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1 **Identification of group A rotaviruses from Zambian fruit bats provides evidence for**  
2 **long-distance dispersal events in Africa**

3

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32

33 Running title: Long-distance dispersal of rotaviruses in fruit bats

34

35 **Abstract**

36 Group A rotavirus (RVA) is a major cause of diarrhea in children worldwide.  
37 Although RVA infects many animals, little is known about RVA in bats. The present study  
38 investigated the genetic diversity of RVA in Zambian bats. We identified RVA from two  
39 straw-colored fruit bats (*Eidolon helvum*) and an Egyptian fruit bat (*Rousettus*  
40 *aegyptiacus*), and analyzed the genome sequences of these strains. Genome segments of  
41 the RVA strains from Zambian *E. helvum* showed 97%–99% nucleotide sequence identity  
42 with those of other RVA strains from *E. helvum* in Cameroon, which is 2,800 km from the  
43 sampling locations. These findings suggest that migratory straw-colored fruit bat species,  
44 distributed across sub-Saharan Africa, have the potential to disseminate RVA across long  
45 distances. By contrast, the RVA strain from Zambian *R. aegyptiacus* carried highly  
46 divergent *NSP2* and *NSP4* genes, leading us to propose novel genotypes N21 and E27,  
47 respectively. Notably, this RVA strain also shared the same genotype for *VP6* and *NSP3*  
48 with the RVA strains from Zambian *E. helvum*, suggesting interspecies transmission and  
49 genetic reassortment may have occurred between these two bat species in the past. Our  
50 study has important implications for RVA dispersal in bat populations, and expands our  
51 knowledge of the ecology, diversity and evolutionary relationships of RVA.

52

53 **Keywords**

54 Rotavirus; African fruit bats; Long-distance dispersal; Interspecies transmission;  
55 Phylogenetic analysis; Novel RVA genotypes

56

## 57 1. Introduction

58 Rotavirus is a major causative agent of gastroenteritis in children under five, with more  
59 than 120,000 cases of diarrheal death annually, worldwide (Clark et al., 2017). Among nine  
60 species of rotavirus (groups A to I), group A rotavirus (RVA) is the major species and the  
61 most well studied to date. RVA has a genome of 11 segments of double-stranded RNA,  
62 which encode the viral structural proteins (VP1–4, VP6 and VP7) and the non-structural  
63 proteins (NSP1–6). The current nomenclature system of RVA defines the genotype as:  
64 Gx-P[x]-Ix-Rx-Cx-Mx-Ax-Nx-Tx-Ex-Hx for the VP7-, VP4-, VP6-, VP1-, VP2-, VP3-,  
65 NSP1-, NSP2-, NSP3-, NSP4- and NSP5/6-encoding genes, respectively (Matthijssens et  
66 al., 2011a; Matthijssens et al., 2008). Based on the genome sequence, all RVA isolates are  
67 classified into genotypes in accordance with the recommendations of the Rotavirus  
68 Classification Working Group (RCWG) to ensure uniformity (Matthijssens et al., 2008).  
69 This classification system has been widely adopted and has greatly facilitated the analysis  
70 of RVA sequence data, which has uncovered high genetic diversity and proposed new  
71 genotypes (Esona et al., 2018; He et al., 2017; Ianiro et al., 2017; Li et al., 2016; Rojas et  
72 al., 2016; Rojas et al., 2017; Yinda et al., 2016).

73 Bats harbor numerous pathogens and act as reservoir hosts of high-consequence  
74 zoonotic viruses (Hayman, 2016; Olival et al., 2017). A limited number of studies have  
75 reported on RVA from frugivorous bats: *Eidolon helvum* in Kenya and Cameroon (Esona et  
76 al., 2010; Yinda et al., 2016), *Rousettus aegyptiacus* in Kenya (Waruhiu et al., 2017) and  
77 *Rousettus leschenaultii* in China (He et al., 2017), and insectivorous bats: *Molossus*  
78 *molossus* in Brazil (Asano et al., 2016), *Rhinolophus simulator* in Zambia (Sasaki et al.,  
79 2016), *Taphozous mauritanus* in Kenya (Waruhiu et al., 2017), and *Rhinolophus*  
80 *hipposideros*, *Aselliscus stoliczkanus*, *Scotophilus kuhlii*, *Hipposideros pomona* and

