

Networked Sacred Authority for Inclusive Heritage Education: Accessibility and Participation in Malaysian Islamic Heritage Sites

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ABSTRACT:

Heritage sites increasingly function as spaces of cultural learning, social participation, and public engagement, yet inclusive access becomes complex when heritage is also sacred and normatively regulated. This study examines how governance shapes access and participation in Islamic heritage settings through a qualitative case study of Melaka, Malaysia. Drawing on the concept of networked sacred authority, governance is conceptualised as a relational configuration of institutional power, religious authority, and community agency. Data were drawn from policy and institutional documents, regulatory and religious materials, and site-based observations. Findings indicate that access and participation are shaped by the interaction of institutional policies, religious norms, and community mediation. Legitimacy alignment among these domains influences visitor access, spatial use, interpretation, and participation, while tensions between tourism development, religious integrity, and community expectations require context-sensitive approaches. The study contributes to inclusive heritage education by extending networked sacred authority to explain how differentiated forms of authority shape access, participation, and heritage learning. Although the study does not directly examine persons with disabilities, it provides a conceptual basis for future research on disability-inclusive access and participation in Islamic heritage environments.

Keywords: Inclusive Heritage Education; Accessibility; Heritage Participation; Networked Sacred Authority; Islamic Heritage.

1. Introduction

Heritage sites increasingly function not only as repositories of cultural memory but also as spaces

for social participation, informal learning, identity formation, and public engagement. Heritage tourism has consequently become an important

component of contemporary place-making, situated at the intersection of economic development, cultural preservation, and identity construction (Chang & Chuang, 2021; Gravari-Barbas, 2018). This expanding role raises an important question of who can access, experience, and participate in heritage spaces. Accessibility and inclusiveness have gained increasing attention because physical, informational, communicative, and attitudinal barriers may restrict participation in cultural, educational, and social activities, particularly among persons with disabilities (Phan & Yaacob, 2019; Zahari et al., 2023). Thus, accessibility extends beyond physical entry to include access to information, interpretation, communication, and meaningful engagement with heritage knowledge (Benoit et al., 2021).

From this perspective, heritage sites can be understood as informal and experiential learning environments in which visitors encounter history, religion, culture, architecture, and collective memory. Inclusive heritage education therefore concerns not only access to heritage spaces but also the ability to meaningfully encounter, understand, interpret, and participate in the knowledge and experiences they provide. However, such participation is shaped by how access is organised and mediated. This is particularly significant in Islamic heritage settings, where mosques, burial grounds, religious landmarks, and other sacred sites may simultaneously function as places of worship, cultural assets, educational environments, and tourism destinations (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). Their use and interpretation are consequently influenced by religious norms, moral expectations, and socially recognised forms of authority.

Inclusion within Islamic heritage spaces therefore cannot be understood solely through conventional accessibility or administrative arrangements. It requires attention to the interaction between institutional responsibilities, religious norms, and community practices. Although previous scholarship has examined authenticity, commodification, and community participation in heritage tourism, religion has

often been treated as a contextual factor rather than as a constitutive element of governance and participation (Arya & Annie, 2020; Nawangsih, 2022). This leaves an analytical gap concerning how inclusive access and participation can be negotiated where conservation, religious practice, tourism, and diverse visitor needs intersect.

This study addresses this gap by extending the concept of networked sacred authority to inclusive heritage access and participation. The framework conceptualises authority as an interaction among three dimensions: institutional power, religious authority, and community agency. Rather than assuming equivalent authority among actors, it recognises that different actors contribute distinct forms of legitimacy to the management and interpretation of sacred heritage.

Institutional actors provide regulatory and administrative authority; religious institutions establish normative boundaries concerning appropriate behaviour and use; and local communities and heritage custodians mediate these requirements through everyday practices. This perspective is relevant to inclusive heritage education because access and participation may depend not only on formal policy but also on how institutional responsibilities, religious norms, and community practices are interpreted and translated at site level.

Malaysia provides a relevant setting for examining these dynamics because tourism is largely administered at the federal level, while Islamic affairs fall within state jurisdiction (Battour et al., 2014). In Melaka, historically significant Islamic heritage sites operate simultaneously as sacred spaces, cultural assets, and visitor destinations. This creates overlapping responsibilities involving tourism authorities, religious institutions, heritage managers, and local communities. From an inclusion perspective, such complexity raises questions about how visitor access is determined, how religious and cultural requirements are communicated, and how diverse visitors, including persons with disabilities, may participate without

compromising the religious and cultural integrity of sacred spaces.

