

## **Esteban Ríos Interview—Teacher in the field of Indigenous Education**

Teaching in the field of Indigenous education for children 6—13, Esteban Ríos uses his expertise to cover several important topics. Ríos begins the interview by introducing the Au'Dam, recollection of the 1991 solar eclipse, different ancestral beliefs of eclipses and the celestial bodies in Au'Dam religion. The conversation continues with the differences of calendars and agricultural traditions, the 5-year drought, and ends with discussing the current concerns of the Au'Dam.

Interviewee: Esteban Ríos (ES)

Interviewer: Amílcar Challú (AC)

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Transcribed with ChatGPT, edited by Amílcar Challú and Hope London

[START OF INTERVIEW]

**AC:** [00:01:00] What do you do for a living?

**ER:** [00:01:03] I am a teacher, currently working with children aged 6 to 12, 13 years old in primary school.

**AC:** [00:01:15] I see.

**ER:** [00:01:16] Yes, in the field of indigenous education.

**AC:** [00:01:20] Is education in Spanish or in an indigenous language?

**ER:** [00:01:29] It's in an indigenous language.

**AC:** [00:01:31] Ah, I see.

**ER:** [00:01:32] We alternate the languages, right? Depending on the main language here. If the child is more proficient in their native language, then that takes priority, and we gradually connect it with Spanish. Yes, that's how it is. And in the case of some children who are more proficient in Spanish, because there are also those who are already losing a bit of their oral skills in their Au'dam language, we introduce them to Spanish, but we also try to teach them to communicate orally in Au'dam.

**AC:** [00:02:17] That's great.

**ER:** [00:02:17] Yes.

**AC:** [00:02:18] And so, uh, the community is called Au'dam, right?

**ER:** [00:02:26] The Au'dam community or the Au'dam societies, yes. And the community where I am from is San Francisco de Lajas, in the municipality of Pueblo Nuevo. Yes, the Au'dam community or society, which is a variant of O'dan [can't understand], covers practically two communities: San Francisco de Lajas, San Bernardino de Milpillas, and Taxi Inga de Magdalena. These are the communities it encompasses here in Durango. And to the south, in Nayarit, there's a part of the municipality of Huajicori, and to the north of Nayarit, there are communities like San Andrés and Quiriquina, which I think are ejidos.

**AC:** [00:03:19] I see.

**ER:** [00:03:20] Yes, those are the names and the Au'dam society.

**AC:** [00:03:22] And each ejido has ejidal property.

**ER:** [00:03:28] Yes.

**AC:** [00:03:29] I see.

**ER:** [00:03:29] Yes, each ejido has its own ejidal property. Exactly. They have their authorities. In each of them, their representatives. Here they are called "comisariados," right?

**AC:** [00:03:40] Of course.

**ER:** [00:03:40] Ejidal commissioners, right?

**AC:** [00:03:41] Ah, I see. And, uh, do you speak Au'dam? And do you speak Spanish?

**ER:** [00:03:50] Yes. Is that so? We speak both Au'dam and Spanish.

**AC:** [00:03:56] Au'dam.

**ER:** [00:03:56] In the places closest to the capital, Spanish is spoken more.

**AC:** [00:04:03] I see.

**ER:** [00:04:04] In the more remote places, Au'dam is still spoken a lot. It's the primary language.

**AC:** [00:04:11] What is the population? Approximately.

**ER:** [00:04:17] In the total population, there are about 8,000 to 10,000 people, or residents, we could say.

**AC:** [00:04:28] I see.

**ER:** [00:04:28] Among the communities, the three communities I mentioned.

**AC:** [00:04:32] Yes.

**ER:** [00:04:32] But we should also add those in the north of Nayarit, as I mentioned, there are maybe about 6,000 more.

**AC:** [00:04:47] What Esther told me is that, uh, Au'dam is the way you refer to yourselves, and previously you were called Tepehua. Could that be?

**ER:** [00:05:04] Yes.

**AC:** [00:05:05] That's a name that the Spaniards gave you, I imagine.

**ER:** [00:05:09] Yes, exactly. Yes. So, well, here it is said that it is a variant of Au'dam, although, well, we as speakers maintain that it is a somewhat separate language, right? Yes, but researchers, researchers and all that, say, right? That it comes from the O'dan family. So, that's how we practically identify ourselves, as Au'dam. And as I mentioned earlier, we are Tepehuanos from the South-North, classified historically like that.

