



Original Article

Genetic variation of *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes across Thailand based on nuclear DNA sequences

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 June 2018

Accepted 12 September 2018

Available online 26 November 2018

Keywords:

Aedes aegypti

Genetic variation

Nuclear DNA sequence

Single nucleotide polymorphisms

ABSTRACT

The *Aedes aegypti* L. mosquito is the primary vector of dengue viruses in Thailand, where dengue disease is a major public health problem in both urban and rural areas. Understanding the genetic variation of *Ae. aegypti* populations can help to understand the distribution, population structure and gene flow of this species. Single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) markers were used to analyze the genetic variation of 21 *Ae. aegypti* populations collected across six geographic locations in Thailand. Nuclear DNA sequences of four putative neutral fragments located on different chromosomes were examined. An average of 14 SNPs per kb was detected per population. Tajima's D statistical test showed no significant deviation from the neutral equilibrium model in the majority of populations, suggesting that the detected patterns of variation were under random mutation and genetic drift equilibrium. Relatively low genetic differentiation was detected between all mosquito populations.

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Introduction

Dengue is the most common and widespread mosquito-borne viral infection in the world (Gubler, 2002; Bhatt et al., 2013). Dengue viruses, the cause of dengue fever and more severe disease, are transmitted to humans by the infective bite of the female *Aedes aegypti* (L.) mosquito, the most important species among potential natural vectors in the subgenus *Stegomyia* and moreover, this mosquito species is also responsible for transmitting chikungunya and Zika viruses throughout Southeast Asia, Africa and the Americas (Higgs and Vanlandingham, 2015; Paixão et al., 2016). In Thailand, *Ae. aegypti* was first reported in 1907 and is believed to have spread from Southeast Asia into the Pacific Region during World War II (Gubler, 1998). This mosquito species is widespread in urban and rural areas of Thailand and is a major public health threat and contributor to disease burden in communities (Bureau of Epidemiology, Department of Disease Control, 2014).

The study of population genetics involves the comparison and estimation of temporal heredity changes for describing patterns of genetic diversity in natural populations and developing genotypic maps. Data from population genetic studies of *Ae. aegypti* are useful for a better understanding the epidemiology of dengue transmission and improving vector control. Genetic structure analysis allows identification of genetic differentiation between individuals in subpopulations across areas (Brown et al., 2011; Gloria-Soria et al., 2016).

Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) is a commonly used genetic marker for studying molecular diversity in animals. However, the appearance of nuclear mitochondrial pseudogenes (Numt) in the nuclear genome of *Ae. aegypti* may result in over amplification of mtDNA, or even the targeting of actual mtDNA sequences (Hlaing et al., 2009), potentially causing serious complications when analyzing population genetic studies using mtDNA alone (Hazkani-Covo et al., 2010). The use of nuclear DNA is intended to overcome this potential problem with *Ae. aegypti*. As others have demonstrated, the use of nuclear DNA for studying *Ae. aegypti* population genetics appears an acceptable alternative for avoiding some inherent limitations with using mtDNA (Crawford et al., 2017; Pless et al., 2017).

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In this study, single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) markers were used to analyze patterns of genetic variation and population differentiation in four putative neutral fragments (*Tsf*, *AelMUC1*, *ApoLp-2* and *CPA*) of *Ae. aegypti*. The *Tsf* (Transferrin) gene is located on chromosome I and is involved in iron transport (Harizanova et al., 2005). The *AelMUC1* (Mucin-like protein) gene, is located on chromosome II and involved in immune responses. The *ApoLp-2* (Apolipoprotein II) gene on chromosome III is involved in neutral fat biosynthesis and transporting lipoprotein (Paduan and Ribolla, 2009). Lastly, the *CPA* (Carboxypeptidase A) gene is located on chromosome II and is involved in the degradation of proteins in the digestive tract (Isoe et al., 2009). The four analyzed genes were chosen based on previous study (Paduan and Ribolla, 2009) that represented a suitable marker for *Ae. aegypti* genetic study. Moreover, the reliability of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) amplification was also a concern for the markers selected in this study.

