-of-date, but their self-sacrifice and their self-control are necessary to-day...

We may say that the ancient Spartans were cruel and ferocious, but there is still a place for hardy endurance and physical fitness.

Many of us look somewhat askance at the 'occult mysteries' and alchemical absurdities of the 15th century Illuminati, but we must remember their determined quest for light.

Our ideas of 'chivalry' have undergone a change, but the fortitude, enthusiasm, and fraternal code of honour of the Knights of the Table Round are still a necessity in this our

modern world of wireless and typewriters.

Ours is a different 'crusade', yet that crusading spirit and adventurous questing of the Knights Templar cannot be put aside as done with. We have a quest for 'light'; for scientific light, and we have our World Crusade for the Holy Sepulchre of Unity.

Of all his borrowings, Hargrave was most inspired by the myths of Rosicrucianism, a mystical, secret brotherhood of the Middle Ages. As 'Highly-illuminated Men', the Brethren of the Rosie Cross were famed as the keepers of hidden mysteries. Kibbo Kift literature drew on the 17th century writing of scholar and priest Robert Burton from *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, where he had noted: "We had need of some general visitor in our age that should reform what is amiss – a just army of Rosie-cross men – for they will amend all matters (they say) in religion, policy, manners, with arts, sciences, etc." Hargrave saw that need still unaddressed in the 20th century, and positioned Kibbo Kift as an equivalent "society of operative philosophers", similarly intent on bringing "the Universal and General Reformation of the Whole Wide World".

Hargrave, and many of his followers, had extensive knowledge of world religions and historical spiritual systems as well as 20th century esoteric practices; those who did not were expected to acquire it. Readings and tasks were set and monthly potted summaries were given in regular features in Kibbo Kift's internal magazines. To have mastered a branch of art, science or philosophy was part of the wider duties of membership, and was no less demanding than the all-night silent hikes, winter camping and 30lb (14kg) rucksack-carrying trials that were also to be undertaken. Fitness of mind, body and spirit was encouraged. Hargrave urged: "I expect every Kinsman over 15 or 16 years of age who hears such words as: — *Al Quran; Gautama; Tao; prayer-wheel; I AM; Vedic; taboo; Shinto;*



TOP: Kinsmen at Stonehenge on the Wessex Pilgrimage of 1929.

'THE GREAT WORK' OF THE KIBBO KIFT ORGANISATION WAS MAGICAL AS WELL AS PRACTICAL

symbolic; Alchemy; Zoroastrianism, to know to what they refer, and to be able to fit the meaning into the general development of Human Ideas."

Among the many questions listed in the group literature that attempted to explain the wide-ranging, sometimes contradictory and often changing beliefs and policies of the

Kindred, one asked if the group was a "sort of secret society". The answer given was a decisive "No".

In *The Confession*, Hargrave firmly dismissed occultism, stating: "Let those who turn tables, read thoughts, speak with tongues, gaze into crystals, and do other operations of a like nature turn away. There is nothing here for them. This is no mystical cult, occult clique nor magical fraternity. Nor is it a secret nor semi-secret society." In typical paradoxical style, however, Hargrave also asserted, in the same breath: "The operative magus does not proclaim his initiation, disclaims 'occult powers' and admits that he 'knows nothing'." In this, Hargrave enacts the statement by occultist Aleister Crowley, utilised in Kibbo Kift rituals: "The word is spoken and concealed: The meaning hidden and revealed!"

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TOP: Consecration of the Long Man of Wilmington banner, 1929. ABOVE RIGHT: Kinsman on a tor, c.1924.

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THE EDENSFOLK

In detailing and then dismissing occult powers, Hargrave highlighted his extensive knowledge. This can be seen most directly in the practices of Hargrave's seven-strong lodge (or 'Eremitical Conclave'), the Ndembo. Established in 1919 in part as a means to excise a radical new organisation from the Boy Scouts, the sub-group had a strongly esoteric character. Continuing into the Kibbo Kift years, its existence rather undermined Hargrave's public claims that Kibbo Kift was nothing like a secret society. Via private rituals, conducted monthly at the full Moon and also in the mysterious 'Taboo Tent' at Kibbo Kift gatherings, Hargrave's closest and most trusted friends and advisors were initiated into allegiance to this 'holy order' of the Egyptian 'Sacred Beetle', in order to carry out what was frequently called 'the Great Work'. This term was used publicly as a dramatic way of describing the conglomeration of Kibbo Kift's various reformist purposes, but it had its origins in occult texts, such as Eliphas Levi's *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*, which Hargrave referred to in his Kibbo Kift writings. Although rarely made explicit, 'the Great Work' of the organisation was fundamentally magical as well as practical.



The name and some of the purposes of the Ndembo had been drawn from Lewis Spence's *Encyclopaedia of Occultism*, another of Hargrave's key reference works. Here it was characterised as a secret society of the lower Congo, whose initiation takes the form of a death and resurrection ritual. Spence explained: "Those who have gone through this rite are known as *Nganga*, or 'the knowing ones'." Elements of other 'secret societies' were also borrowed from Spence to furnish Hargrave's lodge; from the 'Egbo of Calabar', the title of 'The Idem' for 'spirit master' was added. This was merged with a range of ideas filtered through rituals and magical terminology adapted from

Freemasonry, the Order of the Golden Dawn and other Western hermetic traditions.

