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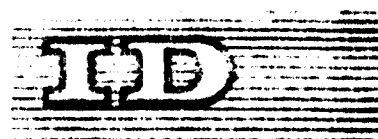
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FURNITURE INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA ^{1/}
ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE AND FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

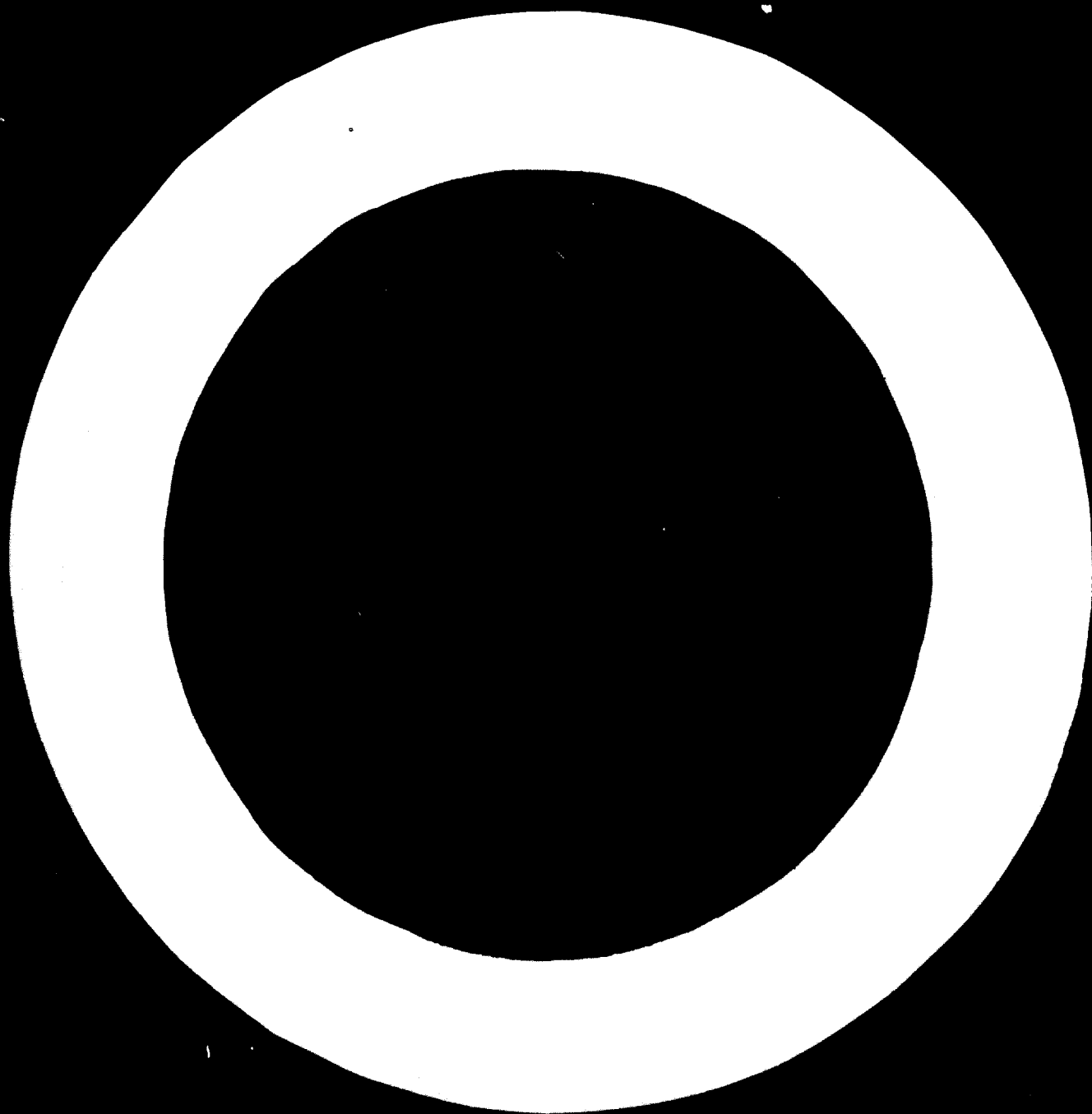
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1. THE COUNTRY

Nigeria is a country in West Africa. It is the most populous in black Africa and one of the developing countries of the world with a speedy growth of industrialisation. The country owes this impressive growth to its richness in natural resources, the ideal climate as well as to the Government's open-door policy on industrial development.

