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Bio-spectral tensors and ConvNeXt architectures: A proximal sensing framework for early detection of *Bipolaris oryzae* in tropical rice crops

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ABSTRACT

Early detection of Brown Spot disease (*Bipolaris oryzae*) in tropical rice systems is constrained by both operational and spectral limitations that hinder large-scale implementation. In-field, the standard Fedearroz protocol, based on W-pattern systematic sampling conducted by an expert agronomist, becomes impractical over large production areas such as those in Casanare. At the remote sensing scale, UAV flights at conventional altitudes (≥10 m) also fail to resolve the problem, as phenotypic ambiguity of early lesions and spectral mixing with the canopy background reduce detectability. Under these conditions, conventional monitoring approaches fail due to the saturation of structural indices in dense vegetation. We propose a framework that integrates proximal multispectral sensing (h = 40–50 cm) with a deep learning architecture, based on the premise that spatial resolution governs pathogen detectability. Through a high-throughput audit of 17 multispectral indices, we constructed a high-dimensional **Bio-Spectral Tensor** combining CVI, MACI, and GNDVI, selected for their complementary capacity to capture distinct physiological signatures. Fisher Discriminant analysis showed that CVI increases class separability by a factor of 144 relative to NDVI, effectively decoupling biotic stress signals from environmental artifacts. These tensors were processed using the **ConvNeXt** architecture, achieving an overall accuracy of 98.95% and a Recall of 1.00 for the diseased class, with zero false negatives in independent evaluation. Grad-CAM analysis revealed that model attention is concentrated on necrotic centers and chlorotic halos, confirming the pathophysiological grounding of the predictions. Taken together, these results establish a physically grounded framework for the early detection of *Bipolaris oryzae* in tropical rice systems, identifying h = 40–50 cm as the critical spatial threshold for supervised lesion discrimination and defining a scalability roadmap toward operational UAV deployment via high-resolution multispectral sensors.

1. Introduction

Global food security is intrinsically linked to the productive stability of staple crops such as rice (*Oryza sativa* L.), which currently underpins the diet of over half the world's population. However, rice production systems face intensifying pressures driven by climate variability and the increasing incidence of biotic stressors [1]. Among the most economically detrimental pathologies, Brown Spot disease, caused by the fungal pathogen *Bipolaris oryzae* (Breda de Haan) Shoemaker, has established itself as a critical endemic threat in tropical regions [2]. Clinically characterized by the emergence of oval, dark-brown foliar lesions surrounded by a distinctive chlorotic halo, this pathology transcends foliar damage by colonizing glumes, causing "grain discoloration" that severely compromises milling quality and commercial value [3–5]. Its epidemiology is particularly complex, as pathogen virulence is exacerbated under conditions of water stress or soil nutrient deficiencies, generating ambiguous visual symptomatology that is frequently conflated with abiotic stressors during conventional inspections [3].

In the Colombian context, the Casanare department constitutes the core of national production, accounting for 46.4% of the sown area, with 210,262 hectares reported in the first half of 2024 [4]. Nevertheless, the vast extent of these monocultures under mechanized rainfed systems hinders the implementation of efficient phytosanitary monitoring strategies. Traditional reliance on *in-situ* visual assessments is insufficient; not only is it labor-intensive and subjective, but the phenotypic overlap between *B. oryzae* infection and nutrient de-

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ficiencies often leads to diagnostic errors in early stages, precluding timely intervention before the pathogen compromises panicle viability [5,6].

Precision agriculture has addressed these limitations through the integration of airborne remote sensors, specifically Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), which enable data acquisition with high spatiotemporal resolution [7]. While conventional RGB imagery has proven useful for general crop segmentation, its capacity to discriminate specific pathologies is limited. Recent studies indicate that responses in the visible spectrum often fail to decouple pathogen-induced chlorosis from natural senescence or water stress [8,9]. In contrast, multispectral technology offers a superior physiological advantage by capturing reflectance in the Red-Edge and Near-Infrared (NIR) bands. [10] demonstrated that complex physiological indices derived from these bands, such as the Chlorophyll Vegetation Index (CVI) or the Green Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (GNDVI), maintain a direct correlation with the net photosynthetic rate and internal cellular structure, enabling the detection of metabolic anomalies before necrotic symptoms become macroscopically evident.

Despite the availability of these sensors, multispectral data processing faces a methodological bottleneck. Current approaches based on isolated Vegetation Indices (VIs) often oversimplify the complexity of the plant-pathogen interaction, discarding critical textural and spatial information required for robust classification [11]. In this regard, constructing high-order data structures, such as **Bio-Spectral Tensors**, allows for the integration of the textural richness of high-resolution visible data with the physiological sensitivity of spectral bands. Furthermore, despite the prevalence of standard indices like the Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) in vegetation monitoring, their sensitivity to specific fungal stressors is often suboptimal due to saturation effects in dense tropical canopies. To address this limitation, we conducted a high-throughput audit of 17 multispectral candidate indices, evaluating their class-discriminative power through the Fisher Discriminant Criterion. This rigorous, data-driven feature selection ensures that the engineered Bio-Spectral Tensors are specifically optimized to capture the distinct oxidative stress and chlorophyll degradation patterns triggered by *B. oryzae* infection, thereby mitigating false positives derived from environmental variability [12,13].