Hargrave was closely familiar with Theosophy, which utilised elements of masonic ritual and structure for their new religious practices. The Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875, offered a highly influential system of metaphysical enquiry or 'occult science', inspired by eastern mysticism and apparently based on ancient wisdom, in pursuit of a Universal Brotherhood (see FT302:32-37). It appealed to a broad range of social progressives and spiritual seekers

in the late 19th and early 20th century mystical revival, who overlapped with the vegetarians and pacifists of early Kibbo Kift. Several prominent Kibbo Kift members and supporters were committed Theosophists, including former suffragette Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and Baron Van Pallandt, the Dutch Scout master who in the early 1920s was torn as to whether to leave his substantial personal fortune to Hargrave or Jiddu Krishnamurti, Theosophy's appointed 'World Teacher' (Pallandt chose the latter).

The structures and organisation of Freemasonry were also a significant influence on the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a select but influential group of women and men of arts and letters first established in the 1880s. Founded by three Freemasons, the Golden Dawn is credited with single-handedly reviving the Rosicrucian ritual magic tradition with a distinctively modern sensibility. Ndembo initiatory rites, originally conducted in secret but later openly deposited in Kibbo Kift archives, drew on characteristics of both historical and contemporary mystical organisations; indeed, the opening pages of their *Chronicle* reproduces the 10-point grade structure of the Golden Dawn. Many Ndembo ritual practices and terminology endure in 21st century forms of occultism, from the casting of a ritual circle in a hallowed 'Place of Working', the banishing and invocation of unwanted and wanted spirits, the consecration of the Four Quarters with water and salt, the ceremonial breaking of bread and sprinkling of earth, and the rousing affirmative cry of "So Mote it Be!" Together these indicate that Kibbo Kift must be understood in the context



ABOVE: John Hargrave as White Fox Spirit Chief with children at Dexter Farm Tribal Training Camp II, 1928. TOP: John Hargrave's White Fox totem, c.1928.



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ABOVE: Body of Gleeman and Gleemaidens at the Gleemote of 1928.

of the development of British mysticism in the 20th century.

James Webb (see FT150:34-38), author of the eminently scholarly twin volumes *The Occult Underground* (1974) and *The Occult Establishment* (1976), interviewed Hargrave in the last years of his life and was the first to position Kibbo Kift among what he described as ‘Edensfolk’, that is, the eclectic reformers, idealists, anti-materialists and nature revivalists who shared what he described as an “illuminated viewpoint”, that is, “an interest in the religious, the mystical, and the occult”. Other attempts to trace Kibbo Kift’s place in occult networks sprang up in the mid- to late 1990s as heated debates developed about whether Wicca – the practice of witchcraft – was best characterised as a new spiritual formation rather than as an ‘Old Religion’. Gerald Gardner, commonly characterised as establishing and popularising from the mid-20th century onwards the rituals and practices that underpin modern neo-paganism, claimed to have been initiated into knowledge by a mysterious hereditary coven in the New Forest in the early 1950s. As the claim of an unbroken line of witches reaching back to antiquity is hardly taken seriously by anyone, pagan enthusiasts and scholars, including Ronald Hutton, have suggested the British woodcraft movement as an alternative source for Gardner’s ideas. The Order of Woodcraft Chivalry – another pacifist splinter group from the Scouts – has been the most common focus, not least because of the proximity of

its grounds to the New Forest. The Order’s Chieftain in the early 1920s, Harry ‘Dion’ Byngnam, was of a distinctly pagan bent and his earnest – if ultimately short-lived – attempts at inserting an ecstatic, nudist and sexually liberated Dionysian aspect into the Quaker educational organisation have been examined as a possible connection between woodcraft groups and the later practices of Gardner.

Kibbo Kift’s contributions to British mysticism have been less well-explored. Some researchers searching for occult links in woodcraft organisations have tended either to rely on secondary sources or to extrapolate – sometimes wildly – from a few suggestive glimpses at archival fragments. Those who have consulted Hargrave’s publications are encouraged by his veiled pronouncements, and especially by his later turn to faith healing, but are ultimately left unsatisfied by Kibbo Kift’s magic qualities. This is in part due to the hidden nature of the knowledge that they seek, but substantial documentary evidence is available for those willing to take the time to consult it. Following several years of research into hundreds of boxes and thousands of documents across public and private archives, the full range of Kibbo Kift culture is now revealed for the first time. As the first full-length book to explore the group’s mystical-modernist artistic style and spiritual belief, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* – alongside its accompanying exhibition at Whitechapel

Gallery, London – offers new information about Kibbo Kift’s occult relationships, philosophies and practices, and enriches understanding of the use and application of occult ideas in early 20th century Britain. FT



- The book, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians* is written by Anabella Pollen, designed by Roland Brauchli and published by Donlon Books. <http://donlonbooks.com/products/the-kindred-of-the-kibbo-kift-intellectual-barbarians-by-annabella-pollen>.

- The exhibition, *Intellectual Barbarians: The Kibbo Kift Kindred*, is co-curated by Anabella Pollen and Nayia Yiakoumaki, and can be seen at Whitechapel Gallery, London, until 13 March 2016. www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/intellectual-barbarians-the-kibbo-kift-kindred/

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