



Cool America

SPRING 2023

SPACE ... the new
frontier
Meet

Moriba Jah

MORIBA

JAH

Written by Vaughn Eric Stewart

Space man,

star man.

a voice

a

Mission

Creative director JUSTOMAR

photographed by Steven Lyon





Moriba Jah

Written by Vaughn Eric Stewart

Moriba Jah is many things.

But foremost he is a is an American space scientist and aerospace engineer who describes himself as a "space environmentalist".

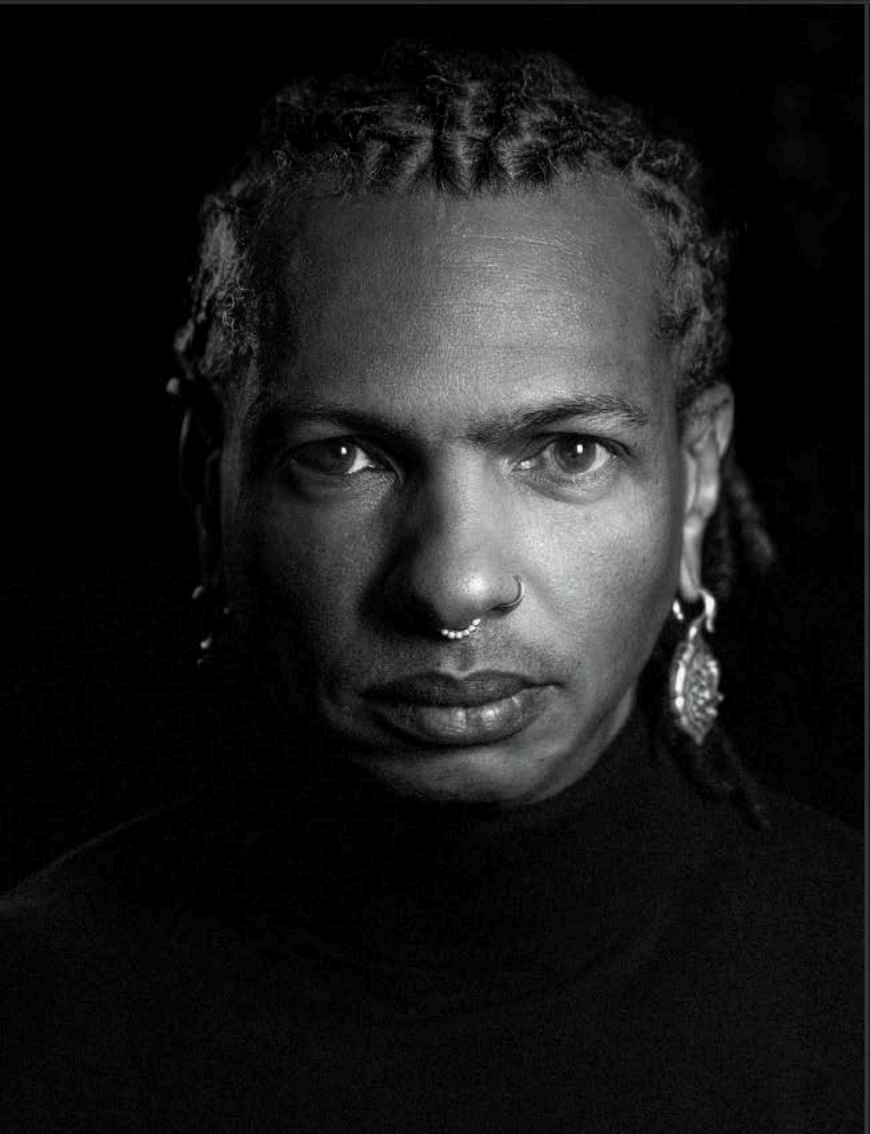
You might ask, what is a space environmentalist.

First off, they watch and help protect our planet in ways you can't even imagine. Secondly, they help protect space, monitoring space and the future of space. Now that's just the beginning. Sound interesting?

