

What in the World is the World's Oldest Woman Doing in Houston?¹

Alemayehu G. Mariam

8/31/07



Artist's life-size model of Dinkenesh

Dinkenesh (Lucy)¹ in Houston with Diamonds?

We call her Dinkenesh². They call her “Lucy”. But what’s in a name? “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” said Shakespeare. But Lucy is one of a kind. She is unlike any other hominid fossil ever found. She is the most complete hominid skeleton of the Pliocene Epoch [1.8-5.3 million years ago]. And she is in terrible danger in Houston, if you believe the foremost paleontologists in the world.

But what in the world is she doing in Houston, Texas?

Officials of the ruling regime “made no bones” about Lucy’s reasons for coming to America. (No pun intended.) National Public Radio quoting these officials reported that Old Lucy is in America to squeeze a few bucks out of American pockets for the folks back home, and snag some tourists: “Officials there [Addis Ababa] have said there are two reasons for sending Lucy on an American tour. The first is to raise the profile of Ethiopia and attract international tourists. The second reason is to raise money for the impoverished African country.”³

The Houston Museum has dubbed the exhibition “Lucy’s Legacy: The Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia”. It is not an accurate caption. A more appropriate caption would have been: “Lucy’s Legacy: Hidden Deals Over the Treasures of Ethiopia”.⁴ Everything about the deal that brought Lucy to Houston remains hidden, from public view. Like the pirates of old, only Houston Museum and regime officials know the value of the treasures and where they are hidden. If you think they will share the loot, abandon all hope, now.

¹ The fossil’s name comes from the Beatles song “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds”, which was playing during the party celebrating the discovery in 1974 by Donald Johanson and Tom Gray.

² Dinkenesh is said to be “only three and a half feet tall, resembles a chimpanzee from the neck up and a modern human from the neck down. She could walk upright like modern humans.”

³ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=13864812>

⁴ The super-hyped Lucy “World Premiere” exhibit will run at the Houston Museum from August 31, 2007 – April 20, 2008. If you want to lay your eyes on her tiny brittle bones, be prepared to shell out a cool 20 bucks.

The negotiations to sneak Lucy into America were done in classic cloak-and-dagger style, with scheming museum officials strutting in the foreground, and nameless and faceless “Ethiopian government officials” skulking in the background. The details of the financial arrangements around Lucy are shrouded in more secrecy than the Holy Mysteries. Mum is the word for both Houston Museum and regime officials. They are sticking by the old Code of Silence. Just like in the Godfather movies. Except Don Corleone’s boys from Sicily call it Omerta. Houston calls it “confidential”. It’s all the same, ain’t nobody talking!

Get a load of this! Few in Ethiopia knew Lucy was splitting town. There was no official public announcement, discussion or information on her U.S. trip. She was whisked away stealthily under cover of darkness. The usual M.O. (modus operandi), snatched in the middle of the night. That’s what the reports said. MSNBC quoted a young lawyer in Addis who was thunderstruck at the news that Lucy has been spirited to America for 6 years, as a guest worker. He was appalled: “This is a national treasure. How come the [Ethiopian] public has no inkling about this? It’s amazing that we didn’t even get to say goodbye.”⁵ He is going to be dumbstruck when he finds out what kind of work Lucy will be doing for the next 6 years.

The whole deal is disgusting. I’d like to say, “Houston, we’ve got a problem!” Just like Apollo 13 said when its oxygen tank exploded en route to the Moon. I’d like to add, “Houston, your attitude about the Lucy affair stinks!”

“Lucy’s Legacy” or no, Professor Richard Leaky, the famed African paleoanthropologist, is pissed off and hopping mad about the whole deal that delivered Lucy to the grubby hands of Houston Museum curators. He does not disagree that Lucy was brought to America to make money. He just objects to the fact that she is being used to make money like a prostitute makes money for her pimp. An irate Leakey protested in the international media that the Mother of All Humanity was being forced into white slavery: “Dispatching of the Lucy skeleton on a six-year-tour of the United States is akin to prostituting the fragile, 3.2 million year-old fossil. It’s a form of prostitution, its gross exploitation of the ancestors of humanity and it should not be permitted,” fumed Leakey.

