Distribution of MGEs and their insertion sites in the *Macaca mulatta* genome

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Mobile genetic elements (MGEs) are fragments of DNA that can move around within the genome through retrotransposition. These are responsible for various important events such as gene inactivation, transduction, regulation of gene expression and genome expansion. The present work involves the identification and study of the distribution of Alu and L1 retrotransposons in the genome of *Macaca mulatta*, an extensively used organism in biomedical studies. We also make comparisons with MGE distributions in other primate genomes and study the physicochemical properties of the local DNA structure around the transposon insertion site using ELAN. The present work also includes computational testing of the pre-insertion loci in order to detect unique features based on DNA structure, thermodynamic considerations and protein interaction measures. Although there is significant sequence divergence between the elements of *M. mulatta* and *H. sapiens*, their genome wide distribution is very similar; comparing the distribution of L1’s in all available X chromosome sequences suggests a common mechanism behind the spread of MGE’s in primate genomes.

**Introduction**

The mammalian order primate that includes humans, apes and monkeys in addition to several other organisms can be traced to the late Cretaceous period. The rhesus macaque is in many ways an ideal model organism, being closely related to humans (sharing a common ancestor about 25 million years ago) and also sharing similar physiology, neurobiology and susceptibility to infectious and metabolic diseases. Since both the *M. mulatta* and *H. sapiens* genomes have been sequenced, it is known that the evolutionary distance between them is small, with local fluctuations and low divergence, particularly in chromosome X. On average, orthologs have about 97% identity between the genomes both at the nucleotide and amino acid sequence levels. Approximately 50% of the rhesus macaque genome consists of various repetitive sequences, similar to the human genome.1,3

The phenomenon of retrotransposition that occurs in eukaryotic genomes of diverse taxonomic groups is implicated in various human genetic diseases. Insertion sites of many non-long-terminal repeat (LTR) retrotransposons play an important role in genome evolution and are distributed throughout the genome. The phenomenon behind the selection of the insertion sites of these elements has been shown to be correlated with patterns found at pre-insertion loci.4 It is well known that mobile elements insertions are capable of altering gene expression,5 generating genomic deletions,6 and they can even create new genes and gene families.7 Existing repetitive elements can also cause ectopic recombinations.8

Despite the overall similarity in retrotransposon mobilization activity in the old world monkeys and hominid lineages, mobile elements have continued to evolve independently in both lineages. The retroelements that are presumed to have had the most dramatic impact in shaping primate genomes are the L1 family of LINE elements and the Alu elements, their partner SINEs.9 Besides contributing large amounts of DNA to many genomes (including at least 40% of the human genome) they have also provided new genes, exons and other motifs involved in the physical and sequence structure of chromosomes. There are instances in which a previous element is now a part of the machinery that regulates gene expression.10

Repetitive elements account for about 50% of the genome3 among all of the presently sequenced primate species (Table 1). In *M. mulatta*, two classes of mobile elements are present, class I DNA transposons and class II retrotransposons. The transposons can also be categorized into different families and subfamilies, based on the relationships between their sequences. The rhesus family consists of about 320,000 copies of many families of DNA transposons and about half a million copies of endogenous retroviruses. The L1s and Alu elements account for most of the lineage specific insertions and these have been playing an important role in shaping the complete genome.3,11

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ELAN was developed earlier as a suite of tools for genome-wide retrotransposon element analysis. The application of modules of this bioinformatics pipeline is described as follows:

(1) ELEFINDER performs a whole genome distribution analysis of the MGEs through a BLASTN search by making the use of Perl/BioPerl scripts by which the output files are parsed. It also extracts sequence 100 bp up and downstream at each MGE site and about 75% at both ends.

(2) DNASCANNER scans DNA sequences such as preinsertion loci and analyses insertion hotspots of elements in detail so as to provide a set of signals or characteristics that are potentially recognized by an element for its insertion.

The M. mulatta genome has a total of 22 chromosomes including X and Y (although the sequencing project did not sequence Y). The only Y chromosome that has been completely sequenced is in Macaca genome in comparison with Human and Pan troglodytes.

