

Wimachtendienk, Wingolauchsik, and Witahemi:  
The Order of the Arrow



Thomas Waltz  
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*On the cover: A Gabe-Shi-Win-Gi-Ji-Kens Order of the Arrow Lodge Patch. Note the "WWW" in the fire (Wimachtendienk, Wingolauchsik, and Witahemi).*

One of the most common and easily recognized mythic references is that of the initiatory rites. Initiations and other ceremonies have been a crucial aspect of cultures the world over for thousands of years. As scholar Mircea Eliade describes initiations in his writings, he notes that many ceremonies involve predetermined structures, isolation, suffering, and then an attainment of a higher status or greater knowledge. My own personal initiation experience was no different.

One July many years ago, as a young Boy Scout, I had the first of many wonderful opportunities to go to summer camp. I had dreamed of this event for many years. Finally, the week arrived and I embarked on this journey with many of my fellow scouts for a period of great fun and personal growth at Northwoods Scout Reservation.

After a week of fun, demanding activities like hiking, camping, sailing, and orienteering, Friday night finally arrived. Sure, this meant the end of the week of camping, but it also meant the exciting closing campfire! After dusk had succumbed to night, campers from all over the lakeshore made their way to the fire bowl using only their night vision. I shivered in expectation, knowing that a special, symbolic campfire would be taking place.

Shortly thereafter, an Indian wearing dark face paint, moccasins, brown fringed leather pants, and a flowing canvas tunic slowly made his way to the fire from the woods in the rear of the bowl as others, similarly dressed, slowly walked down the center aisle between benches of curious scouts. Two Indians stood tall, faced each other, and one,

putting his arm on the shoulders of the other and asked, “Our Chief seeks admittance into your circle.” The other Indian, comprehending the request of the stranger, grants access to the fire. While I sat in the audience, spellbound, the visiting Indian proceeds to tell of his quest for new members for his Order

Who were these Indians? What purpose did they serve? Why did they come to our humble campfire? I was wondering this in awe as the story was told. “We will now seek out those who have been seen as worthy by their fellow scouts to join us on our journey,” stated the one Indian. Additional Indians with lit torches slowly and silently made their way through the rows of scouts, stopping behind certain ones, standing stiffly and solemnly with hard facial expressions. After every qualified scout had been selected, the Indians silently led them out down a small trail, the glows from their torches slowly fading away into the darkness of the forest like a second, much smaller sunset.

We did not see the scouts led away by the solemn Indians again until morning. When asked about what had happened that night, their answer always remained the same: “Sorry, I can’t talk about it.” The mystery of these Indians was overwhelming to me!

What I would find out later is that the Indians I saw at the campfire were my own regalia-clad fellow scouts who were members of the Order of the Arrow, a service organization that is a part of the Boy Scouts of America. The Order is based on the culture and traditions of the Lenni Lenape (Delaware) Indians. Inductees are elected by their peers for their service, dedication to scouts, and positive leadership potential to join this elite “honor society” of the Scouts. After being “tapped out” at a campfire, all

members are first required to take part in the Ordeal, a weekend-long initiation ceremony that stresses solidarity, service, resourcefulness, and courage.

About four years after my first summer camp, I was “tapped out” by the members of the Order of the Arrow. It happened at a troop Court of Honor (award ceremony) at Camp Kiwanis, about two miles from my house. I had an OA member in Indian garments stand behind me with his flickering torch, and I followed him and some other new inductees from my troop down a path where we were told when and where our initiation would take place.

