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The Four Lives of the Micmac Copper Pot Abstract; What to the seventeenth-century French was little more than a mundane article of commerce became, to the Acadian Micmac, an institution with noteworthy economic, ceremonial, spiritual, and demographic connotations. Utilizing portable kettles, Micmac households became less inclined to camp near their immobile wooden cauldrons which now served a diminishing function as the symbolic locus of settlement. The copper kettle thus afforded these people the opportunity to move about at random as they hunted game for the fur trade. Two years after his return home to France, in 1614, the French Jesuit, Pierre Biard set down his memoirs of three stormy years spent in Acadia. A bitter man who had been ill-used by the commandant at Port-Royal, Charles de Biencourt, Biard's relation is clearly self-serving. Nonetheless, despite this blemish, it remains an extremely valuable commentary on early Indian and white relations. Contained within its sparse prose, for instance, we find a list of goods which were customarily exchanged in the early seventeenth-century trade between the two ethnic groups. "All this new France is divided into different tribes," he intoned, "each one having its own separate language and country. They assemble in the Summer to trade with us, principally at the great river (St. Lawrence). To this place come also several other tribes from afar off. They barter their skins of beaver, otter, deer, marten, seal, etc., for bread, peas, beans, prunes, tobacco, etc.; kettles, hatchets, iron arrow-points, awls, puncheons, cloaks, blankets, and all other such commodities as the French bring them." Beguiling in its dryness, this abbreviated catalog was in reality the living anatomy of one of the most revolutionary institutions in North American contact history. What in pre-Columbian times had been a non-profit, balanced, reciprocal exchange of necessities and luxuries between Northeastern and Eastern Subarctic tribes and bands was completely overhauled in historic times into a highly competitive, individualistic, profit-oriented enterprise centered on the furs and skins of furbearing species and large herbivores. In its wake, natives resorted to technological eclecticism as they selectively adopted European tools and techniques, adding them to their existing inventory; male Indians began emerging as an unprecedented merchant class, shifting the locus of authority in matrilineal clan societies like that of the Huron; and intertribal rivalries ominously gathered momentum, leading to confederations of tribes for mutual security. Aboriginal society in many instances became seasonally atomized (e.g., as families ranged over winter hunting territories), and aboriginal culture, under pressure from the trade, disease, and missionization, was rendered increasingly dysfunctional. Across the board, the Indian way of life was being shaken in a most profound sense. In the economic sphere, the Indian's focus of subsistence was no longer based on the food quest; now most of his foraging energies were directed toward supplying an insatiable, external demand for furs. The vicious cycle of dependency which was thereby set in motion eventually castrated the native subsistence economy, reducing numerous heads of families to debt peonage. And it all



started with a few, seemingly innocuous trade goods; greased and "dry" beaver pelts, together with the furs and skins of lesser rodents and browsers, bartered for European hardware, foodstuffs, and raiment. The Jesuit's inventory is clearly misleading in its blandness. Surely each of the French items he so casually recited was loaded with profound implications for the aborigine.... An iron-handled, open copper kettle measuring twenty-five inches across and thirteen inches deep strikes us as a fairly prosaic item of exchange, but to the Micmac of the Canadian Maritime provinces it was "the most valuable article they can obtain from us." So declared the seventeenth-century Acadian merchant, Nicolas Denys, who underscored his point with an anecdote of a Micmac who was allegedly conducted on a grand tour of Paris. What