

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
August 24, 2025
Anaheim, California
Hybrid**

**Standards Committee: Request for Council Approval of the
Principles in Indigenous Archival Repatriation (PINAR)
(Prepared by: Dan Michelson, Co-Chair)**

BACKGROUND

The Archival Repatriation Committee has developed the *Principles in Indigenous Archival Repatriation (PINAR)* to center repatriation and ethical returns as a core responsibility for archivists and institutions with holdings pertaining to Indigenous peoples. Such records contain invaluable information about Indigenous knowledge and lifeways but are often inaccessible to the source communities and/or managed without regard for Indigenous knowledge and practice.

Archival repatriation requires resources, institutional commitment and leadership, and support by professional organizations. It cannot remain as an unfunded mandate that relies on the good will of individual archivists. The Archival Repatriation Committee is confident that these *Principles*, by defining repatriation as a responsible and ethical professional practice, will help archives and archivists support the rights of Indigenous communities to their cultural and historical knowledge.

DISCUSSION

In 2022 and 2023, the Archival Repatriation Committee, in fulfillment of its charge “to support archivists in repatriating and receiving archival materials,” prioritized drafting a set of guidelines centering on ethical returns. The Committee thus conducted listening sessions with an array of people and project teams experienced in the repatriation of records and archives. The Committee discussed lessons learned during their January 2024 meeting, identifying the need for concrete tools and guidance. To meet those needs, the Committee drafted a set of principles to guide all future work.

In June 2024, the Committee met for a two-day hybrid in-person/online writing workshop, hosted by the University of Michigan's School of Information, resulting in the first draft of *Principles in Indigenous Archival Repatriation (PINAR)*. This draft was shared at the online meeting of the Native American Archives Section in late June 2024, which resulted in a minor set of revisions. This revision, version 0.2, was then shared widely with a request for feedback.

The Committee contacted over 30 archivists, administrators, educators, and practitioners representing academic institutions, museums, government departments, and Tribal institutions. The *Principles* were also shared at the Committee's annual online session and in-person in August 2024 at ARCHIVES*RECORDS 2024, at the session "Archival Repatriation: Pathways to Reciprocal and Decolonial Archives." Committee members also shared their work at two Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums conference sessions in Palm Springs, in November 2024. The Committee received substantial feedback at both SAA sessions, twelve formal written comments, and extensive informal feedback from colleagues. In December 2024 the feedback was incorporated into this substantial revision of *PINAR*, version 1.0.

PINAR was submitted to the Standards Committee in March 2025. In alignment with the standards development process, the Standards Committee asked that the draft document be updated to include a plan for maintaining the standard and that the draft be sent to the Diversity Committee and the Accessibility and Disability section. This was carried out and the updated document was approved by the Standards Committee in June 2025.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

That the SAA Council approve the *Principles in Indigenous Archival Repatriation (PINAR)* as an SAA standard and that maintenance of the standard be assigned to the Archival Repatriation Committee with the next revision due in 2030.

Support Statement: SAA's support of the *Principles in Indigenous Archival Repatriation (PINAR)* would provide important and necessary national endorsement of this new standard, provide new levels of support for archival repatriation work, and create the conditions for the standard to be managed over the long-term.

Impact on Strategic Priorities

SAA Council's approval of the *Principles in Indigenous Archival Repatriation (PINAR)* is consistent with multiple strategic priorities:

- 1.1. Provide leadership in promoting the value of archives and archivists to institutions, communities, and society.
- 1.3. Provide leadership in ensuring the completeness, diversity, and accessibility of the historical record.
- 2.2. Provide content, via education and publications, that reflects the latest thinking and best practices in the field.
- 3.1. Identify the need for new standards, guidelines, and best practices and lead or participate in their development.

Fiscal Impact: None

PINAR Background Information

Principles in Indigenous Archival Repatriation (PINAR)

Preamble

The SAA Archival Repatriation Committee offers this set of Principles, which aligns with the SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics, and the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*, to center repatriation and ethical returns as a core responsibility for archivists and institutions with holdings pertaining to Indigenous peoples. Such records contain invaluable information about Indigenous knowledge and lifeways, but are often inaccessible to the source communities and/or managed without regard for Indigenous knowledge and practice.

Archival repatriation requires resources, institutional commitment and leadership, and support by professional organizations. It cannot remain as an unfunded mandate that relies on the good will of individual archivists. The Committee is confident that these Principles, by defining repatriation as a responsible and ethical professional practice, will help archives and archivists support the rights of Indigenous communities to their cultural and historical knowledge.

