When Psychology Meets the Ancestors: Towards a Ritual-Informed Humanitarian Psychology

Inaugural Professorial Lecture

Yaseen Ally

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Total Estimated Speaking Time: 32 – 36 minutes

Abstract

This inaugural lecture traces a scholarly journey through encounters with ritual, religion, and culture in psychological research and practice, culminating in the proposal of **Ritual-Informed Humanitarian Psychology (RIHP)**. Drawing on early work with Muslim faith healers, witchcraft accusations and later supervision of postgraduate research on ancestral calling, witchcraft, burial rites, and indigenous healing, the lecture argues that what psychology often names as "belief systems" are in fact systems of care through which communities regulate emotion, restore meaning, and rebuild dignity.

Revisiting Wilhelm Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie*, the lecture demonstrates that psychology's original concern with myth, language, and ritual has been eclipsed by individualised trauma models that privilege symptom reduction over symbolic repair. Contemporary crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, genocide and displacement in Sudan and Gaza, and escalating violence in South Africa, exposes the limits of debriefing and closure in contexts of ongoing trauma.

In response, the lecture presents RIHP as a framework that conceptualises healing across interconnected social, psychological, spiritual, and moral-ethical planes, with ritual continuity positioned as a humanitarian infrastructure. The lecture concludes by calling for a post-secular, decolonial humanitarian psychology capable of repairing not only minds, but worlds.

Introduction: When Knowledge Arrives with History

Vice-Chancellor, members of university leadership, colleagues, students, family, friends, and honoured guests,

thank you for gathering here today.

An inaugural lecture is often described as a moment of academic arrival. But, I have come to understand it instead as a moment of accountability.

Not simply a celebration of what has been achieved, but a public reckoning with what one is now responsible for carrying forward.

It is the point at which scholarship becomes stewardship.

So today, I want to speak to you about psychology.

But not psychology as a neutral science.

Not psychology as a sealed discipline with clean borders and universal answers.

I want to speak about psychology as a visitor in other people's worlds.

As a guest in cosmologies older than the university itself.

As a discipline that listens deeply in some places—and falters profoundly in others.

My lecture is titled:

"When Psychology Meets the Ancestors: Towards a Ritual-Informed Humanitarian Psychology."

This title is deliberate. By ancestors, I do not mean spirits wandering lecture halls.

I mean the moral worlds, spiritual obligations, historical memories, and ritual grammars that walk onto campus every day with our students, our clients, and our communities.

These worlds sit quietly in our classrooms.

They surface in our interviews and research transcripts.

They enter our consulting rooms wearing the language of distress, belief, hope, and fear.

They do not wait for psychology's permission to exist.

Culture, religion and spirituality, precedes psychology.

They survive psychology.

And often, they are asked to translate themselves into concepts that were never designed to hold them.

So the question I wish to ask today is simple—but deeply unsettling:

What happens when psychology encounters worlds it does not know how to name?

What happens when suffering is explained through ritual rather than diagnosis?

When healing is sought through ancestors rather than algorithms?

When distress is not located only in the individual mind, but in broken moral relationships, disrupted cosmologies, and wounded communities?

This lecture traces my own journey into that question.

From early encounters with faith healers and ritual practices,

through years of supervising students who brought their communities' cosmologies into academic research, toward the realisation that psychology in humanitarian and culturally complex contexts cannot survive on technique alone.

I argue today for a ritual-informed humanitarian psychology a psychology that does not pathologize belief, that does not exile spirituality from science, and that does not treat culture as an afterthought.

When psychology meets the ancestors, it is not superstition that confronts science.

It is another archive of human survival, that has been eclipsed by psychology's bio-medical focus.

And the questions before us today, are not whether these worlds belong in psychology,

but whether psychology is brave enough to belong in them.

Part One: Beginnings in Curiosity and Discomfort

My fascination with culture, religion, and healing did not begin as a grand theoretical project. It began in the unsettled space of my Honours research, when I found myself drawn toward Muslim faith healers and the question of what people do when biomedical explanations feel insufficient. I wanted to understand what people meant when they spoke of spiritual affliction, divine testing, possession, and healing through prayer (Ally & Laher, 2007; Ally, 2010).

What I encountered was not superstition, but coherence.

These practices were not random or chaotic. They were organised systems of care, with their own ethics, hierarchies, rituals, and rules. They offered containment, explanation, and hope. They named suffering in ways that made moral and cosmological sense. This insight later formed the basis of my early work on folklore beliefs and psychological disturbance within South African Muslim and Hindu communities (Ally, 2010).

