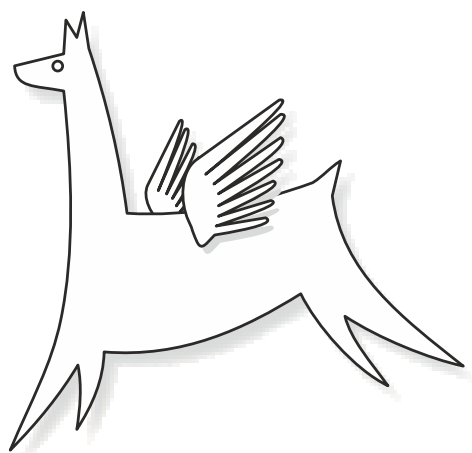




Edgardo Civallero
The erkencho



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Cover image: *Erkencho* and *caja*. [Photo: E. Civallero].

The instrument

The *erkencho* or *erke* (also written *erquencho*, *erque*, *irqi* or *erqe*) is an aerophone traditionally built and played in northwestern Argentina and southern Bolivia, in the Southern Andes cultural region, which belonged to the ancient *Qullasuyu*: the southern quarter of the *Tawantinsuyu* or Inkan Empire.

It basically consists of a pipe (called *boquilla* or *pajuela* in Spanish), between 4 and 6 inches long and up to 0.5 inch in diameter, made out of a piece of common reed (*Arundo donax*) or *sokhosa/suqusa* (different *Bambuseae* from the Bolivian rainforests). In this tube, a single reed is cut at the proximal end —which is closed by a natural septum of the cane— while a huge bell is attached at the distal end, which is open.



Image 1.
Argentinean *erkencho*.
[Photo: E. Civallero].

The *erkencho* is an idioglottal clarinet — the only single reed instrument in the traditional Andean organology. It has a thin, short and substantially cylindrical body —the *boquilla*—, which sometimes may also include part of the bell, and which is provided with a single reed, variable in size. When blown, this reed becomes a vibrating lamella and produces the sound. In idioglottal instruments, such tongues are made out of the body itself, making a difference with heteroglottal ones, such as the European/orchestra clarinet, whose reeds are an independent element that may even be made of a different material from that of the body to which it will be later attached.

The reed is cut downwards, with its free end pointing towards the player. This lamella is sometimes secured with cotton thread; the binding prevents the incisions from extending too far, while also allows adjusting the length of the vibrating tongue and, thus, lowering or increasing the pitch of the

sound it produces. Between the reed and the body of the instrument, a very thin thread is placed (usually a human hair or an animal one, like a horsehair or a cat's whisker), preventing the reed from being stuck to the pipe with the condensed moisture from breath and remaining motionless.

Due to its small size, the body of this particular clarinet does not have fingering holes to permit selective variation of the length of the air column and, therefore, the production of different notes. However, this does not mean that the performer cannot alter and modify the pitch. Combining a series of fairly complex techniques (which include varying the blow intensity, the pressure of the lips or the incisor teeth over the reed, the position where the blow is applied, etc.), a wide and interesting range of sounds can be obtained, and actual melodies can be played.

At the distal end of the pipe, a flared bell is added for amplification. It may be made of horn, gourd, metal,



Image 2.
Parts of an Argentinean *erkencho*.
[Photo: E. Civallero].

plastic, or a combination of any of these materials. These bells are usually carved, engraved, painted in bright colors and/or lined with ribbons, braided cords and wool tassels.

