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Virginia Fons, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8023-180X>

Title: The current rituality of Catholic death in Catalonia, a world of meanings

#### Abstract

This article sheds light on the current Catholic experience of mourning and death in Catalonia by means of theoretical-interpretative contributions from the field of rituality and the sensitive dimension. It focuses on a method of analysis that emphasizes the deep meanings and sensory dimension of the logic of the death ritual itself. Using multiple narratives and autoethnography, it describes the sequence of actions and sensations related to the drama experienced and channels the pain that is progressively expressed in the different phases of the ritual. The effectiveness of the ritual lies in the experience of non-presence, remoteness or emptiness. Even though the perspectives of the participants are different and there are a variety of family situations, the symbolic and sensitive dimension of the ritual works for everyone by sequencing their actions and experiences throughout the process.

#### Keywords

Rituality. Death. Mourning. Senses. Anthropology. Methodology.

## Introduction

This article deals with current death rituals in the Catholic context, particularly in Catalonia. Periods of mourning are experienced and characterized by a drama in which symbolic settings and sensory impressions that animate the emotions are discharged. We cannot unravel all the intricacies of the various personal and familial situations in this article, but it gives an insight into the structure of such practices and what lies behind this ritual experimentation with death and grief. This is made possible by examining the fields of ritual and the senses.

The main contribution of the article is, therefore, the analysis of death and mourning from the ritual sphere. A definition of ritual (Fons & Ventura, 2021) is published on the website of the Ritual Inventory<sup>1</sup> of the Xarxa d'Interès en el Patrimoni Etnològic of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona: "It is a temporal structure that has a high symbolic content, divided into several phases that form the same sequence with a logic to be discovered, with the capacity to act in the experience and seduce through the senses and emotions." Nevertheless, the definition of ritual and its main characteristics continue to give rise to much debate (e.g. Bell, 1992; Stephenson, 2015; Stewart & Strathern, 2014).

With the help of some classicists who have made interesting theoretical-interpretative proposals in the field of rituality and symbolism (Douglas, 1966; Fernández, 1973; Geertz, 1973; Gluckman, 1954, 1962; Leach, 1972, 1976; Tambiah, 1979; Turner, 1967, 1969),<sup>2</sup> and other contributions since then (in the spirit of Bloch, 1989; Bell, 1992; de Coppet, 1992; Díaz Cruz, 2008, 2014; Grimes, 2020; Langdon, 2007; Myerhoff, 1992; Rappaport, 1999; Stewart & Strathern, 2014; Taylor, 2006, *inter alia*), we connect with the meaning of the sensorial, intangible, non-material and symbolically effective dimension of the world, which has unfortunately been relegated to the boundaries of culture. We will analyze the performative system, i.e. the ritual and symbolic, in this ritual field in relation to death and mourning.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://webs.uab.cat/xipe/>.

<sup>2</sup> We have chosen to cite only some of the main works of these theorists.

Similarly, anthropology – as well as the social sciences and humanities in general – has sought to understand the importance of the sensory dimension and the world of the senses in human life. According to Howes (2014) – and see also Classen (1997) and Howes and Classen (2014) – a field can be identified that is referred to as ‘sensory studies,’<sup>3</sup> which draws on various perspectives in the social sciences and humanities. This sensory turn is shaping current social research (Domínguez & Ziri6n, 2017). Experimenting with sensory perceptions articulates a large part of the ability to feel, express and represent our own existence differently from how we perceive and experience the world (Howes, 2014). Their exploration, as Turner (1967) aptly argues, not only offers us lessons for understanding the contemporary world, but also enables us to grasp a different dimension, a divergent mode of expression, an alternative language – in contrast to the naturalistic tradition of logical positivism – which does not aim to describe the world as it is but provoke the sensation of discovering, suggesting or thinking about it. The senses, thus, regain – beyond their biological or biomedical character – their sociocultural dimension (cf. Crossley, 2001; Latour, 2004; Le Breton, 2006; Simmel, 2014 [1907]) and become both an object of study and a methodological resource, thus, reintegrating sensory experience into current research in the social sciences and humanities.