The northern parts of the country, being a fairly dry region, do not grow thick forests, but short trees and grasses as a result of which it is highly blessed with animal resources and with crops such as groundnut and cotton. In many parts of the Southern region, however, particularly where there are reserved forests, very big trees which constitute the bulk of Nigeria's supply of timber do grow. Generally the weather situation in Nigeria could be divided into two; rainy season from April to September and dry season from October to March. At times, temperatures are high and ranging between 70° - 90°F. The climate has no adverse effect on furniture making if seasoned woods are used. Special care, however, has to be taken on furniture construction during the months of December and January when the harmattan is more pronounced because of the adverse effect the weather has on woodwork as a result of the sharp reduction in moisture content resulting in abnormal shrinkage. This is one of the reasons why woodworking industries are very rare in the northern parts of the country; a fairly dry region.

2. THE WOODWORKER IN NIGERIA

The profession is one of the oldest in Nigeria and it is very popular. In schools and colleges, it is widely taught in periods devoted to handicraft, because it is one important craft that could instil a sense of creativity in the student. On the professional front, there are two main classes of woodworkers, namely the carpenter who specializes in building and other heavy constructions and the cabinet maker who specializes in furniture making and sophisticated joinery works.

3. FURNITURE INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA

Every country on the continent have had its training periods in the race for human civilization. Nigeria is not an exception, particularly not in the furniture industry. Until the 1950s, when people were content with just sitting on mats, on the floor or sleep on, there has been greater awareness of the need for stability, comfort and elegance in the acquisition of items of furniture. As a result of this awareness and demand there has been a sharp increase in the number of furniture factories over the years; about one hundred of which are reputable. There are hundreds, however, whose foundations have been laid and are struggling to find their feet.

4. TRAINING FACILITIES AND MANPOWER NEEDS IN THE COUNTRY

In comparison with the manpower needs in the industry, training facilities have proved inadequate in spite of the Government's efforts to expand the existing training institutions. This is so because there are only five Government technical institutions in Nigeria where furniture makers are trained. The estimated annual output of students of these Government institutions is about one hundred. These students are taught up to the City and Guilds of London Institute Intermediate Certificate level. The annual student output of these institutions represents just about one percent of the manpower needs in the industry.

It will, therefore, be seen that it is the private sector that provides the bulk of manpower needs in the industry. In spite of the informal way in which the men in that sector are trained, the quality of their work is appreciable high. The interesting character in the recruitment of manpower in the industry is the preference that most employers have for the informally trained workers to the formally trained workers. The reasons are not hard to understand. While the formally trained class would attract a high rate of remuneration, the reverse is the case in respect of the informally trained class. The employers further buttress their argument in favour of this class of workers with the undeniable fact that in most cases they are more productive because, being conscious of their limited prospects as a result of illiteracy, they work very hard to ensure continued employment. The lot of this class of workers, however, favours the employer whose rate of profit is enhanced in the process. The employers have another cheap source of manpower recruitment. This is the "apprentices system". The training of these apprentices (who in many cases

are not remunerated at all) is accelerated in such a way that they become quickly useful to the employers in production apart from supplying the unskilled labour requirements of the establishments. The Ministry of Labour has a grading system for all skilled workers. The higher the grade, the higher the remuneration.