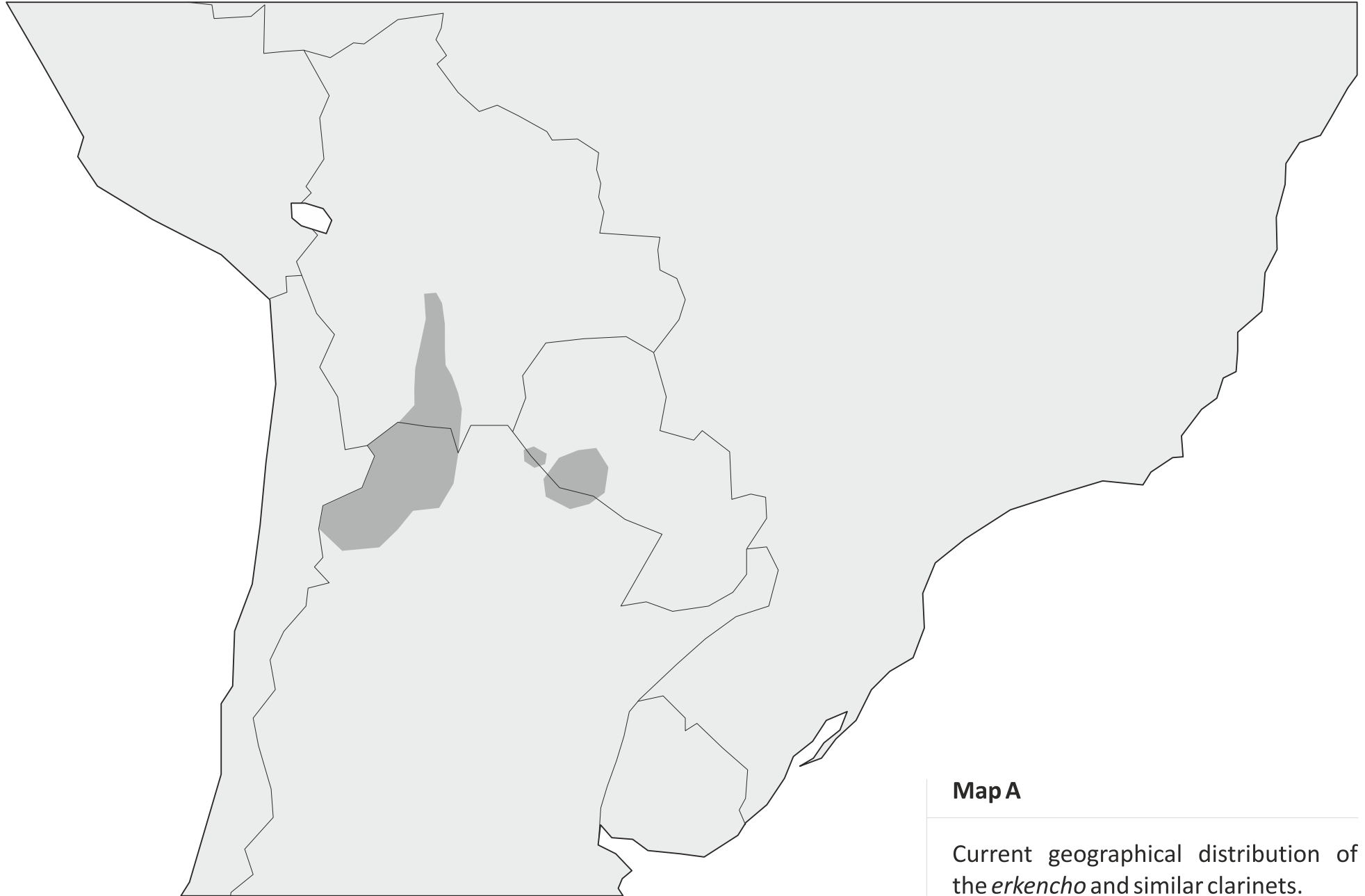
Bells are huge compared to the body of the instrument; such a disproportion in size has led some musicians to refer to the *erkencho* as a "horn with a mouthpiece", and/or to call it using names reserved to Andean traditional, indigenous lip concussion aerophones, such as *pututo* or *asta*. This fact provoked some confusion about the nature of the instrument in the past; as a matter of fact, many chronicles and reports quote the *erkencho* as being a "trumpet" or a "horn".

Its current, popular name seems to originate from the Quechua term *irqi*, "child", although the reason of giving such name to the instrument remains unknown.

The sound and the music

The sound of the *erkencho* may be described as a hoarse and plaintive buzz, and its main features (height, timbre, power) depend on the material, the length and the diameter of the *boquilla* on the one side, and on the size of the vibrating reed and the bell, on the other.

