

Stereotypes, Perception and Intercultural Communication in South Africa

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L'Afrique du Sud est un pays cosmopolite, non seulement parce que des hommes blancs et noirs s'y côtoient depuis des siècles, mais aussi, et surtout, parce les peuples qu'elle abrite ont, les uns des autres, quelle que soit la couleur de leur peau, une perception fortement stéréotypée. C'est cette question qu'aborde ici Dominique Mwepu qui considère que, positif ou négatif, le stéréotype est toujours dangereux dans la mesure où il surgénéralise des représentations fausses susceptibles, si l'on n'y prend garde, d'engendrer les plus graves conflits. Cet essai courageux s'appuie sur une solide enquête, et l'on ne peut que saluer les initiatives du Gouvernement Sud Africain (évoquées dans la conclusion) de mener vigoureusement campagne pour créer, sur l'ensemble du territoire de la République, une atmosphère de paix et de sérénité entre les différentes communautés. Cet article, par ailleurs, est une contribution sociolinguistique dont le lecteur appréciera la pertinence et la clarté.

Introduction

The modern era and particularly the post- modern era have seen the merging of certain groups of population that evolved separately for centuries. Martin and Nakayama (1997:1-18) point out a non-exhaustive list of factors that have made the world population come together. I shall mention the input of technology that has removed the barriers of time and space, the change in population patterns due to migrations, the increasing dependency of national economies on the global economy. These factors and many others have increased the desire of diverse populations to live together in harmony and peace. Thus making effective intercultural communication an imperative.

These factors that have had an impact on the entire world have not spared South Africa. After the breaking of the barriers erected by the Apartheid regime, a new sun has risen on the country in the southern most part of the African continent. The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 was followed later on by the country's first multi-racial free and fair elections in 1994. The installation of democracy and the UN's lifting of remaining embargoes left the country open to the international influence. The country was readmitted to the Commonwealth and the United Nations General Assembly. It became a member of the Organisation for African Unity, Non Allied Movement and other international organisations. This reintegration had both overt and covert implications. Whilst the nation was still at grips with the challenges of internal harmony, it faced

the reality of international immigrants. Moved by the factors described above, the immigrants challenged even more the trend of intercultural communication. South Africa has to deal with issues of communication that concern South Africans and Foreigners. Yet, foreigners living in South Africa face the challenge of establishing a platform for communicating not only with foreigners from other nations but for communicating with South Africans who do not form a monolithic cultural block but a diversity covered by one generic name.

Background

Before coming to South Africa, some visitors think of the country as a land inhabited by Zulus and whites - each group speaking its own language and each being attached to their own culture. Some visitors are amazed by the diversity of people and culture. Udjo and Hirschowitz (2000) show that South Africa is inhabited by over 40 million souls distributed among four main population groups i.e. African (black), Coloured, Indian (Asian) and Whites.

Within each group there can be found a handful of cultures, languages and language varieties. Black South Africans (BSAs) are renowned for their history of struggle against oppression and segregation. The Apartheid Regime established a segregationist policy that precluded the mobility of BSAs. This was by means of influx control, group area legislation and the establishment of homeland areas out of which no one could move unless granted special permission. A Venda, for instance, could not wilfully migrate and live among Tswana people. Dewar, Rosmarin and Watson (1991:12) say the following about the Western Cape Province where this survey was conducted:

“ Large volumes of legislation were passed in an effort to ensure inter allia that the number of African people (black) did not exceed the demand for African Labour whilst other legislation granted to coloured people labour preference in the Cape Town ”

People of colour, however numerous and acculturated they may be, are treated as permanent aliens or outsiders (Steyn 1998:112).

Thanks to the freedom fighters, all South African can now move freely. As they migrate, they meet other South Africans (Black, Coloured, Indian and White) with whom they have to learn to live together. They are exposed to new cultures. They are also confronted with foreigners and their cultures; including Black Africans foreigners (BAFs).

Brunk (1996) and Peberdy (1999), writing on immigration in South Africa, highlight the fact that the new xenophobic discourse in debate on immigration is such that some South Africans see all immigrants (documented, undocumented and refugees) as “illegal aliens”. Though it is difficult to provide accurate statistics on all immigrants, it is known that they come from different countries in West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa and maybe to lesser degree from North Africa and other parts of the world. This situation makes South Africa a fertile field for the study of intercultural communication.