How tragically ironic! The world’s oldest woman working in the world’s oldest profession! What a low-down crying shame!

But if Leaky is right about his prostitution accusation, then we would have to put out an APB (all points bulletin) for her pimps. We’ve got to nab the “Superfly” in this prostitution racket? Track down Lucy’s Iceberg Slim. If Leaky is right, we’d have to wonder if the Houston Museum is a cultural center or a brothel.

But the outrage expressed over this “fossilxploitation” is not limited to Leaky. A large number of the world’s leading paleontologists and many of the top-tier American museums

⁵ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20153408/>

have also blasted the “Legacy Tour”. They share Leakey’s concern that “these specimens will get damaged no matter how careful you are and every time she is moved there is a risk. The point is what is the benefit of taking one of the most iconic examples of the human story from Africa to parade it around in second-level museums in the United States?”

The Smithsonian Institution has declined to exhibit Lucy, and publicly condemned the underhanded vulgarity of the secret deal that brought Lucy out of Ethiopia. The American Museum of Natural History in New York has also declined. So has the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Lucy’s first home. The Field Museum in Chicago, aware of the international condemnation, has expressed deep reservations about exhibiting Lucy.

Rick Potts, one of the foremost researchers on East African fossils and director of the Human Origins Program at the Smithsonian pointed an accusatory finger at the Houston Museum and the Ethiopian “government” for flagrantly disregarding a 1988 Resolution passed by the UNESCO-affiliated International Association for the Study of Human Paleontology. In that Resolution, Ethiopia agreed not to move fossils outside of its territory, and display replicas only in public exhibitions. Rick is missing the point. Outlaws don’t give a damn about international agreements or law.

Prof. Bernard Wood of George Washington University, who has extensive experience working with fossils, says it is irresponsible to rent out the “extremely fragile” fossil: “If Lucy is removed from a box and then put on display, and put back in a box and then put on display again, as sure as night follows day, it will be damaged. It's not something that might happen. It's something that most certainly will happen.” If Wood is right, it’s time to say “So long, Lucy. It’s been nice knowing you, almost.”

Perhaps few can speak on Lucy more authoritatively than Yohannes Haile Selassie, anthropology curator at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History: “There is a lot of damage you can't see with the naked eyes, caused just by touching her and handling her. I'm just sitting and praying that she comes back safe.”⁶ Amen! That kind of damage is not difficult to imagine. If you pack and unpack her dozens of times as she is shuttled between bush-league museums for six years, it is not rocket science to figure out that her brittle bones could be damaged beyond repair. Haile Selassie knows what he talking about. After all, it was the Cleveland team that studied Lucy for 6 years back in 1974 and put her together.

But Joel Bartsch, the president of the “second-level” Houston Museum of Natural Science, says phooey to the outcry in the scientific community. He does not give a hoot about the concerns of scientists who have spent their entire professional lives excavating, analyzing, restoring and curating such fossils. He says: “The fossil [Lucy] was examined by a group of curators who pronounced her hardy and robust, he says. Is she rare? Is she unique? Is she important to all mankind? Absolutely. But she's not too fragile to travel.”

⁶ <http://www.wtop.com/?nid=220&sid=1230397>

Bartsch attitude is that Lucy has been stuck in the mud for the last 3.2 years. She needs to get out and get around.

Dirk Van Tuerenhout, one of Bartsch's lieutenants says: "If you are able to showcase an original fossil, then you have a story, then you have a point of attraction that will bring in the most number of people, and then you can tell them that story."

Nonsense! Whatever story you can tell with the real fossil, you can tell the replica. It's not like Lucy can talk and tell us how her life has been for the past 3.2 million years. Her replica will do just fine. Of course, you won't be able to snag \$20 a pop if you use the replica. What can I say? That's the way the world's oldest profession is practiced in Houston, I reckon.