Unfortunately, however, except in Government services and some other reputable establishments, many employers, due to profit motives, don't receive kindly the employees' attainment of higher grades since the employer was quite satisfied with his services while in the lower grade. The employee immediately gets frustrated and his morale sags. Being conscious of his practical ability, he retires to private practice. It is this trend that accounts for the increasing number of furniture enterprises. He feels he can go it alone; being conscious of the fairly cheap manpower market. It is unfortunate that he does not consider that it would be more profitable for him to go into partnership with experienced colleagues. Because he is completely alien to market research and scientific sales promotion, he produces articles not on demand but in advance of demand as a result of which the articles appreciate daily in value when on display, and are in the event sold at a loss, or are unsold. The situation, therefore, demands the need for educating these "overnight proprietors" on the need to form themselves into cooperative units that would be more viable and deserving of Governmental assistance.

5. QUALITY OF LOCALLY MADE FURNITURE

I am happy to report that this is very encouraging. Unlike in the years gone by, when preference was given to imported items; the Nigerian customer now has a wide local market to choose from. Even though there are some well established and familiar furniture making companies, it would be unfair to single out any one as being the producer of the highest quality products. In fact there are many firms producing high quality items of furniture, but because some of such firms have a scientific approach to marketing, they get on better than the others. There are few also which form part of major building construction firms and as a result enjoy the monopoly of supplying furniture to buildings constructed by their parent bodies.

As far as furniture design in Nigeria are concerned, the most and complicated designs of yesteryears are rapidly giving way to the elegant and lighter designs of modern days. A furniture maker who has undergone a formal course of training is equipped with the knowledge of furniture designs and it is this grade of employee which designs items of furniture for local markets. In any case, however, architects often produce furniture designs in general and for buildings designed by them in particular. I personally hold the view that anybody is a designer. This is because many customers when ordering their items of furniture often dictate the designs which in most cases are original and from which the furniture maker himself would gain useful ideas. It would then be up to the furniture maker to ensure that while following the design of his customer, the conventional aspects of furniture designs such as sitting heights and working heights are respected.

6. MARKETING OF FURNITURE

In recent years, furniture manufacturing companies in Nigeria have realized the importance of marketing in the industry. As a result, each of the well-established companies maintains a formidable sales force. In recruitment to sales posts, preference is usually given to candidates who possess both the knowledge of marketing and the furniture craft. Such employees are classified as "Technical Sales Officers". The main markets are residential houses, offices, schools, commercial houses, hospitals and other institutions. Distribution is usually done with specially constructed delivery vans. Many firms have authorized agents called "distributors" who are remunerated on a commission basis. The furniture market in Nigeria is a wide one in spite of keen competition. I am not aware of any widescale exportation of items of Nigerian furniture because only a few manufacturing firms could afford the hazards that the exportation of furniture involves.

From my own point of view, the major furniture manufacturing firms ought to work out a plan of cooperation to minimize areas of unnecessary rivalry in the marketing of their products. The area of cooperation should be such that each firm shall limit its production to specific items of furniture, unlike the present situation where each firm produces all kinds of items. Under the suggested system of cooperation, the quantity and quality of production shall be enhanced because each firm shall rapidly gain more experience in its own line of production.

7. PRODUCTION METHODS IN THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY

As I said earlier on, the profit motive of the employer is naturally high. As a result, his lack of education about modern production methods leads him into assuming that the huge investment on some sophisticated woodworking machines such as spindle moulder, router, tenoner and sander is not worth it. This is one of the reasons why manual labour is excessively present in the industry in Nigeria. Some employers are becoming increasingly aware of the need for work study experts in the industry, but only a few firms could afford to have one. In many cases one man is saddled with too many responsibilities and he is, therefore, unable to give his best in any. Because of the unscientific approach to production many firms are unable to identify operational bottlenecks that slow down the rate of production. Fortunately some firms have overcome these problems and their production methods are nearing perfection.

