

Edgardo Civallero

Musical instruments
of the Ava people



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Introduction

The Ava, also known as "chiriguano," were among the peoples who most tenaciously resisted the colonial system in South America.

They are a Guaraní-speaking group who migrated from the Amazon region and the northern Chaco to eastern Bolivia toward the end of the 15th century, in a constant search (shared with other Tupi-Guaraní peoples) for the mythical *iwóka*, the "Land Without Evil." They occupied the southern Bolivian lowlands, subjugating the Chané, an Arawak people who inhabited those territories, and attacking the societies that lived around them (e.g., the Wichí or Weenhayek). By the time the Europeans arrived, the Ava were pushing against the eastern borders of *Tawantinsuyu*, or Inka Empire, in the headwaters

of the Pilcomayo and Guapay rivers. In fact, the Quechua- and Aymara-speaking communities of the Bolivian highlands had created a defensive system of fortifications (admittedly unsuccessful) to try to repel their attacks.

The Ava earned a reputation as dangerous and invincible warriors. The Inka armies could not subdue them (according to Inca Garcilaso de la Vega); nor could the Spanish conquistadors and colonial governors, who only managed to establish, with great difficulty, a couple of religious missions on the Parapetí River.

They participated in the War of Independence, fighting against the royalist armies. With the arrival of the Republic, Franciscan missions and private haciendas encroached upon Ava lands, which they resisted fiercely, as they always had, until the Curuyuqui massacre in 1891: a bloody defeat at the hands of Bolivian troops. From that moment on, the former Ava power began to wane.

The increasingly diminished "chiriguano" territories were the battleground for the Chaco War (1932-1935) between Bolivia and Paraguay. Forced to fight in the armies of both sides, the Ava decided to migrate *en masse* to Argentina, settling mainly in the area known as "chaco salteño," the Chaco phytogeographical area in Salta. Today, they inhabit some localities in the provinces of Salta and Jujuy (Argentina), a few areas in western Paraguay, and traditional communities scattered throughout southern Santa Cruz and eastern Tarija (Bolivia), especially in the Parapetí River basin and the Izozog wetlands.

Ava culture is based on a mixed Guarani-Arawak heritage strongly influenced by Andean cultures (an influence clearly reflected in the grave stress of their language, unlike the acute stress of other Guarani-derived languages). This group is also intertwined with the Bolivian and Spanish-speaking Argentine Creole cultures. Despite the dominance of the *karái póchi* (the "evil white man"), the Ava preserve their *ñanderéko*, their original ways. They maintain their language and many of

their traditions, customs, expressions, and beliefs, although in many cases these have been blended with Western urban and Christian elements.

The men dedicate themselves to hunting, fishing, making textiles (*caraguatá* bags) or palm and cane baskets, or working as laborers and farmhands in fields, sugar mills, and forests. The women, for their part, also make baskets, along with various pottery pieces. As part of their Arawak heritage, both sexes dedicate considerable time to agriculture, especially the cultivation of maize. Their age-old attachment to this grain, which is "what blood is to humans, what nourishes and gives life," motivates the annual celebration of the *aréte guásu*, the "great festival."

Currently linked to Carnival, the *aréte guásu* (also called *aréte abáti*, the "maize festival") still retains many ancient meanings. It is said that the living and the dead gather once a year during this celebration to dance together, all hidden behind *aña-aña* masks made of ceibo wood. It is the moment in the annual cycle when

music, dance, and *chicha kãwi* become the axis around which Ava life revolves.

Ava Musical Instruments

The instruments presented and described in the following paragraphs — organized by families — constitute the Ava musical heritage. They are usually made by the performers themselves and are played in traditional contexts, especially during the *aréte guásu*.

The Ava also possess and play instruments of European/mestizo origin (guitar, accordion), with which they perform Argentine or Bolivian folk or popular music (*taquiraris*, *chacareras*, *chamamés*). These instruments will not be included in this text.

Membranophones

In general, Ava membranophones are double-headed tubular drums. They are known by the generic name *angúa*, which is the same name given to wooden mortars (*angu'a*), and are played only by men. They are generally considered to be a family of instruments.

