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THE WOODWORKING INDUSTRIES OF THE GAMBIA *

by

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The Gambia is a country of about 400,000 inhabitants and covers an area of 1,000 square miles. It has an average temperature variance of between 45°F to more than 90°F. There are two basic seasonable climatic conditions in the Gambia, namely the rainy season and the dry season. During the months of June to October (called the rainy months) we have an average total rainfall of 427mm. In the months of November to February (called the cold months) the temperature drops to within 30°F to 45°F. March to June we have a temperature rise and the weather is hot and humid, these are the months when air conditioners are vital in order to protect certain imported types of furniture, machines, etc.

Furniture, especially if finished with laminates such as formica and certain other types of plastics, hardly lasts longer than five years due to the excessive heat during the hot months. They creep and loose their texture and eventually would have to be replaced.

The present furniture and joinery industry in the country is so minute that we can barely fulfil the country's needs and even sometimes we have to resort to importing furniture from abroad. There are two major workshops in this country, one of which is a Government concern and the other is privately owned. The Government Workshop is responsible for the manufacture of office furniture, house furniture and the manufacture of doors and window frames for Government buildings.

In the last financial year, our expenditure in the Workshop was 202,000 Dalasis. ^{1/} Eighty five percent of this amount was spent on office furniture, twenty percent on furniture for Government buildings and the remaining five percent on doors and window frames for Government buildings.

The workshop is divided into four sections, the machine shop section, furniture section, doors and windows section and the saw doctors section. There are 280 operatives including labourers employed in the workshop. These are supervised by four foremen, one assistant superintendent, one superintendent and a works superintendent, who is also the manager of the workshop.

In the machine shop, we have six machines, two planers, one band saw, two morticers and a tenon saw.

The Gambia Government has been giving loans to certain individuals who are interested in opening workshops in the country, as a result there are two or three workshops in the country, their production rate is small and they are of minor importance and therefore not worth mentioning.

The problems facing the industry in this country is finance and training. The industry needs the money to purchase modern equipment and import raw materials. Skilled operatives who can read and write are very difficult to come by. The problem of trained middle foremen is even penetrating the building industry.

The country's forest supply of timber is practically nil. A few years ago, the Government instituted a Forestry Division under the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources. This Division is only at its infancy and at the moment can only supply very few hard redwoods, most of which are wet and unseasoned timber and therefore cannot be used by the furniture industry.

Ninety per cent of all timbers used in the furniture and joinery industry in this country are imported from Ghana, the other ten per cent comes from Senegal and mainly from French speaking countries. The demand is so great that importers cannot fulfil their contracts for supply, hence the price of timber has gone up at a soaring rate. Half the time most building projects are behind programme due to acute shortage of timber.

A few years ago, a new particle board industry was opened under German management. The company produces particle board in 6, 12, and 18mm thicknesses and the panels are about the same sizes as plywood or hardboard.

The raw material consists of groundnut shells pressed with a special resin under high temperatures and pressures. The end product gives a very pleasant finish to certain items of furniture such as tables, kitchen fittings, chair tops, etc. The demand for such a material for ceilings of houses is increasing because of its pleasant finish.

This product is only at the initial stage in this country and as time goes on, we believe it will replace its sister material (plywood) as more people accept it.

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In this country we are still in the days when a head of a family with his sons and nephews works with obsolete hand powered tools. Invariably such men are craftsmen in their own right and a lot of them produce strong and pleasantly finished work. So much so we have a collection of highly skilled operatives, but they also lack modern training in technology and modern science.

Their range of products are limited, design is non-existent and the standards are low.

The industry in this country has the manpower but lacks modern machines, materials and training.

There is no export market for furniture, being a developing country the demand as stated above is so high that workshops cannot cope. With the lack of automation and technology, most sophisticated people go for imported furniture, which are more expensive.

If the standard in our workshops can be improved, the potentials for development of new markets are great.

We can even export to our neighbouring countries Senegal, Guinea and Mali.

We have the manpower, our forests are virtually untapped and above all, labour is cheap. But we need to educate our people. Educate them in modern technology and educate them not to cut down certain trees and use them for firewood.



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