



BALLA KOUYATÉ

Balafon

To say that [Balla Kouyaté](#) was born into a musical family is an understatement. His family lineage goes back over 800 years to Balla Faséké, the first of an unbroken line of djelis in the Kouyaté clan. Djelis are the oral historians, musicians, and performers who keep alive and celebrate the history of the Mandé people of Mali, Guinea, and other West African countries.

Balla explains that the word “Djeli” derives from his Mandinka language, “It means blood and speaks to the central role we play in our society.” One must be born into it. The Kouyaté family is regarded as the original praise-singers of the Malinké people, one of the ethnic groups found across much of West Africa.

In 2001, the “Sosso bala” was declared a site of intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. This powerful symbol of Mande culture is brought out once a year for ceremonial playing. Balla also regularly plays with world renowned West African musicians who are touring in the States. He often accompanies kora master Mamadou Diabaté, and in 2004 joined NEA National Heritage Fellow Sidiki Cond Kouyaté for a month long residency at Carnegie Hall.

In 2010, Balla Kouyaté was awarded a Mass Cultural Council Fellowship in the Traditional Arts. In 2014, Balla and his son Sekou were awarded a Mass Cultural Council Traditional Arts Apprenticeship, helping to ensure the continuance of this hereditary art. Balla’s dedication to carrying on his family’s hereditary role as a Djeli, his musical virtuosity, and his humility truly set him apart from others. He is an exemplar of the kind of traditional artist the National Heritage Fellowships were established to recognize.