Contribution of opsin and chromophores to cone pigment variation across populations of Lake Victoria cichlids

Elodie Wilwert | Rampal S. Etienne | Louis van de Zande | Martine E. Maan

Groningen Institute for Evolutionary Life Sciences (GELIFES), Groningen, The Netherlands

Correspondence
Elodie Wilwert, Groningen Institute for Evolutionary Life Sciences (GELIFES), Nijenborgh 7, 9747 AG Groningen, The Netherlands. Email: e.wilwert@rug.nl

Funding information
This article was funded by an Adaptive Life Programme grant made possible by the Board of the University of Groningen, the Faculty of Science and Engineering and the Groningen Institute for Evolutionary Life Sciences (GELIFES).

Abstract
Adaptation to heterogeneous sensory environments has been implicated as a key parameter in speciation. Cichlid fish are a textbook example of divergent visual adaptation, mediated by variation in the sequences and expression levels of cone opsin genes (encoding the protein component of visual pigments). In some vertebrates including fish, visual sensitivity is also tuned by the ratio of vitamin A₁/A₂-derived chromophores (i.e., the light-sensitive component of the visual pigment bound to the opsin protein), where higher proportions of A₂ cause a more red-shifted wavelength absorbance. This study explores the variation in chromophore ratios across multiple cichlid populations in Lake Victoria, using as a proxy the expression of the gene Cyp27c1, which has been shown to regulate the conversion of vitamin A₁ into vitamin A₂ in several vertebrates. This study focuses on sympatric Pundamilia cichlids, where species with blue or red male coloration co-occur at multiple islands but occupy different depths and consequently different visual habitats. In the red species, we found higher cyp27c1 expression in populations from turbid waters than from clear waters, but there was no such pattern in the blue species. Across populations, differences between the sympatric species in cyp27c1 expression had a consistent relationship with species differences in opsin expression patterns, but the red/blue identity reversed between clear and turbid waters. To assess the contribution of heritable vs. environmental causes of variation, we tested whether light manipulations induce a change in cyp27c1 expression in the laboratory. We found that cyp27c1 expression was not influenced by experimental light conditions, suggesting that the observed variation in the wild is due to genetic differences. Nonetheless, compared to other cichlid species, cyp27c1 is expressed at very low levels in Pundamilia, suggesting that it may not be relevant for visual adaptation in this species. Conclusively, establishing the biological importance of this variation requires testing of actual A₁/A₂ ratios in the eye, as well as its consequences for visual performance.

Keywords
Cyp27c1, ecological speciation, haplochromine, phenotypic plasticity, Pundamilia, visual adaptation

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Local adaptation of sensory traits can initiate or strengthen species divergence. This is because sensory traits are important for both ecological performance and sexual communication (Boughman, 2002; Endler & Basolo, 1998). There are compelling reasons to study the visual system in this context: it is a crucial determinant of fitness in many taxa and highly diverse among species (Endler, 1991; Fernald, 1988; Marshall & Vorobyev, 2003). In particular, aquatic environments induce fine-scale visual adaptation in vision-dependent organisms. Due to the variation in underwater light conditions, divergent selection on visual system properties can be strong (Kullander et al., 2014; Loew & McFarland, 1990; Partridge et al., 1989), and visual adaptation to local light environments has been documented in numerous fish species (Bowmaker et al., 1994; Ehlman et al., 2015; Lythgoe et al., 1994; Partridge et al., 1989; Shand et al., 2008). In particular, populations that occur in multiple distinct visual environments provide a good opportunity to explore variation in cone pigments within and between species. This study explores variation in cone pigments across populations of cichlid fish from different visual environments. Cichlids form one of the most species-rich families among vertebrates (Kocher, 2004) and inhabit a broad range of visual environments (Schelly et al., 2006). They possess highly diverse visual systems (Carleton & Kocher, 2001; Seehausen et al., 2008; Terai et al., 2017) and provide some of the best-supported examples of speciation by divergent visual adaptation (Hofmann et al., 2009; Seehausen et al., 2008; Spady et al., 2005).

