

A Path Finding Effort: Situating the ‘Willy Willy’ Experiment in its Pride of Place in Nigerian Film History

Chisimdi Udoka Ihentuge PhD ^{1*}, Patrick Emeka Oforah PhD ²

¹Department of Theatre Arts, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, Imo State

²Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Port Harcourt Port Harcourt, Rivers State

*Corresponding Author: Chisimdi Udoka Ihentuge PhD

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17388976>

Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	
Received: 05-10-2025	
Accepted: 10-10-2025	
Published: 19-10-2025	
Copyright © 2025 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.	
Citation: Chisimdi Udoka Ihentuge PhD, Patrick Emeka Oforah PhD. (2025). A Path Finding Effort: Situating the ‘Willy Willy’ Experiment in its Pride of Place in Nigerian Film History. UKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (UKRJAHSS), Volume 1(issue 8), 111-116.	<i>Filmmaking in Nigeria is said to have peaked at a certain point after which it dwindled and eventually collapsed. It is also true that film became popular again in Nigeria with the production and box office success of the film Living in Boudage in the early 1990s. Yet, there was no period of interregnum between the periods of the dwindling of the fortunes of film and its re-emergence in the video film format because certain experimentations continued with the video format. Unfortunately, these experiments that laid the foundation for the emergence of the video film industry only get glossed over in some scholarly papers. Herein precisely lies the purpose of this paper- a detailed study of one of such experiments by Prof Innocent Chinyere Ohiri through his Hot Cash series. The aim is to determine the main contributions of that experiment to the development of the film industry in Nigeria and place same in its rightful perspective and pride of place. Hot Cash, which showed on NTA stations in the early 1980s, satirizes some of the societal ills with particular reference to ritual money and secret cultism. The work relies on the documentary materials and interview with Prof Innocent Ohiri for data. It concludes that Hot Cash made great contributions to the re-emergence of the Nigerian film industry. It is therefore recommended that such detailed studies be conducted on the other such experiments with the video format in various parts of Nigeria before the making of Living in Bondage.</i> Keywords: Willy Willy, Hot Cash, Living in Bondage, Video Film, Nigerian Film Industry.

Introduction

Film scholar and historians are agreed on the fact that the business of film peaked in Nigeria at a certain point. Shaka (2002, p. 11) confirms that film production in Nigeria “did, of course, enjoy momentary boom” at this period. Ayakorom (2014, p. 32) refers to this peak period as the glorious years of film in Nigeria stating that “this era is taken as glorious, in the sense that, these were the years cinema convention thrived in Nigeria, to some extent.” After the ‘glorious years’, film practice dwindled for some time before it was resuscitated about a decade later. Ihentuge (2017, pp. 35 - 36) gives a summary of the factors that led to the collapse of cinema in Nigeria saying:

The colonial masters laid a shaky foundation for the cinema industry in Nigeria. Indigenous filmmakers had to get all the facilities needed for film production from abroad. The implication is the production of films at prohibitive costs.

Again, the crime rate after the Nigerian /Biafran civil war left many persons jobless, homeless, hungry and in financial crises. This triggered a corresponding growth in crime rate. Hence, people were scared of leaving their houses at night for Cinema Theatres. Yet the said cinema halls had dilapidated so much so that they were seen as belittling for people within the average class and above who were the main patrons of the cinema. Such people now saw in the television the same fulfillment that the cinema could offer, and this they got in the comfort of the homes and in the company of family members and neighbours. The last stroke that broke the camel’s back was the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by the Babangida administration. SAP reduced the exchange rate of the Naira in the international market. It also

reduced the financial strength of many families thereby excluding leisure from family budgets.

