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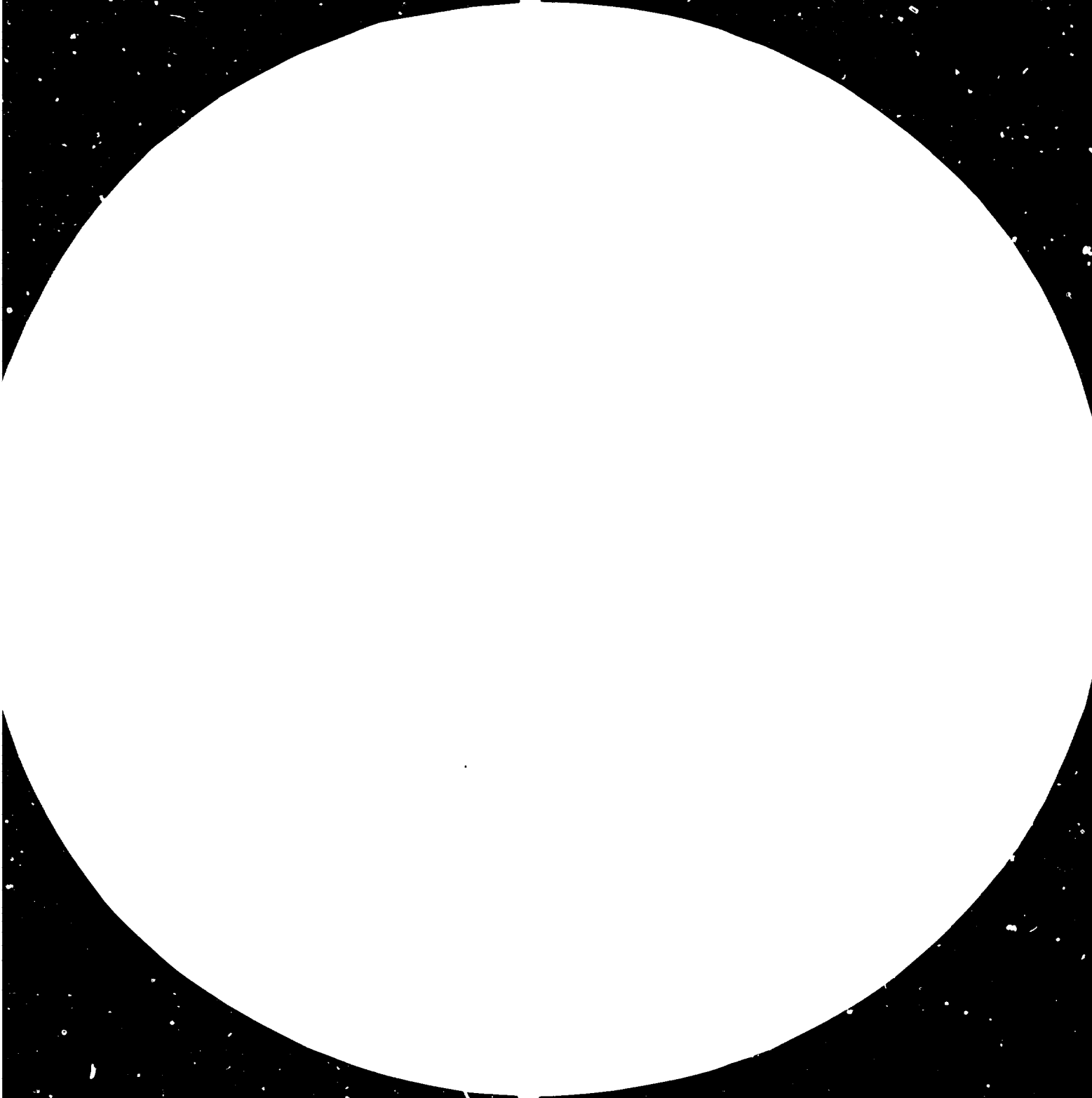
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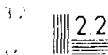
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THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY OF MAURITIUS *

by

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Mauritius is an island situated in the southern part of the Indian Ocean, located 525 miles from the East Coast of Madagascar.

The area of Mauritius is 720 square miles with a population of 875,000.

The island has both a summer and a winter climate. In the upland regions the average annual rainfall varies from 100-180 inches. In the lowlands the maximum rainfall is in the summer months, that is from December to April.

In the lowland regions it is much dryer from May to November, that is during the cool months, with occasional light showers; however, in the uplands, the dry season is less pronounced and is restricted to a short and variable period from mid-September to December.

Mauritius has a very long tradition in the furniture manufacture, dating as far back as the "Compagnie des Indes", which was ruling the island on behalf of France, in the early 18th century. The island at that time was known as "Ile de France".

The furniture manufactures at that time were mostly made of Makak, ebony, trois canelles, and other indigenous species, which are still treasured in many antique collections and Mauritian homes for both their historical interest and their great value.

The furniture made during the period of "La Compagnie des Indes" were of original local design and were ultimately known as the "Compagnie des Indes Style".

The past and present situation of our industry.

It is in fact a very ambitious matter to be in the furniture business, since this industry has always been in transition bringing new designs, innovations, elegance and comfort.

At present the furniture industry of Mauritius consists of some 400 workshops employing about 2,500 craftsmen producing approximately 99,5% of local needs. Exports of furniture is rather insignificant.

In the year 1950, Mauritius did not have the same furniture as we have today, at that time our industry was in a nescient state, most of the manufacturers were very primitive. They had to start from scratch if they were to make a piece of furniture, with practically no tools.

