



© Jessica Hilltout – *Tavfig*, Kusawku, Ghana

Jessica Hilltout

Amen

Jessica Hilltout, a Belgian-born, nomadic, and über-talented young photographer, loves Africa. This love drips off of every beautiful page of her upcoming magazine/book, *Amen*, a collection of photos she took on an extensive journey throughout Africa documenting football. *Amen* will be published this summer—just in time for the World Cup in South Africa; she will distribute it among the people she photographed along with as much football gear as she can gather. What follows are Hilltout's accounts of her insights and adventures while cruising the continent in a VW Beetle with only her camera gear, her notebook, a companion, and of course, a football pump.

Clayton Maxwell: How did you get the idea for this project? Were you a football fan before?

Jessica Hilltout: I wasn't a football fan particularly, but I am in love with Africa. My father who is a big footie fan suggested we tackle this project, that I capture the spirit of football in my way. He has given me a huge amount of support and he is doing the design of the magazine *AMEN*.

CM: I'm curious to know about how you did the research. Africa is a big continent. Why did you choose the places that you did?

JH: Yes, its very big which is why I chose ten countries, and the spirit of football is present everywhere, whether it be in countries that have a good national team or not.

I thought I'd rather do fewer countries and really dig into the subject and get to know people than to cover more countries superficially. I did no research before leaving. It all happens once you're there and depending on who you meet. I just needed film, my Hasselblad plus 80mm lens, some good shoes, an old little lap top, a mini digital printer, digital camera for action shots, my log book and football, and a pump of course. I've travelled quite a lot on the continent

and so I knew mostly what to expect. I wanted to travel by car to have more freedom to drive around and stop where I wanted. Plus, I had the kilo of film, my logbook, and mini printer to give away prints, etc, to travel with! I travelled with a friend who was working on his own project nothing to do with football. I decided for East and West Africa.

My father had a Beetle [car] in Cape Town... perfect low profile car. We equipped it with a roof rack and that was it; covered Mozambique and Malawi in it. I'm tackling the townships of South Africa right now. In West Africa, I bought a Nissan Vanette in which I could sleep. Ghana, Togo, Ivory Coast are all big football countries (in terms of possibly qualifying for the World Cup.) But the passion for football is just as big in Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger. I wanted to do Nigeria and Cameroon but Nigeria is a bit tense. Police give you a lot of hassle. I decided against it. It's all about finding a good place to stop and then spending a week there. It's all a lot of gut feeling.

CM: Did you know any of the people before or were you just meeting them for the first time to photograph them?

JH: I didn't know anyone before I left. All those in my pictures I met along the way.

I arrive in a place; find a good person to work with. Someone who loves football, knows his area, likes the project and especially not a "guide" by profession. Again, it's gut feeling. And I met some wonderful people without whom I would never have gone as far as I did in terms of entering people's lives, and them trusting me and giving me all their good energy. They were people from all walks of life: students, a teacher, a teenage, trainer. I worked with: Anton, a football trainer in a village in Mozambique far off the beaten track; Delito, a fourteen-year-old who loved football and accompanied me to a far away village – we slept in local huts and he helped me cook; Ganiyu, a teacher in Tamale, North Ghana, a soccer lover who spon-

sors a team of street kids (he took me to tiny villages); Sani, a trainer on a much more professional level who devoted his life to his little club Anokye Stars; Atsou, a student at university who introduced me to all his friends and the rest of footie life in Togo.

CM: Was it ever challenging to gain your subjects' trust, to find a way into their lives and their stories?

JH: Being white and a photographer are two things that go against you, two things that scream money. Yes, you have to prepare the ground for people to trust you, convince them that you're not here to make money on their back, convince them that I am me and different from others. Getting on their level, explaining the project over and over. Talking about life in Africa, about life in Europe, the good and bad things in both countries. Taking interest in their life and especially football, going every morning to training to watch them... etc... making them feel my presence.

CM: What kind of stories did people tell you – did they stay mostly about football, or did they open up into broader life stories?

JH: There was not always that deep a communication apart from with the guys I was working with... it was more in the feeling of well being, the laughs, the giggles. Most of my subjects lead simple lives... farming to eat, family for love and fun, football to forget all the hardships of the day. In cities communication was no problem, in villages I definitely needed my friend helpers. The other thing is that although in most of my photos I go in close and like detail... during almost every shoot you are surrounded by ten to fifty curious people, I'm desperately trying to isolate my subject and get a look in the subject's eye which is deep and not distracted by others. There are very few moments alone one-on-one with people; the Western idea of having time alone doesn't exist there.



