This is a story about the old ways of the Eastern Cherokees who live in the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina. What might non-Indigenous peoples gain from reading a detailed religious interpretation of traditional Eastern Cherokee worldviews and lifeways? First, as the historian of religions Charles Long liked to say, “understanding carries its own virtue.” Questions concerning the meaning, purpose, and value of life have gripped humans since they first came into being. Rather than examining such age-old questions in the abstract, this deep dive into the Cherokee spiritual cosmos explores religious experience and expression from the standpoint of a Native American community that is alive and well in the twenty-first century. In learning about the Cherokees, the reader will better apprehend an often eclipsed but worthwhile aspect of their own humanity. That is so because our ancestors were once Indigenous, and most Indigenous folk perceived and engaged the world as a reality that transcends them. Therefore, studying traditional Eastern Cherokee worldviews and lifeways will reward the reader with a better understanding of themselves. Humans do not live by bread alone and an examined life is worth living. This study of a fascinating Native American people will enhance the depth and breadth of the reader’s apprehension of the world we share.

Moreover, understanding the Cherokee way of life may bring useful, everyday benefits to post-Enlightenment Westerners who have created a polarized society that is environmentally unsustainable. Many people
might promote their own survival by realizing that the world is our Mother, not an “other.” This is not simply a matter of engaging in a life-way that seeks to preserve finite natural resources; rather, it is a matter of respecting the cosmos as a relative. Folklorist Barre Toelken once inquired of a Hopi, “Do you mean to say, then, that if I kick the ground with my foot . . . nothing will grow? He said, “Well, I don’t know if that would happen or not, but it would just really show what kind of person you are.” At the risk of grossly oversimplifying the Cherokees’ narrative, the world makes us more than we make the world and nature is not simply material. In other words, Cherokees help us understand that we live in a cosmos that embodies a spiritual power on which our lives depend.

For Cherokees, according to Cherokee co-author Ben Frey, it is good to know these things because it helps Cherokees make sense of the cosmology and worldview from which their spiritual and cultural thinking and understanding arise. Traditionally when Cherokees asked elders why they did things a certain way, they were told: “Because we have always done this; this is who we are. This is what our ancestors did; it would please them to know we are still doing it.” The book paints with a broad brush the larger context of customs, traditions, and practices that a number of Cherokees hold on to and sometimes embody at an almost unspoken level. Many Cherokees grow up with a foot in both worlds, and knowing the spiritual foundation of their own lifeway gives them a sense of meaning, value, and purpose.

This volume represents a consolidation of many disparate sources on Cherokee spirituality, with special emphasis on Eastern Cherokee spiritual ways. In so doing, we offer a new and fresh interpretation refracted through a spiritual lens. We contend that Cherokee economic, social, and political traditions are fundamentally animated by deep-rooted spiritual feelings. Rather than maintaining a Western European–style separation between spiritual and everyday life, Cherokees have historically viewed all significant aspects of their lifeways as sacred. Such an outlook, we argue, has long informed Cherokee people’s actions in a variety of spheres, and it continues to do so today. Because of the shared history of Cherokee people, this adherence to spiritual roots is not isolated to Eastern Cherokees. Consequently, although we pay special attention in this volume to what has become known as Eastern Cherokee spirituality, we do not shy away from outside academic sources, as they have much to tell us about the common inheritance of Cherokee spiritual tradition.
Our work has, in effect, two parts. Part 1, chapters 1–4, focuses on traditional Cherokee spirituality by interpreting beloved stories, community, ceremonies, and medicine. We realize that we address these topics in a somewhat structural and timeless manner. The truth is that Cherokee religion has never been completely static, but the internal and external historical change experienced by aboriginal Cherokees was fundamentally different from the forced change occasioned by European invaders. Contact with the West and with Christianity shocked the Cherokees and at times overwhelmed their old way of incorporating novelty into their worldview. Thus, part 2, chapters 5–12, wrestles with Cherokee religious experience and expression after contact and during colonialism. Cherokees often creatively appropriate Western and Christian influences in ways that are ultimately meaningful. Sometimes Cherokees incorporate outside influences and events into their old religious orientation, and other times they affirm and embrace them outright. Whether they adopt these ideas in part or in whole, Cherokees maintain their identity as Cherokees, a people with a strong spiritual foundation.