#### Methodology of the analysis of rituals<sup>4</sup>

Before describing the ritual of mourning and death in detail, let us first define what the ritual act means and propose a method for analyzing it (Fons & Alvarez Litben, 2024; Fons & Ventura, 2021). The depths of this ritual will be discovered and the play of combinations between times, ritual acts and meanings revealed through the method of analysis presented. Thus, the method of analysis will show how the ritual is a performative act of what is lived at the level of human experience. In other words, this method of ritual analysis emphasizes the qualitative dimension and makes it possible to reconstruct the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Bourdieu, 2011; Bull et al., 2006; Classen, 1993, 1997; Domínguez & Ziri6n, 2017; Dupire, 1987; Elias, 1998; Friedman, 2011; Hall, 2001; Howes, 2014; Larrea, 1997; Le Breton, 2006; Lewkow, 2014; Low, 2009; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Rodaway, 1994; Simmel, 2014, [1907]; Synnott, 1992; Urry, 2008; Vannini et al., 2012.

<sup>4</sup> This methodological proposal for the analysis of rituals was published in an article (Fons & Alvarez Litben, 2024), which, in this case, is tested on a death ritual on the coast of Ecuador.

course of the experience of death and mourning in its context and from a processual perspective by analyzing the logic of the evolving elements and symbolic actions.

The difficulty in defining rituals, already noted by Goody in his famous publication “Against ‘ritual’: Loosely structured thoughts on a loosely defined topic” (1977; and Asad, 1988), lies in the inadequate use of terms (e.g. traditions, celebrations, acts, practices) that do not allow a clear delimitation of all these cultural expressions of man, and is often even considered a subcategory. However, if we look at ritual from the point of view of some great symbolists and ritual theorists (e.g. Bell, 1992; Fernández 1973; Turner, 1967), we find that they are authentic structures that integrate various forms of human expression: songs, words, ideas represented in symbols, objects, masks, dances, gestures, celebrations and acts, practices or traditions of all kinds. Therefore, we find a high content of elements and symbolic actions in ritual that take place in a chronological order. It is, thus, necessary to understand the position of all the elements and the logic of the ritual process itself, which is divided into different ritual times, as Van Gennep stated in 1909 when he examined the rituals of passage, or Turner in his work *The ritual process* (1969) where he pays particular attention to processual analysis – hence, offering a dynamic of the culturally represented as opposed to the static and limited functionalist analysis – and also offers an excellent proposal for the study of the concept of liminality.

The article goes beyond the previous proposals by adding more complexity to the ritual manifestations (Fons & Ventura, 2021; Fons & Alvarez Litben, 2024) by offering a structuralist, dynamic and symbolic approach. It seeks to understand how the ritual proceeds internally in a sequence of times that are variable and numerous, and that go beyond the tripartite structure of Van Gennep (1909), or the concept of liminality proposed by Turner (1969) – which can also reveal different ritual times. It is precisely this concatenation in many temporary units that ultimately reveals the actual logic of the ritual. In this sense, the analysis proposed attempts to discover that ritual is not as linear as it seems and, therefore, has its own internal structure. Discontinuities occur in it, indicating sequence of times and reacting to changes in space, time or the combination of elements. Each ritual time summarizes certain elements that give it meaning. It is of great interest to discover how all the elements occupy a position in the structure, give meaning to a ritual time and play a role in the experience itself. The sum of all temporary units summarizes the ritual process, which conceals a logic and symbolic effectiveness.

In brief, this methodology allows a deep analysis of the ritual and its content, revealing what is not perceived at first sight, and helps one to understand the ritual experience itself and its effectiveness.

The analysis methodology presented in this article follows this procedure:

Discontinuous dimension, which is part of structural and symbolic analysis.