Also, it is the submission of film scholar and historians that film became popular again in Nigeria with the box office hit of the video film *Living in Bondage* in the early 1990s. Yet, it is a statement of fact that there was no period of interregnum between the periods of the dwindling of the fortunes of film production, to period of its eventual collapse, up to the emergence of the video film format as various forms of experiments were on-going in the Nigeria entrainment industry. These experiments were witnessed in various regions of the country. Many of these experiments have been glossed over in various works of film historians and scholars in Nigeria. Yet, this study believes that glossing over them in scholarly articles is not enough. There is actually need to give them in-depth attention as the raw experiments on which the 'perfect' film productions of today rode. Herein lies precisely the *raison d'être* of this work- a detailed study of one of such experiments by Prof Innocent Chinyere Ohiri through his *Hot Cash* TV series. The aim is to determine the main contributions of that experiment to the development of the film industry in Nigeria and place same in their rightful perspective and pride of place.

Overview of the Experiments with the Video Format Prior to Nollywood Nigerian

Film scholars acknowledge the fact that the collapse of the cinema industry paved a way for experimentations in the video film format (Ayakoroma, 2014, p. 49).

As said earlier, and captured the exact words of Ayakoroma above, there were various forms of experiments that went on in the Nigeria film space prior to the emergence of the video film industry nicknamed Nollywood. In other words, the video film culture, which formally kick-started Nollywood, did not emerge from the void, neither was it a novel idea. The video film culture is not an independent invention. Rather, it simply stood out from already existing trials with the cassette and video formats. Put differently, "the sudden growth of the video film in Nigeria was not accidental" (Shaka, 2003, p. 43). But it has to be added here that the cassette technology which aided these experiments were is in itself part of the concept of the small media. The word small media is used to refer to "technologies such as video and audio cassettes, photocopiers, faxes and computers, which differ from the older big mass media of cinema and television and radio stations" (Larkin, 1997, p. 110). Hence, the video technology in Nigeria began as part of the cassette culture which offers cheap cost of production, means of production and consumption of popular entertainment that offer the filmmakers incredible ease and less restrictions.

It may be right to assert that even when the cinema culture was still alive and somewhat vibrant in Nigeria, the video format was in use in other ways other than for feature film making. What Nollywood did at its emergence was to only locally adapt this video technology format into film production. Note that

...when technology makes the transition from one country to another, the different environments transform how the technology works and is used...this raises the question of the extent to which, for example, a cell phone in India is truly comparable to a cell phone in Russia (Barnard and Toumi, 2008, p. 652)).

In attempting to explain the above views by Barnard and Toumi, it will be said that the video format did not enter Nigeria for the purposes of film making. Rather, it entered the country for domestic purposes. Shaka (2003, p. 42) comes to rescue here to further state the point. In his exact words,

The terms "video camera," "video coverage" and "video man" entered the vocabulary of most Nigerians as from 1970s when Igbo electronics merchants who ply Asian import/export trade beat introduced the equipment into the Nigerian market... Here was a portable and novel equipment, which can photograph people as they walk, and talk. In retrospect, **the popularity of the video format... was first established in private and domestic domain as an equipment for ceremonial documentation...** the work of the so-called "video man" (camera man) was to document with a video camera such private and domestic ceremonies... (added emphasis)

Then an elitist medium, the video format was put to the services of documenting social ceremonies such as weddings, burials, naming ceremonies, birthday parties, traditional and religious installations and communal festivals for people within the middle class or above could afford its high cost. The usage of the format was also dependent on the availability of other equipment like video cassette player and television sets and not many homes could afford these leisure equipment then. This scenario notwithstanding, the video medium still had fairly large market. The reason for the fair market is not far-fetched: it had the uniqueness to bestow class distinction of some sort on the few who could pay for their usage in having their ceremonies covered (Shaka, 2003, p. 43).

The video format was adopted for other purposes at its introduction into the Nigerian market. One of such was for the purposes of entertainment drama. Here, it was experimented with for almost two decades before the birth

of Nollywood. The view of Shaka (2003, p. 41) about the experiments with the video will suffice here again to explain why the video format left its domestic usage for the public domain necessitated by the attempts by filmmakers to earn a living when the fortunes of the cinema and live theatre dwindled gravely. To him, video

...equipment as a narrative medium of popular entertainment in Nigeria and other Third World societies grew out of two impulses: the fascination with modern technology and the creative adaptation of such technology to solving pressing domestic problems, often in manners the original producers of such technology equipment never envisaged.