Traditional performers rarely produce well-defined notes: they prefer to emit a continuous, fluctuating sound (within a range limited by the physical possibilities of the instrument) interrupted here and there, seeking to imitate the particular singing style of the region from which the instrument is native. Tarija and northwestern Argentina share a common musical culture, labeled by Argentinean musicologist



Map A

Current geographical distribution of the *erkencho* and similar clarinets.



C. Vega as "tritonic music" (although that name may be debatable). The main expression of that regional culture is the singing of *coplas*: short stanzas, in local Spanish, performed *a capella* both by male and female soloists or by community ensembles. It is a very distinctive style, with many indigenous traits that may be found in other areas of the Andes. One

Image 3.
Detail of Argentinean *erkencho* (*pajuela*).
[Photo: E. Civallero].

of its most frequently used vocal techniques is the *kenko* (from Quechua *qinqu*, "ripple"): a beautiful combination of *portamento* and *falsetto*. The *erkenchos* try to (and do) replicate the melodies produced by the *copleros* (*coplas*' singers).

Image 4.
Detail of Argentinean *erkencho* (bell).
[Photo: E. Civallero].



Erkenchos are intended to be played with the accompaniment of one of the many *caja* variants existing in this region, such as the *cajita chapaca*, the *caja chayera* or the *caja puneña*. Also known as *tinya* in Quechua, the *caja* is a type of double-headed Andean drum made up of a wooden ring about 4-6 inches high and 10-18 inches in diameter, over which two bare skins are stretched without hoops — they are bound together by means of a string or a leather cord that zigzags from one to the other. The *cajas* are beaten with a single stick, the *huajtana* or *guastana* (from Quechua *waqtana*, "a thing that hits/beats"). The *erkencho* and the *caja* are played by the same musician, who holds the bell of the wind instrument with the left hand while with the other hits the membranophone, hanging from his right wrist.

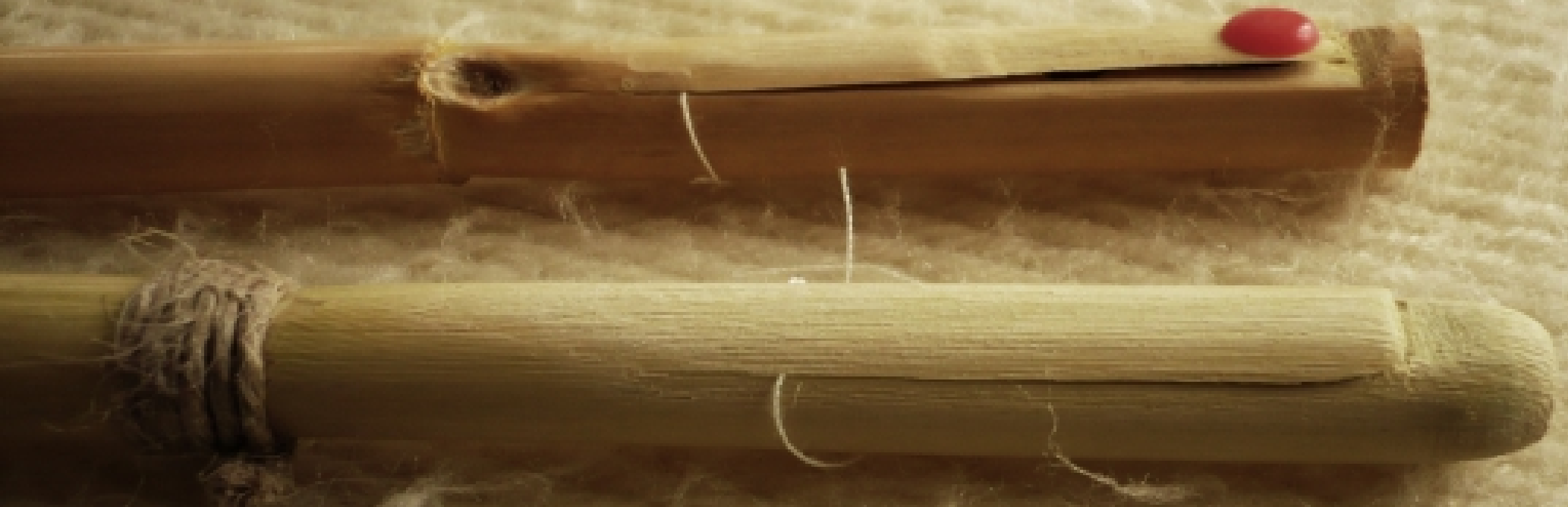
According to the traditional classification of Andean musical instruments by the year's seasons when they can be played, the *erkencho* is a "summer" instrument or, more specifically, a "wet season"

