CHAPTER SIX

GIFTS IN THE COMMERCIALIZING INDIAN TRADE

In 1734, a French military officer, explorer and seasoned native diplomat, Jean Baptiste Lemoyne de Bienville, encountered an unexpected demand inland in the French borderlands of Louisiana.

He reported it to none other than Jean Frédéric Phelypeaux, Count de Maurepas, the marine minister in France. During his recent negotiations with numerous Indian allies, Bienville learned that the Choctaw and others were insisting that the French “carry on trade with them on the same basis as do the English.” The powerful western division of the Muskogean speaking confederacy, by then teetering in their French alliance, wanted to shift trade into the “English Way.”

The Choctaw, like other nations in the southeastern frontier, were making the demand in rapidly changing circumstances. The Choctaw world, by 1734, had been irrevocably transformed by the gun power animating regional tribal blocks of Chickasaw, Shawnee newcomers and Creek confederates. Keen on maintaining supplies of now critically important weaponry to compete with their neighbours, and having seen the complete obliteration of small nations in slave raids and retributive warfare, the Choctaw confronted their challenges with a new strategy.

They wanted English weights and measures.

What an odd request. The Choctaw wanted the French to distinguish between skins that were large (weighing two or more French pounds), medium (1.25 to 2 pounds) and small (under 1 pound). Bienville was in many respects glad to adopt this system: although it was based on a more generous standard (or price), overall, it would stop Indians from keeping the smallest skins as they had for the French to trade by the number, while keeping the largest for the English, “as there is no reference in our [present] trading tariff to the weight of the skins....” Bienville was also

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1 Bienville to Maurepas, 23 April 1723, Mississippi Provincial Archives, 1701–1729 Vol. II French Dominion (Jackson: Press of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1929), pp. 17–18. Bienville later commented on the problems among the Alabamas persisting in demanding the trade “sur le même pied que les Anglois.” M. de Bienville, Mémoire sur les Sauvages, 14 April 1735, C/13a/20, f. 133.

2 Ibid., p. 262.
likely thinking of the obvious. Then as now weights and measures could be manipulated. A trader using his own weights could always find the means of subtly skewering the balances in his favour.

The Choctaw nevertheless were insistent. In that respect, they were formally restructuring exchanges with the French that up to that point had blurred value on goods and indeed laid the basis for more intimate encounters on the frontier. The socio-economic nature of the French trade had formerly animated a loose, ramshackle and criticized “backwoods” borderland in Louisiana. There, intermarriage and “concubinage” were common and ad hoc exchanges of slaves, foodstuffs and small quantities of European wares had attached Indians on their own terms with newcomers in the colony. While the French had found commercial profit of sorts in these frontier exchange, they had paid for it in unquantifiable but significant outlays in social capital. Stephen Gudeman would have characterized the French-Choctaw exchange to that date as a community-centred trade, one with numerous incalculable benefits that were shared throughout a society.3 Critically, the former system had been balanced with sovereign gift presentations made by French military officers that embraced native receivers into the protection, beneficence and generosity of the French King.

That was now being upended by the Choctaw. In much the same ways that a “crisis of the gift” was overtaking liberalizing European economies in the new commercial age,4 gifts in Indian country were changing meaning concurrently as trade was shifting into the “English way.” Mississippian nations were looking for a formal, if not technical, means of ending an exchange after a trade, by having goods more clearly defined according to their intrinsic nature. They wanted to enter into exchange with an eye to profiting as they could, and leaving afterwards.5

This is not to imply that the Choctaw and the other nations adopting such strict barter arrangements had fundamentally changed in culture or outlook. Cultures move in and out of community-centered and

