



Guided Interpretation in Religious Heritage Tourism: Exploring Visitor Experience at Istiqlal Mosque, Jakarta

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Abstract

Religious heritage sites serve as sacred places, as cultural resources, and as tourism attractions, and a need for interpretation arises that must be able to convey religious meaning while being accessible to a variety of visitors. The research explores guided interpretation and visitor experience in Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta. Descriptive qualitative field-research method was used through participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews and documentation. Four guided-tour sessions were observed, involving interviews with two guides and twelve visitors. Guided tours were analyzed based on Ham's TORE principles, Thematic, Organized, Relevant, and Enjoyable, and the role of the guide and the visitors' reactions were analyzed based on the concepts of the guide as an experience intermediary and multidimensional visitor experience. The findings show that guides interpret Istiqlal by telling the intertwined stories of the struggle for independence, Indonesian identity, Islamic identity, architectural symbolism, local Islamic culture and religious tolerance. From factual information, architectural features, Friedrich Silaban's story, the bedug and the mosque's connection with Jakarta Cathedral turn into an interpretive resource. The communication process is marked by the thematic storytelling, spatial sequencing, contextual comparison, and informal communication. Visitors reported that they learnt new things, that they had positive experienced in the mosque, and they were now more contextualized in their understanding of Islam in Indonesia. The study suggests that guided interpretation is an act that can make Istiqlal as communicated heritage, which is a religious monument physically transformed by guided interpretation that becomes an act of mediation in order to communicate the meaning of the monument to the visitors and the Indonesian identity.

Keywords: Guided Interpretation; Religious Heritage Tourism; Visitor Experience; Istiqlal Mosque; Tour Guide; Religious Tourism.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious heritage sites are unique tourist assets since they serve as sacred spaces and at the same time as tourist attractions, cultural and historical sites. The visitors to religious sites might wish to be there for religious or spiritual reasons. They might also wish to visit the location to gain more information about its history, architecture, culture and local identity. In this regard, interpretation is important because it might contribute to the understanding of the meanings of religious heritage sites among visitors and guests. In several countries, monumental mosques may function not only as places of worship but also as expressions of national identity and religious landscapes (Koch et al., 2018). It has also been demonstrated that visitors to Canterbury Cathedral also wanted interpretation of the religious meanings within the history, architecture and art of the Cathedral, as well as the stories associated with a heritage site (Hughes et al., 2013).

Interpretation goes beyond the simple transmission of factual information by helping visitors connect with the meanings and significance of a heritage site. Ham (2013) conceptualizes effective interpretation through the TORE framework, which emphasizes that interpretation should be Thematic, Organized, Relevant, and Enjoyable. Within guided tours, these principles help structure information in a way that is meaningful and accessible to visitors, allowing guides to connect historical, cultural, architectural, and religious information with visitors' prior knowledge and experiences.

This role was first defined by Weiler and Black in their study in 2015. Their work states "the guide is an experience broker." When they also allowed physical access to places, encounters and interactions; to intellectual knowledge; to the sympathy that people develop towards places, people and cultures, they also enacted this role. This requirement for guides is seen in religious tourism where tourists are known to engage in unfamiliar religious practices, behavioral norms, cultural meanings and sacred environments. Visitor experience provides a way of understanding the outcome of such interpretation. Packer and Ballantyne (2016) believe that the visitor experience is personal and subjective, it can have several interrelated dimensions. During this process, Guided Interpretation may therefore have an impact not just on what visitors know but also on what they notice, feel and remember and hence how they make meaning from the site.

The relationships can be explained using the example of Masjid Istiqlal in Jakarta. Research conducted in Indonesia indicates that Istiqlal has many meanings in addition to being a place of worship. According to Juwita and Astrina (2021), Istiqlal is one of the religious monumental buildings that contain in it Islamic values and Indonesian national identity. Hasbi and Nimpuno (2019) and Fathir and Alamsyah (2023) emphasize that modern architecture has a considerable effect on its design. More recent studies also highlight the elements of modernity, nationalism and spirituality in the architectural discourse of Istiqlal (Grimaldi & Roosandriantini, 2026).

However, Istiqlal has also evolved into a religious tourism destination. According to Veronica et al. (2023), its strategic and monumental design enhances its appeal as a religious tourism destination, and it is recommended that future research should focus on tourists' perceptions of Istiqlal. Visitors' perceptions of tourism facilities, focusing on physical condition, cleanliness and comfort were subsequently examined by Rosa and Pradini (2023). Saefudin et al. (2024), on the other hand, found that architectural features and the alterations made after the renovation influence the sacredness perception of the visitors and the deep and meaningful experiences of the visitors in the mosque.