instrument. The Andean "wet season" (Aymara *jallu pacha*, Quechua *paray tiempo*) stretches between All Saints' Day and Easter Sunday (the end of the Carnival). Also, and according to the taboos set in Andean societies about the performance of musical instruments, *erkenchos* have to be played only by men, although some exceptions are granted.

In Argentina, the *erkencho* is used to perform different toques —instrumental pieces attached to a particular moment and place— or to accompany the singing of *coplas* and the *rondas* (dance rounds). In the latter case, the player or *erkenchero* stands in the center of the circle of dancers and singers. During Carnival, traditional *erkenchadas* are celebrated, with several performers playing together, subjected to the same rhythm (but not the melody, not to say the tuning), and producing an impressive heterophony.

In Bolivia, *erkes* accompany Carnival's *rondas de erke* (as they do in Argentina) and the songs sung during

Image 5.
Detail of *pajuelas* of Argentinean *erkenchos*.
[Photo: E. Civallero].



religious festivals, like the one devoted to the Virgin of Chaguaya, in Tarija. Among the Jalq'a people of Chuquisaca, these instruments appear at different festivities, and do so in two sizes: a small and sharp-sounding instrument, the *warmi erqe* (in Quechua, "woman/female *erke*"), usually found in feminine hands (being one of the few Andean wind instruments women are allowed to play), and a large one, the *qhari erqe* (in Quechua, "man/male *erke*"), in masculine hands. As it happens with many other traditional Andean aerophones, the melody is developed by combining the sounds of both instruments (hocket/interlocking technique).



Image 6.
Bolivian *erke*.

[Photo: <http://www.mimo-db.eu/>].

Image 7.
Argentinean *erkenchos*.

[Photo: <http://www.kaypacha.com.ar/>].





Image 10.
Argentinean player of *erkencho*.
[Photo: <http://pallcafilm.blogspot.com.es/>].

Image 8.
Argentinean *erkencho* [<http://www.herrimusika.org/>].

Image 9.
Argentinean *erkencho* [<http://wiki.educacionmusical.es/>].

Local variations



Image 11.

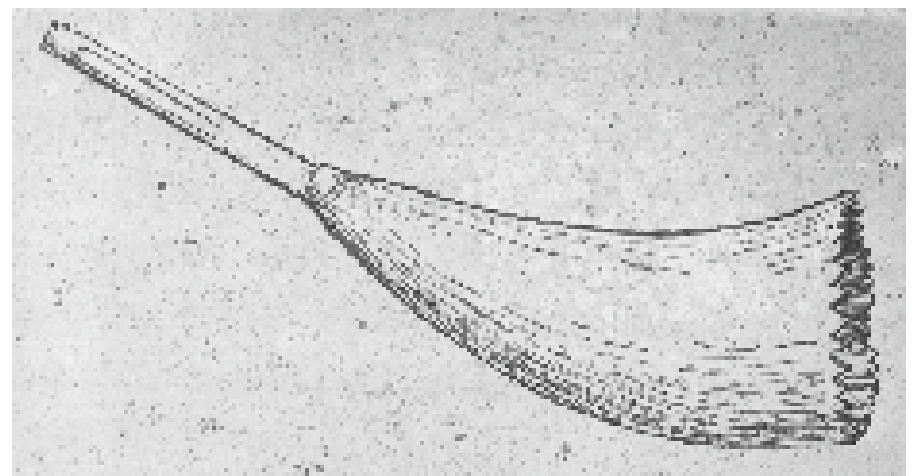
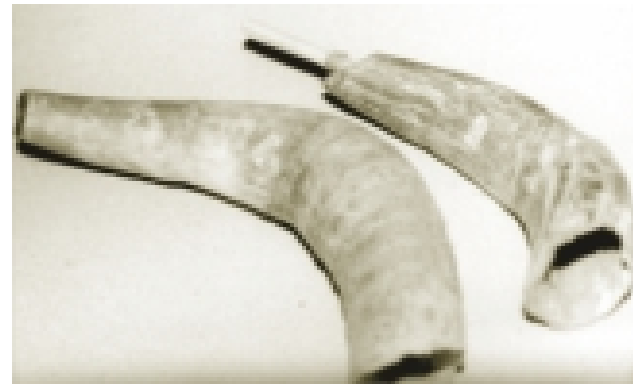
Argentinean player of *erkencho*.

