



## **Cherokee Scholars' Statement on Sovereignty and Identity**

Frequent, persistent, and accelerating assaults on the sovereign right of the Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians to determine their peoplehood have profoundly negative legal, cultural, economic, and familial consequences for Cherokee citizens. As a diverse collective of Cherokee scholars, writers, and educators, we are unified in our commitment to supporting our governments as they defend themselves against individuals and/or collectivities who engage in actions, whether intentional or not, that undermine the sacred sovereign right of the three Cherokee governments, buttressed by federal and international recognition of Cherokee laws and governance, to determine their citizenry. We support the resolution adopted in 2008 during a joint council meeting of the Cherokee Nation and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians opposing fabricated Cherokee entities and non-citizen self-identified Cherokee individuals.

**Misappropriating a Cherokee identity or otherwise falsely claiming to speak as a Cherokee is an act of disrespect and aggression against Cherokee peoples and, above all, is a violation of the sovereignty of the three federally and internationally recognized Cherokee governments.**

While our concern is first and foremost the protection and defense of the sovereign authority of the Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, an assault on the sovereignty of any Native American and Indigenous nation is an assault on the sovereignty of all Native American and Indigenous nations. According to Article 9 of the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), which was officially endorsed by the U.S. in 2010, "Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right to belong to an indigenous community or nation, *in accordance with the traditions and customs of the community or nation concerned.*" We stand in solidarity with all Indigenous nations in their ethical efforts to defend their sovereign right to determine their citizenry.

**1) The sovereignty of Cherokee peoples is uniquely expressed through the governing bodies of the Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, the three federally and internationally recognized Cherokee governments.** Cherokee sovereignty predates the arrival of Europeans to the Americas and the establishment of the United States of America. It has been continuously exercised from time immemorial and will persist. These facts of Cherokee sovereignty have been acknowledged and recognized by the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the government of the United States of America.

**2) Only individuals recognized as citizens of the Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians should claim a Cherokee identity as part of their professional or personal identity, or otherwise assert a Cherokee identity to further their career or gain profit or professional advancement.**

Cherokee identity is a political identity that can only be established through documentation by one of the Cherokee governments that an individual is a Cherokee citizen. It is not, and never has been, an ethnic or racial identity that is established through self-identification.

**3) No individual or collectivity should claim a Cherokee identity on the basis of genetic testing, phenotype, family stories, “inherited” cultural practices, sentiments or feelings of affinity, or any other spurious criteria.** Any person who believes they are Cherokee and have a legitimate claim to a Cherokee identity are encouraged to explore their heritage with candor and honesty. They are encouraged to contact the appropriate Cherokee government for information on Cherokee citizenship. If that Cherokee government determines that they do not have a right to Cherokee citizenship they should immediately cease identifying as Cherokee.

**4) Any person who publicly identifies as Cherokee has initiated a public discussion about their identity.** It is appropriate to ask such persons to explain the verifiable basis upon which they are claiming a Cherokee identity. If they cannot substantiate that they are a Cherokee citizen, they should be clearly and directly asked to cease identifying as Cherokee.

**5) All institutions of higher education, professional organizations, and funding agencies are encouraged to verify any assertions by faculty, staff, students, members, grant applicants, and visiting speakers and scholars that they are Cherokee citizens, especially when it comes to employment, admissions, fellowships, and scholarships.** Individuals making such claims should be willing to provide proof of their Cherokee citizenship. We encourage educational institutions to actively request proof of citizenship, such as a citizenship identification card. An individual’s unwillingness to provide such proof, or other forms of evasiveness, may indicate that they are not Cherokee citizens and do not have a legitimate claim of being a Cherokee person, and the appropriate Cherokee government may be contacted to ascertain that person’s citizenry. In the context of higher education, falsely claiming a Cherokee identity is academic dishonesty, falsification of a material fact, and expropriation of Indigenous peoples’ resources and opportunities. We encourage institutions of higher education to sanction it as such.

**6) We condemn all individuals and collectivities that ‘play Indian’ or ‘play Cherokee’ in all its forms, regardless of the intent.** This includes the widespread practice of forming fraudulent, so-called ‘state-recognized’ Cherokee tribes or nonprofit organizations that claim to confer Cherokee citizenship. Non-Cherokees should never participate in Cherokee cultural expressions unless under the direct guidance of a Cherokee citizen.

**7) We encourage anyone who claims the identity of any Native American or Indigenous nation to contact the appropriate authority and confirm their assertion of that identity is valid and appropriate.**

*Adopted 13 February 2020*

*This is a consensus statement of JSLVPT, a diverse collective of Cherokee scholars, writers, and educators who are citizens of the Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians. For more information see: [www.thinktsalagi/scholars](http://www.thinktsalagi/scholars).*