Parallel to these advances, the rise of Deep Learning (DL) has enabled unprecedented accuracy in plant disease detection using Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) [14,15]. However, the deployment of these models in real-world agronomic decision-making is hindered by their “black box” nature. Farmers and technicians require not merely a binary prediction but an understanding of the spectral features driving the classification to validate the biological diagnosis. Current literature reveals a paucity of research integrating modern vision architectures, such as ConvNeXt, with Explainable AI (XAI) mechanisms specifically applied to *Bipolaris oryzae* pathometry [16,17].

To bridge this gap, this study proposes a detection workflow based on multimodal data fusion and explainable deep learning. Specifically, we developed a model using bio-spectral tensors derived from multi-altitude flight campaigns and proximal sensing ($h = 40$–50 cm), validated by expert agronomic inspection in Yopal and Aguazul (Casanare). These tensors were processed using the **ConvNeXt** architecture to overcome the interpretability and accuracy limitations associated with conventional diagnostic methods [18].

The main contributions of this study are summarized as follows:

- The development of an *adaptive sampling strategy* that determines the critical spatial resolution for early lesion detection, contrasting conventional UAV flights with proximal sensing techniques.
- The formulation of statistically optimized Bio-Spectral Tensors (CVI, MACI, GNDVI) derived from a 17-index audit, outperforming standard structural indices by maximizing class separability.
- The implementation and validation of the **ConvNeXt** architecture combined with Explainable AI (Grad-CAM) techniques to provide interpretable heatmaps that correlate neural activation with actual physiological pathogen signatures.

2. Related work

2.1. Remote sensing in rice pathology

The paradigm of crop monitoring has shifted from manual scouting to high-throughput proximal and aerial remote sensing [19]. Early approaches relied heavily on RGB imagery due to the cost-effectiveness of visible-light sensors. For instance, Bhanu et al. [20] and [21] utilized visible spectrum data to classify rice leaf diseases, achieving high accuracy in controlled environments. However, Zhao et al. [8] highlighted a critical limitation: RGB sensors struggle to differentiate between biotic stress (e.g., fungal infection) and abiotic stress (e.g., drought) due to overlapping spectral signatures in the visible range.

To address this, multispectral and hyperspectral imaging have been increasingly adopted to capture physiological alterations. Chen et al. [22] demonstrated that deep learning models fed with hyperspectral data could detect rice diseases up to 12 days before symptoms became macroscopically visible, capitalizing on continuous spectral domains. Similarly, Shi et al. [13], Logavitool et al. [15] validated that incorporating Red-Edge and Near-Infrared (NIR) bands significantly improves the segmentation of bacterial leaf blight and fungal lesions, as NIR reflectance is directly governed by the spongy mesophyll structure, which collapses during colonization.

2.2. Deep learning and feature fusion

While vegetation indices (VIs) like NDVI are standard in precision agriculture, they often discard spatial texture information. Recent trends focus on *multimodal data fusion* to overcome this deficit. Mia et al. [7], Xu et al. [11] proved that fusing VIs with textural or environmental features outperforms single-source models in crop monitoring tasks.

In the specific context of rice pathology, this fusion has materialized into specialized architectures. Zhang et al. [23] proposed the ISMS-Fuse algorithm, integrating image and spectral data for bacterial blight classification, while [24] developed a dual-branch model fusing spectral signatures with physiological indicators for the early detection of Sheath Blight. Furthermore, Pai et al. [14] employed a twin CNN-based framework to enhance feature robustness against environmental noise.

However, traditional CNNs (e.g., ResNet, VGG) utilized in these studies often lack the global receptive field required to capture large-scale patterns in high-resolution drone imagery. To mitigate this, recent works such as [25] and [26] have begun exploring hybrid CNN-Transformer networks and attention mechanisms for crop classification. Addressing these gaps, this study implements ConvNeXt [18], a modern architecture that bridges the performance gap between Vision Transformers (ViTs) and CNNs, applying it specifically to Bio-Spectral Tensors to combine the benefits of deep feature extraction with physiological interpretability.

3. Materials and methods

The proposed research establishes an end-to-end workflow for precision phytopathology, integrating multimodal acquisition, bio-spectral feature engineering, and explainable deep learning. The overall methodological framework is summarized in Fig. 1.

3.1. Study area and ethical considerations

The research was conducted in commercial rice production zones within the municipalities of Yopal ($5.127°, -72.404°$) and Aguazul ($5.181°, -72.241°$), located in the Casanare department, Colombia. This region is characterized by a tropical savanna climate, representing the core of the country’s mechanized rice production.