In the early 1950's, if a couple had to get married they would have to first think of their furniture, and to get their furniture, they would have to place their order months or even years in advance because of lack of furniture suppliers. It was very slow in meeting the feeble demand. This was due to unavailability of materials and inadequate equipment.

The materials used at that time were mostly local species; the wood being untreated since no wood treatment facilities were available. Even in 1979, there are only two firms for wood treatment and only one modern sawmill. It is unfortunate that they are of no great help to the furniture industry at large.

As for the equipment, it was very difficult to find machines, the materials to be used had to be either purchased from the sawmill or from the forest department. They had to fell the trees to haul them, saw them into planks of their required sizes, everything was done on their own by hand tools. Then the cabinet-makers had to face great difficulties, finishing was mostly done by waxing or French polishing.

Gradually in the early 1960's, the small workshop, which we can consider as small scale industries, grew up and started introducing small machines, such as bench saws and planers, thus relieving the tedious hand work of these craftsmen. At the same time, more and more plywood and wood based panels were used, schools started to use combined steel and wooden furniture, for school desks and chairs.

Since 1970, furniture industries in Mauritius started to expand tremendously and new technique and latest machinery were introduced, but there is yet still much to be done in the field of furniture and joinery industry.

Prospect of development of our furniture industry.

Mauritius has for a long time been considered as a country of the third world. On the island, where we find among the Mauritians a blending of the African style of living with that of Asiatic customs and traditions, the Afro-Asiatic furniture consisted of ancient and coarse wood assembly symbolizing the furniture of the island, which at any rate were of great help in their daily life, and now Mauritius is a developing country and has reached a standard of living that can be compared to that of some European countries. There is a great change in the house of all Mauritians as regards to furniture.

Let us visualize for example, a Mauritian family in the 1960's having the Indian style of living. At dinner, the whole family would normally be at table. But, in fact, everyone would be seated on a piece of rag laid on the ground and would hold his dish. Comparing the old day ladders with that of the modern one, we find sophisticated modern and elegant furniture which nevertheless are less appropriate. Why this sudden rapid process of changes? It is in fact the consequence of changes in the standard of living of our people and they are closely linked with the development and progress of the country.

On the other hand the Development Bank of Mauritius is granting facilities and long term loans to furniture manufacturers to improve their industries' machines and plants.

A market research study should be undertaken to determine the local and export market for reproduction furniture.

As regard to our hand-carved furniture. these pieces will bring very high prices on the foreign market due to their high labour intensitivity.

Since 1960 the population of Mauritius has increased considerably, in fact it has doubled and with the proclamation of independence, the Mauritian Government had in mind to provide work and better standards of living to its population. This had eventually led to foreign investment in factories.

The establishment of these new industries would also mean involvement of more building furniture fixtures and fittings and these must be locally manufactured for, if such goods were to be imported it would mean a severe blow to our economy, particularly in such a period of economic crisis when our Government wants to save the last single foreign penny. Hence, the prospects of our furniture industry can be said to be good, if not very very good.

Furthermore, the thriving of the industries and businesses in our country would lead to a better standard of living of our nation and this would eventually lead our people to a renovation and a new outlook in their domestic furniture and comfort accessories.

As regards to the technical side of our furniture and joinery industry, we find that a great deal is being done to promote this industry and to raise its standard, concerning the quality and design of the furniture itself. The origin of this development is the Industrial Trade Training Centre, and the John Kennedy School, both instituted by the Government of Mauritius. The rash of these institutions is to train and form young students, not keen in academic studies into skilled craftsmen. The student thus trained in the necessary trade skill is able to launch himself into the carpentry, joinery and furniture industry, and hence the furniture industry will be assured an adequate supply of skilled labour.

It can be quoted that at present the furniture and joinery industries have already reached a turning point; innumerable innovations are being introduced and brought about, concerning both the quality of the work and the material used. Actually most of the residential buildings, villas, beach cottages are being fitted with aluminium and even more steel windows and door frames are being used, but we should

not hope against hope for should we come again with a new spirit with ideas, know-how, and appropriate quality and material, we shall witness a rebirth in the wooden joinery industry that has never been before.

In other words, with the creation of firms, the extension of existing ones and the population growth more and more furniture will be required. The furniture industry with its new developments, can be said to be in good health.

Assistance required:

The following assistance that would eventually be very helpful to the development of our industry can be listed:

1. We would further need seminar on furniture industry to be held in Mauritius emphasizing small scale furniture production;
2. Projection of a technical film, during school hours, (educational television programme) supplemented with books. Emphasis should be given to the use of new and modern machines in the furniture industry, jigs, etc.
3. Hand tools, such as carving tools are rater rare in Mauritius, they should be made more easily available.
4. Training facilities should be expanded to train apprentices on workshop practice.
5. Technical assistance should be provided in the setting up of a dehumidifier kiln for the furniture and joinery industry.
6. Raw materials for furniture produced for export should be exempted of custom duties

7. A cooperative body should be established to assist the industries to buy its raw material in bulk.
8. Technical assistance and advice should be available to advise us when buying machines and plants.
9. Assistance should be provided in setting up a maintenance shop for regrinding, resharpening, carbide tipped blades.
10. Assistance should be provided in developing our artisanal wood products.
11. NO wooden houses are built nowadays, yet with the know-how and assistance together with our local wood, wooden houses would be far less expensive than the concrete ones that we are building in Mauritius.



