

CRAFTING CONTRADICTIONS WITH  
**THE KINDRED OF  
THE KIBBO KIFT**  
BY ANNEBELLA POLLEN



Uncredited photographer. Kinswoman (possibly Ruth Clark / Minobi) stitching moccasins at Kibbo Kift camp, 1920s. (c) Kibbo Kift Foundation. Courtesy of the London School of Economics Library, Youth Movement Collection.

In the 1920s, a striking band of disaffected youth leaders, former suffragettes, spiritual seekers and social reformers - mostly drawn from the middle class of the London suburbs - hoped to bring world peace through an idiosyncratic mix of campaigning, camping, hiking and handicraft. Annebella Pollen, author of the book, *The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians*, discusses the organisation's handmade theories and practices.

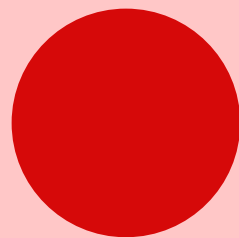
Kibbo Kift's founder, John Hargrave [1894-1982], a precocious youth leader and commercial artist, served in the Great War as a young man. As a non-combatant stretcher-bearer in the disastrous and bloody Dardanelles campaign, he had been devastated by the experience of seeing action first-hand. Invalided out with malaria in 1916, he returned to his beloved Boy Scouts fundamentally changed. Hargrave believed that the war showed that so-called 'civilised' culture was in steep decline. Hargrave's solution to this 'mass mechanised death' was to develop a new system of physical and spiritual regeneration that could be adopted by both sexes and all ages. With a focus on outdoor living for health, and a strong antipathy to the industrialised, urban world, Hargrave's new organisation would demonstrate that a cultural renaissance was possible. 'Kibbo Kift' - an archaic term meaning 'proof of strength' - was founded in 1920. It was always much more than an expanded peace scout movement; through it, Hargrave and his hundreds of followers attempted to craft a new world.

## **MAKING AS A PRIMITIVIST ACT**

As the son of a landscape painter, and as a practicing commercial artist, Hargrave had first-hand experience of the pleasures and powers of the visual. Kibbo Kift, in turn, attracted creative practitioners who used striking costume and cryptic insignia to spread their messages of social reform. Kibbo Kift's covenant positioned craft centrally as a means of counteracting mass industrialisation and cultivating self-expression. Hand-making was also a means to capture what had been lost in the shift from 'primitive' to 'civilised' culture.



**Angus McBean. John Hargrave as White Fox Spirit Chief with children at Dexter Fam Tribal Training Camp II, 1928. Collection of Annebella Pollen.**



As part of his 'Tribal Training' system for educating children, Hargrave had prescribed primitivist practices to be performed in camp. These, he claimed, suited children's natural character and re-enacted 'the struggle with Nature which primitive man in the early history of the race had to endure'. Hargrave's primitive - which problematically included twentieth century contemporaries outside Europe as well as imagined Palaeolithic ancestors - was seen as natural, vital and instinctive, as opposed to the overly sophisticated and complex civilised person. In this, Hargrave's thinking was typical of a range of contemporary discourses in modern art as well as in ethnography, in which he was widely read.

Hargrave argued that a new approach to craft would help restore man's 'primitive skill and instinctive faculty to make his own things from the raw materials to the finished article, which our modern factory-system is ever tending to crush'. He also argued that the development of 'primitive arts' would supply 'the one thing lacking in our present school-system - self-control, self-expression, and self-reliance'. Hargrave had not received much in the way of conventional education, nor had he attended art school and he was fiercely dismissive of its value. He complained, 'The ability to evolve designs and decorations from natural objects is a lost art among the over-civilised races.' He praised instead models of design seen in illustrated books of popular ethnography, such as *The Living Races of Mankind*, and the British Museum's ethnographic collections. He noted:

Very few art students turned out of our civilised art schools are able to sit down and make a design anything like as simple, beautiful, or symbolic of Nature, as the designs given here. In this self-expression by symbolism the modern art school has much to learn. To be sure the art student can draw a conventional leaf-shape with both sides exactly alike and geometrically balanced, which he has learnt from a test-card or cast; but show me the student who could make a design as haphazard, as original, and as effective as the example shown on the headdress of a Mafu woman.

He concluded that those who had received scholarly art training would be incapable of such original design: 'Not one in a thousand art students would even think of it - much less draw it with all the effective simplicity and symbolic meaning!'

In art the primitive man excelled, because he relied on Nature as a teacher and the out-door world as his art school.'

Contemporary art school practices, like youth training, seemed to be based on distant instruction rather than direct experience. Hargrave was incredulous, for example, that scout leaders would instruct boys in their care about constellations using a book in a scout hut rather than taking them outside to observe the stars. Similarly, Hargrave complained that 'art appreciation' classes encouraged 'the blight of the onlooker'. Rather than looking at a 'second-hand sunset' by Turner, Kibbo Kift members should engage with the real thing.

Learning by doing was important to Kibbo Kift. Imagined 'primitives' were culturally superior because they were concerned only with core principles, such as food, warmth and shelter. So-called civilised people, by contrast, were distracted by meaningless details such as manners and fashion, and tended to over-intellectualise. As such they had lost touch with what mattered. As Hargrave put it, 'Instinct is killed by reasoning, by calculation, by indexing and tabulating everything.' In all aspects of Kibbo Kift culture, practice was promoted over theory and action over discussion. Formal, theoretical knowledge - of which most Kinsfolk had little - was dismissed as being of minor value if it could not be put to use. Having letters after one's name meant nothing if you couldn't survive in the woods.