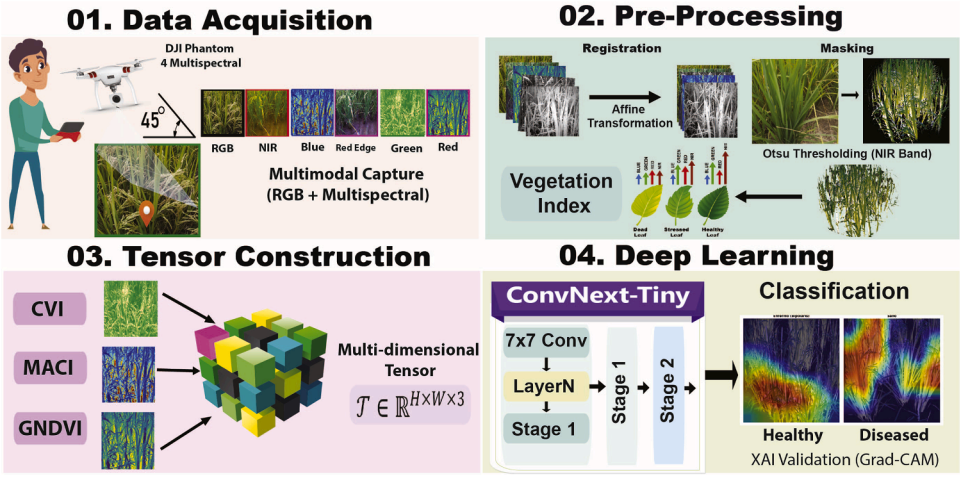


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the proposed methodological framework. The workflow integrates (01) multimodal data acquisition via proximal sensing (h = 40 cm), (02) pre-processing including affine registration and Otsu masking, (03) bio-spectral tensor construction (CVI, MACI, GNDVI), and (04) deep learning classification using ConvNeXt with explainable AI (Grad-CAM) validation.

To ensure the relevance of the study to real-world agronomic conditions, data collection was performed in active commercial fields under cooperation agreements with local producers. A **non-destructive sampling protocol** was strictly adhered to; no biomass was removed, and crop integrity was preserved throughout the study. The data acquisition campaigns were executed within a strict temporal window between 09:00 AM and 01:00 PM to ensure optimal radiometric conditions Figs. 2,3.

3.2. Phytopathological characterization and ground truth validation

Given the phenotypic complexity of rice pathologies, establishing a reliable "Ground Truth" was paramount. The detection target was Brown Spot disease (Helminthosporiosis), caused by the fungus *Bipolaris oryzae* (anamorph of *Cochliobolus miyabeanus*). This pathology affects stems, leaves, and seeds, manifesting initially as small, circular dark brown spots [27]. As the infection progresses, lesions become oval or circular with a necrotic gray center surrounded by a distinctive yellow chlorotic halo.

To guarantee the accuracy of the dataset labels, a supervised validation protocol was executed in parallel with the image acquisition campaigns. An expert agronomist performed *in-situ* inspections following the phytosanitary monitoring standards established by Fedearroz [27,28]. This standard methodology involves:

1. **Systematic Sampling (W-Pattern):** Instead of random selection, inspection points followed a "double V" or "W" trajectory across the field to ensure representative coverage of the lot's heterogeneity. A total of 25 monitoring points were evaluated per lot (distributed as 6-6-6-7 points per transect) to minimize sampling bias and edge effects [27,28].
2. **Symptomatological Confirmation:** At each inspection point, a "handful" (*manojo*) of plants was examined. The expert visually differentiated *B. oryzae* lesions from abiotic stressors (e.g., potassium deficiency) and determined incidence based on the percentage of leaf area affected.
3. **Labeling:** Areas confirmed as infected by the expert-specifically those exceeding the alert threshold for fungal leaf spots-were georeferenced and flagged to serve as the ground truth for the proximal sensing imagery.

Ground truth validation was conducted through a two-stage protocol, beginning with an initial image-level classification and followed by a final depuration and expert validation performed by co-author M.D. Aguilar Castellanos, a certified agronomist with official experience at the Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario (ICA), who assumed full diagnostic responsibility for the curated dataset, following the phytosanitary monitoring guidelines established by Fedearroz [27] and Fedearroz [29]. Only images in which *Bipolaris oryzae* infection was confirmed unambiguously were retained; captures exhibiting mixed or non-specific symptomatology were excluded.

3.3. Data acquisition system

The spectral data were acquired using the **DJI P4 Multispectral** (P4M) Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). This system integrates a gimbal-stabilized imaging payload consisting of six global shutter sensors (1/2.9" CMOS) with a resolution of 2.12 Megapixels each. The spectral array includes:

- One standard RGB sensor for visible light reference (JPEG format).
- Five monochromatic sensors (TIFF format) centered at specific wavelengths: Blue (450 ± 16 nm), Green (560 ± 16 nm), Red (650 ± 16 nm), Red-Edge (730 ± 16 nm), and Near-Infrared (840 ± 26 nm) (Fig. 4).

3.4. Experimental design and sampling strategy

An adaptive sampling strategy was implemented across four distinct campaigns to determine the optimal spatial resolution for detecting *Bipolaris oryzae* lesions. The protocol involved simultaneous aerial data capture and ground-truth validation by phytopathology experts.