**AC:** [00:05:59] Yes, it's similar here as well. In many places, in Argentina too, there are names that were given, and then there are the proper names, and sometimes with very derogatory connotations. Here in Ohio, this happens a lot too. The community names are very different from the names recognized by the government.

**ER:** [00:06:34] Exactly. Well, it happens here as well. That's why I was saying earlier, well, San Francisco de Lajas, during the conquest, those who conquered it gave it this name, right? But the community itself, in our language, is called Acham. And that's why they added San Francisco de Lajas because it means "Laja on top of Laja." ...

**AC:** [00:07:37] I want to ask you a bit about the eclipse. The eclipse is on April 8, 2024, and I wonder if it will happen entirely in San Francisco de Lajas or if you know if it will be total or partial.

**ER:** [00:08:03] Well, I don't have much information about this eclipse, but I don't know if it's similar to the one in 1991 [year 1991: there was a total eclipse]. Yes, yes. And if there was an eclipse here in Durango that covered our community, practically all of Nayarit, because we are

almost between Nayarit and Durango, bordering, yes. So, it's of that magnitude. Well, I imagine it will pass through there and surprise us, just like it did back then, yes.

[Note: Some tangential discussion from the audio file has been omitted.]

**AC:** [00:08:57] But you mentioned the eclipse of 1991. What memories do you have? How old were you? If I may ask.

**ER:** [00:09:07] Well, I was around 20 years old at that time.

**AC:** [00:09:12] And what memories do you have? Yes, if you have any of the eclipse.

**ER:** [00:09:23] Well, at the beginning, following our ancestral tradition, our grandparents used to tell us that eclipses were a bad omen. They believed it was a punishment from our father, you know? Yes. So, they said that on that day or at that moment, we had to be cautious, they said. They said that when it gets dark during the day, the stones turn into snakes or the shoes you have can harm you because they transform into some kind of animal. That's what they used to tell us, you know? So, practically, I hadn't experienced any eclipse throughout my entire life, from the day I was born until that day [in 1991], so I had a little fear and curiosity at the same time, you know? I wanted to see what would happen. Yes, the experience in some ways was exciting. So, well, took like two minutes, I think, of total darkness., because of that, we stayed inside our house because we were a bit afraid to be outside, you know?

**ER:** [00:11:07] Eh, eh? Well. Well, yes, maybe a fear of the unknown, you know? And I thought, "What if the demon really comes out and catches us?" So, we were, well, you could say, taking shelter, right? With our family, talking quietly, saying, "How does it look? How do you feel?" We were chatting with the family who were there, which was my family, mainly. And that was the experience I had, and, well, yes. We saw that the stars, the stars, you know, looked normal as if it were nighttime, right? And the birds and chickens, they all went up to the trees for refuge, as if it were nighttime, you know? Well, as I mentioned, we weren't allowed to look directly because they told us that it was not recommended to look directly at the sun. The only thing we did was watch it on television because they were broadcasting it, you know?

**AC:** [Not in the audio file] You mentioned the traditions your ancestors talked about. Is there any notable event in Au'Dam history associated with eclipses?

**ER:** [00:12:53] Well, they say that in the past, I think so, but I haven't personally witnessed it, like during this last eclipse. Well, I don't know about other families, but in the family where we are, it practically didn't happen. But they say that during an eclipse, when it happens, people start hitting stones, mainly. Well, they call it an instrument for tuning or grinding the masa, and they call it a metate. So, they say that they start hitting that object. Why? To heal the sun, you know? Because they say the sun got sick. It needs, well, it needs this, not that we pray for it, but through

the sounds of that object, the stones, we are sending positive energy to help it heal quickly and not harm us, you know? That's what they told me. But, as I said, I didn't see that tradition. I didn't get to witness it, but they talk about it, you know?

