

## The History of Yoro Port from 1948 to 2022



Zéphirin SAH

Université Marien Ngouabi, Republic of Congo, Brazzaville

**ABSTRACT:** Brazzaville, a former Teke village of M'foa like most African cities, is a colonial city founded in 1880 by Pierre Savorgnan De Brazza. From its creation to the independence of the Congo, the city inherited from the French colonial state certain places of history and infrastructure, among which there is the river port of Yoro in Brazzaville. This place of contact and exchange is a place of memory in the same way as the city that bears it.

This study proposes to analyze the different stages of the history of this port which is a former fishing village of Impila in the Teke country on the lands of King Makoko. It is the result of our field investigations, documentary research and in the archives.

**KEYWORDS:** Brazzaville, Port, Yoro, exchanges, history

### INTRODUCTION

The city of Brazzaville is full of several places of memory among which we can mention the port of Yoro. This strategic location of the port is explained by the combination of several geographical and historical factors, which determine its nature.

Yoro was born at a time when the food supply needs of the African population of Brazzaville increased more and more with the extension of the city and population growth. Several assets favored its creation and its extension: the presence of a population of active fishermen living in the neighborhoods surrounding the port, then called the fishing village, and a geographical location that favors its frequentation by city dwellers and rural dwellers. Large space with high social and economic significance thanks to the nature of the activities carried out there, in particular the supply of products of various kinds from rural areas. This study explains how this port was born, what its organization is and what is its economic contribution for Brazzaville and in the supply of various products to the populations of Brazzaville and its surroundings.

### 1. Origins of Yoro Port

Yoro is a port enjoying a very strategic and advantageous geographical location.

Indeed, the port of Yoro is located in the northeast part of Brazzaville. It stretches for about 500 meters on the right bank of the Congo River, opposite the southern tip of Mbamou Island. Yoro is bordered to the east by the ATC<sup>1</sup> log port, to the west by the Tsiémé River and the new districts of Talangai. It is therefore the upstream extension of the port of Brazzaville and an enclave at the end of the Mpila district. Its location isolated from the city center by the depots of beverages, hydrocarbons and former shipyards gives the curious impression of having left the capital.

The creation of the port of Yoro was a long process because this place was first a fishing village (camp).

The name of Yoro port dates back to 1948. But before that date, we were talking about the fishing village to design this Beach. From the fishing village to the port of Yoro, it took several successive stages, each with its own characteristics.

The first stage is where the fishermen's port was located at the current location of the French Navy. This site corresponded to a small breach made by a Senegalese fisherman named Yéro Thiam. Born on February 7, 1893 in Senegal, the latter landed in the Congo in the 1920s as part of the construction of the Congo-Ocean railway (CFCO), of which he was site manager. At the end of the works in 1934, he confided to Raphaël Antonetti, Governor General of the AEF<sup>2</sup>, who had become his friend, that he came from a family of fishermen.

At the time, the locals only practiced cast net fishing on small canoes. Thus, Antonetti encouraged Yéro Thiam to start deep-sea fishing on the Congo and granted him a large piece of land along the river, in the current district of Mpila. This is how Bab<sup>3</sup> introduced large-scale fishing on the river, using nets 800 m in diameter. He gave his name to the landing stage he had created. Yéro owned continental fishing equipment consisting of nets and canoes. Because of this important equipment for that time, Yéro