Previous studies have indicated interest either from a socio-religious or economic point of view in the Istiqlal Mosque's point of view. Fatimah et al. (2024) discussed the effects of such religious tourism visits on traders in the areas surrounding the mosque. The more recent Indonesian research has demonstrated the symbolic and practical connections between the mosque and Jakarta Cathedral and how the activities carried out in front of their buildings help encourage the idea of religious tolerance. However, there are limited attention are given to the interpersonal process through which tour guides interpret the mosque's historical, architectural, and religious meanings for visitors. This research address this gap by examining guided interpretation as a cultural and religious mediation form within religious site.

The performance of the tour guides as interpretation services at the Istiqlal mosque has not yet been investigated. In order to understand the effectiveness of guides and their interpretation, how they establish connections and guide visitors in the sacred space, and how visitors interpret and perceive the narrative, other related studies would be carried out.

In line with this, the purpose of the present research is to investigate guided interpretation and visitors' experience at Istiqlal Mosque. The study takes into account the contents and the communication of guided interpretation, the mediation role of the guide and how visitors experience the guided visit and make sense of it. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do guides interpret the historical, architectural, cultural and religious significance of Istiqlal Mosque?
2. How do guides interact in supporting the visitor's understanding and interaction during guided tours?
3. How do visitors experience and make meaning from guided interpretation at Istiqlal Mosque?

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a **descriptive qualitative field-research approach**. Field research is the research that is carried out in the field to get an in-depth understanding of conditions, activities, interactions, experiences, phenomena that are occurring in the field as the research object (Sugiyono, 2020). This was deemed suitable as guided interpretation and visitor experience were analyzed in the context where they take place, that is the guided tour activities at Istiqlal Mosque, Jakarta.

Both primary and secondary data were used in the study. Participant observation and non-participant observation were combined with semi-structured interviews with the guides and visitors in Istiqlal Mosque who participated in guided tours as a method for collecting primary data. Secondary data were collected from official documents, institutional information, photos, academic literature and previous works pertaining to Istiqlal Mosque, religious heritage tourism, tour guides, religious heritage interpretation and visitors' experience.

The research was done with descriptive qualitative approach. Sugiyono (2020) stated that the characteristics of the qualitative research were carried out in natural conditions where the researcher is the main instrument in collecting and interpreting data. Descriptive research is a research that has the goal of describing the facts and characteristics systematically and accurately related to the phenomenon of the studied object (Nazir, 2014). This method was hence appropriate for studying the historical, architectural, cultural and religious significance of Istiqlal Mosque and visitors' interpretation and experience of these significances.



Research Focus

The study focused on three interrelated aspects of guided interpretation. First, it examined the content of interpretation, particularly the historical, architectural, cultural, religious, and national meanings communicated by guides. Second, it examined the interpretive communication process using Ham's (2013) TORE framework, consisting of Thematic, Organized, Relevant, and Enjoyable interpretation. Third, it explored visitor experience, particularly visitors' learning, understanding, emotional responses, reflection, and meaning-making following the guided tour.

The research focus can therefore be summarized as three sequential questions: what meanings are interpreted, how these meanings are communicated, and how visitors experience and make meaning from the interpretation.

Research Participants and Informant Selection

This research was carried out in January 2026. The primary data were obtained from two guides of Istiqlal Mosque and twelve visitors who took the guided tours. Four guided-tour sessions were observed, as part of the fieldwork.

The selection of participants was done by purposive sampling because it allowed the researcher to select informants based on their knowledge, experience and direct involvement in the study phenomenon (Sugiyono, 2020). The selection of the guide participants was done based on the prerequisite that they must be directly involved in providing guidance during guided visits and information about the historical, architectural, cultural and religious aspects of Istiqlal Mosque. Selection of the visitor participants was based on their first-hand experience of a guided tour so that they could describe their understanding and their perceptions of the interpretation they received.

