International Development. What kind of development are we promoting? These villagers were removed to a concrete colony without land. Visiting them there, I have never encountered such grief – ‘Even our Gods are destroyed’ – as one woman said, referring to the group of stones in every Kond village centre which represent the Earth Goddess.

Konds win legal case
But in September this year – unprecedented success! The campaign bore fruit when the advisory body to India’s Supreme Court submitted a report exposing Vedanta’s illegacies. This effectively closed down mining explorations on Niyamgiri and stopped construction of the refinery below. But how many other projects are being forced through? How can we change the mind-set? And how can we all become more conscious in using less aluminium?

Saving Niyamgiri is a hard-won victory for tribal people and the network of Indian activists supporting them, who took many risks to get information out and bring a proper investigation. Unusually, the causes of people’s rights and environment worked together. A handful of foreigners played a crucial supporting role too, by visiting the villages and mountains and asking questions.

In India, with indigenous people till living sustainably on the land and water so scarce, big mining projects spell catastrophe, and ‘foreign investment’ brought in by mining companies is exploitation worse than anything during the Raj: an extraction of un-renewable resources on a much bigger, faster scale.

For indigenous people, bauxite, rivers and forests are not ‘resources’, they are sources of life. So saving Niyamgiri is a landmark. It can inspire others to look deeper, more seriously. For Fiona Davidson, the UK’s most distinguished Celtic priest and bard Fionn Túlach, with a vision to breathe new life into this ancient transcendental path.

As the living Celtic spiritual tradition struggles to survive in a rapidly changing world, Will Gethin wills a unique woman, Celtic priest and bard Fionn Túlach, with a vision to breathe new life into this ancient transcendental path.
up any barriers, the truth goes in and you can affect people.

“You get the chance to stand up and talk about your love of God and about the power of the divine”, she says, “in a way that doesn’t come across like a sermon from a pulpit. There’s no need for a barrier because people can’t be sure if it’s you or if it’s a performance, so everyone feels safe.”

Deep reverence for Nature

Rooted deep in the land, the living, Celtic, spiritual tradition originated somewhere between Druidism and early Celtic Christianity around 2,000 years ago and was characterized by a deep and lasting reverence for nature. Its priests were called An Ceile De, or Caleeds, Companions of God, which Fionn has now been herself for almost 20 years. Scottish legend maintains that the Caleds were originally Druids who envisaged the coming of Christ conscious- ness. While the Druids had their many gods, the Caleds perceived the one god, as being the sum of the many and fo- cused on the One.

For Fionn, an An Ceile De combines the best of Celtic Christianity and Druidism, drawing on the wisdom of both:

“The strong relationship with the One feeds the transcendent which I was never able to get from Druidism alone”, she explains. “And the Ceile De relationship with Christ is so simple and beautiful and yet somehow also deeper than what we have in most churches today. It starts with recogniz- ing that we have this place within us, which we call Christ consciousness but then, unlike most forms of Christianity, and more like other traditions in the world, it gives us a way of changing our- selves, of growing spiritually.”

While using bardism as a way of medi- ating the sacred in performance, Fionn uses the living, Celtic, spiritual tradition, An Ceile De, as the vehicle, maintain¬ing that storytelling is about embodying the tradition you belong to.

“It’s partly about acting as a bridge for the ancestors”, Fionn explains. “The Celtic spiritual tradition is in the land, in the bones, and it comes through if you allow it, because you are a medium.”

The Dalai Lama was moved to rec¬ ommend an adherence to the spiritual tradition of your homelands when Fionn performed for him during his visit to Scotland in June, 2004.

“I was invited to perform for His Holiness as a representative of the na¬ tive, spiritual tradition of Scotland at the Dharma Network conference in Glasgow”, she recalls. “And during his ensuing talk he kept saying people should follow the tradition of their land, which felt like he was giving my work his blessing”.

Bardism, for Fionn, was the natural synthesis of her four teenage passions: music, magic, spirituality and nature.

“Mastering the guitar and writing songs, she escaped into the ‘green world’ whenever she could and read countless books. Trading in her guitar for a harp, she ultimately fell upon a Celtic pagan community who encouraged her to be¬ come a bard.

Becoming a bard

Over the ensuing years, Fionn flitted through various pagan groups on an in¬ satiable search for a transcendent ele¬ ment, which none of these groups could assuage. She eventually settled into a Druid community on the Isle of Arran, where her bardic skills were enthusiasti¬ cally received and encouraged. And when she eventually left, it was to begin touring the highlands and islands at a bard – a tour that would ultimately guide her to her destiny:

“I imagined in the deep¬ est way I could, what an ancient bard would have sounded like…”

‘A typical Highland gentleman in a beautiful, rough tweed jacket ap¬ proached during so interval’, she recalls. “He told me he was the head of an An Ceile De order and that it was a family line’. The elderly, Highland gentleman was eager to share the wisdom of his ances¬ tral tradition with Fionn and others be¬ fore he died. And, having at last found the transcendent element she had so long been searching for, it was like a home¬ coming. She felt called to revive the tradi¬ tion and set about adapting it to meet the demands of the modern world.

All great painters, writers and artists are bards. It was during training at Fionn’s three-day workshop at the festival, enti¬ tled The Lustre of the Bard. As sacred artists, they bring the divine energy of the unseen world – Altar – into the world to show us through their perfor¬ mances or works of art.