As scholars such as Chris Teuton, Sara Snyder, and Sandra Muse Isaacs have shown, storytelling and oral performance are among the primary tools for this investigation within Cherokee epistemology. Eastern Cherokee sacred (ᏘᏗᏒᏓ, galvquodi, “beloved”) narratives concerning creation are still told and their ultimate significance is still experienced and embodied by contemporary Cherokees. But Cherokee narratives do not exhaust the range of meanings in traditional Cherokee spirituality. As Osage scholar and pastor George Tinker says, “what we call spirituality is, for us as it is for most indigenous peoples, a way of life more than a religion.” Because Cherokee spirituality informs and grounds their worldview and way of life, we not only examine and interpret traditional stories, symbols, metaphors, dances, rites, medicine, and ceremonies, but we also look at kinship patterns, food production, and communities.

While some argue that comparisons between religious traditions are fruitless due to the differences in personal experiences, we contend that there are also deep similarities that deserve consideration. By the same token, we disagree with the premise that scholars should consider religion solely through a theological or essentialist lens. Instead, we seek a nuanced view that gives proper attention to similarities as well as differences, and to structural continuities as well as to historical transformations.

Cherokee tradition says that time is not linear; it cycles and echoes back on itself. Therefore, understanding the past can shed light on what
is happening now and what will happen later. Spirituality was woven into Cherokee life so seamlessly that there is no word for *religion* in the Cherokee language. As such, we examine their old worldviews and lifeways to focus on those aspects that might be properly called, in English, *religious* or *spiritual*. To fully consider the strands of thought that weave together to create Cherokee religion, it is necessary to consider the fundamental impact of language and thought upon one another. Translating Cherokee to English, for example, sometimes presents challenges. A term in religious studies as common as *sacred* is not easily matched in Cherokee. As co-author Ben Frey notes, in talking about the Cherokee term *beloved* as a term for *sacred*, using it with a set a prefix, as in *galvgwodi*, gives more of a nominal sense, as in “the beloved.” This also comes up in the name of the Oconaluftee River—*egwona galvgwodi* or “beloved river.” It’s not too far a stretch to also extend this meaning to “sacred” or “hallowed” as it is used in the Lord’s Prayer: *ogidoda, galvladi hebi, galvgwodiyu detsado’v’i*—“our father, heaven dweller, hallowed be your name.” As we shall see, some Cherokee terms translate well into English but some do not; the two languages contain some very real differences that defy a 1:1 correspondence. At the same time, despite linguistic differences between English and Cherokee and between Cherokee and other Native American languages, it is fair to say that the English term *sacred* makes sense to most Cherokees.

Throughout the book we use the terms *Cherokee* and *Cherokees* interchangeably, depending primarily on the context, sentence structure, and the way it reads. Generally, we refer to the Nation as the Cherokees rather than the Cherokee, primarily to avoid representing them as monolithic. The most formal name for Cherokees is *DhYSGY* (*anigiduwagi*, “Kituwah people”). Another more formal name for Cherokees is *DhBΩΩ* (*aniyvwiya*, “real human beings”). (This is probably more akin to “the kind of human beings that we tend to see around the most”—that is, “us.” The term can be used not just for Cherokees but also for other Native Americans.) While this volume concentrates primarily on the Eastern Cherokees, we often use Western Cherokee sources. Prior to the migrations and removal that occurred from the 1780s to 1839, the Cherokees lived for thousands of years throughout the Appalachian Mountains as one people. During that time, they shared a mostly common spirituality, and many of those meanings and values continue to abide among all Cherokees, wherever they live today.

Spiritual meanings and values permeate and animate the old ways of Eastern Cherokees. Stories and legends, ceremonies, medicine, and rites
of passage constitute part of their religious orientation, but so do subsistence activities, kinship patterns, community life, politics, and warfare. In other words, Eastern Cherokees ground their traditional worldviews and lifeways in a spiritual understanding of—and an engagement with—the cosmos.⁴