Cool America sat down with Moriba to get a grasp on what he does for the Earth, Space and Humanity.

This man is a modern-day star man to say the least.





"The greatest chance we have to save our world is empathy in action"

-Moriba Jah

Can you explain what a space environmentalist is?

Yes. A space environmentalist recognizes that space is orbital, and orbital space is not infinite; it's finite and a limited resource. It needs environmental protection, like the land, ocean, and air.

Such a space environmentalist like myself works tirelessly to seek technical policy solutions to protect space as a finite resource and perpetuity.

How does that help us humans on Earth?

Well, where we put satellites is not random. Instead, we put satellites on specific paths in orbital space, calling them orbital highways. Once these satellites die, they keep moving at breakneck speeds; occasionally, they break up, age, get old, become smaller pieces, or collide with other orbiting objects and break into smaller pieces.

These pieces then become hazards to the working satellites, providing us with critical services and capabilities like financial transactions, monitoring the Earth for climate change, wars in Ukraine, position navigation, timing, services, and communications. Even the internet is now a space-based infrastructure. Humanity knows more about itself because of the data provided by satellites than any other source of data and information. So that's how it helps humans. It helps us understand ourselves and our planet better.

And tell me, how did I get involved in this?

Interestingly enough, I enlisted in the US Air Force when I graduated high school. I was a security policeman guarding nuclear missiles at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana. And during my night shifts, I would see dots of light jet across the night sky, and I didn't know what these things were. And once I pursued my curiosity, I found out that these things were human-made objects orbiting the Earth, reflecting sunlight, which piqued my curiosity. So I studied aerospace engineering, focusing on astrodynamics, the science that studies the motion of stuff in moving in space. And yeah, I became an astrodynamacist. So I got a job for NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab doing Mars missions as a spacecraft navigator.

And then, after a few years, I relocated from Southern California to Maui, where I worked for the Air Force Research Laboratory. That's when I became acquainted with our space garbage problem. In 2006, the Department of Defense was tracking about 26,000 objects ranging in size from a cellphone to the Space Station, of which only 1200 were working. Everything else was garbage, which I just saw as unfathomable.

How do the voices in the history of the indigenous community help in the future?

There's a body of knowledge called Traditional Ecological Knowledge. I call it ancient TEK. These principles and tenants are adopted by many indigenous populations around the globe. The common thread between these is that these indigenous populations believe in the interconnectedness of all things and have embraced an intergenerational contract of stewardship over ownership. As such, they recognize that we are in an existential crisis. The only way through it is to converse successfully with our environment.