The visitors who came from both inside and outside of Indonesia as the visitor participants were various ages. Having different nationalities and age groups was included to gain insight from visitors with varying backgrounds and familiarity with Islam and Istiqlal Mosque. These attributes were not analyzed as factors for comparison but rather were included to give a wider spectrum of visitor views in the qualitative analysis.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collecting techniques were observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. This was done by employing more than one data source, which is consistent with qualitative research where different forms of evidence can be used to gain a more complete picture of the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Observation

Four guided-tour sessions were held at Istiqlal Mosque for observation purposes. Participant and non-participant observations were used to gain complementary views of the guided-tour process. Participant observation was performed by the researcher when he joined the guided-tour group and went through the tour from the visitors' point of view. This allowed the researcher to see the interpretive messages that were given and felt during the tour, such as the order of the messages during the tour, stories, interactions, questions, and movement in the mosque. The non-participant observation method was used when the researcher observed the tour, but did not actively engage with the visitor group. This enabled more focus on the guidance of behavior, communication

processes, visitors' responses, group dynamics and the connection between interpretation and the physical setting of the mosque.

Qualitative observation can vary in the amount of researcher involvement based on the research question and context (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The use of participant and non-participant observation in this study allowed the researcher to observe the guided experience both from the visitor encounter and more of an observational perspective.

The content of guides, sequence and organization of the interpretation, storytelling technique, explanation of architectural meaning and meaning of religion, reference to the Indonesian history and culture, guide-visitor interaction, question of visitors, and visitor response that can be observed were given special attention.

Interview

Two guides and twelve visitors were interviewed semi-structured. Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as it offers a standardized set of questions whilst giving the participants enough scope to discuss experiences and issues which arise during the interview. Qualitative interviews can be especially helpful to gain insight into the participants' understanding and meaning of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted on guides on the selection of the interpretive contents, communication approach, explanation of Islamic and Indonesian culture, architectural and historical stories, interaction with visitors, adaptation to visitors from various backgrounds, and the problems in interpreting an active religious site.

The expectations before the tour, memorable information, knowledge gained during the tour, interaction with the guide, emotional responses, perceptions of Istiqlal Mosque, and questions whether the guided tour had an impact on Islam, Indonesian culture, or religious diversity were all explored in the visitor interviews.

As the study was conducted among visitors of Istiqlal Mosque both in Indonesia and abroad and their age may affect the knowledge of Istiqlal Mosque and the Indonesian context, the semi-structured approach was used so that the questions could be adapted to the visitors' age without changing the overview of the research.

Documentation

Documentation was used as complementary data source. Sugiyono (2020) mentions that qualitative findings can be supported by documentary material as a form of contextual and supporting evidence in addition to the findings of interviews and observations. The documents utilized in this research were the official documents of Istiqlal Mosque, the basic documents of the visitors, the institutional documents, the historical documents, the pictures obtained during the fieldwork (if any), academic publications and previous studies related to religious tourism and Istiqlal Mosque. These materials were used for contextualization and triangulation of data collected from observations and interviews.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

Data condensation was done by reviewing the interview material and observation notes and choosing the data that was relevant to the research questions and was organized according to the repeated patterns related to the interpretive content, communication process and visitor experience. Ham's (2013) TORE framework was used to analyze the communication process, specifically in terms of whether thematic, organized, relevant and enjoyable interpretations were used. But not all the above dimensions were solely a priori selected, and further patterns that arose from the observations and interviews were kept.

Data display was carried out by arranging the data in thematic form and comparing the data that was collected from the guides and the visitors along with data that was collected from observations and documentation. The final step was the drawing and verification of conclusions, through repeated comparison of the interpretations that were emerging with the original field data. This process allowed the study to explore the information that was communicated during the guided tours, as well as the interpretation of the information and responses to it.

Trustworthiness of the Findings

Triangulation was done to enhance the credibility of the findings, which were based on source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was when information from both guides was compared to that of the visitors from different national and age backgrounds. The use of methodological triangulation was done using the results of the participants observation, non-participant observation, interview, and documentation.

Comparisons of patterns of observations between the four guided-tour sessions were also made to differentiate between common practices and those that occurred only once per session. The integration of several sources and approaches minimized the dependency on one participant and/or one observation and augmented the understanding of the guided-tour experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interpreting Istiqlal as Religious and National Heritage

The tours of Istiqlal showed it as more than a place of worship in all four visits. The content of the guides alternated between religious, historical, architectural and national themes, connecting the mosque to the struggle for independence, Islamic identity, cultural diversity and religious coexistence in the nation.

