





Smoked and ochred ... clans from around NSW are participating in the first corroboree in the area in 71 years. Word went out on Twitter and there are live radio broadcasts. Photo: Ben Rushton

Moree corroboree: hushed songs now are shouted

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THE people of Moree knew the late Gamilaraay elder Dave Spearim as a Christian minister but in his home on the Aboriginal "mission" he taught his 23 children their forbidden language, songs and dance.

His legacy shook the earth of a sportsground in the northern NSW town yesterday as his son Paul's 15-year dream of holding the first corroboree in the area since 1938 was realised.

On sand shaped into three dance circles for men, women

and the elders – replicating the stomping ground at that last ceremony 71 years ago in which Dave Spearim took part – NSW clans from Nowra to Taree to Tamworth came together.

They were resplendent in ochre from their own territory: the Gumbayngirr and Biripi from coastal Taree in their soft sandy paint, the Gamilaraay hosts with their faces daubed with the black soils of Moree. Toyota rear vision mirrors helped get the detail right.

They began by cleansing the grounds with burning green gumleaves and a "smoking

song" which Paul Spearim said was last performed at Yetbin caves for that big corroboree.

In the zealous days of official culture eradication, the Spearim family "had to practise in the dark", said Mr Spearim, 48.

Australians learnt in 1965 about Aboriginal children's exclusion from Moree's public pool when Charlie Perkins and others on the Freedom Ride exposed it. Most had no idea how deeply Aborigines on reserves hid their cultural knowledge.

Three of Mr Spearim's older brothers were secretly put through traditional initiation.

"Every morning Dad used to wake me up and ask: 'What is your name. Where are you from? What is your clan?' I had to answer in language," Mr Spearim said. "My mum used to sing us to sleep with traditional songs."

At this gathering, running until Saturday night, words and songs once whispered are being shouted and the globe is hearing. Organisers used Twitter, created a festival website and are sending amplified sound around Moree from a stage with full lighting and a sound system donated by the Huntsmen Aboriginal band. Sydney's Koori

Radio 93.7FM is broadcasting live as Aboriginal musicians such as Marlene Cummins and Roger Knox perform.

About 80 different educational institutions, from preschools to universities, as well as visitors from Hawaii and South Africa who found out via the internet are expected, said Mr Spearim, who sports gold ear studs and a nifty hat.

There are story circles, tool-making, weaving and spear-throwing.

"It's reintroducing the Aboriginal culture," he said. Fifteen descendants of Dave

Spearim and his two wives have travelled from Campbelltown and three little boys came from Katoomba to dance, sharing one kangaroo skin costume between them. They are cousins of Dean Shillingsworth, the boy found dead in a suitcase in a pond in Sydney's west two years ago.

Behind the celebration is a sadness about harsh Aboriginal lives and deaths, said elder Margie Adams.

"This turnout is bringing people together and just for a moment we can forget. Things are based on enjoyment for a change," she said.