8. MATERIALS USED IN THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA

Except in isolated cases, materials such as adhesives, abrasives, fabrics, leather cloths, fittings, nails, screws, woodfinishes and plastics are imported in large quantities. There are glass and leather processing factories. Timber is, however, the major material used in the industry and Nigeria is lucky to be heavily blessed with this. Over one hundred species are available in Nigeria but the commonest ones in use in the furniture industry are Sapale and Lager Mahogany, Okra, Afara, Teak, Mansonia, Iroko and Agba. It is interesting to note that less than thirty of these species rated as commercial species have been introduced to the world market. The bulk of the timber in Nigeria grows in the Southern parts of the country, particularly in the Midwestern State which has one of the largest plywood factories in the world. Nigerian timbers and wood products are exported in large quantities and are very popular throughout the world.

The ever-increasing growth in population which carries along with it the need for more land for dwelling, farming, development and commercial purposes has been leading to a considerable decrease in the areas of land which grow the trees. Right now, in view of the ever-increasing demand it is very difficult to get well-seasoned timbers on local markets because

the rate of consumption does not allow adequate time for natural seasoning. Kiln seasoning facilities are very rare. As a result consumers are forced to use green timber most of the time; a situation which is not conducive to high quality furniture production. Fears have been expressed about possible shortage of mature timber for use in the next few years. In order to counteract such a situation, the Federal and the State Governments of Nigeria have embarked on reforestation programmes on a large scale.

9. USES OF BUILT-UP BOARDS IN THE INDUSTRY

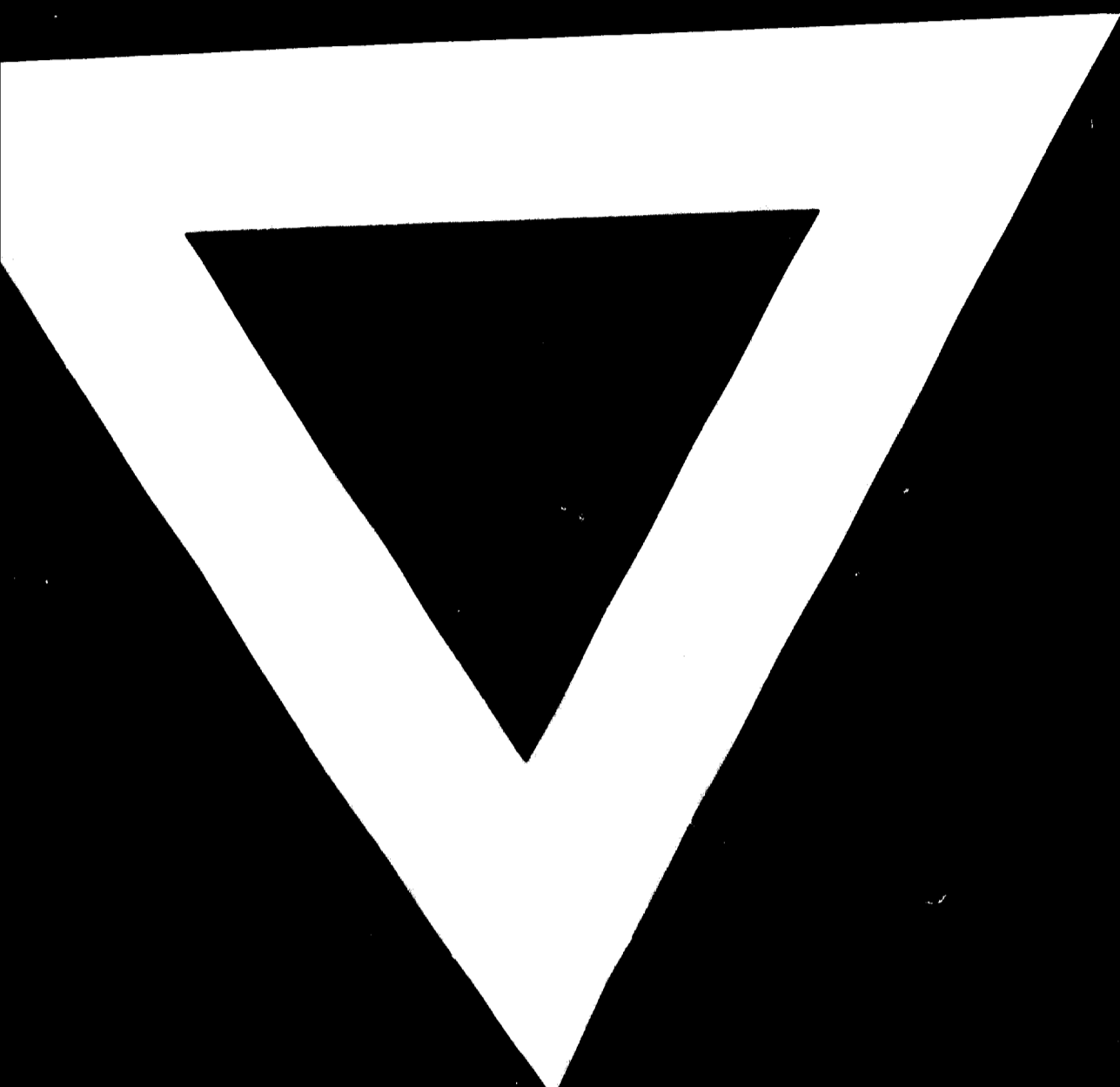
Here in Nigeria only plywood, decorative or otherwise, is popular in spite of the availability of raw materials for the production of similar boards. In some cases, however, fibre boards are used, but mainly for insulating purposes. At present, there are two plywood and veneer processing factories in Nigeria and there are plans to build more and to expand the existing ones.