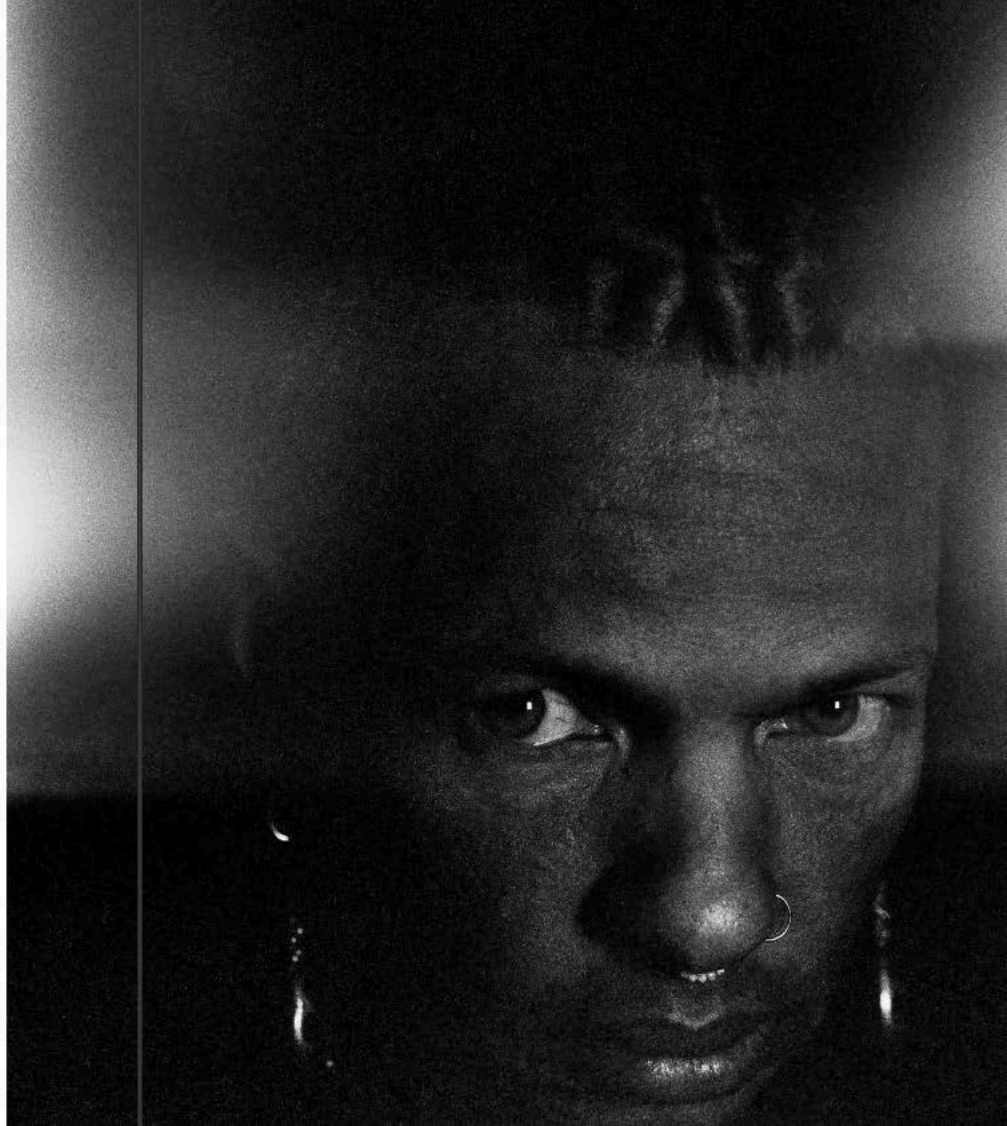
Our lives depend on it. Our lives depend on us being stewards, so the voices and the history of these indigenous people captured in these principles called TEK, ancient TEK is what we should be looking towards as a lens through which to make decisions about how to achieve sustainability in space.

What does the impact in space have on global warming?

Well, we can only do climate change monitoring effectively with working satellites. So if satellites get hit by a piece of junk, we lose their working capability and a vital component of information, so we can make decisions to untangle ourselves from the mess we've created for ourselves at planetary scale.

How can someone get involved with what you do?

First and foremost, consider the hypothesis that all things are interconnected. We recruit empathy from others who seek personal and beyond that societal attunement. If someone is interested in space, we'll look at the kind of contribution you want to make to the space community. Three things, what you're good at doing, your passions, and what brings you joy. Then, looking at all the things that need to be done at the intersection of those three things, you'll find the action items you can take if you are so motivated.





What do countries and the governments of those countries do to support what you're doing?

Governments are responsible and liable for any damage their damaged satellites pose to other objects in space and even to the people on the ground, their properties, and land. In addition, the US government has at least some small funding sources for scientific and technological research and development.

I'm a Scotland International Space Advisory Council member, so I advise the Scottish government on space environmentalism and sustainability and that sort of stuff. But aside from that, some of these countries pull me in, like Switzerland, and others, for my advice. They know I have meaningful and relevant information to share to provide solutions to Space Junk, as it affects all countries and all humanity.

Where do you find the most resistance when accomplishing your goals as a space environmentalist?

I see the lack of empathy. People say, "Hey, that problem, that space junk problem, that space sustainability issue, that's not my problem. It's yours." When people see themselves as independent of these things, they're quick to say, "That's not my problem."