Materials and methods

Mosquito samples and DNA extraction

Immature and adult stage mosquitoes were collected across Thailand between 2012 and 2014 (Fig. 1; Table 1). Larvae were collected in artificial containers and adults were trapped using sweep nets in and around homes. In total, 21 mosquito populations were collected from six geographic locations of Thailand, including two insular populations (Phuket and Chang islands). Immature mosquitoes were reared to adults. All adult specimens were identified to the species level using standard morphological characters (Rueda, 2004), and stored at -20°C until genomic DNA extraction using GF-1 Tissue DNA Extraction kits (Vivantis; USA). Ten adult female mosquitoes from each location were used for DNA extraction and further analysis.

DNA amplification and sequencing

DNA samples were amplified using PCR with four primer pairs of the coding regions described (*Tsf*, *AelMUC1*, *ApoLp-2* and *CPA* genes), and PCR product sizes of 1095, 429, 320 and 261 bp, respectively. Primer pairs of the *Tsf*, *AelMUC1* and *ApoLp-2* genes were obtained from previous work (Paduan and Ribolla, 2009); whereas, primers for the *CPA* gene (forward: 5' TGAGCACGCCCTC-GAATCAC 3' and reverse: 5'CAGTCTAACAGCCTTCACAG 3') were newly designed using the exon-primed, intron-crossing method (He and Haymer, 1997). A total volume of 25 μl comprised the PCR mixture, containing approximately 100 ng of DNA template, 10X buffer, 50 mM MgCl₂, 10 mM dNTPs, 10 μM forward primer, 10 μM reverse primer and 1 Unit *Taq* polymerase (Vivantis; USA). The PCR products were purified and sent to Macrogen Inc. (Seoul, Korea) for sequencing. Sequences were aligned using the BioEdit 7.2.5 software (Hall, 1999) and edited manually afterwards.

Population genetic analyses

Genetic diversity parameters number of SNPs, haplotype ratio, nucleotide diversity, and statistical tests of neutrality (Tajima's D test) (Tajima, 1989), and Fu and Li's D test (Fu and Li, 1993) were estimated using the DnaSP 5.1 software (Librado and Rozas, 2009).

The total fixation index (F_{ST}) value based on the method of Hudson et al. (1992) and pairwise F_{ST} values based on Slatkin (1995) were used to measure population differentiation. The levels of genetic differentiation within and among the 21 populations, and within and among the six geographical regions were estimated using the analysis of molecular variance (AMOVA), with the Arlequin 3.5 program (Excoffier and Lischer, 2010). Population

Table 1
Twenty-one sample locations for *Ae. aegypti* in Thailand.

Province	Geographic region	Geo-coordinates
Nakhon Ratchasima	Northeastern	146°59.69'N 10143'53.94"E
Roi Et	Northeastern	1605'76.91"N 10365'32.59"E
Sisaket	Northeastern	1461'68.07"N 10470'24.54"E
Ubon Ratchathani	Northeastern	1535'70.32"N 10450'74.46"E
Yasothon	Northeastern	1580'41.46"N 10414'48.97"E
Chiang Rai	Northern	19°61'54.24"N 100°08'69.94"E
Lampang	Northern	1818'33.86"N 9928'11.27"E
Lamphun	Northern	1865'38.69"N 9901'26.94"E
Chiang Mai	Northern	1841'0.62"N 9859'38.99"E
Phuket (Phuket Island)	Southern	785'12.02"N 9837'72.94"E
Pattani	Southern	687'46.2"N 10124'96.57"E
Songkhla	Southern	718'87.82"N 10060'79.86"E
Surat Thani	Southern	915'09.09"N 9932'18.99"E
Satun	Southern	664'14.19"N 10006'75.96"E
Trang	Southern	757'01.18"N 9961'30.37"E
Yala	Southern	583'73.49"N 10120'74.28"E
Chachoengsao	Eastern	1338'56.12"N 10179'93.16"E
Chanthaburi	Eastern	1244'35.4"N 0152'26.24"E
Trat (Chang island)	Eastern	1205'14.08"N 0232'32.27"E
Bangkok	Central	1370'93.68"N 10058'41.26"E
Tak	Western	1578'64.35"N 9884'41.97"E

clustering of the 21 populations was done using Bayesian analysis of population structure using the BAPS 6.0 software (Corander et al., 2008).

