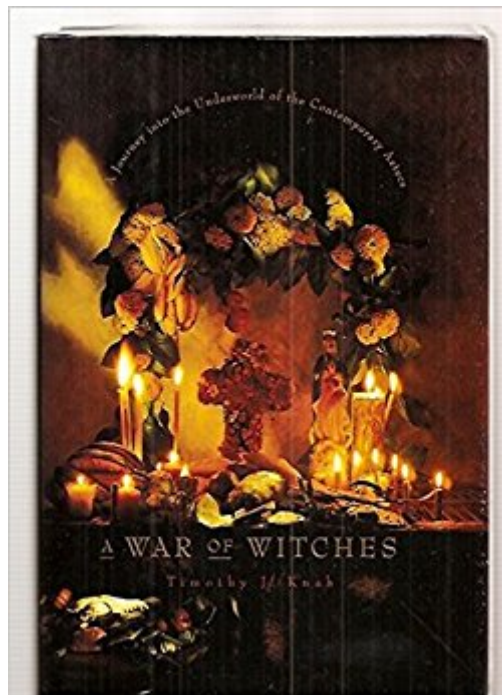




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# A War Of Witches: A Journey Into The Underworld Of The Contemporary Aztecs



## Synopsis

Chronicling the author's spiritual immersion in Aztec culture and his transformation into a curandero or healer, an account of an adventure into the supernatural underworld of Aztec cosmology--talocan reveals the mysterious ""War of the Witches.""

## Book Information

Hardcover: 240 pages

Publisher: Harpercollins; 1st edition (June 1995)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0062512641

ISBN-13: 978-0062512642

Product Dimensions: 1 x 6 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 15 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #83,075 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #11 inÂ Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Aztec #38 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Other Religions, Practices & Sacred Texts > Tribal & Ethnic > Native American #149 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > New Age & Spirituality > Wicca, Witchcraft & Paganism > Witchcraft

## Customer Reviews

The soul of a child has been seized by the Lords of the netherworld, and anthropologist Knab, as an apprentice curandero (healer), undertakes to restore it. Tutored by two elderly healers whose trust he had won during 10 years of visits to their Mexican village in the high sierra near Puebla, Knab descends alone into a nearby cave where, with tobacco smoke, incense, prayers and incantations, he contacts the Lords. He must also reach them in dreams, whose startling content provides leads not only to the child's condition but to the history of the community's murderous witches. In this and other cures he undertook (some with the aid of modern medicine and nutrition), he probes the vibrant ancient Aztec cosmology and its healing and hexing powers. Speaking Spanish and Nahuatl gave him access to this village's culture that outsiders would lack. More gripping than fiction, Knab's account describes only what he saw, heard and learned, his conclusion being that "I still do not... know what it all means." 30,000 first printing; author tour. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Anthropologist Knab's highly personal and compelling narrative on the magico-religious belief

system of contemporary Aztecs has the excitement of a mystery novel yet is interspersed with rich ethnographic detail on Aztec cosmology, magic, and ritual. Through his fieldwork with two Mexican curanderos (healers/witches) Knab uncovers the survival of ancient Aztec religious beliefs and practices thought to have been long wiped out by colonial conquest and Catholicism. Caught between the worlds of academia and Aztec witchcraft, Knab recounts how he found himself subject to his informants' magical devices and began the journey to recover his tonal (soul). Knab's experience challenges traditional assumptions about ethical involvement on the part of the researcher and blurs the boundaries between informant and researcher, science and magic, and healing and murder. This book will appeal not only to anthropologists and students of Aztec religion but to anyone interested in reading a captivating real-life mystery. ?Tracy L. Little, Ohio State Univ., Columbus Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book was for an anthropology class and ended up being a fast-paced read with plenty to keep you glued until the very last page. It read like a crime novel or other riddle to solve, but was very eye-opening into the contemporary world of Mexican Aztec peoples today and how they have coped within their mix of Christianity and Aztec religions and with their micro and macro worlds. A must read for any anthropolgy major or someone interested in a different perspective on spirituality and beliefs. Thoroughly engaging throughout.