Notwithstanding hardships, immigrants and South Africans interact on a daily basis. They even share ties and affinities at different levels. They are neighbours, clients, colleagues, classmates, friends or spouses. How do they perceive one another? How is the communication of their mutual perception conveyed? Does a high educational status have an effect on their communication or perceptions? These questions constitute the focal points of this study, which, however is constrained in its scope to Black South Africans (BSAs) and Black African Foreigners (BAFs). It may as well point at avenues of improving communication among the two groups of population.

In-group dynamics

It seems important at this point to look at the in-group dynamics. There are important variations of cultures and habits within the BSAs and the BAFs. It should be noted that members of the BSA's group do not share the same traditions, native language, ethnic identification, religion or social class, even though they share the same nationality. The members of BAF's group are heterogeneous at all points - so much so that they do not even share the same nationality.

Observant participation has shown that BAFs who have lived longer in South Africa tend to form a block *vis a vis* freshly arrived ones. Those who have lived longer in South Africa also tend to distance themselves from those who have remained in their country of origin. However there is another interesting phenomenon among black African foreigners (BAFs). Some of them although, they have acquired the South African citizenship via naturalisation; they still show much loyalty to the in-group (BAF's group). On the other hand black South Africans (BSAs) who have strong affinities with out-group members tend to distance themselves from in-group members who hold strong views against out-group members.

It is generally argued that maybe the best way to define in-group is that the members of the in-group all use the '*we*' with same essential significance. In the context of the study the '*we South Africans....*' Or the '*especially we black South Africans....*' seems to trigger the '*they*' from the BAF when talking about the out-group members and therefore they become a group although they do not share the same nationality.

Although it has been demonstrated that in-group loyalty does not necessarily imply hostility towards the out-group nor even imply any awareness of the existence of the out-group, media reports have exposed incidences of BAFs rejection, which ranges from verbal rejection to serious physical attacks like a black African foreigner being thrown out of a moving train by out-group members.

Approach

It is always a challenging task to investigate the way communication is carried out among people who have different socio-cultural experiences. But generally, investigations in the field of intercultural communication use three approaches, i.e. functionalist, interpretive and critical. Each of these approaches has its strength and its shortcoming.

The functionalist approach, also called the *etic perspective* is founded on psychology. It believes that behaviour is predictable and that the researcher's goal is to describe and predict behaviour. Its method of data gathering includes survey and observation. It considers communication as being influenced by culture. The etic perspective recognises cultural differences in many aspects of communication (Martin and Nakayama 1997: 26-30).

The interpretive approach is also called the *emic perspective*. It is mainly based on anthropology and sociolinguistics. It aims at understanding and describing human behaviour. It sees human behaviour as creative and voluntary. The emic perspective postulates that culture is created and maintained via communication. The use of participant observation and field study is common. This perspective emphasises that communication, culture and cultural differences should be studied in context (Martin and Nakayama 1997: 30-35).

The critical approach aims at changing behaviour. It argues that human behaviour is changeable. Its method of study uses textual analysis of the media. It assumes that reality is subjective. This approach suggests that culture is a site of power struggles. It recognises that all intercultural interactions are characterised by power. The critical approach acknowledges the economic and political forces in culture and communication

(Martin and Nakayama 1997:35-37).

Rather than limiting the scope of this research to a single approach to investigate the topic, I have used an eclectic perspective that draws on the positive input of each of the approaches. The critical approach is of great value for its assumption of reality (i.e. subjective) and its assumption of human behaviour (i.e. changeable). The etic perspective seems to cast a fruitful view on the relation between culture and communication, i.e. culture influences communication. The combination of both the methods of study of the emic and the etic perspective is thought to yield effective results. The emic approach's stress on context is not to be neglected. These approaches cannot be effective without the help of observational methods (Sarrett 1994).

Stereotypes and perception

A raw definition of stereotypes will see them essentially as assumptions that are made about a person or group's character or attributes, based on a general image of what a particular group of people is like. But, Hamilton, Sherman, and Ruvelo (1992:146-147) suggest a more useful definition:

“ Stereotypes are certain generalisations reached by individuals. They derive in large measure from, or are an instance of, the general cognitive process of categorising. The main function of the process is to simplify and systematise, for purposes of cognitive and behavioural adaptation, the abundance and complexity of the information received from its environment by a human organism.... ”

This definition suggests that stereotypes are a result reached by individuals via the cognitive process. We know that the cognitive process in general and the social cognitive process particularly, depend on the way social actors perceive reality and the way they perceive one another.