Ethics statement

Animal care or biosafety and all experimental procedures were approved by the Animal Experiment Committee, Biosafety Committee Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand (Animal Ethics Permission number ACKU03558).

Results

Genetic diversity

The genetic diversity of 21 *Ae. aegypti* mosquito populations across Thailand was estimated based on four putative neutral DNA sequences: *Tsf*, *AelMUC1*, *ApoLp-2* and *CPA* fragments. In total, 106, 27, 10 and 23 SNPs were detected from the sequence lengths of 1,095, 429, 321 and 261 bp sequences, respectively. A mean of 14 SNPs per kilobase ($\pi = 0.014$) was observed from the distribution of SNPs among the four nuclear DNA genes. Estimates of nucleotide diversity (π) ranged from 0.009 (*ApoLp-2*) to 0.019 (*AelMUC1*), and (θ_W) ranged from 0.005 (*ApoLp-2*) to 0.016 (*Tsf*) (Table 2).

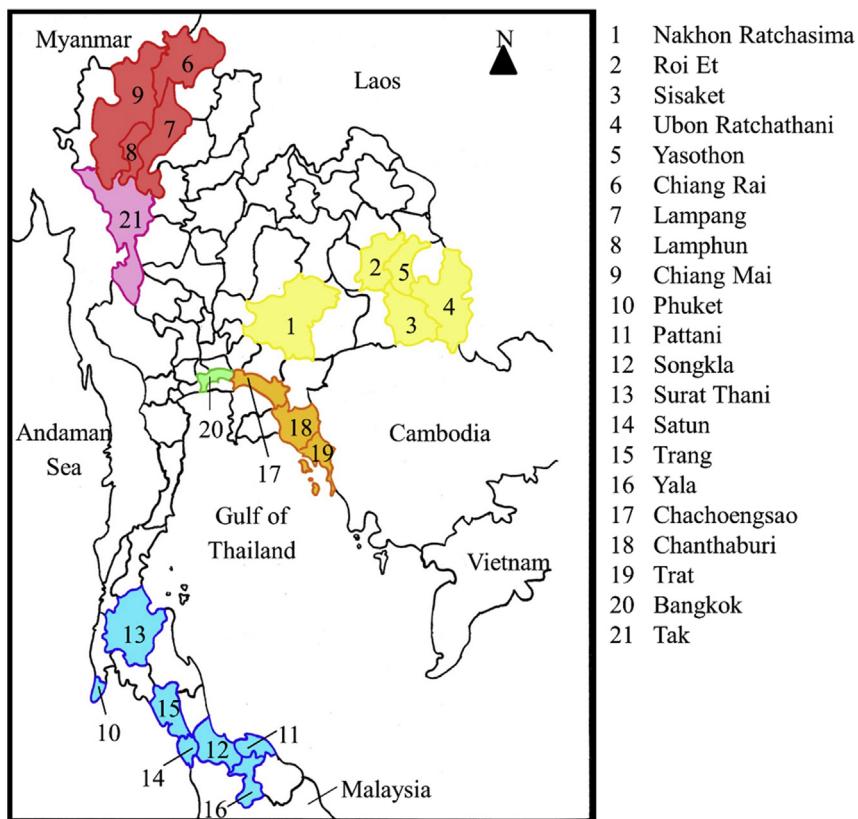


Fig. 1. Collection sites (by province) of sampled *Ae. aegypti* populations in Thailand.

Consistently low levels of genetic diversity (π and θ_W) were detected from the Bangkok population in all four genes (Fig. 2A–D). Moreover, the lowest levels of nucleotide diversity were also seen in the Bangkok population compared with the estimated diversity of populations from the other six locations in Thailand (Fig. 3).