[Photo: <http://www.fotorevista.com.ar/>].

There are regional variants of the *erkencho*. In Argentina it is used throughout Jujuy province and in the mountainous area of Salta province, both of them located in the northwestern part of the country. In the highlands of Jujuy, the instrument's bell is usually made from goat's horn (due to shortage of cattle), and in the east of the same province, of copper or brass sheet. In Salta there are *erkenchos* that combine metal and cow's horn and can reach considerable sizes. In some modern versions, Argentinean builders do not cut the vibrating reed from the pipe itself; instead, they make a rectangular hole, where a small sheet of x-ray film or other similar material is inserted. Incidentally, that turns the clarinet heteroglottal.

In Bolivia, where the instrument is called *erke* (probably the original name) or, according to some authors, *huacachupa* (from Quechua *wakachupa*, "cow's tail"), it is mostly found in the department of Tarija, in the south of the country. It has also been located in the neighboring department of Potosí, in regions such as Calcha, and between the Jalq'a people in the department of Sucre. There, it is very common to elaborate the reed by directly splitting the node at the proximal end of the pipe, and to make the bells with huge cattle horns or gourds, in both cases densely decorated.

It is because of the influence of the Andean indigenous societies, that this highlands' instrument is also present in the neighboring lowlands — for example



Images 12 and 13.
Wakasekech of the Mak'á people.
Image 14.
Taklúk of the Nivaklé people.

among the Mak'á people from central and boreal Chaco (Argentina and Paraguay), under the name of *wakasekech*. Izikowitz (1934) mentions it among the Ashlushlay (Nivaklé or Chulupí) people in the same region; according to Pérez Bugallo (1996), that people calls it *taklúk*, and their neighbors, the Yofwaja or Chorote people, *waka kiú*.

No archaeological, ethnographic or documentary evidences have been found so far to assert a South American indigenous origin for this particular instrument. According to one of the theories currently in play, it might be derived from a number of European traditional aerophones with similar features, which were quite popular on the continent, particularly in the Iberian Peninsula, e.g. the Asturian *turullu* or the Cantabrian *berrona*.

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Image 15.

Argentinean player of *erkencho*.

[Photo: <http://www.fotorevista.com.ar/>].

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Image 6. Bolivian *erke*. Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis (Brussels, Belgium). <http://www.mimo-db.eu/media/KMKG-MRAH/IMAGE/1990.028.jpg>

Image 7. Argentinean *erkenchos*. Kaypacha. <http://www.kaypacha.com.ar/instrumentos/erquencho/erquenchos.jpg>

Image 8. Argentinean *erkencho*. Soinuenea. <http://www.herrimusika.org/files//kotsultak/tresnak/1321.jpg>

Image 9. Argentinean *erkencho*. Wiki educación musical. <http://wiki.educacionmusical.es/images/b/bf/Erkencho.jpg>

Image 10. Bernabé Montellanos playing an *erkencho* made of goat horn for the CD "Huellas del tiempo", music for the film "Pallca". <http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-hxhYzf74lck/UC-8GfT2Uji/AAAAAAAAABA0/cIURbONGXHI/s1600/DIRECTO+02.jpg>

Image 11. Player of *erkencho* in the Festival del Queso y la Copla in Chorrillos, Jujuy (Argentina). FotoRevista. <http://www.fotorevista.com.ar/SFotos/12/09/02/120902072457.jpg>

Image 12. Player of *erkencho* in the Festival del Queso y la Copla in Chorrillos, Jujuy (Argentina). FotoRevista. <http://www.fotorevista.com.ar/SFotos/12/10/19/121019055651g.jpg>



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