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Westward-propagating Moisture Mode over the Tropical Western Hemisphere

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Key Points:

- A westward-propagating mode is found to explain a large fraction of the intraseasonal T_b variance over the western hemisphere.
- The processes that govern this mode are distinct from the ER waves from Matsuno's theory, instead being more consistent with a moisture mode.
- Results underscore the need to move away from dry theory to understand slow convectively-coupled tropical systems.

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Abstract

A westward-propagating Rossby-like wave signal is found to explain a large fraction of the intraseasonal variance in cloud brightness over the western hemisphere. A series of diagnostic criteria suggest that this wave is a moisture mode: its moisture anomalies dominate the distribution of moist static energy (MSE) and are in phase with the precipitation anomalies; and the thermodynamic equation obeys the weak temperature gradient approximation. The wave propagates westward due to zonal moisture advection by the mean flow and is maintained by radiative heating and meridional moisture advection. These properties compare favorably with the westward propagating Rossby mode in an equatorial beta-plane model with prognostic moisture, mean meridional moisture gradient, and mean zonal wind. These results underscore the importance of water vapor in the dynamics of slowly evolving tropical systems, and the limitations of dry shallow water theory that rely on a "reduced equivalent depth" to represent moist dynamics.

Plain Language Summary

Recent studies have shown that water vapor plays a crucial role in the occurrence and organization of tropical rainfall, leading to the existence of moisture modes. Such waves do not exist in the dry theory of tropical waves. While this acknowledgment has significantly advanced our understanding of tropical meteorology, most studies on how moisture and the large-scale circulation couple have been focused on the equatorial eastern hemisphere. In this study, we examine the features of a westward-propagating signal that has received relatively little attention. On the basis of several objective criteria, we show that this wave has properties consistent with moisture modes. We show evidence that this is the case by investigating the thermodynamic budget of this wave, which is shown to be consistent with the budget of a theoretical moisture mode. Our results underscore the importance of water vapor in the governing dynamics of tropical waves, and the need to move away from dry theory as a basis to understand convectively-coupled tropical motions.

1 Introduction

Convectively-coupled atmospheric waves are often viewed as an extension of dry waves but with a reduced static stability arising from the latent heat release in convection (K. A. Emanuel et al., 1994; Haertel & Kiladis, 2004). However, in recent years it has become clear that interactions between moisture, convection, radiation and circulation are important for the dynamics of convectively-coupled waves, especially at the intraseasonal ($\sim$ 10–100 days) time scale (A. H. Sobel et al., 2001; Raymond, 2001; A. Sobel & Maloney, 2013; Á. F. Adames & Kim, 2016; Gonzalez & Jiang, 2019; Á. F. Adames & Maloney, 2021; Ahmed, 2021; Wang & Sobel, 2021). These interactions can cause the dynamics of these waves to significantly differ from those described by dry shallow water theory. Furthermore, simple models of convectively-coupled waves with prognostic moisture have revealed the existence of moisture modes, which do not exist in dry theory, and whose dynamics are governed by the evolution of moisture (Neelin & Yu, 1994; A. H. Sobel et al., 2001; Sugiyama, 2009; Ahmed et al., 2021). The primary signatures of moisture modes are strong moisture tendencies and weak temperature tendencies (Á. Adames et al., 2019; Ahmed et al., 2021; Á. F. Adames & Maloney, 2021). The former condition manifests as a tight coupling between moisture and precipitation. The latter ensures that the weak temperature gradient approximation [WTG; A. H. Sobel et al. (2001)] is the dominant column energy balance.

An increasing number of studies show that slow, intraseasonal disturbances are better characterized as moisture modes (Raymond & Fuchs, 2009; Á. Adames et al., 2019;

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Inoue et al., 2020). Most of these studies (Á. F. Adames & Kim, 2016; Kang et al., 2021) have focused on the Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO), the dominant mode of tropical intraseasonal variability (Madden & Julian, 1994; Zhang, 2005; Jiang et al., 2020). However, recent theoretical (Fuchs-Stone et al., 2019; Ahmed et al., 2021) and observational (Gonzalez & Jiang, 2019) studies suggest that equatorial Rossby waves (ER) might be moisture modes as well. Gonzalez and Jiang (2019) report the existence of slow ER modes over the Indo-Pacific Warm Pool with properties of moisture modes. This finding matches the theoretical expectation that moisture modes will preferentially occur over the Warm Pool due to the high column water vapor content observed in this region and the impact that moisture fluctuations in this region have on tropical rainfall (Roundy & Frank, 2004; Kang et al., 2021; Á. Adames, 2017). However, in this study, we find that ER modes over the tropical western hemisphere (TWH) are also better characterized as moisture modes. Our focus on the TWH region is motivated by the sparse literature on ER waves over this region, despite a significant contribution from ER waves to TWH rainfall variability (Fig. S1a).

