

# **THE MIRACLE OF MULATOS**

## **A Centre for Planetary Future in the Colombian Jungle**

by Martin Winiecki

Translated from the German by Marina Köhler

### **SUMMARY**

The peace community San José de Apartadó is a rural community of about 1500 inhabitants living in the north of Colombia. They do not belong to any organisation, do not carry weapons, and are bound together through an unswerving ethic of peace. Yet they are in the way of the government and multinationals who want to push forward globalisation, and are therefore being brutally fought by the state. In the past thirteen years they have lost nearly 200 community members who were killed by the military, paramilitary and guerilla. In December 2009 a core group moved uphill to the site where Luis Eduardo Guerra, one of their leaders, was murdered. Here they want to build a place for planetary peace work. To do this, the forest needed to be cleared and materials brought up the mountain. In spite of the most difficult conditions, in two months of construction they completed a new centre for about 100 pilgrims to participate in an event of the “Global Campus” in February 2010. The Global Campus is an international university founded by the Peace Centre Tamera in Portugal for the education of peace workers around the world.

What was it that gave the community members of San José the strength to persevere and to build this centre in such a short time despite all the cruelties they have seen? It was the decision to set an example for peace under any circumstances and to create a model for the possibility of survival for all threatened peoples. Furthermore, a deeper friendship between them and the peace village Tamera in Portugal had developed. Members of San Josecito say that through the community that lives in Portugal they have rediscovered their own vision of community. I participated in the pilgrimage and I will now report about it in detail.

### **REPORT**

After an eight-hour march through the jungle, over steep mountains and past paramilitary and guerilla, we are wearily arriving at the tiny hamlet Mulatos, which is now just around the corner. Our Caminata de la Vida, the “Pilgrimage of Life” is slowly reaching its destination. We are campesinos and indigenous people, political activists from Colombian cities, and international peace workers from many countries - among them a big group from the Peace Research Centre Tamera. Children, elderly people and mules accompany us. While we are walking through the lush nature, joyful excitement is in the air. Sometimes it is almost as if we were in paradise. But we are not. We are constantly reminded: we are not to leave the paths. The forest is full of mines.

Many of us have been here before. We walked the same path almost two years ago. Back then it was the rainy season, and endless mud and repeated crossing of a river reaching our chests took us to our physical limits. Compared to that, the ascent today is easy.

We are the participants of the Global Campus, a global peace university that was initiated by Tamera in Portugal. The peace community San José de Apartadó has invited us.

Just a few days before the Campus started the peace community told the participants that the venue had changed. The campus will now take place in Mulatos – a place high up in the mountains, accessible only by foot – and not in the main village San Josecito with a school, community kitchen and simple shelters. It is the place where five years ago, the then leader of the peace community and his whole family were killed in a massacre by military and paramilitary. From our last visit we still remember Mulatos as a remote site at a river with a small memorial chapel and a small shed, not more. How will it be possible to host an international peace university here – including accommodation, food and education? From some of our fellow pilgrims we hear hints about a new centre in the middle of the jungle. As we finally come around the river bend and see what has been built here, we are breathless. Who would have imagined such a thing! There is a whole village. A sign at the entrance says “Welcome to the Peace Village Luis Eduardo Guerra”. In the space of only a few weeks, the

farmers and refugees, men, women and youth who are members of the Peace Community have succeeded in clearing three hectares of forest and have built shelters for 120 people, a school house and a kitchen – many hours away from where they live. They did all this constantly threatened and surrounded by armed groups, far off any roads and without money. They must have worked night and day. But still: to us it is a pure miracle - the miracle of Mulatos.

What gave them the strength? What was their motivation? What made this miracle possible? They say: “Here we want to manifest the vision of a planetary community of peace that leaves the situation of war behind. In the years to come, we want Mulatos to become a lively Peace University for Latin America.” We - as international guests who have seen the miracle of this place, this power of vision and the people’s courage to build a new future - we think that this could become a model for Colombia and furthermore a model for all suppressed peoples in the world.

In the following we want to enter the story of a miracle – the miracle of Mulatos and the miracle that is necessary to show the way towards hope everywhere that violence currently prevails.

### **WHAT IS THIS PEACE COMMUNITY?**

San José de Apartadó is situated in the north of Colombia, in one of the most violent regions of the country. Not only is the region rich in natural resources and agricultural diversity, but also its proximity to the border of Panama is strategically valuable because it connects Central and South America.

