The Nigerian Civil War and Tungbo Benimo-Oge: A Historical Discourse

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Abstract

This work is a historical presentation of the Nigerian Civil War and its resultant effects on the Tungbo people of Bayelsa State of Nigeria. Tungbo is located in Sagbama Local government area of Bayelsa State. Though the Tungbo people are of Ogbia origin, through acculturation and cultural dynamism, they are now Ijo people and they speak the Izon language. The central focus of this historical discourse is on the Tungbo Benimo-oge (Tungbo unity festival), an historical memory of the war. The Nigerian civil war was fought between the Nigerian government and the Republic of Biafra, a secessionist state from July 6th 1967 to January 15th, 1970. Fighting broke out on Tungbo land between the Federal troops and the rebels on the 19th of October, 1967. Many were killed including three Tungbo prominent indigenes namely; Prince Ekpi, Fineboy Odogu and Amos Ebegu. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, data was collected from different fields of academic study such as geography, economics, sociology, political science, anthropology and linguistics. Using both primary and secondary sources it is discovered that, though the rebels left Tungbo land on the 21st October 1967, the tragic memories of the war has not left the minds of the Tungbo people. The aftermath of the war is the commemoration of the Biblical Passover in Tungbo clan known as, 'Ebe Benimo-oge', (Tungbo Unity Festival) held annually from 18th to 22nd

October as proposed by the then 'Tungbo Benimo-Oge' Committee Head, Amos Ado Adah.

Keywords: Nigerian Civil War, Benimo-Oge, Amos Ado Adah, Tungho Unity Festival, Cultural Dynamism

Introduction

The Nigerian Civil War was the protracted war fought between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Secessionist Biafrans. The war broke out between Federal troops and 'Biafran' forces on Thursday 6th July 1967. The war was fought from 6th July 1967 to 15th January 1970, It lasted for thirty months. The impact of the war cannot be over-emphasized as it has both negative and positive effects on the land and people of Nigeria. However, with a critical assessment, the negative impacts outweighs the positive effects, this is because no property can be compared to the lives of people. According to Chinua Achebe:

> *At the end of the thirty months war, Biafra was a vast smoldering rubble. The head count at the end of the war was perhaps three million dead which was approximately 20 percent of the entire population. This high proportion was mostly children. The cost in human lives made it one of the bloodiest civil wars in human history*[1].

There were certain factors that led to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, which are grouped into remote and immediate causes. The remote causes include but not limited to the following, the build-up of the various faulty constitutions that plunged Nigeria into constitutional crises before independence, such as Sir Hugh Clifford 1922 constitution, Sir Arthur Richard constitution of 1946, the Sir John Macpherson constitution of 1951 and the Lyttleton constitution of 1954. Others are the Kano riot of 1953, the national census controversy of 1962, the general assembly crisis of 1964, the western region election of 1965. In addition, the high level of irresponsibility among politicians in their expression of tribal sentiments during political campaigns and the tendency to suppress opposition in politics led to the first military coup of January 15th 1966. This development led to the collapse of the 1963 Republican constitution as all democratic structures including the constitution were suspended. [2].

According to D.A Akpan and J.J. Akpabio, there were factor combination that instigated the Nigerian Civil War.These immediate factors include a radiation from the chain of crises into which Nigeria was plunged soon after independence culminated in the election crisis in the Western region, the coup of January 15th 1966, which catapulted Nigeria into a military rule resulting to the enthronement of Major General Johnson Thomas Umunake Aguyi Ironsi as the Head of State[3].

The Chief plotter of this coup was Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. Other leaders of the coup include Major Timothy Onwuatuegwu, Emmanuel Ifeayuna, Donatus Okafor, Wole Ademoyega, Christian Anuforo, Humphrey Chukwuka and Captain Emmanuel Nwobosi[4]. The coup claimed the lives of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (the Prime Minister), the Premier of the Northern Region, Sir Ahmadu Bello, The Premier of Western Region, S. L. Akintola, and the Federal Minister of Finance, Chief Festus Okotio-Eboh[5].

Due to the fact that most of the coup plotters were Igbos and the Head of State was also an Igbo, the Northerners assumed and became convinced that it was a deliberate act by the Igbos to wipe out their prominent leaders with the aim of taking over the government. This belief became intensive following the inability of the Head of State, General Aguyi-Ironsi to punish the coup plotters; instead, he enacted a unification decree. The resultant effect was the counter coup of July 10th, 1966, which also claimed the life of the Head of State, General J. T. U. Aguyi- Ironsi. The July counter coup brought in Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon as the Head of State.