<sup>1</sup> Trans-Congolese Communications Agency

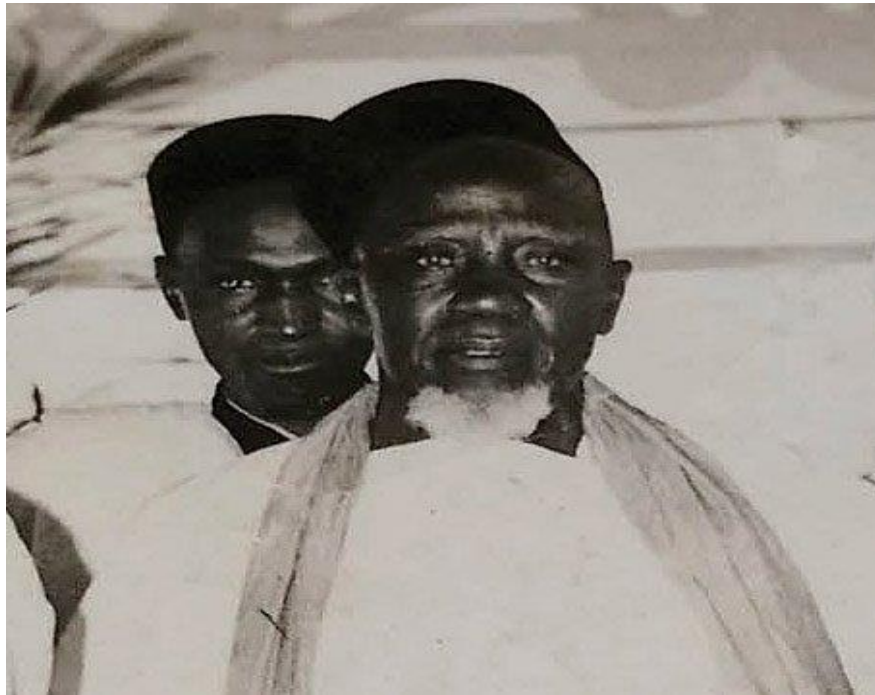
<sup>2</sup> French Equatorial Africa

<sup>3</sup> Nickname given to Yero Thiam by the Muslim community of Brazzaville

## The History of Yoro Port from 1948 to 2022

employed Congolese fishermen to whom he rented his fishing equipment. Urban and rural boatmen arriving by river landed here to sell all kinds of food products. The rural people of Stanley-pool were the most numerous to land there.

Image1: Yéro Thiam



Source: W<sup>4</sup>ebographie

In the image, Yero Thiam is the person in the foreground with a white beard.

The second stage corresponds to the transfer of the fishermen's port to the location of the shipyards (CHACONA). Indeed, in 1948, the deputy mayor of Poto-Poto, forced the boatmen to free the port of fishermen "Yoro" because the French colony wanted to create a private nautical club there. Thus, anxious to perpetuate the activity born at this landing stage, the fishermen were obliged to develop another site. They chose to go upstream from the site chosen by Roussihe in 1912 for the construction of one of the two components of the river port of Mpila (the citrus port).

The new landing stage therefore corresponded to the part left by the hydrographic engineer Roussilhe to whom the governor of the A.E.F had entrusted study work to see the possibility of setting up a river port in Brazzaville. This site was on a low, marshy coast, with difficult, if not impossible, access, encumbered along part of its length by a vast sandbank<sup>5</sup>. But for the boatmen, it was an ideal landing stage for the small boats they used. It was a fisherman called Ossendza who initiated the development. Cassava was then sold there, in particular the roui cassava called Ntouka that the Téké peasants brought from the Alima in canoes. There was also the fish provided by the Likouala and Likouba fishermen.

Around the 1970s, fishermen were again forced to move when the new site was occupied by the CHACONA shipyards. It is then that, it seems, in compensation, the Beach of Mpila was attributed to the boatmen who, to perpetuate the tradition, called it Yoro in memory of their former pier. This is the third stage in which the Beach of Mpila will cease to be called a fishing village, to be recognized as the port of Yoro. Ouabari notes about this site:

that it was a small village of boatmen located opposite the southern tip of Mbamou Island and distinct from the urban agglomeration but which, due to the spatial growth of Brazzaville, has increasingly more akin to a new suburban neighborhood. The organization of this new site as well as of the fishermen, was the work of Ossendza who launched the idea of a cooperative and even undertook to <sup>6</sup>initiate fundraising with traders to build a common house at the port for all fisherman. The port was then only an open ramp in front of the C.I.B. sawmill (Congolaise Industrielle du Bois), and only non-motorized canoes docked there.

The fourth and final stage in the history of the Port of Yoro is that which corresponds to the introduction of whaleboats and motorized canoes into port traffic. This is the period during which the port of Yoro will experience a great extension towards the northwestern part. This process began around the 1970s with a former trader, Obounga Pierre. The latter succeeded, after an agreement with

<sup>4</sup> Lomba N., 1985, *The Brazzaville market for food products from Zaire*, Brazzaville, DESS dissertation, p.122

<sup>5</sup> B. Mengho, 1971, *Op.cit.*, p.70

<sup>6</sup> J.ouabari

## The History of Yoro Port from 1948 to 2022

Zairian traders, in bringing thirty traders' whaleboats into the port of Yoro. He thus laid the groundwork for more dynamic traffic at the port, and ended up asserting himself as the outstanding figure of the moment.