North American corporations have plans for big economic projects in this region. They want to exploit and ship natural resources and industrialised agricultural products from here. Dry ports (“puertos secos”), that are planned close by are part of a geostrategically important traffic concept: an addition to the Panama Canal to bring the much-wanted economical upswing to Colombia.

For decades there have been uncounted expulsions and massacres of the peasant farmers, who by their mere existence stand in the way of the plans of the multinationals and the government, and the state offers no protection. The history of this region is an example of the merciless violence with which the globalisation of markets is being enforced in large parts of the world.

Under these circumstances, some of the leaders of the community San José de Apartadó met more than thirteen years ago. They thought about what they could do to protect themselves against the eviction. Together with Padre Javier Giraldo, a human rights activist who supports many persecuted activists and communities in Colombia, they came to the conclusion that they had to leave the system of the state – not only was the state not protecting them, it was even fighting them. They decided to form a peace community, a neutral village, in which all inhabitants were to undertake non-violent resistance against the warfare of any armed party. In March 1997, after a peak of violence by the paramilitary, 1350 campesinos of the various hamlets of San José de Apartadó gathered to sign the constitution of the peace community. Those who join commit not to co-operate with any of the conflict parties, not to own weapons, not to consume drugs or alcohol and to contribute to the communal work-life. These principles are the core of their communal identity and thus their basis of survival. In the course of the thirteen years of their resistance, almost 200 community members have been killed by paramilitary, army and guerilla. Yet, they keep on going. They live in simple wooden huts between chicken and pigs. They work hard on cocoa and banana plantations. They face the armed forces in rubber boots and with bare hands. The only thing they have is their power of vision, their solidarity and the power of community.

With this they have been able to resist many threats to date. They have also survived subterfuge: in March 2005 the police occupied their main village San José de Apartadó, allegedly to protect them. The fact that a police station undermined their basic principle of neutrality nearly broke the community. Besides, they had experienced that even state groups participated in violent actions against them. How could they trust the police – or any other state organ?

The peace community acted with great determination: they gave up their settlement. 300 people left their homes, moved a few kilometres downriver and built a new provisional village on a meadow: San Josecito – the small San José. That's where they are still living, under the simplest conditions. San Josecito has become the main village of the community.

Still, the leaders of the community cannot dare to go into the nearby city Apartadó without being accompanied by internationals. In the official controls at military or police posts, members of the council are repeatedly pulled out of the cars and arrested without trial or directly murdered at the roadside.

The members of the community have been declared outlawed by the highest authorities of Colombia: the media and politicians of the country – above all president Uribe – publicly slander them as terrorists. They claim that the village is a guerilla camp. Any visitor can see that the opposite is true. These voices, however, are not heard in the Colombian media scene.

The constant threat has made the inhabitants realize how essential it is to trust each other and to rely on each other. Careless conduct with information may cost lives.

There is nobody in San José de Apartadó that remember times of peace. Even before the civil war that has been going on during the last 40 years, there was violence, murder and dominance by big agricultural business. And still, right here in this country, where basic human rights have long been disrespected, they have reconquered their moral right, their right for a humane life.

They do not do this for themselves but for all who are suppressed. San José de Apartadó has become a pioneer of a whole movement: about 20 communities in Colombia have declared themselves to be neutral peace communities in this sense and build non-violent alternatives. Some of them even created the so-called “University of Resistance”, an alternative system of education of the peace communities. Their urgent wish is to offer the youth a perspective that goes beyond the illusion of a wealthy life in the cities and that supplies them with peace knowledge.

The peace community was awarded the Aachener Peace Prize in 2007 and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in the same year. International attention is their protection. Networks of solidarity were formed in Italy and Spain. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, Peace Brigades International and Fellowship of Reconciliation have been constantly present for years and offer as much protection against attacks as they can.

In 2005 Luis Eduardo Guerra - one of their visionaries and leaders - his wife, his little son and another family were brutally killed by the military and paramilitary. Luis Eduardo embodied, more than almost any other, the power of the community to always take one more step. His murder was such a heavy blow that the community almost fell apart. Gloria Cuartas, who as the former mayor of Apartadó had supported the peace community from the very beginning, started an emergency call to all her friends to help the peace community in this difficult time.