The campaigns were designed with decreasing acquisition altitudes to test the limits of sensor resolution (Table 1).

- **Exploratory Phase (Campaigns 1–3):** Conducted at altitudes ranging from 2 to 4 m above the canopy. These flights aimed to assess the feasibility of automated detection from standard low-altitude flight paths. However, preliminary analysis indicated that mixed pixels (soil/leaf) hindered the identification of early-stage lesions.
- **Proximal Sensing Phase (Campaign 4):** Based on the findings of the exploratory phase, the final campaign utilized a **handheld proximal sensing approach**. The UAV was operated manually at a height of 40–50 cm from the canopy with a sensor inclination of 45°. This oblique perspective allowed for the capture of high-resolution textural details of the lesions and facilitated the separation of the "Healthy" vs. "Diseased" classes.

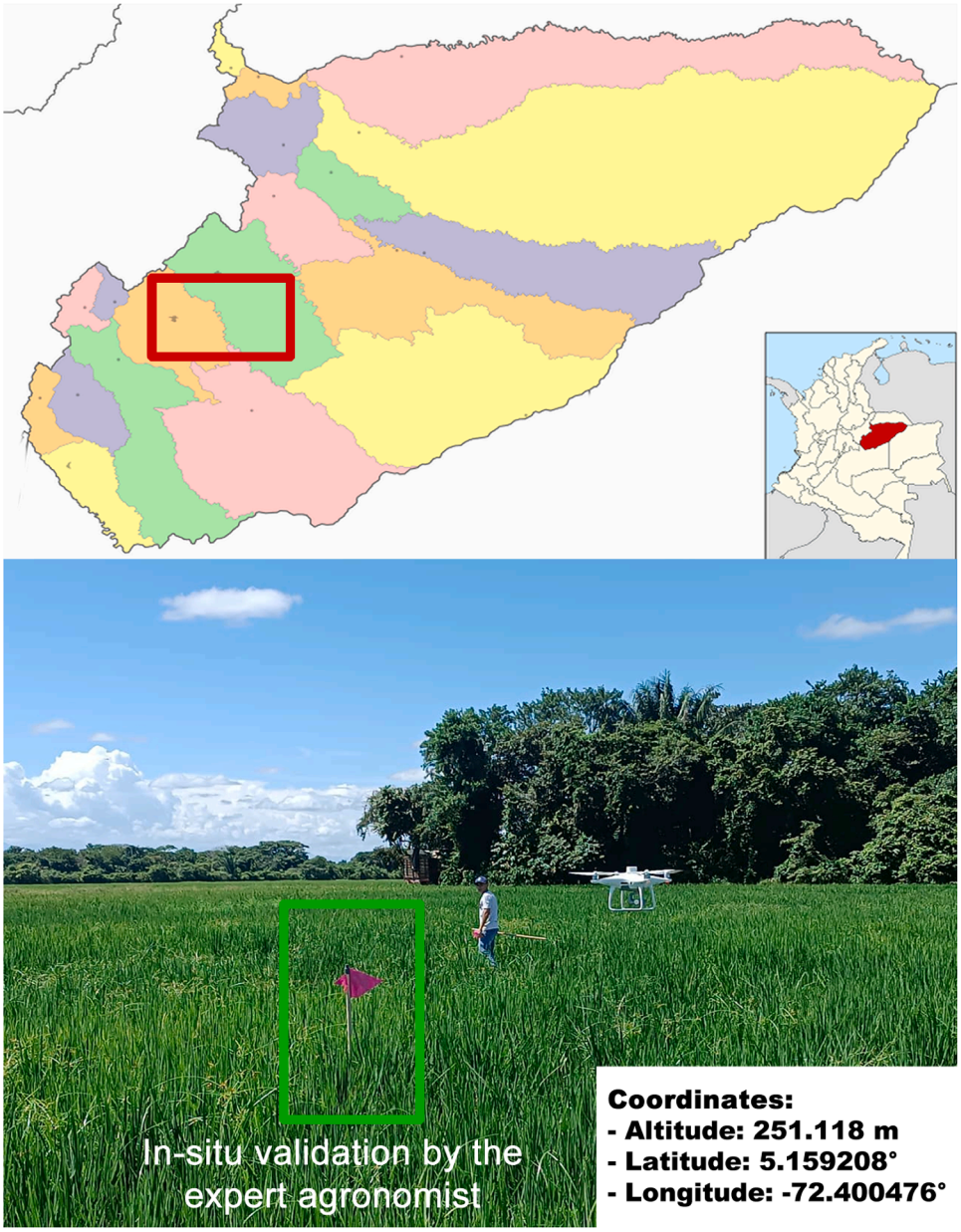


Fig. 2. Geographical location of the data acquisition sites in Casanare, Colombia. The map highlights the specific commercial plots in Yopal and Aguazul where the four sampling campaigns were conducted.

Table 1
Description of data acquisition campaigns and geolocations.