Furthermore, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, the then Military Governor of Eastern Region suspected the intentions of the Northern Soldiers who carried out the July counter coup. Hence, he saw Gowon as a junior military officer that should not have taken the mantle of leadership when actually there was a senior military officer who was superior to him in the person of Brigadier Babafemi Olatunde Ogundipe. This misplacement in ranking led to the non-recognition of Gowon by Ojukwu[6]. In the midst of all these happenings, the Igbos living in the Northern Nigeria were massively killed by the northerners. The peace of Nigeria became at stake, there was tension between the North and the East, represented by Gowon and Ojukwu, and the centre could not hold.

According to D.A. Akpan and J.J. Akpabio, the 1966 events to a large extent scattered the basis of Nigeria's corporate existence[7]. The Igbo massacre and the fear of the repeated killings were the main factors which influenced the decision on secession by the Easterners. The Easterners were slaughtered like animals. In eastern Nigeria, it was confirmed that the slaughter was premeditated and organized because it was so widespread in the northern region. Thus every Easterner attributed the crimes to all people of northern origin not minding the handful of people who participated in the crime[8].

In spite of the tension, Gowon was preparing a way to return Nigeria into regional structure through Ad-hoc Constitutional Review Conference which had its first meeting in Lagos on September 1966[9].

Initially, the Conference was drifting towards a confederal arrangement with the right to secession by the constituent regions recognized. But that was not to be because it was later argued that they would prefer a stronger center than confederal constitution that would allow for the creation of more states from the existing regions[10]. Deliberations were not concluded before the meeting came to a close as a result of disturbance and the news of the new massacre of the Igbos in the north. Thousands of Igbos and other Easterners were massacred and they began to stream south for their safety. In the circumstance, there was a retaliation action in the east, such that northern indigenes also started streaming back to the north. Ojukwu called all the easterners back home and requested non-easterners to leave their territory as their security was not guaranteed. At this juncture, it became clearer that Nigeria was going into civil war but however, in order to retrieve the peace of Nigeria, Lt. General Ankrah of Ghana interceded. A meeting between the Federal Government and Ojukwu was convened at Aburi in Ghana for a peace talk. The Aburi peace agreement did not produce any tangible result, thus, the tension and suspicion between eastern Nigeria and Federal Government was still alive.

Moreso on May 27th, 1966, Yakubu Gowon created the twelve state structure in Nigeria and after three days, Ojukwu proclaimed the former eastern region as the sovereign Republic of Biafra[11]. This proclamation was fully supported by the Igbos but, there was no much support from the minority ethnic groups from Rivers and

South-Eastern States. They were more interested in the future of the federation of Nigeria than being in the independence of a sovereign Biafra in which they would be dominated by an Igbo majority.

According to Cervenka, cited in D.A Akpan & J.J. Akpabio, "since May 30th, 1967, Nigeria lived on the brink of war, the signs of which began to be more and more visible". Thus, "the first communiqué on what was described as police action issued at Lagos. Saturday, July 8, 1967 stated thus;

> *"The Federal Military Government announced yesterday that fighting has broken out between the Nigerian Army and the rebel forces in the three Eastern States. The rebel troops opened fire on Nigerian Army positioned at the border between Benue-Plateau State and the East Central State in the early hours of Thursday July 6,1967. The federal troops Immediately returned the fire"*[12].

By extrapolation, the Nigerian Civil War commenced on Thursday July 6th, 1967. Initially, the Federal Military Government saw the issue of exchange of fire as a police action but however, as the events unfolded, what was seen as a police action turned to a full scale war, a war that lasted for Thirty Months, between July 6th 1967 and January 15th, 1970.

The war was tragic and devastating which claimed several thousands of lives, and valuable properties were destroyed. It made the rich to be poor, especially the Igbos who were in the North, their properties and wealth were confiscated by the Federal Government of Nigeria hence the **Three "R"** policies were introduced; Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. It was at this point that the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) was introduced in 1973. Other measures were the introduction of the various unity schools.