One of the initiatives that offered to help was based in Portugal. Years before, Gloria Cuartas, a human rights lawyer who had become known beyond the borders of her own country, had come to know Tamera, in a time of heavy crisis in her tireless fight for better living conditions in Colombia. Her attempt to find a political solution by negotiating with the guerilla and paramilitary had failed. During her visit to Tamera, a community that works on a real living model for a peaceful future, she met a different kind of peace work. This gave her strength to continue in spite of all losses. She said to the Tamera community: “You continued the very dream we had buried a long time ago.”

After the massacre of Luis Eduardo she called Tamera to suggest that two representatives of San José come to Tamera. And they did. It was the beginning of continuous mutual visits, of a constantly deepening cooperation and friendship between the two communities.

Since 2005 Sabine Lichtenfels, co-founder of Tamera, has repeatedly led peace pilgrimages “In the name of Grace”. In October 2008 the first Caminata de la Vida, a pilgrimage in the name of Grace, went through San José de Apartadó to draw international attention to the peace community and its overall situation.

The pilgrimage with up to several hundred participants unexpectedly turned into an existential trip. After heavy rainfalls they had to cross deep rivers at night-time. Many participants were absolutely exhausted. At a stopover, members of the peace community were taken hostage by the paramilitary, but set free again later. The group was alarmed: they found themselves in the middle of the jungle, surrounded by armed groups on a collision course. Eventually, the situation became life-threatening when members of the peace community wanted to use the presence of the internationals to directly confront the paramilitary. The mediating supervision of Sabine Lichtenfels prevented further

collisions. She gathered the pilgrims underneath a big tree. Surrounded by armed forces, who were hiding in the bushes, they prayed for reconciliation.

Many pilgrims felt that the prayer had also reached the paramilitary. In this moment a big peaceful snake showed up on the trunk of the tree - a scene like the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. It was like a sign; as if nature wanted to give the human being a hint of the paradise that is meant to be here. The threat disappeared.

They experienced a similar moment in Apartadó when the military wanted to stop a procession of the peace community. Sabine Lichtenfels mediated between San José and the brigadier Hector Peña. When a few weeks later he stepped down it was said that he had not been able to fulfill his aims in the region. Others, however, see a connection with the encounter with a woman of the “opposite side” who abrogated the usual pattern of violence through her living compassion.

The subsequent first educational meeting of the Global Campus in San José became a platform of deep understanding between peace workers of different cultures and continents. Intense geistic\* exchange created an idea of a shared global identity. It was the beginning of a planetary community of people from all over the world who wanted to leave the system of violence and work for an alternative free of violence.

When two of the community’s visionaries, Eduar Lancho and Padre Javier Giraldo eventually visited Tamera themselves in 2009, they decided to establish a future-centre for the global community within their peace community. The place they chose was the most difficult and significant they could have chosen: Mulatos.

## **WHAT IS TAMERA?**

The Peace Research Centre Tamera is based on over 30 years of radical research for peace. Dieter Duhm, one of the geistic leaders of the German student revolution of '68, had left behind his conventional life and also Marxism, because he couldn't participate in any structure that was based on violence and exploitation of others any longer. He met Sabine Lichtenfels and others to found a project of a new kind for a different notion of revolution. They knew that resistance and political appeals alone would not put an end to war but that new, real living systems were necessary. They wanted to create a peace model that was not in any way based on violence and hypocrisy. Besides all the questions of architecture, ecology, water, food, technologies and so on, the community soon discovered the inner fields of conflict in relationships amongst humans.

Here, in the inner human domain of love, sexuality, trust and community, all communities and attempts to change the world for a better had so far failed. For exactly this reason they had to find a real perspective in this field. They had to find answers. What does a social system look like where there is no more jealousy when a beloved one opens up to someone else? How can the underlying rivalry about power, money and sex be turned into trust and complementarity? They wanted to effect the changes they wanted to see in the world in themselves. They knew that they would not find new answers using old methods - therefore they were looking for new methods to reveal the human underground. They succeeded in doing the exceptional: to create a sustainable community.

In 1995 Tamera was founded on a spacious terrain in South Portugal - the first global pilot model for a planetary peace culture. Since then Tamera has become an international community with 160 people. In the frame of their peace university they work together with their founders Dieter Duhm and Sabine Lichtenfels on the human issues to dissolve the collective human trauma and to deeply reconcile the genders. Besides that a self-sufficient system for sustainable ecology and water landscapes is developed as well as the so-called “SolarPowerVillage”. This is a new kind of solar technology for villages in sunny areas of the world, developed by the inventor Jürgen Kleinwächter.