Indeed, Obounga Pierre was the founder of the association of whalers in Port Ntouka, now called Yoro. This association was created on August 15, 1972 in Mafoumba district of Ngabé. The association worked from 1972 to 2002 under the supervision of the Town Hall. In 2000-2002 the port of Ntouka became the Autonomous Port of Yoro under the direction of Mr. Dominique Bemba. The Ntouka port was created between 1944 and 1945. President Obounga Pierre was the first to bring the whalers to Brazzaville, followed by Mr. Bouka. The association was created so that Brazzaville is supplied with basic materials such as cassava, corn and other products for a better life for the Brazzaville population.

Since its creation until today, there are eighteen (18) commissioners, the first of whom was Ndinga Georges, and eleven (11) deputy mayors. The Teke came with cassava, the Mbosi with tortillas and those from Mossaka with fish.

### 2. Organization and operation of the port of Yoro from its creation to 2022

At the head of the port of Yoro is a president, former trader and president of the association of whalers and outboard motors. The latter plays the role of intermediary between the administration (Town Hall, Police) and the various users (housewives, traders, transporters). In reality, the president of the port is the spokesperson of the users of the port with the administrative authorities and defenders of the interests of the carriers. It relies on the association of owners of whaleboats and outboard motors to carry out its action. Its status has not been conferred by any given administrative text. However, the users of the port do not recognize him less "the authority of the chief", because of the decisive role he played in the creation and development of the said port. This is confirmed by the various taxes of which he is the author and that the carriers pay. These include the parking fee that it imposes on each pusher or trucker parking at the port for the transport of goods and the sweeping fee collected from traders selling at the port as part of its sanitation.

Less known but just as present as the association of whalers, the fishermen's cooperative occupies a significant place in the administration of the port. She manages all matters related to fishing at the port of Yoro. It is an institution duly recognized by the State is responsible for defending and promoting the interests of fishermen. The fishermen's cooperative is also involved in the settlement of issues related to the management of the port.

It was actually from 1985 that the Mayor of Brazzaville began to organize the port of Yoro, in particular by setting a certain number of obligations for all boats that dock at or leave the port. On February 10, 1990, a tripartite meeting brought together the Town Hall of Brazzaville, the police station of Yoro and the association of whalers to see the possibility of initiating a new policy of administration of the Port. This policy was to be designed so that each party present at the meeting could fulfill a specific mission with a view to good management of the port. At the end of this meeting, the Police were entrusted with the mission of ensuring the safety of goods and people, with the association of whalers the mission of sensitizing and mobilizing the owners of the whalers and taxpayers and with the Town hall that of coordinating and managing all the activities of the port.

A tariff scale to be applied to the port was also adopted. It fixed the berthing fee at the port for each boat as follows:

3,600 CFA francs for large whaleboats, 2,000 CFA francs for "essende" (small whaleboats without a roof), 300 CFA francs for speedboats (motorized canoes). So it currently looks like this:

- 4,600 CFA francs for whaleboats with goods
- 3,000 CFA francs for whaleboats with firewood and charcoal
- 2,000 CFA francs for the "essende"

In 1997, the Yoro Police Station initiated a first attempt to identify porters and pushers working in Yoro. To better control them, he undertook to grant them distinctive work clothes, for a modest sum of 2,000 CFA francs. These outfits gave them the privilege of working at the port under the cover of the Police and in an official manner.

Similarly, to better control the whalers, goods and people, the Commissariat took the initiative of designing a "travel manifesto" that was to be given to each whaler in front of the port. This administrative paper, on which are carried the reference of the boat and the names and addresses of all the passengers, is given to the manager of the whaleboat on the day of its departure for a sum of 1,000 CFA francs.

In addition, in February 2000, a contract was signed between the Kleyn Trucks group and the Town Hall of district 6 Talangai. This contract gave the Kleyn Trucks group the responsibility of ensuring the daily maintenance and sanitation of the port of Yoro so that all the spaces can be in the best conditions of cleanliness, comfort and hygiene. Traders selling at the port will also have to participate in this sanitation effort by paying a daily sum of 200 CFA francs to agents of the Kleyn group. The revenue measures thus obtained must be shared between the two parties, at the rate of 70% for the Kleyn Trucks group and 30% for the Town Hall of Talangai.