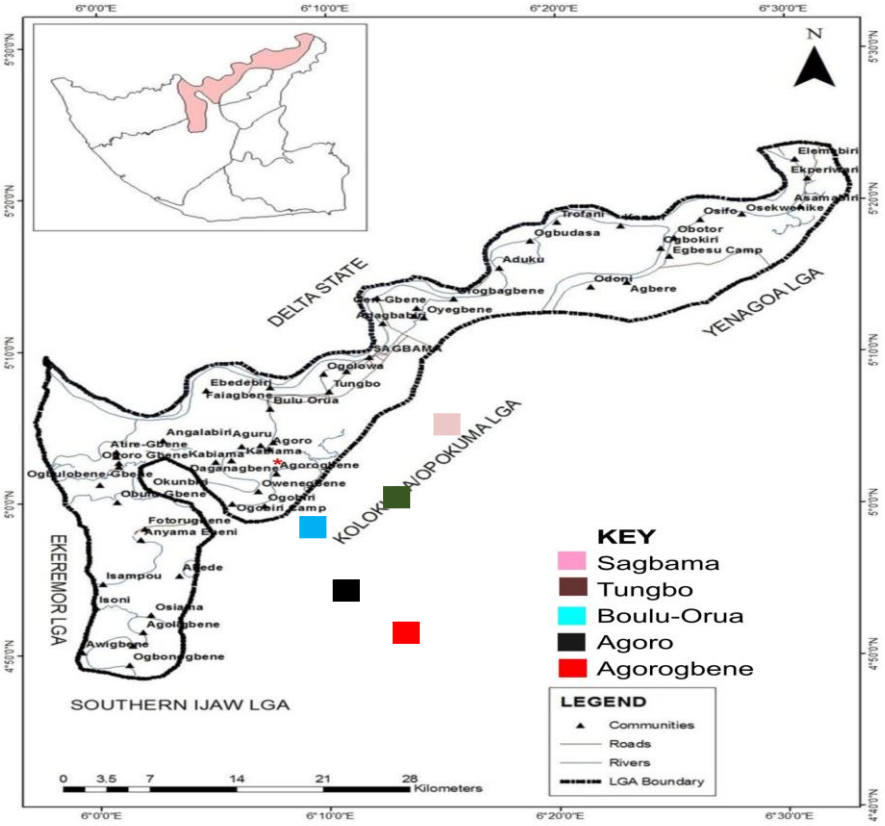
Location, Environment and History of Tungbo

The Location of Tungbo

The location of an area deals with the direction as well as the accessibility of that area. Under this premise, Tungbo is accessible through land and water. Tungbo is one of the recognized clans in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. It is located in

Sagbama Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Tungbo clan is bounded by Sagbama to the North-West, Kolokuma to the East and Agoro to the South.[13]. The journey takes about an hour by car from Yenagoa, the capital city of Bayelsa State to Tungbo. E.J. Alagoa divided the environment of the Niger Delta into four ecological zones. These include the fresh-water swamp zone which is characterized by the rainforest vegetation, the salt-water swamp zone largely dominated by mangrove vegetation, the sandy-beach ridges zone; also composed of rainforest vegetation, and the seaward zone; comprising the waters of the Atlantic ocean.[14]. In the light of this division, Tungbo falls into the fresh-water swamp zone which is characterized by the rainforest vegetation.

Fig 1: Map of Sagbama Local Government Area showing where Tungbo is located



Source: Internet www.google.com(Retrieved 15th November, 2024)

Environment of the Tungbo people

The environment of Tungbo means its physical features as well as the surroundings of Tungbo. In this aspect, Tungbo inhabits the fresh-water zone of the western Niger Delta sub-region of Nigeria. The land is flat and swampy. As a town in the Western Niger Delta region, Tungbo is surrounded by rivers, creeks and lakes with the principal, the River Nun, an arm of River Niger, the longest river in Africa.[15] In these water bodies, fishes of different species are found, such as "tilapia" (oeochromismiloticus) "mudfish" (clariasangularis), "electric fish" (electrophorus electrices), "catfish" (siluriformes) and "mullet" (mugillidae). The land of Tungbo is also fertile for agricultural production, As a result, the people engage both in farming and fishing. However, fishing is very lucrative and relevant to the people as it serves as one of the most important economic activities as well as a way of occupation and sustenance with cultural festivals due to the many lakes surrounding the environment till date.

