

# Johnny Lingo's eight-cow wife

By James Dobson

When I visited the South Pacific Islands, I took a notebook along. I had a three week leave between assignments in Japan, so I borrowed a boat and sailed to Kiniwata. The notebook was supposed to help me become a junior grade Maugham or Michener. But when I got back, among all my notes, the only sentence that still interested me was the one that said, "*Johnny Lingo gave eight cows to Sarita's father.*"

Johnny Lingo wasn't exactly his name. But I wrote it down that way because I learned about the eight cows from Shenkin, the fat manager of the guest house at Kiniwata. He was from Chicago and had a habit of Americanising the names of the islanders.

He wasn't the only one who talked about Johnny, though. His name came up with many people in many connections. If I wanted to spend a few days on the island of Nurabandi, a day's sail away, Johnny could put me up, they told me, since he had a five-room house – unheard of luxury! If I wanted to fish, he would show me where the biting was best. If I wanted fresh vegetables, his garden was the greenest. If I sought pearls, his business savvy would bring me the best buys. Oh, the people of Kiniwata all spoke highly of Johnny Lingo. Yet when they spoke, they smiled, and the smiles were slightly mocking.

*"Get Johnny Lingo to help you find what you want, and then let him do the bargaining,"* advised Shenkin, as I

sat on the verandah of his guest house wondering whether to visit Nurabandi. *"He'll earn his commission four times over. Johnny knows values and how to make a deal."*

*"Johnny Lingo!"* the chubby boy on the verandah steps hooted the name, then hugged his knees and rocked with shrill laughter.

"What goes on?" I asked. "Everyone around here tells me to get in touch with Johnny Lingo and then breaks up. Let me in on the joke."

"They like to laugh," Shenkin said. He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "And Johnny's the brightest, the quickest, the strongest young man in all this group of islands. So they like best to laugh at him."

"But if he's all you say, what is there to laugh about?"

"Only one thing. Five months ago, at fall festival time, Johnny came to Kiniwata and found himself a wife. *He paid her father eight cows!"*

He spoke the last words with great solemnity. I knew enough about island customs to be thoroughly impressed. Two or three cows would buy a fair to middling wife; four or five a satisfactory one.

*"Eight cows!"* I said. "She must be a beauty who takes your breath away!"

"The kindest could only call Sarita plain," was Shenkin's answer. "She was skinny. She walked with her shoulders hunched and her head ducked. She was scared of her own shadow."

"Then how do you explain eight cows?"

"We don't," he said. "And that's why the villagers grin when they talk about Johnny. They get special satisfaction from the fact that Johnny, the sharpest trader in the islands, was bested by Sarita's father, dull old Sam Karoo."

*"Eight cows,"* I said unbelievably. "I'd like to meet this Johnny Lingo."

So, the next afternoon I sailed a boat to Nurabandi and met Johnny at his home, where I asked about his eight-cow purchase of Sarita. I assumed he had done it for his own vanity and reputation – at least until Sarita walked into the room. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. The lift of her shoulders, the tilt of her chin, the sparkle of her eyes all spelled a pride to which no one could deny her the right.

I turned to Johnny Lingo after she had left.

"You admire her?" he asked.

"She ... she's glorious," I said. *"But she's not Sarita from Kiniwata."*

"There's only one Sarita. Perhaps she does not look the way they say she looked in Kiniwata."

"She doesn't." The impact of the girl's appearance made me forget tact. "I heard she was homely. They all made fun of you because you let yourself be cheated by Sam Karoo."

*"You think eight cows were too many?"* A smile slid over his lips.

*"No, but how can she be so different?"*

"Do you ever think," he asked, "what it must mean to a woman to know that her husband settled on the lowest price for which she could be bought? And then later, when the women talk, they boast of what their husbands paid for them. One says four cows; another maybe six. *How does she feel, the woman who was sold for one or two?* This could not happen to my Sarita."

"Then you did this just to make her happy?" I asked.

"I wanted Sarita to be happy, yes. But I wanted more than that. You say she's different. That is true. *Many things can change a woman.* Things that happen inside; things that happen outside. But the thing that matters most is *what she thinks of herself.* In Kiniwata, Sarita believed she was worth nothing. *Now she knows she is worth more than any other woman in the islands.*"

"Then you wanted ..."

"I wanted to marry Sarita. I loved her and no other woman."

"But ..."

"But," he finished softly, *"I wanted an eight-cow wife."*

Someone said, "We are not what we think we are. We are not even what others think we are. *We are what we think others think we are.*" In other words, our estimation of our value as human beings is greatly

influenced by the way people respond to us and the respect or disdain they reveal day by day. *Those interactions shape our self-concepts* and are translated into nuances of our personalities.

Johnny Lingo was indeed a brilliant man. He was astute enough to know that his negotiations with Sarita's father *would seal forever the self-concept of the woman he loved*. That's why Sarita revealed such confidence and beauty. Let me say to the husbands and wives reading this book: *You have the power to elevate or debase each other's self-esteem. Rather than tear it down, don't miss a single opportunity to build up.*

*James Dobson*