The initiatives of the Town Hall of Talangai for a good administration of the port of Yoro were crowned by the organization of the Yoro market adjacent to the port, in particular by the establishment of a management committee supervised by the president of the market. On July 24, 1991, Obounga Pierre was appointed chairman of the Yoro market committee by the administration of the Mayor of District No. 6 Talangai, Mbou Pascal.

## The History of Yoro Port from 1948 to 2022

The port of Yoro was born from the fishing village and its creation is the work of fishermen and traders of products stimulated by a growing Brazzaville population which they ensure the supply. The public authorities only had the role of regulator and manager. This is why, the administrative organization of the port presents on one side the Association of whalers and outboard motors and the fishermen's cooperative recalling the origin of the port, and on the other the police station and the town hall , port control and management body. The port facilities are still embryonic, but the port has two major advantages: its geographical location facing localities and riverside camps and close to very working-class districts, and its character as a port for local fishing.

### 2.1. Port compartments

The commercial activity developed at the port of Yoro and because of the specificity of each food product sold, induces a subdivision of the port into compartments. We distinguish four of them according to the specificity of each one:

- the compartment for fishermen or fish: its attendance is daily and practically identical every day. It is related to the nature of the boats that dock there, with the frequency of their trips or displacements, and with the distances they cover. The motorized canoes bring fresh fish there for the women to wait for, seated under the baobab in the square;
- the whaling or cassava compartment: it is also the market place. Apart from cassava, Marantaceae leaves, maize and other common products are sold there. Its animation is linked to the rhythm of the arrivals of the whaleboats, and it measures approximately 2,305 m<sup>2</sup> in area. It is the Association of whalers, the pushers and the "Koro men" have installed their parking lot there;
- the whaleboat manufacturing and repair compartment: you can find a whaleboat being manufactured there.

### 2.2. Piers

The port of Yoro has four piers adjoining the compartments or places, which we have just seen. Two of them are the most popular:

- - the pier of the place of the fishermen: it is the first by the degree of frequentation. It does not have mooring stakes, but there is metal gear on the river bank (engine blocks, large iron bars, etc.) to which the fishermen attach their canoes. There is no special arrangement. Every day, nearly a hundred canoes are moored there;
- the pier at the place des whaleboats: this is the mooring point for the whaleboats. Like the previous one, it does not have any particular layout. Each whaleboat has an anchor that holds it and prevents it from being carried away by the water current. There are sometimes whaleboats on trial where still out of use, not a day goes by when at least three whaleboats do not dock at this pier, while at least three others leave it;
- the last two piers are that of the place of manufacture and repair of the whaleboats and that of the part of the port which is a little neglected, near the site of the C.I.B. These piers are the least frequented, because being located at the away from the area of intense commercial activity. They receive whaleboats that are obsolete or under repair, whaleboats for private use (for pleasure on weekends).

The current of the Congo River in the Brazzaville area is regular and moderate. The average surface water speed is about 6 to 7 km/hour. This current does not pose a problem for the docking of whaleboats and canoes. Docking is thus done without difficulty in all seasons, especially since the boats that dock loaded with foodstuffs do so on the descent. They let themselves be carried away by the current to the level of the port, it is only there that they begin the docking maneuver by starting the engines.

### Image 2: Yoro port berthing area



## The History of Yoro Port from 1948 to 2022

### 2.3. Deposits

The port of Yoro had nine (09) small ports, which were actually simple sheet metal sheds or containers in which traders stored unsold goods when it was still called port of Ntouka. Often, there were found very basic items (bailer, gas tank, etc.) forming part of the equipment of the whaleboats or canoes, and which the shipowners keep to avoid having to transport each time from the house to the port and Conversely. We distinguish among these deposits:

- two containers for storing cassava (mainly cassava chips)
- two deposits of cassava retted and various (marantaceae leaves, but) of more or less identical dimensions: length 7m, width 4.80 m for the first and length 5.50m, width 3m for the second.
- four charcoal deposits with a volume of 1265m<sup>3</sup> each<sup>7</sup>;
- a deposit intended to collect various articles such as: tables of the traders, empty bags, cans etc.

These deposits were generally kept by young boys who were responsible for registering the objects entrusted for safekeeping, and for ensuring their safekeeping. Each trader wishing to keep some object there will have to pay a small sum ranging from 50F CFA to 200F CFA per unit. This deposit duty is normally paid only once for the entire period during which the goods or object will remain in the deposit. In some cases traders are obliged to pay every day until all the goods are finished.