In Section 2, we discuss the statistical methods used to extract the intraseasonal westward-propagating (ISWP) signal over TWH region. In Section 3, we elucidate the horizontal and vertical structures of ISWP mode. In Section 4, we examine the leading thermodynamic properties of the ISWP and show that they are consistent with moisture modes using a set of objective criteria developed by Á. Adames et al. (2019) and Ahmed et al. (2021). In Section 5, we examine the MSE budget of the ISWP mode and highlight the dominant processes that contribute to its maintenance and propagation. While dry shallow water theory explains the structural features of the ISWP wave, it cannot explain the primary thermodynamic properties of the ISWP mode. We address this in Section 6 using an equatorial beta-plane model with prognostic moisture, including advective interactions with the background fields. This model is similar to that of Ahmed (2021), and is adept at reproducing both the ISWP horizontal structure and the leading terms in the MSE budget. The results highlight the importance of prognostic water vapor fluctuations and advective interactions with the background fields in slowly evolving waves, even outside the warm pool. The results also suggest that dry shallow water theory must be supplemented with prognostic moisture variations to better describe these systems.

2 Data and Methods

2.1 Satellite CLAUS T_b and Reanalysis dataset

Satellite-observed brightness temperature (T_b) data is used in this study as a proxy for convection. The data is obtained from the Cloud Archive User System (CLAUS) satellite data (Hodges et al., 2000). Three-dimensional (27 pressure levels) fields from the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts ERA-5 reanalysis [ERA5; Hersbach et al. (2019)] are used for analyses of the physical structures associated with the ISWP mode. The ERA5 dataset utilizes a 0.5° horizontal resolution grid, with four times daily analyses that match the CLAUS T_b data for the 36-yr time period 1984 through 2015. We make use of the zonal, meridional and vertical winds (u, v, ω), specific humidity (q), temperature (T), diabatic heating rate (Q_1), surface and top of the atmosphere radiative fluxes, surface sensible and latent heat fluxes (SH and LE, respectively), and precipitation (P). We also use twice daily radiosonde data for Manaus (59.98°W, 3.15°S) and Belem (48.48°W, 1.48°S) obtained from the Integrated Global Radiosonde Archive – IGRA (Durre et al., 2006) for the for the 14-year period from 2000 to 2013. Finally, we make use the constrained variational analysis product for the GOAmazon 2014/2015 field campaign [VARANAL; Tang et al. (2016)].

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Table 1. Characteristics of the ISWP mode over tropical western hemisphere. (upper row) The filter settings for the period and the wavenumber (k). (bottom row) Spatial domain for the EOF calculation. Propagation characteristics of the ISWP mode is determined by using the Radon Transform (Mayta et al., 2021).

Filter	**Acronym**	**Direction**	**Period (days)**	**k**
–	ISWP	westward-only	10–96	-∞ to 0
EOF	**Lon domain**	**Lat domain**	**Phase speed (c_p)**	**Wavelength (λ)**
–	120°–0°	5°S–20°N	5.4 m s^{-1}	58°

2.2 Filtering of CLAUS T_b data and EOF Analysis

To explore the ISWP mode over TWH, T_b is filtered using a fast Fourier transform retaining westward-only wavenumbers and periods between 10 to 96 days. Considering that filtered anomalies include background noise, we use Empirical Orthogonal Function (EOF) analysis to extract the dominant mode associated with ISWP mode. The EOF analysis was applied to the filtered T_b data over TWH region (5°S-20°N, 120°W-0°). The leading pair of EOFs is found to correspond to the ISWP mode, together accounting for 26% of the total variance of the westward-propagating component of T_b. Table 1 summarizes the details of the filtering and EOF analysis techniques.

2.3 Linear regression

The PC1 time series of the T_b ISWP mode is regressed against raw T_b and ERA5 fields to obtain a composite of the wave evolution. Similarly, the relationship between the ISWP mode and MSE budget terms was determined using linear regression, following the same procedure as previous studies [e.g., Mapes et al. (2006); Á. F. Adames et al. (2021); Mayta and Adames (2021); Snide et al. (2021)]. Then, the perturbations are scaled to one standard deviation of the corresponding ISWP wave at zero lag. The statistical significance of these results is then assessed based on the two-tailed Student's t-test. This method takes into account the correlation coefficients and an effective number of independent sample (degrees of freedom) based on the decorrelation timescale (Livezey & Chen, 1983).