Campaign	Location	Coordinates (Lat, Lon)	Method/Height	Images	Objective
Toma 1	Yopal	5.127°, −72.404°	Flight (10 m)	4002	Exploratory Analysis
Toma 2	Aguazul	5.181°, −72.241°	Flight (3–4 m)	4326	Data Augmentation
Toma 3	Aguazul	5.184°, −72.240°	Flight (1 m)	2850	Resolution Testing
Toma 4	**Yopal**	5.159°, −72.400°	**Proximal (40–50 cm)**	**2,360 (472 tensors)**	**Model Training**

The dataset from **Campaign 4** was selected for the final training of the deep learning model due to its superior spatial resolution and clearly annotated classes (1,476 Healthy images and 1296 Diseased images), ensuring a balanced dataset for the Bio-Spectral Tensor construction.

The dataset from **Campaign 4** was selected for the final training of the deep learning model due to its superior spatial resolution and clearly annotated classes. From the 2360 raw TIFF files acquired (1,180 Healthy captures and 1180 Diseased captures), the Bio-Spectral Tensor generation pipeline (Script 03) produced **472 PNG tensors** (236 Healthy and 236 Diseased), ensuring a balanced dataset for model training.

Fig. 5 illustrates the spatial resolution constraint that motivated the stepped campaign design. At $h = 40$–50 cm (Panel A), individual *B. oryzae* lesions occupy a sufficient fraction of the field of view for spatial discrimination and reliable binary label assignment. At $h \approx 4$–5 m (Panel B), a single frame simultaneously integrates healthy and infected plants, generating spectral mixing that breaks the direct image-to-class correspondence and renders supervised image-level classification



Fig. 3. Visual characterization of the target pathology in the field. Rice leaves exhibiting the typical appearance of *Bipolaris oryzae* lesions: oval necrotic centers with chlorotic halos (yellow arrows), validated during the in-situ inspection. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

methodologically inconsistent - justifying the adoption of unsupervised approaches (K-means clustering, autoencoders) for Campaigns 1–3. This contrast establishes, in empirical terms, a spatial threshold: $h = 40$–50 cm as the necessary condition for early-stage supervised detection of *B. oryzae* under the tropical canopy conditions considered. Studies such as Logavitool et al. [15], which report semantic segmentation of Bacterial Leaf Blight (BLB) at 20 m altitude with mIoU of 97.20%, operate under different conditions: BLB produces foliar lesions of greater surface extent, reducing the spatial resolution requirement. This contrast between pathosystems confirms that the $h = 40$–50 cm threshold is not an equipment limitation, but an intrinsic constraint imposed by the submillimetric morphology of early-stage *B. oryzae* lesions [15].

3.5. Data pre-processing and alignment

3.5.1. Band alignment and registration

Due to the discrete arrangement of the P4M sensors, raw proximal imagery exhibits parallax-induced spatial misalignment. To generate a coherent multispectral stack, the registration process was modeled as an affine transformation. Let I_{ref} be the reference band (Green) and I_{mov} be the moving band (e.g., NIR). The spatially registered image I'_{mov} is obtained via the transformation matrix A:

$$\begin{bmatrix} x' \\ y' \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} = A \times \begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} s_x \cos\theta & -s_y \sin\theta & t_x \\ s_x \sin\theta & s_y \cos\theta & t_y \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} x \\ y \\ 1 \end{bmatrix} \tag{1}$$

Where s denotes scale, θ rotation, and t translation. This correction was automated using the lens distortion parameters embedded in the XMP metadata, ensuring sub-pixel correspondence across all five spectral channels.

3.5.2. Background masking via NIR thresholding

To isolate the canopy from non-vegetative artifacts (water, soil, shadows), we exploited the strong absorption features of water in the near-infrared spectrum. Since flooded rice paddies exhibit near-zero reflectance at $\lambda \approx 840$ nm, a binary mask $M(x, y)$ was computed using Otsu's adaptive thresholding method:

$$M(x,y) = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } I_{NIR}(x,y) > \tau_{Otsu} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \tag{2}$$

This mask was applied element-wise to the aligned multispectral stack to extract the Region of Interest (ROI), ensuring the deep learning model focuses exclusively on foliar tissue features.

3.6. Spectral feature selection and Fisher discriminant analysis

To minimize redundant information and optimize the input space for the ConvNeXt architecture, a feature selection analysis was performed on 17 candidate spectral indices. We processed a massive dataset of 1,048,575 pixel-level observations to quantify the separability between 'Healthy' and 'Diseased' classes. The discriminative efficiency of each index was evaluated using the Fisher Discriminant Ratio (F):

$$F = \frac{(\mu_{healthy} - \mu_{diseased})^2}{\sigma^2_{healthy} + \sigma^2_{diseased}} \tag{3}$$

Where μ and σ^2 represent the mean and variance of the reflectance values, respectively. This criterion measures the distance between class distributions relative to their internal dispersion. Indices with higher F scores indicate superior sensitivity to the physiological alterations (e.g., chlorophyll lysis and anthocyanin accumulation) triggered by the pathogen.