**AC:** [00:14:19] Are there other traditions related to stars, the sun, the moon, and such that are memorable?

**ER:** [00:14:31] Well, in fact, the most ancestral society... Well, they revered the stars a lot, you know? Maybe not so much nowadays, but it used to be somewhat notable. For example, here they say the sun is your father, right? So, it is revered. Yes, they revere the sun for the light it provides us. And, well, its counterpart would be the moon, which could be considered our mother, you know? The sun would be our father. Yes, that's how they relate it more or less. So, there is some reverence or festivals, direct activities aimed at the sun or the moon, but not very emphasized, you know? But maybe they do it in some way to help improve the crops or ask the moon for abundant water to ensure good harvests... and such. In that way, they venerate the celestial bodies, asking for health, harmony, and that there are no pandemics affecting society, right? Yes. So, within those, they perform rituals, as I mentioned, which here they call Chilean. The people of Au'Dam call it Chiotal, which is a procession led by a priest, who they call curanderos here. But, well, I identify them as priests because they are the ones who start... praying, you know? They pray three times a day for five days, then, before... before sunrise at 6 AM, they start... They start dancing all night until dawn. And children, young people, elders, adults, everyone participates. And in the morning, they serve food, traditionally known as Chuy [spell?], which is prepared with meat and a little masa. It's prepared with venison. It has to be venison, not from any other animal. Yes.

**AC:** [00:18:07] Wow.

**ER:** [00:18:07] Yes.

**AC:** [00:18:08] Do you follow a calendar for your rituals?

**ER:** [00:18:30] Well, yes, exactly. Specific calendars, not exactly, but yes, more or less. For a certain period of time. Let's say, well, now, for example, as the harvest season is coming to an end, right? So, once they harvest everything, some families perform that ritual, yes. As I mentioned, it's a way of giving thanks for the abundance they had during the planting season, you know? Yes. And there's another season, roughly around March to April, in that timeframe, and that's for, well, we can say, to request or ask for abundant water in the next harvest so that the crops grow well, you know?

**AC:** [00:19:32] And is this harvest and planting calendar based on the lunar calendar?

**ER:** [00:19:43] Well, here, in this case, the harvests are seasonal. So, they practically start harvesting in the summer period. Yes, but when it comes to planting, maybe they do follow a lunar calendar as you mentioned, especially when it comes to planting to ensure that the plants develop quickly. They plant when the moon is in its crescent phase, you know? To help the plants grow rapidly. And for harvesting, they believe it should be done during the full moon to ensure that the harvest they reap lasts a long time and doesn't spoil quickly, you know? Because they say that if you harvest during the waning moon or the first quarter, the seeds spoil quickly because pests start to infest them. Yes. So, this is their way of protecting... Well, it's their wisdom, you know? Even though, as I mentioned, personally, well, it may not have anything to do with it, but perhaps it does. If they've been practicing it for a long time, you know?

**AC:** [00:21:45] Do they have something similar to the lunar calendar, or do they mainly follow the common calendar?

**ER:** [00:21:56] Well, here, we follow the calendar. The global one... Well, there are times when they prepare the land, bless it, thank it, and when they need to clear it for preparation. So, they have their own times. For example, when making a "coamil," if it's from virgin forest, we could say... I call it virgin forest when the trees and bushes are very tall and big, you know? So, they start preparing or cutting it down in February. Yes, and they let it dry properly so that it's ready by May to burn it well and not leave many branches, you know? That's for when the tree is very big. But when they're smaller bushes that have been worked on for a long time, they start preparing them in April because the small branches dry faster since they're not as thick, you know? So, it depends. Where they clear or use oxen to loosen the soil, they start from, well, they used to start from the end of May, almost the last few days of May. Yes. So, yes. And... to plant more or less... around June 15th.

**ER:** [00:24:03] Yes. And... by June 30th, everything should be planted because if not, the harvest won't be successful, they say. Nowadays, it seems like the weather is delaying a bit. The rainy seasons, well, many people are already planting by the end of June, and sometimes the harvest turns out well, and sometimes it doesn't, right? Yes. So, it's more or less like that. These are the agricultural activities that take place here in this part with the Au'dam people. And the harvest. There are about 2 or 3 types of climate. Cold climate and warm climate in the warmer areas. Or if they harvest faster, they start lifting the crop in October, but in the colder areas, they might only start harvesting in December. It's curious (or maybe not, but interesting), the special thing about this is that in the Au'dam village on December 25th, which is when the birth of Jesus Christ is commemorated, they make popcorn. We call it "esquite" here, but it's popcorn made from the new corn they harvest. This symbolizes that, on one hand, there is now permission to consume the new corn. From that point on, they can use the newly harvested corn for consumption, right? We could say that this marks the inauguration.

