#RevelsConnects: Musical Connections Episode 2
Balla Kouyaté: The Legacy of the Balafon

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Maggie: Balla Kouyaté is a virtuoso musician on the West African Balafon, a gourd resonating xylophone. He also has this incredible family story with a lineage that goes back to the 13th century founding of Mali's Mandian Empire. At the center of that story is the Sosso-Bala, considered the very first Balafon. 800 years later the Sosso-Bala remains under the protection of the Kouyate family. And, here to tell us more is Balla Kouyate. Welcome to musical connections.

Balla: Thank you!

Maggie: You're welcome, Balla! You've called Massachusetts home for twenty plus years, but you were born and raised in Mali, West Africa. Tell us a little bit about the family you were born into.

Balla: Thank you so much for having me, this is a real pleasure to be here today, with all of you. And thanks for the question. The family I was born into is the Kouyaté Djeli family. Which is, the Kouyatés are the first Djelis in the Mandian Empire. And, I believe that French people call us "griot" because we are a French colony. But in my native language, they call us Djeli. And the meaning of Djeli, if you translate that in English, is like when you say "blood." None of us can survive without blood. So basically, our role in our society is like we're the (same) blood in the human body but in a different form. Because, not just recounting the family history, not just the peacemaker, but we have a very important role in our society.

Maggie: Interestingly, this was just what I was going to begin with. I love that you brought up the word "griot," which I think many listeners may be familiar with...and Djeli, which they may not be. What is the difference between those two?

Balla: The difference of those two, I think, between a Djeli and a griot, in a sense, my understanding, because the European, in the sense of most of the West African countries had been colonized by the Europeans, and they didn't have any other word for Djeli. So when you say "JELL-EE," some people depending on the area of Mande, some people say "JAHL-EE," some people say "JILL-EE," it just depends where you are. It's like when it comes to English, you got an American English and a British English, they all have a different tone and a different accent.

Maggie: My understanding is that to be a Djeli, you must be born into that tradition, it's hereditary. But people can use the word griot, and that's not the case. Is that true?

Balla: The Djeli is definitely not something you can just become overnight, you have to be born into the family. So, I will say it this way, just to make people understand more...I would say maybe the sense of where we came from, "griot" is more related to the artist, than Djeli. You see what I mean?

Maggie: Yes!

Balla: Yeah so, when you say griot, it can be anybody, because right now, anybody can call themselves you know, "I'm a griot". But not everybody is a griot.

Maggie: You mean not everybody is a Djeli.

Balla: Yeah! Sorry! Not everybody is a Djeli.

Maggie: Very important distinction! And part of the Djeli's hereditary responsibility, as far as I understand it, is the retelling of the Sundiata Epic, in which the Sosso-Bala plays an essential role. Why is it important to keep this cycle of narratives alive?

Balla: Okay, That's a really great question, definitely. The important thing is to keep the history alive, it seems today, our generation, we, the young generation seems to have forgotten their history. Because, you're not gonna know where you're heading if you don't know where you came from. So part of that, to keep that history alive, if we don't maintain that tradition, people might forget who they are! A lot of times today, like in my culture, there's a lot of different things, certain families are not allowed to do. They won't allow you to do some of those things. So if there isn't a griot not reminding you, doesn't matter if it's a man or a woman, it's easy to go down the wrong path, without forgetting who you are. You see what I mean? Like a quick example, the family name is very important to us, ok? An example here, when a man and a woman get married, some women, not all of them will take the man's family name, right? So, where I come from, you get married, everything's legal, you guys do everything together, but the woman will keep her family history, and family name. She won't change her name to the husband's family name. Because if she doesn't want to lose her family history, through the man's family history. Because each family name in our society, the Mande society, has the history behind. Not just Sundiata. The whole reason Sundiata became so famous, or until now the Djeli have been talking about Sundiata, because he has done what nobody has ever done, which is bringing unity. Bringing the people together. Ok? I mean people can get a name in a lot of different things. Either doing good things or doing bad

things. But most of the time, people who do bad things, they get famous quicker. But it's not gonna last. People who're doing the good things, that might take time to succeed, to become famous. But as soon as they become successful, it's gonna be forever. Because the good things last forever. So the reason why we maintain this tradition until today, is for that purpose.