Statistical neutrality tests (Tajima's D and Fu and Li's D (one-tailed) tests) were used to measure deviation from neutral equilibrium expectation. Fragment sequences of the *Tsf*, *AelMUC1* and *ApoLp-2* genes showed positive D values, while fragment sequences of the *CPA* gene produced a negative value (Table 2). A positive Tajima's D value indicates an excess of intermediate frequency polymorphisms in the population, while a negative Tajima's D value indicates an excess of low frequency polymorphisms. No significant Tajima's D value was found in fragment sequences of the *Tsf*, *ApoLp-2* and *CPA* genes ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that these fragments are under neutral equilibrium control. In contrast, a significant positive Tajima's D value (1.968) was found in a fragment sequence of the

AelMUC1 gene ($p < 0.05$), indicating it is not under neutral equilibrium control. Moreover, it was also found that most of the 21 populations showed no significant deviations from the neutral equilibrium model. Fu and Li's D tests indicated none of the fragments had a significant deviation from the neutral equilibrium model. A positive Fu and Li's value was observed for fragments of the *AelMUC1*, *ApoLp-2* and *CPA* genes, indicating an excess of polymorphisms on internal branches (intermediate frequency polymorphisms). In contrast, a negative Fu and Li's D value was shown in a fragment of the *Tsf* gene, indicating an excess of polymorphisms on external branches of the genealogy (singletons).

Genetic structure

Genetic differentiation among the 21 mosquito populations was estimated using the total F_{ST} values of Hudson et al. (1992). A relatively low level of genetic differentiation was detected from all

Table 2

Nucleotide diversity of sampled *Ae. aegypti* populations across Thailand within four selected genes.

Gene	Sample size	Length (base pair)	Number of SNPs	Haplotype ratio	Nucleotide diversity		Test of neutrality	
					π^a	θ_W^b	Tajima's D	Fu and Li's D
<i>Tsf</i>	204	1095	106	0.42	0.017	0.016	0.177	-0.268
<i>AelMUC1</i>	208	429	27	0.29	0.019	0.011	1.968*	0.240
<i>ApoLp-2</i>	208	320	10	0.06	0.009	0.005	1.826	1.144
<i>CPA</i>	208	261	23	0.19	0.011	0.015	-0.701	0.509

SNP = single nucleotide polymorphism.

* $p < 0.05$.

^a Nei (1987).

^b Watterson (1975).