**AC:** [00:26:19] Starting on the 25th.

**ER:** [00:26:20] Yes. [Some nods omitted...]

**AR:** [00:26:24] Interesting.

**ER:** [00:26:24] In December. Yes. So, all the families gather...

**AC:** [00:26:30] I see.

**ER:** [00:26:31] ...in the village. They bring their corn, some bring ten kilos, others more, some just a little, whatever they can, but they bring their corn, and there, together, they start making esquite or popcorn, right? In their pots, you know? There's a special place... where the authority tells them, "Here, you will gather, here you will make your esquites or popcorn," right? But that's the significance of it, that from then on, there's permission to consume the new corn because they say that if you don't do it this way, a disease comes as punishment from the Lord, and your ears start hurting, and that's because you didn't do... that, right?

**AC:** [Not in audio file] Are there similar customs for other crops?

**ER:** [00:27:30] Well, not really. Not for other crops like beans. For other things like tomatoes, chili, there isn't much of an issue. It's only with corn that I've observed, even before they start cutting the corn, they do a meditation for five days where women or men cut the tiny corn cobs when they're very tender, and they throw them into the fire as an offering or to ask for permission to start cutting the corn. Without doing this, they also have the belief that something could happen, right? That's how it is. So, that's why families always do that. This is specific to corn. Why corn? Well, from my conceptual point of view, or maybe because it's the staple food, the main thing, right? I mean, corn is always there in the house, it's never missing. Other products, like beans, well, they might be missing sometimes, but it's no big deal if vegetables are missing for a while, but corn has to be there. So, I imagine that's why these rituals are performed.

**AC:** [00:29:10] Do you think there's a memory of hunger or very severe food shortages? Are there stories about that?

**ER:** [00:29:26] Mmm. There's an account that talks about that, a time when it didn't rain, and there was indeed a severe drought. As a result, there were no harvests, right? People say, well, they mention that they survived on the fruits of the trees, but they also say that those didn't provide much. Yes. And some say that they planted small corn plants, and they watered them. Yes, but there came a time when... and there wasn't any water, they say. It dried up, and there was no water. They say, well, it lasted for about five years.

**AC:** [00:30:16] Wow.

**ER:** [00:30:16] Yes. And it was in one place, here, they say, where the water didn't run out. So, everyone went to live there, to that place. It was during that time when they went to live there. I mean, they lived in the surrounding areas. Yes, they went to live there, in those surroundings.

**AC:** [00:30:44] Do you know the name of the village?

**ER:** [00:30:45] Well, it's near Lajas. Yes, well, in our language, it's called "kubuka," which means "the little jump." Yes, there's a river that flows into it. And I imagine that due to the force of the water, the excavation for water deepened a lot, so the water reservoir lasted a long time, right? It's a large pond...

**AC** [00:31:28] Do you know what the approximate date or time period was?

**ER:** [00:31:32] Mmm, no, I really couldn't say in what time period because I imagine that even they don't know the time period. They just used the word "truth," which means a long time ago, right? Yes. So, this... Well, what they intended to convey was that we should take care of the water. I mean, keep the lake alive so it wouldn't get polluted. But on the other hand, it was to ensure that traditions continued among the families, right? For example, they say, "Why didn't it rain? Why didn't it rain?" They say it's because they stopped performing the mitote, which is the ritual I mentioned earlier, you know? They stopped, right? Yes, that's why God got angry, and it didn't rain anymore. Yes, that's the second reason. So, they say that, yes. So, what happened? They said that people had to organize themselves again. They started performing rituals, mmm, to bring back the rain, they say. And that's how it rained. But there were many, many priests who finally agreed to unite their energy so that the rain could come again. Because if not, it wouldn't rain according to their beliefs, right? Yes, right? And they say that, well, as an offering to pay for the water they drew or poured into the pond, in that place, they would throw or give a piece of a container, either a pot or a dish. That was a way of paying, right?