Maggie: But back to the Sundiata epic, I think people would be interested, I want you to tell us about how, what's considered the very first balafon, plays into that story and exactly what it is, you know, before Sundiata, there was this king, right? Tell that story about that transition to a more unified Africa.

Balla: Before Sundiata, it was Soumaoro, Soumaoro Kante. Soumaoro Kante, he was the king of the Mande Empire. So actually, to keep the long story short, and to the new story, it's like the life we're living today. Everybody's wearing a mask. Alright? So back in Soumaoro Kante's time, he was the king who was able to put a mask on everybody's mouth, the men and the women. And when I say mask, not the same mask of today, but back then they say bara, like the gourds underneath my balafon. So, nobody in the Mande Empire was allowed to speak without covering your mouth with a gourde. So Soumaoro was so powerful, the balafon was his tool to entertain himself. So he had the balafon, in his kingdom in his cave. So he goes hunting and when he comes back hunting, he will play the balafon for himself. So, back then nobody was allowed to touch that balafon. Even a simple mosquito, he touches that balafon, he will find you to kill you. That 'show crazy he was, that's how powerful he was. And then one day, my ancestor, which is Balla Fasseke right now. But back then he was Balla Fasseke, Inyum Gomandoga. That was his real name at the time. So, to keep the long story short, Sundiata, when he was a young boy, he sent my ancestor to go tell Soumaoro, "we've had enough of this bad behavior in our community." So he's gonna rise. So when my ancestor, Inyum Gomandoga went to the Soumaoro compound, he wasn't there at the time. Soumarouo was hunting. So he had a bird called "eagle," the eagle would go down, grab the baby chicken. So that was the bird that was guarding the balafon. So any human being comes by, he won't allow you to touch that balafon. So when my ancestor came, Inyum Gomandoga came, and tried to enter and the bird let him know that the king is not around, he's out hunting. And he's not gonna allow him to touch the balafon or anything. So my ancestor was able to convince the bird. He comes down to play the balafon. When he started playing the balafon, Soumaoro heard it wherever he was, he comes back as a volcano, you know what I mean? Said, this is a genie or a human being? And my ancestor started talking to him and flattering him the idea about, in Africa we have a lot of proverbs when we speak, so we say, "no matter how sharp the knife is, the knife won't be able to cut itself." The meaning behind that is, it doesn't matter how bad you are or how good you are, it's always good for someone to tell you

who you are than for yourself to flooding yourself (With your own praise or your own criticism). You see what I mean? So he was so impressed, he said “wow!” So actually, it is good to hear somebody talking about you then you talking about yourself. And he asks my ancestor his name and he says “My name is Inyum Gomandoga” and he says, “Ok, you playing this instrument better than I do even though I’m the one who the intrument belongs to. So from today, I’m gonna give you that balafon but I’m gonna give it a new name: Balla Fasseke. In Mandinka (language), Balla - for the balafon, Fa - play, Sekke - now. That’s how he got Balla Fasseke. Because of the Europeans they always like to add things, like unnecessary things to stuff. And I’m sorry that’s just the way it is, so I’m just gonna say it the way it is. It’s like when you say, today, everybody say “balafon, balafon.” But it’s not balafon, that “fon” thing came from the Europeans. Because when they figure, you know, saxophone, vibraphone, everything's phone. So they just wanted to add the “fon” thing to the balafon. So just keeping the long story short, that’s how my family ancestor was able to get the balafon in the first place. So from that day to now, when they started counting, it was back in the 12th century. But the balafon was there even before that, but they started counting from that day to now. That’s why since then, back then to now, the balafon is still in my family. And it’s just been passed from generation to generation until today.

Maggie: That’s an incredible story, and Sundiata, was he able to conquer this tyrannical king?