It looks for the discontinuities that occur in ritual time to illustrate that the ritual is in fact fragmented by a whole series of temporary units that give it meaning and that it is therefore not as linear as it seems. With the help of a final figure, the ritual process and its whole universe of senses and meanings, which gradually appear in a logical and very meaningful combination, are perfectly illustrated. (Fons & Alvarez Litben, 2024)

In this context, it is pointed out that ritual itself is an interesting structure to study (Lévi-Strauss, 1958), as it creates a reality and condenses many signifiers, a lot of the present system of representation, with songs, words, ideas represented in symbols, objects, gestures, postures, roles, positions and many other elements contextually and even dynamically over time. Leach states that the essential contents of a social and symbolic order are expressed in the rituals practiced: “At the very least, every ritual action has a visual, verbal, spatial, and temporal dimension; in addition, sound, smell, taste, and touch may also be significant” (1976, p. 111).

The methodology of analyzing ritual actions presented in this article, therefore, offers the possibility of describing all actions as they are experienced in the ritual itself and follow one another, linearly and continuously from beginning to end. The result is an authentic sequence that refers in minute detail to everything that happens processually in the ritual structure itself.

Moreover, these elaborate formulas of creativity and human imagination are juxtaposed with the lived reality that dramatizes something that brings about change. Once the ritual begins, a new temporality of “fiction” is initiated, interrupting the flow of everyday time, with the intention of acting<sup>5</sup> on reality itself (Díaz Cruz, 2008). In this sense, we must be

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<sup>5</sup> With the ability to “perform” (from the French “*parfournir*”), which refers to the process of completing, executing, accomplishing, performing or realizing something.

aware that one of the fundamental characteristics of performativity is that it is not only limited to what it does, but also to the way it does it, using mechanisms and strategies that allow it to act or experiment with everyday reality, which means a parenthesis of authentic fiction, as Díaz Cruz defines very well:

[...] they are practices that explicitly coexist with our human condition. [...] Dramatization, which I call performance here, is not a mere, unmediated representation of what is said, what is crystallized in a text or in a predetermined script; rather, it consists in a translation, a transformation, and thus in a displacement, a reworking, a recreation and interpretation [of the representation of the real<sup>6</sup>]. (2008, pp. 33-4)

If symbols are the molecules of rituals, they must be analyzed. Something is dramatized in this sophisticated formula of creativity and human imagination. In this sense, this work also aims to make a theoretical contribution to the field of performance in human experience by highlighting the sensitive dimension of reality, the role of the senses and human fragility, and the power of imagination in negotiating everyday life (James Fernández expresses this well in *Capturing Imagination*, 2020).

## Data description

The following data comes from an autoethnographic study of the direct observation of death rituals in Catalonia since 2000. I witnessed these rituals as a friend, or close or distant relative of the deceased. There are also several observations of death rituals analyzed by students of the subject “Anthropology of Religion, Symbolism and Ritual” in different courses of the Social and Cultural Anthropology degree program at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, who gave their narratives and analyses of what they experienced in the ritual itself<sup>7</sup>. As we will see, the results of the qualitative analysis emphasize the subjective dimension of the deceased and the grieving relatives in the death ritual in a predominantly Catholic context. It should be remembered that the main

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<sup>6</sup> Added by me.

<sup>7</sup> In the above-mentioned subject, the assessment system consists of a theoretical and a practical part, in which students submit an essay on a ritual that they have been able to observe or reconstruct from a dense narrative by a ritual participant. They are free to choose any ritual that interests them. For this article, only the rituals related to death in Catalonia that were studied by the students were selected, with prior consent to their use. All data provided were anonymized according to the UAB Code of Good Research Practices. [https://www.uab.cat/doc/DOC\\_CBP\\_EN](https://www.uab.cat/doc/DOC_CBP_EN)

religion in Spain is Catholic. However, agnosticism and secularism among Catholics have increased dramatically in recent years (as cited in Rodríguez-Becerra, 2004, *inter alia*). As will be seen in the case of prescribed death rituals, Catholic doctrine and liturgy do not seem to have disappeared altogether.

If we turn our attention to the structured components that regulate the ritual acts in the death experience, temporal discontinuities in the ritual context become clear. Let us look at the following description of events to understand how the ritual process is characterized by a whole series of times. Note that this summary description is the result of directly observing several versions of the ritual.