3 Large-scale Horizontal and Vertical structure of the ISWP mode

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the T_b and circulation of the ISWP mode at the 850–hPa and 200–hPa levels. The convective anomalies propagate at ∼5.4 m s^{-1} westward from the tropical North Atlantic (0°–25°N, 70°W–20°E) at day 0 (Fig. 1a) and reach the eastern north Pacific and Central America at day +10 (Fig. 1d). At 850 hPa, an anticyclone is seen propagating westward with the T_b anomalies (Fig. 1a). The enhanced convection is nearly in phase with poleward flow associated with this anticyclone. At 200–hPa, the circulation features more closely resemble the structure of the $n = 1$ ER wave documented in Yang et al. (2007) and Kiladis et al. (2009), with pairs of cyclonic and anticyclonic gyres straddling near-equatorial convection (Fig. 1d). When the upper and lower troposphere are considered together, we see that the ISWP mode structure starts off barotropic (e.g., Figs. 1a and 1d), and slowly becomes more baroclinic as it propagates westward (day +5 onward). The out of phase relationship between the lower and upper troposphere also resembles the structure documented in Yang et al. (2007) for the Western Hemisphere ER waves.

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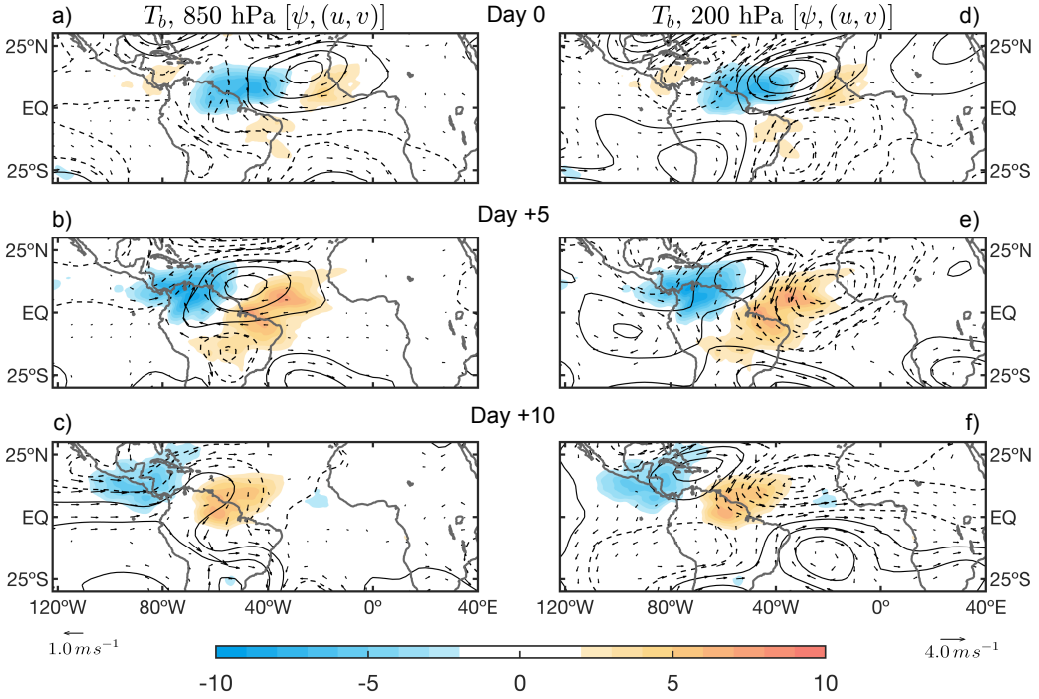


Figure 1. Anomalous T_b (shading, in units of K), streamfunction (contours), and wind (vectors) regressed onto PC1 of the ISWP mode at 850 hPa (left panels) and 200 hPa (right panels) for the 1998–2015 period and all 12 calendar months. Time lags go from day 0 to day +10, with day 0 representing maximum convection around 60°W. Streamfunction contour interval is 2.0×10^6 m^2 s^{-1}, with negative contours dashed. The shaded and contoured regions are statistically significant at the 95% level. Wind vectors are plotted only where either the u or v component is significant at the 95% level or greater.

Even though the convection associated with the ISWP mode is mostly off-equatorial, its circulations features resemble the theoretical shallow water structure of an equatorially trapped ER wave (Matsuno, 1966; Wheeler et al., 2000; Kiladis et al., 2009). However, its slow westward propagation of 5.4 m s^{-1} is difficult to explain with dry shallow water theory alone. It would require a reduction of the equivalent depth from $\sim$ 250 m, the depth that yields the observed phase speed of dry gravity waves to a mere 5 m. Thus, other physical processes must occur in the ISWP mode that make it distinct from dry shallow water ER waves.