3.7. Feature extraction: bio-spectral tensor construction

Standard RGB inputs often fail to capture the subtle physiological changes associated with early-stage infection. To address this, we engineered a **Bio-Spectral Tensor** $\mathcal{T} \in \mathbb{R}^{H \times W \times 3}$, a composite structure designed to highlight the specific physiological fingerprints of *B. oryzae*.

Based on the Fisher Discriminant Criterion analysis detailed in Section 3.6, three spectral indices were selected to represent Chlorophyll content, Pigment degradation, and Canopy structure. The tensor components are mathematically defined as follows:

- **Channel 1: Chlorophyll Vegetation Index (CVI).**

$$\mathcal{T}_{:,:,1} = CVI = \frac{I_{NIR} \times I_{Red}}{I^2_{Green}} \tag{4}$$

Biological rationale: CVI is highly sensitive to the chlorotic halos caused by chloroplast degradation in the early stages of fungal infection [10].

- **Channel 2: Modified Anthocyanin Content Index (MACI).**

$$\mathcal{T}_{:,:,2} = MACI = \frac{I_{NIR}}{I_{Green}} \tag{5}$$

Biological rationale: Acts as a proxy for stress-induced pigment variations; under biotic stress conditions, anthocyanin accumulation increases progressively with disease severity [30], contrasting healthy tissue (high reflectance in Green/NIR) against necrotic lesions.

- **Channel 3: Green Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (GNDVI).**

$$\mathcal{T}_{:,:,3} = GNDVI = \frac{I_{NIR} - I_{Green}}{I_{NIR} + I_{Green}} \tag{6}$$

Biological rationale: GNDVI correlates with the net photosynthetic rate and chlorophyll concentration, providing a robust measure of overall plant vigor and biomass integrity [31].

The resulting tensor $\mathcal{T}$ was normalized to the range $[0, 1]$ to facilitate convergence in the convolutional neural network, effectively "translating" biological stress into a computer vision-compatible format.

3.8. Deep learning architecture: Modernized ConvNeXt

To process the high-dimensional Bio-Spectral Tensors, we implemented the **ConvNeXt-Tiny** architecture [18]. This model represents a "modernized" Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) that integrates architectural priors from Vision Transformers (ViTs)-such as large kernel

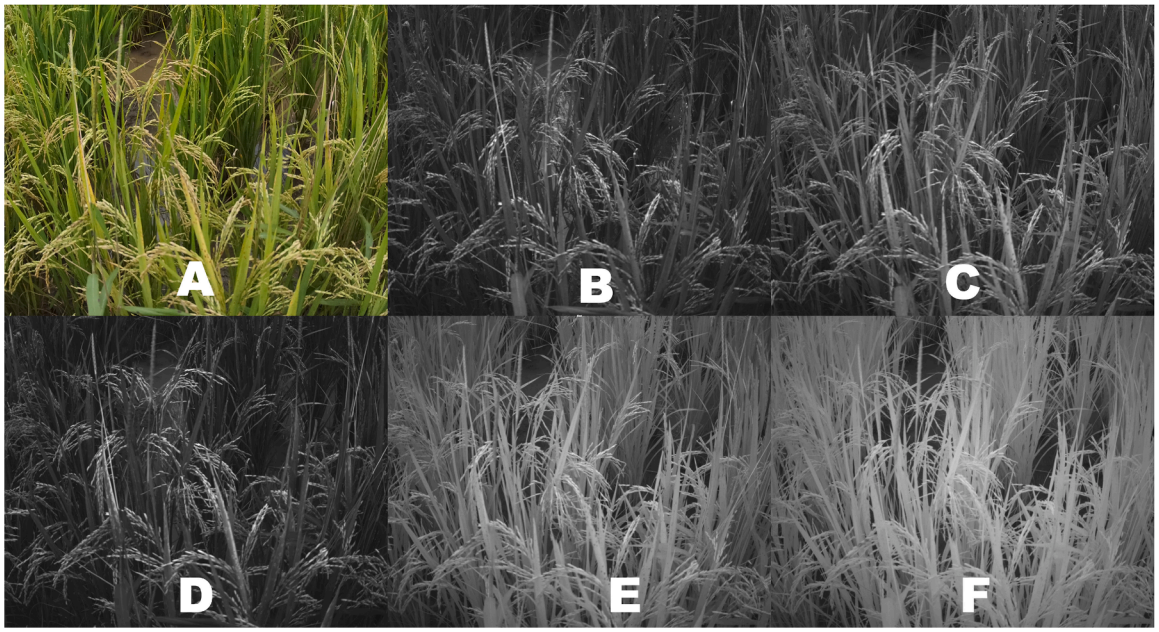


Fig. 4. Multispectral breakdown of a rice leaf infected with *Bipolaris oryzae* (Proximal Sensing, $h = 40$–50 cm). **(A) RGB Composite:** shows the typical necrotic lesions with chlorotic halos. **(B-C) Blue & Green Bands:** display general structural features. **(D) Red Band (650 nm):** high contrast allows for clear delineation of the necrotic center. **(E) Red-Edge (730 nm):** reveals the physiological stress gradient surrounding the lesion. **(F) NIR Band (840 nm):** healthy tissue exhibits high reflectance (white), while infected areas appear dark due to cellular collapse, facilitating segmentation.

