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Identification of the subspecies of *Oreochromis niloticus* (Pisces: Cichlidae) using restriction endonuclease analysis of mitochondrial DNA

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ABSTRACT

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Restriction endonuclease analysis of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) was used to characterize differentiation among the seven described subspecies of *Oreochromis niloticus* from East Africa and Egypt. Mitochondrial DNAs of 14 populations were examined with 42 restriction endonucleases. Two subspecies of *Oreochromis spilurus* were also examined. Approximately 8% of the mitochondrial genome of *O. niloticus* (17 070 ± 40 base pairs) was assayed; 29 (70%) of the 42 restriction enzymes that were examined displayed restriction phenotypes that varied among the samples analyzed.

Several endonucleases produced restriction phenotypes which were diagnostic for the described subspecies of *O. niloticus*, though a few samples did not agree with the conventional taxonomy of the group. Extensive differentiation of some populations suggests that additional taxonomic recognition is warranted. Because all subspecies of *Oreochromis niloticus* could be distinguished by their unique restriction enzyme profiles, analysis of mtDNA can be used to identify the origin of cultured stocks. This study provides the first molecular key for the objective identification of this taxon.

INTRODUCTION

The cichlid fish *Oreochromis niloticus* (Linnaeus) is one of the most important taxa in global aquaculture today (FAO, 1980). The species occurs naturally in East and West Africa, though its distribution is not continuous. It is probably the most widespread and the most abundant of all the tilapiine species having been extensively introduced into many areas of the world (Welcomme, 1981). These introduced populations of *O. niloticus* have been founded from a variety of both natural and cultured sources (Trewavas,

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1983). The identification of taxa and of cultured stocks is central to aquaculture and effective fishery management of tilapias.

Oreochromis niloticus has been subjected to detailed morphological study and analysis. The most recent systematic treatment (Trewavas, 1983) divided the taxon into seven subspecies: *O. niloticus baringoensis* Trewavas, *O. n. cancellatus* (Nichols), *O. n. eduardianus* (Boulenger), *O. n. filoa* Trewavas, *O. n. niloticus* (Linnaeus), *O. n. sugutae* Trewavas, and *O. n. vulcani* (Trewavas). This classification is based on osteological features and composite differences in meristic and morphometric characters. However, none of these characters, either singly or in combination, can be used to unambiguously identify individual fish: all characters overlap among subspecies. Additionally, this situation can be exacerbated by potential environmental influences on meristic traits, morphometric characters and population parameters (Dentry and Lindsey, 1978; Ryman et al., 1984; Beacham and Murry, 1986). If some attributes on which these taxa have been characterized are indeed plastic, their usefulness for stock identification in aquaculture may be limited.

Protein electrophoresis has been used extensively to delineate species and differentiation among populations of fishes (e.g. Shaklee, 1983; Utter, 1987). In tilapias, some studies using allozymes have very successfully discriminated among species (Kornfield et al., 1979; McAndrew and Majumdar, 1983, 1984). However, many species of cichlids are exceedingly similar when assayed by this technique, possessing identical alleles at most loci (Sage and Selander, 1975; Kornfield, 1984; McKaye et al., 1984; Sage et al., 1984; Kornfield 1991). This is particularly true for taxa of very recent origin. In such cases, protein electrophoresis is not sufficiently sensitive to reveal discriminatory genetic characteristics. Extensive protein electrophoresis was conducted by Seyoum (1989, 1990) for eleven population samples representing five subspecies of *O. niloticus* (*O. n. baringoensis*, *O. n. cancellatus*, *O. n. filoa*, *O. n. sugutae*, and *O. n. vulcani*). Though four of the 32 resolved loci were polymorphic, no diagnostic alleles were present and allele frequencies could not be used to discriminate among subspecies. Thus, an alternative method for objective identification of tilapias was pursued.