The transaction from Goodwill was great- easy, fast delivery. The condition of the book was good. However, the content of the book itself was questionable, highly biased, and not completely reliable or well-informed. At the end of the book, Knab discloses that he wrote this almost entirely from his memory about events that occurred at least two years before he began writing the book. The way the book is written can easily lead the reader to believe the book is non-fiction, as it uses recollections of informal "interviews," real people he interacted with in Mexico, but it never claims that it is all recalled from his memory until the very end of the book. The reviews promote this book as an authority in studying curanderas/brujeria from the Aztecs, but it is not. It's deficient in understanding what curanderas/brujeria are, he makes it about his experience doing a ritual and does not use this to expand on his understanding of culture or cultural practices. He writes this book from memory because his interview transcripts and research documents were confiscated when he was traveling to a country in Asia, so the content is not as clear as he presents it. He discloses having to use recorded audio from when he was telling the story to a group of colleagues, and he has a co-writer that he names at the end of the book, who helped him write the book without actually

having being there at all with him when he was in Mexico doing his research. He also wrote some of his book while he was traveling throughout vacation hotspots in the Caribbean. All of these practices seem quite questionable to me, and the end result is a book that I consider to lack anthropological authority, a clear picture of cultural representation, and honestly, I think it misrepresents what *brujeria/curandera/os* are. His writing is shaped by separating things as "good" or "evil", and he writes in a way that depict *curanderas* as good and *brujos* as evil, which leads the reader to conclude that he is using more of a Christian lens to interpret his experiences (i.e., good v. evil), but in this case, this is not a competent way of studying pre-columbian traditions because the beliefs and cultural productions of the Aztecs were not just black and white, not just good or evil. So in conclusion, this book is basically retelling a story based on what Knab remembers from his research, it contains elements of fictions and non-fiction, and it is Knab's limited interpretation of his experiences and what he understands are two fully separate traditions (*curanderismo/brujeria*), not giving it a thought that they might be the same practice but by a different name based on who is benefited and harmed by it. I should not forget to include that Knab writes in a very entertaining way, and this book is a quick read, but should be read with caution and critical eyes.

For anyone who wants an idea of what Carlos Castaneda's work might have been like if he had written real ethnographical accounts of sorcery and "dreaming" as practiced by followers of ancient Mexican traditions, I strongly recommend this book. It's also a colorful and intriguing story of revenge, murder and the impact of cultural upheavals spanning a period of over sixty years. Knab was an anthropology professor in the early 70s at the National University of Mexico doing fieldwork in a small village in the Sierra de Puebla when he encountered authentic *brujas* and *brujos* who followed ancient traditions of sorcery and dreaming dating back to at least the Aztecs. Unlike Castaneda, Prof. Knab is fluent in Nahuatl, and records the actual ancient terms used for various practices, and for regions of the dreaming world--*Talocan* or *Tlalocan*--that witches need to visit to help cure their patients, or to inflict harm on their opponents and other witches. He also faithfully records and translates his Nahuatl conversations with his two primary informants, an elderly man and woman of the village--*Innocente* and *Rubia*--who had both practiced curing and witchcraft for over 50 years. Unlike the supposed metaphysical and philosophical discourses of don Juan (especially in Castaneda's later books), these conversations are what one would expect of someone coming from this kind of cultural milieu. Probably the most fascinating aspect of the book for Castaneda readers is the detailed descriptions of dream journeys that Prof. Knab is instructed in by his two informants. These sections of the book describe a realm that has a geography and

consistent features that have supposedly been experienced by generations of Aztec-descended brujos. Knab's instruction and interaction with his informants described in the books takes place over a three-year period, from the fall of 1974 to the fall of 1977, but it also eventually leads him to unravel a dark tale of witchcraft and intrigue in the same region in the 1920s that ultimately led to dozens of deaths attributed to witchcraft. These killings, which occurred over a period of about a decade, were ultimately brought to an end only when the townspeople literally crucified one of the alleged witches.

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