

# AFRICA TIME

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The Africa group and Multiculturalism network hosted an Africa Day celebration on 25th May in London, this follows on from recent events organised by the group, including the firm's first drinks reception in Lagos and our second annual energy conference in Nairobi.

External speakers included David Butler, CEO of the South African Chamber of Commerce and Inua Ellams, an international poet, playwright and performer.

Inspirational freelance journalist David Wilkins, attended the celebration and shared with us his impressions of the evening in his below article.

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By [David Wilkins](#)

The London boardroom of Herbert Smith Freehills has often played hosts to serious meeting for discussion about investment, property rights, diversity and inclusion with international clients. However on Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> May it was kitted out for a very different occasion altogether. To celebrate Africa Day, guests were invited to enjoy a glass of wine or two, to network and hear tales of the incredible opportunities and diversity that make Africa a truly unique continent. Masterfully organised by Juliet Zalewski who works in Herbert Smith Freehills's business development for emerging markets and the Multiculturalism network, the evening had a serious theme too. It was designed to persuade investors that Africa is an emerging market and that this was the time to invest in it. To say as Stephane Brabant (from Herbert Smith Freehills Paris) was to state later on, today was not Africa day, but now was Africa time.

After a prelude for a drink and to network, the evening kicked off with an opening address by Peter Leon of the newly opened office in Johannesburg South Africa. For myself, a journalist with a rudimentary knowledge of business and legal affairs, the excitement in the room was palpable. Mr Leon's own joy at Herbert Smith Freehills finally investing heavily in South Africa, was plain to all. He began by explaining the origins of Africa Day. On 25 May 1963 in Addis Ababa, 32 African countries signed an accord to unite and make Africa a group that solved its own problems and made its own way. Although this was 54 years ago, it marked the day when Africa chose to throw off colonialism and chose to become an emerging market in which businesses could invest. Mr Leon said what an honour it was that Herbert Smith Freehills was now investing in his own country of South Africa.

After a grave introduction the atmosphere changed completely when the playwright, poet and former graphic designer Inua Ellams took to the stage to discuss his latest work. *The Barber Shop Chronicles* tells the story of the unique African barber shops, where men gather to discuss life the universe and everything but where the answer is not 42. A place of hard truths, humour and stories, each country and tribe is a unique tile on the mosaic that is Africa. Roars of laughter gusted from business professionals and layman alike as he told of his journeys across Africa to find material for his masterpiece. Why do South Africans drink so much alcohol? How he was nearly thrown out of a barber shop in Uganda for confessing that though Nigerian he not only had no wife \*(let alone 3) but he had no current girlfriend either. Though hilariously funny, the story also had some very serious undertones that shone through. Why the wounds of apartheid South Africa remain raw 27 years later. And why many Zimbabweans feel a sense of loyalty to President Mugabe. But each sketch ended with a hash tag of "If Africa was a ... it would be."

Having ended much too soon, David Butler took to the podium. How could he possibly compete with such a fantastic performance? However he was mistaken as he brought a more serious tone to the proceedings. Having been raised in Uganda and worked as a in risk assessment for many years Mr Butler's speech focused mainly on Southern Africa, which was fitting as he is the CEO of the South African Chamber Of Commerce. His presentation was a reality check on the claims that South Africa and Africa itself were dangerous places. Yes, it was true that there was a problem with the Islamic fundamentalists in parts of Africa. But the rise of Boko Haram had prompted West African countries to combine to fight them, and showing a level of cooperation never seen before. As for Daesh in Southern Africa (the Manchester bombings in everyone's minds) they did not even feature as a force there. However South Africa had problems of its own, yes it had been credit downgraded to junk status, and uncertainty about the government was certainly cause for concern, but at the same time the situation was far more complicated, with the judiciary being able and willing to call the president to heel, and the constitution still being as strong as ever.

This left the floor to Stephane Brabant to close the evening with an optimistic assessment of Africa's potential. Not only was this Africa day Stephane said "but this is Africa time", the time when Africa will rise to become a mover and master of the world and the world of business, and development. A true emerging market in its own right.

He told the guests that investing in Africa was indeed a risk. But that without taking a risk there was never any way that a business could move forward. Indeed he argued eloquently that not to invest in Africa was an even bigger risk, otherwise there was a chance of being left behind.

Here the evening ended with time for people to circulate, network and swap business cards. Undoubtedly several wine bottles were emptied, good food was eaten and many jokes made about the presentation on Inua Ellams' play which thanks to his speech has almost certainly sold out. But the serious elements of the evening still stick in the mind. It was not just a celebration of Africa Day, this year marked the dawning of Africa Time. Invest now, before you're left behind. What happens next? Where will my investment in Africa lead me? Only time will tell.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**David Wilkins** is a qualified journalist with a heart for African affairs though he also enjoys international affairs (mainly the Middle East) and politics. He has worked in Cape Town, South Africa for the Big Issue Magazine's African addition and on several contracts with BBC Radio Guernsey as well as BBC radio Lincolnshire. More of his work can be found on [davidwilkinswords.blogspot.co.uk](http://davidwilkinswords.blogspot.co.uk).

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