Accordingly, this study examines how networked sacred authority provides a context-sensitive framework for understanding inclusive access and participation in Islamic heritage spaces in Malaysia, with particular reference to Melaka. It argues that inclusive heritage education should extend beyond physical accessibility to encompass institutional responsibility, religious legitimacy, community mediation, and access to heritage knowledge and experience. The study contributes theoretically by connecting networked governance and sacred authority with inclusive heritage and accessibility scholarship, and conceptually by positioning Islamic heritage sites as cultural-learning environments in which access, participation, and knowledge are negotiated among multiple sources of authority.

2. Literature Review

The literature relevant to this study brings together three interconnected areas: inclusive education beyond formal settings, accessibility and participation in heritage environments, and governance of sacred heritage. Their intersection remains underexplored, particularly in Islamic heritage contexts. This section therefore establishes the basis for understanding heritage sites as cultural-learning environments in which access and participation are shaped by institutional, religious, and community-based forms of authority.

2.1 Inclusive Education Beyond Formal Schooling

Inclusive education is increasingly understood as a process of removing barriers to participation and learning rather than merely placing learners within conventional educational settings. UNESCO conceptualises inclusion in terms of ensuring the presence, participation, and achievement of diverse learners, with particular attention to barriers created by physical, social, institutional, and cultural environments. This perspective extends the discussion of inclusion beyond classrooms to informal and community-based learning environments where knowledge, culture, and social interaction are experienced.

Heritage sites represent one such environment. They provide opportunities for experiential learning through architecture, historical interpretation, religious practices, cultural narratives, and interaction with communities. Consequently, inclusive heritage education concerns not only whether individuals can physically enter a heritage site, but also whether they can access information, understand its meanings, and participate meaningfully in the experience.

Mastrogriuseppe et al. (2021), for example, demonstrate that accessibility to cultural heritage for persons with intellectual disabilities involves physical interaction, language and symbols, content comprehension, and engagement with knowledge. This suggests that inclusion in heritage settings should be understood as a multidimensional process involving both access to place and access to knowledge. For the present study, therefore, inclusive education is approached broadly as the capacity of heritage environments to facilitate meaningful participation among visitors with diverse needs. This does not imply that heritage sites function as formal educational institutions; rather, it positions them as informal cultural-learning environments in which accessibility and participation are integral to the educational value of heritage.

2.2 Accessibility and Participation in Heritage Education

Accessibility is a central condition of meaningful participation in heritage. Research on heritage tourism has identified physical, informational, and attitudinal barriers that may restrict the participation of persons with disabilities. In the Malaysian context, Zahari et al. (2023) highlight the importance of disability-inclusive approaches in heritage tourism and show that barriers to accessing heritage buildings can constrain social and cultural participation.

Similarly, recent research on cultural heritage accessibility emphasises that inclusion requires attention to physical access, communication, interpretation, and opportunities for engagement rather than focusing exclusively on infrastructure.

Flego and Tei (2025) further identify accessibility and inclusiveness as cross-sectoral concerns requiring coordinated action among public authorities, communities, and other heritage stakeholders.

This literature is particularly relevant to sacred heritage sites because accessibility may intersect with cultural and religious requirements. A heritage site may be technically accessible while certain areas, activities, or forms of interaction remain subject to religious or cultural norms. In Islamic heritage settings, for example, mosques and religious landmarks are simultaneously places of worship, cultural heritage, and visitor engagement (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). Access must therefore be negotiated in ways that respect both the rights of diverse visitors and the normative character of sacred spaces. This creates a governance dimension to inclusive heritage education.

Decisions concerning visitor movement, information provision, interpretation, appropriate conduct, and use of sacred spaces are not determined solely by accessibility standards. They involve institutional regulations, religious norms, and local practices. Accessibility, therefore, is partly an outcome of how different sources of authority interpret and negotiate inclusion. This observation provides a conceptual bridge between the literature on inclusive heritage and the networked sacred authority framework developed in this study.