Elsewhere, Shaka had explained the rationale behind this saying

To stay afloat and sustain their large families the independent producers responded to the problem ... in several ways: first, many fell back to their old production base of stage drama or survived by selling video recorded copies of their stage productions (Shaka, 2002, pp. 14 - 15).

Some Nigerian film scholars believe that such was the condition of some Yoruba traveling theatre companies that recoded their stage performances on video to sell to the public. Ayakoroma (2008, p. 5) that they later graduated into recording such productions on celluloid and exhibited same in cinema houses. Local film practitioners were said to be desperate, and in their desperate state “it occurred to somebody that the domestic video technology...could be appropriated for commercial purposes” (Ekpenyong, 2005, p. 62). The result of this was the experimentation with the video format for entertainment across the country.

These experimentations were witnessed in the western part of Nigeria. Ihentuge (2016, p. 155) states that some of the western videographers in the west are said to have included Ade Ajiboye (Big Abass), Muyideen Alade Aromire, Gabenga Adewusi, Sunday Omobolanle (Aluwe), Jide Kosoko, and the Ojo Ladipo Theatre led by Adebayo Salami. It is interesting to also know that Kenneth Nnebue who was to play a prominent role in the emergence of Nollywood experimented with the video format in western Nigeria.

It is interesting to note that though Kenneth Nnebue is Igbo by ethnic nationality, his production outfit, NEK Video links, started by experimenting in the production of Yoruba language based video films such as *Aje Ni Iya Mi* (1989) and *Ina Ote* (1990) because that was what was commercially viable and fashionable, at least in Lagos where he resided and operated as a

business man. It was not unlikely that the financial rewards from the Yoruba video film productions encouraged him to venture briefly into similar project in Igbo (Shaka, 2003, p. 44 - 45).

The experiments with the video format for commercial film making were also recorded in eastern and southern Nigeria. In Onitsha, an Igbo producer, Solomon Eze (1951 – 2016), who adopted the screen name Mike Oriehedinma experimented so much in this regard. In fact, “Solomon Eze (aka Mike Oriehedinma) is said to have pioneered video film productions” in Nigeria (Ayakoroma, 2014, p. 49). The video film production experiment of Mike Oriehedinma is said to have “affinities with the ephemeral Onitsha Market Pamphlet Literature” (Haynes & Okome, 1997, p. 32). Some of the titles from him are “*Ochoifekwu*, *Adaeze*, *The Olanna series*, *The Onyemaechi series* and *Ihe naeme series*” (Shaka, 2012, p. 13).

There were also such experimentations with the video format in Enugu and Aba. They were majorly of recordings of local dramas on video for sale to viewers. Artists like Chinwetalu Agu and Roy Danani were said to be in control in Enugu. In Aba, Ebere Iheanacho and Ndubuisi Okoh (who were both at the NTA) were said to be in charge. “In Port Harcourt, Innocent Ohiri tried his hands in packaging films woven around his *Hot Cash* series for sale” Ihentuge (2016, p. 156). Ayakoroma, 2014, p. 50) explains this experimentation in a more detailed account thus:

Innocent Ohiri, Director of Wizzi Travelling Theatre, a Port Harcourt-based theatre group... also attempted packaging some films woven around his *Hot Cash* television serial, popularly called “Willy-Willy.” Though a staff of NTA Port Harcourt then, he packaged the video films under his production company, Lilino Ventures.

Our interest here lies in this experimentation in Port Harcourt by Innocent Ohiri. In order to acquire first hand information on *Hot Cash* and its contributions to the emergence of Nollywood, the video film industry in Nigeria, the researchers conducted an oral interview with Professor Innocent Chinyere Ohiri, the initiator of the *Hot Cash* series. Hence, the discussion that follows form here will rely much on that interview.