In fish, as in all vertebrates, visual information is captured by visual pigments in the eye, composed of an opsin protein covalently bound to a photosensitive vitamin-A-derived chromophore. Visual sensitivity depends on the interaction between these components and may be tuned by variation in either component (Carleton et al., 2016). Cichlid fish possess several major opsin proteins: one rod opsin (RH1) for dim-light vision and five cone opsins involved in colour vision (UV sensitive (SW1), blue sensitive (SW2), green sensitive (Rh2a and Rh2b) and red sensitive (LWS)). Variation in colour vision among cichlids results from differences in the set of opsin genes that are expressed, from variation in opsin expression levels within that set and from differences in opsin coding sequences (Carleton et al., 2005; Carleton et al., 2008; Carleton et al., 2016; Carleton & Kocher, 2001; Hofmann et al., 2009; Larmuseau et al., 2009; Terai et al., 2006). This variation can be amplified by variation in chromophore composition (Saarinen et al., 2012; Sugawara et al., 2005; Terai et al., 2006; Torres-Dowdall et al., 2017). Two types of chromophores occur in fish visual pigments, derived from either vitamin A1 or vitamin A2. Higher proportions of vitamin A2 shift pigment absorption maxima to longer wavelengths, with a stronger effect in longer-wavelength-absorbing opsins (Govardovskii et al., 2000; Hárosi, 1994; Parry & Bowmaker, 2000) (Figure 1a). Chromophore composition varies among species: marine fish and some freshwater fish possess solely A1-derived chromophores, whereas most freshwater fish carry A2 or A1/A2 mixtures (Bridges & Yoshikami, 1970; Morshedian et al., 2017; Provencio et al., 1992; Reuter et al., 1971; Toyama et al., 2008; Van der Meer & Bowmaker, 1995). In some species, chromophore ratios are phenotypically plastic, changing with environmental and/or life-history variables, such as migration, development, diet, season or temperature (Munz & McFarland, 1977; Suzuki et al., 1984). For example, the migratory Coho salmon (Oncorhynchus kisutch) shows annual shifts in A1/A2 usage, changing from high proportions of A1 in the sea to high proportions of A2 when migrating to freshwater streams for spawning (Temple et al., 2006). In the non-migratory rudd, Scardinius erythrophthalmus, chromosome ratios co-vary with age, with older fish expressing higher A2 proportions (Bridges & Yoshikami, 1970). Switches between the two types of chromophores can occur within a few weeks (Munz & McFarland, 1977) and can, therefore, serve as a way to adjust to short-term changes in light conditions. In cichlids, only a few studies have explored variation in chromophore composition. They suggest that A2-based chromophores tend to dominate in species inhabiting clear waters (e.g., Lake Malawi cichlids) (Carleton et al., 2000; Parry et al., 2005; Sugawara et al., 2005; Torres-Dowdall et al., 2017), whereas species occupying turbid waters show higher usage of A2-based chromophores (Escobar-Camacho et al., 2019; Terai et al., 2006), indicating that variation in A2 usage in cichlids may be important for perceiving long-wavelength light. This study explores the potential contribution of differential chromophore usage to visual adaptation in multiple cichlid populations from Lake Victoria.

This study focuses on closely related populations of Pundamilia cichlids (red and blue phenotypes) from several locations that differ in water clarity and therefore different light environments. Correlated differences in male coloration, female mate preference, photic environment and visual system properties suggest that visual adaptation to different light regimes contributes to Pundamilia divergence. Nonetheless, chromophore usage has not been documented in Pundamilia, and therefore, its role in divergent visual adaptation is unknown. Microspectrophotometry (MSP) of pigment absorption suggests that red phenotypes may use higher A2 proportions than blue phenotypes (Carleton et al., 2005).

Previous studies in a variety of vertebrate species have estimated chromophore ratios by MSP or quantified alternative vitamin A derivatives using high-pressure liquid chromatography. Enright et al. (2015) showed that in zebrafish, the conversion from vitamin A1 to vitamin A2 is mediated by the enzyme cytochrome p450 family 27 subfamily C polypeptide 1 (CYP27C1). In line with this, studies in bullfrog, zebrafish and lamprey have documented positive correlations between cyp27c1 expression levels and A2 proportions in retinal pigments (Enright et al., 2015; Morshedian et al., 2017). This suggests that cyp27c1 expression levels can be used as a proxy for A2 proportions. This is the approach adopted in the present study. Specifically, we investigate in Pundamilia whether (a) cyp27c1 expression profiles vary between islands and phenotypes, (b) visual conditions with long-wavelength light are associated with higher expression levels of cyp27c1, (c) variation in cyp27c1 expression is correlated with opsin expression patterns and (d) the observed patterns in cyp27c1 and opsin expression optimize visual performance; finally, given that chromophore usage may be influenced by both genetic and environmental factors, we (e) explored the effect of different light regimes on cyp27c1 expression levels in laboratory-reared fish.
2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 | Fish