The association with independence has been present in the tours from early on. Guides provided explanations of Istiqlal and conveyed the saga of the founding of the mosque to the formation of post Independence Indonesia. One guide explained:

“In telling Istiqlal, we don't start just from the building, the name itself is the independence. The mosque was built when Indonesia had become independent, so the story is also part of the story of Indonesia. — Guide 1

The mosque's name, history and architecture were therefore introduced as part of the same national story. This aligns with Ham's (2013) concept of thematic interpretation, which positions the different information pieces around a central message. The mosque also has been mentioned in previous studies related to the construction of a nation in post-independence Indonesia and the expression of Indonesian national identity (Ardiansyah & Aly, 2017; Juwita & Astrina, 2021).

This was reinforced by architectural symbolism. Guides gave the 45 meter diameter of the main dome as an example of 1945 and the meanings of the 12 main pillars and the 5 levels of the



mosque. These explanations provided a way to link the visible architectural features with national and religious meanings for visitors.

One visitor said this is what the change in perception was:

“Initially, it was only a very big building that I saw, but when the guide explained to me the reasons for some of the numbers, I understood that the design was not only for religion, but also for Indonesia.” — Visitor 4

Therefore, the architecture was not “felt” only in its size or its face. Interpretation was valuable for visitors to appreciate the meanings that were not obvious to them.

Another frequent theme of the tours was the story of Friedrich Silaban. The importance of the Christian background of the architect in charge of the winning design of Istiqlal was stressed. His religion was used as a way to start a general discussion about religious pluralism.

“For many foreign visitors, this is one of the most surprising stories. The architect of the national mosque was Christian. We explain it because it shows that the mosque was a national project, it was not something that should separate people according to religion.” — Guide 2

Silaban's background was significant and it was presented not as simply biographical data, but linked with the concept of Istiqlal as a project of nation-building of people of various religions that's reflecting plurality in Indonesia

This discussion became real, as the mosque is located opposite Jakarta Cathedral. The guide explained the concept of tolerance to the visitors, by two religious institutions sharing the same urban space. Arifah et al. (2026) also record the cooperation that takes place between Istiqlal Mosque and Jakarta Cathedral, ranging from coordination during religious ceremonies, sharing facilities, symbolic exchange, and the Terowongan Silaturahmi. Tolerance, national commitment, non-violence, and accommodating local culture are also important aspects of Istiqlal's religious-moderation communication, as noted by Ridesta et al. (2022).

The results indicate that there is a message of tolerance in both narrative and place. Visitors can gain several reference points to understand religious coexistence in the Indonesian context from the background of the architect, the existence of the Cathedral and examples of interreligious cooperation.

Indonesian Islam and Local Culture

The guides also embedded the Islam in the broader social and cultural context of Indonesia. Explanations were not restricted to a mosque's design, prayer or doctrine. They also discussed religious diversity, democracy and variations in the manifestations of Islam in societies.

This was especially so for foreign tourists who had mainly experienced Muslim majority societies in the Middle East. Guides illustrated with examples from current Indonesian life, and demonstrated that the political and cultural features of Muslim societies are not necessarily the same. The tours included Indonesia's experience with democratic institutions and female national leadership.

One guide explained:

“If people have a perception of Muslim countries as mostly Middle Eastern, I often tell them that actually, Indonesia has its own history and society, that we are Muslim, but that Indonesia is also religiously plural, and that we have a political and cultural experience that is different.

These explanations relate to the relevance dimension of Ham's (2013) framework. The visitors were offered new religious and cultural data and information, which were more current and closer to the visitors' prior knowledge.

It is crucial, however, to recognize that the comparison is not a straightforward one between a monolithic “Indonesian Islam” and a monolithic “Middle Eastern Islam.” What was said during the tours was better appreciated as an introduction to diversity in the Muslim societies which form in different historical and cultural contexts.

This relationship became more apparent from the explanation of the bedug to Islam and with local culture. The guides made a clear distinction between Islamic teachings and cultural practices that arose in the Islamic community in Indonesia. This is in line with the literature concerning Islamic acculturation in Indonesia. Truna (2021) explained about the interaction between Islam and the cultural landscape in Indonesia, while Afandi (2023) highlighted the adaptation of Islamic communication with the local language, tradition and culture.

The bedug provided visitors with a tangible illustration of this interaction. Guides explained the historical role of it in conveying information about the time to pray and the role of it in the culture of Indonesian mosques.

A visitor commented:

“It was the only drum that I've seen in other mosques that I visited and the explanation was interesting because it's possible that religion and local culture can grow together.” — Visitor 1

The object thus became a useful point of reference for a discussion of cultural adaptation. Instead of abstractly explaining about acculturation or Islam nusantara, the guide utilized a visible object to illustrate how religious practice can be manifested in local culture.