For L1 elements, results are similar and about 75% at both ends. L1 elements were between -2 to -19 for the majority of the cases. The X chromosome is recognized by an element for its insertion. The application of modules of this bioinformatics pipeline is described as follows:

We present here a study of the primate Macaca mulatta genome to identify and characterize insertion sites of the two representative retroelements present, and further, comparison with similar features of the human genome (excluding the Y chromosome). The structural and thermodynamic features as well as protein interaction measures are computed in preinsertion loci using the tool DNA Scanner.

**Results**

In the human genome, a full-length L1 element is around 6 kb long, and is reported to be the most successful TEs in human genome by mass while Alu elements, typically ~300 bp long are most successful in terms of copy number. Currently, there are three macaque consensus sequences for Alu: AluMacYa3, AluMacYa2, and AluMacYa4 and five of that for L1: L1P4a, L1P4b, L1P4c, L1P4d, L1P4e in Repbase (Version 13.5).

We first compute the nucleotide sequence divergence of L1 (human) with respect to the corresponding L1 (Macaca genome) (Table 2A). As can be seen, pairwise alignment shows a low percentage identity, with the major areas of dissimilarity in the 3' region. The macaca lineages show higher percentage similarity with each other; with regard to the human genome, the L1 nearest to its human analog is L1P4d, while that which has diverged the most is L1P4e.

Macaca lineages show high similarity with each other and human Alu seems to be most closely related to the Macaca specific AluMcaYa3 (Table 2B). There are approximately 1.1 million Alu and 95,000 L1 copies in the Macaca genome. Tables 3 and 4 give details of the numbers of Alu and L1 elements in each chromosome. The four groups constructed for the pre insertion loci were: intact on both ends, intact on 5', intact on 3' and intact on neither end.

About 107,7410 copies of Alus were found uniformly distributed on each chromosome. Of these approximately 13.49% (145,428) are truncated on the 5' end, 456,752 copies (42.39%) are truncated at both the ends, 30.29% are the truncated at 3' end (326,447). Only 148,783 are intact at both the ends (13.8%). A negligible fraction (1.6%) of L1 elements was intact on both sides: of the 94,616 elements identified 22% (21,044) were truncated at the 5' end, 456,752 copies (42.39%) are truncated at both the ends, 30.29% are the truncated at 3' end (326,447). Only 148,783 are intact at both the ends (13.8%).

As in the human genome, there are few functional Alu copies in M. mulatta, and their distribution on the various chromosomes follows similar patterns (Fig. 1A). The X chromosome is known to have an exceptionally high number of the L1 elements (Fig. 1B), which also contained the largest number of truncated elements (at both the ends).

The pre-insertion loci were extracted and evaluated for various physicochemical properties as described in our earlier paper. The positions of the extrema were similar to those seen in other cases in the physicochemical profiles generated by DNASCANNER.

Similar tables were calculated for each M. mulatta chromosome and for all the 14 characteristics extrema were seen in the range of -9 to -11 bp for Alu element and that for the L1 element was between -2 to -19 for the majority of the cases.

For L1 elements, results are similar and Table 5 gives the complete information about the values and the extrema for each of the properties.

**Figures 2 and 3** show the graphs obtained for four physicochemical properties for Alu and L1 elements insertion sites in

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**Table 1. Summary of the number of L1 and Alu elements present in Macaca genome in comparison with Human and Pan troglodytes.**

| Species       | LINE(L1) | SINE (Alu) |
|---------------|----------|------------|
| Human         | 104,541  | 1,144,000  |
| Pan           | 558,000  | 1,111,000  |
| Rhesus        | 100,000  | 1,076,800  |