In recent years the port has been improving in terms of infrastructure and equipment. As shown in the images below, the sheds are now made of durable materials.

This site also houses small mechanical repair shops because outboard motors need regular overhaul. They were simple constructions consisting of a roof resting on a few pillars or posts (4 to 6) and serving the mechanic as shelter against the sun and the rain. Each workshop has a kind of workbench at the front intended to receive the engines and on which the mechanic always places a sample engine to attract the attention of his customers. The mechanics were obliged, given the nature of their workshop, to transport their equipment every day from the house to the port and vice versa.

There are three mechanical repair workshops in the port of Yoro, run by young people aged between 26 and 35, who have learned the trade through daily practice. It is difficult to know their exact daily recipe, as the entries are irregular and closely linked to the clientele available to each. This clientele also varies every day. However, we can estimate their daily income at around 3,000 to 4,500 CFA francs.

Currently, the situation has improved to the extent that there are repair workshops built in durable materials and more or less well equipped.

The port of Yoro does not have many service premises. There are four services that work more or less in collaboration at the port of Yoro: the collection service, the water and forest service and the police.

The town hall plays the role of coordinator and manager of the activities of the port of Yoro and the service detached to the port is responsible for carrying out collection operations from traders through taxes ranging from 200 FCFA to 1000 FCFA.

The phytosanitary service depends on the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock. Its mission is to control all plant products from the North of the country, in particular by checking the state of their quality for human consumption. For products from abroad (DRC, Cameroon) it requires traders to obtain an international phytosanitary certificate, which must attest to the quality of the product.

In the event of non-compliance with this rule, the products are simply seized and then destroyed. The phytosanitary service has three agents who carry out collections from traders disembarking at the port with plant products (apart from cassava).

The water and forest service is made up of four agents and is responsible for controlling forest and wildlife products landing at Yoro. These are basically charcoal, firewood, marantaceae leaves, game meat, cattle and some species of fish. It is also a collection service. Among all its services, only the Police has viable premises housing the Mpila Police Station and the Border Control Department. The Town Hall service uses the premises of the association of whalers and outboard motors. It is actually a container converted into an office, which has no other purpose than to offer agents the possibility of navigating through it before and after collection operations. In addition, due to a long fishing tradition, the port of Yoro has set up premises housing the headquarters of the cooperative, which operates as a service in its own right. Every day, the members of the cooperative supervise the rental of canoes to fishermen and women traders leaving for the sandbanks or the surrounding camps to buy fresh fish. The rental amount varies between 200 CFA francs and 500 CFA francs for canoes intended for motors. These sums are used for the exercise of commercial activities and for the purchase of equipment (fishing nets, canoes) necessary for the smooth running of the cooperative

### 3. The role of the port of Yoro in supplying Brazzaville

It is a port open to the camps and localities bordering Brazzaville

Indeed, Yoro is a port at the head of the line in a considerable river network, nearly 1,200 km long, but its real zone of influence to the north stops around Makotipoko at the confluence of the Congo River. with the Nkeni; Makotipoko is therefore the terminus of

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<sup>7</sup> Ngayo Germain, 2011, *The management of port infrastructures in Congo: case of the Autonomous Port of Brazzaville, Brazzaville*, Master of ENAM, p. 45.

## The History of Yoro Port from 1948 to 2022

convoys from Yoro, which is recognized as a port with a dual vocation: it is both a port for fishermen and a food supply port for the population of Brazzaville.

This port enjoys a privileged geographical location, as it is the point of arrival and departure of significant river traffic fed by several camps and villages built on the right bank of the Congo.

From Brazzaville to Loukoléla, the Congo River flows in a fairly long corridor successively crossing the Cuvette region, the Plateaux and the Pool region. On the wooded slopes of the Batéké plateaux where the Congo has a steep course, there are many villages and hamlets. The zone of influence of the port of Yoro corresponds to a long corridor of approximately 294 km where the largest localities are: Makotipoko, Mpouya and Ngabé (nearly 2000 inhabitants who are mostly farmers and fishermen).

A study presented by conducted in 1997 states that 36.48% of the villages in this area (the corridor) had 100 to 250 inhabitants; 10.82% and 250 to 500 inhabitants 5.40% had 500 to 1000 inhabitants. Here, local residents grow cassava on forest clearings and engage in fishing. Cassava and especially smoked fish partly supply a commercial flow directed towards Brazzaville. This situation continues today.