81 *Taphozous melanopogon* in China (He et al., 2017; He et al., 2013; Xia et al., 2014).  
82 Genetic characterization of bat RVAs has led to discoveries of new RVA genotypes. In  
83 addition, these studies revealed that bat RVAs not only carry unique genotypes exclusively  
84 observed in bats, but also share some genome segments with RVAs derived from humans  
85 and other mammals, indicative of interspecies transmission and the zoonotic potential of  
86 bat-borne RVA (Esona et al., 2010; He et al., 2017; Sasaki et al., 2016). Although the  
87 sporadic detection of RVA from bats worldwide has demonstrated that RVA infection can  
88 occur in some bat species, thus far, the genotypic tropism(s) and transmission cycle of RVA  
89 in bat populations are poorly understood.

90 Previously, we reported RVA strain LUS12-14 from the insectivorous horseshoe bat  
91 species, *R. simulator*, in Zambia (Sasaki et al., 2016). In the present study, we screened  
92 insectivorous and frugivorous bat species in Zambia to investigate the prevalence of RVA  
93 infection and also to determine host species susceptible to RVA infection. Three RVA  
94 strains were newly identified from the fruit bats, *E. helvum* and *R. aegyptiacus*. Our  
95 findings have important implications for RVA dissemination across long distances in  
96 African fruit bats and provide evidence of interspecies transmission and genetic  
97 reassortment events among African bat RVAs.

98

99 **2. Materials and Methods**

100 2.1. Sample collection and ethics statement

101 From 2014 to 2015, 60 frugivorous and 40 insectivorous bat species were captured at five  
102 different locations in Zambia, with permission from the Department of National Parks and  
103 Wildlife (formerly the Zambia Wildlife Authority), Ministry of Tourism and Arts (Act No.  
104 12 of 1998). Spleen, liver, kidney and colon tissues were collected through dissection. Bats  
105 were speciated based on morphology and sequencing of ribosomal RNA and cytochrome b  
106 loci, as previously described (Sasaki et al., 2012). Sample information is summarized in  
107 Table 1.

108

109 2.2 Nested RT-PCR screening for RVA

110 Total RNA was extracted from bat colon tissue using the QIAamp Viral RNA Mini Kit  
111 (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany) according to the manufacturer's instructions. For nested  
112 RT-PCR screening, cDNA was synthesized using random hexamers and SuperScript IV  
113 Reverse Transcriptase (Invitrogen; Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA), and  
114 subjected to nested PCR amplification employing the Tks Gflex DNA polymerase (Takara  
115 Bio, Kusatsu, Japan) and oligonucleotide primers targeting RVA VP7 as follows: RotexoF  
116 (5'- MDCGGWTAGMYYBTTTWAATG -3') and RotexoR (5'-  
117 CCCATNGMDATCCAYTTRTT -3') for the 1st round PCR, and RotinF (5'-  
118 TAGCYYBTTTTRATGTATGGKAT -3') and RotinR (5'- TCCATNGGRTTRCAHARCC  
119 -3') for the 2nd round PCR (Li et al., 2016). The thermocycling conditions were: 1 cycle of  
120 94°C for 2 min followed by 35 cycles of 98°C for 10 s, 46°C (1st PCR) or 50°C (2nd PCR)  
121 for 15 s and 68°C for 30 s. Amplicons were purified with the MonoFas DNA Purification  
122 Kit I (GL Sciences, Tokyo, Japan) and sequenced using BigDye Terminator v3.1 Cycle