4 Evidence that the ISWP wave is a moisture mode

The slow propagation of the ISWP mode suggests that it may have properties of a moisture mode. To test this possibility, we will examine the three criteria described by Ahmed et al. (2021) that moisture modes must satisfy, modifying them to make them more suitable to for their diagnosis in observational, model and reanalysis data. We will also examine the criteria outlined by Á. Adames et al. (2019). These criteria are:

(a) **Moisture anomalies must exhibit a high coherence with precipitation anomalies**
For a disturbance to be considered a moisture mode, its signature in column water vapor ($\langle q\rangle$, where $\langle\cdot\rangle \equiv 1/g\int_{100}^{1000}(\cdot)dp$) must be sufficiently large to signifi-

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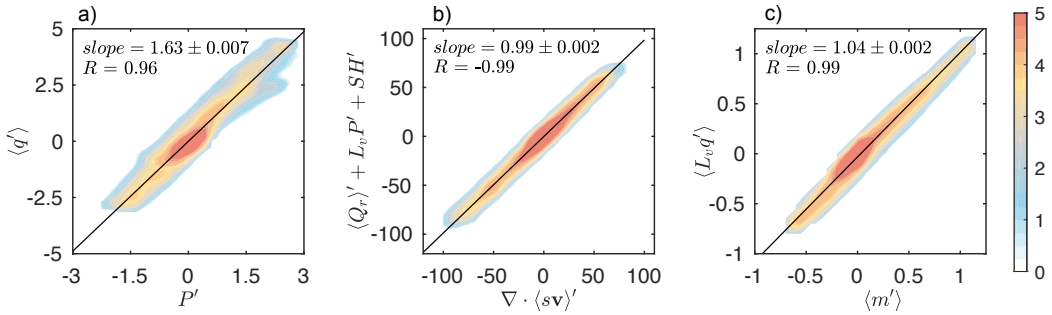


Figure 2. Scatterplots of (a) P′ vs $\langle q' \rangle$, (b) $\nabla \cdot \langle s\mathbf{v} \rangle'$ vs $\langle Q_r \rangle' + L_v P' + SH'$, and (c) $\langle m' \rangle$ vs $\langle L_v q' \rangle$. The shading represents the base-10 logarithm of the number of points within 0.2 mm × 0.2 mm bins in (a), 5 W m^{-2} × 5 W m^{-2} bins in (b), and 5×10^{-4} J m^{-2} × 5×10^{-4} J m^{-2} bins in (c). Anomalies are obtained by regressing all fields against the PC1 (normalized, ISWP) over the TWH region (120°W–0°,5°S–10°N). The linear fit obtained from linear least squares fit is shown as a solid black line. The slope of the linear fit and the correlation coefficient are shown in the top-left of each panel.

cantly modulate surface precipitation (P'). This should result in a strong correlation between P' and $\langle q' \rangle$. We apply this criteria to the IWSP by constructing a scatterplot between P' and $\langle q' \rangle$. A strong linear correlation of 0.96 is observed (Fig. 2a), and anomalies in $\langle q' \rangle$ of 2.5 mm are associated with anomalies in P' of 1.5 mm/day, which satisfy this first criterion.

(b) **The mode must obey the weak temperature gradient (WTG) balance at the leading order in its temperature budget**

Following Inoue and Back (2015), the WTG approximation in the column-integrated dry static energy (DSE) budget can be expressed as:

$$\nabla \cdot \langle s\mathbf{v} \rangle \simeq \langle Q_1 \rangle \tag{1}$$

where $s = C_p T + \Phi$ is DSE, $\mathbf{v} = u\mathbf{i} + v\mathbf{j}$ is the horizontal vector wind field, and Q_1 is the apparent heating rate, which can be calculated from ERA5 reanalysis data following Yanai and Johnson (1993):

$$\langle Q_1 \rangle \simeq \langle Q_r \rangle + L_v P_0 + SH \tag{2}$$

where Q_r is the radiative heating rate, SH is the surface sensible heat flux, and L_v represents the latent heat of vaporization (2.5×10^6 J kg $^{-1}$).

The individual terms in the balance implied by Eq. (1) must be at least an order of magnitude larger than the temperature tendency over region of maximum convection. From the scatterplot of Fig. 2b we see a robust relationship between them, with a high correlation coefficient of 0.99 and slope of ≈1. Therefore, the ISWP mode is in WTG balance at the leading order.

(c) **Thermodynamic variations in the mode must be dominated by moisture**

Moisture modes occur when moisture is the main contributor to moist static energy (MSE, m). From Fig. 2c, we can see that $L_v q'$ explains nearly all of the m' variance, and exhibits a near one to one relationship with m'. Thus, we can make the following approximation for the ISWP mode $m' = C_p T' + \Phi' + L_v q' \approx L_v q'$.