Every day, traders and rural merchants ensure the traffic between the port of Yoro and the localities of the corridor on board the whalers. They bring all kinds of foodstuffs to Brazzaville. Thus, every week more than ten whalers arrive at the port of Yoro from villages such as Mouala, Mboka-Léfini, Bowando and others, located along the right bank of the Congo River.

Similarly, in Stanley Pool, many camps have been built, especially on Ile Mbamou. These camps are mostly inhabited by fishermen. The port of Yoro occupies a privileged position there: it is the nearest landing stage for fishermen coming from these camps, and its current layout facilitates the docking of small boats used by these fishermen.

The privileged position of the port of Yoro, open to the camps and riverside localities, makes it the center of intense river traffic. The many motorized and non-motorized canoes providing daily connections between the port and the various villages testify to the extent of this traffic, which recalls the role played by N'couna, a major commercial center in the Congo Basin before European colonization.

Image 8 et 9 : illustration des embarcations du port de Yoro



One of the advantages that promotes frequentation of the port of Yoro is the proximity of the local populations. Indeed, Yoro is the immediate outlet of the districts of Talangai, Poto-poto and Ouenzé as well as the Mpila district. All these areas are inhabited mostly by people from the north of the country, in particular from the Congolese basin. It is therefore largely the residents of the rivers watering this region. There are a large number of téké from Alima, the Mbosi, the Likouala, the Likouba and the Moye.

These populations undertake commercial activities geared towards the river, either by buying or selling regularly at the port of Yoro a varied range of food products, or by making almost regular trips between the city and the surrounding riverside localities. Among those who carry out this activity, some have already lived in these localities, others still live there and are only in town for a stay that often does not exceed a month. This confirms the closeness of city-countryside relations, which are dominated by daily or weekly migrations between places and of which the port becomes the facilitating instrument<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, it is not rare to meet rural people who, because of their commercial activity, stay one month or one week in town, in the districts adjoining the port, before returning to the village by means of either a motorized canoe, or of a whaleboat. They represent about 19.23% of traders selling at Yoro Port<sup>9</sup>. Among the traders who sell at the port of Yoro, we find 25% of Mbosi from the Central basin, 11.55% from Likouala and Moye, and 48.07% from Teke (especially from Alima). The surveys also showed that for those of these traders who live in the city, 93.88% reside in the districts of Talangai, Poto-Poto, Ouenzé and in the Mpila district, against only 6.12% in the rest of the districts. The situation of the port of Yoro not far from the districts where the populations originating from the riverside localities live explains in part its great frequentation<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> E.O. n°3.

<sup>9</sup> E. O. n°4.

<sup>10</sup>E. O. n°5.

## The History of Yoro Port from 1948 to 2022

The operation of the port of Yoro has been reviewed since 2003, the modernization of this port was included in the investment program for the year 2011. For this, the following works were planned: the development of land- full, the construction of docking structures, the development of access roads, the construction of warehouses, the completion of the boundary wall<sup>11</sup>.

### Conclusion

The geographical location of a port is, in addition to its equipment, a determining factor for its frequentation. In the case of a public utility port, the proximity of the populations that must ensure its animation through regular visits is an important asset. In this case, the port is no longer simply a supply organ, but a point of convergence of multiple activities, and a place of mixing and meeting of populations of various origins. Thus, the port of Yoro from its creation to 2022 and even until has remained a port which receives and evacuates goods or products in the city of Brazzaville. It is therefore a very important place of memory for the Congo which deserves the attention of the public authorities for its anchoring and its development.

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| N° | Nom(s) et Prénom(s) | Profession | Date et lieu de l'enquête | Sujet abordé                   |
|----|---------------------|------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1  | Essouli Jean        | Chauffeur  | 16/08/2020                | Histoire de Yoro               |
| 2  | Ibara Gabriel       | pêcheur    | 16/08/2020                | Les produits alimentaires      |
| 3  | Ebongo              | pêcheur    | 29/10/2021                | La population du port de Yoro  |
| 4  | Essaka              | Enseignant | 29/10/2021                | L'organisation du Port de Yoro |
| 5  | Ngona Louis         | Piroguier  | 29/10/2020                | L'organisation du trafic       |

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<sup>11</sup> C. Mitoumbi, 2020, *The Autonomous Port of Brazzaville and its impact in the Central African sub-Region from 2000 to 2010*, Brazzaville, Marien Ngouabi University, Master's dissertation in history, p.19.