Sacrred performers and artists put themselves on the line, Fionn said. Whereas ordinary performers some¬ times act from a place of ego, a true bard performs for something greater than themselves without seeking recogni¬ tion and access to divine creative powers is their reward.

Fionn attributes the development of her bardic skills to a curious alliance of her own imagination and divine assistance, which she calls her ‘signal’, a term first coined, she says, by Henri Corbin, an emi¬ nent scholar of Islamic traditions.

“I imagined in the deepest way I could, what an ancient bard would have sounded like”, she tells me, ‘because there was no one to teach me that. And I created this person in the imaginal world of the spiritual, who taught me what I knew how like. I knew everything about him. I would sit and watch him perform in a great Celtic hall. For me he exists in some place between heaven and earth co-created by imagination and spirit’.

Fionn, Fionn, also inhabits the imaginal void, but not as the cute, little nature spirits we envisage them to be today:

‘Faires are depicted in the Celtic tra¬ dition as awesome beings of power, luminous gods, the Celts call the Sidhe. In one of the Gnostic gospels, Christ says: “The truth doesn’t come into the world naked, it comes into the world in types and images”, I think the truth filters itself into this world. And one of the ways it does this is through the imaginal. We can’t look into the face of God, so we look into the face of God and I think into the face of God and I think I was taught to be bard was somewhere mixed up in all that’.

The Celtic tradition teaches that through interaction with the Sidhe, the world of the imaginal, you reach an en¬ lightened state of being, a Nirvana, which, as with the Tibetan Buddhists, is a state of Nibbunoutu.

But in the Ceile De tradition, you don’t stay there”, Fionn enlightens me. “you don’t attain Nirvana and disappear, you seek to be Christ-end and come back to this world again, bringing Nir¬ bunnoutu back with you, bringing what you seek to embody into this world.’

Levels of spiritual commitment

As part of her reformation of the Ceile De, Fionn is offering different levels of commitment, tailored to suit indi¬ vidual needs and lifestyles. At the first level, spiritual teaching and guidance is made available over flexible time peri¬ ods. The next level of annath is only for those who wish to explore the possibility of joining the order. And finally, full commitment is possible for those wishing to devote themselves to their faith in an unconventional way by becoming an annath, Ceile De equivalent of a con¬ tinental nun, who in some cases, preaches.

Joanie Alderslade, a carer and com¬ plementary therapist from Perthshire,

first came into contact with the order 11 years ago and 15 months ago she com¬ mitted herself deeper to this tradition through becoming an annath before more recently graduating to the next level of annath. Being an annath for a certain period meant having the space to see if this way of life was really right for me’, she says. “It was the first step toward a completely dedicated, focused spiritual life’.

And people are increasingly search¬ ing for a spiritual path embracing all as¬ pects of life. Joanie tells me.

‘When my own orthodox Christian upbringing couldn’t answer all my life questions, I began to look at nature- based traditions’, she says, ‘and that’s how I found An Ceile De, which seemed to encompass the best of both worlds. The earth is revered as much the Christ. It’s about living fully in every moment, about seeing that every blade of grass contains God.

“The more I grow and eliminate stuff in myself”, she continues, ‘the more I feel connected to the world around me. It’s my life now and I feel incredibly grateful to have found it’.

In August this year, Joanie was or¬ dered to become a fully-ordained Ceile De and took a vigil in a hermit’s cell on the Isle of Iona, staying up all night in prayer and meditation. In the morning, she received a new name, Savas, which means freedom.

While she continues to do the occa¬ sional one-on-one performance as a bard and a little bit of teaching on bardism, the contemplative life and passing on the Ceile De tradition are now Fionn’s main focus. Workshops, retreats and individ¬ ual teachings are held regularly in Scotland and groups are also starting to spring up around the UK and abroad, as interest grows worldwide.

Fionn teaches how to become more fully who we truly are’, says Shulamith Straus, a Scotland-based teacher and global ethic promoter from Germany who has known Fionn for 15 years. ‘She shows how to be a con¬ scious vessel for our highest potential in every day life and how to honour life’s cycles.

‘I think it’s the one thing that can change this tide of secularism con¬ sumerism in the world’, she resumes, ‘which destroys the resources of soul and soil, resulting in the violence we see around us’.

I ask Fionn if she thinks the tide isn’t already changing.

‘Yes, I believe it is’, she says. ‘There’s been such a spiritual drought for so many over the last century or so and now this feels like a revival of interest out of a lot of good people these days, not nec¬ essarily feeling the need to follow a trad¬ ition, like us, but just following their hearts. Thank God. Because it might just save the world. I think it’s the one thing that will’.

For more details about An Ceile De and forthcoming talks, workshops and retreats please visit www.ceilede.co.uk. For details of forthcoming events at the Findhorn Foundation please visit www.findhorn.org

Fiona has traveled and explored the spiritual mysteries over the past ten years, now finding this time between his spirit-adventure writing and his work for humanitarian and holistic projects such as the Makhad Trust, IT Schools Africa and the Joanne Marie Foundation. Will Gethin: 01242 582810 07719520483 willgethin@me.com Fiona email: Anceilede@aol.com