1. Firstly, the relatives say goodbye in the narrower sense and/or accompany their relative in the dying process; unless it is a sudden death that does not allow any real communication with the loved one. Nevertheless, this first phase is always characterized by the compelling idea of death and its message.
2. A second phase is the washing and dressing of the deceased (by very close relatives or professionals specifically involved in preparing the deceased) and marks the beginning of mourning for the relatives, who move away from their own daily reality.
3. A third period is mainly used to watch over the deceased, who is visible in the coffin, in the home environment or in the funeral home, where the relatives accompany him/her, where the silence, weeping, sobbing and expressions of condolence of all those present at the wake are conspicuous. At the end of this temporary interruption, the expression of grief is particularly strong and often provoked by the thought of a real and final separation. Flowers can fill the space of the wake, enveloping the recently deceased<sup>8</sup> with their fragrance, as a sign of the pain of loss, courage and respect for the deceased.
4. The fourth stage takes place in the sacred space with the symbol of the cross that sacralizes it. A mass is held for the deceased, who has already been placed in the

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<sup>8</sup> The presence of flowers were a technique for perfuming the room in times when embalming techniques did not yet exist.



closed coffin, and for all those present. This is presided over by a priest, who, through performative words (Austin, 1970)<sup>9</sup>, wishes to initiate the beginning of the deceased's journey to the afterlife and separate the soul from the body. According to the Christian creed and the clergyman's speech, the resurrection of the soul of the deceased takes place at this moment, activating the idea of its transfer to an ideal space that is not close to its living relatives. Therefore, a lit candle is always placed to symbolize the light that the deceased will follow; as well as flowers, especially white ones, which signify rebirth or the hope of a new beginning, of eternal life. On the other hand, the black clothing of those present contrasts exactly with this light and prevents the deceased from straying from his/her path. The sacred singing, the music and the weeping or sobbing accompany the deceased during this ritual time. The expressions of pain from the audience and, above all, the relatives are the result of the drama being lived, and illustrate the idea that the deceased is on their way.

5. The fifth movement is about the transfer of the body to the cemetery, its final resting place. A line, led by the closest relatives, followed by all of those seeing off the deceased, crosses the cemetery to reach the equally sacred place (the grave or niche) where the deceased is finally buried so that the next cults can take place in memory of the deceased. The words addressed to the deceased, the songs, the prayers, the intensified expression of pain through weeping and flowers (e.g. roses, chrysanthemums, gladioli, carnations, daisies), which symbolize the loss and respect for the deceased, are important in this ritual period.
6. Finally, the sixth period is characterized by remembrance and the pain of absence. Those who were closest to the deceased remember them through the presence of a common space, smells, images, objects and memories, as well as through the performance of cults in their memory, such as November 1, All Saints Day, which is dedicated to all the deceased when they are visited in the cemetery.

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<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the article by Díaz Cruz (2008) sheds light on what Austin said at the time about "How to do things with words" (1970).

We can also glean a multitude of details from the various versions of this death ritual that cannot be described in this article. The ritual experiences of death are very diverse and include many particularities, all of which are significant in the ritual context, such as the presence of certain actors and specialists who sacralize the act, their plastic gestures and postures (e.g. standing, sitting, kneeling), the difference between sounds (such as sobbing, crying, screaming), silences, speeches, words, spaces, objects, substances, colors, whether it is day or night, and so many others. However, the point is to show that, however different they may be, they all ultimately form far-reaching contexts of deep meaning, all in time. The essential thing is that they all occupy a position in the ritual structure, are in a ritual time and give it meaning.

Discussion

From here we enter the logic of the death ritual itself, where the sequence of times perfectly illustrates the ritual actions of the relatives experiencing the loss. Note that the next of kin are present with the deceased throughout the ritual sequence; the extended kin and social networks act particularly in times 3 and 4.