The technique of restriction endonuclease analysis of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) has been successfully exploited for stock identification and population analysis in fishes (Ferris and Berg, 1987; Gyllensten and Wilson, 1987; Kornfield and Bogdanowicz, 1987). Because of its small size, taxonomic homology, absence of recombination and ease of isolation, the mtDNA genome is an excellent system for population analysis (Wilson et al., 1985; Avise et al., 1987; Moritz et al., 1987). Strict maternal inheritance (Lansman et al., 1981) insures that each lineage accumulates its own mutations in the mtDNA genome. Further, the apparent rapid rate of mtDNA evolution relative to nuclear DNA (Brown, 1983) has provided sensitivity sufficient to resolve acute taxonomic problems in ichthyology (Avise et al., 1986). Restriction enzyme

analysis of mtDNA permits quantification of variation at the nucleotide level and provides a large number of characters for comparative purposes. Here we exploit restriction enzyme analysis of mtDNA to define the subspecies of *O. niloticus*.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Twelve populations of *Oreochromis niloticus* and two populations of the related congener *O. spilurus* were examined (Table 1). A few of the samples were taken from waters that are interconnected to some degree. Three samples from the Gallo Lakes in the Ethiopian Rift (Lakes Abijata, Langano and Zewai) are interconnected by intermittent streams; these three localities are lumped together in analyses. There are potential interconnections between the Blue Nile and the White Nile, but distances between populations (e.g. in Lake Albert and Lake Tana) are very large and intervening habitats are very diverse.

Specimens were dissected in the field and tissues were placed in cryotubes and transported to the laboratory on dry ice. Tissue samples were stored up to 7 months at -70°C prior to analysis.

Mitochondrial DNA was extracted from ovarian tissue using cesium chloride/ethidium bromide gradient ultracentrifugation (Lansman et al., 1981). Aliquots of purified mtDNA were digested (Maniatis et al., 1982) for 5 h

TABLE 1

Source and samples of *Oreochromis niloticus* and *Oreochromis spilurus*. Nomenclature according to Trewavas (1983); acronym according to the results in this study. *N* indicates sample size

Taxon	Source ^a	Latitude	Longitude	<i>N</i>	Acronym
<i>O. n. baringoensis</i>	L. Baringo, Kenya	0° 38' N	36° 05' E	3	BB
<i>O. n. cancellatus</i>	L. Abijata, ^b Ethiopia	7° 38' N	38° 27' E	9	CC
<i>O. n. cancellatus</i>	L. Awassa, Ethiopia	7° 03' N	38° 27' E	4	CC
<i>O. n. cancellatus</i>	L. Akaki, Ethiopia	8° 40' N	38° 35' E	3	FF
<i>O. n. cancellatus</i>	L. Chamo, Ethiopia	5° 50' N	37° 40' E	3	CC
<i>O. n. cancellatus</i>	L. Tana, Ethiopia	12° 00' N	37° 20' E	3	CT
<i>O. n. eduardianus</i>	L. Victoria, Kenya	1° 00' S	33° 00' E	3	EV
<i>O. n. filoa</i>	R. Awash (Metehara), Ethiopia ^c	8° 53' N	39° 53' E	3	FF
<i>O. n. filoa</i>	L. Beseka, Ethiopia	8° 52' N	39° 52' E	3	CC
<i>O. n. niloticus</i>	L. Manzilah, Egypt	31° 08' N	32° 00' E	3	NM
<i>O. n. sugutae</i>	R. Suguta (Lopetakinyanga), Kenya	1° 00' N	36° 15' E	3	SS
<i>O. n. vulcani</i>	L. Turkana (Loyengalini), Kenya	3° 30' N	36° 05' E	3	VT
<i>O. s. spilurus</i>	R. Tana, Kenya	1° 03' N	37° 05' E	5	ST
<i>O. s. niger</i>	L. Turkana, Kenya	3° 30' N	36° 05' E	3	ST

^aL=Lake (Amaharic, Hyke); R=River (Wonze).

