Effects of *DGAT1* on milk performance in Sudanese Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle

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Received: 23 September 2021 / Accepted: 14 March 2022 / Published online: 25 March 2022
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Abstract

The improvement of milk production of indigenous Sudanese cattle such as *Bos indicus* Butana and its cross with Holstein is a major goal of the Sudanese government to ensure sufficient healthy nutrition in the country. In this study, we investigated the K232A polymorphism of *diacylglycerol acyltransferase (DGAT1)*, a well-known modulator of milk production in other breeds. We determined allele frequencies and the allele effects on milk production. Therefore, 93 purebred Butana and 203 Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle were genotyped using competitive allele-specific PCR assays. Association analysis was performed using a linear mixed model in R. In purebred Butana cattle, the lysine *DGAT1* protein variant K232, which is found to be associated with higher fat and protein contents, as well as higher fat yield, was highly frequent at 0.929, while its frequency in Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle was 0.394. Significant effects were found on milk yield (*P* = 7.6 × 10⁻²⁰), fat yield (*P* = 2.2 × 10⁻¹⁷), protein yield (*P* = 2.0 × 10⁻¹⁹) and lactose yield (*P* = 4.0 × 10⁻¹⁸) in crossbred cattle. As expected, the protein variant K232 was disadvantageous since it was decreasing milk, protein, and lactose yields by 1.741 kg, 0.063 kg and 0.084 kg, respectively. No significant effects were found for milk fat, protein, and lactose contents. The high frequency of the lysine *DGAT1* protein variant K232 in Butana cattle could contribute to their high milk fat content in combination with low milk yield. In Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle, the *DGAT1* marker can be used for effective selection and thus genetic improvement of milk production.

Keywords *Bos indicus* · Association analysis · Allele frequencies · Crossbreed

Introduction

The improvement of milk production is a major goal of the Sudanese government to ensure sufficient and healthy nutrition and to meet the increasing demand for milk and dairy products in Sudan. One of the indigenous breeds in Sudan is the *Bos indicus* Zebu breed Butana which is known for its good milk yield and adaption to the extreme environmental conditions. To increase the productivity of Butana cattle, they are crossed with the high-yielding dairy breed Holstein–Friesian. Moreover, the productivity of Butana as well as Butana × Holstein cattle could be improved by developing sustainable management systems, breeding programs, and also genetic selection for higher milk yield.

The *DGAT1* (*diacylglycerol acyltransferase*) gene is located on bovine chromosome 14. The gene affects milk production traits in a wide-range of cattle breeds. Especially, the non-synonymous mutation K232A in exon 8 of *DGAT1* which causes an amino acid change from lysine to alanine has a strong effect on milk yield and composition (Grisart et al., 2002; Spelman et al., 2002; Winter et al., 2002). The lysine *DGAT1* protein variant K232 was found to be associated with higher fat and protein contents, as well as higher fat yield, but lower milk and protein yields (Bobbo et al., 2018; Bovenhuis et al., 2016; Li et al., 2021; Grisart et al., 2002; Spelman et al., 2002). Because of the strong negative relationship between lactose and fat content in milk across species (Fox, 2009), it is assumed that the lysine variant K232 also decreases lactose content. The frequency of the lysine variant K232 is high in *Bos indicus* cattle ranging from 0.80 to 1 (Abu Sara et al., 2015; Rahamattalla et al.,...
5.25 measurements per cow were recorded. Outliers were from the latest finished lactation of each cow. On average, MY per lactation and the lactation length were recorded lactation number and days in milk were calculated. The total on the calving and sampling dates, the age at first calving, and 2018. Samples of fresh milk were analysed using the milk analyser Lactoscan for fat (FC), protein (PC) and lactose (LC) contents in percentages. Fat yield (FY), protein yield (PY) and lactose yield (LY) in kilograms were calcu-
tosed (LC) contents in percentages. Fat yield (FY), protein
and removed from the data set.

**Statistical analysis**

Association analysis was performed only for Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle because the investigated DGAT1 marker was not segregating among the 37 Butana cattle, which had phenotypic data available. Association analysis between phenotypic and genotypic data was performed with a linear mixed model using the lmer function implemented in R language for statistical computing (version 4.0.3). The model for testing the additive effect of the DGAT1 marker was:

\[ Y = X\beta + DGAT1 + (1|animal) + error, \]

where \( Y \) is the test-day record of the respective trait, \( X \) is the matrix of significantly estimated fixed effects, \( \beta \) is the vector of the fixed-effects regression coefficients, \( DGAT1 \) is the genotype at the DGAT1 marker rs109234250 and \( (1|animal) \) is the animal as a random effect to compensate for repeated measurements of the animals followed by the error term. The fixed effects farm, lactation number, year of sampling, season of sampling, birth year, birth season, calving season, age at first calving in days and days in milk and were only included in the model, if they significantly contributed to the model tested using ANOVA (Supplementary Table 2).

