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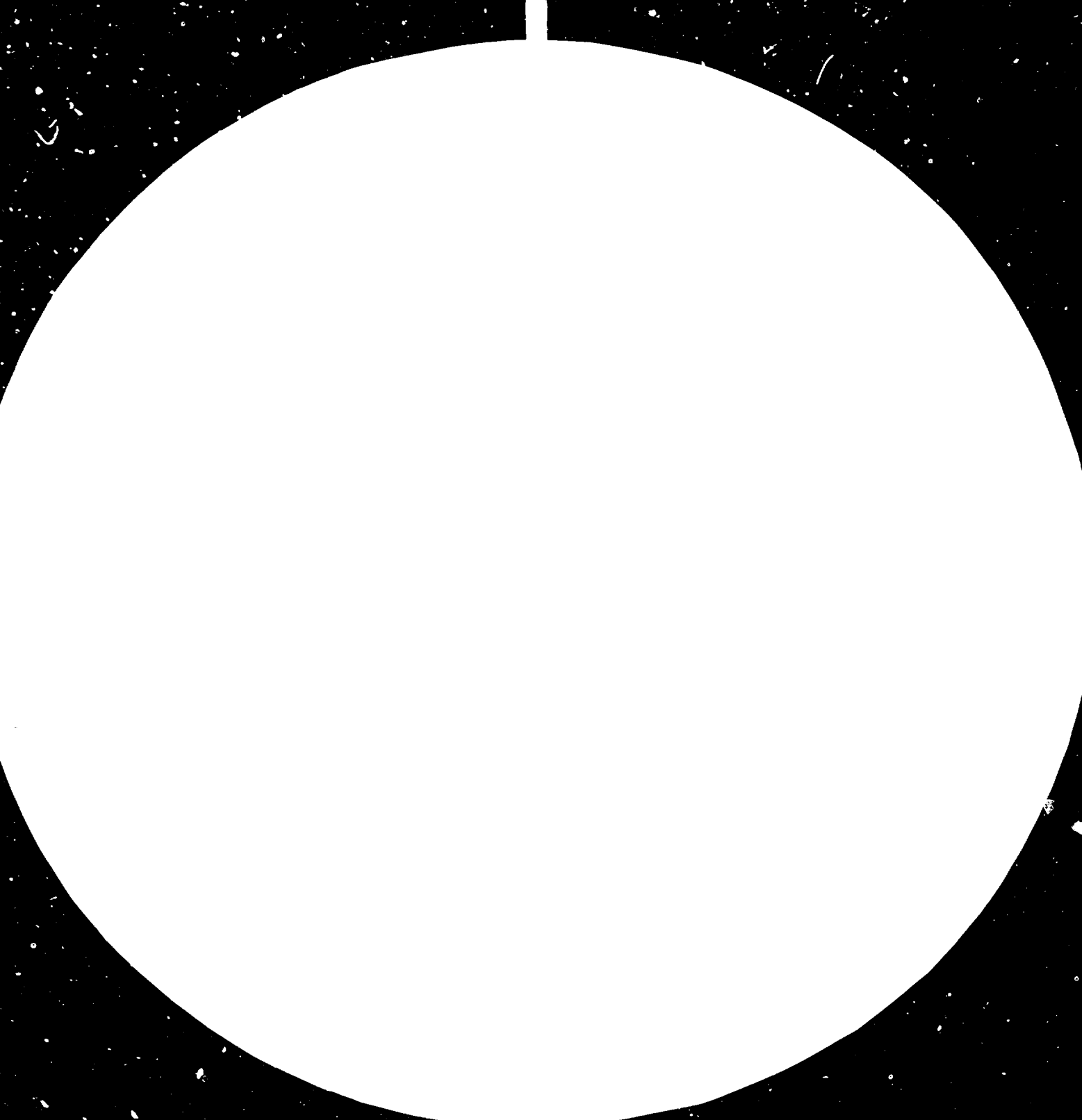
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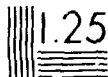
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Seminar on the Furniture and Joinery Industries,
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THE FURNITURE AND JOINERY INDUSTRIES OF MAURITIUS *

by Messrs.

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Introduction

The views expressed in this country paper might be repetitive as others from our country have participated in the Lahti seminars. We are trying, however, to accurately paint the present status of the furniture and joinery industries in Mauritius.

When thinking of furniture one immediately thinks of wood. Since man requires shelter, from pre-historic times onward we have been making use of this invaluable resource, namely, wood.

Mauritius has a total land area of 750 square miles and is an island situated in the Indian Ocean. We had no human life on our island until a few centuries ago when the Dutch explorers landed. They found the island rich in fauna and flora and trees of a variety of species flourished. When the Dutch left they took with them certain of these tree samples, one of which was ebony which is so sought after today. Shortly after that time the French landed on the isle of Mauritius. It was then that houses of wood were constructed and french traditional furniture made. Africans who had accompanied the French explorers learned to make this style of furniture under the tutelage of their mentors and later when the English finally took over, the building of furniture incorporated the English style as well.