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\* Translators' note: The noun “Geist” (adj. “geistic”) is used throughout this text to better reflect the notion of “intellect, spirit and soul” as expressed in this German term.

## **THE IDEA OF THE GLOBAL CAMPUS**

Tamera cooperates closely not only with San José but also with peace initiatives in Israel/Palestine, India, Tibet, the US and in other countries. Tamera has organized political pilgrimages and relief campaigns in various crisis areas and educates peace workers. These global connections gave rise to an idea. Through connecting future-projects, inventors and education centres all over the world, the idea of the Global Campus was born: a worldwide peace university with bases on all continents where young people can learn the comprehensive basic knowledge that the various projects have been gathering in decades of research. The knowledge about community and the design of self-sufficient models is most important. In theory and practice this knowledge is studied in a combination of modern science, social learning, technology and ecology. The idea is that students of the Global Campus will be qualified and powerful co-workers for the creation of planetary future-centres of peace all over the world. They take part in a world project for a future without war.

Padre Javier Giraldo and Eduar Lanchero visited the Peace Research Centre Tamera in Summer 2009. They asked many questions and they were reminded of the basic thoughts of their own community. They didn't participate in a conference where you meet to talk about peace and then separate again, as usual in Europe, but they entered a completely new living model. They saw that the people here, members of a wealthy society, had given up their own careers to voluntarily live under very simple and experimental conditions.

They met their own dream in Tamera: the vision of a peace community in which humans and all other beings live together in a biotope of truth and trust. It is the dream the people of San José have always known intuitively. They regained their faith, which was sometimes hard to keep in their difficult situations.

## **MULATOS – A PLANETARY CENTER**

Back in Colombia they spoke to their community about their experience in Tamera – they had returned with new strength. The whole community came together and discussed, “Shouldn't we make a fresh start? What about making the original idea reality and building a completely new place?” Seen rationally, it seemed quite impossible, given the circumstances they were living in. But the power of the dream that they had rediscovered in Tamera prevailed.

In early December 2009 they began to build Mulatos. The new planetary centre was to be built at the spot where Luis Eduardo had been killed. Here they wanted to inaugurate a university for Latin America. In early December there was not much more than a shed and Luis Eduardo's cross. Now there is a growing village with the potential to become a center to address the social and technological questions of the most exploited countries in Latin America and in other regions of the world.

## **EDUCATION 2010**

In Mulatos we can see the emergence of a global community. Indigenous people, campesinos and internationals mingle in the jammed Kiosko, the brand-new local assembly hall. Many languages are spoken simultaneously. Exactly five years after the massacre of Luis Eduardo and his family, Eduar Lanchero says: “The community has been resurrected.” Here the vision of Luis Eduardo himself is emerging. He knew that the politics of death could not be overcome with ideology but only through new ways of life where men and women transform the capitalistic reality into a reality of life. Five years after his murder, this place of horror has turned into a nucleus of new life. In the first university meeting of the Global Campus in Mulatos, foundations for a future perspective are laid. Padre Javier Giraldo: “A time bomb is ticking in the communities: the youth are tempted to move to the cities by an illusion of wealth, which doesn't exist in this sense. For years this has been one of the biggest challenges for the peace communities in Colombia. What does a future perspective look like that is more attractive than the temptation of the cities? Many young people leave the communities. They came as children with their parents and they don't have an inner connection to the principles.”

What kind of an education can deal with the heartfelt questions of the young people and offer answers to their longing for a meaningful life?

On a material level the concept of the education comprises simple technologies that aim to simplify the everyday life of the campesinos and to help them to become self-sufficient. With this comes knowledge about independent health provision, sustainable ecology and construction as well as the first forms of a new kind of technology. One group built a simple solar dryer for cocoa beans. For the members of San José, an independent health service is essential for survival, and a political step. The people of the community have often been refused medical aid by the local hospitals: a perfidious instrument of power that has caused many deaths. A health team now gathers the regional knowledge about healing plants of the indigenous people and campesinos. It will be summarized in a manual that can be used beyond the peace community. Gardens for healing plants have been started in the various hamlets of the peace community; old knowledge of how to treat many illnesses meets a modern holistic concept of healing.