World's Oldest "Hardy and Robust" Woman Forced to Work in the World's Oldest Profession for Six Years?

According to reports, Lucy has been viewed by the Ethiopian public only twice since her discovery in 1974. A replica is said to be on display at the Ethiopian Natural History Museum in Addis Ababa. For the last 34 years, she was kept away from public view in a climate-controlled vault. "Too fragile", they said, for those big prying Ethiopian eyes. May be they were afraid she will be seen by the "evil eye" (buda).

Now Lucy is unchained from her vault to satisfy the scientific and cultural curiosities of "good ole" Houstonians. But Leaky and his colleagues say, "scientific and cultural curiosities, my foot!" Her ladyship has been shanghai'd into indentured servitude for prostitution for 6 years. Just get a load of that!

But is the Houston Museum pimping Lucy, or using her to tell a "story" as Bartsch and Van Tuerenhout claim? The Houston duo's story about retailing Lucy is as audacious as it is knavish. It is not unlike the rap a pimp would lay on his lady to get her to go out into the street and ply her trade. "You are strong and tough, baby. You can handle it. There ain't nobody like you. You are the only one I care about. Now, go out and bring me my money!" Bartsch, Van Tuerenhout and Iceberg Slim, they are all the same!

So, Old Lucy will be turning \$20 "tricks" for the Houston Museum and all of the other third-rate wannabe museums for the next six years. Like the gaudy prostitute in the red light district beckoning her customers to come in, Lucy's fossilized remains will be splattered all over the billboards by the side of Texas highways. She will beckon "all them Texan cowboys and cowgirls to come to the museum for a little bit o' culture and learnin'", for \$20 a pop, that is. Yeah, Houston patricians will be squeezed for few more bucks to support this "once-in-human-history" event. Everybody will make beaucoup bucks. There will be NO ACCOUNTABILITY for the money collected on Lucy's skin, or more appropriately, her fossilized bones. What a sweet deal! What a low-down dirty shame!

Could Lucy be in America on a Secret Mission?

According to National Public Radio, one of the two reasons for Lucy's trip to America is "to raise the profile of Ethiopia and attract international tourists." Perhaps Old Lucy is here on a special secret mission, code named: "Raise the Profile: Mission Distraction!" Naturally, she'd make for a perfect foil. She does not have to say anything, just look pretty while her handlers adorn her showcased fossil with "over 100 artifacts such as ancient manuscripts and royal artifacts" dating back to the "biblical King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba". And museum spin doctors will yak about Ethiopia "as the origin of mankind... the cradle of civilization... the birthplace of coffee...the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant...the first Christian African nation in the 4th century A.D..." Blah, blah, blah!

Stop! Why is it necessary to "raise the profile of Ethiopia and attract international tourists" now? Would it have anything to do with the recent conclusions of the U.S. State Department?

The [Ethiopian] government's human rights record remained poor in many areas. Human rights abuses reported during the year included the following: unlawful killings; beating, abuse, and mistreatment of detainees and opposition supporters by security forces; poor prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly of those suspected of sympathizing with or being members of the opposition; detention of thousands without charge and lengthy pretrial detention; infringement on citizens' privacy rights; restrictions on freedom of the press; arrest, detention, and harassment of journalists for publishing articles critical of the government; restrictions on freedom of assembly and of association; violence and societal discrimination against women and abuse of children; female genital mutilation; exploitation of children for economic and sexual purposes; trafficking in persons; societal discrimination against persons with disabilities and against religious and ethnic minorities; and government interference in union activities.⁷

Well, if the aim is to "put a spotlight on Ethiopia as the cradle of civilization," as the Houston Museum claimed, and spruce up the regime's image along the way, I am afraid there are just too many blood spots on that image for Lucy's skirt to cover. Nothing can overwrite the indelible facts of gross human rights abuses seared into the consciences of all freedom-loving people. Please, don't insult the intelligence of the American people. No amount of hoopla around Lucy's "diminutive bag of bones" can beguile the American tourist into visiting Orwellian (Zenawian) Ethiopia.