^bIncludes samples from interconnected Lake Langano (latitude 7° 38' N, longitude 38° 35' E) and Lake Zewai (8° 00' N, 38° 50' E).

^cNames in parentheses are local names of places where samples were collected.

using 42 restriction endonucleases: 27 six-base enzymes (*ApaI*, *BamHI*, *BclI*, *BglI*, *BglII*, *BstEII*, *Clal*, *DraI*, *EcoRI*, *EcoRV*, *HindIII*, *HpaI*, *KpnI*, *MluI*, *NarI*, *NcoI*, *NdeI*, *NruI*, *PstI*, *PvuII*, *Sall*, *SmaI*, *SphI*, *SstII*, *XbaI*, *XhoI*, *XmnI*), three 5.3-base enzymes (*AvaI*, *HincII*, *StyI*), one 5-base enzyme (*MboII*), three 4.6-base enzymes (*AvaII*, *EcoRII*, *NciI*) and eight four-base enzymes (*HaeIII*, *HinfI*, *HhaI*, *MboI*, *MspI*, *RsaI*, *ThaI*, *TaqI*). The resulting cleavage fragments were endlabeled with ^{32}P dNTPs by the method of Drouin (1980). Fragments were separated according to size by standard agarose gel (1–2%) electrophoresis using 1000-base-pair (bp)-size standards (Bethesda Research Laboratories, Bethesda, MD) on each gel. Restriction fragment patterns were visualized by autoradiography (Kodak XO-Mat AR film and Dupont Cronex Lightning Plus screens); exposure was typically 2 h at room temperature. Restriction fragment sizes were determined from autoradiographs using a polynomial regression equation derived from the fragment mobilities of the standard.

For each population, a minimum of three individuals was examined. A single letter was assigned to each cleavage phenotype observed for each enzyme; a 29-letter sequence constitutes the composite phenotype or clonal type of a specimen. Thirteen enzymes that did not cleave the mtDNA, or gave identical multibanded patterns, were not included in the composite phenotype.

RESULTS

Of the 42 restriction enzymes examined, ten did not cleave the mtDNA genome (*BamHI*, *Clal*, *EcoRI*, *KpnI*, *MluI*, *NruI*, *Sall*, *SmaI*, *SstII*, and *XhoI*). Three additional enzymes (*BglI*, *EcoRV*, and *NarI*) had identical multibanded phenotypes among all subspecies and *O. spilurus*. The mtDNA genome was estimated to be $17\,020 \pm 40$ base pairs in length; based on the number of fragments visualized, we estimate that approximately 8% of the mitochondrial genome was assayed.

A total of 97 phenotypes was observed for the 29 polymorphic enzymes (Table 2). The fragment sizes of these phenotypes are provided in the Appendix. MtDNA restriction fragment patterns produced with *ApaI* are illustrated in Fig. 1. No intrapopulation polymorphisms were observed for any enzyme; from each population, all individuals examined had identical phenotypes.

Several unique and discriminatory cleavage phenotypes were found for the subspecies, with the highest degree of resolution observed using four-base restriction enzymes. A dichotomous key to the described subspecies of *O. niloticus* using diagnostic mtDNA restriction enzyme phenotypes is given in Table 3. The key was constructed employing six enzymes and can be used to objectively identify single individuals in the absence of locality information.