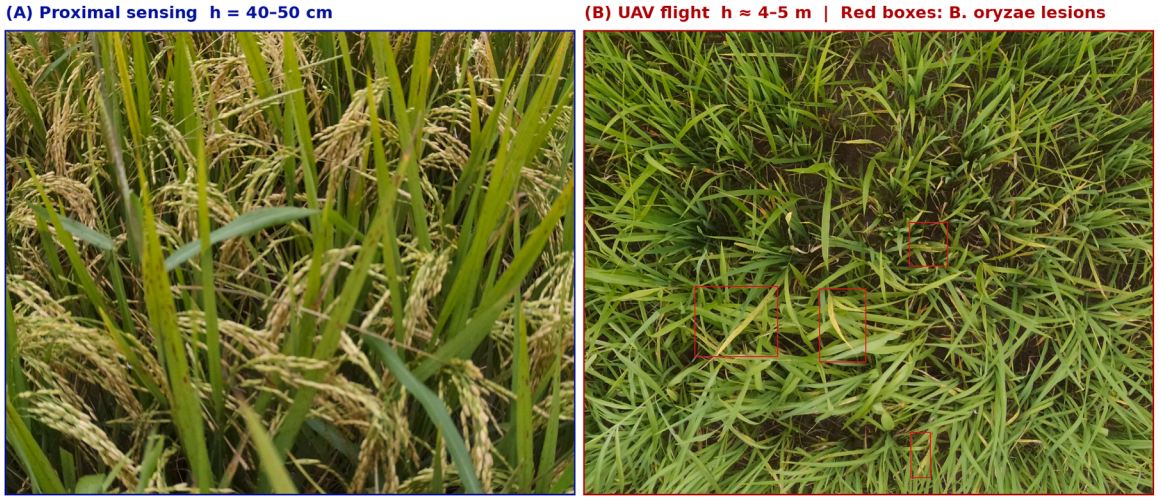


Fig. 5. Spatial resolution constraints at two acquisition heights. **(A)** At $h = 40$–50 cm (proximal sensing, Campaign 4), individual *B. oryzae* lesions are spatially resolved and unambiguously assignable to a binary label. **(B)** At $h \approx 4$–5 m (Campaigns 1–3), a single frame contains both healthy and infected tissue (red boxes: confirmed lesion regions validated by expert agronomist), rendering image-level binary classification methodologically inappropriate and motivating patch-based or semantic segmentation architectures for higher-altitude deployment [15]. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

sizes and micro-design tweaks-while retaining the inductive biases of standard convolutions (translation invariance and locality), which are critical for detecting small lesions on variable leaf surfaces.

3.8.1. Backbone mechanics: the "Patchify" stem and large kernels

The constructed Bio-Spectral Tensor $\mathcal{T} \in \mathbb{R}^{224\times224\times3}$ enters the network through a "Patchify" stem layer. Unlike standard CNNs that use aggressive max-pooling, ConvNeXt employs a non-overlapping 4×4 convolution with a stride of 4. This operation effectively tokenizes the image, preserving the local spectral coherence of the lesions.

The core innovation lies in the **ConvNeXt Block** design, which diverges from the ResNet bottleneck in three key aspects optimized for phytopathology:

1. **Large Effective Receptive Field (ERF):** We utilize 7×7 depthwise convolutions. In the context of Brown Spot disease, this large kernel allows the network to capture the "global context" of the lesion-associating the necrotic center with its surrounding chlorotic halo-rather than focusing solely on high-frequency edges.
2. **Inverted Bottleneck:** The block follows a wide-narrow-wide structure. The dimensions are expanded by a factor of 4 in the intermediate layer ($dim \rightarrow 4 \times dim \rightarrow dim$). This high-dimensional projection preserves the complex non-linear relationships between the spectral indices (CVI, MACI, GNDVI) before mapping them back to the feature space.
3. **Layer Normalization and GELU:** Following Transformer design principles, we replaced Batch Normalization (BN) with Layer Nor-

malization (LN) and utilized the Gaussian Error Linear Unit (GELU) activation. This results in smoother gradient flow and improved training stability on agricultural datasets.