123 Sequencing Kit (Applied Biosystems; Thermo Fisher Scientific).

124

### 125 2.3 Amplification and sequencing of RVA genome segments

126 Each genome segment was separately amplified by a nested RT-PCR strategy. After  
127 denaturation at 95°C for 5 min, RNA samples were reverse transcribed with SuperScript IV  
128 Reverse Transcriptase and specific primer sets targeting the 5' and 3' ends of each of the 11  
129 RVA genome segments, referred to as exoF or exoR, as described previously (Li et al.,  
130 2016). The 1st round PCR was performed with Tks Gflex DNA polymerase and the  
131 gene-specific primer pairs that were used in the reverse transcription step. The 2nd round  
132 PCR was performed with Tks Gflex DNA polymerase and the inner primer set, referred to  
133 as inF or inR as described previously (Li et al., 2016). The PCR amplicons were sequenced  
134 as described above.

135

### 136 2.4 Assignment of RVA genotypes

137 Genotypes of the identified segments were determined using the online tool RotaC  
138 (<http://rotac.regatools.be>) or following the judgment of RCWG  
139 (<https://rega.kuleuven.be/cev/viralmetagenomics/virus-classification/rcwg>) (Maes et al.,  
140 2009).

141

### 142 2.5 Phylogenetic analysis

143 Maximum likelihood phylogenetic trees with 500 bootstrap replicates were inferred from  
144 multiple nucleotide sequence alignments of full-length genes of RVA reference strains and  
145 bat RVAs using MEGA7 software (Kumar et al., 2016). For the maximum likelihood  
146 analyses, the GTR+G+I model for *VP1* and *VP6*, the GTR+G model for *VP7*, *NSP2* and



147 *NSP3*, and the TN93+G model for *NSP4* were employed based on the “Find best  
148 DNA/protein model” in the MEGA7 software.

149

150 2.6 Nucleotide sequence accession numbers

151 The determined RVA genome sequences were deposited in the DDBJ/EMBL/GenBank  
152 database under accession no. LC277159–LC277170.

153

154 **3. Results**

155 3.1 Detection of RVA *VP7* genome segments in *Zambian fruit bats*

156 During 2014–2015, three frugivorous bat species (*E. helvum*, *Epomophorus crypturus*,  
157 *R. aegyptiacus*) and three insectivorous bat species (*Hipposideros gigas*, *Nycteris* sp.,  
158 *Miniopterus schreibersii*) were captured in Zambia (Table 1). No bats showed signs of  
159 serious infection, including diarrhea. RNA was extracted from 100 bat colon samples and  
160 subjected to nested RT-PCR screening targeting the conserved *VP7* gene of RVA. The  
161 screening identified three *VP7* positive samples from *Zambian fruit bats*: strain ZFB14-52  
162 from an adult male *E. helvum*, ZFB14-135 from an adult female *E. helvum* and ZFB14-126  
163 from an adult female *R. aegyptiacus*. To determine the genotype, we attempted to amplify  
164 the near-complete sequence of the *VP7* gene and recovered it from ZFB14-52 and  
165 ZFB14-135, but not ZFB14-126.

166

167 3.2 Detection of RVA genome segments from *VP7*-positive bats

168 To further characterize the RVA strains detected in *Zambian fruit bats*, we sought to  
169 identify the remaining 10 genome segments of RVA in the *VP7*-positive specimens. The  
170 genome segments were amplified by nested RT-PCR. All RT-PCR products were  
171 sequenced directly and multiple peaks were not observed in the sequencing  
172 electropherogram, suggesting each amplicon originated from a single RVA strain. We  
173 determined the sequences of *VP6* and *NSP3* from strain ZFB14-52, *VP6* and *NSP2-4* from  
174 strain ZFB14-126, and *VP1*, *VP6* and *NSP3* from strain ZFB14-135 (Table 2). Despite  
175 multiple attempts by RT-PCR, the sequences of the other RVA genome segments remain to  
176 be elucidated.