2.3 Networked Sacred Authority and Inclusive Heritage Governance

Conventional governance literature has increasingly employed network, collaborative, and multi-level approaches to explain coordination among interdependent actors (Bevir, 2013; Provan & Kenis, 2007). These approaches have advanced understanding of dispersed authority and stakeholder collaboration, but their emphasis on coordination and institutional relationships may be insufficient in normatively regulated environments. The original governance literature reviewed in this study identifies four limitations: assumptions of actor equivalence, privileging of formal

institutional authority, an efficiency-oriented conception of governance, and a tendency to treat religion as peripheral to public governance.

These limitations are particularly relevant to Islamic heritage, where institutional power operates alongside religious authority and community agency. The concept of networked sacred authority therefore conceptualises governance as a relational configuration of differentiated authority rather than simply a network of equivalent stakeholders. Its three dimensions are institutional power, exercised through legal mandates and administrative structures; religious authority, derived from Islamic norms and recognised religious legitimacy; and community agency, expressed through local knowledge, lived practices, and social acceptance.

The framework proposes legitimacy alignment as the mechanism through which these dimensions interact. Governance outcomes emerge when institutional objectives, religious expectations, and community practices are sufficiently aligned, while tensions arise when these sources of legitimacy diverge. This perspective is particularly useful for inclusive heritage education because accessibility cannot necessarily be implemented through institutional policy alone. Inclusive practices may require negotiation between administrative requirements, religious propriety, and community-based interpretations of appropriate participation.

In the Malaysian context, this interaction is especially visible because tourism is largely administered federally while Islamic affairs fall under state jurisdiction. Melaka provides a relevant case because its historic mosques and Islamic heritage sites simultaneously function as religious spaces and tourism destinations, creating overlapping institutional, religious, and community interests. Accordingly, networked sacred authority provides a basis for examining inclusion not simply as an infrastructural issue, but as a governance process through which access, participation, religious integrity, and heritage learning are negotiated.

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive case study approach to examine how networked sacred authority shapes governance, access, and participation within Islamic heritage settings. An interpretive orientation is appropriate because authority in sacred heritage contexts is not solely institutional or procedural but also normative, relational, and meaning-laden (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, the study develops analytical understanding of how institutional power, religious authority, and community agency are constituted and negotiated in practice. The case study approach supports theory-informed interpretation of a contextually bounded setting and analytical rather than statistical generalisation (Yin, 2018; Alasuutari, 1995).

Melaka was selected as the focal case because its Islamic heritage sites simultaneously function as religious spaces, cultural assets, and tourism destinations. This setting provides an appropriate context for examining how differentiated forms of authority shape access, visitor participation, heritage interpretation, and the preservation of religious norms.

3.1 Data Sources and Collection

The study draws on qualitative documentary and site-based observational evidence covering institutional, religious, and community domains. Documentary sources included policy documents, strategic plans, institutional reports, guidelines, promotional materials, and official communications relating to tourism and Islamic affairs at federal and state levels, with particular attention to materials produced by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Tourism Malaysia, the Islamic Tourism Centre, and Jabatan Agama Islam Melaka. Regulatory and religious materials were also examined to identify normative expectations concerning the use and interpretation of Islamic heritage sites.

These sources were complemented by contextual observations at selected Islamic heritage sites in Melaka. Observations focused on the translation of formal policies and normative expectations

into everyday practices, particularly visitor access, spatial use, interpretation, conduct, and interaction within sacred environments. Combining documentary and observational evidence enabled triangulation between formal governance arrangements and their practical implementation.

3.2 Data Analysis

Data were analysed through a theory-informed interpretive process guided by the networked sacred authority framework. The analysis proceeded in three stages: (1) mapping relevant actors and governance levels, including federal tourism institutions, state religious authorities, and local or community actors; (2) examining the forms of authority exercised by these actors and their implications for access, participation, and heritage interpretation; and (3) identifying patterns of legitimacy alignment and misalignment, including tensions between tourism development and sacredness, institutional policy and religious requirements, and formal governance and local practice.

These tensions were interpreted as manifestations of differentiated authority rather than simply as governance failures. This process enabled the framework to be examined against empirical observations while identifying its implications for inclusive access and participation.