**Table 2A. Table showing the percentage similarity between the L1 of human and Macaca genome**

| L1 | L1P4a | L1P4b | L1P4c | L1P4d | L1P4e |
|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| L1 | 100%  | 25.80%| 20%   | 18.10%| 23.60%|
| L1P4a | 25.80%| 100%  | 41.30%| 38.30%| 42.70%|
| L1P4b | 20%   | 41.30%| 100%  | 52.50%| 44.30%|
| L1P4c | 18.10%| 38.30%| 52.50%| 100%  | 46.70%|
| L1P4d | 23.60%| 42.70%| 44.30%| 46.70%| 100%  |
| L1P4e | 13.10%| 38.50%| 44.20%| 45.70%| 55.20%|

**Table 2B. Table showing the percentage similarity between the Alu of human and Macaca genome**

| Alu | AluMcaYa2 | AluMcaYa3 | AluMcaYe4 |
|-----|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Alu | 100%      | 76.80%    | 79.30%    | 75.70%    |
| AluMcaYa2 | 76.80% | 100%      | 91.90%    | 96.70%    |
| AluMcaYa3 | 79.30% | 91.90%    | 100%      | 90.90%    |
| AluMcaYe4 | 75.70% | 96.70%    | 90.90%    | 100%      |

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Table 3. Alu element distribution on the different chromosomes on the M. mulatta genome

| Chromosome no. | TOTAL  | Truncated at both ends | 5' Truncated & 3' intact | 5' Intact & 3' truncated | Intact on both ends |
|----------------|--------|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1              | 103699 | 44769                  | 13593                    | 31424                    | 13913             |
| 2              | 61712  | 25396                  | 8860                     | 18475                    | 8981              |
| 3              | 71346  | 30537                  | 9480                     | 21743                    | 9586              |
| 4              | 56574  | 23427                  | 7909                     | 17041                    | 8197              |
| 5              | 50565  | 20280                  | 7969                     | 14779                    | 7537              |
| 6              | 54732  | 22044                  | 8079                     | 16564                    | 8045              |
| 7              | 70113  | 29889                  | 9379                     | 21225                    | 9620              |
| 8              | 46914  | 19670                  | 6653                     | 13949                    | 6642              |
| 9              | 52238  | 22445                  | 7096                     | 15740                    | 6957              |
| 10             | 49717  | 21500                  | 6107                     | 15674                    | 6436              |
| 11             | 57920  | 25428                  | 7465                     | 17379                    | 7648              |
| 12             | 33564  | 13738                  | 4897                     | 10014                    | 4915              |
| 13             | 46262  | 18827                  | 6283                     | 14224                    | 6928              |
| 14             | 44333  | 18676                  | 5954                     | 13483                    | 6220              |
| 15             | 42923  | 17631                  | 5765                     | 13445                    | 6082              |
| 16             | 51097  | 22740                  | 5794                     | 16036                    | 6527              |
| 17             | 26701  | 10529                  | 3966                     | 8080                     | 4126              |
| 18             | 22914  | 9211                   | 3222                     | 7099                     | 3382              |
| 19             | 47666  | 23303                  | 5244                     | 13934                    | 5185              |
| 20             | 43127  | 20163                  | 5249                     | 12809                    | 4906              |
| X              | 43293  | 16549                  | 6464                     | 13330                    | 6950              |
| Total          | 1077410| 456752                 | 145428                   | 326447                   | 148783            |

Table 4. L1 element distribution on the different chromosomes on the macaca genome

