A Little Knowledge Is a Dangerous Thing

During the colonial period in Kenya there were three Kikuyu men Kioi, Githogori and Kaminju who thought that they knew everything. They decided to go to adult education classes to learn English. When they went to the school they carried with them books and pencils and put them on a table. When the tutor came he asked them, "Who put these items here?" They said in the Kikuyu language ni ithuï atatu. The tutor told them that to say this in English they should say we three.

They learned these words and went home. The following day the tutor found they had sharpened their pencils very badly "like sugarcanes" and asked them, "What did you use to sharpen the pencils?" They said in Kikuyu na banga.

He told them that to say this in English they should say with a panga or knife.

They went home and came back the following day. But the tutor told them that he would not teach them until they come back with school fees, that the classes were not free. He sent them away and told them if they were asked why they were sent away they should say it was because of money.

As they walked home they feared that they might forget what they had learned so they decided to assign the three phrases they had learned so far -- we three, with a panga or knife and because of money -- to the three of them respectively, that is, to Kioi, Githogori and Kaminju. As they were going home they came upon the body of a man who had just been killed so they started looking around the scene. As they were looking around a colonial policeman arrived in a car, saw the dead man and asked, "Who killed him?" Kioi replied, "We three." The policeman asked, "With what?" Githogori replied, "With a panga or knife." The policeman asked further, "Why?" Kaminju replied, "Because of money." Now the three Kikuyu men thought that they knew English quite well and were eager and happy to speak with a white man. But they were immediately handcuffed and landed in jail. So the English proverb, A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

Story, Dr. Gerald Wanjohi, adapted from a Kikuyu Ethnic Group story on a satiric radio program, Nairobi, Kenya