Balla: The whole reason Sundiata is not just uniting people, but he was able to defeat Soumaoro Kante because he was a bad king. But for him to be able to do that, Soumaoro Kante’s nephew, was named Fakoli, was able to join Sundiata to defeat his own uncle. So the reason that happened. Because we have this expression, not just as an African but everywhere in the world, “Any big man, has a big woman behind (him)” Women don’t have to be big and tall, but any big man that you can see succeed, (there) is a woman behind him supporting. Any guy, it doesn’t matter how big or how small, or who you are, if you don’t respect women, the woman always is gonna come back and beat you down, doesn’t matter how big you are. So what happened was, Soumaoro had ninety-nine wives, and his nephew Fakoli had only one wife, but his one wife was really powerful, and they told Soumaoro you have do 100 plates (of food) for a sacrifice for his kingdom. If you don’t want to go down badly, (you won’t) if you do that sacrifice as soon as possible. So Soumaoro tells his ninety-nine wives, make that plate of food, a hundred plates, and he tells his nephew to do (the same) too. But before Soumaoro’s ninety-nine wives come, each one having one plate, his nephew’s wife already provided 100 plates of food, before (Soumaoro’s) wives provide their 99. So you know, power is a good thing sometimes and power is a bad thing sometimes because you (think) you’re so powerful, you’d think you could do anything. And then that ego will destroy you, at

the end of the day. So then he said, “Wow, nephew this is so impressive, I’m so impressed by your wife. So, how about we do the exchange? So you take my ninety-nine wives, I take your one wife.”

Maggie: Hahaha

Balla: And the nephew said, “No uncle” We also have this proverb that say, if I come to you, hey Maggie I’ve got to go and you have to go, can we have the exchange? So my goal is not bad so, I want to change my goal to your goal. So the nephew said, “no.” And he said, “Ok if you don’t accept my offer, you’re gonna lose cause I’m gonna take your one wife, add it to my ninety-nine so I will have one hundred wives”. So that’s how the fight started, that’s when Fakoli said, “We’ve had enough of this now. So I’m going to join Sundiata to defeat you.” You see? That’s why those three family names are very important in Mande. Kante, Fakoli, and Balla Fasseke, and Sundiata. The Fight- Balla Fasseke was a part of all that. That’s why our role has become so important in our society.

Maggie: I mean most of us here in the west don’t tell stories eight hundred years old in our daily lives when we go out performing, so that’s quite significant. So let’s shift a little bit to the actual instrument, the balafon. Just describe the materials it’s made from including the gourdes underneath.

Balla: Well, the balafon (Bars) are made out of rosewood, (the frame) is bamboo trees, and (the resonators) gourde. So, in the construction of the balafon, nylon string you see on the top today, (that holds it all together) my dad told me they started changing (to nylon materials) in the 1950s. Because they started in the worst country, we haven’t experienced bad snow or the weather change because it’s always raining or wet or snowing here. So when that touches the balafon, because it was an animal skin like the antelope skin, so the keys (bars of the balaphone) gets moving around. So they started putting in the nylon string.(to stand up to the weather) But some’s structure, even today, are made of goat skin, even the one I have here, twenty years later but I still have the goat skin to tighten (hold together). Because what happens is when you wet the skin and tie it to something and it dries, it’s gonna stay for a long time and it won’t move.

Maggie: You’re talking about the strings that tie and secure all of the slats, the rosewood slats on the top, like a keyboard.

Balla: That’s the antelope skin, that skin.

Maggie: Okay.

Balla: But the structure of where those keys lay in the frame down, those frames tight (are secured) with the goat skin. So, and the gourde, each gourde has two holes, and those holes used to be covered by a spider web, so that's why you'd hear the buzzy sound. But now, I've been living in the U.S. for the last twenty years plus, and I don't know where to find the spiderwebs, so I've been using, being a modern Djeli, getting plastic from Whole Foods or Walmart. So that's what I've been using for the moment. The mallet is made out of the rubber tree, because the rubber is a natural plastic, so we've been using that since day one. And so now, that hasn't changed yet.

Maggie: Okay, but I want to go back to the spiderweb plastic things, because again, people need to visualize this...so you have this round gorde with a hole on the bottom and where the air is coming out, you have this membrane over it, and in this case it's very thin plastic and it's vibrating and giving you a buzzy sound.

Balla: Right.

Maggie: And I think in your performance you mentioned this interesting thing, like when you go into the recording studio, often the engineer will say, "I'm hearing this buzzy sound, like what is this?" Like as something to get rid of.

Balla: Definitely.

Maggie: However, it's a definite desired effect.

Balla: Yep.

Maggie: And I was wondering, the desired effect and the buzzy sound, are there other instruments that also have that, like percussion instruments, or the rattly buzzy sound, is that part of the overall aesthetic? Where's that come from?

