

Nike Ardilla: Instant Pop Saint

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The voice is pure, powerful, expressive. Hitting every note with perfect pitch it rides easily above the orchestral backing – a rock band with skeletal symphonic pretensions. It is the strong voice of a vigorous young woman, but behind its strength there is unmistakable vulnerability and a little-girl quality.

Mama, oh Mama, I want to come home

I miss you

I didn't listen to your advice

Mama, forgive your daughter

Mama, oh Mama, I want to come home

I miss you

The one I love has betrayed me

And has left me

My life has lost its meaning

Like a bird in a cage

I want to be free... from this pain

Mama... please rescue me

From the shackles of his love

The gold ring he placed on my finger

What was it for if he didn't love me?

The silk-embroidered gown he gave me

What was it for if he wasn't thinking about me?

I have cried all my tears

Mama, I want to come home



Nike Ardilla (pronounced “NEE.kay.ar.DEE.la”) was a pop phenomenon. She was one of the biggest singing stars Indonesia has ever seen and a dominant presence on the pop scene in the early and mid 1990s. She was a singer, not a songwriter. The most successful of her hits were composed by songwriters Deddy Dores and Youngky RM. But like all great entertainers, she transformed the potential of their songs into massive impact. Her innocent, exuberant singing style struck a chord that seemed to resonate throughout the country, not only, as you might expect, among urban teenagers and young adults but among a surprising number of parents as well.

Perhaps this is because Nike’s songs were irreproachably conservative. They gave sentimental expression to the youthful angst of the time without ever making explicit mention of sex, drugs, crime, poverty or politics, and without ever straying into the rhetoric of youthful rebellion. They were perfect exemplars of the mass art that was tolerated, though hardly encouraged, under the steely mould clamped on Indonesia by President Soeharto and his New Order government.¹

In most respects Nike’s songs mirror the agonistic rhetoric of popular music all over the world. There is love, deception, lies, betrayal, parting, longing, good memories, nostalgia, pain, wounds, regret, disappointment, guilt, failure, doubt, anxiety, solitude, the lonely desolation of night, dreams, nightmares, faith in God, sunlight, strength, resilience, acceptance and more... much, much more.

Tumbled along in rip-tides of rich, beautifully modulated slow rock music, this rhetoric is already a potent mix. But hidden in the lyrics of the songs are some more characteristically Indonesian obsessions, or more accurately perhaps, New Order obsessions.

The ostensibly innocuous ideology that dominated Indonesia under Soeharto was “familyism” (*kekeluargaan*). In a thousand ways, direct and subtle, Indonesia was officially imagined as a great, warm family, with Soeharto, the father of economic development, at its head. He was a generous patriarch who could, nevertheless, visit vicious discipline on any “children” who broke family ranks or showed him disrespect. His own wife and children were models of how Indonesia should be. Madame Tien Soeharto was his loyal companion and helper. She was

¹ In mid 1988 Minister of Information Harmoko expressed irritation at a song written by popular songsmith Obie Mesakh and sung by Betharia Sonata, labelling it “whining and sappy” (*cengeng*). It was evidently a distraction from the serious task of economic development. For a time he banned “sappy songs” altogether from the state television monopoly TVRI, and tried to discourage them in other media as well.



called “the mother of the nation” (*ibu negara*). His children, outrageously indulged by their parents and by the state, gave the nation a glittering vision of what prosperity looked like. But these symbols turned out to be perishable and their decay presaged the end of the regime. Madame Tien died suddenly in 1996 and without her Soeharto seemed bereft. Certainly between her death and his own fall in 1998 he was incapable of doing anything about his greed-maddened children except look on them with pride.

Familyism, above all, is the ideology at the heart of Nike Ardilla’s music. It sucks its authority from her artistry and the mesmerising momentum of the backing music. Parents are to be obeyed, devotion to them is a matter of social and personal honour. Parents symbolise the authority, and the authoritarianism, of tradition, and tradition (or a state-defined version of it) is sacrosanct too. Many of Nike’s best known hits are about an unavoidable fate, of being shackled, or locked in a cage, of having no socially acceptable options, of submitting to “what is written”.