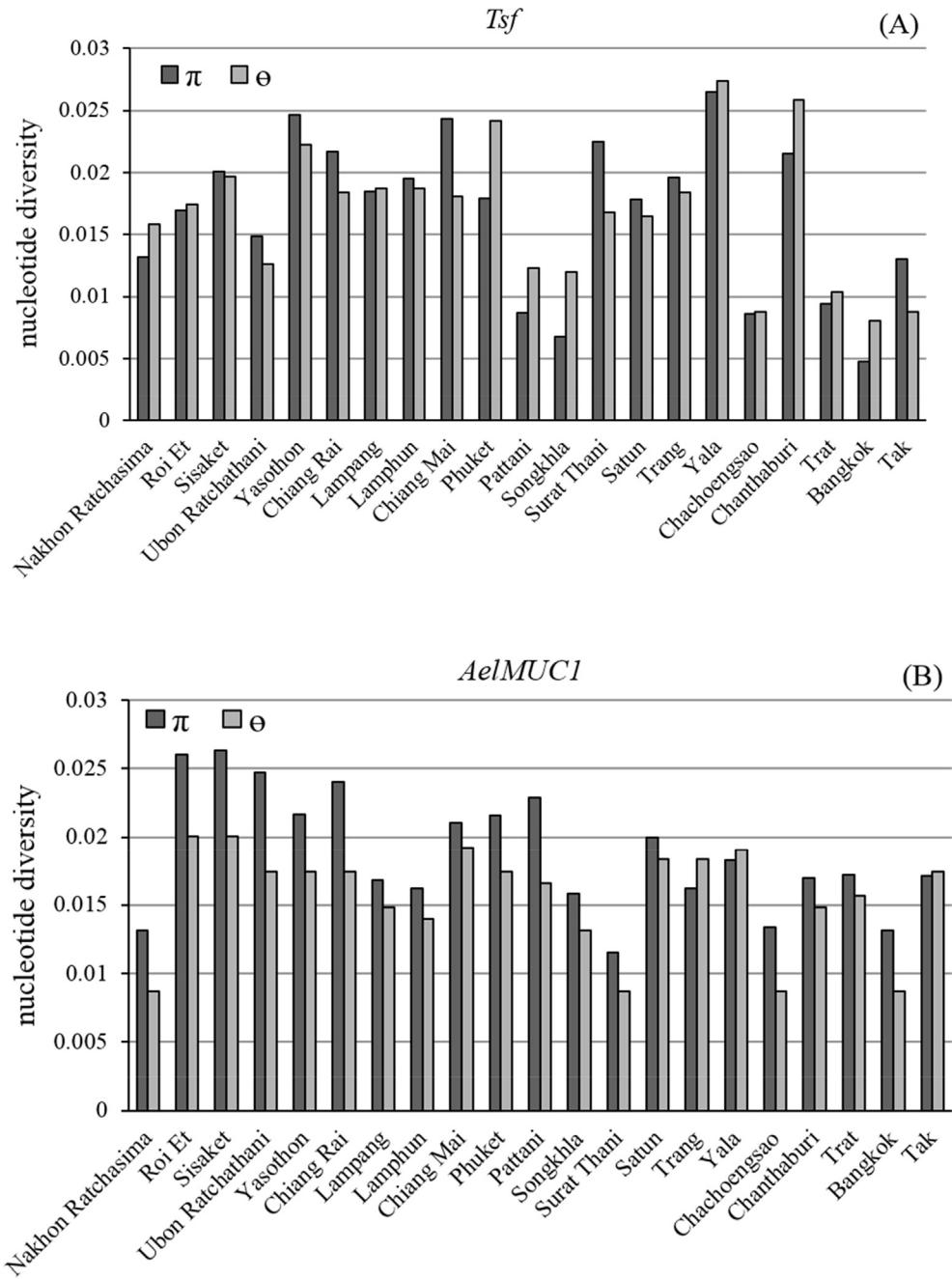


Fig. 2. Nucleotide diversity, (θ_w ; Watterson, 1975 and π ; Nei, 1987), of 21 *Ae. aegypti* populations across different provinces of Thailand for gene fragments: *Tsf* (A), *AelMUC1* (B), *ApoLp-2* (C) and *CPA* (D).

fragments, suggesting low evolutionary separation between the 21 population samples across Thailand (Table 3).

In AMOVA analysis, low variation among all populations (0.37%) demonstrated a low degree of genetic differentiation (Table 4). Additionally, the genetic separation between the mainland and the two island populations was estimated using pairwise F_{ST} values for all four gene fragments. The Chang Island population showed no genetic differentiation from mainland populations ($F_{ST} = 0.000$), while the Phuket Island population showed a non-significant differentiation ($F_{ST} = 0.0059$).

Population clustering of the 21 mosquito populations using the combined data of the four fragment genes was tested using BAPS analysis (Fig. 4). The best cluster pattern for the 21 populations was

five ($K = 5$) with the best log of marginal likelihood. Across the majority of populations, the highest proportion cluster was 36%. This cluster indicated the appearance of a common shared haplotype in 85.7% of sampled populations across Thailand, including the north-eastern, northern, southern, eastern, central (Bangkok) and western (Tak province) regions. The least common cluster (5%) was found only in southern and eastern populations (also with a relatively low frequency), indicating a unique haplotype in these populations.

Discussion

Using four nuclear genes, the mean number of SNP sites among 21 populations across Thailand was 14 per kb, corresponding well