| Chromosome no. | TOTAL  | Truncated at both ends | 5' Truncated & 3' intact | 5' Intact & 3' truncated | Intact on both ends |
|----------------|--------|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1              | 6918   | 5234                   | 1477                     | 96                       | 111               |
| 2              | 7056   | 5271                   | 1583                     | 87                       | 115               |
| 3              | 5791   | 4409                   | 1213                     | 84                       | 85                |
| 4              | 6123   | 4558                   | 1399                     | 88                       | 78                |
| 5              | 7652   | 5541                   | 1869                     | 120                      | 122               |
| 6              | 6980   | 5093                   | 1654                     | 106                      | 127               |
| 7              | 5102   | 3819                   | 1136                     | 60                       | 87                |
| 8              | 4940   | 3638                   | 1136                     | 69                       | 97                |
| 9              | 3768   | 2821                   | 837                      | 44                       | 66                |
| 10             | 1819   | 1461                   | 321                      | 13                       | 24                |
| 11             | 4194   | 3080                   | 976                      | 61                       | 77                |
| 12             | 3489   | 2549                   | 814                      | 63                       | 63                |
| 13             | 4352   | 3274                   | 938                      | 67                       | 73                |
| 14             | 4167   | 3075                   | 961                      | 67                       | 64                |
| 15             | 3417   | 2609                   | 724                      | 35                       | 49                |
| 16             | 1257   | 969                    | 258                      | 21                       | 9                 |
| 17             | 3517   | 2605                   | 821                      | 46                       | 45                |
| 18             | 2305   | 1738                   | 505                      | 26                       | 36                |
| 19             | 889    | 701                    | 159                      | 19                       | 10                |
| 20             | 1276   | 993                    | 253                      | 12                       | 18                |
| X              | 9604   | 7320                   | 2010                     | 130                      | 144               |
| Total          | 94616  | 70758                  | 21044                    | 1314                     | 1500              |
Figure 1. (A) Distribution of Alu element across macaca genome. Four classes of elements are indicated with four different colors. The y-axis represents the frequency of elements found on the different chromosomes (marked along the x-axis). (B) Distribution of L1 element across macaca genome. The y-axis represents the frequency of elements found on the different chromosomes (marked along the X-axis).
Table 5. Information derived from DNASCANNER analysis of the *M. mulatta* chromosome 1 for Alu and L1 elements

| PROPERTIES                  | SINEs (Alu) | LINEs (L1) |
|-----------------------------|-------------|------------|
|                            | Trend | Position | Value | Trend | Position | Value |
| A rule                      | U     | -9       | 0.480  | U     | -16      | 0.528 |
| AT rule                     | U     | -10      | 0.743  | U     | -19      | 0.771 |
| b-a-trimeric1               | U     | -10      | 0.280  | U     | -17      | 0.288 |
| bend_scl1                   | D     | -9       | -0.021 | D     | -14      | -0.026 |
| bendingstiffness1           | D     | -10      | 23.457 | D     | -19      | 22.463 |
| C rule                      | D     | -9       | 0.104  | D     | -14      | 0.104 |
| duplexstability-freeenergy  | U     | -10      | -0.674 | U     | -19      | -0.659 |
| G rule                      | D     | -11      | 0.145  | D     | -19      | 0.116 |
| np_scl1                     | D     | -10      | -3.583 | D     | -18      | -4.197 |
| propellartwist1             | D     | -10      | -7.370 | D     | -18      | -7.507 |
| proteininducedform1         | D     | -10      | 1.966  | D     | -18      | 1.923 |
| stabilizingenergy_zdna1     | U     | -10      | 1.787  | U     | -14      | 1.814 |
| stackingenergy1             | U     | -10      | -3.363 | U     | -19      | -3.289 |
| T rule                      | D     | -5       | 0.222  | D     | -2       | 0.191 |

Figure 2. Various signals upstream of the insertion sites of Alu in chromosome 1, for (A) stacking energy, (B) AT content, (C) Propeller twist and (D) protein induced deformability. The y axis represents value of the property and the x-axis gives the relative position with respect to the insertion site (taken to be 0).
macaca genome. The trend followed is the same for both elements. Control sequences were generated by scrambling the positive data set of pre-insertion sequences; all these above properties gave a featureless distribution (namely no extrema). Another independent set of control sequences that were obtained by randomly selecting genomic sequences of 100 bp also gave similar featureless results.

Our rationale for the choice of the various parameters are briefly given below:

1. Regions with alternating purines/pyrimidines steps and AT rich regions melt more readily. Therefore DNA denaturation profiles were computed for insertion sites. We found regions of low GC and high AT content, indicating that a relatively less energy is required to melt DNA near insertion sites, which in turn favors retrotransposition (Figs. 2B and 3A).