“Let me be the one who gives in” (*Biarlah Aku Mengalah*), her mega-hit of 1993 written by Youngky RM, catches the flavour of this sentimental stoicism. The Sitti Nurbaya mentioned in the song’s “letter” is the heroine of a famous 1920s novel whose father gives her in marriage to an evil money-lender to pay off a debt. Out of deference to her father, and because tradition does not permit her a choice, she meekly submits, and ultimately is hounded to death by her husband.

That afternoon... the sun caressed the earth,
I received an invitation card.
I opened it and read it, it had a pink cover.
Your name was on it... and tears flowed down my cheeks.

*[Male Voice] “My love, I know this will be difficult for you to accept
But to honour tradition and out of respect for my parents
I have to obey them
And be married to another girl.
Although we know that we no longer live in the age of Sitti Nurbaya
I don’t want people to say I’m not a devoted son.
But believe me, it’s you I love.”*

Willingly I let you go.



Although it hurts, I have to accept it.
Fate, it seems, has decreed I'm to be a girl who misses out.

Abandoned by my love
Now I'm on my own again.
I hope you find happiness
With the girl your parents have chosen for you.
Let it be me who stands aside
So you and she can be together
Despite the wound in this heart of mine.

Alone again... alone again
Without you at my side.
Alone again... alone again
I'm trying to forget you.
Fate has decreed this is the way it has to be
Oh Lord... give me the strength to endure this.

Nike Ardilla was born on December 27, 1975 in Bandung, the youngest of three children. Her full name was Nike Ratnadilla. Her father was descended from the petty aristocracy of West Java and worked in the training section the state railway company. The family were good Muslims without being especially conservative or strict.

From an early age Nike showed talent as a singer. She started to win singing competitions when she was still at primary school, the first at the age of 10 on a national song contest conducted by Indonesia's state television service TVRI. By 1987 she was appearing publicly in pop concerts, initially under the name Nike Andina. She first won fans with an amusing teeny-bopper version of the Mick Jagger hit *Honky-Tonk Woman*. At the age of 14 Nike met the songwriter and savvy pop impresario Deddy Dores who became her mentor and who wrote many of her best known songs.

Her first big hit came in 1990 with the song *Bintang Kehidupan* (Star of Life). In the same year she released the album *Seberkas Sinar* (A Ray of Light), which reputedly sold 300,000 copies. But this was instantly eclipsed by the album *Bintang Kehidupan* which sold around two million copies. Adopting the name Nike Ardilla, she took the hit song *Bintang Kehidupan* to the 1991 Asia Song Festival in Shanghai where she won the major prize in the competition.



She was just 15 years old. International recognition accelerated the already frenetic pace of her career. A series of top selling singles and albums followed, most of them selling in the millions. By 1995 she had recorded a total of 11 top-selling albums, six of them produced by Deddy Dores.

As if the treadmill of concerts and recording sessions were not enough to still her energy, she took on roles in movies and television drama. These included *Gadis Foto Model* (The Photo Model Girl, 1989), *Sukreni Gadis Bali* (Sukreni, Maid of Bali, 1993), *Saputangan dari Bandung Selatan* (Handkerchief from South Bandung, 1994), *Warisan I* and *Warisan II* (Heritage I & Heritage II, 1995) and many more. She also strolled the catwalk in several fashion shows and even established a modest reputation as a photo model.

Nike's rise to fame coincided with the deregulation of television and radio in Indonesia. For around 25 years after its start-up in 1963, television had been monopolised by the state-run channel *Televisi Republik Indonesia* (TVRI). In 1989 and 1990 three commercial stations were given permits to broadcast. Their impact was electric, though not in terms of ideas. Two of them were, after all, owned by children of Soeharto, and the third by one of his close cronies. But the new stations jumped with glitzy graphics and a focus on personalities. With a sniff of prosperity in the air, viewers loved their garish advertising and quickly abandoned the plodding, commercial-free flatlands of TVRI. A field of aggressive FM radio stations also shot out of the blocks cheered on by new, bright, radio and TV-oriented magazines.

It was a fizzy, pop-culture milkshake and the teenage Nike Ardilla drank deep. Her face, her voice, her music, her personality were everywhere. Together with a small number of other entertainers of the time, she made necessary the coining of a new word in the Indonesian language: *selebriti*.