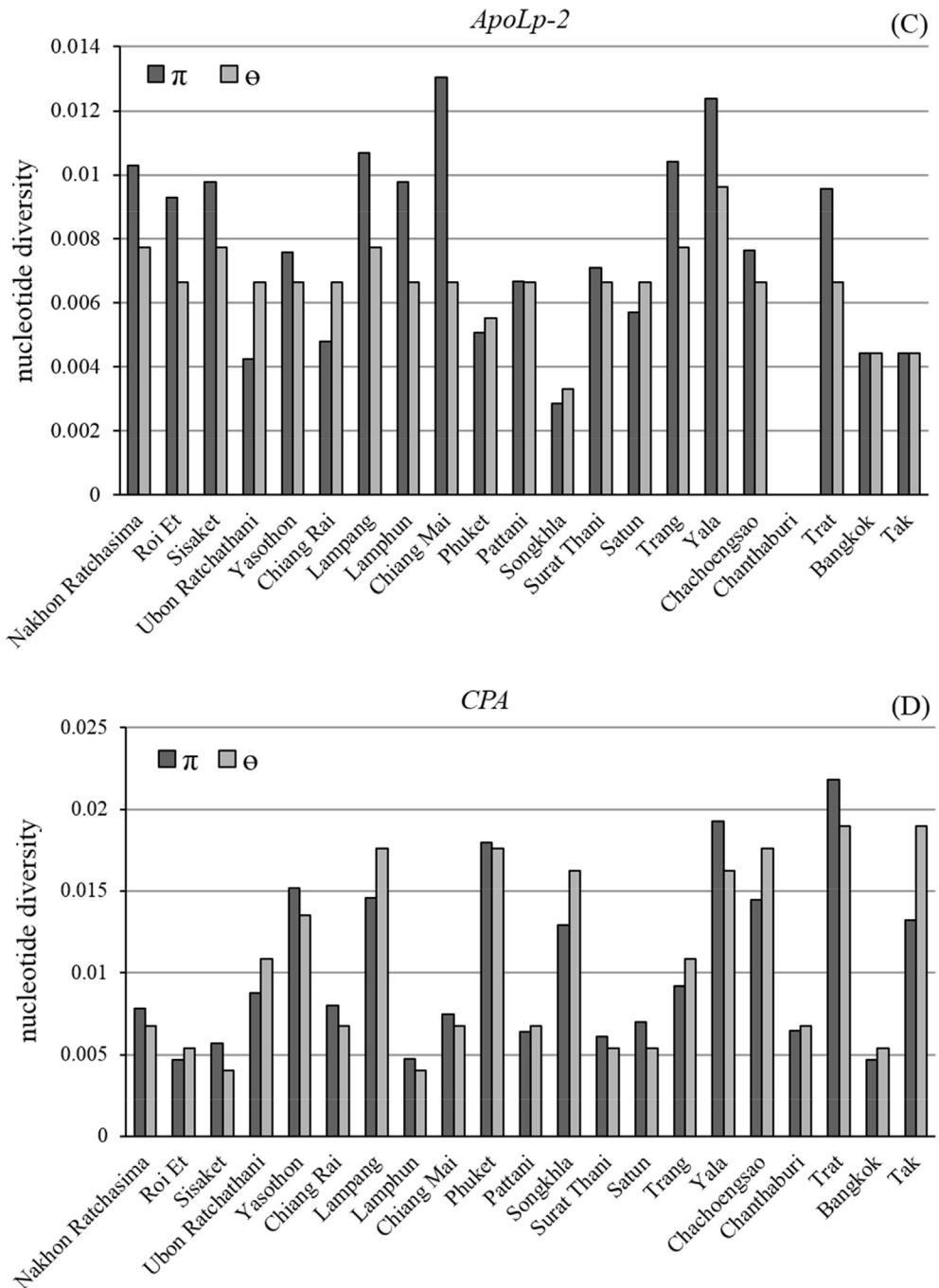


Fig. 2. (continued).

with the average number of SNP sites (12 per kb) in a previous study examining 25 nuclear genes in *Ae. aegypti* (Morlais and Severon, 2003). The use of specific SNP sites allows the analysis of variation in a single nucleotide that occurs at a specific position in the genome, and where each variation is present to some appreciable degree within a population. Single nucleotide alterations are usually considered to be point mutations that have been evolutionarily successful enough to recur in a significant proportion of the population of a species.