2.1.1 | Wild-caught fish

We included only male fish. We focus on *Pundamilia pundamilia* (Seehausen et al., 1998) and *Pundamilia nyererei* (Witte-Maas & Witte, 1985) from the Speke Gulf and north-eastern Mwanza Gulf of Lake Victoria, and similar sympatric *Pundamilia* species pairs from the western and southern Mwanza Gulf of Lake Victoria (*P. sp. “pundamilia-like”* and *P. sp. “nyererei-like”; Meier et al., 2017, 2018). In particular, *Pundamilia* species were collected in 2014 at five rocky islands in south-eastern Lake Victoria, Mwanza Gulf: Luanso (−2.6889, 32.8842), Kissenda (−2.5494, 32.8276), Python (−2.6238, 35.8566) and Anchor (−2.5552, 32.8848); Speke Gulf: Makobe (−2.3654, 32.9228). Water transparency varies across islands, with more turbid waters at the southern end of the sampled region (i.e., Luanso, Kissenda and Python islands) and clearer waters at the northern end (i.e., Anchor and Makobe). Males of the species pair differ in nuptial coloration: *P. pundamilia* and *P. sp. “pundamilia-like”* display a blue/grey coloration, and *P. nyererei* and *P. sp. “nyererei-like”* are yellow on the flanks and orange or red dorsally (Seehausen, 1996). Females are inconspicuously coloured and exert colour-mediated...
assortative mate preferences (Haesler & Seehausen, 2005; Seehausen & Van Alphen, 1997; Selz et al., 2014; Stelkens et al., 2008). For simplicity, “blue phenotype” is for *P. pundamilia*/P. sp. “pundamilia-like” and “red phenotype” is for *P. nyererei*/P. sp. “nyererei-like.” Phenotypes tend to have different depth distributions coinciding with different photic environments: blue phenotypes inhabit shallow waters with broad-spectrum light, whereas red phenotypes occur at greater depths, where long-wavelength light (i.e., yellow and red) dominates (Seehausen et al., 2008). Until recently, all populations with blue males were classified as *P. pundamilia* and all populations with red males as *P. nyererei*. Nonetheless, population genomic analyses revealed that populations from the southern and western Mwanza Gulf (Kissenda and Python islands) represent a separate speciation event; they are therefore referred to as *P. sp. “pundamilia-like”* and *P. sp. “nyererei-like”* (Meier et al., 2017, 2018). At the most southern island, Luanso, blue and red phenotypes show no genetic differentiation (Meier et al., 2018), and fish were categorized into blue or red phenotype by visually scoring coloration (as in Wright et al., 2019). Blue and red phenotypes have distinct visual system properties: they differ in the amino acid sequence of the long-wavelength sensitive opsin (LWS) and also show differences in opsin gene expression levels, corresponding to the differences in visual environment between geographic locations and depth ranges (Seehausen et al., 2008; Wright et al., 2019). In line with these differences, the red phenotype displays greater behavioural sensitivity to long-wavelength light than the blue phenotype (at least in the most northern, clear-water location Makobe; Maan et al., 2014).

Sampling was conducted with permission from the Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH no. 2013-253-NA-2014-117). We collected 111 adult male fish by gillnetting and angling (Luanso = 10, Kissenda = 32, Python = 29, Anchor = 13 and Makobe = 27). Capture depth was recorded for each individual. Fish were transported to the Tanzanian Fisheries Research Institute (TAFIRI – Mwanza Centre) and sacrificed by using 2-phenoxyethanol (~2.5 ml l⁻¹) and subsequent cutting of the vertebral column. All fish were killed in the early evening on the day of capture (17.00–20.00 hours) to maximize RNA yield and minimize differences due to circadian variation in gene expression (Halstenberg et al., 2005; Yourick et al., 2019). Eyes were subsequently extracted, preserved in RNAlater (Ambion, Austin, TX, USA) and frozen (−20°C).

### 2.1.2 Laboratory-reared fish

To explore the effects of light manipulation on *cyp27c1* expression levels, F1 and F2 offspring of wild-caught fish collected in 2010 at Python Island were reared in light conditions mimicking the conditions experienced by each phenotype in their natural habitat at Python Island (Supporting Information Figure S1). Fish were bred opportunistically with 18 dams and 15 sires. We used 75 male offspring resulting from 30 crosses (mother × father: 17 P × P; 21 N × N). *Pundamilia* are female mouthbrooders; eggs were removed from brooding females c. 6 days after fertilization and divided evenly between the two light conditions. Fish were housed at 25 ± 1°C on a 12:12 h light–dark cycle and fed with commercial cichlid pellets and frozen Artemia, spirulina and krill. All specimens were sacrificed as adults, by applying an MS-222 (1 g l⁻¹) overdose and subsequent cutting of the vertebral column. Eyes were extracted, preserved in RNAlater (Ambion) and frozen (−20°C). All fish were sacrificed in the late afternoon (16:00–18:00 hours). This study was conducted with the approval of the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of the University of Groningen (DEC6205B; AVD105002016464).