The gossip magazines were interested in everything about her. There was minute dissection of her preferences in clothes (tomboy style), food (noodles with meatballs) and drink (Coca Cola). In the world of celebrity, idols must also have idols, and when asked about her own idols, without a frown of hesitation Nike was able to cite the names of Marilyn Monroe, Margaret Thatcher and pioneer Indonesian feminist Raden Ajeng Kartini. The hard-working journalists of the new media also did a professional job conjuring up rumours about her, letting them loose on the public and feasting on the scandal. Nike was a lesbian, Nike was a



drug addict, Nike was a heavy drinker. Mostly she managed to laugh this off with equanimity far beyond her years. But when accusations of lesbianism kept coming, she hinted at a relationship with a mysterious rally driver. This turned out to be Andra Fahreza, the son of the governor of East Kalimantan. As quietly as the media would permit the couple became engaged.

Early on the morning of March 19, 1995, aged nineteen, Nike Ardilla left her home in Bandung and set off for Bogor where she was to resume shooting a television drama. Driving herself, and with her female companion-bodyguard Atun Sofiatun beside her, she slammed into a wall in a suburban Bandung street. Nike was killed instantly. Atun was taken, badly injured, to hospital where she eventually recovered, though with little recollection of what had happened.

The cause of the accident has never been definitively determined. Most likely Nike was simply tired and may have fallen asleep at the wheel. She had not slept at all the previous night, spending several hours at a discoteque in the centre of Bandung, followed by an early morning snack at a restaurant and a pre-dawn visit to friends in a nearby hotel. But the absence of witnesses to the accident, and its shocking unexpectedness, immediately triggered the conviction that a divine hand had intervened to end the young star's life.

Islamic custom requires the quick burial of the dead. Within hours of the accident Nike's body had been transported to her home village of Imbanegara, near Ciamis, and buried. As the news broke across Indonesia genuine grief gripped the country. Over the next few days tens of thousands of people recorded their condolences at her Bandung home. At the site of the accident floral tributes lay in thick piles for months afterwards and local vendors did a brisk trade in souvenir photographs of the star.

Two months later a huge commemorative concert was held in an open square in Bandung. With contributions from fifteen top singers and several of the country's best known bands the concert raised funds for a newly established charity, the Nike Ardilla Foundation. It was the first of innumerable such events. On the first anniversary of her death the Indonesian Postal Service issued 50,000 commemorative postcards and 20,000 commemorative envelopes. They sold out within days. Sales of her recordings, mostly on cassette tape at the time, shot up. In



subsequent years her music made the transition to CDs and today she remains one of Indonesia's strongest-selling recording artists.

Almost immediately after her death plans were set in motion to build a permanent memorial to Nike at her burial place. Reportedly funded by Governor H.M. Ardans of East Kalimantan, who would have become Nike's father-in-law had she lived, a small mausoleum was completed at the site in 1998. It is in the village of Imbanegara in the highlands of West Java about 12 km from Tasikmalaya and about 4 km from Ciamis on the main highway between the two cities.

The mausoleum lies about 100 metres from the highway up a narrow road. Visitors with cars pay a small fee to pass through a boom gate, and there is a parking area. The building itself is in a nearby walled enclosure. It takes the form of a simple, beautiful, open-sided pavilion under a *tujug*-style roof. A small sign on the front edge of the roof marks the place as the *Maqom Nike Ardilla* (the tomb of Nike Ardilla). The grave rises from a white tiled floor. It is made from dark, polished wood – even the two tall headpieces are of dark wood. The side of the grave is inscribed in Arabic script with the Islamic confession of faith: There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His prophet.

Beside Nike's grave there is another that bears testimony to the cruel shock of her death. Built in similar style to that of Nike, it belongs to her father, Raden Eddy Kusnadi. Crushed by their daughter's death Nike's parents sought strength in an *umroh* pilgrimage to the Islamic Holy Land in December 1995. Although this evidently gave them some closure, neither fully recovered from their grief. Within two years her father had shrunk from life and died.

Despite the passage of time and the erosion of memories, Nike Ardilla's tomb is still a popular place of pilgrimage today. On the anniversaries of her birth (December 27) and death (March 19) as many as twenty buses may turn up bringing hundreds of visitors. The little complex is also busy at weekends and on holidays, especially Islamic holy days. Although there is an undercurrent of solemnity, and occasionally of open grief, for the most part pilgrimage to Nike's tomb has the character of a boisterous outing. The visitors are mostly young adults. Some of them would have been children when Nike's popularity was at its height and they now count themselves as new fans of the singer. Some come by car in two and threes but most come in groups of 50 or more using chartered buses organised by fan



clubs or community organisations. They scatter flower petals on the grave and say a quiet collective prayer. The rest of the visit is devoted to banter and souvenir photographs.