177

178 3.3 Sequence comparison and phylogenetic analysis of *VP7*, *VP1*, *VP6* and *NSP3*

179 Genotype identification was performed employing the RotaC online tool, which  
180 indicated that *VP7* of ZFB14-52 and ZFB14-135 could be assigned to the G31 genotype  
181 (Table 2). The sequence of these *VP7* genome segments showed 98% nucleotide identity to  
182 RVA strain BatLi08, belonging to the G31 genotype, which was discovered previously from  
183 *E. helvum* in the South West region of Cameroon (Yinda et al., 2016). Phylogenetic analysis  
184 of *VP7* showed that ZFB14-52 and ZFB14-135 clustered with BatLi08 and were distantly  
185 related to BatLi09, BatLi10 and BatLy17 belonging to the G30 genotype (Figure 1), which  
186 were also identified from *E. helvum* in Cameroon (Yinda et al., 2016).

187 The *VP1* of ZFB14-135 showed 94% nucleotide identity with that of BatLi08  
188 belonging to the R15 genotype. The *VP6* of ZFB14-52, ZFB14-126 and ZFB14-135  
189 showed 97%, 90% and 99% nucleotide identities with that of BatLi08 belonging to the I22  
190 genotype, respectively. The *NSP3* of ZFB14-52, ZFB14-126 and ZFB14-135 showed 98%,  
191 90% and 99% nucleotide identities with that of BatLi08 belonging to the T17 genotype,  
192 respectively. Phylogenetic analyses of these genome segments revealed that ZFB14-52,  
193 ZFB14-126 and ZFB14-135 formed a discrete cluster with Cameroonian bat RVAs  
194 (BatLi08, BatLi09, BatLi10 and BatLy17) and were clearly separable from other previously  
195 described bat RVAs (Figure 1). Collectively, these results indicated that Zambian fruit bat  
196 RVAs harbor the same genotypes of *VP1*, *VP6*, *VP7* and *NSP3* as Cameroonian fruit bat  
197 RVAs and exhibit high nucleotide sequence identities with these genome segments.

198

199 3.4 Identification of novel *NSP2* and *NSP4* genotypes

200 The *NSP2* and *NSP4* genotypes of ZFB14-126 could not be determined by RotaC due  
201 to their nucleotide sequence divergence. BLAST search analyses indicated that both *NSP2*

202 and NSP4 of ZFB14-126 showed <80% nucleotide sequence identity with all available  
203 RVA sequence data deposited in the DDBJ/EMBL/GenBank public databases. Therefore,  
204 these sequences were submitted to RCWG and were approved as new genotypes: N21 for  
205 NSP2 and E27 for NSP4 (RCWG, 2018). Phylogenetic analyses revealed that NSP2 of  
206 ZFB14-126 was distantly related to other RVAs and segregated in a different clade from the  
207 Cameroonian bat RVA N15 genotype (Figure 2). Furthermore, NSP4 of ZFB14-126 was  
208 highly divergent from all other RVAs and represented a distinct lineage of NSP4 (Figure 2).  
209 These findings indicate that RVA strain ZFB14-126 possessed discordant NSP2 and NSP4  
210 gene segments when compared with other genome segments.

211

#### 212 4. Discussion

213 *E. helvum* is distributed across sub-Saharan Africa and previous studies revealed that  
214 the mean migratory distance of *E. helvum* was 860 km with a range from 270–3,000 km  
215 (Ossa et al., 2012; Richter and Cumming, 2008). Prior genetic studies revealed a panmictic  
216 population of *E. helvum* across continental Africa, suggesting that this bat species travels  
217 and interbreeds over long distances (Peel et al., 2013). In Zambia, over one million *E.*  
218 *helvum* roost from October to December (Peel et al., 2017). Previous reports have  
219 suggested that migration of *E. helvum* facilitates the introduction of viruses into the bat  
220 population, such as filoviruses, henipaviruses, lyssaviruses and coronaviruses (Drexler et al.,  
221 2012; Leopardi et al., 2016; Ogawa et al., 2015; Peel et al., 2013).