Therefore, in short, we can say that the Dutch explored and raided the forests of the island but the French actually settled and colonized Mauritius. They cleared large forest areas and grew crops (especially sugar cane) and in 1810, when the English overtook the island, far more forest areas were cleared of trees. The English maintained that the land area occupied by forests could be put to better use (i.e. growing tea, etc.) and so ignoring ecological as well as aesthetic reasoning, chopped away at our forests. In 1968, Mauritius became an independent nation. At that time there were still some fairly good forest areas left for cultivation of the furniture and joinery industries. As earlier, though, trees were battered down and spaces cleared for more "productive" (i.e. those having a quicker

return of capital investment) crops, as in tea plantations. This development has had disastrous consequences for the building and timber industries of Mauritius. Our once beautifully rich wooded lands are now depleted and dangerously short in supply.

Even though Mauritius is inhabited by a number of different ethnic groups today the furniture used by most everyone reflects more or less the same tastes. This, naturally, depends on the economic situation of the average Mauritian. Currently we are attempting to combine the traditional Mauritian style furniture with the more modern look in furniture and so far we are getting positive comments from our buyers.

Training Facilities Available to the Industry

As for any branch of knowledge, the furniture industry requires that its members be somewhat trained professionally. Not so very long ago the traditional furniture was made by artisans however nowadays we have vocational training schools for this sort of thing. The first specialized training centre in carpentry and joinery was set up at Beau-Bassin in 1969 by the ILO and under the United Nations Development Programme. Here apprentices that have been nominated by various furniture industries are screened and then trained in the basic concepts of carpentry and joinery. This course has a 45 week duration and comprises both theoretical and practical lessons. Some 70 per cent of the time is devoted to the practical in which the apprentice studies the handling of tools and of various types of wood working machinery.

It was only recently that the Government decided that our entire economy could not possibly be based upon sugar cane alone. Diversification, therefore, became a popular concept. The building industry came into its own at this time and shortly after it the furniture and joinery industries became ever-growing. Around this time the World Bank sent a group of specialists to our country to set-up and train more persons in the fields of furniture and joinery (1975). The training centres developed in 1975 did not differ so much from those described above at Beau-Bassin.

All of these new institutes have been doing Mauritius a great service. We have now completed them by creating a Para-Static Body named the Central Training Office and it is up to the officers of this body to ensure that the training centres are running smoothly. As the demand for higher technology makes itself evident in consumer preference, we hope that the technical level of the graduated students from these institutes will meet and even rise above the need.

The furniture and joinery industries of Mauritius have become a source of private enterprise for many of our countrymen. Here again the World Bank has been extremely helpful in aiding small entrepreneurs to set up their own small-scale industries of furniture and joinery. They have helped to procure the basic woodworking machinery needed, supplied some with capital to work with and assisted in many other ways so that presently quite a number of these small businesses are in production having only 5 to 6 persons working them.

In spite of the encouraging tone of the above, though, we are encountering certain difficulties. Hereunder are listed but a few:

- (1) The main raw materials of either solid wood or panel boards are fast becoming scarce. At present the majority of the raw materials are being imported from other countries, in fact and this is indeed a great handicap since the prices for these are always increasing.
- (2) Besides raw materials, all machinery and equipment have to be imported too and obtaining spare parts for these is an impossible problem. This, of course, makes for sluggish or haphazard production.
- (3) The furniture and joinery industries are both being affected by a rising cost of labour and energy requirements.
- (4) Various auxiliary materials for furniture and joinery enterprises like glue, paints and varnish, hardware, upholstery materials, etc., are usually imported by middlemen and they are always high

priced. So naturally the cost of furniture produced with these high priced items is going to be affected.

- (5) In terms of production planning, quality control and strategies for marketing, our knowledge is meagre. If our industries put out poor quality materials it is because of the lack of know-how. The application of what our students are now learning in the technical schools has yet to be realized.
- (6) Again speaking of raw materials, we do have the potential to rebuild our forests. With the use of modern technology, also, panel boards could be produced locally (from our own resources). Many countries have been actively studying the possibilities of producing panel boards from agricultural and saw mill wastes, however, we are still unsure which test method will best apply to our situation.
- (7) At present, each and every furniture and joinery manufacturer produces products to order. There should be specialized concerns, rather, for each and a set pattern of manufacture. Competition should be encouraged but controlled, too, which is also one of our major problems just now.
- (8) Finally, short-term courses and seminars organized by our Government could greatly aid manufacturers in technical matters and altogether better management.

Even with its short-comings, the furniture and joinery industry has a bright future. We have a large human resource and a desire to achieve. Therefore with available labour and future raw materials we should be able to satisfy our own country's needs and perhaps even those of our neighbors. This could be indeed a very viable secondary industry for Mauritius. We are convinced, then, that by attending to the problems at hand and someday by-passing them that Mauritius will develop a successful and profitable furniture and joinery industry line.