In the immediate vicinity of the mausoleum there is a cafeteria (closed on quiet days), and a guest house as well as a small mosque. A marble bust of Nike wearing an Islamic headscarf stands in the centre of the precinct. This is especially popular with visitors who pose beside it for photographs. There is also a small souvenir shop selling photographs of the star, and souvenir pennants, key rings and wallclocks.

For many young pilgrims, visits to Nike's tomb are important landmarks in their social lives. In fact, for some, their whole sense of identity comes from devotion to the star or membership of a fan club. A Nike Ardilla website reports the view of Indah, a visitor who, at the time of the posting in 2002, had made the pilgrimage five times with the Nike Ardilla Entertainment (NiAR) club. "It is good to visit Nike's tomb and remember her, and there is a bonus," she says. "You get to broaden your circle of friends and broaden your mind as well." The NA Fans club from Jakarta comes to the site twice a year on the anniversaries of the star's birth and death. Each person is charged Rp.65,000 (\$US6.50). "That also covers the cost of lunch and a tee-shirt," says Emma from the NA Fans organising committee. "We usually charter one bus, but sometimes this is not enough to cope with all the Nike fans who want to come, so we have to put in extra seats."

At several points in the garden around the mausoleum there are big concrete pots decorated with poetic tributes to Nike. Tributes from fans, fellow artists and work colleagues are also inscribed on plaques fixed to the inside of the mausoleum's perimeter wall. Armo Arief's biography of Nike, *Napak Jejak Sang Mega Bintang Nike Ardilla* (In the Footsteps of Mega-Star Nike Ardilla), gives several examples of these ardent poems. In some of them, echoing the "hidden name" convention (*sandi asma*) found in some genres of pre-modern poetry, Nike's name is discernable in the initial letters of the lines. This heartfelt poem was written by Lia Nathalia, long-time head of the Nike Ardilla Fans Club in Jakarta.

*Namamu akan selalu kukanang
Ini tekad janjiku padamu
Keke, engkau sang idolaku tersayang
Engkau sosok pribadi yang luhur.*

I will always remember your name
This is my unswerving promise to you
Keke (Nike), you are my dearest idol
You are the noblest of individuals.

*Aku bersama NAFC siap menjadi
penerusmu
Rasanya seperti mimpi di siang hari
Dari lubuk hatiku yang paling dalam*

Together with NAFC (Nike Ardilla Fans
Club) I'm ready to take up your cause
I feel like I'm dreaming in broad daylight
From the deepest depths of my heart



*Ingin aku baktikan hidupku demi
cita-citamu
Lambat namun pasti
Akan lahir kembali seorang Nike Ardila*

I desire only to devote my life to your
ideals
Slowly but surely
A new Nike Ardila will be born.

The construction of Nike Ardilla's mausoleum necessitated the reconstruction of Nike herself. As an instant pop saint she had to be clad in the symbolic vestments of sainthood and inducted into mainstream popular Islam. The discourse of saint veneration in Java, like everywhere across the world, generates stories about exceptional piety, accounts of miracles and premonitions, and appearances by saints after death. All of these have materialised in the post-mortem re-badging of Nike Ardilla.

Within hours of her death the process had already started. At her mausoleum there is a decorative concrete cannister inscribed with a poem of tribute authored by her uncle. The poem came to him in a moment of miraculous inspiration on the night after Nike's death. It spells out her name in the initial letters of its lines and is very directly religious in tenor. It is, moreover, in the Sundanese language, lending it an air of indigenous authenticity. As if Nike's death had awakened voices from a distant past it echoes a perennial motif of religious rhetoric in Java: that we are in this world for no more than an instant – “a quick stop for a drink” as they say – and to live a life of understanding we must never forget our mortality. But we are not random presences in this world. We came from somewhere and after death we will return to where we came from. This notion is often referred to by the Javanese phrase *sangkan paraning dumadi*, the “coming from” and “going to” of existence, and it lies at the heart of indigenous ontology.

Ngaran

Insan

Kudu

Eling

Asal ti mana



Rek ka mana

Di dunya ukur ngumbana

Iman taqwa ka Ilahi

Langgengkeun salawasna

Laillaha illalloh

Allohu Akbar

Those who call themselves human must remember
Where they come from and where they are going.
In this world we just wander (for a short time)
So we must always show faith and devotion to God.
There is no God but Allah, and Allah is great.