Principle I - Centering Indigenous Communities

Indigenous communities have an inalienable right to self-determination, and care of archives by and about them requires deference to Indigenous knowledge and practice. Archivists and institutions have a moral and ethical obligation to build, repair, or maintain relationships with Indigenous communities, and to seek their guidance. Community-driven archival practices preserve and honor Indigenous ways of knowing, thereby supporting cultural reclamation and resilience.

Principle II - Records and Responsibilities

It is the duty of archivists to understand their holdings of Indigenous materials, and to share this information so communities can make fully informed decisions about whether to pursue

repatriation or shared stewardship. Understanding archival holdings may include working with outside organizations, because related records and objects may be held across different institutions.

Archivists have ethical obligations to connect records to source communities, and to engage with community decision-making that may result in the repatriation of such holdings. The archivists' responsibility is to support, not impede, repatriation and ensure the practice of ethical return.

Records themselves may be the items to be repatriated, but they can also play a critical role in supporting repatriation as sources of information for enabling return of other Indigenous cultural materials or ancestors.

Institutions and institutional leadership must seek and commit commensurate resources to meet these responsibilities.

Principle III - Decentering Objects, Centering Relationships

Beyond the material or tangible records of return, archival repatriation has a relational or intangible dimension that is critical to enacting a reciprocal practice centered around acknowledgment of cultural autonomy and collaboration with communities. Reciprocity exists along a spectrum of possible community-institutional relationships and actions, all of which require consultation, consent, respect for community timeline, and trusting relationships with Indigenous communities.

Principle IV - Beyond Colonial Boundaries

The relationships between archives, records, and communities are dynamic. Indigenous communities and materials by and about them reach beyond historical, colonially-imposed nation-state boundaries. Many Indigenous communities and their records were displaced and reside far from their ancestral territories. U.S. institutions hold Indigenous collections from beyond the current geographic definition of the U.S., and archives in other parts of the world hold American Indigenous collections. Institutions must understand and look beyond these boundaries in fulfilling their ethical obligations regarding returns, and build long-term relationships with Indigenous communities.

Conclusion

Indigenous knowledge has been extracted and held by colonial repositories for hundreds of years, often without consent, undermining Indigenous people's inalienable right to self-determination and ways of knowing. The SAA Archival Repatriation Committee puts forward these Principles, which align with SAA's Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics and build on SAA-endorsed *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*, as a framework for a more ethical, respectful, and inclusive future for Indigenous archival records.

Definitions

These are working definitions used by this Committee. They do not supersede other definitions that may be more relevant in particular contexts.

Archival repatriation is the ethical and respectful return of ownership, control, and/or possession of archival records to the country or community who created them and/or are reflected in them, by a process that upholds community rights to those records. This may include physical return, deaccessioning, or destruction of holdings in accordance with community protocols. This is distinct from forms of access that do not involve the actual return of physical items, full rights, or ownership to communities.

The Committee recognizes that return may not be the current desired outcome for some communities. Ethical institutional-community engagements can include various forms of **non-repatriation actions**, such as:

- *Knowledge Sharing*: proactively providing communities with copies, such as digital surrogates, reciprocal access models, privileged digital access, facsimiles, printed volumes, and microfilm copies, and pursuing thoughtful community arrangements, such as memoranda of understanding.
- *Shared stewardship*: shared status in which source communities and institutions are partners in ownership and/or stewardship decisions. This may result in changes to physical care, access, and use practices, and can include post-custodial arrangements. (Adapted in part from the National Museum of Natural History Ethical Stewardship Policy, dated December 30, 2022)

Community consultation is a necessary component of archival repatriation, but the question of who speaks for a community is a complex one. Consultation may include working with designated community officials or representatives, and may involve working with more than one person or group. In some communities, official and unofficial authority may not be what institutions expect. Every community is different, and it is incumbent on the archival institution to understand the appropriate approach for a given community. Absence of consultation compromises ethical return, and may result in lack of shared expectations, mistrust, or strained relationships between archivists, institutions, and communities. Consultation involves open communication, which is necessary to promote relationship-building.

Indigenous is used in these Principles as an inclusive term to include Native American, Native Hawaiian, Alaska Native, First Nations, Aboriginal and First Peoples across the globe, while recognizing the Committee's special obligations to American and North American communities as representatives of the Society of American Archivists. We also acknowledge complex and ongoing discussions of this term. See for example UNESCO's definition of Indigenous peoples, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues factsheet, and the National Museum of the American Indian page about impacts of terminologies.

Records and archives encompass archival documents and institutional cultural heritage documentation. These may include, but are not limited to, manuscripts in the form of letters or diaries, institutional records, photographs, sound recordings, moving images, museum records, accession files, field notebooks, expedition records, editions and facsimiles such as microfilm, printed materials, object metadata associated with museum collections, or scholarly and research data on Indigenous people, cultural practices, or objects. Relevant records and archival collections may be held in an archives or special collections library, but may also reside in a department or an institution that does not define itself as archival in nature.