The river also serves as a means of transportation from Tungbo "Ebe" (clan) to other communities and clans through the use of barges and canoes and recently, engine boats. However, with civilization and modern basic amenities in place, such as electricity, borehole for potable drinking water, hospital and road being constructed by the Bayelsa State Government, which has eased the means of transportation. Federal presence is also felt by the Tungbo people with the establishment of the Federal Technical College Tungbo.

The vegetation is an evergreen vegetation comprising trees such as "abura" (macrophylacihate), "mahogany" (khaya/voresis), "kuru" (lophira alata), "palmtrees" (elaeis guineensis) amongst others. The climate of the area is marked by two seasons which are the rainy and dry seasons. The rainy season usually starts from the month of June and ends in the month of November, while the dry season begins from the month of November, and ends in June. These seasons also dictates the economic experiences and also the maturity of the agricultural productions of the people. The dry season is for planting of crops while the rainy season is for harvesting of crops. This is also the season the area experiences flooding, as the river over flows its banks into the community. Moreso, the environment is endowed with vast assortment of animal species such as "monkeys" (cercoeibus torquatus), "antelopes" (netaguspygameus) "squirrels"

(sciuridae), "porcupines" (hystrix cristata), "grasscutters" (thryonomys swinderianus), "crocodiles" (crocodylidae), amongst others. The environment is also home to several bird species such as hawk (accipitridae), seagulls (iaridae), egrets (adlidae) and eagles (accipitridae)[16]. Thus, one of Tungbo-Ebe's finest hunters of his time was Late Chief M.P Sagbegha, would come home with life antelopes and monkeys caught in traps on his shoulders with his bear hands[17].

History of Tungbo

Origin, Migrations and Settlement Patterns of the Tungbo people of Bayelsa State

There are two accounts of the origin, migrations and the settlement patterns of the Tungbo people. One account claims that, the founder of Tungbo was called Otugbo and that the settlement was named after the founder. Otugbo was a son of Otuododo and grandson of Agotomo. Agotomo was a son of Otuokpoti and a grandson of Ese. Ese was a direct son of Indo who also had Ogbia as brother. The account stated that Otugbo, the founder of Tungbo migrated from Osungapolo in Otuododo's quarters of Otuokpoti in present day Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Accordingly, Otugbo carved a canoe in a forest, invited his brothers and other able bodied men to assist him drag the canoe from the forest to the creek for the final completion of the carving. In the circumstance, one of the invited men was fatally injured and that led to his death. Upon his death, relations of the deceased asked Otugbo for traditional reparation as it was usually practiced in Ijo land. The practice was that if a person was directly or indirectly responsible for the death of a man, the person was required to offer two virgin girls to the deceased family for compensation. Consequently, Otugbo donated two of his sisters to the deceased family.

However, the account revealed that an aggressive section of the deceased family was not satisfied with the payment of the reparation of Otugbo's two virgin sisters, hence, continued to disturb and harass Otugbo. In order to avoid such disturbing situation, Otugbo left Otuokpoti with his family and his fathers' deity *Okpolokiyai*, the god of protection, *Diyan*, the god of fertility, *Opu-oru*, the god of war and migrated through Yenagoa to the River Nun. He then moved north-wards along the River Nun and settled first at opposite Sampou in present day Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

At this settlement, Otugbo bore an unknown number of children but, the only son that survived was called Pere. His two elder sons whom he migrated with; Ogbein and Olou also took wives for themselves and Olou bore Okrungbo. Because of the blessings he (Otugbo) received in this settlement and love for his children, he named the settlement after his grandson Okrungbo. However, Okrungbo was not the final place of settlement. Otugbo and his family further migrated as a result of constant threats from unknown people. He moved south-west along River Nun to Igbedi Creek and settled at a place close to the present Agorogbene in Sagbama Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. This account of Tungbo's origin stated that after eight years of his settlement, Otugbo and his family undertook further migration which led them to Ekebou settlement. In order to avoid unnecessary troubles perpetrated by his neighbours mostly by the main settlement of Agorogbene, and also to contradict the belief and the view that Ijo man always settles at the riverside, Otugbo went inland and settled with his family in the forest in 1588 A.D[18].

