

Singular brightening events on Titan: S. Rodriguez et al.

Singular equinoctial activity over Titan's dunefields as seen by CASSINI/VIMS. S. Rodriguez¹, S. Le Mouélic², J.W. Barnes³, M. Hirtzig⁴, T. Appéré¹, P. Rannou⁵, C. Sotin^{2,6}, R.H. Brown⁷, J. Bow³, G. Vixie³, T. Cornet², O. Bourgeois², C. Nartean⁸, S. Courrech du Pont⁹, C.A. Griffith⁷, R. Jaumann¹⁰, K. Stephan¹⁰, B.J. Buratti⁶, R.N. Clark¹¹, A. Coustenis⁴, ¹Laboratoire AIM, Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7/CNRS/CEA-Saclay, DSM/IRFU/SAp, 91191 Gif sur Yvette, France (sebastien.rodriguez@cea.fr), ²Laboratoire de Planétologie et Géodynamique, CNRS-UMR 6112, Université de Nantes, 2 rue de la Houssinière, 44322 Nantes, France ; ³Department of Physics, University of Idaho, Engineering-Physics Building, Moscow, ID 83844, USA ; ⁴LESIA, Observatoire de Paris, section de Meudon, 5 place Jules Janssen, 92195 Meudon Cedex, France ; ⁵Groupe de Spectroscopie Moléculaire et Atmosphérique, UMR CNRS 6089, Université de Reims, U.F.R. Sciences Exactes et Naturelles, Moulin de la Housse B.P. 1039, 51687 Reims Cedex 2, France ; ⁶Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology, 4800 Oak Grove Dr., Pasadena, CA 91109, USA ; ⁷Department of Planetary Sciences, University of Arizona, Lunar and Planetary Laboratory, 1629 E. University Blvd., Tucson, AZ 85721, USA ; ⁸Institut de Physique du Globe de Paris, Laboratoire de Dynamique des Fluides Géologiques, Paris, France ; ⁹Laboratoire Matière et Systèmes Complexes, Université Paris Diderot, Paris, France ; ¹⁰DLR, Institute of Planetary Research, Rutherfordstrasse 2, D-12489, Berlin, Germany ; ¹¹United States Geological Survey, Mail Stop 964, Box 25046, Denver Federal Center, Denver, CO 80225, USA.

Introduction: Titan, the largest satellite of Saturn, is the only satellite in the solar system with a dense atmosphere. The close and continuous observations of Titan by the Cassini spacecraft, in orbit around Saturn since July 2004, bring us evidences that Titan troposphere and low stratosphere experience an exotic, but complete meteorological cycle similar to the Earth hydrological cycle, with hydrocarbons evaporation, condensation in clouds, and rainfall. Cassini monitoring campaigns also demonstrate that Titan's cloud coverage and climate vary with latitude. Titan's tropics, with globally weak meteorological activity and widespread dune fields, seem to be slightly more arid than the poles, where extensive and numerous liquid reservoirs and sustained cloud activity were discovered.

Only a few tropospheric clouds have been observed at Titan's tropics during the southern summer [2-4]. As equinox was approaching (in August 2009), they occurred more frequently and appeared to grow in strength and size [5-7].

VIMS observations: We present here the observation of intense brightening at Titan's tropics, very close to the equinox. These detections were conducted with the Visual and Infrared Mapping Spectrometer [8] (VIMS) onboard Cassini. Figure 1 presents the VIMS color composite images of the three individual events detected so far, observed during the Titan's flybys T56 (22 May 2009), T65 (13 January 2010) and T70 (21 June 2010). T56, T65 and T70 observations show an intense and transient brightening of large regions very close to the equator, which all appear spectrally and morphologically different from all previous observed surface features or atmospheric phenomena. These

events share in particular a strong brightening at wavelengths greater than 2 μm (especially at 5 μm), making them spectrally distinct from the few large storms observed near the equator.

Discussion: We will discuss the possibility that these singular events may have occurred very close to the surface, having a very local origin. We will also discuss the possible implication of the equinoctial occurrence of such events for Titan's tropical climatology and their probable link with particular geological features at Titan's surface.

References: [1] Griffith et al. *Astrophys. J. Letters* 702, L105-L109, 2009. [2] Turtle et al., *Geophys. Res. Lett.* 36, CiteID L02204, 2009. [3] Rodriguez et al., *Nature* 459, 678-682, 2009. [4] Schaller et al., *Nature* 460, 873-875, 2009. [5] Turtle et al., *Geophys. Res. Lett.* 38, CiteID L03203, 2011. [6] Turtle et al., *Science* 331, 2011. [7] Rodriguez et al., *Icarus* 216, 89-110, 2011. [8] Brown et al., *Space Sci. Rev.* 115, 111-168, 2004.

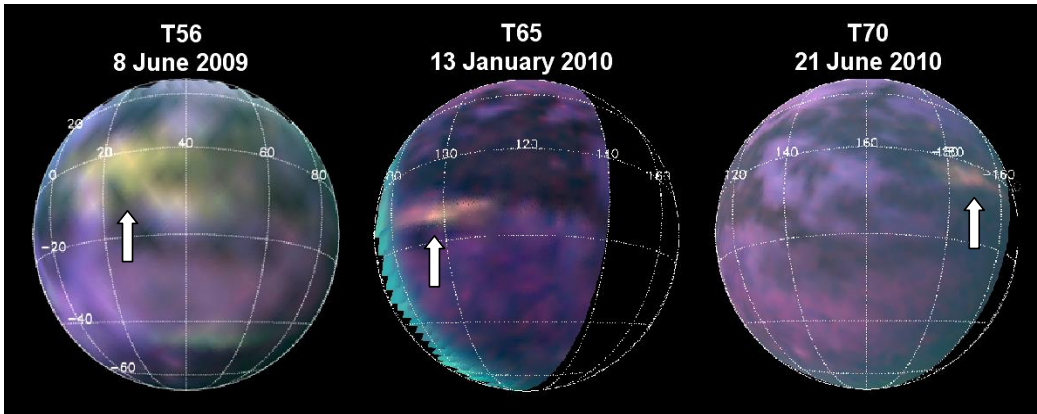


Figure 1. Orthographic reprojection of VIMS observations of Titan during the T56, T65 and T70 flybys. These images are RGB color composites, using the VIMS 5 μm channel as red, the 2.78 μm as green and 2 μm as blue. The yellowish/pinkish areas, also marked by the white arrows, denote the unusual spectral behaviour of large regions within Titan's tropics.