Table 1. Ritual sequence and actions

| Time 1   | Time 2         | Time 3     | Time 4                       | Time 5                  | Time 6      |
|----------|----------------|------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| Farewell | Wash and dress | Watch over | He/She goes to the afterlife | Discharge and placement | Remembering |

From the perspective of the deceased, the ritual sequence means that the symbolic elements and the ritual acts themselves lead him/her from one space to another, crossing borders and social affiliations. The ritual itself signifies the transition from being human (time 1) to being an ancestor (time 6), whereby the deceased goes through a liminal time in which his/her entire preparation takes place, which is divided into four times (from 2 to 5).

Table 2. Ritual procedure and social status of the deceased

| Time 1 | Time 2   | Time 3   | Time 4   | Time 5   | Time 6   |
|--------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Person | Deceased | Deceased | Deceased | Deceased | Ancestor |

The most significant changes concern the domestic space, which, depending on the case, is replaced by that of an institution, the hospital or geriatric center, and the funeral home, which also take over ritual acts such as medical treatment and the preparation of the deceased or his/her wake.

Table 3. Ritual sequence, spaces and ritual acts

|                | Time 1                        | Time 2                   | Time 3                   | Time 4                             | Time 5                | Time 6                            |
|----------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Spaces</b>  | House<br><i>Health center</i> | House<br><i>Mortuary</i> | House<br><i>Mortuary</i> | Church                             | Cemetery              | Empty house<br>Church<br>Cemetery |
| <b>Actions</b> | Farewell                      | Washing and dressing     | Watch over               | Transport him/her to the afterlife | Release and placement | Remembering                       |

Following the logic of ritual also illustrates the idea of how ritual actions are linked to a variety of senses and emotions experienced in time by the actors themselves. The progression of the ritual time experienced through the senses ultimately means an increasing distancing of the relatives from their deceased. Each ritual time revolves around a meaning that can no longer be recreated in the next. In the first period, the

ritual acts are related to language, to the dialogue with the dying person. In the second stage, speech is no longer emphasized, but touch by embellishing acts. In the third period, the emphasis is on the possibility of still seeing him/her, as he/she is no longer addressed and can no longer be touched. Times 4 and 5 mark a deep discontinuity, in which there is no longer any possibility of seeing him/her, as only the coffin or the grave (which is closely connected to the earth) can be seen and the new experience of mourning is already imminent, characterized only by memory.

If we look at the structured components that regulate the experience of death in the following table, the sequence of a whole field of senses and the designated words in ritual times becomes clear.

Table 4. Ritual process and the sensitive dimension

|                | Time 1                    | Time 2         | Time 3                     | Time 4                             | Time 5                         | Time 6      |
|----------------|---------------------------|----------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|
|                | Farewell                  | Wash and dress | Watch over                 | Transport him/her to the afterlife | Release and placement          | Remembering |
| <b>Actions</b> |                           |                |                            |                                    |                                |             |
|                | <b>SPEAK</b>              | <b>TOUCH</b>   | <b>SEE</b>                 | <b>SEE</b>                         | <b>SEE</b>                     | <b>SEE</b>  |
| <b>Senses</b>  | TOUCH<br>SEE              | SEE            |                            | COFFIN                             | GRAVE                          | MEMORY      |
|                | Intimate verb<br>Farewell | Silence        | Social verb<br>Condolences | Sacred word                        | Intimate verb<br>Last farewell |             |

This ritual example of death (see Table 5 for the full ritual sequence, at the end of the article) is used to illustrate the ritual process, its content and symbolic efficacy, and create a sense of discovery, suggestion or reflection about it.

## Conclusion

The contribution of this analytical proposal is to show how the ritual sequence itself generates meaning. It is not a question of isolating a ritual phase but of grasping its meaning through a formal processual analysis. By considering each phase according to its place in the ceremonial sequence, one can discover why it changes its inner meaning when it precedes or follows another. Moreover, the totality of its inner elements gives it meaning. Consequently, ritual logic is approached by examining the actions and ritual symbols in the order in which they are performed, rather than isolating them in apparent disorder.

