Ancient Landmarks and African Spirituality

Understanding Proverbs 22 verse 28 through an African lens

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"Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set."
Proverbs 22:28 — King James Version

What does this passage mean for Africans seeking to understand their spiritual inheritance? It invites a conversation about justice, memory, and responsibility. Before drawing that connection, however, we must respect what the verse actually says. Its original concern is the protection of inherited land. Its application to African cultural and spiritual heritage is a reflective interpretation, not a claim that the biblical writer was directly describing African traditions.

The original meaning of the landmark

In the biblical setting, landmarks were boundary markers identifying where one person's or family's land ended and another's began. Moving a marker could quietly take away part of a neighbor's inheritance. The warning therefore concerns dishonesty and dispossession, not simply a preference for old things. Deuteronomy 19:14 gives a similar instruction, while Proverbs 23:10 connects the warning with protecting the fields of the fatherless. [1]

The moral concern is practical: no one should use power or deception to take what belongs to another. An inherited boundary represents a responsibility to people whose security depends on its being respected. We should retain that concern for justice whenever we apply this passage to culture.

An African application

Read through an African lens, the landmark can become a metaphor for what previous generations entrusted to us: language, family memory, ethical teaching, sacred places, and knowledge of the environment. The question becomes: what happens when a people are persuaded to despise their inheritance before they have understood it?

Africa does not have one uniform spiritual system. Beliefs differ across communities and even within the same community. This teaching identifies connections found in a number of traditions; it does not speak for every African people.

Honoring those who came before us

In many African traditions, relationships with those who have died remain part of the community's spiritual life. Ancestors may be understood as guardians, intermediaries, or continuing members of the family. These are religious understandings, and communities differ about who becomes an ancestor and how that relationship is expressed. Remembering the dead, honoring them, and worshipping them should not automatically be treated as identical acts.

For this reflection, the "fathers" also brings our attention to the mothers and grandmothers who preserved family life and knowledge. Women carried histories, taught children, cultivated food, and sustained communities. A discussion of ancestral inheritance is incomplete when their contribution disappears.

We can honor our predecessors by learning their names and listening carefully to the stories they left behind. We can examine their teachings without beginning from the assumption that everything they knew was worthless. Respect does not require us to pretend that they were perfect. It requires us to recognize their humanity and give their knowledge a fair hearing.

Land as a responsibility across generations

The connection with African spirituality is especially direct when we consider land. In many communities, land carries relationships with the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. Burial grounds, forests, rivers, and former settlements may hold responsibilities that cannot be measured by a selling price alone. African landholding systems are diverse, however; it would be inaccurate to describe all African land as communally owned.

The sacred Kaya forests of the Mijikenda in Kenya offer a specific example. UNESCO describes these sites as ancestral settlements and sacred places maintained through the authority of councils of elders. Their significance joins community identity with the care of the surrounding forest. [2]

In Cameroon, UNESCO's account of Baka relationships with the Dja forest describes a connection encompassing food, materials, cultural life, and communication with ancestors. It illustrates how environmental knowledge and spiritual meaning can belong to the same understanding of a place. [3]

These examples do not make every African tradition the same. They show why damaging an ancestral site can mean more than losing a piece of property. It can interrupt memory, belonging, and responsibilities passed between generations.

Recovering inheritance without rewriting history

Colonial rule and some missionary movements contributed to the devaluation of indigenous African institutions and spiritual practices. In different settings, traditions were dismissed as primitive or condemned as demonic. Yet this history must be examined locally rather than reduced to a single story. Africans also made choices, resisted, adapted, and shaped the religions they encountered. [4]

Christianity and Islam have long African histories that cannot be reduced to modern European colonialism. Their encounters with indigenous traditions varied across places and periods. Criticism of cultural erasure should therefore identify particular actions and teachings rather than assign identical motives to every Christian, Muslim, or missionary.

For our purposes, recovering an ancient landmark means asking what was lost, why it was rejected, and whether we have understood it fairly. It may mean recovering a language, recording an elder's account, restoring a neglected burial place, or learning the meaning of a ceremony before judging it. Indigenous traditions deserve study in their own right; their worth does not depend on finding a biblical verse to authorize them.

Preservation requires discernment

Proverbs 22:28 does not establish that everything ancient is good or that every change is wrong. A custom can be inherited and still cause harm. Respect for ancestors should never become an excuse for coercion, exclusion, or preventing people from asking honest questions.

We can ask of any inherited practice: What purpose did it serve? Whose well-being did it protect? Who might it have harmed or excluded? Can its wisdom be preserved while an unjust feature is changed? These questions allow us to take tradition seriously while remaining responsible for our choices today.

The same standard should apply to institutions introduced from elsewhere. Neither African origin nor foreign origin is enough to establish that a practice is beneficial. We must consider its meaning, evidence, and effects on human dignity and communal life.

A bridge for conversation

Christians may disagree about ancestral rituals, and African traditional practitioners may disagree with Christian interpretations. This passage alone cannot resolve those theological differences. It can, however, open a fair conversation about inheritance and justice. People should be able to explain what their practices mean before others condemn them.

My invitation is to approach our heritage with both respect and inquiry. We can acknowledge the wisdom of our ancestors, examine their limitations, and decide carefully what we will pass to our children.

Putting this teaching into practice

Begin with something close to home. Ask an elder about a family name, proverb, place, or custom. With permission, record the explanation and preserve the language in which it was given. Note who told the story and distinguish remembered history from personal interpretation. Respect knowledge that a community considers private or sacred.

Share what you learn with younger family members. Visit ancestral places respectfully when possible, and learn from their custodians. Where a practice raises questions, investigate it with the people who know it rather than accepting either automatic condemnation or automatic praise.

The responsibility extends beyond remembrance. A person who praises ancestral land while cheating a relative out of it has missed the original force of the proverb. Protecting inheritance includes fairness toward those with less power to defend their interests.

Questions for personal or group reflection

1. What valuable knowledge from my family or community have I never taken time to understand?

2. Have I rejected a tradition because I examined it, or because someone taught me to fear it?

3. Which inherited practices deserve preservation, and which need reform? What reasons support my judgment?

4. What can I pass to the next generation, and how can I protect the rights of others while doing so?

Closing reflection

The ancient landmark reminds us that what we inherit comes with responsibilities. For Africans reflecting on spiritual identity, it can encourage the recovery of neglected knowledge and a more respectful relationship with our predecessors. Its original warning must remain beside that application: do not enrich yourself by taking away another person's inheritance. Let our remembrance produce honesty, care, and something worthwhile for those who will come after us.

Scripture and further reading

[1] Proverbs 22:28; Deuteronomy 19:14; Proverbs 23:10–11. The opening quotation uses the King James Version. These passages ground the discussion of boundaries and inheritance.
https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs+22%3A28%3B+Deuteronomy+19%3A14%3B+Proverbs+23%3A10-11&version=KJV

[2] UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests.
https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1231/

[3] UNESCO, Guardians of the forest: the Baka and the living spirit of the Dja.
https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/guardians-forest-baka-and-living-spirit-dja

[4] Further reading: John Chitakure, African Traditional Religion Encounters Christianity: The Resilience of a Demonized Religion. Pickwick Publications, 2017. A study of the encounter between indigenous traditions and Christianity.