222 In this study, we identified bat RVA strains ZFB14-52 and ZFB14-135 from *E. helvum*  
223 in Zambia, which belong to genotypes G31 for *VP7*, R15 for *VP1*, I22 for *VP6*, and T17 for  
224 *NSP3*. These genotypes were initially identified from Cameroonian *E. helvum* by another  
225 research group who proposed that novel RVA genotype constellations exist in *E. helvum*,  
226 such as has been determined in humans and domesticated animals (Matthijnsens et al.,  
227 2011b; Matthijnsens and Van Ranst, 2012; Yinda et al., 2016). Our results support this  
228 view that certain RVA genotype constellations exist in this bat species. Interestingly, these  
229 Zambian bat RVA strains (ZFB14-52 and ZFB14-135) carried *VP7*, *VP6* and *NSP3* genome  
230 segments that shared 97%–99% nucleotide sequence identity with those of BatLi08 from *E.*  
231 *helvum* in Limbe, Cameroon, at least 2,800 km apart from our sampling locations. Notably,  
232 it has been reported that RVA strain BatLy03 from Cameroonian *E. helvum* shared the same  
233 genotypes for *VP2*, *VP6*, *VP7*, *NSP2*, *NSP3* and *NSP5* as strain KE4852 from Kenyan *E.*  
234 *helvum* (Yinda et al., 2016). These findings suggest that the migration of *E. helvum* may  
235 have the potential to spread RVA across long distances and impact on the viral ecology.

236 Recent genetic analyses of bat RVAs have discovered new genotypes of this virus  
237 (Asano et al., 2016; Esona et al., 2010; He et al., 2017; Yinda et al., 2016). In this study, we  
238 identified the previously unrecognized genotypes N21 for *NSP2* and E27 for *NSP4* in RVA  
239 strain ZFB14-126 from *R. aegyptiacus* in Zambia. Both N21 and E27 were distinguished  
240 from other mammalian RVAs by long branch lengths in their phylogenies (Figure 2). These  
241 results indicate that previously unrecognized genotypes are harbored by bats with unique  
242 evolutionary histories. In addition, ZFB14-126 shared the same I22 and T17 genotypes with  
243 ZFB14-52 and ZFB14-135 from *E. helvum* (Table 2), suggesting interspecies transmission  
244 and genetic reassortment may have occurred between these two bat species in the past.  
245 However, we could not formally exclude the possibility of mixed infection with different  
246 RVA strains in this individual bat.

247 Unfortunately, we failed to recover all RVA gene segments of these RVA strains and  
248 their complete genotype constellations remain to be elucidated. Although several universal  
249 primer sets targeting the 5' and 3' regions of each genome segment were employed to  
250 amplify RVA genomes and determine the genotypes (Fujii et al., 2012; Gentsch et al., 1992;  
251 Gouvea et al., 1990; Li et al., 2016), there are significant nucleotide mismatches between  
252 these primers and recently described bat RVA genomes (Yinda et al., 2016). A  
253 high-throughput sequencing approach may help to identify divergent bat RVA genomes and  
254 determine the genotype constellations (He et al., 2017; Yinda et al., 2016).

255 Previous studies reported that bat RVAs carry genome segments closely related to other  
256 mammalian RVAs, including human RVAs (Asano et al., 2016; He et al., 2017; Sasaki et al.,  
257 2016). In this study, all detected genome segments were divergent to those of other  
258 mammalian RVAs and are tentatively considered to be bat-specific. However, Esona *et al.*  
259 recently identified RVA strain KE4852 from *E. helvum*, which carried *VP4* and *NSP4* genes

260 with shorter genetic distances to other mammalian RVAs providing evidence of interspecies  
261 transmission between *E. helvum* and other mammal host species (Esona et al., 2010).  
262 Therefore, further studies with increasing numbers of specimens are required to evaluate  
263 the public health risk of RVA harbored by Zambian bats. and to delineate further the genetic  
264 diversity and evolutionary history of these viruses.

265

266

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284

285 **Declaration of interest**

286 The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.



287 **References**

288

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421 **Figure Legends**

422 **Fig. 1 Phylogenetic analysis based on the nucleotide sequences of the *VP7*, *VP6*, *VP1***  
423 **and *NSP3* genes**

424 The group A rotavirus (RVA) strains ZFB14-52, -126 and -135 identified in this study are  
425 highlighted in red. Other reference bat RVAs included in the analysis are colored in blue.  
426 Genotypes are shown to the left of each taxon. The bootstrap values above 70 after 500  
427 replicates are shown at tree nodes. The scale bars represent the numbers of nucleotide  
428 substitutions per site.