Balla: Well, part of that came from the old fashion sound, we didn't have technology that provided a sound system. So, with those gourdes (taken) out of the balafon, (the bars by themselves) sounds like...flat. It's not loud enough. You see? So those gourdes provide not just that buzzy sound, it also makes the balafon sound louder. So that's why we use it for that purpose.

Maggie: I understand that it amplifies the sound, but I've also seen, like metal caps? Bottle caps? Other things, I just meant, is western music I can't think of anything that seeks out that buzziness. Except maybe the fuzz on the electric guitar, I don't know. I just wondered about that, is that an African sort of…

Balla: To be honest, I think we love the buzziness, because as you can see, even in the djembe, sometimes they have a shakere, or like little metal things they put on it at an angle. So when they play it, you hear those things, you know, moving around and making the buzzy sound. But anywhere in the world, very often you hear like, “that’s an exotic sound, what is that?” I say, “No, that's part of the sound, it has to sound like that.”

Maggie: Ok, thank you. That clears it up. Also, tuning. Tuning an instrument is a necessity for many musicians, not all. But it’s not often that it requires a sharp metal tool that looks almost like a weapon. So can you tell us, tell the listeners how it is that you actually tune the keys of the balafon?

Balla: The balafon, the way we tune it... On the edge of the key we’re tuning, if we shave that, it gets sharp. And if you cut in the middle, It gets flat. That’s how you tune it. But to be able to tune it, you have to take all the balafon apart. You know, you have to take it one by one and tune it. And so the tools we use to tune, I think they call a hux (carving knife). So for a little while, before people get used to it, I used to get in trouble in the airport a LOT. You know, cause when I travel, the balafon’s tuning changes by the weather because it’s wood, because when it gets hot, the wood gets so warm it gets out of tune. So anywhere I travel I used to have that in my case, so I get the airport security, a lot of time they’re like, “Ok, can you wait over here, what do you have this for?” And I say, trust me, sir. I’m not a criminal, I’m not going to kill anybody. This is just for my instrument.” You know, it’s crazy, especially one place they really gave me a hard time about this is in Israel. I say, “Well, believe me, I’m just a simple artist. One thing I can tell you guys is I know. I totally feel you guys, I understand what you’re going through all these years. But one thing I can guarantee you, and the whole world, you’re not going to find any entertainer, any artist on the planet who’s gonna go kill himself or who’s gonna go put a bomb on himself, because we here, we’re there to make everybody happy. That’s how we’re making our living, by making people happy.” So, you know I’m fine with this, I go back with this to the U.S.

Maggie: Another aspect of tuning, traditionally, the bala is tuned to a seven-note scale.

Balla: Yes.

Maggie: But, I want to talk about the innovations you’ve made to that scale, and what that allows you to do musically.

Balla: Well, in traditional balafon, we don’t tune the balafon on the western scale. The balafon in the village today, they’re still in that traditional tuning. So you can’t even put it

in a box, and say ok, is it a G major? Or F minor? Or D? No. It is between. It's not G, it's not Gb, it's not G#. So it's just, between all those notes. But, of course growing up in Bamako, which is the capital of Mali, there was a lot of western instrument influence. For example, the guitar. And a lot of guitar players. And for me to be able to play with a guitar player, I say, ok, maybe I need to tune my balafon to the piano. And then I tune the first balafon to the white keys of the piano. So then, I started playing with the guitar player and a lot of different singers and they were happy with me. But to get to the point, I mean, that's not the tradition anymore. When you "make it," I mean it can happen even in the U.S, they see you have the talent in this and that, and you have brothers and cousins and so, jealousy started, like, here and there. What I mean about that, is on the one balafon you only have the seven keys. Do - re - mi - fa - so - la - ti - do. So when you're playing in C major, and in D minor, so you only have D minor on the one balafon, you don't have D major, you see? So because growing up, I was really quick to learn and quick at improvising and so some of the guitar players wanted to challenge me more (so I would stop playing). So we're always playing in C major and one day they don't want to see me challenged and say, "He's not gonna so much here" So instead of playing in C major, they put a capo and then in D major. (thinking I would stop) So they started playing in D major and I don't have anywhere to to, just two keys. So I'm just struggling. And I was like, ok. I better find a solution about this. (To keep up with them) And it was an older guy in Mali, named Kélétigui Diabaté. He was a balafon player who played with a lot of Malian artists like Salif Keïta, Habib Koité. And he was like, you know, a father figure to me. So he's the one who started doing these two balafon things, but the way he did it was different. I got the idea from him, I mean life is all about you seeing something and then trying to take it to the next level. So then, I say, "Ok, if he does it, maybe it's possible that I have a second balafon and then tune it to all the black keys of a piano." So then, when I built that and I was like, ok, but in the piano or marimba, they have the space between either the three and two, three and two, (Between all of the) black notes. But if you do that on a balafon, it's not going to look nice. You know, you have the gourde here and a gourde there, in the middle is empty, and this... I said, "No I'm not gonna do that." So then, I said, "Ok, I have all the flats and the sharps. So what about having something in between? Since the traditional balafon is not tuned in the western scale. They don't have flats, they didn't have sharps. They had it in the middle somewhere. So maybe I can find the same things to put in somewhere, it's not flat and it's not sharp. So it would be in between. You see? So that's why I was able, instead of having twelve notes, because in western music, and all the music, it doesn't matter what kind of music you play, they're all based off those twelve notes. Between the flat and the sharp. So then I was able to come out with something, we call quarter-tone. Which we don't use that in Africa. We don't use quarter tones in African music. You only see those quarter tones in Arabic music, most of the time. Or