In an attempt to explaining how perception operates, Singer (1987: 9), points at five major steps that characterise the perception process, i.e.

1. We observe the available data in our environment
2. We choose what data we see/hear/feel/taste and process it. This is known as selective perception
3. We define the person or the event and build expectations of future behaviour.
4. Our expectation help determine our behaviour toward the other person.
5. Our behaviour affects the other person's perception.

Stereotypes are a result of social cognition, which in turn is influenced by the perception process.

It seems important at this point to establish the difference between stereotypic perception and prejudices. Gordon Allport (1979) and Van Dijk (1987) offer a detailed analysis of prejudices. They argue that prejudices are the result of a cognitive bias. Prejudices differ from stereotypes because stereotypes can be either negative or positive, whilst prejudices are always negative. Prejudices are characterised by diverse elements, among which we shall mention that the in-group perceives all that the out-group does as negative. The in-group dismisses or distorts information that does not fit the negative image of the out-group. The in-group interprets the out-group's negative behaviour as being part of their personality rather than an incident due to a particular situation. The in-group tends to exaggerate negative character of the out-group's actions. Minor differences between the in-group and the out-group tend to be perceived as major ones.

Prejudices often lead to discrimination and discrimination often leads to racism. Negative stereotypes may hinder the flow of communication between members of the in-group and those of the out-group. Positive stereotypes create a false impression of *the other*. They may facilitate communication but this can face a sudden blockage people discover negative elements in each other's behaviour.

Survey

The sample was made of 18 people were selected randomly. Eight of the respondents were foreigners, each coming from a different country i.e. Zimbabwe, Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Swaziland, Botswana, Zambia, Rwanda, and Tanzania. Ten respondents were Black South Africans originating from different provinces. Both male and females were represented. Their age varied from 20 for the youngest to 46 for the oldest. All the respondents had lived in South Africa for at least 6 months (uninterrupted). Data were collected by questionnaires coupled with structured interviews. The questionnaire included both general to specific questions. General questions looked at respondents' general perception of the out-group and the stating of differences between the in-group and the out-group. Specific questions examined the out-group's behaviour, talking, eating, approaching of the in-group members, helping its in-group members, helping out-group members, working, greeting, expression of love and expression of anger. Additional questions inquired on whether some of the characteristics could hinder communication and how communication could be improved.

Table 1 and Table 2 present in a schematic way the perception of BSAs and BAFs towards the out-group.

Table 1

Black South Africans' (BSAs) as perceived by Black African Foreigners (BAFs)

Respondent No	General	Behaviour	Talking	Eating	Approaching	Helping in-group	Helping out-group	Working	Dressing	Greeting	Expression of Love	Expression of anger	Thinking
1-	Good people	Appropriate towards prosperous black people	Women are out going but men are shy	Normal	Women are out going but men are shy	Communal	Insecure	Lazy for school work but hard working for money	Like looking smart	Sociable, can greet any body	Easy going. Shy out door but free in door	Temperate, Patient	Not fair minded but race and colour minded
2-	Rude and violent	Not good morals	Straight talkers	Normal	Direct	Individualistic	Ill treat other blacks	Hard workers	Not proper, tight	Selective	No compassion, lack of self control	Beating or killing	Up to date, bright
3-	Ignorant	Show off	No Gossip, loud	No measure	No manners, lack of tact	Individualistic	Some are kind, not caring	Very lazy, always complaining	Expensive, competing	Hug any body	Movie-like, love=sex	Kill, no self control	Narrow and limited
4-	Good, unformed	-	Proud of their languages ,traditional	Fine	Too westernised, some lost their roots	Individualistic	Mistreat	-	-	Respect their culture	Women seem more open	Violence, Revenge, Death	-
5-	Good, violent	Strange	Do not love us	Strange	Fine	-	Non existent	Not hard working	Inappropriate	Very kind, respectful	Hypocritical	Direct	No depth
6-	Not welcoming, artificial	Individualistic	Confident	Impressionistic	Terrible, rude	Survival of the fittest	More distant	Some are dedicated but like easy ways	Very clean, buy quality	Fair, some are indifferent	Youngster are different, not openly	Outrageous, easy fighters, not peaceful	Some are naive, actually the majority is
7-	Cold and distant	-	Proud of their language	Love their food	Reserved	-	Helpful	Co-operative, expect you to know more than them	Conservative, Eurocentric	Humbleish	Not romantic	Lose control	Broad
8-	Depend on individuals, 65% are bad people	Depends , Women are powerful, can't be mastered	Loud, as if they are fighting	Eat much, like meat	Some are respectful, some show no consideration	Yes	Expect you to have more, cannot help	Some are hard workers some playful	Men no, 80% women are in fashion	No discrimination but use mother tongue	Hypocrite, can't open fully	Can kill you	Not good, think for present plan no future