Is Dinkenesh's (Lucy's) Story an Allegory of "Modern" Ethiopia?

So, what is the lesson to be learned from the sordid Lucy deal? Sell the most priceless fossil of the human origin for the best offer! Rent out Lucy to an escort service? Everything has a price on it, just bring me the money!

Some say this is the standard way of doing business is done in Ethiopia today. Everything is for sale. Sell me your honor, and I will give you a scrap of land. Bow before me, and I will

⁷ <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/shrd/2006/80586.htm>

give you an office and title. Incriminate your neighbor, I will let you go free. Everybody has a price; you just have to find out the right price point. It all sounds so Mephistophelian: “Give me your soul in exchange for riches and power.”

Well, there are some things that money just can't buy, such as rare, priceless and irreplaceable objects -- Dinkenesh (Lucy) of Ethiopia. There are other simple things that you can't buy either, for any amount of money. One is Love of Country. It comes bundled with such things as pride in your cultural heritage and the sacrifices of your ancestors, uncompromising allegiance to individual liberty, tenacious commitment to truth, compassion for the poor and downtrodden, self-dignity, honor and courage in the face of overwhelming odds, and most of all, enduring faith in the Almighty.

But without Love of Country, everything is up for sale, just like the prostitute your soul, honor, dignity, heritage, country.... Everything! So, where can one buy this “Love of Country”? Like I said, you don't. You've got to be born with it. Either you got it, or you ain't. But how do you know when you ain't got it? For starters, if you start prostituting your cultural heritage, you know you ain't got it!

Can Lucy be Rescued From White Slavery?

Can we save Lucy from white slavery? I don't know, but we can try a few things. First, we must speak out and plead her cause before the American people, every chance we get. In the newspapers. On TV. On radio. We need to have chats with those Houston Museum patrons. We've got to tell them what's happening to Lucy. Give them a flyer to take home. Ask them to help you send Lucy home. Like Spielberg's E.T., Lucy has got to go home!

We must inform American policy makers -- federal, state, local-- that Lucy has been smuggled into America for an illicit purpose by panderers, and demand that she be returned back to her country, pronto. We've got to tell them what Prof. Leakey, Dr. Haile Selassie and all of the other scientists have said. They will understand.

But it is not enough to condemn the pimps and argue Lucy's cause in the court of American public opinion. We must also praise and thank those scientists who exposed the truth about the secret deal that now threatens Lucy, and the museums that refused to join the prostitution ring. A special debt of gratitude should go to Prof. Richard Leakey, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Prof. Bernard Wood of George Washington University, Dr. Rick Potts of the Smithsonian Institution, and many others scientists. We should express our special appreciation and thanks to the Smithsonian Institution, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History and all of the other museums that have declined to be part of the this sleazy museum escort service.

But there is more to be done. We should register our profound disappointment and disapproval of the actions of those corporations and institutions in Houston that funded this disgraceful enterprise: The Smith Foundation, METRORail, British Petroleum, The Hamill Foundation, the Albert and Ethel Herzstein Charitable Foundation and Texas Monthly. They

need to be told that they did the wrong thing by bankrolling the deal that brought Lucy to Houston. Now, they should now do the right thing and get Lucy back home, ASAP.

I have heard Ethiopians in Houston are planning to boycott the exhibit. Ain't it great to live in a country where you have a constitutional right to boycott whatever you want. There is a lesson Lucy can take home for the folks, in six years. That is if she can "hang in there" (no pun intended) that long!

I Love Lucy, But I Don't Like Her Pimps

There is ample evidence to support Prof. Leakey's "fossil prostitution" accusations. Both Houston Museum and Ethiopian officials have confirmed Lucy is here to make a few bucks. All the other cultural stuff is just fluff around her "employment contract".

