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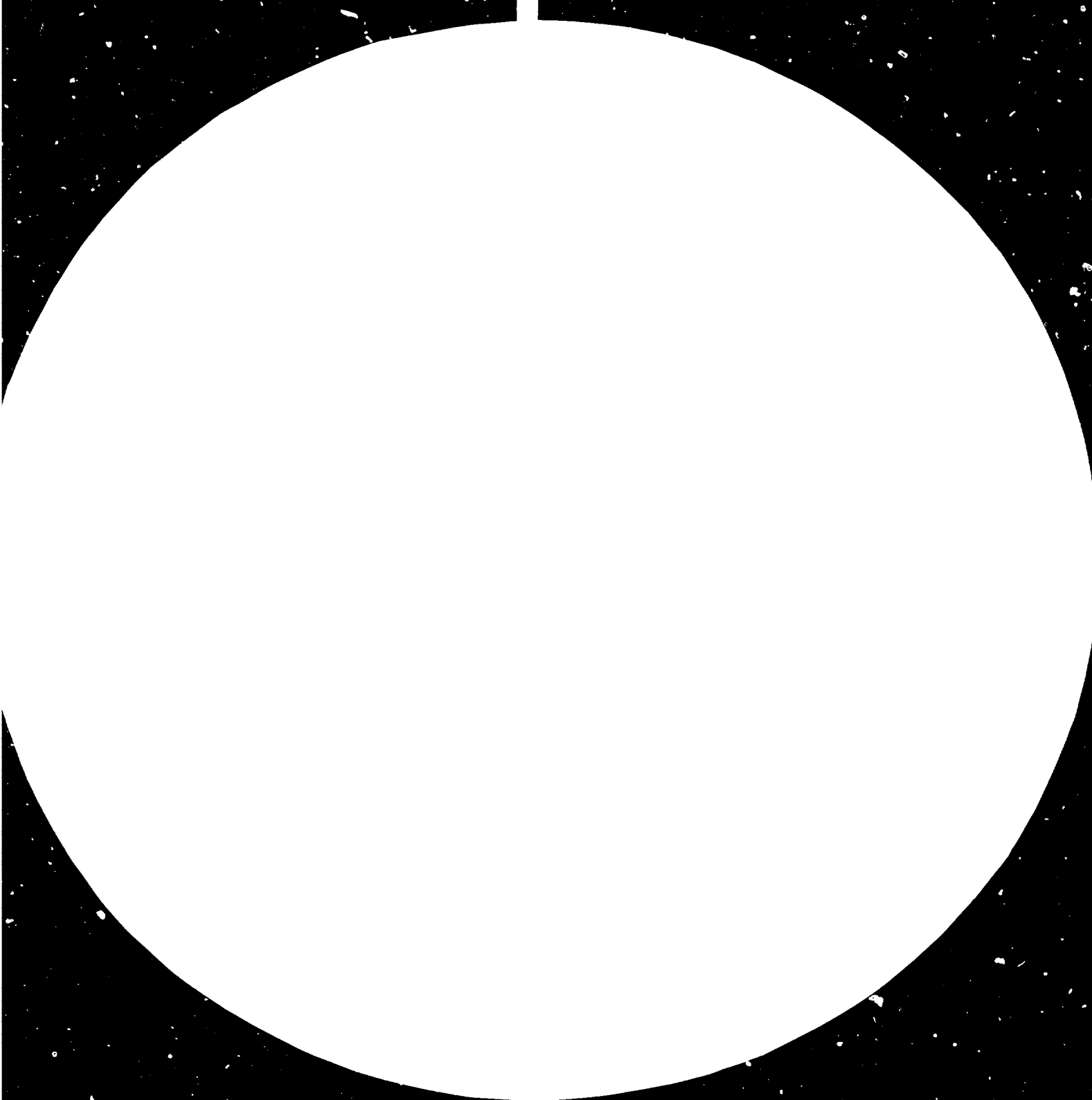
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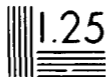
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THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE FURNITURE  
INDUSTRIES IN MAURITIUS\*

by

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Mauritius, located 800 kilometres off the eastern coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, was first inhabited by the Dutch in the 16th and 17th centuries. But it was during the French colonisation from 1715 to 1810 that development really started. At this time rare tropical timber was abundantly available from the large forests which covered most of the island. This factor highly contributed to the manufacture of antique furniture internationally reputed and known under the name of 'Meubles de la Compagnie des Indes'. Pieces of this particular style of furniture existing nowadays have an outstanding value in Mauritius as well as overseas.

This tradition of taste and quality having been enjoyed since the very beginning of our young history, the population as a whole still pays importance to furniture.

When the French left in 1810 the British took over immediately and stayed until the country became independent in 1968. Meanwhile immigrants from India, Africa and China had settled in the country. All those countries, especially France and England, influenced strongly local furniture designs and production. It is also very common to note a mixture of both occidental and Oriental styles. Due to the different origins of the population, furniture here has not yet its own identity as illustrated by Scandinavian furniture. Nevertheless, what is available generally suits our tropical and warm climate. Rattan for example is a popular material.

With the average Mauritian travelling more and more abroad, especially to European countries, a noticeable western life style is more widely spreading. This leads inevitably to a greater consideration to contemporary European style furniture. Antique and period furniture is also very much appreciated by part of the population.