Of the seven populations morphologically assigned to *O. niloticus cancelatus* (Trewavas, 1983), five (Lakes Abijata, Awassa, Chamo, Langano and

TABLE 2

Mitochondrial DNA cleavage phenotypes of *Oreochromis niloticus* subspecies and *Oreochromis spilurus*. Sample size was three individuals for each population. Abbreviations of samples as in Table 1

Restriction enzyme	Samples								
	BB	CC	CT	EV	FF	NM	SS	VT	ST ^a
<i>Apal</i>	I	G	H	M	G	H	H	H	E
<i>Aval</i>	C	A	B	B	A	B	B	B	G
<i>AvaII</i>	M	A	E	D	A	D	D	D	C
<i>BclI</i>	A	A	A	A	B	A	A	A	A
<i>BglII</i>	A	B	A	A	B	A	A	A	E
<i>BstEII</i>	D	A	A	B	A	B	B	B	B
<i>DraI</i>	B	A	B	H	A	B	B	B	A
<i>EcoRII</i>	C	A	A	C	A	A	B	B	E
<i>HaellI</i>	A	H	A	B	H	C	A	A	D
<i>HhaI</i>	E	B	A	E	D	A	E	E	G
<i>HincII</i>	B	A	B	B	A	B	B	B	C
<i>HindIII</i>	A	A	D	D	A	D	D	D	A
<i>HinfI</i>	C	B	A	A	B	A	D	A	E
<i>HpaI</i>	A	B	A	A	B	A	A	A	A
<i>MboI</i>	F	D	F	F	A	F	B	F	E
<i>MbolI</i>	A	A	C	A	E	A	A	B	D
<i>MspI</i>	B	E	B	J	E	B	B	B	D
<i>NciI</i>	B	A	B	B	A	X	B	B	E
<i>NcoI</i>	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	C
<i>NdeI</i>	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	C
<i>PstI</i>	B	A	A	B	A	A	A	A	A
<i>PvuII</i>	A	A	E	A	A	A	A	A	A
<i>RsaI</i>	B	D	E	G	D	G	A	F	C
<i>SphI</i>	B	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	E
<i>StyI</i>	D	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	E
<i>TaqI</i>	C	B	A	D	B	C	C	C	F
<i>ThaI</i>	A	B	A	A	B	A	A	A	B
<i>XbaI</i>	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	B
<i>XmnI</i>	C	A	A	C	A	C	C	C	A
Number of populations sampled	1	6	1	1	2	1	1	1	2

^aIncludes both subspecies of *O. spilurus* (*O. s. niger* and *O. s. spilurus*).

Zewai) showed identical mtDNA composite phenotypes. However, the sample of *O. n. cancellatus* from Lake Tana exhibited different phenotypes for 19 of the 29 polymorphic enzymes and the sample of *O. n. cancellatus* from Lake Akaki showed mtDNA composite phenotypes different from its assigned subspecies. In addition, the samples from Lake Beseka were not similar to *O. n. filoa*, the taxon to which they had been assigned (see Discussion).

Pairwise comparison of the number of differences in mtDNA composite

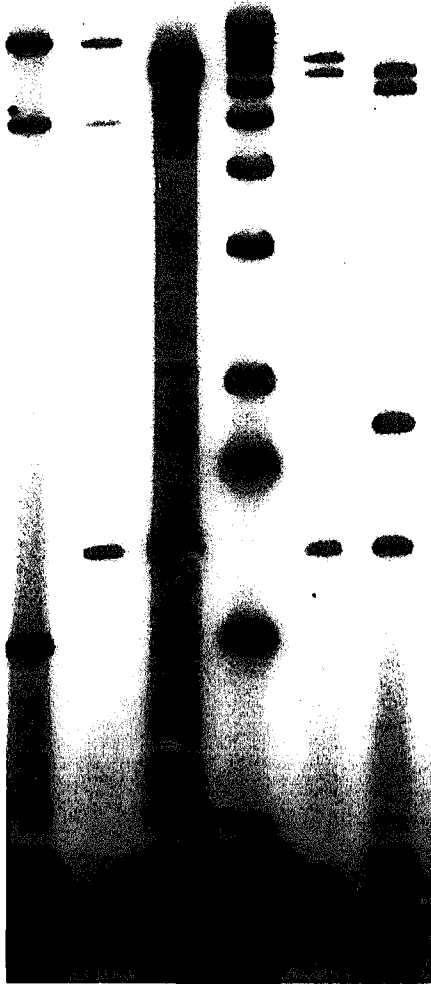


Fig. 1. Mitochondrial DNA restriction fragment patterns produced with *Apa*I. Samples (left to right), *Oreochromis niloticus cancellatus*, *O. spilurus spilurus*, *O. n. vulcani*, 1 kb molecular weight standard, *O. n. sugutae*, and *O. n. baringoensis*.