(d) N_{mode} **parameter**

N_{mode} is a nondimensional parameter that measures the relative contribution of moisture and temperature to the evolution of moist enthalpy. When $\mathrm{N}_{mode} \ll 1$,

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moisture governs the thermodynamics of a wave, resulting in moisture modes. Thus, N_{mode} can be thought of as an independent measure of criterion (c). This parameter can be easily estimated as $N_{mode} \approx \left|\frac{C_p T'}{L_v q'}\right|$, giving a value of N_{mode} of ~ 0.1 from ERA5 and soundings (Fig. S3). A more strict definition of N_{mode} can be computed as in Á. Adames et al. (2019):

$$N_{mode} \equiv \frac{c_p^2 \tau}{c^2 \tau_c} \tag{3}$$

where c is the phase speed of a first baroclinic free gravity wave ($c \simeq 50\ ms^{-1}$), and $\tau_c = \langle q' \rangle / P'$ is the convective moisture adjustment time scale. For the ISWP mode the calculated phase speed (c_p) is 5.4 ms^{-1} so that $c_p/c \sim 0.108$. From Table 1 we can estimate τ to be roughly 13.7 days, where $\tau = \lambda/c_p = 58 \times 111.319km \times cos(\varphi)/(5.4ms^{-1})$, and $111.319km \times cos(\varphi)$ is the length of a degree longitude at latitude $\varphi = 5°$ N. $\tau_c = 1.6$ days can be estimated from Fig. 2a, yielding $\tau/\tau_c \approx 8.6$. Combining the two results we obtain $N_{mode} \approx 0.10$. Thus, the ISWP mode can be categorized as a moisture mode according to the N_{mode} criterion.

In the Supporting Information, we also show one last criterion based on the effective Gross Moist Stability (Γ_{eff}), which the ISWP mode also satisfies. Thus, the ISWP mode satisfies all the criteria necessary to be considered a moisture mode.

5 Moist static energy budget

That $L_v q$ governs the distribution of MSE and is highly correlated with rainfall implies that we can use the MSE budget to understand the evolution of convection in the ISWP mode. The column-integrated MSE budget is written as:

$$\frac{\partial \langle m \rangle}{\partial t} = -\langle \mathbf{v} \cdot \nabla m \rangle - \left\langle \omega \frac{\partial m}{\partial p} \right\rangle + \langle Q_r \rangle + LE + SH \tag{4}$$

where the first and second terms on the right-hand side of Eq. (4) are the horizontal and vertical MSE advection, respectively. The remaining terms on Eq. (4) are the MSE source terms: Q_r, the surface latent heat flux (LE), and SH.

Fig. 3 shows the anomalous MSE budget terms from Eq. (4) in the same format as Fig. S1b. It is clear from comparing the six panels that horizontal advection is the largest contributor to the MSE tendency, exhibiting a similar magnitude and a near in-phase relation with it. Column-integrated radiative heating, on the other hand, is the second-largest term and is approximately in phase with the MSE itself but in quadrature with the MSE tendency (Fig. 3d). The column-integrated vertical MSE advection (Fig. 3c) and $\langle Q_r \rangle$ are of similar amplitude and roughly cancel one another. Finally, surface fluxes (Fig. 3e) vary almost in phase with vertical MSE advection and out of phase with $\langle Q_r \rangle$. A residual exists in the budget that is of a comparable magnitude to the vertical MSE advection (Fig. 3d). This residual has been documented in the ERA5 data (Ren et al., 2021), and is hypothesized to be due to an improper representation of convection in the reanalysis, in a similar vein to what Mapes and Bacmeister (2012) documented for MERRA-2 data.

Following previous studies [e.g., Andersen and Kuang (2012); Á. Adames (2017)], we can more objectively quantify the contribution of different processes to the propagation and maintenance of the ISWP mode by projecting them upon the MSE tendency and the MSE anomalies. The regression corresponding to each budget term is multiplied by the regression of the $\partial_t \langle m \rangle$ and $\langle m \rangle$ and then divided by the areaweighted square of themselves.