In Argentina, the *angúa guásu*, *angúa rái*, and *michi rái* are used. In Bolivia, until the beginning of the last century, only one drum was documented, simply called *angúa*, made from the trunk of the *soto* tree and fitted with a single drumhead. However, by 1916, Romano and Cattunar recognized in their writings the use of the *angúa guásu* (large bass drum) and the *angúa rái* (small snare drum).

Angúa guásu

Its Guaraní name translates as "large drum": at 50-80 cm tall and 30-50 cm in diameter, it is the largest member of the Ava drum family. It is also called *angúa aretépe* ("festival drum"), *angúa tubícha* ("chief drum"), or *tambora*. It is the only membranophone that the Ava considered feminine.

It is constructed by hollowing out a softwood log, usually cedar (*Cedrela balansae* or *C. fissilis*), *ishpingo* or Creole oak (*Amburana caerensis*), or *zapallo caspi* (*Pisonia ambigua*). Once hollowed out, the piece of wood is roughed out with a form until a 1 cm thick wall is obtained. A 1 cm diameter hole is then drilled in this wall with a red-hot iron, serving as a pressure relief hole (a feature borrowed from European drums). The wood can be substituted with a tin container of appropriate dimensions.

The drumheads (*mboapíre*) are made from the hide of the brocket deer (*Mazama gouazoubira*), agouti

(*Dasyprocta azarae*), iguana (*Tupinambis sp.*), or green lizard (*Teius teyou*). The first two kinds are covered with cold ash and then scraped with the edge of a cane to remove all the hair. The non-playing drumhead can be made of cowhide and have a snare of various materials.

The hide is stretched over a ring of thick vine (*isípo*) and sewn in a spiral with long stitches, using plant fiber or thin wire. Once the drumheads are placed on the body of the drum, two hoops of *palo amarillo* (*Phyllostylon rhamnoides*), *aguay* (*Puotera salicifolia*), *tala* (*Celtis tala*), or *peteribí* (*Cordia trichotoma*) are added, their ends joined by wire or thong. These hoops have a series of perforations through which a thong of plant fiber, cowhide, or deer neck leather is passed in a zigzag pattern to tie them together (Rocca and Rossi, 2004).

To play it, the musician, standing, hangs it over his shoulder and strikes it with a mallet called a *mbopúka*, fitted with a head of wool and leather. It appears especially during the *aréte guásu*: it is said that its sound summons the living and the dead to participate in the celebration. It



marks the pulse of the flute melody and signals the choreographic variations of the dance.

Angúa rái

Its name means "child drum"; it is also called *angúa míni*, "small drum." It measures 25 cm high and 25 cm in diameter, and is the intermediate size of the Ava drum set, serving as a snare drum.

Unlike the *angúa guásu*, the body of the *angúa rái* is made from a piece of carob or palm wood; the drumheads, for their part, are made of the hide of agouti, *vizcacha* (*Lagostomus maximus*), or *teyuguásu* lizard. The unplayed drumhead has a snare over it: a cord of bristles or twisted plant fibers called *evínsa* or

Image 01 [prev. page].

Angúa rái.

Photo: <http://conar.senip.gob.ar/>].

wirapáüsa, which vibrates against the membrane, producing a sound similar to that of a European military drum.

The musician hangs the instrument from his left forearm and adjusts the handle by rotating and twisting the drum. He strikes it with two peeled sticks, multiplying the pulse marked by the *angúa guásu* with rolls.

It is believed that the sound of the main Ava orchestral ensemble, composed of *angúa guásu*, *angúa rái*, and flute, improves as the number of *angúa rái* increases. It was once used in now-forgotten funeral rites. Currently, it is only used during the celebration of the *aréte guásu*. Its sound — if played continuously for days — is said to have the power to make the dancers levitate collectively.

Míchi rái

It is the smallest of the Ava drums: its name translates as "the youngest son."



Chordophones

The player hangs the small drum from his left wrist and strikes the drumhead — which is usually decorated with multicolored designs — with a pair of sticks. It is exclusively accompanied by a giant flute, the *temímby guásu*, during summer dances.

Turúmi

The *turumi* or *miori* is the only stringed instrument of the Ava people. Its size, structure, and proportions are identical to those of a European viol (despite one of its names being an indigenous corruption of the Spanish word "violín"); it is handcrafted and its appearance much more "rustic" than that of the standard instrument. Its four strings are tuned in fifths, like the violin, but a third lower (Cavour, 1994; Kuss, 2004; Sánchez, 2010; Rozo, 2011).