© Jessica Hilltout - Congo, Anokye Stars, Kumasi, Ghana



© Jessica Hilltout - Anokye Stars Player, Kumasi, Ghana



© Jessica Hilltout – Raymond, Bantera Methodist Primary School, Kumasi



© Jessica Hilltout – Odwa, Cape Town Stars FC, Litha Park, Cape Town



Etoile Brillante d'Eburnie's cup. Abidjan, Ivory Coast



Vento Inha's playing field. Pacasse, Mozambique

CM: The way you represent the balls they seem more like precious treasures than tied up plastic bags or socks – they don't seem to represent poverty and lack. Your images make them come alive. What was it like photographing them – did their owners enjoy it? Did they seem to get why you thought they were beautiful and/or worthy of photographing?

JH: The big challenge of this project was to photograph people, objects, etc. that are essentially poor, but that have another energy as well. Yes, it was essential to portray them with a precious, unique, individual, proud, strong, beautiful feeling. I collected balls during my trip; I have about twenty-five. I would exchange hand made balls for quality footballs. When people didn't get why I was photographing the balls, I would take the rice bag off the roof, take out all the footballs, lay them out, and say, "Look how different and unique they all are. This one is from Mozambique and this one from Togo." The nametags of the players were attached to each. They were fascinated. But how much they understood, I don't know. I think half of them thought I was mad.

Again, I had a lot of explaining to do, especially when it came to feet. What I wanted to show was the fact that through thick and thin they all play football with what they have – and proudly. They are tough, nothing stops them, and that's what I explained to them. Once they had understood, people would bring me into their homes or take out their shoes to show me a unique pair that had lasted for years or that they had decorated or repaired. I always shot feet or shoes from the level of the subject, never looking down; I would lie on the ground and spent sometimes fifteen minutes exploring a pair of shoes. At first they all laughed, then they would be part of the game, helping me tilt the shoes to find the best angle.

CM: The ball photograph titled *Sambo's Sock* is particularly amazing. Can you tell me more of the story behind it?

JH: *Sambo's Sock* is one of a series of three sock balls – "desert balls", as I call them. The images were taken in a village called Bombofa in Burkina Faso... one hundred kilometres from Niger and fifty kilometres south of Mali. There is very little rubbish in these places and so people either use old pieces of material or old socks to make balls. The style of the ball totally fits the dry desert environment.

CM: You begin the series with this quote by Alain de Botton: "Humanity can be divided into a minority of people who can do a lot with a little and a majority who can do little with a lot". Why do you think it is so remarkable to see people create something meaningful with so little?

JH: Basically, it's wonderful to feel places untouched by consumerism. Because I come from a world where you are often faced with people having everything they need, if not more, and not doing much with it. The more we have, the more we want, and we often take it all for granted. We live in a consumer society which is all the opposite. Deprivation drives us to a process of appreciation. I'm on slippery ground here saying that. I obviously don't want to come across like I'm saying Africa is poor and people are happier... as me, the white woman, who only spends the time she desires there and then returns to the land of everything. It's obviously not my reality, and that life is tough. But, I believe that there are things to learn and observe everywhere. Africa may be poor but with their situation comes a wisdom and appreciation of the small things in life that is unique to them. They are ingenious in their ways of making do with what they have.

CM: I love the beautiful sparseness of the goal images – so often in your images the goal is just two posts standing alone in the middle of nowhere, with no object, building or anything at all around it. Tell me about finding these places – did all of the soccer fields you found possess such a bare quality?

JH: A lot of them did, but not all of them. I'm obviously attracted to a certain look in my images. I want the goal to look like the king, or a temple. If there was too much going on in the background it distracts from the subject and message. I must have seen over 500 goals during my trip. It's incredible. Even small villages would have at least 5 fields, even if they were the size of normal fields and numerous other little playing grounds where any two bricks or debris act as a goal. Before matches in villages the grass is cut trimmed in the field, all by hand with a machete. One problem I faced due to lack of research, but I would never have known, is that because it was the rainy season football fields are often converted into farming fields, only to become a playground once the season is over. So I was there at a time when footie activity had slowed down in the countryside. It was still very much present though.

