On the Symbolic Meaning of White Robes
Worn in Rites of Passage

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In this paper I introduce and discuss studies in the field of folklore of the symbolic role of white robes worn during rites of passage. In the first chapter, I introduce a hypothesis which asserts that white robes are used as an aid to those who feel psychological resistance during a rite of passage to help them complete the ritual without hindrance. Concerning the question of why the color white is used, I trace earlier arguments asserting that the use of white derives from the phonetic similarity between shira (産室, a term for birthing huts and rice planting in some southern Islands) and shiro, (白, meaning white).

In the second chapter, I refer to descriptions of initiates who change from white garments back into colored garments, marking the completion of the ritual. In the third chapter, I discuss descriptions found in folklore of experiences after death in which the dead are expected to remain in their white garments. I also cite references to similarities between the datosueba, elder women who dress the dead and whose role it is to complete the transmigration of the dead from the world of the living to the world of the dead, and samba, or midwives. This suggests that the datosueba and the samba or midwives fulfill the respective roles of assisting the rite of passage into life and that out of life into the realm of death. Through this study, it becomes clear that the distribution and collection of white robes play a critical symbolic role in creating the cycle of life and death.