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RENOWNED SCIENTIST RECEIVES THE ORDER OF MAPUNGUBWE IN BRONZE

Top honours for UWC savant



Prof Priscilla Baker was awarded the Order of Mapungubwe (bronze) by President Cyril Ramaphosa. PHOTO: TAMARA GOLIATH/UWC

A renowned scientist from Kuils River has been recognised with one of the highest honours in the land.

President Cyril Ramaphosa bestowed national orders on 38 recipients, 33 South Africans and five foreign nationals, at a ceremony in Pretoria on Tuesday 19 May.

Of the South Africans honoured, 13 were recognised posthumously.

Prof Priscilla Baker, an analytical chemistry scientist and acting deputy vice-chancellor for research and innovation at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), received the Order of Mapungubwe in bronze. She was recognised for her outstanding contribution to scientific research and leadership in science and technology, particularly in the field of electro-analytical chemistry.

National orders are the highest awards in the country, through its president, bestowed on citizens and eminent foreign nationals in recognition of excellence and exceptional contributions that benefit South Africa and the world.

KUILS RIVER-BORN SCIENTIST AMONG 38 HONOURED BY PRESIDENT

HONOUR

Baker expressed deep gratitude when the award was announced ahead of the ceremony, saying the achievement belongs to everyone who has been part of her journey. "It's a great honour for me to be the recipient [of this award], but I'm fully aware that I do not stand alone," she said, acknowledging the role of her family and the diverse cultural and faith communities that have shaped her life. "All of the people who have crossed my path in one way or another have been part of the making of a moment. I receive this award for all of us," she added.

She thanked the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI) for nominating her and reflected on the value of working together: "Individually we can't go fast, but together we can go far, and we leave a legacy that counts."

Growing up in Bellville South, Baker's path to academic leadership was not without its obstacles. In the mid-1980s, her schooling was disrupted under PW Botha's state of emergency.

Despite facing systemic discrimination that prevented her from pursuing an honours degree, she persevered.

In 1990 she became the first woman of colour to graduate with a BSc in physical oceanography from the University of Cape Town.

GROUNDBREAKING

Her research has since been groundbreaking. As co-director of the SensorLab research group at UWC alongside Prof Emmanuel Iwuoha, Baker is at the forefront of developing electrochemical sensors capable of detecting health biomarkers and environmental contaminants.

Her work includes the development of a biosensor for detecting uric acid in gout patients, technology that could revolutionisehealthcare in underserved regions like rural Africa, by enabling early detection of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

Baker's growing list of accolades includes being appointed a fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa in 2025, one of the country's highest recognitions for scientific excellence.

She was also named the 2025 L'Oréal-Unesco for Women in Science laureate for Africa and the Arab States. A National Research Foundation (NRF) B-rated scientist, she has served as the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) chair for analytical systems and processes for priority and emerging contaminants (ASPPEC) since 2018.

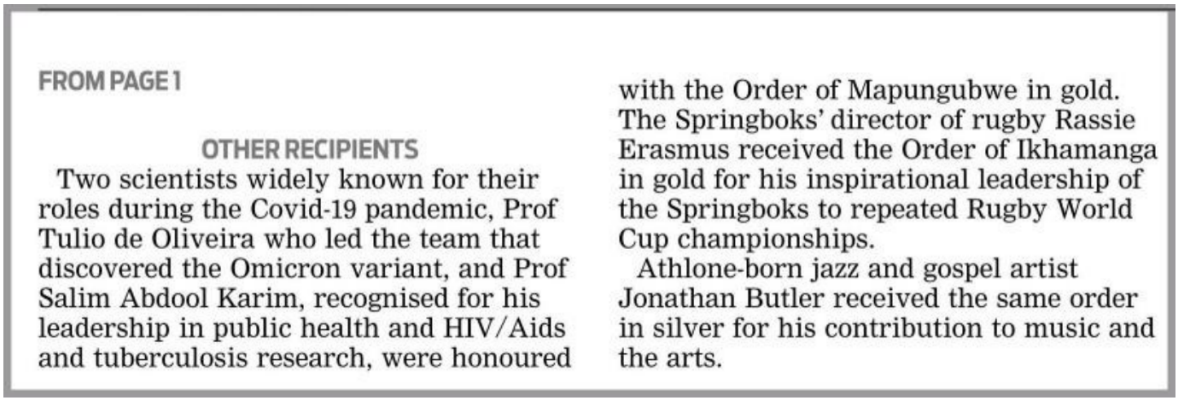
UWC's rector and vice-chancellor, Prof Robert Balfour, was quick to congratulate her: "This is a proud testimony to Prof Baker's contribution to our university, our country and global scholarship: we are UWC. Well done, Prof Priscilla!"

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OTHER RECIPIENTS

Two scientists widely known for their roles during the Covid-19 pandemic, Prof Tulio de Oliveira who led the team that discovered the Omicron variant, and Prof Salim Abdool Karim, recognised for his leadership in public health and HIV/Aids and tuberculosis research, were honoured with the Order of Mapungubwe in gold.

The Springboks' director of rugby Rassie Erasmus received the Order of Ikhamanga in gold for his inspirational leadership of the Springboks to repeated Rugby World Cup championships.

Athlone-born jazz and gospel artist Jonathan Butler received the same order in silver for his contribution to music and the arts.

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