### 2.2 Light measurements

In 2010, downwelling light intensity (µmol m⁻² × s⁻¹) was measured at each island, using a BLK-C-100 spectrometer with an F-600-UV-VIS-SR optical fibre with CR2 cosine receptor (Stellar-Net, Tampa, FL, USA). Measurements were taken between 08.00 and 12.00 hours at depths 13 m at 0.5 m increments. We took two independent series of measurements from Luanso, three from Kissenda and four from Makobe and Python islands. Measurements were collected on different days, and we used the mean across sampling days for each depth measurement. Irradiance measurements were not conducted at Anchor Island.

To explore the relationship between photic environments and fish visual system properties we calculated the orange ratio of each light spectrum. The orange ratio is the ratio of light transmitted in the 550–700 nm range (yellow, orange and red) over the transmittance in the 400–549 nm range (blue and green). As short wavelengths are more strongly absorbed and scattered with increasing depth in Lake Victoria, orange ratios increase with turbidity and depth (Supporting Information - Figure S2). For each population, we calculated two measures of the orange ratio. First, population-level orange ratios were calculated for each population, based on depth distribution data from larger samples of fish (from Seehausen et al., 2008). Second, individual-level orange ratios were based on the capture depth of each individual fish that was sampled in the present study. Because no light measurements were available for Anchor Island and prior work has shown that the water transparency at Anchor Island is intermediate between Python and Makobe islands (Seehausen et al., 2008), we estimated the orange ratios at Anchor Island as the medians of the ratios from Python and Makobe islands, following Wright et al. (2019).

### 2.3 Cyp27c1 gene expression

Cyp27c1 expression was quantified using real-time quantitative PCR (qPCR). We removed the retina from the preserved eyes and extracted total RNA using Trizol (Ambion) followed by a DNase treatment to remove genomic DNA. RNA was reverse transcribed into cDNA using Oligo(dT)₁₈ primer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Carlsbad, CA, USA) and RevertAid H Minus (Thermo Fisher Scientific) at 45°C. cDNA was diluted to a final concentration of 10 ng µl⁻¹. Three housekeeping reference genes (HKGs) were used: *ldh1*, β-*actin* and *gapdh2* (Jin et al., 2013; Torres-Dowdall et al., 2017). The stability of the HKG expression was confirmed using RefFinder (Xie et al., 2012). qPCRs
were run for 45 cycles (95°C for 3 min, 95°C for 15 s, 60°C for 25 s and 72°C for 30 s) with specifically designed primers using cyp27c1 sequences from the *P. nyererei* reference genome (Supporting Information Table S1) to amplify short fragments (200 bp). Each 20 μl reaction mixture contained 9 μl gene-specific primer pairs, 1 μl diluted cDNA sample and 10 μl of SYBR Green PCR Master Mix (BioRad, Hercules, CA, USA). Fluorescence was monitored on StepOnePlus Real-Time PCR System (Applied Biosystems StepOnePlus Real-Time PCR System, Foster City, CA, USA). To determine the critical threshold (Ct) and the initial concentration (*N*0) of cyp27c1 and the three HKGs, we used LinRegPCR (Ramakers et al., 2003). Expression levels were based on two technical replicates. The following quality criteria were applied: PCR efficiency 1.75–2.25 and Ct standard deviation between duplicates ≤0.5. The following equation was used to calculate cyp27c1 expression for each sample separately:

\[
Re = \frac{N_{0,\text{Target}}}{N_{0,\text{Reference}}}
\]

where *N*0,Target is the initial concentration of cyp27c1 and *N*0,Reference is the geometric mean of the starting concentration of the three HKGs.

### 2.4 | Opsin gene expression

To determine the relationship between opsin gene expression and cyp27c1 expression in wild-caught fish, we used previously reported opsin gene expression data (i.e., SWS2b, SWS2a, Rh2 and LWS) from the same individuals from Wright et al. (2019).