In early June of that year, I and a few others from my troop departed again on the journey to Northwoods. At dusk, we set out on our Ordeal. Each inductee was allowed to take only a bedroll consisting of a sleeping bag or blankets wrapped in a tarp and instructed not to talk from here on out. Led silently by an older scout in Indian attire, we set out on a hike around the lake. Stopping after a while in a remote part of the woods, we were met with a small band of Indians around a circle of fifteen small fires, representing the twelve points of the Scout Law and three points of the Scout Oath. A figure in ceremonial dress (Kichkinet, the guard of the circle) stood by and instructed us as to what this Ordeal would require, stressing the principles of Wimachtendienk (Brotherhood), Wingolauchsik (Cheerfulness), and Witahemi (Service). When this ceremony was complete, our Elangomat, or “friend” led us on.

After darkness cloaked our party, the leader silently pointed to an isolated spot along the trail, and the inductee directly behind him immediately fell out of line and set

up his bedroll there, all alone. The row of silent scouts continued hiking down the dusty, isolated path. Farther on down the trail, the next scout would be sent off into the gloomy woods alone. While quietly observing, I was finally instructed to fall out, and I found a level spot amongst the dry leaves and fragrant ferns. I laid my sleeping bag directly on the leaves, pulled the tarp completely over my body, and slept.

The next morning, I was awoken by an Elangomat when the great expanse of sky was still gray. The gag order was still in effect – silently, scouts appeared from various areas of the surrounding woods and assembled to cook our paltry breakfast. This meager meal, supplied to us in a brown paper bag, consisted of a raw egg, a waxed paper cup, one precooked sausage link, and a fresh orange. The egg posed a challenge to me because all that I had to work with was an open fire. This test of ingenuity prepared us for the day – some successful scouts, myself included, placed the egg in the paper cup of water, hard-boiled it in coals and were able to eat it. Others cracked their egg open, placed it in a hollow orange peel, and were disappointed when the egg spilled into the fire along with their hopes of a full stomach.

After our cleverly cooked breakfasts, my group of prospective Ordeal members trudged silently down an overgrown trail to start our day. Throughout out the morning, we worked in silence setting up musty, heavy, canvas wall tents for that summer's campers to use. Since speaking in any form was forbidden, we devised a primitive system of grunts and hand gestures to communicate. Slowly, the cumbersome tents were set up and we continued with various other projects. Lunch was brought to us at a vacant campsite around noon – a plain baloney sandwich with white bread and a half of an orange. With the pangs of hunger still gnawing at my stomach after lunch, my group had

a short break and hiked down a leaf-strewn pathway to the lake to perform more service. Now the Elangomats had us tow large plastic sections of the floating dock into place at the waterfront with aluminum rowboats. It sure was difficult to remain cheerful while tired and hungry, but the Ordeal members stuck it out and performed their assigned initiation duties.

Dinner that night, after a whole day of hard manual labor, was a single cup of chicken broth. Still hungry, we performed even more service, definitely getting a feeling for hard work, self-reliance, and courage. I knew that tonight, we would have the initiation campfire, our hard work and suffering would pay off in the form of pride, and I would become a full member of the exclusive Order of the Arrow.

That night, after dark, the Elangomats rounded up their respective groups of scouts and silently led them out into the woods, farther than we had gone before. Each scout was required to place his hand on the scout preceding him as a symbol of continuing service to scouting, and then we were bound by a rope, representing brotherhood. As we approached a different fire bowl, I could see the dancing flames of the ceremonial fire, along with all of our sashes prominently displayed on a branch. Meteu, Allowat Sakima, and other Indians in leather leggings, ceremonial headdresses, and moccasins, stood regally around the fire, staring silently at the groups of scouts filing in. After repeating the legends of the Lenni Lenape people, we were told of the arrow being straight, true, and with its point aimed high. Finally, after the Ordeal handshake, I was handed my sash as an official member of the Order of the Arrow.

After the Ordeal campfire, the new members, now able to talk, joyfully made our way back to the main camp area for a feast that had been prepared for us by adult leaders. I was elated, with a greatly heightened sense of self-awareness, that I had survived the deprivation, hunger, and service of the Ordeal and thankful that I had completed this initiatory test of courage and personal strength to become a member of Scouting's elite honor society.