In the context of the Global Campus a perspective of abundance arose – an abundance that is no longer based on consumption but on cooperation with nature. Together they developed the complete plan of a potential self-sufficient village: it includes the supply of clean drinking water, self-grown fruits and vegetables, construction using local materials, a bio-gas facility for environmentally friendly energy supply, etc. In June and July 2010, co-workers from Mulatos will visit Tamera to set up a bio-gas facility together with co-workers of Tamera. They will learn how to set up and run such a facility to later be able to bring this knowledge back home – a basic element for a self-sufficient energy supply. At the same time, stones in which they chiselled symbols for a new peace culture were set around the chapel of Luis Eduardo Guerra. In this way a sacred space is created that is independent of any particular religion. Everyone who comes here is to be reminded that he is part of a bigger creation and that he has to re-learn to cooperate with it. Christian and indigenous elements influence the work and complement each other without conflicting with each other.

Sabine Lichtenfels says that in a new culture of peace no one aspect of creation will stand above another, and neither will aspects be excluded. Peace is the secret of balance and cooperation between all forces and beings.

On the village square many people surround Claudio Miranda de Moura, a beaming samba musician from Brazil who is also participating in the Global Campus. With relentless joy he teaches the children and youth new songs. He lives in São Paulo in one of the most brutal slums in Brazil. Many stories he hears here could be his own stories. As a young man he saw how many of his friends were killed. On a deeper level Claudio knows that there is no difference between the youth of the peace community and those who join the military or paramilitary. He says: “The youth need a kind of orientation. If they don't have parents they join people they admire, such as the military. I want to show them something more attractive so that they don't have to take part in the violence.” In the slum, he built a centre for music, poetry and creativity to help the young people to get off drugs.

For some days the youth of the widely scattered villages meet in Mulatos. They study together, they transform the school house into their youth centre and learn about the cultures of the world. Slowly and shyly they begin to express themselves. They talk about why they are in the peace community, about the influence of the media and culture in Colombia, and above all they say that they want to be part of a new culture, that they want a different kind of life, that they are no longer willing to project on the Western world. Ever more women start to talk. We hear moving stories of the losses of their husbands and children and how they afterwards struggled to stay faithful to their love. It is devastating to see how much these women have suffered in their lives. Still, they do not only talk about their pain. It is surprising how many of these women even in the most difficult moments encountered a loving power they call God. It is the power that has enabled them not to seek revenge but to contribute to the peace community. Over many years the women have silently kept the social basis of the community together. They let the men hold the speeches and lead the community. Now they find encouragement and support to dare to come forward more and to raise their own voices in solidarity.

## **PROSPECTS**

At the end of the first meeting of the Global Campus in Mulatos, Eduar Lanchero describes the vision for the peace village Mulatos in three years: a place that creates peace every day, a village in which people are filled with the power of community that unites them in a relentless commitment for peace. He says, “ It is our challenge to become new men and women and to create real alternatives in which the future is not the future we have been taught, but one that is created by all of us.”

Now Claudio Miranda talks about the changes in São Paulo that he has experienced since he came back from Tamera last summer. In Tamera he had the vision to turn his slum – in Brazil a symbol of the drug war – into a lively peace community. He calls it “Favela da Paz”. The certainty grew in him that if it would be possible to turn a place that is known for its brutality into a place of lived peace then all of Brazil would sit up and take notice – and even more, that then there would be a model for slums all over the world.

Back in São Paulo he was showered with offers of help which he could never have imagined before. His vision suddenly turned him into the magnet of its realisation. Full of hope and activity, driven by the radiance of Claudio and his team, the transformation of the slum began.

I am very moved by all this. Here in Mulatos, in the Colombian jungle the miracle of a new power of peace has begun. This miracle needs our support, the help of the global public. It needs financial, technical and journalistic support. It needs further international attention. Therefore, a pilgrimage will take place in Bogotá this year in the context of Global Grace Day, an initiative of Sabine Lichtenfels, on 9th November. Please help.

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### **Book recommendation:**

**Sabine Lichtenfels: GRACE.** Pilgrimage for a Future Without War.  
ISBN 978-3-927266-25-4, Verlag Meiga, 2007

If you want to support this work of the Global Campus, please transfer donations with the keyword “**Mulatos**” to the following account:

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