10. INFLUENCE OF METAL AND PLASTIC ON THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA

As it naturally should be, metal furniture is becoming popular because of its suitability for such places as hospitals and hotels. In addition, metalwork is used as support for wooden furniture in some cases. But the product which has by far had the greatest influence on our furniture production methods is the laminated plastic of the formica type. The customer is highly attracted by its glossy, decorative, and water proof surface and would pay any amount to purchase items of furniture overlaid with it. Many furniture manufacturing companies are cashing in on this heavily because it constitutes a short course to a high rate of profit. This is because the base work on which the plastic is laid could be very cheap. The tendency is such that many furniture manufacturing companies, quite apart from using the laminated plastic for the purposes which motivated its invention, now take delight in using it on items such as wardrobes, cupboards, doors, coffins, radio and television cabinets and, strangely enough, on chair arms. The popularity of this product has resulted in an alarming decrease in the use of decorative veneers.

11. FURNITURE OF THE INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA AND POSSIBLE ASSISTANCE BY UNIDO

The future of the industry in Nigeria is very bright. Already a sound foundation has been laid and the country's richness in raw materials needed in the industry is a firm guarantee of this forecast. What we need is an exposure to the modern trends in the industry particularly through mechanization. There is need for greater awareness in the use of machinery and the training of efficient hands to man them. Through the appropriate Government agencies, the UNIDO could explore the possibility of rendering assistance in the training of the manpower needs in the industry. Apart from the need to expand the existing training institutes and to equip them with adequate machinery and tools, there is the need to expose the teachers to modern trends in the furniture industry by way of offering them facilities for short term on-the-job training in advanced countries. Assistance could also be given in the setting up of furniture industries in selected rural areas as it is now the case in the Western State of the country where a United Nations agency is rendering the assistance in co-operation with the State Government. Another area deserving of assistance is in the setting up of the wood processing factories because an alarming quantity of timber is often wasted in the process of conversion. The Federal Department of Forest Research is doing a lot of work in the growing, preservation and utilization of timbers and it is deserving of technical assistance. Rubber is obtainable at an appreciable quantity as a result of which foam and natural latex sheets are produced in reasonable quantities, thereby boosting the well-patronized market of upholstered furniture; but with the availability of large quantities of hides and skins in the Northern areas of the country, assistance could be given in the establishment of a tannery for the production of leather cloth. In view of its popularity, assistance could be given in the setting up of a factory that is capable of producing laminated plastics of the formica type. If assistance is given in the few areas suggested, the diverse and difficult problems confronting the industry in Nigeria can perhaps be appreciably reduced, and Nigeria would then be in a good position to be of assistance to some other countries of the world in the field of furniture industry.



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