In terms of nucleotide diversity, both the π and θ_W values for the Bangkok population showed a consistent low level of diversity in all genes, and the lowest level of diversity among the six geographical

locations. The relatively low level of genetic diversity in Bangkok may have been the result of more frequent mosquito control activities in large urban areas. Such control, typically involving the application of insecticides to control immature and adult mosquitoes, may have periodically suppressed mosquito numbers sufficiently to decrease genetic diversity (intraspecific breeding); a finding coincident with the lower number of reported dengue cases (lower transmission) in the central regions of Thailand (Bureau of Epidemiology Department of Disease Control Ministry of Public Health, 2014). In Bangkok, *Ae. aegypti* samples were collected from only one site (in Khlong Toei district). This district is a densely populated, economically depressed community, where most

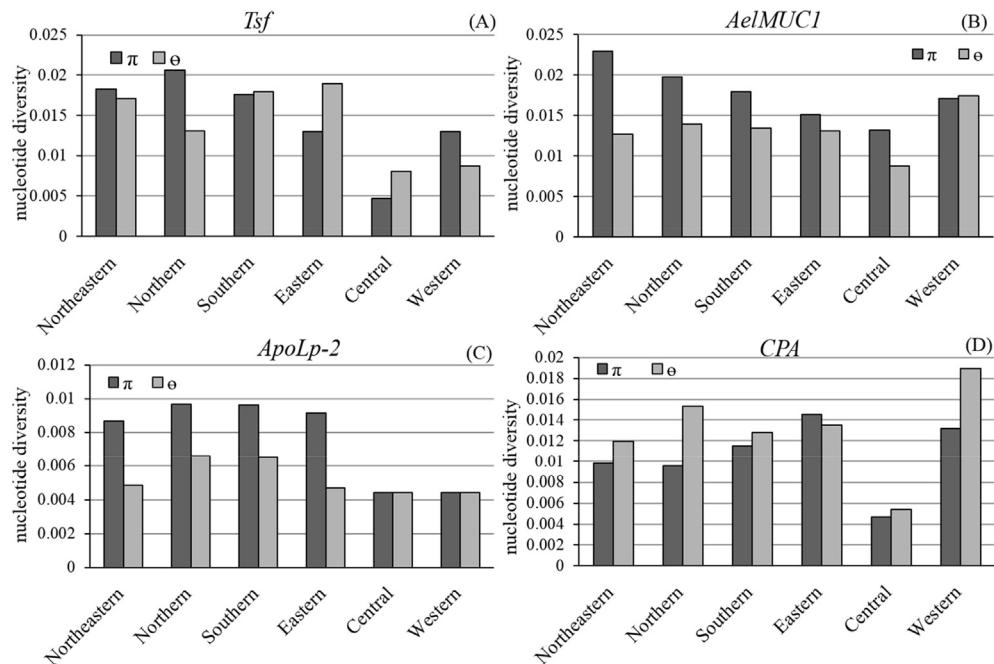


Fig. 3. Nucleotide diversity, θ_w (Watterson, 1975) and π (Nei, 1987), of *Ae. aegypti* populations in six geographic regions of Thailand for gene fragments: Tsf (A), AelMUC1 (B), ApoLp-2 (C) and CPA (D).

Table 3
Total fixation index (F_{ST}) values of sampled *Ae. aegypti* populations across Thailand.

Gene	Total F_{ST} value ^a
Tsf	0.06
AelMUC1	0.02
ApoLp-2	0.24
CPA	0.08

^a Hudson et al. (1992).

houses are of modest-to-poor construction and in close proximity to each other (Tonn et al., 1969). These circumstances allow mosquitoes to move more easily from one house to another. Thus, the samples collected from water containers in this locality could have contained siblings (from the same parent), potentially leading to the lower level of genetic diversity seen. However, it was also possible that the immature stage samples collected from the water containers might have represented multiple parental sources.