A lot of the things I'm discussing produced very opposite emotions – of sadness for the toughness of life, but of strength for the solidarity, power, acceptance. We so often see images where we pity Africa; I want to show that they have amazing strengths. In fact, the human being has an amazing way of dealing with any situation they are in and adapting to survive.

CM: In the intro to this series, you write: "Africa is a land where the superfluous and superficial seem stripped away, a place where the fundamentals shine through." Your photos beautifully communicate that message. How much of that quality do you think is determined by the fact that most of the people you photographed simply don't have extra money to buy things, so the fundamentals aren't clouded by stuff? If they had more money and more material goods, do you feel like the fundamentals would still shine through?

JH: Yes, I think it's very much to do with the fundamentals not being clouded by things. There, I was far from chain stores, and the seemingly omnipotent hold



Stocking ball. Kuyasa. Cape Town



Thandile, Cape Town Stars FC, Litha Park, Cape Town

of advertising on beings. They have just the essentials; it's them, the nature and their various ingenious ways of survival, all blending in one, all harmonious, a kind of circle of life. My friend Ganiyu said to me, "Happy yourself where even you are, no matter the conditions happy yourself."

I wanted to show another kind of beauty. One that has nothing to do with perfection or flawlessness (which is essentially bland). A hidden beauty, revealing the dignity of the ordinary in the poetry of the every day. A hymn to human ingenuity in a land where machines are not yet king, where life still has a soul. There is good and bad in everything, I want to capture the good on this continent.

CM: Why do you think football is so important in Africa – does it mean something different there than elsewhere? Does the sport mean something different than it would, say, in Brazil or France?

JH: I think football is one of the most democratic sports. David Goldblatt said, "Football is available to anyone who can make a rag ball and find another pair of feet to pass to."

And yes, the meaning is different in Africa than in France... Brazil probably has more in common with Africa. I think football is the opium of the poor. After a long day in the fields, they can concentrate on the ball and forget their troubles. One ball can give pleasure to many. Two teams, a referee, endless spectators. Also about ten to fifteen years ago, coloured players were discovered in Africa (Eto'o, Essien, Drogba...) and sent to play in European teams. This created a dream to strive for, gave them hope to one day leave Africa for other lands, the ones they see on TV. Yes, here I am talking about the fundamentals that to my eye shine through. But the reality is that they all dream of leaving to Europe and America.

CM: Please tell me about the football clubs that you photographed. Are most football fans in one? How

are they organised – for example, are they exclusive? Based on age and talent? Are they very competitive? I'd love to know more about the culture of the football club.

JH: I concentrated on what I would call grassroots football. There are all sorts of clubs at different levels. From professional national teams, to more local clubs, school teams, village teams and just kids kicking around. The village teams have very little equipment apart from a ball but they take pride in the game. They play amongst each other and sometimes play against a neighbouring village... In Chicome, the team told me they sometimes walk for two days to go and play a match against another village. Football here is not a profession, it's a way of disconnecting from life for the time of a game.

Then there are teams with a little more money; they have their team jerseys and shorts that the captain looks after – only to be used on match days. All clubs have their manager, secretary, captain, rules, and punishments, etc., even if they aren't professional. When it comes to boots, each uses what they have. A same team could have a guy barefoot, another with old sewn boots, another with socks only. There is no judging of each other. The importance is to play well.

CM: In Mandela Park, some of the players wear what look to be pretty nice shoes and some don't. Is there a status issue in own shoes? Does it ever create problems that some have them and others don't?

JH: It doesn't seem to... I never saw tension about that. People just accept what they have and get on with it.

CM: Please tell me about the title.

JH: *AMEN* is a four-letter word, same in every language. It means, "So be it." This is very pertinent to Africa in terms of the fact the people accept their fate, with pride and dignity, tough as it may be. It was

also the word I heard the most during the trip. When I would leave groups I had been working with they all said they would pray for me that the world would see the images and feel the message. Then they said AMEN.

My dream is to find sponsorship in terms of equipment – boots, balls, jerseys and socks. I left my car with a friend in Ghana on purpose, at the end of this year I will fill it up with footie equipment to go back and give to all those who gave to me and trusted me and made this project come to life. I gave away seventy balls during the trip, but would like to be able to do so much more.

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Exhibitions:

Cape Town , Expo Design Indaba, February 26-28
Cape Town, Joao Ferreira Gallery, June 09 – July 24
Johannesburg, Resolution Gallery, June 05 – July 31
Brussels, Le Botanique, June 10 – July 18