The tours also helped to establish Istiqlal as a learning ground. Visitors were not only provided with an introduction to Islam but also to the Indonesian history, architecture and interreligious relations. This teaching role is achieved in a living religious context since the mosque continues to be a place of worship. Information on dress, prayer and behavior and etiquette in the mosque had thus both practical and interpretive functions.

The educational role of Istiqlal also places communication at the heart of what visitors experience. In the context of tourism, in Indonesia, Hidayati (2024) points out that communication helps people take part and supports the growth of tourism areas by linking actors with the meanings and possibilities of a place. Even though her research looks at tourism villages it shows in a way how communication is involved in how tourism spaces are understood and built

Interpretive Communication during Guided Tours

The tours observed generally supported Ham's (2013) TORE framework. Thematic, organized, relevant and enjoyable elements were present, but not necessarily in the same way throughout each tour.

The thematic dimension could be seen in the links that were made between seemingly unrelated subjects. The themes of independence, Silaban's religious background, architectural symbolism, the bedug and the surrounding Cathedral, were elements that made up the broader theme of Islam, Indonesian identity and religious diversity. The stories were not simply presented as a list of facts.

Partly, organizations were formed via movement in the mosque. The opportunities for explanations varied between different locations. Discussions of worship, architecture and



symbolism were facilitated in the prayer hall, while the bedug was used to discuss Islam and Indonesian culture and the views about the Cathedral was a natural place to discuss religious diversity. Thus, the physical path also contributed to the development of the story.

Relevance was particularly evident when guides made explanations in relation to the background of visitors. Additional background information about Indonesia and its society was often provided for international visitors, and for those who were not Muslim, information on prayer, terminology, etiquette and religious practice was provided.

One visitor explained:

“The guide made himself known to us, and he didn't assume that we knew Islam, so when we asked something very simple, he answered normally and linked it to everyday life, that made it easy to follow.” — Visitor 10

This is similar to the mediatory role that Weiler and Black (2015) refer to. The guide helps negotiate between the cultural significance of the site and the visitor's previous knowledge. Puja et al. (2026) also state that modern guides have more of an interpretive and educational function than just simply conveying information about a destination. This mediatory role also applies to religion at Istiqlal, as it is an active sacred space.

Another factor in the visitor experience was enjoyment. The guides were found to be friendly, accessible and informal in the interviews. The tours were easier to follow with some questions, storytelling and humour, but not at the expense of the respect that is required when inside the mosque.

“I thought it was going to be very formal as it is the national mosque and the guide was relaxed and we were able to ask many questions, it was educative, but nothing like a lecture.” — Visitor 12

Enjoyable interpretation is not necessarily that the tour is entertainment in the TORE framework. In this context, it was closer to an environment where attendees were more likely to listen, ask questions and interact with topics they didn't know.



Figure 1: International visitors

Visitor Experience and Meaning-Making

Visitor interviews reveal that learning and affective response were an outcome of the guided tours. A common theme was learning new information about Istiqlal that the visitors had not been previously connected to. Among the most often recalled were the meaning of the mosque's name, Silaban's religious background, architectural symbolism, the bedug, and relationship with Jakarta Cathedral.

One visitor stated:

“It had been a very interesting mosque but I didn't know a Christian architect built it and the connection to independence. I knew that Istiqlal was an important mosque but didn't know the stories. It changed the whole of my perception with respect to the building.” — Visitor 6

This is an example of how the visitor's understanding of the site was affected by the interpretation and not just by providing additional factual information. Over time, Istiqlal became known as a mosque, as national heritage, architecture and as a cultural arena. This is in line with Hughes et al (2013) who determined that when visiting religious heritage sites, visitors seek out historical, architectural and human stories in addition to spiritual interpretation. It also aligns with the notion of visitor experience being multidimensional as presented by Packer and Ballantyne (2016).

The guided experience was also an emotional experience. The visitors found Istiqlal impressive, peaceful, welcoming and interesting. Some of these answers were definitely linked to the physical setting itself. For instance, Saefudin et al. (2024) demonstrate how the use of scale, lighting, materials, and interior composition in Istiqlal elicits a sense of sacredness and tranquility.

Interpretation seemed to add context to these sensory impressions, however. Scale and appearance of architectural features initially of interest became linked with history, religion, and national identity. This builds on the research by Rosa and Pradini (2023) which primarily focused on the physical conditions, cleanliness and the comfort of the visitors at Istiqlal. The current results indicate that the engagement with the guides is another aspect of the visitor experience.