3.3 Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigour

Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation, theory-data alignment, and transparent analytical procedures (Miles et al., 2014). Documentary and observational sources were compared to identify convergent and divergent representations of governance, while the analysis maintained a clear link between empirical evidence and the framework's three dimensions. Consistent with interpretive case study research, the study prioritised conceptual depth and analytical clarity rather than exhaustive empirical coverage (Houghton et al., 2015).

4. Findings And Discussion

The findings are organised around the interaction of institutional power, religious authority, and

community agency, followed by an examination of legitimacy alignment and tensions between competing governance logics. The analysis considers how these dimensions shape access, participation, and the interpretation of Islamic heritage, and relates the findings to the broader proposition of networked sacred authority and inclusive heritage education.

4.1 Differentiated Authority and the Governance of Access

The findings indicate that governance in Islamic heritage tourism is not adequately characterised as a flat network of coordinated actors. Instead, it operates as a layered configuration of institutional power, religious authority, and community agency, with governance outcomes emerging through their interaction and contingent alignment.

At the institutional level, federal agencies, including the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Tourism Malaysia, and the Islamic Tourism Centre, shape the broader tourism environment through strategic planning, promotion, and heritage branding. However, institutional intentions are mediated at site level. Promotional narratives may present historic mosques as cultural attractions, while actual access is moderated according to local expectations concerning modesty, conduct, and religious practice.

This demonstrates that access is not determined by infrastructure or policy alone. In sacred heritage environments, participation is also shaped by the normative conditions under which access is considered appropriate. An inclusive approach must therefore consider both visitors' opportunities to engage with heritage and the religious integrity of the site.

Religious authority constitutes a distinct dimension. At sites such as Masjid Kampung Kling and Masjid Tengker, visitor behaviour is influenced by dress requirements, prayer times, spatial boundaries, and on-site guidance. Some restrictions are communicated through embodied practices and mosque custodians rather than formal rules, demonstrating that sacred heritage

governance includes normative authority beyond administrative procedures.

Community agency provides a further layer of mediation. Mosque committees and custodians translate institutional and religious expectations into situated practices, adapting visitor access according to circumstances such as visitor volume and prayer activities. In one observed situation, visitors were guided to a designated area rather than the main prayer hall, illustrating how community actors mediate between visitor participation and religious sensitivity.

Table 1. Dimensions of Networked Sacred Authority and Implications for Inclusive Heritage Participation.

Authority dimension	Empirical expression	Implication for inclusion
Institutional power	Tourism policy, heritage promotion, visitor management	Establishes institutional responsibility for access and information
Religious authority	Dress, prayer times, spatial boundaries, sacred norms	Defines culturally and religiously appropriate forms of participation
Community agency	Custodian guidance, adaptation of access, local mediation	Translates formal and religious expectations into situated practice
Legitimacy alignment	Negotiation between institutional, religious and community expectations	Enables context-sensitive access and meaningful participation

These dimensions demonstrate that inclusive participation is produced through the interaction of differentiated authority rather than institutional policy alone. Accessibility and participation are therefore embedded within the governance structures through which sacred spaces are interpreted and experienced.

4.2 Legitimacy Alignment as a Mechanism of Inclusive Participation

A central finding is that governance outcomes depend on the degree of legitimacy alignment among institutional, religious, and community domains. Alignment occurs when visitor-management practices satisfy policy objectives while remaining consistent with religious norms and community expectations. Misalignment emerges when these logics diverge, such as when promotional narratives emphasise openness and accessibility while site-level practices impose more restricted forms of access.

This finding extends conventional network governance perspectives. While network approaches commonly emphasise coordination, trust, reciprocity, and resource exchange, the present case indicates that coordination alone does not explain how decisions concerning sacred heritage are accepted and implemented. The critical issue is whether practices are regarded as legitimate across different domains of authority. The analytical emphasis therefore shifts from coordination to legitimacy alignment.

For inclusive heritage education, this distinction is important. Meaningful participation involves engagement with heritage knowledge and spaces while respecting their cultural and religious meanings. Inclusion is therefore more sustainable when institutional, religious, and community actors jointly shape how access and interpretation are organised.

This also demonstrates why differentiated rather than equivalent authority is important in sacred heritage governance. Religious institutions exercise normative legitimacy, tourism institutions possess structural and administrative power, while community actors influence how policies are accepted and translated into practice. Inclusive governance therefore requires

mechanisms for interaction among these differentiated roles rather than the replacement of one form of authority by another.