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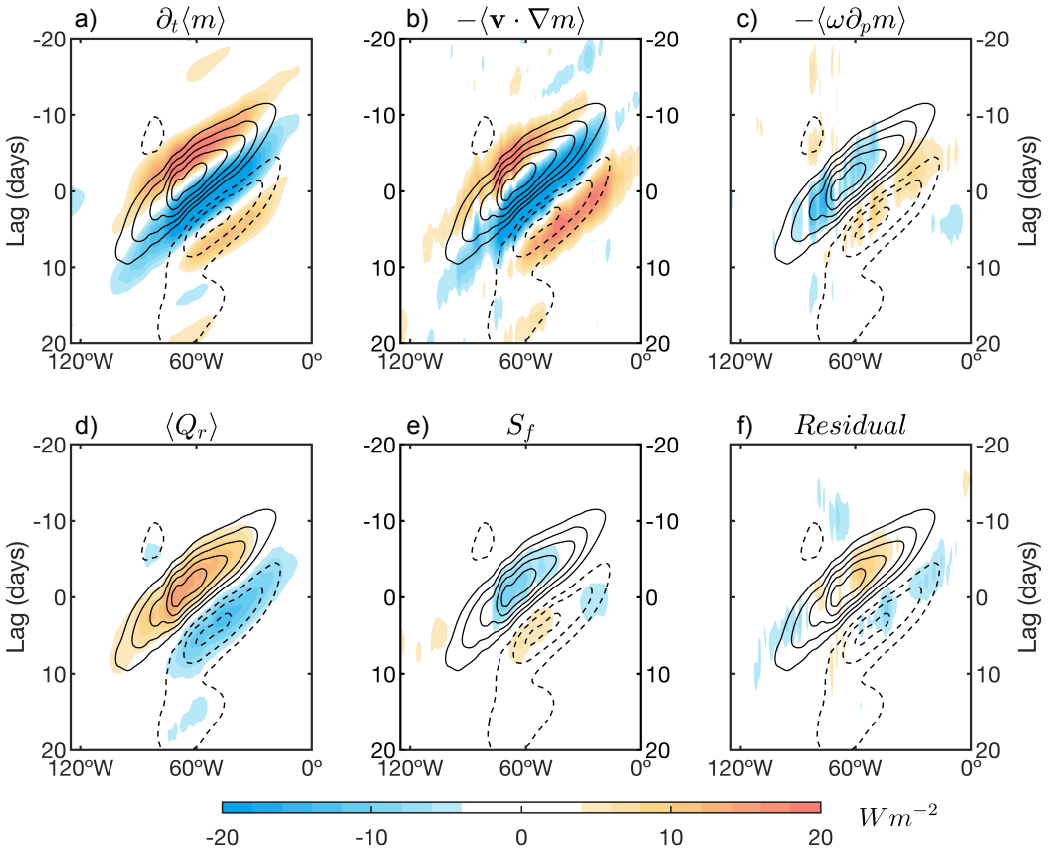


Figure 3. Time-longitude diagram of 5°S - 10°N column–integrated MSE (contour) and MSE budget terms (shading) regressed onto PC1 (normalized, ISWP). (top) Advective MSE terms: (a) $\partial_t\langle m\rangle$, (b) $-\langle \mathbf{v}\cdot\nabla m\rangle$, (c) $-\langle\omega\partial_p m\rangle$. (bottom) Source MSE terms: (d) $\langle Q_r\rangle$, (e) surface fluxes ($S_f = LE + SH$), and (f) residual. The contour interval for $\langle m\rangle$ is 2×10^6 J m^{-2}.

The results of this projection, shown in Fig. 4, reveal that horizontal MSE advection is the largest contributor to the westward propagation of the ISWP (Fig. 4a). To understand in more detail how horizontal MSE advection governs the propagation of the MSE anomalies, we decompose it into the following contributions (Figs. 4 and S5):

$$-\langle u\partial_x m\rangle \approx -\langle \bar{u}\partial_x m'\rangle - \langle u'\partial_x \bar{m}\rangle - \langle u'\partial_x m'\rangle \tag{5a}$$

$$-\langle v\partial_y m\rangle \approx -\langle \bar{v}\partial_y m'\rangle - \langle v'\partial_y \bar{m}\rangle - \langle v'\partial_y m'\rangle \tag{5b}$$

where the overbar represents the low-frequency component, obtained from a 96 day low-pass filter, and the primes are departures from this low-frequency component.

The leading term associated with westward propagation is the horizontal advection of the MSE anomalies by the low-frequency zonal wind ($\langle\bar{u}\partial_x m'\rangle$). Propagation of ER waves over western Pacific is also governed by the same process (Gonzalez & Jiang, 2019). All other contributions are much smaller and will not be discussed.

Fig. 4b shows the contribution of each budget term to the maintenance of the MSE for the ISWP mode. As expected from recent studies on slowly-propagating disturbances

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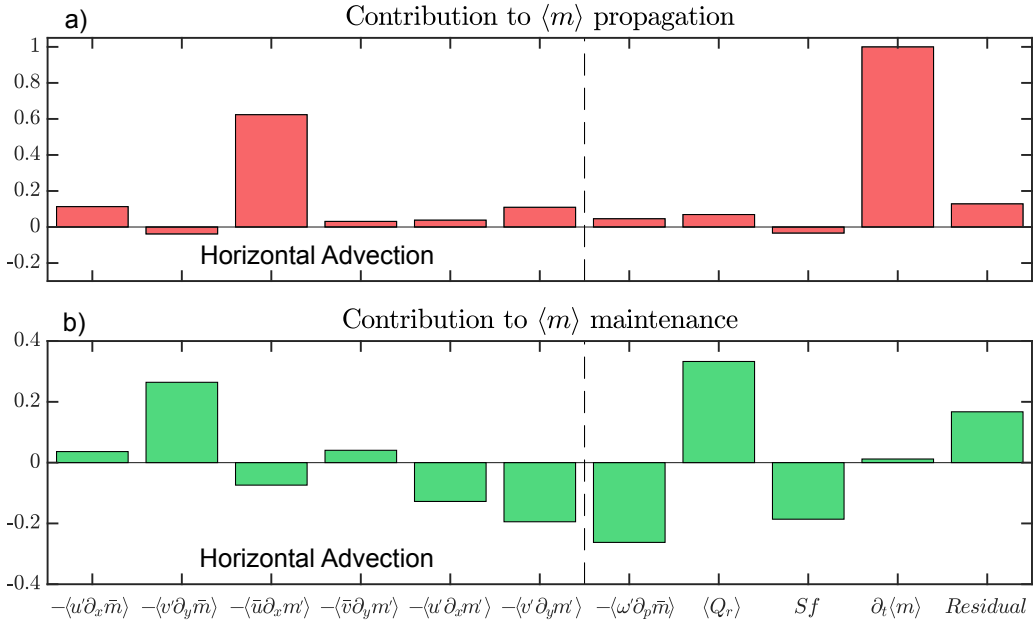