It is constructed from a single block of cedar wood (*Cedrela balansae* or *C. fissilis*), which is carved and hollowed out. The soundboard is made separately (usually

Image 02 [prev. page].

Angúa rái.

[Photo: <http://www.selecciontexo.com/>].



from the same wood) and a sticky substance obtained from a local climbing plant called *sacha* is used (Pérez Bugallo, 1996). The bridge is also made of cedar. The bow (*mióri mbopúka*) is prepared from a branch of *palo amarillo* (*Phyllostylon rhamnoides*) to which a bundle of horsehair or plant bristles (*píndo rívi*) is attached. The most common strings are made of thin wire or nylon thread (used as fishing line).

To play the instrument, it rests against the chest and forearm. The bridge's height, generally exaggerated, prevents pressing the string against the fingerboard; the string length is then varied by lightly resting the fingers on it (a feature probably inherited from the musical bows of the region).

In general, a slow and progressive decline in the use of this instrument has been observed, replaced by com-

mercially produced violins. It was probably introduced to the region by the Franciscans (Langer, 2009); this missionary influence (which Sánchez, 2001, analyzes in detail) is reflected in the contexts in which the *turúmi* is currently played: in both Argentina and Bolivia, it appears during Easter, after the *aréte guásu*, playing the melodic lines of the circle dances (*chánka chánka*), Easter tunes, praise songs, and the wordless songs of the *arerúya* (hallelujah).

It is also present during the so-called "*tairári* season" (from May to October) until the beginning of the following "*aréte* season" (from October until the end of Carnival); during this period, it is often associated with the *tairári*, a musical genre through which singers express their feelings in just a few words — a cathartic song sung until exhaustion (Sánchez, 1997).

Image 03 [prev. page].

Turúmi.

[Photo: <http://conar.senip.gob.ar/>].

Aerophones

Temímby púku

Also called *mímby púku* ("long flute") or *temímby ñembó'y* ("vertical flute," especially in Izozog), this is a vertical flute without a blowing conduct, similar to the Andean *quena*. It is made from a piece of the cactus known as *sacharrosa* (*Pereskia sacharosa*) or from a segment of *takuapúku* (*takuára púku*, "long cane"), or even from industrial copper, bronze, or iron pipe.

Despite its clear Andean origin, it is a widespread instrument among the Ava people. Its length ranges from 50 to 60 cm (two hand spans and four fingers) and it has a square bevel and 5 holes: 4 finger holes on the front and one for tuning on the side. To place them, builders mea-





sure three fingers from the middle of the tube and make the first hole; from there, three more equidistant holes are drilled in a row to the distal end. The last hole, which is covered by the ring finger (since the little finger is never used), is made to one side: left or right, depending on whether the musician is left- or right-handed. In cane instruments, the holes are drilled with a red-hot iron; in

Image 04 [prev. page].

Temímby púku.

[Photo: <http://conar.senip.gob.ar/>].

Image 05.

Temímby púku.

[Photo: <http://conar.senip.gob.ar/>].

metal instruments, with a file or a drill (Pérez Bugallo, 1996; Arce, 2003; Rocca and Rossi, 2004).

It is a vehicle that channels the sexual potency of the musician, always a man. It is played with the accompaniment of an *angúa guásu* and one or more *angúa rái* in the dances of the summer period, especially those of the

aréte, or in a solitary, improvised, and personal way, to express intimate feelings.

Temímby ye piása

Its Guarani name, "crossed flute," clearly indicates that it is a transverse flute. It is also called *yúru ye piása* ("crossed mouth") and *chikitáno*, the name of an ethnic group from the lowlands of eastern Bolivia (Chiquitano) who may have been its first users, following its introduction by Jesuit missionaries.

It is made from a segment of common reed (*Arundo donax*) or *takuapúku* of varying dimensions, but no less than 30 cm in length between partitions. The mouthpiece can be square or round, and it has six finger holes. These are all located frontally, over a straight line obtained by lifting a thin strip of the reed's outer layer. The first hole is pierced by fire in the middle of the tube, and the others are placed equidistantly between this first hole and the distal end, generally 2.5 cm apart (Pérez Bugallo, 1996; Rocca and Rossi, 2004).