This settlement too was not favorable to him and his family as kidnappers frequently kidnapped his children and sold them to the slave merchants at the waterside (Nun River). The account revealed that this was the reason why he left his inland settlement. He then moved northwards and settled by the waterside in a place called "I-zen-Asa" in 1599 AD which is the present Tungbo settlement[19].

On the other hand, the second account states that Otugbo had family rift with his brothers over the mode of sharing and distribution of two bush pigs which he killed with his brothers through trapping. This misunderstanding generated a bitter and uncomplimentary rivalry between him (Otugbo) and his brothers. After attempts at reconciling with his brothers, Otugbo discovered that his brothers could not be pacified. Hatred and enmity was enormous among them. Thus, in order to avoid unpleasant consequences resulting from this deep-rooted misunderstanding, he (Otugbo) took his two wives and surviving children among whom were Ogboin and Olou and left Osungapolo in Otuododo of Otuokpoti in search of greener pastures and founded Tungbo in the 16th century.[20]

There are discrepancies between the two accounts of the origin, migration and the settlement pattern of the Tungbo people. Both accounts however subscribed to the

fact that the founder of Tungbo was called Otugbo and that he was a son of Otuododo who migrated from Osungapolo in Otuododo's quarters of Otuokpoti in present day Ogbia Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The first account stated that the cause of the migration was as a result of the death of a man whose name is yet to be known in the process of dragging Otugbo's carved canoe. A section of the deceased family was consistently harassing Otugbo even when traditional rites and reparation was made. In order to avoid such unpleasant situation, Otugbo and his family left Otuokpoti and after several places of settlement, finally settled and died at the present settlement of Tungbo.

On the other hand, the second account stated that it was a misunderstanding between Otugbo and his brothers over the manner and mode of sharing the bush-pigs which he killed with his brothers that caused his (Otugbo) migration due to hatred and enmity from his brothers.

However, after due consideration, the facts gathered from the fieldwork attest to the fact that Otugbo migrated from Otuokpoti as a result of the death of a man who sustained injuries while helping Otugbo to drag his (Otugbo) carved canoe from the forest. Based on the facts gathered and with the use of historical knowledge, I align myself with the first account.

The Arrival of Biafran soldiers in Tungbo

During the course of the Nigerian civil war, the rebel forces (Biafran soldiers) stationed at different places within the Niger Delta environment, Tungbo was also one of their base. According to chief Amos Adoh Adah, due to the civil war in 1967, the rebels came to stay at Tungbo on the 16th of October, 1967, with a marine launch. The team was led by a Sergeant and a Corporal. Chief Amos informs accordingly that the Sergeant told Tungbo community during their welcome reception that by instructions, they were here in Tungbo for protections. They further added that they were to face any consequences since Tungbo was their area of authority. The launch was tied at the waterside of Diyain deity. The play ground at the front of Diyain was their parade ground, State School building was their cooking, dining hall, hostel and the southern end of Tungbo as their check point..[21] As it was earlier discussed in the introduction, the proclamation of the former Eastern region as the Republic of Biafra by Ojukwu was not fully supported by the

minority groups, the Tungbo people were not exceptional.Therefore, they sent delegation to inform the rebels about their displeasure several times. These delegates included S.R. Shiabo, A.A. Adah, G.D. Efere, B. Vulture, Yinware, G.B. Nosika, E. Karibai, K. Lokoja, S. Boloma, N. Prebiri-owei, W. B Kubuye, O. Tuwotuwo, R. Ekpi,S. Mounyenimigha and Epete Omu, however, the rebels refused to listen to them and they were ready to face any challenge. This made them to report the rebels to the Nigerian Army at Agoloma, Sagbama, Patani and then Lagos[22].

Finally, the Nigerian Army and the rebels clashed on the 19th of October, 1967. The battle broke out at about 05:30am at the northern part of *Akpolokiyai* shrine in Tungbo. There was heavy firing for about four and half hours. Many of the rebels were killed and others heavily wounded. Their marine boat was utterly destroyed by the Nigerian troops. They ran for their safety. Three Tungbo prominent indigenes namely; Prince Ekpi, Fineboy Odogu and Amos Ebegu were killed while others ran to the bush wandering without shelter or food for days. Though some people locked themselves inside the rooms in their houses and slept on the floor. Tungbo became a ghost town, dead bodies laid helpless without burials. The rich became poor as many valuable properties were destroyed. The Tungbo people became helpless as the Federal Government or the Rivers State Military government was ready to render polices of rehabilitation and reconstruction[23].

