Port of call that goes way back in time

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The history of Kilindini Harbour goes way back in time. It is many centuries old. The port, a large, natural deep-water inlet extending inland from Mombasa with a depth of between 25-30 fathoms (45-55 meters) was the port of call for the early explorers and seafarers of the lives of the Portuguese sojourner Vasco da Gama in 1498.

The quest for a sea route to India to access the lucrative spice trade made the east coast of Africa the shortest route to the Indian sub-continent and the Far East.

With the partitioning of East Africa by various nations including Great Britain and Germany in the 17th and 18th centuries, Kenya and Uganda fell under British control while Tanganyika (now Tanzania) went to Germany.

Trade began to boom between Kenya and Uganda protocoletes in 1895 and work commenced on the construction of a railway line from Mombasa to Kampala in order to open up the hinterland for trade.

As this expanded and the interior of East Africa was opened up by the new railway line, so did the demand grow for full fledged seaport with a spacious deep-water harbour to handle the ever-increasing trade in the region.

From the days of shows that dotted the Old Port to the east of the current Port of Mombasa, a jetty was needed to handle the larger ships that brought construction materials for the Kenya-Uganda railway in 1897.

This need saw the birth of a new port at Kilindini in 1936 with the building of a jetty at Kilindini on the west of the island which was mainly used to transfer goods between sea-going vessels and the Kenya-Uganda railway line.

“Kilindini” is an old Swahili term that means “deep” and the port was so called because the channel is naturally deep - a geographic phenomenon known as a fa.

Later three more jetties were built to handle rail-born goods and other imports and exports leading to the construction of the first two lightships wharves on the south side of Ras Kilindini with four lighter holding points.

But the development of the modern Port of Mombasa began in earnest in 1936 when the completion of two deep water berths supported by transit sheds at Kilindini Harbour.

This was followed by three more berths with support sheds in 1931. In the same year, Shimizu Oil Terminal entered into service.

Two more berths were built in 1944 to cope with a sudden increase in shipping and traffic as a result of British’s wartime naval requirements in the Indian Ocean. Berth No. 6 was omitted due to unfavourable foundation conditions.

To keep up with the expansion pace, a second lightship was built in 1954 with eight head jetties as two more deep-water berths, on the island, were added in 1955 and 1958.

As the level of cargo and ship traffic continued to rise, the port was obliged to expand to the mainland at Kipevu whose berths No. 11 and 12 were completed in 1961 just two years before Kenya’s independence.

Just as Kenyans were ushering in their independence in 1963, the Kipevu Oil Terminal was built to serve the East African Oil Refinery while another two berths were completed in 1967.

With the coming of container age, two deep-water berths came into service in 1973, the same year marked the beginning of the container trade in the port with 1,365 TEU handled.

As the container traffic continued to grow, berths No. 16 and 17 were converted into container handling berths and the third one (berth) designed for containers was added in 1990.

The rapid increase in container traffic through the port prompted the port authority to extend the container handling operation upcountry and in the years that followed, it set up two inland container depots at Embakasi, Nairobi and Kisumu in 1994.

Revind to 1963 when Kenya gained independence while her East African neighbours Tanzania and Uganda got theirs early in 1961 and 1962 respectively heralding a joint partnership in 1967 that saw the setting up of the East African Community (EAC).

This working partnership also created a new authority, the East African Harbours Corporation to run the principal ports of Dar-es-Salaam, Mombasa and the oil port of Tanga.

Initially, there was positive development under this arrangement but with the collapse of the EAC in 1977, the running of Kenya’s port was taken over by the government which established the Kenya Ports Authority in 1978.

The new authority was enlarged in 1986 when it merged with the autonomous state agency, Kenya Cargo Handling Limited, to form a single body responsible for all aspects of national port development and operations.