429

430 **Fig. 2 Phylogenetic analysis based on the nucleotide sequences of the *NSP2* and *NSP4***  
431 **genes**

432 The group A rotavirus (RVA) strain ZFB14-126 identified in this study is highlighted in red.  
433 Other reference bat RVAs included in the analysis are colored in blue. Genotypes are shown  
434 to the left of each taxon. The bootstrap values above 70 after 500 replicates are shown at  
435 tree nodes. The scale bars represent the numbers of nucleotide substitutions per site.

436

437 **Table 1. Sample information and RT-PCR screening results for rotavirus**

Bat species	Location	RT-PCR positive/total
Fruit bats		
<i>Eidolon helvum</i>	Ndola	1/10
<i>Eidolon helvum</i>	Kasanka national park	1/10
<i>Epomophorus crypturus</i>	Monze	0/20
<i>Rousettus aegyptiacus</i>	Lusaka	1/20
Insectivorous bats		
<i>Hipposideros gigas</i>	Lusaka	0/10
<i>Miniopterus schreibersii</i>	Lusaka	0/10
<i>Nycteris</i> sp.	Livingstone	0/20

438

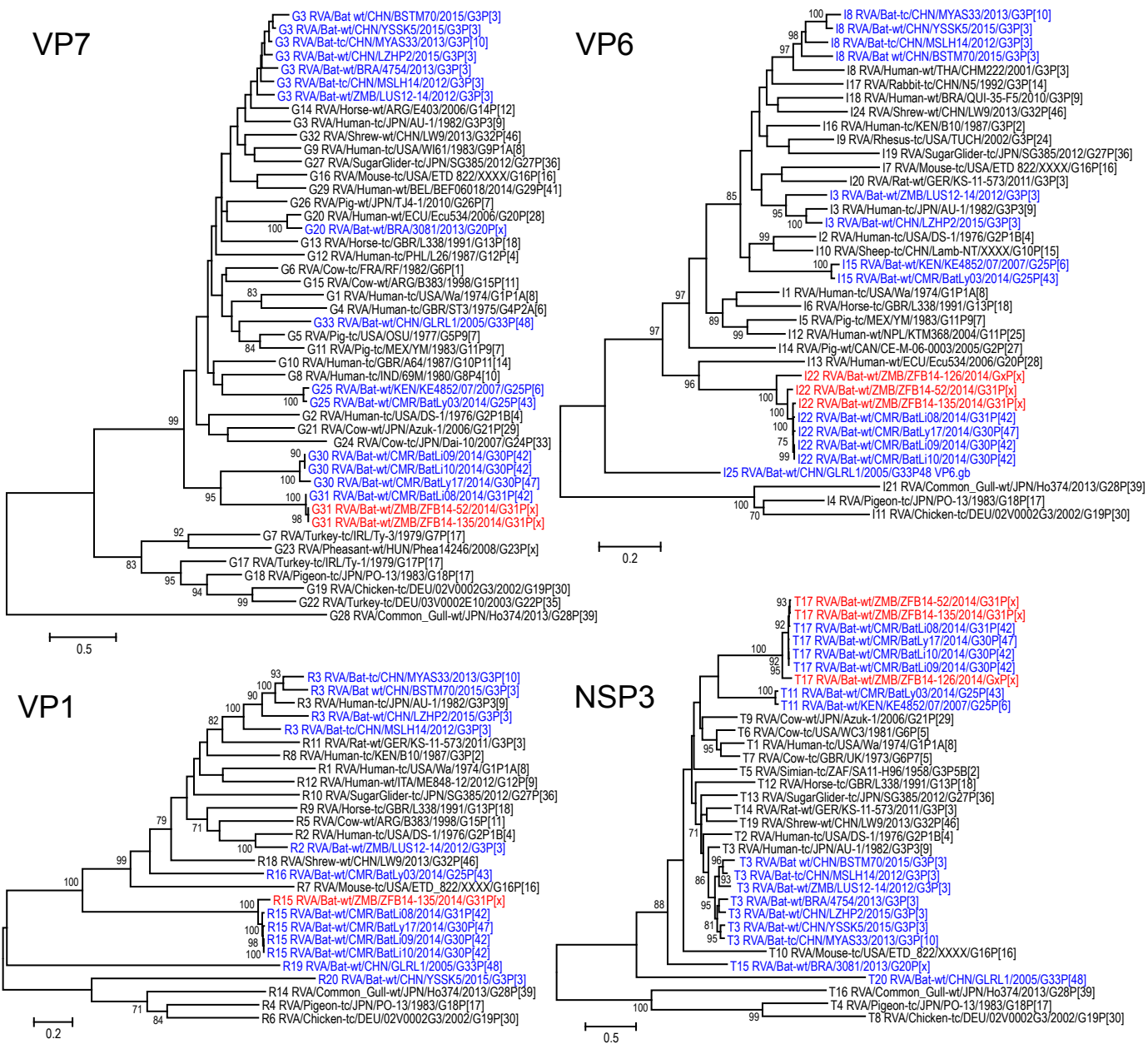


439 **Table 2. Genotype constellations of African bat-borne RVA strains.**

Strain name	Host	Location	Genotype											
			VP7	VP4	VP6	VP1	VP2	VP3	NSP1	NSP2	NSP3	NSP4	NSP5	
RVA/Bat-wt/ZMB/ZFB1	<i>Eidolon</i>													