Alongside these encounters were my own personal experiences with what many would call the “supernatural”: moments of fear, awe, and disruption that did not sit comfortably within psychological language. These experiences would later become central to my turn toward autoethnography as a legitimate psychological method. In writing myself into the research, I began to understand that knowledge is never neutral and that lived experience is not an obstacle to science but one of its deepest sources (Ally, 2019; Ally, 2020).

At the time, psychology allowed me to treat these encounters as beliefs or coping mechanisms. But that language felt thin. It reduced something living and structured into something secondary. The language of diagnosis flattened worlds of meaning into symptoms. This discomfort followed me into my Master's and doctoral work, where I began to explore bewitchment, spirit possession, and differing health belief systems (Ally, 2010; Ally, 2014; Ally, 2015).

What these studies revealed was not irrationality, but alternative epistemologies of distress. Bewitchment was not simply fear. It was a social explanation for misfortune. Spirit possession was not merely dissociation. It was a moral narrative of rupture and repair. Witchcraft accusations were not only violence, but attempts to restore threatened social order (Ally, 2014; Ally, 2015).

This line of inquiry grew into a sustained programme of scholarship on witchcraft, myth, and the moral economies of suffering in South Africa (Ally, 2014; Ally, 2015; Sibam-Twalo & Ally, 2021). It also forced me to confront the limits of psychology's vocabulary. Again and again, the people I studied did not speak in the language of symptoms. They spoke in the language of ritual rupture.

Later, as a lecturer and supervisor, this discomfort returned with greater force.

Students came to me wanting to research ancestral callings, cleansing rituals, possession states, masculinity and initiation, femininity and purity, sexuality and religious conflict, grief,

infertility, witchcraft, and moral injury. These were not abstract topics. They were lived struggles brought into the academy by students whose communities did not experience distress as individual pathology, but as cosmological imbalance (Sibam-Twalo & Ally, 2021; Yew-Siong & Ally, 2020; Ally & Yew-Siong, 2020).

My own autoethnographic work on religion, sexuality, and identity further deepened this conviction (Ally, 2019; Ally, 2020). Autoethnography taught me that the researcher's body is not outside the field. It is already inside the cosmology being studied. Knowledge is always situated. And psychology, when it pretends otherwise, becomes a discipline that listens only to itself.

Across conferences and publications, this tension became increasingly visible:

Is psychology in South Africa merely psychology practiced on African soil?

Or is it capable of becoming an African psychology that takes ritual, spirituality, and indigenous knowledge seriously as epistemological partners (Ally & August, 2018; Kiguwa & Ally, 2017)?

The arc of this work—from faith healers, to witchcraft, to autoethnography, to supervision—reveals not a linear career, but a deepening discomfort with psychology's silence around ritual and cosmology. It also reveals the slow birth of a new question:

What kind of psychology is required in humanitarian and culturally plural worlds where suffering is not only neurological, but moral; not only individual, but communal; not only psychological, but cosmological?

It is from this journey—of curiosity, discomfort, supervision, and scholarship—that the idea of a ritual-informed humanitarian psychology begins to emerge.

Not as a rejection of science. But as an expansion of its listening.

Part Two: At the Crossroads of Worlds: From Supervisory Discomfort to Supervision as Decolonial Knowledge-Making

By the time I became a lecturer and supervisor, the questions that had unsettled me in my earlier research returned with greater force. Students arrived carrying entire cosmologies into the academy: ancestral callings, cleansing rituals, possession states, burial practices, witchcraft, initiation, gendered rituals of purity and belonging. These were not abstract topics. They were accounts of suffering and repair grounded in moral and spiritual worlds.

Again and again, their participants did not speak in the language of symptoms.

They spoke in the language of ritual rupture:

A woman was not depressed. She was ritually unclean after a death.

A man was not traumatised. He had failed initiation.

A family was not dysfunctional. They had buried someone incorrectly.

And the students would ask the question that still echoes in my mind:

“Professor, how do I write this without betraying them?”

That question revealed that the problem was not methodological. It was epistemological.

It was not about how to code the data. It was about whose reality psychology was willing to recognise.

In those rooms, I began to see that supervision is not only pedagogical. It is a moral and political space. It is where psychology encounters other systems of care and decides whether to translate them into pathology or allow them to remain knowledge.

This is where I came to understand supervision as decolonial praxis:

A praxis in which students are supported to hold two worlds at once: the world of academic psychology and the world of ritual meaning.