But when people embrace our interconnectedness, everything is everybody's problem to a more or lesser degree. However, we're not entirely independent of each other. That's what I'm seeking to clarify to everyone and those who want to participate in being part of the solution. The very most enormous resistance is the absence of empathy. So I look for ways to recruit empathy from people towards solving these problems.

How do you spread your message on a day-to-day basis?

That's done through podcasts, interviews, social media, recording videos, putting stuff out there, and writing. I have an op-ed column in Aerospace America Magazine. So yeah, I do my best to leave no stone unturned. When I teach classes at the University of Texas with my students, all of the above.

What do you feel is holding society back?

The lack of belief in the interconnectedness of all things, and this lack of belief creates a lack of empathy. Those two things are primordial and holding us back from making significant progress.



"We must embrace stewardship instead of ownership. Ownership asks us to claim rights to things, while stewardship asks us to claim responsibility"



Where do you see the world in the next 10 or 25 years?

I'm both hopeful and optimistic; in what I do, I can show humanity evidence of the interconnectedness of all things; I want to successfully recruit empathy from people and motivate them through some inner shift through compelling storytelling and whatnot to attune each person to seek to have a successful conversation with themselves and their environment, seek harmony.

If you had three wishes for humankind, what would they be?

The first wish is that humankind believes in the interconnectedness of all things and respect and honor it. My second would be for humanity to empathize with our problems and issues. My third wish would be for society to accept their intergenerational contract and role as stewards of life versus trying to be owners of stuff. Those are my wishes.

What do you like to do when I'm not working?

I like sitting and listening to birds, feeling the breeze, and looking at the trees; to travel and interact with people of different cultures. I definitely like nature. I embrace my spirituality, so feeling connected to the universe and getting involved in activities, mindful meditation, that sort of stuff. Listening to music, for sure. I enjoy that quite a bit. Yeah, those are some things I like to do when I'm not working.

Where's your favorite place in the world?

It's a tie between Scotland and Italy for very different reasons. Scotland, there's a connection, like a druid, just nature, raw, and all that stuff is amazing. I've been all over Scotland.

Then Italy, its history, beauty, and food. Yeah, Italy is also fantastic for different reasons. So those are the two most remarkable places for me. But where I consider home is Maui, Hawaii; although I teach in Austin, Texas, I'd like to return home at some point.

If you could have a conversation with anyone in the world, dead or alive, who would it be?

If the figure we know as Jesus existed, I would want to converse with him. That's the first person I'd like to talk with and try to know him more as a person, his motivations as a human, his challenges in life, and the things he wanted to achieve. What did Jesus feel? What wasn't he able to get done? Is there anything he would've liked to have done differently, and if so, what? I'd love to have that conversation with him and that same conversation with Mahatma Gandhi. I'd love that as well.

How do you deal with disappointment and spreading yourself too thin? What about the people you love, being able to balance family life with serving one's Dharma. So yeah, those would be the top two people I'd want to have a conversation with.

I'd also like to have similar talks with elders from indigenous populations throughout history, which I can do now.

Our magazine is called Cool America. What do you find Cool about America?

The "coolest" thing I've found about America is my story as a space environmentalist, an astrodynamacist, and a first-generation American citizen with my mom from Haiti and my father from Sierra Leone, which could only happen in the United States.

So the United States, the fabric of the United States with all its flaws, is unique because my story could only happen here. And I'm confident of that. I'm convinced that had I just stayed in Venezuela, where I grew up, I would never have been able to do what I've achieved here.

If I had been raised in Europe or anywhere else, I would've been limited for various reasons. And as flawed as America is, the "coolest" thing about America is the possibilities and the potential to do so many things in an almost limitless capacity. And I appreciate that about this country so very much.

Finally, tell us what's "cool" about yourself.

I think the "coolest" thing about me is that I have diverse views and backgrounds, lots of experience, and the traumas I've been through. I have a unique story that I want to tell, and I'm motivated to share the pain I've experienced, if only to serve others and humanity. So there you go. Thank you for this opportunity, and Aloha!

All wardrobe provided by @wolkmorais
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