## **KIN CRAFT: FUNCTION, TECHNIQUE AND STYLE**

For Hargrave, craft was a 'discipline of hand and head'; a way of correcting an instinctive body-knowledge lost in modern behaviour. Other practitioners in Kibbo Kift had earnest theories of making, including Kinswoman Winifred Tuckfield. A former suffragette, Tuckfield wrote Kibbo Kift articles on the beneficial qualities of hand making for moral, physical and spiritual improvement, and was a committed craftsperson in a range of materials. Along with her sister Denise Tuckfield, later Wren,



Uncredited photographer. View of 1929 Kibbo Kift Educational Exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery. The 'handskill' elements were overseen by Winifred Tuckfield. Items on display include painted tents, weaving looms, carved and painted staffs and shields, ceremonial surcoats and theatrical backdrops for mumming plays. (c) Kibbo Kift Foundation. Courtesy of the London School of Economics Library, Youth Movement Collection.

she had founded the Knox Guild of Design and Craft in 1912 after walking out of Kingston School of Art in protest at the expulsion of her teacher, the celebrated Art Nouveau designer Archibald Knox, whose hands-on pedagogic methods had been deemed too unorthodox for the institution.

The range of craft techniques on which Kibbo Kift advice was given was extensive and included stencilling, printmaking, woodworking, leatherwork, dyeing, basketry, spinning, weaving, embroidery and calligraphy. Kibbo Kift artefacts survive in abundance and show a high level of skill. While Kibbo Kift's enthusiasms coincided with the renaissance in hobby crafts in the interwar period, there were distinctive

characteristics. Hand-manufacture had political implications for the Kin's ambitions to reorganise industry and economics, and crafted articles - like all Kin arts - were designed to make philosophies material.

In all Kin craft work, originality was encouraged. Members were instructed: 'NEVER copy a design or use a bought transfer, this is only the resort of the slothful.' Kinsfolk needed to make their own costume - a distinctive green hooded jerkin, cape and cowl - as well as a personal staff showing their chosen mythological alter ego. Members were also encouraged to make their own tents; shop-bought camping items were looked upon with serious disapproval. The design had to be basic, and not only for ease of construction. Hardihood should be shown by aspiring Spartans. Members were told 'Ignore comfort and luxury. It is Taboo. In your training follow the hard open air trail. Sit on stone rather than cushion. Let your legs carry you rather than a machine.' In this, Kinsfolk followed a longer Arts and Crafts tradition, despising - as William Morris would put it - 'the waste of useless luxury'.

To make every item of your own kit was a demonstration of your commitment to the cause and a survival skill for the new world to be established, post-civilisation. It also guaranteed a distinctive Kibbo Kift aesthetic, which was furthered by the required symbolic decoration. Again, imagination was encouraged. Those lacking in design inspiration were directed to Hargrave's publications on symbolism or to one of his key sources, the British Museum. Resulting designs thus mixed together imagery from Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, American Indian and Egyptian traditions alongside modernist abstract patterns in flat, bright colours.

Kin craft needed to be purposeful rather than decorative; it should contribute to the making of a better world. Kinsfolk noted, 'We do not go in for "Blotters for Auntie" or a "Paperknife for Uncle". Kibbo Kift craft projects were instead meant to develop essential skills and products necessary for survival, self-development and the requirements

of an outdoor life. Kinsfolk likened this practice to the making of an ancient canoe: this was 'a real necessity for the lake dweller; he wanted it, and he could paddle it .it was not something to be put into a Lake Dweller's Handicraft Exhibition.'

## **ANTI-THEORY THEORIES**

Hargrave suggested that all other solutions to the manifold problems of civilisation had failed through a lack of creative direction. Through his leadership of Kibbo Kift he was determined to transform modern methods of decision-making, to take them out of 'the conference hall and the crowded meeting .the lecture hall and the interminable discussions' and to revitalise them with fresh air and action.

Kibbo Kift's creative activities deliberately stood apart from other cultural movements, just as they stood firmly apart from other reform groups. This was in part due to Hargrave's aggressive contempt for almost all other organisations. In order to promote Kibbo Kift as the singular solution to the world's shortcomings, he regularly derided other endeavours as ineffectual.

There are enough references in Hargrave's writings to ascertain that he was familiar with a range of cutting-edge art and design practices from Cubism and Dada to the Ballets Russes. He appreciated the work of the London Group and Jacob Epstein in particular. His employment in the advertising industry meant that he mixed daily with trained artists. He also held exhibitions of his own paintings in London's Burlington Gallery.

Kibbo Kift makers, however, took their inspiration from outside the artistic avant-garde. They looked back to earlier forms and deliberately mixed them up with modern styles to create new hybrids.

Hargrave keenly preferred method over theory and direct leadership over discussion. He reviled manuals of instruction, complaining that



reform movement handbooks merely 'dish out a pottle of dead words and hope that life will spring out of them. Out of words, words - and out of life, life.' Nonetheless, Kibbo Kift constructed abundant manifestos on how to live and how to design; they developed a theory that was paradoxically anti-theory. In venerating instinct over intellect, group members defended their social position - mostly modestly educated and excluded from elite circles - and they also communicated their disdain for so-called advanced civilisation. Although Kibbo Kift would not last for much more than a decade, they produced an abundance of crafted articles informed by primitivist fantasies as well as modernist communication. Kibbo Kift's craft theories were full of contradictions but the results are all the richer for it.



Angus McBean. Kibbo Kift decorated tent, c.1928. Collection of Annebella Pollen.