Background Information on *Hot Cash*

Hot Cash is a thirty-minute programme that started in the early 1980s. It satirizes some of the societal ills with particular reference to ritual money and secret cultism. Its main theme is on ritual killing while it touches on other societal ills among the people today. The film tells the story of a man who used his relation to make quick money. Unfortunately for him, he promised to give his son as at the

time he was lured him into the cult. But he later gave his relation William, popularly known as Willy Willy by the neighbours, as the sacrifice instead of his son. This became a breach of his promise to the secret society. As a result of this, the potency of the charm which was encapsulated or coded in a mystical ring and a magical box became useless. The charm stopped working as a result of which the magical box and mystical ring could not bring the expected money. The man gets annoyed and breaks the box thereby setting the spirit of the boy engaged in the box free. The spirit then goes to the cemetery and from where it started hunting everybody especially the man who used him for ritual sacrifice and his wife Nchelem. By extension, anybody who wanted to help Nchelem and the husband had the ghost of Willy Willy attacking him or her. At a point, it grew into a kind of general matter, fight for justice for everybody. So Willy Willy goes to attack anybody who indulges in any kind of anti-social practice. The film teaches the lesson that people should stay away from money ritual. About 39 episodes of the programme is said to have been produced before its eventual decline.

Contributions of *Hot Cash* to the Nigerian Film Industry

Hot Cash contributed in many ways to the development of the Nigerian film industry at least as far as the eastern part of Nigeria is concerned. It helped in the inducement of other productions including the epoch making film *Living in Bondage*. In the exact words of Prof Innocent Ohiri,

Hot Cash induced other films like the popular *Living in Bondage* which can be said to be an adaptation of *Hot Cash*. Adaptation in the sense that it was the same story in *Hot Cash* of a man joining a cult, offering his relation, making money and all those money rituals. It was the same story that was adapted in *Living in Bondage* only that it made more commercial success than *Hot Cash*. *Hot Cash* was also in the market at Aba and Lagos. So it had some commercial value. Yes very much induced *Living in Bondage* because it was the storyline they took and adapted it to Igbo language and more other things and it became *Living in Bondage*. So *Hot Cash* also helped induce other productions (Innocent Ohiri, personal communication, August, 2023).

Prof Ohiri goes further to give more exposé of how *Hot Cash* influenced the production of *Living in Bondage* that was to usher in a great revolution in film making in Nigeria saying:

It also encouraged other productions. Kenneth Nnebue and the rest of them, I think they had watched *Hot Cash* before they produced their films.

It is good to mention that that *Living in Bondage* was produced in 1993 while *Hot Cash* was in the 80s. So it was the storyline in *Hot Cash* that was taken to do *Living in Bondage*. The only difference is that *Living in Bondage* had a better commercial value while *Hot Cash* did not because it was not produced as a commercial film. It was produced as NTA film... So I can say that *Hot Cash* had a whole lot of influence on Nollywood.

The production process of *Hot Cash* is also believed to have helped to further advertise Theatre Arts as an academic discipline. Some parents who were not pleasantly disposed to the idea of their wards going to study Theatre Arts in the department are said to have soft-pedalled at the release of *Hot Cash*. Prof Ohiri recounts his personal encounter on this issue thus:

I can say that it also helped to advertise theatre in this our part. There was one woman who did not like I was reading Theatre Arts. When I told her I was in the University to read Theatre Arts she didn't even understand it. She said why not come let our catechist's wife teach you concert. Is that what you are going to read in the university? She didn't know what Theatre Arts meant. But by the time she saw me in *Hot Cash* she said so that your Theatre Arts they also act films in Television. I said yes ma. She now said 'my son will read Theatre Arts.' And when I was the Head of Department of Theatre Arts in UniPort in 2012, she brought her son and I gave the boy admission. He is now a graduate of Theatre Arts. So the film created a whole lot of influences on many people who didn't know about Theatre Arts before.

