

Feathers, shells and turquoise: Chronicles of a lifetime of barter and trade

'Trade Roots: The Macaw Chronicle, Character Sketches, Observations and Reflections'

By J. Cosmo Lewis
Existential Press (2025, 375 pp.)

Macaw feathers and parrot skulls from the Amazon found in ancient Pueblo cave dwellings. Turquoise discovered 2,000 miles south from its mining source of Cerrillos, New Mexico. Remnants of cacao contained in pottery in Chaco Canyon. These items are not indigenous to where they were found, indicating that a rich trade route extending thousands of miles once flourished across what we now call the Americas.

Whether by organized routes or casual bartering, commerce involving commodities like shells and dye along with the exchange of cultural currents between Southwestern tribes and Mesoamerica has been ongoing since at least 1100 AD.

Author J. Cosmo Lewis, owner of the TradeRoots Collection based in Santa Fe, retraces these ancient routes in his multifaceted new work, a combination of memoir, reflection and history lesson. Indeed, as an early middleman for the Hopi and Zuni in securing ceremonial macaw feathers and material for making fetishes, Lewis plied these ancient routes as a trader and importer for over 50 years. He later created some new routes into the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia and Indonesia, in search of other gems and rare minerals.

"We need these feathers," an elder Hopi medicine man tells the young Anglo hippie visiting the Arizona village of Kykotsmovi in 1972. The young man, hailing from Charleston, South Carolina, and recently spit out by the Army, is enflamed by the reading of the Existentialists and the taking of LSD, and finds his way to the Southwestern mesa in an almost comically clichéd search for "authentic experience."

Befriending Hopi elder David Taliptewa, aka David Lightning, who becomes Lewis' mentor and teacher (he calls him grandfather), sets him on his "sacred mission" to Mexico's Lacandon rainforest along the Rio Usumacinta to secure what the Hopi need. The colorful macaw feathers worn in the Shalako cer-

emonies bring life-giving rain to the Hopi, while the fetishes made of mother of pearl, abalone and various shells are used in Zuni religious rites, among those of other tribes.