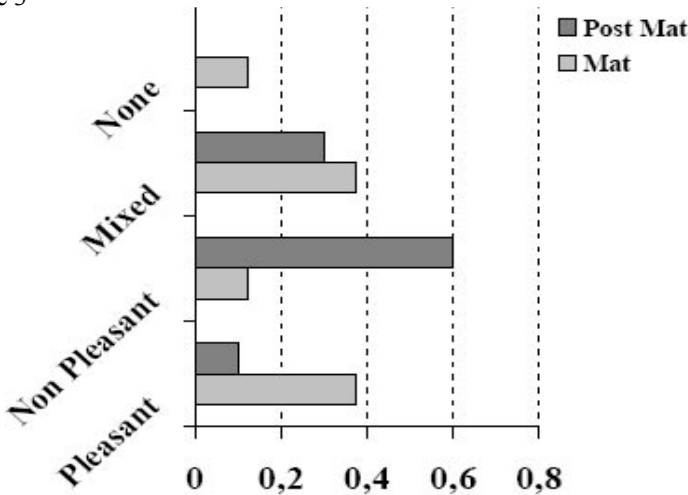
Table 2

Black African Foreigners' (BAFs) as perceived by Black South Africans (BSAs)

Respondent No	General	Behaviour	Talking	Eating	Approaching	Helping in-group	Helping out-group	Working	Dressing	Greeting	Expression of Love	Expression of anger	Thinking
9	Always friendly, Most of them are good	Right, friendly Some are aggressive and rough	Accent Good communicators	Do not eat much A lot, big dishes	Good	Good	Yes	Hard working	Normal	Fine	Loveable, open	-	Positive, nice and good things
10					Free	Good	Not much	Hard working, goal and objective minded	Some normal, some strange	Like hand shake, just ask 'How are you'	Free, unfaithful	Aggressive, don't keep quiet	Broadminded and somewhat intellectuals
11	Some are drug dealers and bring crime	Bad	Loud	Nothing wrong	Kind	Good	Some help, they give jobs	Hard work	Nice, clean, Nothing wrong	Okay	Open, tender care, some abuse women	Like a lion, they can even smash a car	Okay, good, positive
12	There are intra-group differences	Nigerians are crooks (quite)	Not clearly hrs of the accent	Same type of food as South Africans	Quite respectful	Sense of community	Quite helpful	Hard working	As ordinary South African	Normally	Bit caring	-	Normal
13		Can behave well	I can understand, English not good (uneducated)	Like buying nice food	Good way, care good heart	Not discriminatory	Treat us well	Very hard working, Skill, not corrupt at work	Expensive, nice clothes, presentable	Nice, greet every body	Know how to treat a lady, care a lot	Aggressive, can kill, take time to calm	They think and do know, don't reason, stubborn
14	They pretend a lot	Rude undisciplined	Speak loud, not good English	Funny, disgusting	Good way can approach people	Willing to help, have a good heart	Some undermine us,	Hard working, skills, business minded	Wear name tags, like coloured	Friendly	Good	Can kill you when angry	Think better than us, bullies, cant take argument
15	Skilled people	Disciplined, well mannered	Some loud, some softly	-	Good way, acceptable way	Willing to help their brothers	-	Hard working, no particular job	Funny	Good people	-	They get mad, stay away	Well, positively, ambitious
16	Some are good some are bad	Scary sometimes	Okay	-	Okay	Yes	No	Like to work	Nice	Do not greet	Use money to express love	Aggressive	-
17	Irresponsible	Good	Hard to understand	Good	Very good	Very good	Good	Like working	Nice clothes	Good	Offer presents	Keep quiet	Not bad
18	I don't like them	-	Very funny	-	-	-	-	Organised	Very clumsy	Greet when they feel like	Well	Can't express anger	-