2. Propeller twist is a property, involved in the distortion of the hydrogen bonds that hold two bases together. Regions with specific dinucleotides with large propeller twist, followed by a lower propeller twist were obtained (Fig. 2C), which shows that latter regions may be easily distorted and are suitable for insertion.

3. Nucleosomes are involved in DNA compacting and providing transcription factors access to the respective regulatory regions. Two different nucleosomal related features, the bending energy/persistence length and the position profiles of the nucleosomes, were studied. Regions with comparatively low energies were obtained, within the upstream areas of the insertion sites (Fig. 3B and C).

4. Stacking energy profiles showed a maximum near -10, indicating that this region is unstable, leading to easy de-stacking of DNA sequence, which would thereby enable an easy insertion of Alu (Fig. 2A).

5. Duplex stability is a measure of the relative stability of the DNA-duplex structure, which is directly dependent on sequence. We obtained the region around the -10 position for Alu and at -19 for L1, with a peak, representing a region which would de-stack or melt easily.
The criteria used for the plotting was the occurrence of 5’ truncated and 3’ intact ends and 3’ truncated and 5’ intact ends in the Macaca genome. The basic aim was to identify the positions in the element sequence, where most of the times truncation occurs for the macaca genome as a whole.

The graph plotted for the 3’ truncated ends, the maximum number of hits were obtained in the last bin, i.e., the 276–300 bin has the maximum number of truncations in the Macaca

Figure 4. (A) The truncation distribution of Alu element in *Macaca mulatta* for bin size 25 and the graph is plotted for 3’ end of Alu truncated and its 5’ end being intact. (B) The truncation distribution of Alu element in *Macaca mulatta* for bin size 25 and the graph is plotted for 5’ end of Alu truncated and its 3’ end being intact.
Detection of the most probable truncation sites for Alu elements within the complete Macaca genome revealed that during insertion the truncation distribution of Alu peaks toward the starting positions in the case of the trailing edge truncation and is reversed for leading edge truncations.

We have found that LINEs are present in large number in all the primate genomes which includes the recently studied gorilla genome as well as Callithrix jacchus, Pan troglodytes, orangutan (Fig. 5). There could be an evolutionary link in primate genomes through the spread of LINEs and SINEs; alternately, there may have been a “master” L1 or retrotransposon copy in the genome of last common ancestor of all primates.

The present work adds insight into primate genome architecture, showing the common structural features that promote MGE insertion and genome expansion. In future work, we aim to compare the insertion sites across species—a task that will be facilitated as the diversity of sequenced genomes increases further.

**Methods**

The genome sequence of *Macaca mulatta* was retrieved from the NCBI (ftp server: ftp://ftp.ncbi.nih.gov/genomes/). The element sequence (for Alu and L1) were obtained from RepBase and pairwise alignment was performed for the human and Macaca specific L1s and its lineages using standard procedures. Copies of L1 and Alu, were mapped on the genome using ELEFINDER. Each of the peaks for the several properties carry biological significance and may be used further for the identification of potential new insertion sites. In each case, that the nature of the extremum that has a role in defining the trend of each property was identical for both Alu and L1 (Table 5), explaining that the signals that are needed for the insertion of the element is same, and are probably necessary for the insertion to actually occur, although also probably are not sufficient.

Figure 5. L1 element distribution on the X-chromosome of different organisms.
also generates several set of sequences. Since we have previously shown that intact copies show the presence of signal as compared with the truncated groups, the analysis of the full-length elements, i.e., of those capable of transposition was also performed.

The tool DNA Scanner analyses the DNA for many physicochemical properties by using various thermodynamic, protein interactions and sequence-based features, which are beyond the T density and AT density. In accordance to the choice of input parameters, the program evaluates a number of properties, using windows that move along the length of the query DNA sequence.12,23

Since downstream sequences tend to show signals that are not sufficiently statistically significant only upstream sequences were investigated for both Alu and L1 elements. The controls were selected by scrambling sequences, randomly picking sequences from genome as well as gene sequences.

Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest
No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

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