Stories began to circulate of unusual or miraculous events that happened to Nike during her lifetime. In his biography, Armo Arief reports a story that was told to him by Nike's father. At the time of Nike's birth, her father was the administrator of a RW (*rukun warga*), a cluster of urban neighbourhoods. One day a young man of European ancestry came to the family home and asked Nike's father to register him as a convert to Islam. Shortly after, when Nike was born, people remarked that she resembled a European baby.

This story has mythic features. In the first place, in Indonesia's world of film stars and pop singers, a fair complexion and European features are much admired, especially in women. So a baby born with these attributes may be seen as naturally suited, or "predestined", for success in the entertainment industry. A foreign connection is important in the pedigree of Muslim saints as well. Many of the most revered of Java's saints were born overseas, and tradition invariably asserts that *all* of them can at least trace their descent back to foreign origins. So a foreign appearance in a baby may also be a sign of holiness. Then there is the young man who converted to Islam. He is a mythically mysterious figure with the magic power to touch a baby in the womb and shape its appearance.



Many believe that Nike knew of her impending death, as saints conventionally do. According to her biographer, Nike happened to be in Jombang (East Java) for a concert when a respected Muslim cleric died. Huge crowds of mourners gathered to pray for the repose of his soul. Apparently foreseeing the similar scenes that would accompany her own death, Nike is reported to have remarked: "It's great, isn't it, to have so many people pray for you when you die... that is what I want to happen to me when I die." On the evening before her fatal accident, as she left home for a night of relaxation with friends in the discotheques and restaurants of Bandung, she took unusually elaborate leave of her family, apologising to her father, elder brothers and other family members. After leaving the house she even turned her car back and returned to make a special point of apologising to her mother. Family members are reported to have found her behaviour strange.

There have also been stories of Nike appearing to her fans after her death. In his biography Armo Arief tells of one such incident. At a song contest held in remembrance of Nike, one member of the audience who was watching the program with intense interest, thought she saw Nike among the singers on the stage. The vision was such a shock that she passed out and had to be carried from the hall. Another story carried in *Misteri*, Indonesia's most popular magazine of the supernatural, reports that, three months after her death, Nike telephoned a fan and later materialised in his bedroom. She tearfully pleaded with the fan to pray for her rather than play her music. Hearing her songs, she said, only made her sad.

Of course, many admirers of Nike greet these stories with scepticism, not to mention ridicule or embarrassment. But even sceptics seem eager to accept the transformation of Nike into a pious performer of good works. There is no contemporary evidence that Nike was other than a fairly ordinary middle-class teenager. True, she was a practising Muslim but she made no special show of religious piety. None of her songs make explicit reference to Islam, though there are general references to God and fate. Nike loved night-life and discoteques. As an actress she took part in kissing scenes. She was an extrovert on stage and never wore the Islamic headscarf (*jilbab*). She was an admirer of Mick Jagger, Madonna and Marilyn Monroe, even acquiring a modest collection of Marilyn Monroe posters and other memorabilia. In fact for some fans, Nike Ardilla – singer, actress and "candle in the wind" – was Indonesia's Marilyn Monroe. The parallel is made explicit in a bizarre but somehow touching painting of the two stars presented to Nike's family by artist Yudha Noor.



But sanctification of the star demands the re-jigging of this image. Today much is made of Nike's charitable work. In 1993 she set up a charitable foundation and funded the construction of a special school in Bandung for deaf and intellectually handicapped children. This fine initiative reflects great credit on Nike. The school survives today funded with income from continuing sales of her albums and is cited as an instance of her pious concern for the less fortunate. Nevertheless Armo's biography strongly suggests that one factor in its establishment was Nike's wish, and that of her family, to improve her image as a counter to damaging gossip that she was a lesbian. Similarly her often mentioned, but unfulfilled, ambition to build a mosque may have been driven by a wish to emulate Itje Tresnawati, a *dangdut* singer who built a public mosque and named it after one her best selling albums.

Emblematic of Nike's new saintly status is the marble bust of her at her mausoleum in Imbanegara. The pensive face looks out from under a *jilbab*, the marker of prim religious piety she never normally wore during her lifetime.

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