### 2.5 | Quantum catch estimates

To explore whether the observed variation between populations in cyp27c1 expression (and opsin gene expression) enhances visual performance in the local light environment, we calculated quantum catch estimates (Qc), representing the number of photons captured by visual pigments in a given light environment. Quantum catches were estimated for the red and blue phenotypes at three locations (i.e., Kissenda, Python and Makobe islands). We excluded Luanso Island because of the low sample size and Anchor Island because of the lack of light measurements. Quantum catches were calculated considering population-specific LWS genotype, with red phenotypes predominantly carrying LWS alleles conferring a more red-shifted sensitivity (H allele) than the blue phenotypes (P allele) (Seehausen et al., 2008), opsin expression profiles and depth ranges (i.e., visual environments), for three hypothetical *A*1/*A*2 proportions (Figure 1). Quantum catches were calculated for each opsin using the following equation:

\[
Q = N_0 \int_{400}^{700} I(\lambda) \{a R(\lambda, A_2) + (1 - a) R(\lambda, A_1) \} \, d\lambda
\]

where *I*(*λ*) is the normalized irradiance spectrum at a specific capture depth and island, *N*0 is the relative opsin expression for each individual reported in Wright et al. (2019) and *R*(*)* is the absorption spectrum of the visual pigments calculated for *A*1 and *A*2 separately (based on Govardovskii et al., 2000). We used previously established peak sensitivities for each opsin in association with both *A*2 and *A*2̃-based chromophores (Carleton et al., 2005) (Table 1). To explore the impact of differential chromophore usage, we estimated quantum catches for three hypothetical proportions of vitamin *A*2 (designated by *α*): 10%, 30% and 50%. Quantum catch estimates were obtained using (a) population-level irradiance spectra (based on the depth distributions of each population reported in Seehausen et al., 2008) and (b) individual-level irradiance spectra (based on the individual capture depth of each fish).

### 2.6 | Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were performed in R (v 4.1.0; R Development Core Team 2021).

#### 2.6.1 | Wild-caught fish

Cyp27c1 expression data were tested for outliers (1.5 × the interquartile range) separately for each population (i.e., phenotype–island combination). This resulted in cyp27c1 expression data for 95 wild-caught fish (six were excluded). After log transformation, we used linear models to explore if cyp27c1 expression (a) differed between islands and/or phenotypes; (b) covaried with water transparency, using the spectral midpoint from each island as an estimate for water transparency; and (c) covaried with population-level and/or individual-level photic environment (i.e., orange ratio) as follows: cyp27c1 expression ~ island × phenotype + orange ratio. To determine the minimum adequate models, we used stepwise backward selection using likelihood ratio tests (drop1 function, Crawley, 2002). We used ANOVA to estimate parameters and P-values (car package, Fox et al., 2017). In case of more than two categories per fixed effect (i.e., island), we used post hoc Tukey’s tests (glht – multcomp package, Hothorn et al., 2008).

#### 2.6.2 | Laboratory-reared fish

Cyp27c1 expression data were tested for outliers (1.5 × the interquartile range) separately for each phenotype and light treatment. This

| Opsin     | *λ*max *A*1 (nm) | *λ*max *A*2 (nm) |
|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|
| SWS2b     | 455             | 462             |
| SWS2a     | 425             | 435             |
| Rh2       | 528             | 547             |
| LWS (P-allele) | 544       | 604             |
| LWS (H-allele) | 559       | 61              |
resulted in 66 laboratory samples for cyp27c1 expression (9 removed). We tested for (a) differences between wild-caught and laboratory-reared fish, using general linear models: cyp27c1 expression ~ phenotype/origin/light treatment, where "origin" denotes wild-caught or laboratory-reared fish (i.e., including laboratory-reared fish from both light treatments) and light treatment denotes broad-spectrum light or red-shifted light; and (b) differences between light treatments, including only the laboratory-reared fish and using linear mixed effects modelling (lmer, package lme4) after log transforming the data: relative gene expression ~ phenotype/treatment + (1|mother ID) + (1|father ID). To estimate the parameter effects, P-values and degrees of freedom, we performed “KRmodcomp” (pbkrtest package; Halekoh & Højsgaard, 2014).

3 | RESULTS

We found that Pundamilia from all five locations expressed cyp27c1, but the expression levels differed between islands ($\chi^2(4) = 3.23$, $P = 0.015$). There was no overall difference between blue and red phenotypes ($\chi^2(1) = 0.75$, $P = 0.387$). Indeed, differences between islands were inconsistent between phenotypes, indicated by a significant island-by-phenotype interaction ($\chi^2(4) = 4.12$, $P = 0.004$) (Figure 2): cyp27c1 expression decreased with water transparency in the red phenotypes ($\chi^2(1) = 8.93$, $P = 0.003$) but not in the blue phenotypes ($\chi^2(1) = 0.62$, $P = 0.429$).
We then evaluated whether cyp27c1 expression could be predicted by the local light environment. We found no evidence that cyp27c1 expression covaried with population-level orange ratio [$\chi^2(1) = 0.13, P = 0.716$; Figure 3] nor with individual-level orange ratio [$\chi^2(1) = 0.02, P = 0.898$; Supporting Information Figure S3], indicating that the spectral composition of the local light environment did not explain variation in cyp27c1 expression levels.