But pimping fossils should be a concern not only to Ethiopians, but also Americans and all peoples of the world. Fossils are part of the world culture heritage. That is why they are protected by international law: The 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage⁸, and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage⁹. These Conventions were designed to prevent endangerment and impoverishment of world cultural heritage through illicit import, export and transfer of ownership. Ethiopia has ratified both conventions. But neither the Houston Museum nor regime officials seem to care much for international law. Big surprise there!

The Houston deal really sets a bad precedent. Now, other countries with priceless fossil collections can use the Houston example to engage a little bit of "prostitution" themselves. They will likely argue, "Ethiopia cut a deal with the Houston Museum, why can't we do the same with Po Dunk Museum on the left bank of the Rio Grande? What's good for Ethiopia is good for us too. Now, hurry up! Show me the money, and you can have whatever bone collection you want." It's all downhill from there.

So, what's next for Lucy, Joel Bartsch? Dirk Van Tuerenhout? How about "The Lucy Fossil Freak Show," in Barnum and Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth"? May be Lucy can join up with other snake oil salesmen and travel the back country in a wagon trail. Hey, can you "hook" her up at the Grand Ole Opry for a one night stand with an Elvis look-alike. (No pun intended.) America is a land of opportunity; and the possibilities are endless in the world's oldest profession.

But Why Do We Love Lucy?

We love Lucy because she gives us a chance to talk about Ethiopia not as a land of famine, pestilence, poverty, HIV infections, political prisoners, human rights abuses and brutal dictators, but as the place where humankind could have originated. She gives us a chance to

⁸ <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/convention-en.pdf>

⁹ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf>

brag a little bit about the homeland. We can hold our heads up high and engage our friends in good conversation about human origins. May be chat about “baby Lucy” (the 3.3-million-year-old fossilized remains of a human-like child unearthed in the same region in 2000), and the trailblazing work of Cleveland Museum’s Dr. Haile Selassie, and paleoanthropologist Dr. Zeresenay Alemseged at the world renowned Max Plank Institute¹⁰. Yes, Lucy could offer a welcome distraction from all of the gloom and doom that envelopes Ethiopia today. But for God’s sake, keep her home and send her replica on tour.

Lucy is fundamentally about what it means to be human, and preserving the fossil records of the origins of humanity. That’s the reason for the massive outcry from the scientific community. But a fossil does not a human make. There is another deafening outcry for humans in Ethiopia today. It is an outcry for human rights. It is an outcry for official accountability. It is an outcry for democracy and freedom. After all, it would not make much sense to worry about human origins 3.2 million years ago if we are not concerned about human rights today!

“I Love Lucy. Let’s pitch in and get her a plane ticket home.”¹¹

“Help pass H.R. 2003 “Ethiopia Freedom and Accountability Act of 2007.”

¹ I offer some comments on Lucy in America because I was asked to do so by various individuals and groups who felt strongly that Ethiopians should not stand idly by while others are passionately defending Ethiopia’s cultural heritage. It should be acknowledged that a number of Ethiopians in Houston have made passionate public statements decrying the decision to bring Lucy to Houston. But it has been the chorus of condemnation by the world’s foremost paleontologists and museum curators that has commanded the world’s attention on the dangers of trafficking in the rarest fossil of all. I write not only to express my shared concern with the scientists and all Ethiopians who care about their heritage.

¹⁰ See, e.g., the video stream of Dr. Zeresenay at: <http://www.nature.com/nature/focus/hominiddevelopment/video/index.html>

¹¹ According to unconfirmed reports, Lucy made a press statement upon arrival in Houston. In response to a reporter’s question about the Ethiopian Millennium, Lucy said: “Look, I have seen 3,200 Millennia in my day. But this is the most depressing Millennium I have ever had. Man, they bagged me up in the middle of the night and kicked my behind out of the country. What’s up with that? I want to go home. Help...” The interview was immediately terminated, and Lucy whisked away by Houston Museum officials.