This aerophone is used for the rounds and foot-stomping music typical of Easter. It is usually played at the same time as the *turúmi*, although its repertoire is different. It is accompanied by an *angúa guásu* and two *angúa rái*.

Temímby guásu

Its enormous size lives up to its name, "large flute." It is an aerophone similar to the *erasos* or *requintos* of the *pinkillo mohoseño* ensemble from the Bolivian highlands.

It is a vertical flute, easily exceeding one meter in length. Traditionally, it was made from *takuára* bamboo, although nowadays iron pipes up to 5 cm in diameter are used. It has five finger holes on the front, located in its distal half, and produces two octaves of a pentatonic scale. Its mouthpiece is that of a recorder, although, as with *pinkillos mohoseños*, both the air duct and the fipple are located on the opposite side (back) of the instrument, a feature that facilitates playing.



Images 06 and 07.

Temímby ye piása.

[Photo: <http://conar.senip.gob.ar/>].

It is of limited use. It is usually used by adult men, accompanied by one or more *michi ráj*, to attract women (Pérez Bugallo, 1996).

Pinguyo

It is a fipple flute similar to the Andean *pinkillo* (*pinkullo*, *pingullo*), although with some very particular characteristics.

It is made from a segment of *takuapúku* cane about 30 cm long and 1-2 cm in diameter. Six finger holes are drilled on the distal half, positioned over a line made by removing a thin strip of bark. The holes are pierced with a red-hot iron, the first in the middle of the pipe, and the others equidistantly; the last one is drilled near the distal node. This node is pierced in the same way as the finger holes.

The fipple window is usually square and is cut with a knife, although sometimes it takes the shape of two Ws facing each other at their bases, similar to an hourglass, a

characteristic of the *pingullos* of Ecuador. The wooden block that closes the proximal end and creates the air duct is curved, unlike other traditional South American recorders, whose cuts are usually straight.

Finally, a pair of small whistles called *imémby* (*imbémbuy*) of varying lengths are attached to either side of the mouthpiece. The *imémby* are made from turkey feather quills or thin reeds whose ends are beveled and filled with wax, leaving a slit or opening (made with a small piece of corn husk or cardboard) as a blowing channel. They serve to produce a pedal note and are the most distinctive feature of this recorder, shared by only a handful of South American instruments, including a traditional Bolivian *pinkillo* (Pérez Bugallo, 1996; Rocca and Rossi, 2004).

A widely used male instrument, it accompanies dances and recreational activities, especially during the *aréte*. Some Tapieté describe it as a "double flute" and call it *tinguyu* (Arce, 2003).

Añáchi

A whistle made from the bone of a stork, chicken, or deer, whose name (also spelled *añánchi*) means "demon." It is the exclusive property of the *imbaékwá*, a malevolent sorcerer who uses it as a blowgun to cast his spells (Pérez Bugallo, 1996).

Wakaránty and Iguaéru

The *wakaránty* is a composite natural trumpet. Its name literally means "cow horn." In some sources, it appears as *wakar'hanti* (Pérez Bugallo, 1996) or even *huacananti* (Sánchez, 1999). In Bolivia, it is often called "corneta del aréte" or "corneta del Izozog" (Cavour, 1994).

It is made from a piece of cane up to 2.50 m long, from which the internal nodes or partitions are removed, and a cow horn bell is added. This bell can also be made by molding the hide of an ox's tail with hot sand, a technique used in nearby Tarija (Bolivia) and Jujuy (Argentina) to make the *caña tarijeña* and the *corneta*, respec-

tively; in that case, the instrument is called *wakarée punta* ("cow tail"). In the past, according to Father Bernardino Niño (1912), the horn was also made from the hide of the tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*) and even from the tail of an armadillo. The priest explains that, to give the instrument a "luxurious" appearance, the lateral opening that serves as the mouthpiece was often adorned with the bark of the root of the *güembé* (*Phllo-dendron bipinnatifidum*), an epiphytic plant.

To blow it, it is held diagonally. Depending on the source, this horn was incorporated late, as an alarm instrument (Giannecchini, 1898/1996), with warlike uses during battles (Corrado and Comajuncosam 1990), and to summon people to agricultural tasks during the planting of maize. Although it is used less and less, it is currently used to summon the *aréte guásu* and to dance the traditional Easter "rounds."