Though the rebels left Tungbo land on the 21st of October, 1967, the tragic memory of the war has not left the minds of the Tungbo people, thus, the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war is the commemoration of the Biblical Passover in the whole of Tungbo clan as 'Ebe Benimo-Oge' (Tungbo Unity Festival) annually held between 18th and 22nd October as proposed by the then Tungbo Benimo-Oge Committee headed by Amos Adoh Adah. Other members of the committee were J.K Soroh, M.P. Sagbegha, Robert Siabo, Maclean Egberibin, Ekomail Ewepu amongst others.

The Formation of the Tungbo Benimo-Oge (Tungbo Unity Festival)

After the incident, particularly in 1968, the executive cabinet of Tungbo declared and agreed that every 19th of October should be a remembrance day. Members of the executive cabinet included A.A Adah, S.R. Shiabo, Jimmy Akanatu, B. Karibai, A. Dunukemefa, G. Inziri and E. Omu. In the following year, 19th of October 1969,

the Remembrance Day was held. It was a great day. Free drinks, cigarettes and tobacco were purchased and distributed to the Tungbo people by the cabinet members. Personal donations and word of condolences were passed to the families of the three prominent indigenes killed and presentations were equally offered accordingly.

From 1974 to 1976, there was no celebration of the Remembrance Day because no funds were realized. Cabinet was also accused by few members of the community that the remembrance was of no use because of the families that lost the lives of their loved ones. On the other hand, majority of the town members advised the executive cabinet that all the Tungbo people who migrated to neighbouring communities in the course of the civil war should be called back home. In the circumstance that, Tungbo as a whole ought to be happy and that 19th October should be marked as a day of joy and not sorrow[24].

In 1977, a group of Tungbo masquerade dancers, M.E. Egberibin, E. Adah, A. Ogboriogbo, E. Karibai, C. Boloma, C. Amadawa, H. Fouyoubai, O. Biritinkumo, C. Waigbegha, G. Prenanagha, P. Odogu, D. Gbasingha, Makinimo Ogbowei, S.R. Shiabo, W. B.P. Kubriye, K. Bekeowei, J.K. Soroh, L. Porbeni, E .Amcourt. and chief A.A Adah reconsidered the idea based on the fact that Tungbo was too fortunate to survive during the war. Therefore, on behalf of the community, they announced to the public that 19th of October, 1977, be declared as "*Tungbo Suu Oge*" (Tungbo War Festival). These people raised funds by themselves and celebrated the festival. It was so interesting. A unity cloth was provided and worn by everybody.

In 1978, the cabinet members and other prominent members of the community decided that the Oge (festival) should be called *"Tungbo Benimo-Oge"* meaning Tungbo Unity Festival as a home call to all that fled during the war and it was signed into law.[25]

The 1978 *Tungbo Benimo-Oge* was celebrated under the supervision of the aforementioned people in peace and unity, providing clothes known as "sweet-mother" and round neck singlets. Many activities took place during the festival such as wrestling competition between neighboring communities, football

competition, canoe racing, masquerade display, dancing competition of various dance clubs, war boat regatta and many more.

Personalities from far and near usually come to witness the festival every year. The festival is declared open by firing of cannons at 05:30am on the19th of October every year.

Tungbo Benimo-Oge traditional display of enchanting war songs and dance led by Commander Happy Sagbegha





Conclusion:

The clash between the Nigerian army and the Biafran soldiers on Tungbo land took place on the 19th of October; 1967. The Nigerian Civil War has impacted the land and people of Tungbo both positively and negatively, however the negative effects outweigh the positive effects because nothing can be compared to human lives that were lost.

The aftermath of this clash led to the formation of the Tungbo Benimo-Oge (Tungbo Unity Festival) which has attained both local and international recognition. Tungbo indigenes that live abroad sometimes come to partake in the activities of the festival. The festival flashes their minds back to the 1967 event that claimed the lives of their brothers. It is also a binding factor that unites the people of Tungbo.

The festival has also contributed to the economic growth of the community as many traders usually sell their products and other items during the festival. It is a great festival that has affected the people of Tungbo and a sight to behold.

This festival can be a huge tourist attraction if given the needed support by the government of Bayelsa State.

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