sometimes in can even be in Chinese music, you know? So then I think that's the reason I was able to do a lot of different types of music I'm doing here today in the U.S.

Maggie: Right, and Indian music, and in a way you are broadening the musicians you can play with, the repertoire you can play.

Balla: That's right.

Maggie: Okay.

Balla: Because I do not want to have that limitation when it comes to music. I just want to be able to play with anybody I can play with.

Maggie: Yeah. I want you to talk a little bit about the context in which you perform. You've clearly been very successful in sharing your music with the wider general public through live performances at concerts and festivals throughout the world. Tell us about the typical kinds of places you play when there is not a worldwide pandemic taking place. What kind of places do you play?

Balla: Oh wow. Since it is a pandemic started . . .

Maggie: I want you to tell us before the pandemic. What would be . . .

Balla: Before the pandemic. Okay. Oh yeah I was all over the place because last year. I had a great honor because you, too, Maggie, thank you so much, I was honored having a National Endowment for the Arts, I was a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts . . .

Maggie: For a National Heritage Fellowship, you mean.

Balla: National Heritage Fellowship, yes. And that opened a lot of doors. I mean, I was performing a lot before, but then after that just put me in a different category performing here and worldwide. So, I was doing Wintergrass Festival, Seattle, Washington. And, then was also touring in Florida. And I was in Africa presenting my work to the President, at the time, of Mali and the Minister of Culture, things was going pretty well before this whole pandemic happened. I had a whole lot of Summer festivals lined up here in the U.S. which is going to happen next year, you know God willing. So, that's some of the . . . I've been doing a lot of school shows before, and with Crocodile River

Music (Worcester, MA) and almost more than 200,000 kids have seen in a school year all over the country.

Maggie: Right, residencies. Yeah, that's fabulous, but in addition to performing for the general public and for students, you're deeply committed to carrying on your family's traditional role as the djelis playing for your own community which I think many listeners may not be aware of this. I would love you to describe some of the domestic ceremonies you perform for within the West Afriucan immigrant communities in the region.

Balla: Yeah, I am still, even in the pandemic, we have a different way to do it now, you know, because we have this expression in Africa, if you go to any place and you saw everybody walking on one leg, even if you have two, try to pretend you have one leg, too. What I mean about that, and when this is happening, on Zoom and on Facebook Live, and that. So even that we have been doing (it virtually we have still been maintaining) the same tradition, providing that (tradition) to our own community (in a different way). Because now any ceremony that happens- I think you attended one of those in the Boston area? - one that I perform for one of my good friends... We were playing for eight hours.

Maggie: Describe what was the ceremony? What were they celebrating?

Balla: They were celebrating their wedding. They celebrated the baby shower. They were celebrating a lot of different concepts. Even in a, somebody, they call it here, a fiancee, engagement (party). They invite a griot to come and perform for them. When we can perform, it would be one side of the male's family, the Djelis would be performing. Another one would be the woman's family performing. Just to remind them where they came from, who they come from, that sort of thing. (display of the different family traditions)

Maggie: And also, as you say, the performance goes on for eight hours or more. Not your typical 2-hour concert in a concert hall.