**Results**

**Overview of the investigated traits**

The average MY per day was 2.4 times lower in Butana cattle (4.15 ± 1.40 kg) compared to Butana × Holstein cattle (10.12 ± 1.10 kg) (Table 1). Due to the low MY in Butana cattle, FY, PY and LY were also lower in Butana (0.25 kg, 0.22 kg and 0.21 kg, respectively) compared to Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle (0.43 kg, 0.36 kg and 0.49 kg, respectively) (Table 1). Correlations between FY, PY and LY with MY and between each other were high (\( r > 0.89 \)) (Table 2). In contrast, FC, PC and LC were higher in Butana (6.01%, 3.74% and 5.03%, respectively) than in Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle (4.30%, 3.59% and 4.84%, respectively). Lactation length of Butana cattle was shorter than in Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle (243 days vs. 309 days). Therefore, the total MY per lactation was lower in Butana compared to Butana × Holstein crossbred cat-
tle (1222 kg vs. 3406 kg). Age at first calving was higher in Butana compared to Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle (1897 days vs. 998 days) (Table 1).
Allele frequency of the K232 protein variant

When investigating the DGAT1 marker rs109234250 (14:611,019 G/A), we observed that the frequency of allele A corresponding to the lysine DGAT1 protein variant K232 was almost fixed in Butana. The allele was entirely fixed in the 37 Butana cattle from Atbara Research Station, but segregated at a high frequency of 0.929 for all 93 genotyped Butana cattle. In Butana × Holstein cattle, the average frequency of protein variant K232 was 0.394, whereas the frequency per farm ranged from 0.386 at Abbas Alreef Farm to 0.658 at Kuku Research Station (Table 1). The homozygous genotype of the lysine variant K232 was not observed at Abbas Alreef Farm, while the highest frequency of homozygous cattle with 0.368 was found at Kuku Research Station (Supplementary Table 3).

Association analysis in Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle

The investigated DGAT1 marker rs109234250 was not segregating in the 37 Butana cattle for which phenotypic data were available. Therefore, an association analysis with milk production traits could be performed for Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle only. We found significant associations with MY (P = 7.6 × 10⁻²⁰, Supplementary Fig. 1), FY (P = 2.2 × 10⁻¹⁷), PY (P = 2.0 × 10⁻¹⁹), and LY (P = 4.0 × 10⁻¹⁸) (Table 3). The minor protein variant K232 which had a frequency of 0.394 was disadvantageous for the associated traits. It decreased MY by 1.741 kg, FY by 0.080 kg, PY by 0.063 kg and LY by 0.084 kg. No significant associations were found for FC (P = 0.370), PC (P = 0.812), and LC (P = 0.386) (Table 3).
Discussion

We found that the lysine DGAT1 protein variant K232 is almost fixed in purebred Butana cattle. This is in line with studies in other Bos indicus breeds where the frequency of the lysine variant K232 ranged from 0.80 to 1 (Abu Sara et al., 2015; Rahamattalla et al., 2015; Spelman et al., 2002; Tantia et al., 2006; Kaupe et al., 2004). The high proportion of the lysine variant K232 might contribute to the higher FC and PC, and lower MY, FY and PY in Butana and other Bos indicus breeds compared to Holstein–Friesian cattle. The frequency of the lysine variant K232 in the investigated Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle is similar to studies in other Holstein–Friesian populations or their crosses where it ranged from 0.21 to 0.63 (Molee et al., 2012; Patel et al., 2009; Banos et al., 2008; Spelman et al., 2002; Thomsen et al., 2002). The differences in frequency of the lysine variant K232 among breeds might result from different breeding goals.

The association study provides evidence for DGAT1 gene effects on milk production traits in the investigated Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle. The direction of effects of the lysine variant K232 on MY, PY, and LY was the same as in previous studies, decreasing them (Grisart et al., 2002, 2004; Spelman et al., 2002; Gautier et al., 2007; Schennink et al., 2007; Streit et al., 2011; Cardoso et al., 2011). We observed that the lysine variant K232 decreased FY, in contrast to what has been reported in literature. However, this might be due to the overall low MY in the crossbreed animals causing also a slight decrease in FY. Furthermore, the very high correlations between the associated traits in our study (r > 0.89) may justify the same direction of effects for MY, FY, PY and LY.