Regarding the within-island, between-phenotype differences in cyp27c1 expression, we found that sympatric blue and red phenotypes showed significant differences in cyp27c1 expression at several islands, but the direction of the difference was inconsistent between islands (Figure 4a). At locations with higher turbidity (i.e., Kissenda and Python), cyp27c1 expression tended to be higher in the red phenotypes, whereas at clear-water locations (i.e., Anchor and Makobe), cyp27c1 expression tended to be higher in the blue phenotypes. Previous work in the same populations (Wright et al., 2019) reported that at the clear-water islands (Makobe and Anchor) the red phenotypes expressed higher LWS (and lower Rh2) than the blue phenotypes, whereas at the turbid-water locations (Python and Kissenda), the pattern was reversed (Figure 4b). The present study observed that this reversal in Rh2/LWS expression is matched by a reversal in cyp27c1 expression, suggesting that there is a consistent relationship between blue–red differences in cyp27c1 expression and blue–red differences in opsin gene expression. In other words, at all locations, the phenotypes with the lower level of Rh2 expression (and higher level of LWS) tended to express lower levels of cyp27c1, but the identity of the phenotypes reversed between clear- and turbid-water locations (Figures 4 and 5). In contrast to this general consistency in the differences between sympatric blue and red phenotypes, we observed substantial individual variation (Figure 5) and no consistent relationships between cyp27c1 and opsin gene expression at the individual level (Supporting Information Figure S4).

We used visual modelling to evaluate whether the observed patterns of cyp27c1 expression maximize visual performance. Based on previous studies (Enright et al., 2015; Morshedian et al., 2017; Torres-Dowdall et al., 2017), models incorporated the assumption that higher levels of cyp27c1 expression would cause higher vitamin A$_2$ levels in the visual pigments and thereby a

![Figure 4](image-url)
red-shifted visual sensitivity. Thus, visual models predict that populations with higher cyp27c1 expression levels, and therefore presumably higher A2 levels, obtain higher quantum catches (Qc) in red-shifted light conditions. The analysis did not support this hypothesis: a hypothetical increase in A2 proportions generates higher quantum catch estimates for every phenotype at each location (Figure 6). Quantum catch estimates based on individual depth ranges yielded similar results (Supporting Information Figure S5). Therefore, these results do not provide evidence that the observed differences between populations in cyp27c1 expression contribute to locally adapted visual performance.

To evaluate whether the observed variation in cyp27c1 expression in the wild is due to genetic differences and/or phenotypic plasticity, we reared both *Pundamilia* phenotypes from one population (i.e., Python Island) under two different light conditions, mimicking the light spectra in the natural shallow-water and deep-water environments of Python Island (i.e., broad-spectrum light vs. red-shifted light). We found that overall, laboratory-bred individuals showed similar
cyp27c1 expression levels as their wild-caught counterparts (Figure 7a). Nonetheless, there was a statistical trend indicating that the red–blue phenotype difference in the field (see earlier) was not maintained in the laboratory [phenotype by origin interaction: \( \chi^2(1) = 3.63, P = 0.05 \)]. Consequently, analysis including only laboratory-reared fish showed no difference between red and blue phenotypes \( \chi^2(1) = 0.180, P = 0.675; \) Figure 7a]. This was not explained by the different light conditions employed in the laboratory: they found no influence of the two rearing light conditions on cyp27c1 expression (Figure 7b; \( P. \text{sp.} \) “pundamilia-like”: \( z = 1.33, P = 0.56; \) \( P. \text{sp.} \) “nyererei-like”: \( z = 0.03, P = 1.00 \)). The difference between field and lab data was mostly due to the fact that laboratory-bred individuals of the red phenotype tended to have lower cyp27c1 expression levels than their wild-caught counterparts, irrespective of the light conditions \( t = 2.25; P = 0.05 \). In the blue phenotype, levels did not differ between laboratory-bred and wild-caught individuals \( t = 2.18; P = 0.97 \).