phenotypes between samples of the subspecies of *O. niloticus* and between *O. spilurus* are provided in Table 4. Each phenotypic difference represents (minimally) one mutation step. Of particular note are differences exhibited by the samples from Lake Tana that had been assigned to *O. n. cancellatus* (Trewavas, 1983). The two subspecies of *O. spilurus* showed identical phenotypes for all 29 polymorphic enzymes. Formal treatment of the evolutionary relationships among the subspecies will be presented elsewhere.

TABLE 3

Dichotomous key to the described subspecies of *Oreochromis niloticus* from East Africa and Egypt, based on mitochondrial DNA restriction enzyme phenotypes. Many other keys can be constructed from the composite phenotypes (see Table 2)

1.	A.	<i>DraI</i> "H"	<i>O. n. eduardianus</i>
	B.	All other phenotypes	2
2.	A.	<i>HinfI</i> "D"	<i>O. n. sugutae</i>
	B.	All other phenotypes	3
3.	A.	<i>RsaI</i> "F"	<i>O. n. vulcani</i>
	B.	All other phenotypes	4
4.	A.	<i>BclI</i> "B"	<i>O. n. filoa</i>
	B.	All other phenotypes	5
5.	A.	<i>AvaI</i> "A" or "E"	6
	B.	All other phenotypes	7
6.	A.	<i>AvaI</i> "A"	<i>O. n. cancellatus</i>
	B.	<i>AvaI</i> "E"	<i>O. n. cancellatus</i> (Lake Tana population)
7.	A.	<i>NciI</i> "X"	<i>O. n. niloticus</i>
	B.	<i>HinfI</i> "C"	<i>O. n. baringoensis</i>

TABLE 4

Number of mitochondrial DNA cleavage phenotype differences between the subspecies of *Oreochromis niloticus* and *Oreochromis spilurus* (ST). Total number of polymorphic enzymes was 29

	CC	CT	EV	FF	NM	SS	VT	ST
<i>O. n. baringoensis</i>	21	17	13	24	14	12	12	25
<i>O. n. cancellatus</i> (CC)	-	19	21	4	19	20	21	22
<i>O. n. cancellatus</i> (CT)	-	-	14	20	9	11	8	23
<i>O. n. eduardianus</i> (EV)	-	-	-	23	9	10	9	25
<i>O. n. filoa</i> (FF)	-	-	-	-	21	22	22	23
<i>O. n. niloticus</i> (NM)	-	-	-	-	-	7	6	24
<i>O. n. sugutae</i> (SS)	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	24
<i>O. n. vulcani</i> (VT)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	24

DISCUSSION

In previous studies, protein electrophoresis could not be used to discriminate among five of the subspecies of *Oreochromis niloticus* (Seyoum, 1989, 1990). Indeed, the tilapiine fishes are morphologically very similar and no earlier work has successfully identified any taxonomic group below the species level with allozyme analysis. However, using restriction endonuclease analysis of mtDNA, we were able to unambiguously distinguish all the subspecies.

Several keys to the subspecies of *O. niloticus* can be drawn from diagnostic restriction enzyme patterns (Table 2, Appendix). One dichotomous key is

illustrated in Table 3. Alternatively, the subspecies can be discriminated by cleavage phenotypes for only three restriction endonucleases: *ApaI*, *BclI* and *RsaI* (Table 2). Thus, for introduced or cultured tilapias, assuming that stocks have remained genetically isolated (i.e., have experienced no hybridization since they were obtained from the wild), mtDNA analysis can be exploited to indicate their origin.