sample, 10 had a level of education beyond secondary school (they were labelled ‘Post Mat’) and 8 had a level equal or below secondary school (they were labelled ‘Mat’). These two groups were compared to determine whether the level of education does influence perception of the out-group and the communication of the perception. The general perception could be illustrated by the respondents’ answer to this broad question: ‘What can say about BSAs /BAFs?’ to the results appear in table 3.

Table 3



- **Mat** designates the group of informants whose highest educational level was inferior or equal to matriculation i.e. secondary school leaving certificate
- **Post Mat** designates the group of informants who have a tertiary education
- **Pleasant, Unpleasant, Mixed or None** refers to respondent’s general perception of the out-group. The perception could be perceived by the out-group as positive or negative, sometimes the respondent said both or gave none

Pleasant comments can be illustrated by the answer of Respondent No.9, i.e. ‘BAFs are always friendly, they are good [nice] people’. Unpleasant comments can be illustrated by the answer of Respondent.

No. 18, i.e. ‘BAFs are irresponsible’. Mixed comment can be illustrated by the answer of Respondent No.5, i.e. ‘BSAs are good, they are also violent’.

The highest level of unpleasant perception was expressed by people with higher educational level (Post mat). During the interviews, I noticed that people with tertiary education always constructed their arguments. Therefore using communicational strategies to decrease the effect on the listener who can a member of the out-group. I also noticed that they made special efforts to contextualise and limit the scope of their opinion. In a conversation, a constructed argument can limit the shock of a negative perception expressed and open room for further debate or analysis of the element under consideration.

The answers provided by 2 respondents to the same question can serve as an illustration.

Question: ‘ What can you say about the way BSAs help their brothers?’

Respondent No 1 (Post Mat.)

‘They [BSAs] have a sense of communalism. You can see that in the university residences when their brothers visit them, they can a room with 3 people. I think this is due to fear of what their community will say if the don’t help their brothers. But the community will not condemn them when they do (something) bad to a foreigner’

Question: ‘What can you say about the way BAFs help their brothers?’

Respondent No 2 (Mat)

‘They are good at helping their brothers’

Hinderances to intercultural communication between BSA and BAF

It was interesting to note that 39% of the respondents thought that the differences between BSAs and BAFs could not hinder communication between them. The reason mentioned included the universality of mankind (i.e. people are people) and ability of human beings to adapt over time. But 61% of respondents mentioned a number of reasons that could hinder effective communication between the 2 groups. A close examination of these elements can help improve intercultural communication between the 2 groups.

Language

The issue of language concerns both the aspect of language choice and language variety.

BSAs find the languages used by BAFs strange to them. The range of languages used by BAFs range from French or Portuguese to Yoruba or Bambara. Whilst BAFs appreciate that BSAs value their language and that they are respectful and tend to greet everyone without distinction, BAF complain that the out-group members use their language too often. Language matters.

If language-related issues are not well understood, they can be a source of frustration. It is important to note that BSAs evolve in their home socio-cultural environment. Therefore assumption of similarity wins over assumption of difference. In consequence this assumption dictates the choice of code. When a BSA meets any black man, he naturally addresses the person in local dialect (Xhosa) and expects the person to answer in the local dialect. When the person remains silent or replies in English, the BSA can either fill offended or disappointed. However, more educated people and people in academic milieus tend to assume that everyone is different. Thus, they tend to use a neutral code or a more inclusive language, which is English. Yet, the current rhetoric of language planning in South with the promotion of 11 official languages tend to advocate the use of African languages rather than English (Alexander 1989)

When both group members use English, there appears problem of misunderstanding due to the accent, the regional variety of English, first language interference, errors and fossils. Even, speaking English accurately cannot always solve the problem. Whilst using the “RP” i.e. Received Pronunciation can be highly prestigious in school environment, what is mostly needed outside the Academia is South African English. Certain fossilised language errors serve as markers of socio-cultural identification. Ignoring them could marginalize the speaker. Differences in language use affect the syntax, the morphology, the phonology as well as the semantics (Hyme 1974), (Lass 1995), (Mesthrie and Tabouret-Keller 2001).