Figure 4. Normalized contribution of each term in the MSE budget Eq. (4) to the (top) propagation and (bottom) maintenance of the ISWP. The contribution of each horizontal MSE advection terms are plotted in the left part of the panels.

(Andersen & Kuang, 2012; A. Sobel et al., 2014; Á. Adames, 2017; Benedict et al., 2020), the column-integrated radiative heating is the largest contributor to the maintenance of the ISWP mode. The second-largest contribution to maintenance is the horizontal advection of the low-frequency MSE by the intraseasonal meridional wind ($-\langle v'\partial_y\bar{m}\rangle$). Horizontal MSE advection by high-frequency eddies, vertical MSE advection and anomalous surface fluxes act to damp the MSE anomalies.

6 Intraseasonal westward propagating wave in an Equatorial Beta-Plane Model

Up to this point, we have shown that the ISWP mode has the properties of a moisture mode. Since moisture modes exhibit a behavior that are distinct from Matsuno's dry shallow water wave solutions, it is instructive to instead compare the ISWP mode to a model that accounts for the important role water vapor plays in tropical motions. In this section, we compare the horizontal structure and MSE budgets associated with ISWP mode with an equatorial beta-plane model that is similar to the model of Ahmed (2021). Our comparison is qualitative, and is primarily used to highlight the importance of slow moisture variations for ISWP dynamics.

The prognostic moisture equation in this model is given by:

$$\frac{\partial\langle q'\rangle}{\partial t}+\left\langle u'\frac{\partial\bar{q}}{\partial x}\right\rangle+\left\langle v'\frac{\partial\bar{q}}{\partial y}\right\rangle+\left\langle\omega\frac{\partial\bar{q}}{\partial p}\right\rangle+\langle\bar{U}\frac{\partial q'}{\partial x}\rangle=E'-\langle Q_c'\rangle. \tag{6}$$

In the above equation, q', u' and v' are the perturbation moisture and horizontal winds respectively; E' and Q_c' are the perturbation surface evaporation and convective heating respectively. The background moisture and zonal wind fields are $\bar{q}$ and $\bar{U}$ respectively. The only structural difference from the model of Ahmed (2021) is the inclusion of the $\langle\bar{U}\frac{\partial q'}{\partial x}\rangle$ term in (6), whose importance was only apparent after the MSE budget analy-

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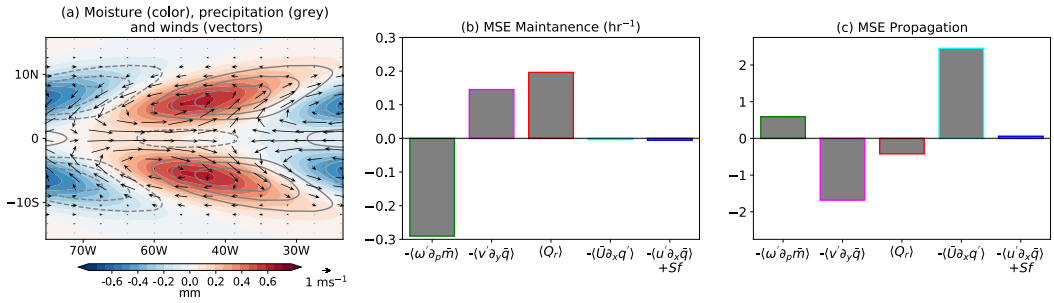


Figure 5. (a) Moisture (color), precipitation (contours), and low-level winds (vectors) for the westward-propagating zonal wavenumber-5 ($k = -5$) Rossby moisture mode discussed in Section 6. Panels (b) and (c) show the relative contribution of each MSE budget term to the (b) maintenance and (c) propagation of the MSE anomalies associated with this wave.

sis in Section 5. The value of $\bar{U}$ is set to -5 m s^{-1} to represent the background low-level easterly flow seen over TWH region (Fig. S6). Other model details are provided in the SI Section 2.

