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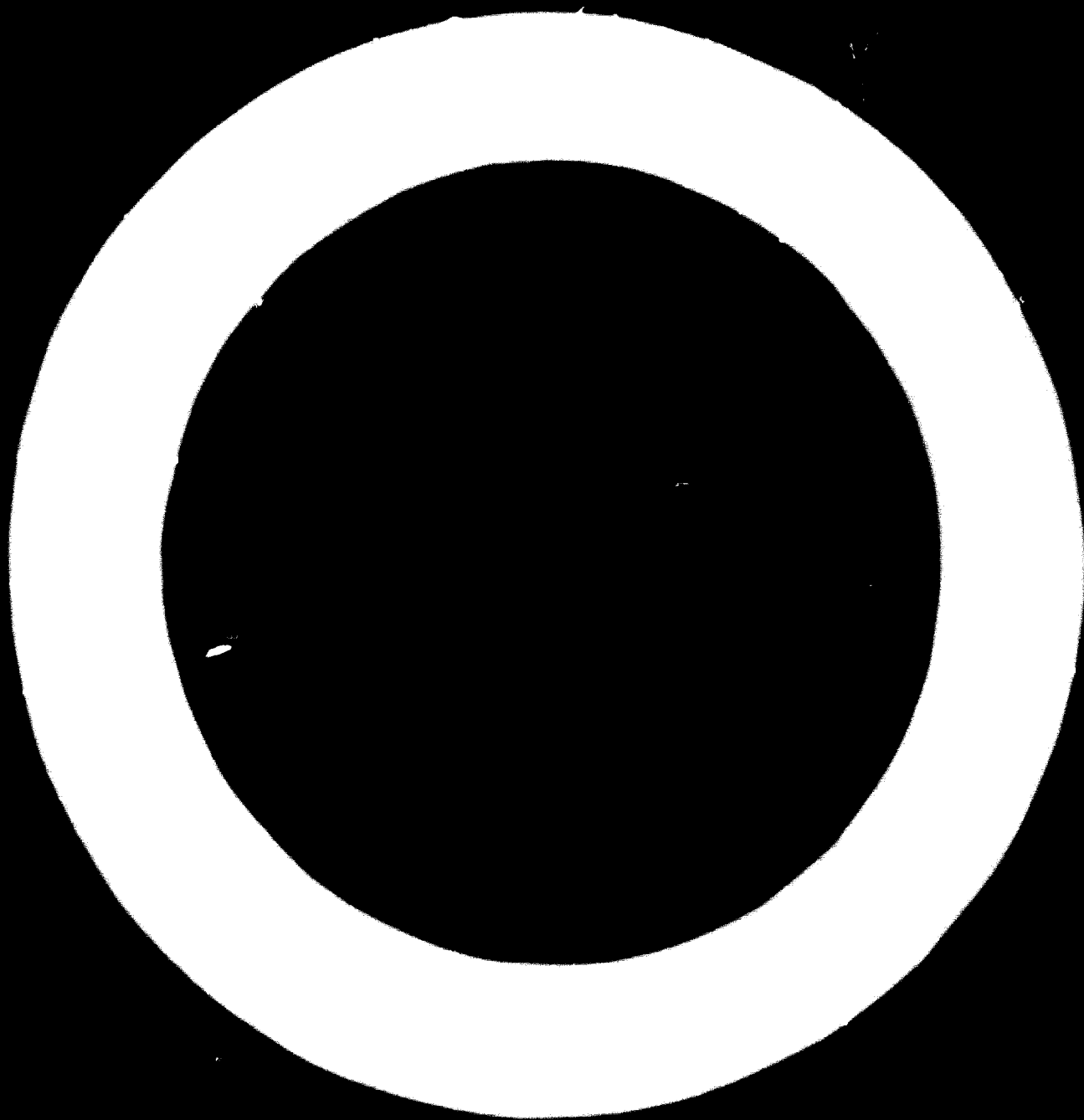
THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY IN ETHIOPIA ✓

by

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## Introduction

The Empire of Ethiopia is situated in the African highlands in the north-east corner, bordering on Kenya in the south, on Sudan in the north and west, Somalia in the south-east and in the north-east the Red Sea.

The country lies in the tropics, stretching from 3° 30' to 18° north covering an area of 1,221,900 square kilometers (478,000 square miles).

The total population is 22,000,000.

The nation's main livelihood is based on agriculture, and the country's largest and most valuable export crop is coffee.