Manufacturers produce all kinds of furniture (domestic, office, industrial, etc) and imports represent to date an insignificant percentage of the trade. This is also due to the very high customs duty applied on furniture importation.

The country's area is 2000 square kilometres and the population is about 900.000. There are about 1200 persons employed by approximately 400 companies of which at least 75 per cent are small. Medium-sized companies do not exist at all. The small companies are generally run by the owner-manager and have a work force of not more than 10 persons. They generally produce anything from cabinets to chairs and bedding. If the basic machinery does exist they usually have a factory space problem and the buildings are generally inadequate. They are located throughout the island. They manufacture furniture according to the client's requirements, this being due to the fact that the clients are still individualistic. But it seems that standardization is finding slowly but gradually its way. There the customer deals with the owner-manager as no facilities such as showrooms, sales service etc. are yet available.

The five or six large companies have a very different structure. Some of them have a work force of 50 persons or more (plus the salaried staff). They usually offer additional services such as showrooms, sales staff, interior designer etc. and supply either domestic or office furniture from a standard range. They are mostly located in the capital city of Port Louis. Recent mechanization and convenient factory space in adequate buildings have contributed to up-grading of the trade. This recent optic of the industry denotes a start in the field of mass-produced furniture.

In both cases, whether small or large companies, furniture is purchased directly from the manufacturers. In fact the retail trade does not exist at all and there are only one or two retailers who market products of poor quality and very low priced furniture.

Most manufacturers obtain their materials, accessories etc. from local suppliers and only some of the large companies purchase

directly from overseas suppliers. Apart from foam, some local timber and some other few things everything is imported and sources of supply are very often far away. Basic supplies come from South Africa, Europe and the Middle-East. This high dependance from abroad generally causes great inconvenience to manufacturers. Those purchasing locally find great difficulties quantity wise, price wise and quality wise. As a whole, there has been a sudden and considerable price increase of raw materials, components, accessories etc. All the machinery, tools, spare parts etc. are also imported. There seems to be no real problem in this field except that prices have gone up very much and very rapidly.

In general the local skill is of rather of a high level and new techniques are thus easily assimilated. Until a few years ago recruitment was smooth but is difficult at present. The country has known an unprecedented economic boom in 1974 and this situation has been, of course, very profitable to the furniture trade, but, on the other hand, wages have increased rapidly and considerably. This situation is also due to the recent growing importance of trade unions. Until 1974 wages accounted for approximately 30 per cent of total production costs. They now represent around 50 per cent. The average increase in wages since 1974 is around 300 per cent. Taking into consideration the various and rapid increases during the past few years, we can easily explain the high prices of furniture today.

As there are very few furniture designers most of the production is manufactured from catalogues or copied from famous models. The results are very often not so convincing. It is hoped that local designers will be more numerous, more capable professionally and attempt seriously to create models with a national identity in using locally available basic raw materials, taking into account the local lifestyle. The search for such identity should be profitable to both the trade and the country.

The growing importance of furniture in the country has been clearly shown recently by a market survey. It also meant that furniture manufacturers as a whole have not yet followed the rapidly changing trends of the customers who always desire new and better models. The trade should thus be up-graded. It should be advantageous to have much less manufacturers but each having a better organization and greater output. Design must be greatly improved because it is inevitably a very important selling argument. Manufacturing techniques as a whole should be reviewed and improved.

The Mauritius Standards Bureau, existing since some years ago, started in 1975 drafting standards in collaboration with representatives of the various sectors concerned. But, to the best of my knowledge, there has been no official decision taken up to now. It is obvious that standards applied to furniture by the Standards Bureau and Government will also contribute in up-grading the trade.

It should be advisable that all registered manufacturers join the Mauritius Furniture Manufacturers' Association. This could lead to numerous advantages such as, for instance, combined purchasing of materials, equipment etc. The representatives of the trade would then be able to negotiate on a strong basis with the responsible authorities on important matters such as, for instance, the reduction or even removal of customs duty (very high now) on imported materials etc. solely and exclusively for the manufacture of furniture.

Provided these problems be seriously considered and solutions found, the industry's future prospects should be better than today. Development in the fields of housing, schools, factories, hotels, administrative buildings etc. seem to be progressing and, in such case, the furniture and joinery industries as a whole should develop accordingly. On the other hand, renewal of furniture, either domestic or office, still continues. Furniture has not yet been competing with other consumer durable goods such as cars, household appliances,



television sets, Hi-Fi etc. More imagination from aggressive furniture manufacturers should bring the trade to a keener competition especially since there are enormous difficulties concerning imports of the above mentioned items.

I think that closer collaboration between representatives of the trade and the local authorities could also lead the industry to a brighter future.

Before ending this paper, I would like to mention some fields in which assistance from UNIDO is required:

- (a) Implementation in Mauritius with the collaboration of various sectors concerned with the solar kiln on an experimental basis.
- (b) The creation of, in collaboration of the various sectors involved, a National Furniture Institute (or school) wherein all aspects of the trade will be treated including tool maintenance
- (c) Apart from oversea seminars, regular local contacts with UNIDO consultants so as to have a follow-up programme. In this instance it should be preferable and appreciated that these persons be able to speak French.
- (d) To provide facilities to local manufacturers to participate in international furniture fairs.