**AC:** [00:33:44] Wow, you know, I work on the history of agriculture. So, these things interest me a lot. I got off topic with the question, but there was a very long drought at the end of 1786 and 1785 that affected all of central Mexico, but particularly that region between Durango, also Zacatecas, and part of Jalisco. Oh, so I wonder if it might be related to this, perhaps, but well, I don't know.

**ER:** [00:34:35] Eh? Well, yes, maybe it wasn't so noticeable now because perhaps nowadays, with the flow of trade, people had more ways to go and find products elsewhere, right? Yes, because back when I talk about it, well, when they talk about it, they're referring to that time when, well, I imagine there wasn't a way to get things, right? And for people back then, it was practically the end of the world because they didn't have contact with other societies. I'm not sure if they were very isolated because even in the 1970s, Lajas still didn't have transportation communication, right? Yes. Yes, well, I remember that when the road came, the one they opened for vehicles, it was around '78, roughly '80, that's when I started seeing, well, vehicles...



**AC:** [00:35:50] Of course.

**ER:** [00:35:51] ...trucks, right?

**AC:** [00:35:55] Well, I have one last question for you. If you don't mind. Are there any other traditions related to astronomy, stars, or eclipses that you'd like to talk about? I don't know.

**ER:** [00:36:15] Hmm. Well, I'm trying to remember if there's anything else. I don't think so. As I mentioned earlier, we discussed eclipses, but in terms of other astronomical traditions or natural phenomena, well, there's one notable event, and that's the flood, you know? They say that it even reached these parts here. As a reference point, there's a place near San Francisco de Lajas called Cerro Gordo, or in our language, it's called Cota. "Cota" means something powerful, like a place with power, you know? I haven't asked exactly why they call it that, but from my perspective, I imagine it's because it's very humid.

**ER:** [00:38:05] Well, they say that clouds always form there when it's about to rain, and the clouds start forming on that hill. So they say that, well, we were talking about the flood, and it even reached that area. They say that the ark settled there in that place, and that's why the hill has that power, you know? Yes. In the past, many people used to go there to worship. They would offer food and what they had. Yes, and they would participate. It wasn't just the Au'dam people; other societies also participated there. For example, in this case, the Wixárikas, who are the Huicholes. They also participated there, or they are still participating. And now, well, that place is considered a kind of heritage of the Au'dam society, and it's a bit more protected, legally speaking, by the authorities

**AC:** [00:39:30] I ran out of eclipse questions, but out of curiosity, what are the most significant concerns or priorities of the Au'dam people? What do they value the most, especially the issues they actively advocate for with the government and so on?

**ER:** [00:40:01] Well, currently, one of the major concerns, as far as I've observed, is the issue of territory. This has been a significant topic that they have been fighting for or claiming. In the past, Lajas had a vast territory, but over time, portions of it were taken away, and now there's very little left. But it was our home. That's one of the significant issues I've noticed. On the other hand, we, as educators in indigenous education, promote the continued use of the Au'dam language. We encourage its preservation within families, because right now, compared to maybe 30 years ago, the number of language speakers has decreased significantly. The population of speakers today is much smaller than it was back then. Nowadays, it's very limited, as I mentioned. More and more young people and children are no longer speaking it. It's still preserved in the areas that are more isolated. So, perhaps this was part of a poorly planned strategy with the goal of making Spanish the only official language throughout Mexico.

Historically, we know that those who spoke languages other than Spanish were punished and forced to speak Spanish, one way or another. I believe that over time, subsequent generations decided not to pass down their native language, Au'dam, to their children, and it was gradually replaced by Spanish.

**AC:** [00:42:54] I see. And today, there is quite a bit of migration, I imagine, to other cities or even to the United States?

**ER:** [00:43:09] Well, there isn't much migration to the United States, but there is migration to other states and cities. For example, to Nayarit, Sinaloa, here in Durango, and Zacatecas, with a more significant presence. There is also some migration to other states, but it's minimal. In the United States, it's not substantial either. There is migration, but it's not very noticeable. In neighboring states, yes.

**AC:** [00:43:48] Well, Esteban, I greatly appreciate your time. I ended up taking much more of your time than I initially mentioned. I apologize for that.

[END OF INTERVIEW]