Most of the 21 *Ae. aegypti* populations sampled showed no significant deviation from the neutral equilibrium model, suggesting that the pattern of genetic variation was most likely explained by the influence of mutation and random genetic drift interaction,

rather than influenced by forces of natural selection. Comparing the mainland populations and the two island populations, mosquitoes from Chang Island showed no genetic difference from mainland samples, although the geographic distance between Chang Island and the mainland is greater than between Phuket Island and the mainland. Phuket Island showed slight, but no significant genetic differentiation from mainland populations either. This was not unexpected, since both islands have large and frequent interaction with the mainland and so the opportunity for regular re-introduction of outside populations of *Ae. aegypti* is substantial. The present data suggested that the 21 *Ae. aegypti* populations sampled across Thailand presented no significant genetic differences between populations, the capacity to transmit dengue and other viruses, as well as strategies to control this important mosquito species could likely be uniform throughout the country.

The BAPS analysis of the fragment sequence data showed the appearance of a common haplotype among a majority (85.7%) of populations using the clustering model, indicating that samples shared similar genetic patterns. Five clusters appeared best for population clustering among the 21 locations across Thailand. A common haplotype appeared in most of the populations and was present in the northeastern, northern, southern, and eastern locations, as well as in the central (Bangkok) and western (Tak

Table 4
Analysis of molecular variance with combined four genes and sampled *Ae. aegypti* populations.

Source of variance	Degrees of freedom	Variance component	Variation (%)	Fixation index
Among 6 geographic locations	5	0.066	0.37	$F_{CT}^a = 0.004$
Among populations within 6 geographic locations	15	1.950	10.77	$F_{SC}^b = 0.108^*$
Within populations	187	16.092	88.87	$F_{ST}^c = 0.111^*$
Total	207	18.108		

* $p < 0.05$.

^a Fixation index among groups.

^b Fixation index among populations within groups.

^c Fixation index within populations.

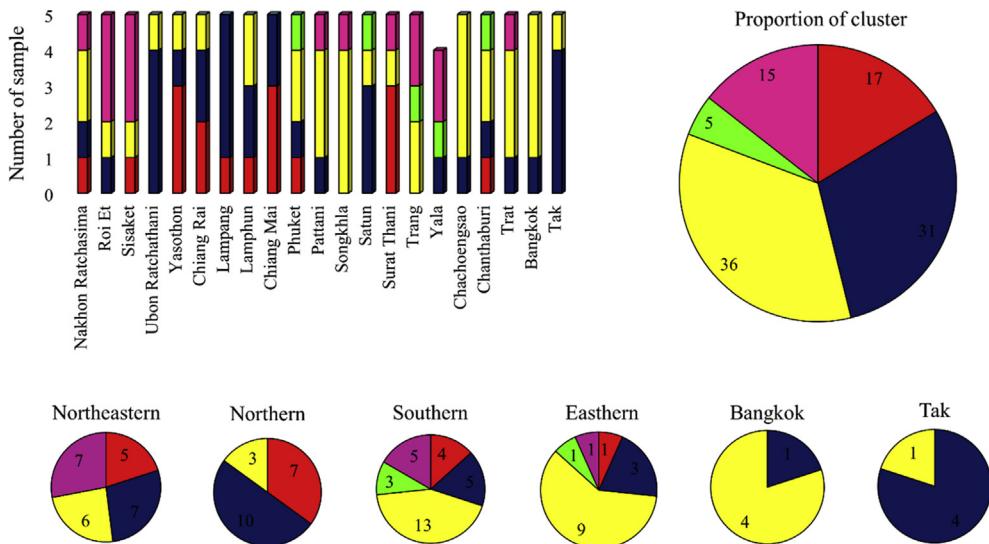


Fig. 4. Bayesian analysis of population structure based on 21 *Ae. aegypti* populations across Thailand using combined four fragment genes, where numbers represent number of samples.

province) populations, indicating clear genetic similarity among populations. A unique haplotype only appeared in some southern and eastern populations.

This study assists in understanding the contemporary genetic structure of *Ae. aegypti* populations in Thailand. However, the small sample size was a possible limitation to the conclusions and that future studies increasing the number of fragments and samples analyzed should provide. The strong similarity of mosquito populations between geographically separated regions in the country has possible epidemiological as well as vector control and pest management implications (such as genetic manipulation and insecticide resistance) for combating virus transmission by *Ae. aegypti*.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgements

The last author was supported by the Kasetsart University Research and Development Institute (KURDI), Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand.

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