Cultural dis-ease

Drawing on Barna (1983), cultural dis-ease can be understood as a state of discomfort

due to high anxiety provoked by cultural encounters. As Respondent No.9 remarked ‘...BAFs like to be alone, they [only] socialise among themselves’. Cultural dis-ease makes people close up on themselves. It sometimes makes them feel the place where they are is unpleasant. Positive attitude to the out-group culture and adaptability as well as acceptability of the out-group culture can lessen the effects of cultural dis-ease.

Cultural dis-ease combined with self-fulfilling prophecies can lead to misinterpretation. Many BAFs feel very uncomfortable with the question “where do you come from?” They see in it evidence of their unwanted presence.

Yet even a fictional work such as Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* and Travellers ‘recites’, tell of a long established custom among the people of Southern Africa to ask where are you from as normal part of the salutation formula.

Uncertainty

Respondents No.6. said, ‘ Because the out-group members are humble and expectants, I censor myself and I am not sure of what to say or what to do’. Both expectative and predicative uncertainty characterise the interactions between BAFs and BSAs. On the one hand, they do not know what the out-group expect them to do or say and on the other hand they cannot predict that expectation. This may cause high anxiety and preclude communication fluency. But as people get used to one another, the degree of anxiety and the level of uncertainty will decrease. Gudykunst (1998:21-25) provides tables that can help assess the level of Uncertainty and Anxiety.

Stereotypes

Both positive and negative stereotypes are dangerous for intercultural communication. The fact that BSAs can be misled if they consider all BAFs as hard working people, tender caring, skilled, broadminded, friendly and disciplined. In the same manner viewing all BAS as respectful, confident, straight talking people, not gossipers, proud of their languages and smart can be disappointing.

Negative stereotypes associated to BAFs fit the universal attributes of minority groups, they are not very different from those for example associated to Turkish in Germany (Apitzsh and Dittmar 1987) i.e. Job competitors, criminals, abuse out-group women, sell drugs. Negative stereotypes associated with BSAs include; they neglect school for entertainment, they don’t like white people, not welcoming, violent. These characteristics are not the characteristics of the group but they are characteristics of certain members of the group. Some members of the group can have these characteristics and some others may not have them. Stereotypes may be stupid judgements [verbatim] (Leysens et al. 1994:206). Therefore, members of each group should be considered individually

Conclusion

By means of an eclectic perspective, combined with observational methods, a study of perception was attempted. Perception was considered as an aspect of social cognition, i.e. a process helping to determine ‘how people think about people’ (Gudykunst and Gumbs 1989:205). The sample showed that more educated people depicted a higher frequency of unpleasant perception as compared to lesser-educated ones. Nevertheless, the former tended to always substantiate their viewpoints. This could account, though partially, for lesser open conflicts between the BSAs and BAFs of higher educational level.

The study has also helped determine sites of potential conflicts between the two groups i.e. language, uncertainty, cultural dis-ease and stereotypes. Both positive and negative stereotypes are seen as dangerous. The process of stereotyping involve both an

overgeneralization and the assumption that an individual is just like anyone else in his culture or group, i.e. all the many people in that culture can be put in one mould (Jandt 1995: 8).

Brislin (1991) points out that there are more subtle forms of bias, such as those based on people's gender, national origin or occupation. It was also noticed that the male members of both groups said that they found the female members of the out-group to be more open or more respectful than the men. Yet female member of an in-group found that the dressing of out-group female members was inappropriate. These are examples of subtle issues that have to be dealt with by means of debate aiming at raising cultural and language awareness.

The issue of intercultural communication between BSAs and BAFs still hold a peripheral position in research on intercultural communication in South Africa. The acceptability of foreigners' presence is still a topic for hot debate in certain conservative milieus. If politicised, it can be disastrous for the many foreigners living in South Africa. But the government of the Republic of South Africa is trying hard to create an atmosphere of peace and serenity for South Africans and foreigners. These efforts include the National Campaign against Xenophobia in 2001 and the International Conference on Racism and Xenophobia in 2002.

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