4-52/2014/G31P[x]	<i>helvum</i>	Zambia	G31	P[x]	I22	Rx	Cx	Mx	Ax	Nx	T17	Ex	Hx	
RVA/Bat-wt/ZMB/ZFB1	<i>Eidolon</i>													
4-135/2014/G31P[x]	<i>helvum</i>	Zambia	G31	P[x]	I22	R15	Cx	Mx	Ax	Nx	T17	Ex	Hx	
RVA/Bat-wt/ZMB/ZFB1	<i>Rousettus</i>													
4-126/2014/GxP[x]	<i>aegyptiacus</i>	Zambia	Gx	P[x]	I22	Rx	Cx	Mx	Ax	N21	T17	E27	Hx	
RVA/Bat-wt/KEN/KE485	<i>Eidolon</i>													
2/07/2007/G25P[6]	<i>helvum</i>	Kenya	G25	P[6]	I15	Rx	C8	Mx	Ax	N8	T11	E2	H10	
RVA/Bat-wt/CMR/BatLi0	<i>Eidolon</i>													
8/2014/G31P[42]	<i>helvum</i>	Cameroon	G31	P[42]	I22	R15	C15	M14	A25	N15	T17	E22	H17	
RVA/Bat-wt/CMR/BatLi0	<i>Eidolon</i>													
9/2014/G30P[42]	<i>helvum</i>	Cameroon	G30	P[42]	I22	R15	C15	M14	A25	N15	T17	E22	H17	
RVA/Bat-wt/CMR/BatLi1	<i>Eidolon</i>													
0/2014/G30P[42]	<i>helvum</i>	Cameroon	G30	P[42]	I22	R15	C15	M14	A25	N15	T17	E22	H17	
RVA/Bat-wt/CMR/BatLy1	<i>Eidolon</i>													
7/2014/G30P[47]	<i>helvum</i>	Cameroon	G30	P[47]	I22	R15	C15	M14	A25	N15	T17	E22	H17	
RVA/Bat-wt/ZMB/LUS12	<i>Rhinolophus</i>													
-14/2012/G3P[3]	<i>simulator</i>	Zambia	G3	P[3]	I3	R2	C2	M3	A9	N2	T3	E2	H3	

440 \*Strains and genotypes reported in the present study are shown in bold.

# Figure 1



# Figure 2

