

CHICAGO - In 2018 astronomers in a remote Kenyan observatory partially confirmed the existence of an additional 3 moons in Jupiter's orbit, bringing the total number of satellites anchored its planetary axis to 80. The discovery was made possible in part by a surplus of government funding that was commonly perceived to be made available amidst rumors of a planned visit to the nearest village of Wamba by the Obamas. In actuality, the funding was in play long before the end of Obama's 2nd term, and was made possible by an increased influx of Chinese investment in the sciences in African nations broadly, and Kenya in particular. The news of the discovery was largely ignored, overshadowed by reports issued on the same day that American president Donald Trump had caused an uproar after leaks from a closed meeting with U.S. lawmakers corroborated that the American president had casually referred to African countries and Haiti as "shitholes." Even so, it is the largest discovery of new celestial bodies in our home galaxy in nearly 50 years.

In 1968, the 56th through 68th moons of Jupiter, which remain unnamed, were discovered somewhat by accident as part of an international program bolstered by Lyndon B. Johnson's administration. The program, which would later form the backbone of the teams behind the Voyager missions nearly a decade later, invited representative scientists and astronomers and astrophysicists from developed nations to collaborate and share research. While lauded by the scientific community, which skewed heavily white and male in the US, it was largely dismissed by civil rights leaders and radicals as a smokescreen for state-sanctioned hostility towards Vietnam and the failure to meet the demands for equality that black, Native American, chicano, feminist, and gay rights activists were bringing to the forefront of American consciousness.

Delegates from rival space programs in Japan, North and South Korea, Iran, Israel, Italy and France (The USSR was not invited) along with astronomers and astrophysicists from Haiti, Afghanistan, Kenya and South Africa (Vietnamese and Cuban scientists were overlooked as well) assembled at the observatory station on Mauna Kea on the Big Island of Hawaii in late July. By the end of August, they had discovered an astonishing 13 sizable satellites orbiting Jupiter. Even so, the trickier task was agreeing on how to name them. Through casual conversations in the coffee break room, it became clear that though the astronomers were unanimously thankful to the U.S. for funding their research and creating the occasion for their collaboration, they were equally dismayed at the American aggression in Vietnam, and towards communism and the U.S.S.R. more broadly. The absence of highly qualified Russian and Cuban astronomers, of which there were many, deepened the critique. Jokingly, a North Korean astronomer suggested they name the moons after Marxist theorists or perhaps even blacklisted American celebrities scarred by McCarthyism. Fearing these might get rejected by American bureaucrats, the astronomers landed on naming each moon after a different Russian dog sent to space during the golden era of the U.S.S.R. space program.

News of the discovery was lauded as a great scientific advancement, but was overshadowed by political unrest in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention. It is widely speculated that J. Edgar Hoover, then head of the FBI, had at least one informant within the international program. It is believed that this is why confirmation of the submitted names of the 13 moons - Tsygan, Lisa Lisa, Malyshka, Bobik, ZIB, Snezhinka, Albina, Bars, Laika, Belka, Strelka, Mushka, Chernushka - was escalated to the desk of the president and delayed until the day after next year's (and a new president's) inauguration. The names remain unconfirmed to this day. Before embarking on her U.S. presidential bid, Green Party candidate Jill Stein started an online petition in 2016 to get the 13 names confirmed by then-president Barack Obama, but the gesture was largely regarded as a joke and only garnered a few thousand signatures.

Eager to celebrate their discovery, the Kenyan astronomers headed down from Wages Mountain into nearby Wamba for cokes and beers. Antithetical to contemporary scientific protocols, the astronomers let slip to the bartender that they had discovered new moons for the planet Jupiter. Coincidentally, a journalist from the Washington Post had been stationed in that same village to do a short piece about the anticipation of the Obamas' visit later that month. When she overheard news of the discovery, she followed one of the astronomers into the women's bathroom and congratulated her. She then prodded for details, including what the new moons would be named. According to the journalist, the astronomer hesitated, proclaiming "I'm not supposed to tell anyone this but..." and then proceeded to share that they had discovered 3 new moons, named "Barack," "Michelle," and "Nfewaske."

Rumors of the discovery spread quickly. The news was both exciting and shameful to American astronomers. Federally funded space exploration and scientific research have seen wild budget cuts since the passing of a Republican-backed tax cut. The news from Kenya was bittersweet: a discovery that Americans would most likely have laid claim to in the not-so-distant past, a past that many remember with quick recall and fine-tuned details.