Balla: Not at all. I mean, it's nothing like that. It's not like what we are doing right now in an hour we are done. But there, sometimes it can start at 8:00 in the morning and go to 8:00 PM. Or it can start at 9:00 PM to 4:00 in the morning.

Maggie: And there's lots of good food, too, right?

Balla: Lots of good food. And then they will come and throw the money on us and yeah…

Maggie: I'm coming to the end here, but I guess I want to talk a bit about the future of the bala both here and in Mali. So growing up in Mali, learning the bala, was a given and I'm wondering if it is still today. Do most children growing up, you grew up in Bamako, do most children learn to play a little bit, like here, we learn to play the recorder? Or not?

Balla: In a family, in my family - even today, okay?- everybody plays balafon. Everybody. It doesn't matter if… you know, I have an uncle, Judge in the Supreme Court but they have a balafon. And when it's that rule come (after the ruling) they are going to take the balafon and come and play, that doesn't have anything to do with being a judge. And, even an example here. I have been living here the last 20 years and I have a kid here. And my kid is born in this country. They have that heritage, too. It's not like because they are born in the U.S, now all of a sudden now they are not Kouyaté anymore or cannot practice that tradition. No. They can still be the next president of the United States or next Secretary of State or Prime Minister or whatever. They have to practice that tradition. That's why you guys see me anywhere I go. They are not in school. I made that clear to my kids. As soon as my son was wearing a diaper, (motions with hands) I had this big, this much, balafon for him. So because they are the next generation. If I do not sort out to them it's like I just destroyed my own history. Okay, so who knows twenty years from now, forty years from now, they become their own adult and then they have children. So that's how the tradition is passed on. Okay, so they are going to play the balafon that's why I take them back to Africa so they can go see the first balafon, me, their grandparents see how the whole this culture be passing down.

Maggie: Particularly in your family, because your father I believe is 99 now?

Balla: He is over 100. Usually, you do not get to see that in Africa.

Maggie: Oh gosh. But he is the guardian of the Sosso-Bala, right? So given that, I know it gets passed down to the next oldest, and it's a big family, but it seems like given your family lineage, is there not quite a lot of pressure on your children to carry this forward.

Balla: Oh, well, yeah. You mean the bala from passing down to them? Is that what you mean?

Maggie: Well, I don't know, I mean, there's two things. One being a Djeli and carrying that tradition on. But there's this added aspect of your father being the one guardian of that 800-year-old bala. You know, that's pretty significant.

Balla: Definitely.

Maggie: As we try to wrap up here, I'm wondering if there's anything I haven't thought to ask you that you would like to add?

Balla: Well, what I would like to add, first of all, I would like to thank all of you, to make this happen. And it was a really honor to be part of the Revels sharing. And was just really a pleasure. And the fact that I was able to perform with my kids. And, that was incredible because I always want to be able to do more with them.

Maggie: How does it feel to perform with your kids?

Balla: It just makes me proud. And an honor. It's my family instrument. All the family played the balafon. In this sense, I am only the one also who takes this as a profession. You see? So, to see my kid following in that tradition and a value in that, that definitely makes me proud. I don't think I can express myself enough when it comes to that because even when I bring them to Africa, people would be, like, surprised. You know, And in the world we live in today (thinking about all the bad things and) about worse in the world "Oh in America they are playing the balafon or they are singing in Mandinka." They would be like, "Wow!" So, that is something because I think today only (one of the most) positive things we have in the world is music. That is the thing that is going to connect all of us without fear. You know what I mean? Because I do not need to speak English to play the music with Yo-Yo Ma. And Yo-Yo Ma does not need to speak Mandika or Bambran to play with me or Bela Fleck. Just to give it a simple fact. But right now, music is going to bring all of us together. I hope my message to the whole world- I hope one day it's not going to be a passport. It's not going to be about identity or any border. All that's left for all of us is the heart. How we are feeling about each other. That's my message to everybody. And thanks again for this interview. I really appreciate it.

Maggie: Thank you Balla Kouyaté. We are fortunate to have you here with us. Thanks.

Balla: Thank you.