In the case of the death ritual, the order in which the actions and sensory impressions are performed testifies to a logic that expresses the drama experienced. The ritual expresses the development of the relatives' own experience of grief: the distance from their deceased experienced through the senses, by ceasing to speak to, touch and see him/her. In this sense, the realm of experience is key to the ritual, as it attempts to visualize the loss of the person to fix the idea of their absence. However, the experience of loss itself must be progressive to dose and ameliorate the pain it causes. Therefore, the ritual experiments with the drama of death channels the pain that is gradually expressed in the different ritual times; and the efficacy of the ritual lies in the experience of non-presence, absence or emptiness.


Moreover, as we questioned at the beginning of the article, Catholic doctrine and liturgy do not seem to have completely disappeared in the mourning and death rituals. Although agnosticism and secularism have increased dramatically in recent years, both frames of representation and symbolic efficacy are still important in this experience of grief and death. Even though the ritual framework is particularly secular, many Catholic elements remain in this process. It seems that the sacred liturgy is still fundamental in this transcendent ritual framework of death in which the deceased undergoes a transmutation with the resurrection of his/her soul. In this sense, the sacred time par excellence is that which is immersed in the sacred liturgy and allows the soul of the deceased to pass into another life. Through the space with the symbol of the cross, the holy word spoken by the priest, the holy water and, above all, the element of light that contrasts with the black clothing of those present, the soul detaches itself from the body to go to the afterlife.

Many other Catholic elements have been maintained throughout the process, such as the condolences, the songs, the sacred prayers, the burial in a sacred space or the ritual of November 1st to commemorate the deceased.

Looking at the social dimension of the death ritual, each version of the ritual itself reveals the structural position of the participants with its incoherences, contradictions, positionings and social differentiations. Thus, as Turner (1967) notes, it can happen that each participant views the ritual from his/her own point of view, “that the participant’s actions are determined by interests, purposes, feelings which depend on his specific situation and which may affect his understanding of the situation as a whole” (Turner, 1967, p. 29).

Nevertheless, the symbolic and sensitive dimension of the ritual works for everyone, as the performances and experiences follow one another throughout the process. The meanings expressed in the ritual continue to work, especially for those who must experience the tragedy the most strongly. This is the case for the direct relatives of the deceased. The alienation experienced by the relatives who suffer the loss of a loved one becomes clear through this ritual and symbolic method of analysis, which focuses on the senses. In addition, through this methodological proposal for the analysis of rituals, this example of the rituality of death clearly shows how senses change during the ritual process.

Table 5. Overall sequence of the ritual

|                | Time 1  | Time 2   | Time 3  | Time 4   | Time 5   | Time 6                      |
|----------------|---|--|---|--|--|-----------------------------|
|                |  |  |   |  |  |                             |
| <b>Space</b>   | Death<br>Home   | Preparation<br>Home                            | Wake<br>Home  | Mass<br>Church   | Burial<br>Cemetery                                 | Remembering<br>Grave/Masses |
| <b>Social</b>  | PERSON<br>Close<br>family   | DESEASED<br>Close family                       | DECEASED<br>Close and<br>extended<br>family,<br>social<br>network | DECEASED<br>Priest<br>+ close and<br>extended family,<br>social<br>network | DECEASED<br>Close family                           | ANCESTOR<br>Close family    |
| <b>Actions</b> | Talk  | Washing and<br>Dressing<br><br>+<br>Remoteness | Watch over<br><br>++<br>Remoteness                                | Transport<br>him/her to the<br>afterlife<br><br>+++<br>Remoteness          | Release and<br>placement<br><br>++++<br>Remoteness | Reminder                    |
| <b>Senses</b>  | <b>SPEAK</b><br>TOUCH<br>SEE  | <b>TOUCH</b><br>SEE                            | <b>SEE</b><br>DECEASED  | <b>SEE</b><br>COFFIN   | <b>SEE</b><br>GRAVE                                | <b>SEE</b><br>REMINDER      |
|                | Intimate<br>verb<br>Farewell  | Silence  | Social verb<br>Condolences  | Sacred word  | Intimate verb<br>Last farewell                     |                             |

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## Author contributions statement and ethics

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## Data availability statement

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Table(s) with caption(s) (on individual pages); figures; figure captions (as a list) [Table 1 near here]