Different levels of Holstein genomic background in the different crossbred populations and differences in the management of the herds influence the MY of individual animals. We observed that cows at Abbas Alreef Farm produced around twice as much milk (on average 17.16 kg/day) as the cows on the other Butana × Holstein farms (Table 1). One reason for this are the excellent conditions with regard to farm management and feeding at Abbas Alreef Farm, which allows to make use of the genetic potential of Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle despite the harsh environmental conditions in Sudan. That is not to be taken for granted in Sudan considering the costs of feeding and management challenges at keeping high-yielding cattle. Thus, high variation of milk production traits and lactation properties between different farms is normal in Sudan. However, the average values reported in this study were in similar ranges compared to previously reported values for Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle (Supplementary Table 4) and Butana cattle (Supplementary Table 5). Another reason for the high MY is the higher amount of Holstein genomic background of crossbred cattle at the Abbas Alreef Farm compared to the other Butana × Holstein farms. This could be seen also in the allele frequency of the investigated DGAT1 marker for the K232A polymorphism, where alanine variant 232A is the favourite variant in Holstein cattle: At Abbas Alreef Farm, where the Holstein genomic background is the highest, the frequency of the alanine variant 232A is the highest. All in all, a negative trend between the frequency of lysine variant K232, and the daily MY in the five investigated farms is visible. It would be interesting to know to which extent the DGAT1 marker could serve as a marker for the Holstein genomic background in crossbreeds with Holstein, where it is clear that this SNP was introduced from the Holstein breed. Furthermore, it would be desirable to consider the confounding factor of

Table 2 Pairwise correlations between investigated traits in Butana×2 Holstein crossbred cattle. High pairwise Pearson correlations (r > 0.89) are highlighted in bold

| Traits | MY | FY | PY | LY | FC | PC |
|--------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| FY     | 0.930 | | | | | |
| FY     | 0.987 | 0.913 | | | | |
| FY     | 0.974 | 0.892 | 0.985 | | | |
| PC     | -0.218 | -0.221 | -0.074 | -0.091 | -0.046 | | |
| LC     | -0.217 | -0.251 | -0.127 | -0.016 | -0.128 | 0.673 |

Table 3 Associations between milk traits and DGAT1 marker rs109234250 in Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle. The minor protein variant K232 of this marker had a frequency of 0.394. The β-estimates with regard to the minor allele ($\beta_{\text{minor}}$), their standard error (SE ($\beta_{\text{minor}}$)), and p-values from association tests are shown. P-values < 0.05 are highlighted in bold

| Trait | $\beta_{\text{minor}}$ | SE($\beta_{\text{minor}}$) | p-value |
|-------|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------|
| MY    | -1.741                | 0.170                     | $7.6 \times 10^{-20}$ |
| FY    | -0.080                | 0.009                     | $2.2 \times 10^{-17}$ |
| PY    | -0.063                | 0.006                     | $2.0 \times 10^{-19}$ |
| LY    | -0.084                | 0.009                     | $4.0 \times 10^{-18}$ |
| FC    | 0.046                 | 0.051                     | 0.370 |
| PC    | 0.004                 | 0.015                     | 0.812 |
| LC    | -0.023                | 0.026                     | 0.386 |
the Holstein genomic background. Unfortunately, neither pedigree data nor whole-genome data (e.g. from 50K SNP chip) are routinely collected in Sudan, so that we could not consider or investigate this factor in our current analyses. The only possibility to compensate for the farm-effect was to include “farm” as covariate in the association model. This farm-effect captured all differences between farms including farm management as well as Holstein genomic background.

Despite the small sample size in this study, we could confirm significant effects of \textit{DGAT1} on Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle. With a higher sample size, it might be also possible to obtain significant associations for fat and protein contents in Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle. In conclusion, the high observed frequency of the cysteine \textit{DGAT1} protein variant K232 in Butana cattle could explain their higher milk FC and lower MY. In Butana × Holstein crossbred cattle, the \textit{DGAT1} marker can be used for selection and based on our results should lead to an increase in MY. Nonetheless, other factors such as the farm management and feed supply have to be improved in parallel to increase production efficiency.

\textbf{Supplementary Information} The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s11250-022-03141-7.

\textbf{Acknowledgements} We gratefully thank the cattle owners in Sudan for providing the samples and traits, as well as the management and staff team of the Athbara Research Station. We thank Elhady A. M. Omer for the help in sample collection.

\textbf{Author contribution} GAB and SE designed the study. SE collected the samples and phenotypic data and did the laboratory work. MR helped with the laboratory work. SE and PK performed all the statistical analyses. SE and PK drafted the manuscript. GAB and DA helped draft the manuscript. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

\textbf{Funding} Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. SE was supported by the Sudanese Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and the Fiat Panis Foundation. The collection of data and samples was supported by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research Sudan.

\textbf{Data availability} All phenotypic and genotypic input data used in this study can be found in Supplementary Table 6.

\textbf{Declarations}

\textbf{Ethics approval} Blood samples of animals were collected based on routine procedures on farms, according to the animal protection law in Sudan.

\textbf{Consent to participate} Animal owners agreed to the participation of their animals in this study.

\textbf{Consent for publication} Not applicable.

\textbf{Conflict of interest} The authors declare no competing interests.

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