Ancient Texts Present Mayans As Literary Geniuses

March 5 2010

UB's Dennis Tedlock is author of a highly praised new book on Mayan literature.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Literary critics, cultural scholars and aficionados of the Mayans, the only fully literate people of the pre-Columbian Americas, have lined up to call the first fully illustrated survey of two millennia of Mayan texts assembled by award-winning scholar Dennis Tedlock, "stunning," "astounding," "groundbreaking" and "literally breathtaking."

The book is "2000 Years of Mayan Literature," published in January by the University of California Press. Its author, a SUNY Distinguished Professor, James McNulty Chair in English and Research Professor in Anthropology at the University at Buffalo, has long been recognized as one of the world's principle experts in Mayan culture and literature.

Tedlock is a distinguished ethnopoeticist, translator, linguist and poet, best known for his definitive translation of "Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings," for which he won the PEN Translation Prize.

In "2000 Years," a beautifully illustrated and highly readable book, Tedlock makes the intellectual world of the ancient Mayans visible and meaningful in distinctive new ways.

His most notable accomplishment is that he establishes for the first time that two millennia of Mayan writings produced in various writing systems and media -- from stone glyphs and paper documents produced in the post-Columbian Roman alphabet -- constitute a single literary history and tradition.

Tedlock's application of a literary designation to stone-carved Mayan glyphs is undoubtedly his most important and emphatic claim he makes and it is one he supports with scholarship of sweeping scope.

He makes the case that hieroglyphic texts represent a visible (not oral) literature that originated long before Old English was born, and centuries before Europeans came to the Americas. This has not been understood, he says, because while there has been much progress in the glyphs' decipherment, an appreciation of their literary value has lagged behind.

"These carvings have traditionally been described as 'inscriptions' and their ancient writers as 'scribes,'" he says, "as if no one was actually composing the written material."

Tedlock analyzes this material not just as discrete bits of data, but as a series of narratives, a task, he says, which "requires paying attention to the whole story the writers tell" through a unique literature that employs complex visual art forms to recount complex stories.

He describes what Mayans dreamed and the stories they told themselves about astronomy, math, medicine and other sciences to history, mythology, poetry and spiritual practice.

Tedlock says part of his inspiration lies with the late Linda Schele, an expert in the field of Maya epigraphy and iconography whose role in the decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphics he considers invaluable.

He calls her "a very generous scholar" who also made literary connections in her analysis and, like Tedlock, linked the older works to living Mayan culture as well, "interpreting inscriptions in the light of what we know about Mayan culture today." After Schele died in 1998, however, Tedlock says most scholars went back to treating the inscriptions as data.

He presents the material chronologically, beginning with early "calculiform" hieroglyphic materials and moving on to paper codices considered "works of the devil" by the Spanish, who systematically destroyed most of them. Tedlock also considers literature written in their native languages by Christianized Mayans after the Spanish conquest, and ends with writings composed by contemporary Mayans, whose literature is not only thriving, but experiencing a renaissance.

The author drew on his decades of work among the Mayans and the work of major scholars in this field, to assemble the book, and to challenges a number of other commonly held assumptions about this culture.

He firmly establishes, for instance, that many Mayan writers (not just a few) were women, and that Mayan inscriptions on monuments were not just the abstract speculations of priests or stories of royal life, but descriptions of the lives of every day flesh and blood human beings. Tedlock says they also simultaneously describe events in the skies among

the gods.

He also challenges notions that Mayan rulers claimed the status of gods, claiming that inscriptions previously cited by scholars as describing the kings as gods are actually accounts of their good deeds as religious practitioners.

"It is clear that these rulers were not considered gods, nor did they claim to be gods," says Tedlock. "Rather, they were priest-kings whose role was to mediate between men and gods."

Tedlock's research, writing, and editing has been supported by grants and fellowships from the NIMH, NEA, NEH, Fulbright Commission, John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and Harvard's Dumbarton Oaks museum and library in Washington, D.C.

Provided by University at Buffalo