From Apprehension to Familiarity

One discovery that was significant was visitors who went to the mosque with a small knowledge of Islam. Pre-visit uncertainty was expressed by some international non-Muslim visitors, particularly about what to do and being comfortable in a Muslim place of worship.

One visitor explained:

“Before going in I was a little nervous as I had never been in a mosque of such size and didn't know what was appropriate for me. After speaking to the guide I was more comfortable as everything was explained to me and questions were welcome.” — Visitor 11

Another participant spoke of a more general shift in thinking:

“Well, my impression, I would say, became more positive and more complicated because we were able to get in touch with someone here, and ask questions, which I got a lot of ideas about Islam from the media.” — Visitor 9

These responses do not prove that a one-off guided tour eradicates Islamophobia or leads to an enduring attitude change. There's not enough data to make that conclusion possible. They do, however, illustrate how direct contact can provide opportunities for visitors to challenge assumptions, to seek information about unfamiliar practices and to gain a more nuanced perspective on Islam.



It resonates with Weiler and Black's (2015) explanation of guides as 'facilitators of encounters, understanding and empathy'. This is reinforced by the setting at Istiqlal. One finds a national mosque built by a Christian architect, adjacent to a Catholic cathedral, and is informed of the harmonious relations between the two. Religious coexistence is thus not only expressed in the oral message, but also in the physical and historical context.

Ridesta et al. (2022) see Istiqlal as an institutional communicator of religious moderation using digital media. As the guided tours discussed below reveal, similar themes can be conveyed by direct interpersonal interaction. The concept of the mosque guiding from this aspect can be interpreted as a part of Islamic and intercultural communication and tourism interpretation.

The Guide as a Cultural and Religious Mediator

Based on the results, it can be seen that Istiqlal guides have a role that is not only to guide to a destination, but also beyond. They link information on the past, architecture, culture and religion with guests who have limited information about the site or about Islam in Indonesia.

This aligns with recent tourism research in Indonesia, which views guides as cultural interpreters, as well as simply a source of practical information (Puja et al., 2026). The Istiqlal case is a religious aspect as the interpretation takes place in a functioning religious institution.

The meanings which are explained on the tours are not always obvious. The dome without its connection to 1945, the Bedug without its cultural history, and the Cathedral without its relationship with Istiqlal. The guide offers connections to these physical features, to be understood in the broader context of Indonesian history, Islam and religious diversity.

Thus guided interpretation in Istiqlal is seen as a process in which religious and cultural heritage is made accessible as an interpersonal communication. The significance of a guide is not just to give information, but to give the visitors the opportunity to relate what they see with the meanings that are given to the site.



Figure 2: Indonesian visitors

CONCLUSION

This study explored the impact of guided interpretation on the experience of visitors to Istiqlal Mosque by examining three aspects : the meanings communicated by guides, how these meanings were communicated during guided tours, and how visitors experienced and interpreted the guided visit. The result obtained from the respondents shows the guided tour has delivered the information regarding the mosque by developing stories that connect such subjects as Indonesian independence, Islamic identity, architecture, local traditions, religious tolerance and national identity.

During the tour, historical, cultural and architectural elements of the mosque are used to interpret. The meaning of Istiqlal name, the building design itself tells the story of Friedrich Silaban, the bedug (drum) and the relationship of the mosque with Jakarta Cathedral, which are used to convey deeper ideas related to Islam in Indonesia and the religious diversity in the country. How these ideas are shared involves stories that follow a theme, how things are arranged in space putting things in context, comparison of things, and having conversations between guide and visitors. These methods are similar to the principles of interpretation, which are thematic organized, relevant and enjoyable.

It was reported by visitors that the guided experience allows them to learn things, feel positive emotions and to think more about what they saw. For some, who did not know too much prior to their meeting with the guides, they learned more about life after speaking to the guides directly. It was not found that guided tours eradicate attitudes toward Islam, but it was found that meetings and chatting with the guides may lead to a change in thinking regarding their ideas or questions.

This study contributes to the study of Istiqlal by not only examining the mosque as a place to visit or a building, but also the way the meaning is shared with the visitors. The study indicates that it is important to help guides become more effective in telling a story with a theme, to communicate across cultures and understand the meaning of the architecture, and to adapt to various groups of visitors. For those that remain significant religious sites, good guides must be able to describe history and culture and also demonstrate respect towards the sacred aspects of the place.

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