One important factor in the effective exploitation of mtDNA polymorphism for the purpose of stock or subspecies identification is adjustment for intrapopulation variation. Variation of mtDNA within populations has been found in a number of fishes, e.g., rainbow trout, *Oncorhynchus mykiss* (Palva and Palva, 1987), Atlantic herring, *Clupea harengus* (Kornfield and Bogdanowicz, 1987), Great Lakes walleye, *Stizostedion vitreum* (Billington and Hebert, 1988) and southern African hakes, *Merluccius* spp. (Becker et al., 1988). However, no variation was observed within any of the populations we sampled. Indeed, the sample sizes in this study (Table 1) may not be sufficient to expose all clones that may occur within a population. However, the complete absence of differentiation among the lakes inhabited by *O. n. cancellatus* strongly suggests that variation within populations is very limited. On the other hand, a great deal of interspecific polymorphism was observed as differences among the subspecies. Our ability to perceive these differences among populations strongly suggests that we could also have been able to recognize variation within populations had it been present.

Relationships within the *O. niloticus* subspecies complex derived from our analysis of mtDNA basically support the morphological classification of the group; each subspecies can be recognized by four or more unique restriction enzyme patterns (Table 4). However, there are three inconsistencies between the mtDNA findings and expectations from the current taxonomy of the group. The first case involves the position of the specimens from Lake Tana. Fish from Lake Tana, morphologically assigned to *O. n. cancellatus* by Trewavas (1983) differed from other population samples of that subspecies for 19 of 29 informative endonucleases (Table 4). The population in Lake Tana is not *O. n. cancellatus*, but represents an additional, previously unrecognized taxon. This fish has apparently remained static in morphology while its mtDNA diversified; the magnitude of distinctiveness may warrant taxonomic recognition.

A second exception to the conventional taxonomy involves identification of the fish collected from Lake Beseka (Metehara). This small Ethiopian lake possesses a number of hot streams around its periphery. Cichlids from Lake Beseka were thought by Trewavas (1983) to be allied to *O. n. filoa* since she believed that this taxon was adapted to high temperatures. However, analysis of fish from this location showed mtDNA restriction phenotypes identical to those of specimens assigned by Trewavas to *O. n. cancellatus*. Our identification of these fish as *O. n. cancellatus* is consistent with the idea that *O. n. filoa*

is naturally limited in distribution to the Awash system; Lake Beseka has no connection with the River Awash.

The final inconsistency between morphology and mtDNA data concerns the cichlid of Lake Akaki, an intentional impoundment in the River Awash system associated with hydrological development in the region. The lake is cold, shallow and muddy. Trewavas (1983) examined five specimens of *O. niloticus* from Lake Akaki, assigned them to *O. n. cancellatus*, but noted that they had meristics similar to *O. n. filoa*. The low number of dorsal fin elements in some Akaki specimens suggested to her that these fish may have been stocked from an Awash River hot spring since populations in high-temperature areas could display reduced fin elements. However, the fish we collected from Lake Akaki did not show mtDNA phenotypes for *O. n. cancellatus*, but instead had phenotypes characteristic of *O. n. filoa* from hot springs in the Awash near Metehara. Though her taxonomic allocation was incorrect, Trewavas (1973) had anticipated this finding by identifying meristic inconsistencies of these fish.

The use of restriction endonuclease analysis of mitochondrial DNA has allowed us to establish a molecular key to distinguish among the subspecies of *O. niloticus*. With a single individual, identification using morphology is virtually impossible in the absence of locality information. Given the global scale of aquaculture involving *O. niloticus*, we suggest that additional coordinated molecular studies of wild and cultured stocks should be undertaken. Such an effort would be useful for preservation of gene pools and unambiguous identification of cultured or wild stocks. We hope that our findings will assist in stock identification programs and aquaculture research.

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