4.3 Managing Tensions between Inclusion and Sacred Integrity

The findings reveal persistent tensions between commercialisation and sacredness, federal and state authority, and formal policy and site-level practice. These tensions are not necessarily evidence of governance failure; rather, they reflect the coexistence of economic, religious, and social value systems that cannot always be completely reconciled.

This is particularly relevant to inclusive participation. Greater accessibility may support broader cultural and educational participation, while sacred spaces may simultaneously require restrictions concerning movement, dress, photography, prayer areas, or timing. The challenge is therefore not to maximise access without qualification, but to develop context-sensitive forms of access that enable participation while maintaining religious and cultural integrity.

Networked sacred authority consequently reframes governance as the management and stabilisation of tensions rather than their complete elimination. Formal policies may require adaptation at site level, while community practices mediate between institutional objectives and religious requirements. For inclusive heritage environments, accessibility should therefore be approached as a relational and contextual process involving physical access, information, interpretation, visitor guidance, and opportunities for participation.

Importantly, the present study does not empirically measure the experiences of persons with disabilities. Its contribution is conceptual: the observed governance dynamics demonstrate how differentiated authority may shape the conditions under which more inclusive forms of heritage access and learning can be developed. Direct investigation of disability-related accessibility needs remains an important area for future research.

4.4 From Network Governance to Networked Sacred Authority

The findings contribute to governance theory by demonstrating that authority in Islamic heritage contexts is differentiated according to institutional, religious, and social sources of legitimacy rather than simply distributed among equivalent stakeholders. Networked sacred authority extends existing governance approaches in three respects: it places religious legitimacy alongside institutional power and community agency; identifies legitimacy alignment rather than coordination as a key governance mechanism; and conceptualises persistent tensions as structural features of normatively complex environments.

For inclusive heritage education, this contribution indicates that access cannot be separated entirely from the governance structures through which sacred heritage is regulated and interpreted. Where heritage is simultaneously sacred, cultural, educational, and touristic, participation is shaped by multiple forms of authority. Institutional responsibility, religious sensitivity, community mediation, and accessible opportunities for engagement must therefore be considered together.

The resulting proposition can be expressed as:

Institutional Power + Religious Authority + Community Agency → Legitimacy Alignment → Context-Sensitive Access and Participation → Inclusive Heritage Learning

This proposition is conceptual rather than an empirical claim that networked sacred authority improves accessibility for persons with disabilities. Instead, it provides a theoretical basis for examining how governance arrangements may enable or constrain inclusive participation in future empirical research.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how authority operates within Islamic heritage settings and shapes conditions for access, participation, and heritage learning. Drawing on the Malaysian case of Melaka, the findings demonstrate that governance in sacred heritage contexts involves

the interaction of institutional power, religious authority, and community agency, each representing a distinct source of legitimacy. The concept of networked sacred authority therefore provides a context-sensitive framework for understanding governance as a relational and multi-layered configuration of authority rather than a network of functionally equivalent stakeholders.

Access and participation are shaped by the alignment and negotiation of institutional objectives, religious norms, and community practices. Tensions between tourism development and sacred integrity, formal policy and site-level practice, and broader access and religious boundaries reflect the coexistence of different value systems requiring continuous mediation and contextual adaptation. From an inclusive heritage education perspective, meaningful participation therefore extends beyond physical access to include access to heritage knowledge, interpretation, appropriate visitor engagement, and opportunities to experience cultural and religious heritage within its normative context.

The study contributes conceptually by connecting networked sacred authority with inclusive heritage participation and by highlighting institutional responsibility, religious sensitivity, and community mediation as interconnected conditions of access and learning. However, the study does not empirically measure the experiences of persons with disabilities; its contribution to inclusive education is therefore primarily conceptual. Future research should directly examine disability-related accessibility and learning experiences in Islamic heritage environments through participatory, ethnographic, or mixed-method approaches and further test the framework across different heritage and religious contexts.

The study does not empirically measure the experiences of persons with disabilities; therefore, its contribution to inclusive education is primarily conceptual. Future research should directly examine the accessibility and learning experiences of persons with disabilities in Islamic

heritage environments through participatory, ethnographic, or mixed-method approaches. Such research could further test and refine the proposed framework across different heritage and religious contexts.

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Author's Declaration

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