Reciprocity and relationality are fundamental to Indigenous ways of knowing. Reciprocity involves power flowing back and forth between parties, ensuring that relationships are not extractive. It also requires relational accountability, which characterizes relationships by respect and centers the interests of communities in all aspects of work.

Sovereignty or self-determination, in the context of Indigenous communities, recognizes their rights, autonomy, and authority to self-govern; and to exist as a separate territory, nation, or state that can determine the allocation, distribution, and use of tangible and intangible resources. Not every Indigenous community represents itself as a sovereign nation or has a formal government structure. Many non-federally recognized Tribes and communities in the United States, Alaska and Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and other former colonies may not share the same notion of sovereignty as other communities. In addition, some communities displaced from their traditional land are nevertheless still connected and have mechanisms for decision-making in the diaspora.

Related Laws and Policies

The practice of archival repatriation is based on relationships with Indigenous communities, but also must abide by international, national, and professional codes, principles, and laws. While repatriation extends beyond the parameters defined by any one law or standard, relevant works include, but are not limited to, the following:

The **SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics** (Revised 2020) emphasizes equitable access, diversity, and accountability, and sustainable stewardship in archival practices.

The **Protocols for Native American Archival Materials** (PNAAM) recognize Native Nations as sovereign governments with associated rights, consider community-based approaches to collections ownership, preservation, treatment, and access, and emphasize the need to build relationships and include Native perspectives in information. They further advocate for “knowledge repatriation” and ask repositories to “consider transferring primary physical ownership and all copyright or literary rights” for archival collections.

The **Tandanya-Adelaide Declaration** (2019) asserts an ethical responsibility for international archivists to accept Indigenous worldviews and practices, and further advocates for “state-sanctioned archival institutions to recognize Indigenous ownership of Indigenous traditional knowledge, cultural expression, knowledge, and intellectual property,” and “the replevin of archival materials when requested by the originating community” amidst the inadequacy of individualist Western legal frameworks (No. 2).

The **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** (UNDRIP) broadly addresses the human rights of Indigenous peoples, including protecting cultural property taken without “free, prior and informed consent” (Article 11), and “the right to maintain, control, protect and develop ... intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions” (Article 31).

The **American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** (2016), ratified by the Organization of American States (OAS), mirrors UNDRIP and advocates for a range of Indigenous rights, including “the right to their own cultural identity and integrity and to their cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, including historic and ancestral heritage; and to the protection, preservation, maintenance, and development of that cultural heritage for their collective continuity and that of their members and so as to transmit that heritage to future generations,” and redress, including “restitution,” developed collaboratively, for “cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs” (Article XIII).

The **Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act** (NAGPRA), and the **National Museum of the American Indian Act** which preceded it (Public Law 101-185), legally require federally funded organizations to repatriate ancestral remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony to descendants in federally recognized tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations. New NAGPRA regulations (2023 ruling) require Indigenous review and consent for institutions to display and provide access to Native “cultural items.” NAGPRA and other extant laws and policies should be used in dialogue with institutional and Tribal protocols and principles to help advance the goals of archival repatriation and to enact a comprehensive vision for ethical and respectful handling of Indigenous archives globally and locally.

Document History

In 2022 and 2023, the Archival Repatriation Committee, in fulfillment of its charge “to support archivists in repatriating and receiving archival materials,” prioritized drafting a set of guidelines centering ethical returns. The Committee thus conducted listening sessions with an array of people and project teams experienced in the repatriation of records and archives. The Committee discussed lessons learned during their January 2024 meeting, identifying the need for concrete tools and guidance. To meet those needs, the Committee drafted a set of principles to guide all future work.

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The Committee is very grateful for the contributions of listening session participants and event attendees, and thoughtful critiques raised by the community. We are hopeful that the resulting revision is a stronger and clearer set of principles that will help make repatriation a core archival responsibility.

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Document Maintenance and Reuse

This set of Principles is intended to be useful for archives, archivists, and Indigenous institutions pursuing archival repatriation. As the needs of the community of practice change, these principles should also change as needed to continue supporting archival repatriation efforts. This can include amending, extending, or even retiring this document. The Archival Repatriation Committee will maintain this document in this spirit, and offers it to the community for re-use with a CC-BY-NA license.

This document will be maintained by the Archival Repatriation Committee. An initial review will occur five years from the year of initial approval. After the initial review, the SAA Standards Committee requires review every five years. Updates may occur outside of the formal review period in order to correct minor issues, e.g. typos. Feedback and suggestions beyond correcting errors (e.g., a suggestion that warrants broader consideration, or a desired expansion into new areas) will be collected and acknowledged but might not be addressed until the formal review period.