A praxis that resists forcing participants’ narratives into pre-existing Western categories.

A praxis that treats ancestral callings, initiation rituals, and cosmological explanations not as data problems, but as knowledge systems. A space where the discipline learns to listen across cosmologies rather than discipline them into silence.

Through supervising studies on ancestral calling, burial rituals during COVID-19, mythical creatures, children accused of witchcraft, indigenous healing, and cultural coping with mental illness, I watched students struggle to hold two worlds at once. They were being trained in a psychology that located trauma in the mind, while their participants located suffering in broken relationships between the living and the dead, between families and moral order, between communities and the sacred.

These projects revealed something crucial: what psychology calls “belief systems” are in fact systems of care.

They are ritual ecologies — overlapping practices of prayer, cleansing, mourning, confession, sacrifice, and communal gathering that regulate emotion, restore coherence, and rebuild dignity after rupture. They are not cultural ornaments. They are psychosocial infrastructures of survival.

It was here that humanitarian questions entered my thinking.

As wars, pandemics, and disasters interrupted burial rites, prayer, and communal mourning across the world, I began to see a terrifying pattern: when ritual life collapses, psychological closure collapses with it. Trauma was not only neurological injury. It was moral paralysis. It was the inability to complete grief, to restore order, to speak to the dead, to make sense of loss.

Humanitarian psychology, shaped largely by Western trauma models, was offering containment without cosmology. It stabilised symptoms but left meaning unresolved. It addressed fear, but not moral rupture. It focused on the individual psyche while communities were suffering collective symbolic disintegration.

At the crossroads of worlds, I began to ask a different question:

What if rituals are not peripheral to humanitarian psychology, but central to it?

What if rituals are not beliefs, but technologies of healing?

What if the true infrastructure of recovery is not only clinics and counsellors, but prayer, burial, cleansing, and communal witnessing?

From this question emerged what I now call Ritual-Informed Humanitarian Psychology (RIHP).

RIHP begins from a simple but radical premise:

healing is not only psychological. It is moral, social, and spiritual.

Rituals restore what violence, trauma and conflict shatters. They regulate affect through rhythm and repetition.

They rebuild narrative coherence where trauma fragments meaning.

They confer dignity through moral witnessing.

They reconnect individuals to community, ancestry, and time.

In this sense, rituals are not outside psychology.

They are its forgotten ancestors. Even psychotherapy, when stripped of its scientific language, reveals itself as ritualised practice: scheduled encounters, symbolic roles, sacred rules of

confidentiality, patterned speech, and embodied witnessing. Psychology did not invent ritual. It secularised it.

At this crossroads, I began to see that humanitarian psychology itself carries a colonial inheritance — one that decides whose suffering is intelligible and whose healing practices count as evidence. The exclusion of ritual from humanitarian frameworks is not neutral. It is historical. It is tied to a model of care that privileges cognition over cosmology and technique over meaning.

Supervision became the laboratory where this critique took form. Guiding students who wrote about ancestral callings and burial rites forced me to confront the limits of the discipline I was teaching. Their work revealed that trauma is not healed when symptoms disappear. It is healed when moral order is restored.

From these encounters, I developed what I later conceptualised Ritual-Informed Humanitarian Psychology (RIHP), a framework that maps distress across biological, psychological, social, moral, and cosmological planes. RIHP does not ask which explanation is correct. It asks how multiple explanations coexist and guide help-seeking.

RIHP marks a shift from psychology as a science of the individual to psychology as a practice of translation between worlds.

At the crossroads, psychology learns humility. It learns that it is not the only archive of survival. It learns that suffering is not only inside minds, but inside broken rituals, silenced ancestors, and interrupted moral time. This is not a rejection of science. It is an expansion of its listening.

Standing at this crossroads changed how I understood my role — not only as a scholar, but as a custodian of dialogue between epistemologies. My task was no longer simply to teach students how to research. It was to help them walk between worlds without betraying either one.

At the crossroads of worlds, psychology becomes something else:

not a master discipline, but a guest, a translator and a witness.

And it is only from this place — this unstable, sacred, demanding place — that a ritual-informed humanitarian psychology can begin to exist.

Part Three: When Psychology Meets the Ancestors: RIHP

There is an irony at the heart of psychology.

The discipline that claims Wilhelm Wundt as its founder began not only in laboratories, but in the study of myth, language, and ritual. In *Völkerpsychologie*, Wundt argued that the deepest structures of consciousness were not located in the isolated brain, but in the shared symbolic life of people. Ritual, for Wundt, was the earliest laboratory of meaning.