4 | DISCUSSION

Cichlids are a major model system for visually mediated ecological speciation, based on evidence for divergent adaptation in opsin genes and opsin gene expression levels. In many vertebrates, particularly in fish, variation in chromophore usage also contributes to visual adaptation. This study provides the first investigation of differential
chromophore usage across multiple cichlid populations from Lake Victoria, using as a proxy cyp27c1, an enzyme responsible for converting A2 to A2-derived chromophores (Enright et al., 2015). We found that Pundamilia cichlids from five different islands express cyp27c1 in the eye and that expression levels differ between populations. Nonetheless, we also found substantial individual variation and no clear association between the visual environment and cyp27c1 expression levels. We also find that overall expression levels are low, possibly indicating that cyp27c1 has no significant role in Pundamilia visual adaptation.

Typically, fish that inhabit red-shifted visual conditions (as in many turbid waters) use higher vitamin A2 proportions (Bowmaker, 1995). Yet evidence for this pattern in cichlid species is mixed. Based on MSP, it has been shown that cichlids from clear waters of Lake Malawi use only A2 (Carleton et al., 2000), whereas cichlids from turbid waters of Lake Victoria incorporate A2 (Carleton et al., 2005; Teraï et al., 2006; Van der Meer & Bowmaker, 1995). Nonetheless, indirect measurements of chromophore usage through cyp27c1 expression are inconsistent. For example, Härer et al. (2018) observed that several closely related Neotropical cichlid species expressed higher levels of cyp27c1 in turbid waters (Lake Managua and Lake Nicaragua) than in clear waters (Lake Xiloa). Nonetheless, in the Amazonian cichlid Cichla monocus from Lake Gatun, fish from turbid waters expressed lower cyp27c1 than fish from clear waters (Escobar-Camacho et al., 2019).

The present study observed that both Pundamilia phenotypes (i.e., red and blue) express cyp27c1, but it found no clear relationship with visual conditions (i.e., differences in water transparency across locations and variation in orange ratio across depths). In particular, it found that the red Pundamilia phenotype displayed higher cyp27c1 expression in turbid waters than in clear waters, but the blue phenotype showed no such pattern. A possible explanation for this species difference is the difference in depth distribution between the red and the blue phenotypes: the consistently shallower depth range of the blue phenotype entails a relatively consistent light environment across locations, whereas the red phenotypes occur in deeper waters where variation in water transparency has a much greater impact, generating larger variation in light conditions (Figure 3; Supporting Information Figure S6).

In various aquatic taxa including cichlids, species and population differences in opsin expression have been shown to correlate with variation in visual conditions (Carleton 2009; Carleton et al., 2016; Höffmann et al., 2009). Recent work in Pundamilia (Wright et al., 2019) demonstrated that at locations with higher turbidity (i.e., Kissenda and Python), the red phenotypes express more Rh2 and less LWS than the blue phenotypes, whereas this difference reverses at clear-water locations (i.e., Anchor and Makobe). Visual modelling suggested that these patterns do not maximize quantum catch at each location, implying that the observed patterns could not be explained by local adaptation. Here, we explored whether cyp27c1 expression could act as a compensatory mechanism and thereby explain these findings. Strikingly, we observed a similar reversal for cyp27c1 expression levels across locations: at locations with higher turbidity (i.e., Kissenda and Python), cyp27c1 expression tended to be higher in the red phenotypes than in the blue phenotypes, whereas at clear-water locations (i.e., Anchor and Makobe), we found the opposite. Therefore, there is a consistent relationship between phenotype differences in cyp27c1 expression levels and phenotype differences in opsin expression levels, where the phenotype expressing more Rh2 consistently also expresses more cyp27c1 than its sympatric relative, but the red/blue identity reverses between clear-water and turbid-water locations. We propose three possible explanations for these findings. First, the observation that phenotypes with low LWS levels expressed high cyp27c1 levels could reflect a compensatory mechanism, where reduced long-wavelength sensitivity (i.e., lower LWS expression) might be compensated with higher vitamin A2 usage (i.e., higher cyp27c1 expression) and vice versa. Nonetheless, the present quantum catch estimates suggest that the observed variation does not maximize local visual performance, as any hypothetical increase in A2 proportion generates higher quantum catch estimates for every phenotype at each location. It should be noted that quantum catch estimates are a fairly crude measure of visual performance, considering only the ability to capture ambient light and ignoring more complex perceptual abilities such as colour discrimination and object recognition. Either way, a second explanation could be non-adaptive: the parallel reversal in opsin expression and cyp27c1 expression between blue and red phenotypes may simply be a by-product of the evolutionary history of the study populations. Meier et al. (2017) found that the speciation event resulting in P. pundamilia and P. nyererei occurred outside the Mwanza Gulf, after which the species pair settled at Makobe Island. Many generations later, P. pundamilia colonized the Western Mwanza Gulf (including Python Island). After 1000 generations, P. nyererei from outside the Mwanza Gulf immigrated into the Western Mwanza Gulf and hybridized with the local P. pundamilia population, which resulted in a new speciation event in which P. sp. “pundamilia-like” and P. sp. “nyererei-like” emerged. Given this recent history, the characteristic expression patterns observed at Python and Kissenda, but not at Makobe and Anchor, may be a non-adaptive by-product of this event rather than an adaptation to the visual environment at these locations. Third, in the past decades, intensive agriculture, deforestation and urban runoff have significantly increased nutrient loading causing the eutrophication of Lake Victoria (Schener et al., 2000). This resulted in an increase in algal biomass, which in turn, together with silt carried by the rivers, decreased water transparency (Nyamweya et al., 2020). Therefore, Pundamilia populations have recently been exposed to environmental changes, allowing very little time to adapt and possibly explaining the lack of a relationship between opsin expression, cyp27c1 expression and current visual conditions.