The production of *Hot cash* also helped theatre practice in Eastern Nigeria. It was also during the preparation stage of *Hot Cash* that Prof Ohiri revived a theatre troupe in his community and brought it to Port Harcourt.

I was able to go and prompt a travelling theatre in my village, refined it, and started a branch of it in Port Harcourt- the Wizi Travelling Theatre which dates back to 1940. In fact it was the Wizi Travelling Theatre that produced that *Hot Cash* on our own, on a private basis. As a youth corps member, I did it as Innocent Ohiri not as a youth corps member with NTA. It was a private was a private property of Wizi Travelling Theatre, the theatre I resuscitated in Port Harcourt. In-fact when it started making waves, NTA borrowed it from us, paid us off and then used their channel to get meaningful sponsors. By the fact that I was a youth corps member there they inherited the film I had no other option then. So they started producing it because

we were using NTA to get subsequent sponsors like Barnas. But Alu Window, who was the first sponsor, came courtesy Wizi Travelling Theatre and started the sponsorship before other ones came.

The production of *Hot Cash* was also some form of encouragement to other trained Theatre Artists to go into the practice of the theatre.

... spurred other colleagues of mine who read Theatre Arts into the practical aspect of our course. Because many people had read Theatre Arts but do not practice... The film was transmitted in all NTA stations... It won a national award (TELEFEST). I was given some money ... But the award was more important to me. So it was a national thing and helped to project the Nigerian film industry.

Most importantly, *Hot Cash* contributed greatly in the area of special effect creation in the Nigerian film industry as well as in the area of the horror film genre. Hear Prof Ohiri on this:

Again, people were used to some kind of effects that were a bit common place. So *Hot Cash* brought some kind of effects that people were not used to. It made use of the Chroma key effect. So it was the Chroma key effect that I used to create some of the marvellous effects used in producing *Hot Cash*.

In his book *Trends in Nollywood: A Study of Selected Genres*, Barclays Ayakoroma had given *Hot Cash* and its creator, Prof Innocent Ohiri, the credit for contributing in the creation of special effects in filmmaking in Nigeria in these words:

As a point of fact, Ohiri was among the first television producers/directors in Nigeria to experiment and popularise vanishing effects of characters in local television drama productions... Ohiri did it commendably, within the technical limitations at that time, the disappearing act of the ghost of Willy-Willy, a character he (Ohiri) played and a name that his fans still call him up till today... (Ayakoroma, 2014, p. 50)

This of course is a huge contribution worthy of critical attention.

Conclusion

The discussion so far has been the main on experimentation with the video format by Prof Innocent Chinyere Ohiri contributions of that experiment with his *Hot Cash* series in the early 1980s to ascertain its contributions to the development of the film industry in Nigeria. Such contributions have been discussed in some details. It will be right also to conclude that *Hot Cash* made great

contributions to the re-emergence of the Nigerian film industry. these contributions are in the areas of advertisement of Theatre Arts as an academic discipline, encouragement of theatre practice in the Eastern part of Nigeria, encouragement of trained Theatre Artists to go into full practice of the theatre, great contribution in the area of special effect creation in the Nigerian film industry as well as in the area of the horror film genre, and, most importantly, inducement of other productions including the epoch making film *Living in Bondage*.

It is therefore recommended that such detailed studies be conducted on other such experiments with the video format in various parts of Nigeria before the making of *Living in Bondage*. One of such is the experimentation at Onitsha by Solomon Eze who adopted the stage name 'Mike Oriehedinma' which Prof Innocent Ohiri admitted helped inspire the making of *Hot Cash*. Also, further critical studies of the contributions of *Hot Cash* to the Nigerian film industry (Nollywood) should be conducted especially on the area of special effects creation in the midst of the technical realities of that time.

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