And yet, in its pursuit of scientific legitimacy, psychology severed itself from this ancestry.

It privileged the individual mind over the communal world.
It replaced moral and symbolic life with cognition and behaviour.
It forgot that the psyche was once understood as social and ritual before it was clinical.

Ritual-Informed Humanitarian Psychology is therefore not an invention without roots.
It is a return to a lineage psychology abandoned.

My thinking about this did not emerge in theory alone. It emerged from a practical and ethical dilemma I faced as both a registered counsellor and a research psychologist:

How do you offer containment, debriefing, and trauma intervention when trauma is not over?

What does crisis counselling mean when the crisis has no end?

The COVID-19 pandemic confronted us with this question globally. Communities were denied burial rituals, prevented from gathering, forbidden from touching their dead. Prayer, mourning, and cleansing were interrupted. As Yew-Siong and Ally showed, indigenous knowledge systems and religio-cultural practices became essential sites of psychological survival during this rupture (Yew-Siong & Ally, 2020).

But COVID was only a rehearsal.

Today, genocides in Sudan and Gaza, escalating violence in South Africa, and the politicisation of fear have created a world in which trauma is not episodic but continuous. Violence moves from the political arena into everyday life. Crime becomes symbolic. Blue-light convoys, militarised policing, and spectacle replace safety. Trauma is not processed; it accumulates.

In such contexts, traditional trauma models ask people to narrate what is still happening.
They ask for closure when there is none.
They offer debriefing in the middle of the wound.

This forced me to ask:
What kind of psychology is needed when suffering is not post-traumatic, but ongoing?

It was through my work with postgraduate students researching ancestral calling, burial rituals, witchcraft, cleansing ceremonies, and communal healing that the answer began to form. Their studies revealed something psychology had overlooked:

What we call "belief systems" are in fact systems of care.
They are ritual ecologies — moral infrastructures through which communities regulate affect, rebuild coherence, and restore dignity.

These practices were not symbolic extras.
They were survival technologies.

From this work, I began to conceptualise what I now call Ritual-Informed Humanitarian Psychology (RIHP).

RIHP begins from a radical premise:
that rituals are not cultural ornaments,
but psychosocial infrastructures of healing.

Humanitarian psychology has been shaped by Western trauma epistemologies that stabilise individuals through safety, calming, and cognitive coherence. These models are indispensable. But they assume that trauma lives primarily in the mind.

RIHP begins elsewhere:
trauma lives in broken ritual life.

When burial is interrupted, grief cannot complete.
When prayer is forbidden, meaning collapses.
When cleansing is delayed, shame and fear remain suspended.
When initiation is broken, identity fractures.

Wars and pandemics do not only destroy buildings.
They destroy the symbolic architecture through which people remain human.

This is what I call the coloniality of care:
a humanitarian logic that decides which forms of healing count as knowledge and which are reduced to belief.

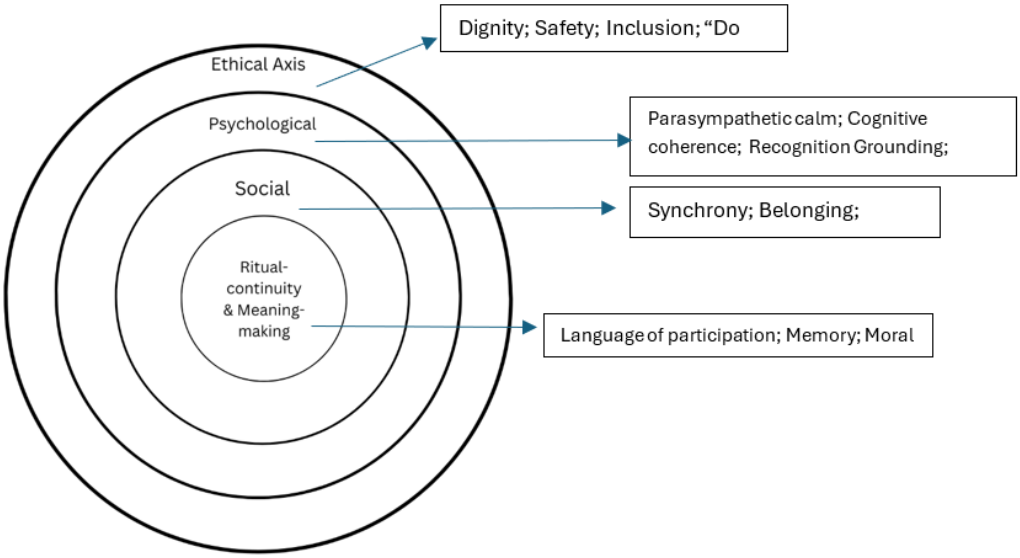
RIHP challenges this by placing ritual at the centre of humanitarian psychology, not at its margins.