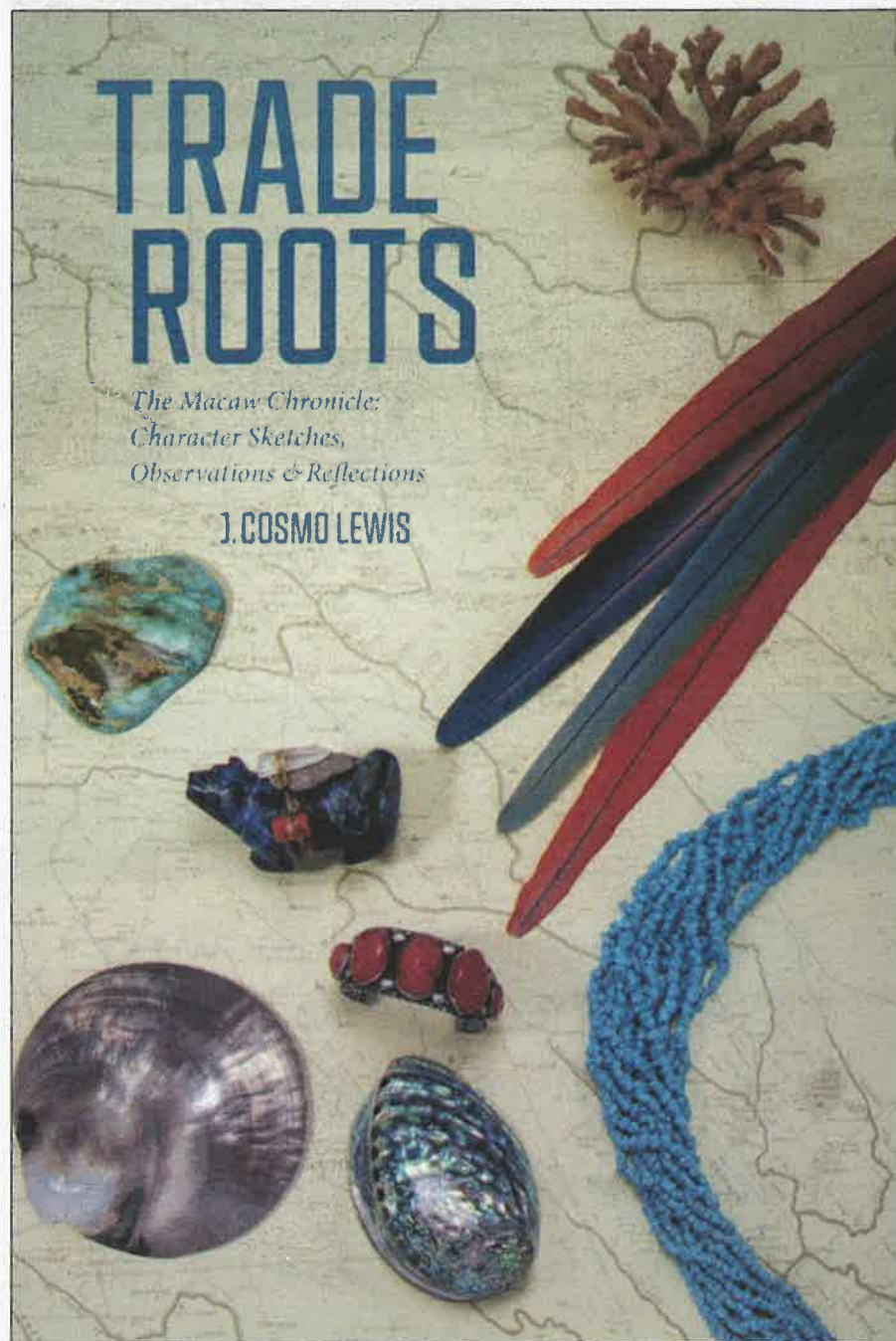
It is a delicate operation because the macaws are protected, and Lewis insists he is bartering his Western goods with the ancient Lacandon people (a Mayan tribe fairly untouched by Western society) for molted feathers. As an "emissary" for the Hopi and Zuni tribes to the north, Lewis is accepted by the Lacandon and becomes a regular trader with them, thus establishing what he calls a yearlong "blessed circle." For the feathers he offers to the Hopi, he is given valuable pieces of turquoise jewelry, much like the ancient traders must have bartered.

Ultimately, as Lewis learned more about the demise of the scarlet macaw, due to smuggling, deforestation of their natural breeding grounds, logging, and the local inhabitants killing them for food, he helped found a sanctuary for the birds as well as supporting a rescue aviary zoo project in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, in Chiapas, Mexico.

His notes in the back of the book rigorously document much of this journey and expand on topics he only touches on in the main text, such as the "pochtecas" society of long-distance traders, an entire socioeconomic class in ancient Mayan society equipped to supply prestige items for the elite classes; and a history of the lives and work of European-Mayan scholars Frans and Trudi Blom, who worked closely with the Lacandon people and lived in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.

As Lewis' business opportunities expanded, his travels extended across the globe for fetish materials like coral, amber and rare snail shells, with a bustling shop on Burro Alley, Santa Fe, stints at the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show, work with the Southwest Association on Indian Arts, all while taking care of his growing daughter, attending Hopi ceremonies and living part time in Ramah, NM.

His reflections and selections from his



COURTESY IMAGE

Author Jeff Lewis recounts his five-decade career providing rare ceremonial items for the Hopi and Zuni.

diaries reveal the tumultuous political history in many areas of Mexico and Central America and the massive shrinkage of the rainforest, among other ecological devastation he witnessed firsthand. His life's work has brought him full-circle to enjoying the simple pleasures of life such as gardening. And he still reflects on lessons in

Ram Dass' "Be Here Now," revealed over LSD journeys in his youth.

As requests continue to come for materials like spiny oyster shells for Zuni ceremonies or crushed coral for Tibetan religious rites, he muses on his journey: "Your real life begins when you run out of an agenda."