## Forests

Much of the natural wealth of the country is vested in its forests. The utilization of these forests can be developed to one of the most valuable economic resources of the country. If the country's forests were properly administered, most of the countries in the Middle East and the nearby African countries could be well supplied with timber. Previously, owing to transportation problems, most of the forests could not be exploited.

## Wood Work

Handicraft is an ancient craft in Ethiopia. Handicraft and cottage industries are booming throughout the country. The admirable art of carving articles of furniture out of a simple block of wood is executed with very primitive tools. Small three-legged chairs, called Burtchuma, are bought by visitors as a real curiosity.

## Raw Materials

Local small-scale industries are facing raw materials problems. Most raw materials are imported; owing to the pressure of the price changes in the world market and heavy

local duties, every raw material is expensive. The locally produced raw materials are also of poor quality and more expensive than the imported ones. There is no commercial wood-seasoning plant in Ethiopia. All the local furniture shops and some big factories are using unsound wood for any type of furniture they produce. Thus, the furniture produced from this green wood is inferior in quality, less stable in use, impaired in its strength and rot-resistance. The wood shrinks, bends and the formica (laminated plastic) or plywood veneers peel off very easily and the glue applied to the grooves loses strength, etc. Lack of proper raw materials, skilled labour to check material quality, surface finishing, scratches, and other defects which will lessen the value of the physical appearance, as well as the more economic maintenance of the products result in consumer preference for foreign made goods and a general belief that local manufactured goods are of poor quality.

The customer wants a master-piece and a functional product which meets the demand of beauty and comfort at the lowest possible price. Furthermore, the product must yield the manufacturer returns and satisfaction which are the guarantee of success and progress of the enterprise.

Thus, my firm has planned to start an artificial wood-drying business so as to raise the quality of its furniture to the accepted standards of quality, elegance, comfort, resistance and function.

Since the natural seasoning of timber is an expensive and time-consuming operation, I have considered a kiln-drying system where the technical know-how and advice of UNIDO will be of vital significance.

#### Market

The size and resources of these small cottage industries have strongly affected the market strategy, i.e. small producers are restricted to a particular geograph-

ical area solely on a retail level owing to the want of resources. They cannot compete with the well-established nationally known companies which have enough funds to spend on advertising, product planning, sales promotion, etc.

There is no active attitude towards market studies, public relations and product promotion.

For want of appropriate machinery, adequate space, raw materials, sufficient capital, proper labour force and administration, every small wood working shop starts to produce doors, windows, all types of bedroom, dining room and sitting room furniture, office desks and all types of wood-work products.

What is more, they claim to be the producers, wholesalers and retailers which results in a very bad cut-throat competition between themselves.

By doing so, their small capital and concentration is scattered; they do not have proper control of the purchase of their raw materials, quality control and labour force. The main problems in most furniture shops are the procurement of appropriate machinery, the systematic lay-out thereof to suit production movement, the proper maintenance of these machines and the optimum utilization of all these available machines, raw materials and labour.

The owners cannot share their responsibilities, most of their valuable time is spent attending to minor transactions. They do not have time to plan, to improve their product, to advertise and promote sales, to create business and after all these complications they do not know how to run their businesses and enjoy good profit margins.

Thus, because they failed to co-ordinate production and capacity, and failed to concentrate on specialisation, together with an increase in unemployment, rise in the cost of raw materials, a drop in both industrial activity and the community's purchasing power, the larger firms seized the opportunity to put small furniture producers out of business.

They attracted customers through competitive price reduction and long-term hire purchase sales, i.e. the retail business is passing more and more into the hands of foreign firms, creating an unfavourable balance of trade for the country's economy.

### Labour

Despite its quality, any number of labour is available in the country. Most of the labour is unskilled and the lack of adequate machinery makes this labour force highly unproductive and expensive.

There are only very few vocational training schools. The training given in these vocational training schools is not practical and will not fit in with the small cottage industry at all. Illiteracy is the main problem of training. Unless and until the man to be trained can read and write or he is a school boy, there is no possibility for him to be trained. It is only after a long, hazardous and tiresome apprenticeship that he is accepted by this small-scale industry.