To make this operational, RIHP is not merely a philosophy.
It is a model.

Visual Explanation of the RIHP Model

The RIHP model conceptualises healing as unfolding across interconnected planes of experience, held together by a moral–ethical axis.

You can imagine it as concentric circles:



At the **core** is *Ritual Continuity and Meaning*.

This is the primary humanitarian infrastructure.

Prayer, burial, cleansing, lamentation, fasting, and storytelling are the grammars through which suffering becomes intelligible.

Psychological First Aid stabilises emotion.

Ritual continuity stabilises meaning.

Without ritual continuity, healing cannot complete its cycle.

The **social plane** surrounds this core.

Ritual is collective. It restores belonging through synchrony — singing, chanting, mourning, walking, remembering together. This is where Durkheim's collective effervescence and Turner's communitas re-emerge after rupture. Trauma ceases to be private and becomes shared testimony.

The **psychological plane** emerges from this participation.

Here ritual produces measurable effects: emotional regulation, co-regulated nervous systems,

cognitive coherence. Psychological recovery is not primary; it is emergent from social and spiritual participation.

The **spiritual plane** situates suffering within moral cosmology.

Loss becomes prayer.

Death becomes narrative.

Chaos becomes order.

Trauma becomes meaningful when it is ritualised.

Holding all of this together is the **moral–ethical axis**.

This is where dignity is restored.

Where guilt, shame, and unfinished obligations are addressed through apology rituals, symbolic restitution, elder mediation, and reconciliation practices.

The ethical axis ensures that ritual is never romanticised.

RIHP always asks:

Which rituals heal?

Which exclude?

Which must be adapted to protect rights and safety?

Healing is ecological.

It occurs when these planes move together.

This is what I call a **psychomoral ecology of trauma**.

Existing crisis and trauma models stabilise the psyche.

RIHP restores the world in which the psyche can live.

This is why RIHP does not replace Psychological First Aid or trauma counselling.

It extends them.

It moves humanitarian psychology:

from symptom reduction to symbolic reconstruction, from individual recovery to communal repair, from technical intervention to moral witnessing. When psychology meets the ancestors, it is forced to recognise that healing is not only a clinical outcome. It is a ritual achievement.

This has implications for how we train psychologists and counsellors in South Africa.

It requires ritual literacy. It requires that practitioners ask about burial, prayer, dreams, ancestors, and moral rupture with the same seriousness as anxiety and sleep.

It requires collaboration with elders, healers, and faith leaders as co-architects of recovery.

It also repositions the registered counsellor and community practitioner as central figures in humanitarian response — those already trained to work at the interface of distress, culture, and meaning.

RIHP reframes humanitarian psychology as a post-secular discipline:

one that no longer treats science and spirituality as enemies,

but as parallel grammars of care.

In returning ritual to psychology, RIHP returns psychology to its own forgotten ancestry.

To Wundt's insight that the psyche is not born in isolation, but in myth, symbol, and shared moral life.

When psychology meets the ancestors, it does not become less scientific. It becomes more human. It becomes capable of repairing not only minds, but worlds. And that, I argue, is the ethical future of humanitarian psychology.

Acknowledgements

I do not wish to offer acknowledgements in the usual way, as a list of thanks for tasks completed or roles fulfilled.

This journey toward becoming a professor has never been only individual.

Nor has it ever been only communal. It has been a shared becoming.

Not in triumph. But in truth.

I honour the years of doubt. The nights of writing when faith wavered.

The moments of standing between worlds and not belonging fully to either. The choice, again and again, to stay with questions that had no easy answers.

I thank the self who did not abandon this path when it became difficult. The self who believed that culture, ritual, and meaning belonged in psychology even when they had no obvious home. The self who learned to walk between science and spirit without betraying either.

This is not self-congratulation. It is self-recognition.

Because becoming a professor is not only an academic achievement. It is a moral and personal journey.

A journey shaped by God, by community, by teachers, and by the courage to remain present to one's own becoming.

So tonight, I do not say thank you in the ordinary sense. I bear witness to a shared journey.

One that is both communal and individual. Both sacred and scholarly. Both inherited and chosen.

This moment belongs to all who walked with me. And to the one who kept walking when the road became uncertain.