Rapid adjustments in visual system properties may improve individual visual performance in changing light conditions. Such plasticity may enhance population persistence and thereby provide a starting point for evolutionary change (Fusco & Minelli, 2010; Price et al., 2003; West-Eberhard, 2003). Several cichlid species have been shown to change opsin gene expression levels over development and in response to different light regimes (Härer et al., 2019; Nandamuri et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2020), suggesting a potential role of phenotypic plasticity in optimizing visual performance. Also in Pundamilia, expression levels of long-wavelength-sensitive (LWS) and short-wavelength-sensitive (SWS2a) opsins can be influenced by light
manipulations (Wright et al., 2020). The present study is the first to explore plasticity in chromophore usage in *Pundamilia*. We observed that the phenotype difference in *cyp27c1* expression observed in the wild was reduced in laboratory-reared fish, which indicates a potential but modest contribution of plasticity to the variation observed in the wild. Nonetheless, when fish were reared under different light conditions in the laboratory, we did not detect an effect on *cyp27c1* expression levels. Together, these findings indicate that *cyp27c1* expression in *Pundamilia* is less plastic than opsins gene expression and that the observed variation in *cyp27c1* expression among natural populations largely reflects genetic differences. Nonetheless, compared to other cichlid species, *cyp27c1* expression in *Pundamilia* is very low (Torres-Dowdall et al., 2017), questioning the biological relevance of the observed variation in *cyp27c1* expression between phenotypes and locations. Therefore, the present study suggests that *cyp27c1* expression may not be relevant for visual adaptation in *Pundamilia*, and this may also explain the absence of a strong plastic response in expression level to different light environments.

A key assumption in this study was that *cyp27c1* expression and $A_2$ proportion are positively correlated. Nonetheless, only a few datapoints in Neotropical cichlids are available to substantiate this assumption, with inconsistent results (Escobar-Camacho et al., 2019; Torres-Dowdall et al., 2017). Consequently, Escobar-Camacho et al. (2019) hypothesized that in cichlid fish, conversions between $A_1$ and $A_2$ might be regulated differently. Thus, further studies are needed to explore whether *cyp27c1* expression does actually reflect $A_1/A_2$ ratios in cichlid fish and how this gene functions and interacts with other genes in visual system functioning. Also, there is a need for data from additional cichlid species, from different visual habitats, to evaluate the contribution of chromophore usage to cichlid visual adaptation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology for research permission and the Tanzanian Fisheries Research Institute for hospitality and facilities. We thank Daniel Shane Wright for collecting the wild-caught samples and performing RNA isolation; Roel van Eijk and Jolien Gay for helping design the qPCR protocol; and Sjoerd Veenstra, Brendan Verbeek, Lucia Irazábal-González and Willem Diederich for taking care of the fish in the laboratory.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

M.E.M. designed the study, together with R.S.E., L.Z. and E.W. E.W. designed the qPCR protocol for *cyp27c1* and completed the laboratory work. E.W. performed the analysis, with assistance from M.E.M., R.S.E. and L.Z. E.W. wrote the manuscript with contributions from M.E.M., R.S.E. and L.Z. All authors approved the contents of this manuscript.

ORCID

Elodie Wilwert https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4135-1811

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**How to cite this article:** Wilwert, E., Etienne, R. S., van de Zande, L., & Maan, M. E. (2022). Contribution of opsins and chromophores to cone pigment variation across populations of Lake Victoria cichlids. Journal of Fish Biology, 101(2), 365–377. https://doi.org/10.1111/jfb.14969