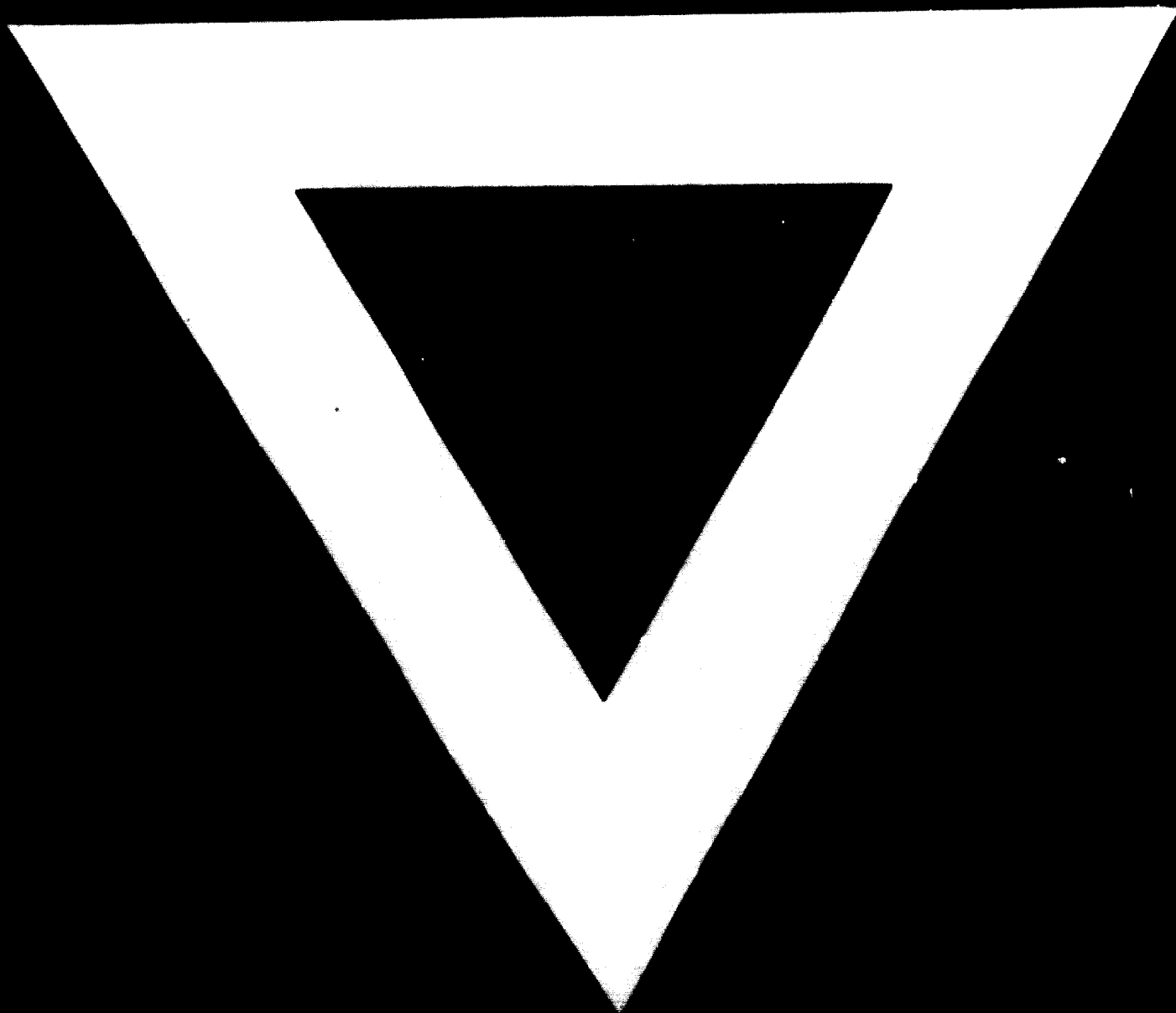
The labour is very easily satisfied with the very poor income. Lack of ambition and the failure to challenge new ideas and to improve family living conditions by going through hard training and apprenticeship. In every work shop the trainee is not given a chance to specialize in a particular field of production, and because the trainee is not qualified and lacks experience in a special field, the workmanship of a finished product made by this worker is very poor.

Lacking self-control, lazy by habit and continued unexcused tardiness and absenteeism, as well as inefficiency, the failure to do the amount and quality of work expected of the employee when hired, wilful disobedience and refusal to carry out reasonable requests made by the supervisor, the irresponsible attitude towards his daily work, and failure to meet established quality and quantity standards of his work: these and other labour problems are obstacles to the growth and progress of small firms.



To programme training facilities for its employees is very expensive for a small firm. Ethiopian labour has proved **itself** capable of imitating any foreign made furniture very easily. Thus, introducing low-cost and mass-production systems could help to solve these problems and contribute to the future development of the furniture industry which is most promising.





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