The *porongos* or *iguaéru*, for their part, are short horns made from gourds from which the seeds were removed (Romano and Cattunar, 1916).

Whistles

The Ava used at least two whistles, which appear to be obsolete today. Perhaps the best known (and most debated) was the *serére*, *senéne*, or *jocüro* (Vega, 1946).

Regarding this instrument, Díaz Gainza (1977) notes:

...the Chiriguano serere belongs to the family of longitudinal flutes. It is made by drilling a hole in the wood to create the tube. Its two fixed notes suggest a biphonic or minimal scale, but it also seems to be influenced by Andean whistles.

Basically, it consists of a wooden strip with a single hole drilled through it, open at both ends. By blowing into the proximal end, as if it were a panpipe, and covering and uncovering the distal end with a finger, two notes are produced.

Sánchez (1999) cites numerous authors who describe the aerophone as a long, angular whistle made of the

hardwood of the *igüirayepiro* or *algarrobilla* tree and adorned with carved figures and symbols, which men would play both at celebrations and in battles. The construction techniques, the type of wood used, the ornamentation, and the way the Ava instrument is played are similar to those of the *jant'arki*, a whistle of the neighboring Calcha people of the Bolivian highlands.

Interestingly, after many years of working with the Ava, Pérez Bugallo (1988-89) claims never to have seen them play the instrument in question (for the ensuing debate, see Velo, 1995).

The other whistle, called *yvýra mímby*, was, as its name indicates, a "wooden flute": circular, flat, made of *igüirayepíro* wood, with three holes, profusely decorated, and played only by men (see the references compiled by Sánchez, 1999). Some authors have referred to it as *naseré*.

Regarding these Ava aerophones, Father Giannechinni (1898/1996) recounts:



These are the musical instruments of our Chiriguano people, which they play at the festivals dedicated to Bacchus: without these instruments, the celebration would be impossible. They are generally used by young men with healthy teeth. To produce the sound, they place the upper part of the senene against their lips, blow forcefully, and with their finger open and close the lower hole; the resulting sound is very similar to the bellow of a bull. It offers neither note nor harmony; for them, it is enough that it makes a lot of noise.

To pierce it, they adopt the patience of weeks and months, using a nail and any piece of iron they can find nearby. They sharpen it, tie it tightly to a stick, and turn it tirelessly until it is perfected. With any old knife blade, they carve the designs and patterns

that appear. They hang it by means of a fringed cord, which is a great luxury.

They make them longer, more hideous, and more ornate... according to the wealth and skill of the carver.

They were blown both at festivals and in war; during armed conflicts, in addition to these whistles, trumpets and horns were also played.

Image 08 [prev. page].

Seré.

[Photo: <http://conar.senip.gob.ar/>].

Idiophones

Among the Ava idiophones was the *yandúgua*, a rhythm stick, similar to an umbrella, used by the *yingári* or "dance master" in the *ayarisse*, a song-dance performed during the *aréte* in honor of Ñandu Tumpa (Sánchez, 1999). It was made with ostrich feathers tied around a long, straight cane. Father Giannecchini notes:

Because of its use, we can call it the musical baton of the Chiriguanos, since the dance and song master, with this featherwork in hand, directs the dance... The two long canes form the handle, which has two holes. In the first of these, they insert one of the two sticks of the respective number, and next to the stick, they add that old, crude circle with a mesh made of soroche fiber. Then they tie the end

Bibliography

of the feather cord to the cane, the wooden frame, and the mesh. After that, they wrap the feathers around the cane until they reach the second hole. Here they place the other piece of wood and the other circle, securing it well with the ends of the same cord so that it can withstand the feathers and remain firmly in place. It takes the shape of a Chinese umbrella. The singing and dancing master takes it, waves it this way and that, beats it on the ground, and thus directs the dance.

Another idiophone was the *yvýra nambichái*, or "tree tendril," anklets made of seeds obtained from a type of vine covered in tendrils.

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Image 01.

http://conar.senip.gob.ar/pawtucket/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/71567

Image 02.

http://www.selecciontexo.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/TAMBOR-ARETE-2014_DSC3682-e-1024x684.jpg

Image 03.

http://conar.senip.gob.ar/pawtucket/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/77158

Image 04.

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Image 07.

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Image 08.

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