In Ahmed (2021) it was shown that the moist beta-plane system contains eastward and westward propagating Rossby wave solutions, and that the former closely resembles the MJO. The similarities between the westward propagating Rossby wave solution and the ISWP are now discussed. Fig. 5a shows the horizontal structure of the westward propagating, $n = 1$ Rossby mode. This mode has a zonal wavenumber 5 ($k = -5$), chosen to match the peak wavenumber in the regional space-time spectrum of CLAUS T_b (Fig. S1a). Similar to observations, the theoretical mode displays two off-equatorial gyres. Convection is nearly in quadrature with the gyres—similar to Figs. 1a and 1d—and nearly in phase with column moisture—as implied by the moisture mode analysis in Section 4a. The MSE budget for the theoretical mode is computed as shown in Supporting Information. A projection in the MSE maintenance and propagation budget terms are shown in Figs. 5b and 5c respectively. The dominant processes that propagate and maintain the theoretical mode are in qualitative agreement with the observed ISWP mode (see Fig. 4). Large opposing contributions to MSE maintenance by radiative heating and vertical MSE advection (Fig. 4a) are reproduced in the theoretical mode. The contributions from mean meridional moisture advection to MSE maintenance is also reproduced. As in the reanalysis data, the main process responsible for the westward propagation is moisture advection by the mean zonal winds $\langle \bar{U}\partial_x q' \rangle$.

Discrepancies do exist between theory and observations. For instance, meridional moisture advection opposes the westward propagation due to the off-equatorial gyres moistening to the east of convection (Ahmed, 2021). This effect is smaller in the reanalysis (Fig. 4b), plausibly due to asymmetries in the local meridional moisture gradient. There is a stronger negative contribution from vertical MSE advection (Fig. 5b) compared to the reanalysis (Fig. 4b). This effect is possibly due to the absence of stratiform heating (Schumacher et al., 2004) in the beta-plane modes; stratiform heating can oppose the MSE export by deep baroclinic heating (Raymond et al., 2009), and potentially limit the impacts of vertical MSE advection. Despite these discrepancies, there is overall qualitative agreement between theory and observed ISWP, with respect to the horizontal structures and the MSE budget.

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7 Summary and conclusions

This study showed that an intraseasonal westward-propagating (ISWP) wave over the western hemisphere explains a large fraction of the intraseasonal T_b variance. While the structural features of this mode are akin to the ER waves found in Matsuno's dry shallow water theory, its propagation is too slow to be easily explained by it. On the basis of four criteria based on previous work by Á. Adames et al. (2019) and Ahmed et al. (2021), we conclude that the ISWP is instead a moisture mode. In its MSE budget horizontal MSE advection by the mean flow governs the propagation of the MSE anomalies, which in turn are maintained by radiative heating and meridional moisture advection. The governing MSE maintenance and propagation processes are in qualitative agreement with the model of Ahmed (2021), in which the inclusion of prognostic moisture and a mean meridional moisture gradient causes ER waves to exhibit moisture mode behavior.

Previous theoretical and observational studies (Fuchs-Stone et al., 2019; Ahmed, 2021; Gonzalez & Jiang, 2019) have already shown evidence that ER waves over the Indo-Pacific warm pool are moisture modes. However, this is the first study to show evidence for the existence of moisture modes over the tropical western hemisphere. It is also the first study to diagnose whether a wave is a moisture mode on the basis of a series of objective criteria that are based on theory. The fact that we have identified a moisture mode in a region that is previously not known to support them suggests that these types of systems may be common. These modes are characterized by slow propagation driven by moisture fluctuations that are coupled to convection and circulation. Other tropical wave properties such as meridional tilts and equatorial asymmetry also likely emerge from similar moist dynamics (Fuchs & Raymond, 2017; K. Emanuel, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2021; Wang & Sobel, 2021). These recent results highlight the limitations of shallow water equatorial wave theory without prognostic moisture variations. Moisture mode theory (A. H. Sobel et al., 2001; Jiang et al., 2020; Á. F. Adames & Maloney, 2021) may be a more reasonable starting point to understand the dynamics of these waves.

8 Open Research

The dataset used in this study are available at ECWF (ERA5; `https://doi.org/10.24381/cds.adbb2d47`), the Atmospheric Radiation Measurement (ARM) program archive (VARANAL; `https://iop.archive.arm.gov/arm-iop/0eval-data/xie/scm-forcing/iop_at_mao/GOAMAZON/2014-2015/`) [registration is required to access data], Integrated Global Radiosonde Archive (IGRA; `https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/pub/data/igra/`), and the interpolated CLAUS T_b data is available at `https://catalogue.ceda.ac.uk/uuid/ce476101711ce73107c9e90265ec6d9a`.

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