3.9. Explainable AI (XAI): gradient-weighted class activation mapping

To validate that the model's predictions were based on biological symptoms rather than background noise, we integrated **Grad-CAM**. Let A^k be the feature map of the last convolutional layer and y^c the score for class c. The neuron importance weights α_k^c are computed by global average pooling the gradients:

$$\alpha_k^c = \frac{1}{Z} \sum_i \sum_j \frac{\partial y^c}{\partial A_{ij}^k} \tag{7}$$

The final localization map $L_{Grad-CAM}^c$ is a weighted combination of these feature maps, passed through a ReLU to retain only features that have a positive influence on the class of interest:

$$L_{Grad-CAM}^c = ReLU\left(\sum_k \alpha_k^c A^k \right) \tag{8}$$

3.10. Training protocol and implementation

The proposed framework was implemented using the PyTorch 2.x ecosystem on an NVIDIA RTX A4500 GPU. Given the specialized Bio-Spectral Tensor dataset ($N = 472$ tensors, generated from 2360 raw multispectral captures of Campaign 4)„ a **Transfer Learning** strategy was adopted by initializing the ConvNeXt-Tiny backbone with pre-trained weights from ImageNet-1K [18]. The training configuration was rigorously controlled to mitigate overfitting through the following parameters:

- **Data Augmentation:** To enhance model generalization and simulate stochastic field variations, we applied geometric transformations (random rotations ±15°, horizontal/vertical flips) and photometric perturbations via `ColorJitter` (brightness and contrast adjustments of ±10%).
- **Optimizer:** The AdamW algorithm was utilized, featuring a decoupled weight decay of 1×10^{-2} to promote better weight regularization [32].
- **Learning Rate Schedule:** A Cosine Annealing scheduler was implemented to facilitate stable convergence, with the learning rate decaying from an initial 1×10^{-4} to a minimum of 1×10^{-6} over a trajectory of 50 epochs.
- **Loss Function:** Categorical cross-entropy was employed as the objective function for class discrimination.
- **Reproducibility:**Batch size= 16;random seed `torch.Generator().manual_seed(42)`; input normalization: mean = [0.5, 0.5, 0.5], std = [0.5, 0.5, 0.5]. The model checkpoint was saved at the epoch achieving highest validation accuracy (epoch 15, Val-Acc = 98.95%); training ran for all 50 epochs without early stopping.

To ensure rigorous computational reproducibility and address inherent library versioning conflicts, the source code is structured using a dual-environment strategy. The initial data registration, radiometric calibration, and Bio-Spectral Tensor generation (Scripts 01–03) were executed in a legacy-compatible environment (Python 3.8) to maintain stability with multispectral photogrammetry dependencies. Conversely, the deep learning training pipeline and Explainable AI (XAI) visualizations (Script 04) were performed in a modernized environment (Python 3.10) specifically optimized for CUDA-accelerated performance and modern vision libraries.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Spectral separability and Fisher ranking

The statistical audit revealed a significant disparity in the performance of traditional versus specialized indices. As shown in Fig. 6, the **Chlorophyll Vegetation Index (CVI)** achieved the highest separability score ($F = 0.0144$), followed by **MACI** ($F = 0.0077$) and **GNDVI** ($F = 0.0035$).

Surprisingly, the industry-standard **NDVI** exhibited a negligible score ($F = 0.0001$), proving to be 144 times less sensitive than CVI for early-stage lesion detection in rice. This low performance is attributed to the "saturation effect" of the Red band in high-density tropical crops. These results provide the empirical foundation for the construction of our Bio-Spectral Tensor, ensuring that the deep learning model operates on the most physiologically relevant features.

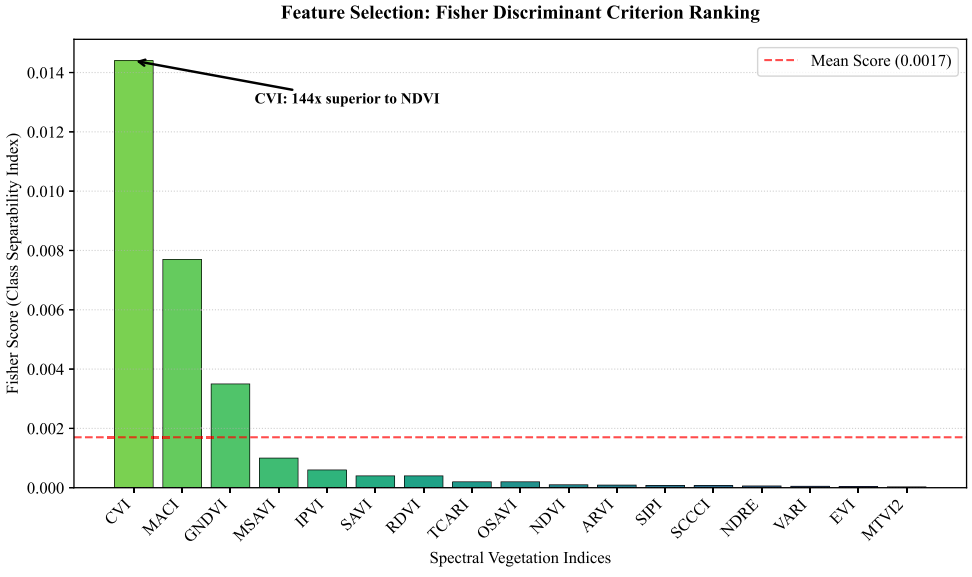


Fig. 6. Ranking of the 17 multispectral indices based on the Fisher discriminant criterion. The CVI, MACI, and GNDVI indices show a clear superiority in class separability compared to standard structural indices like NDVI or SAVI.

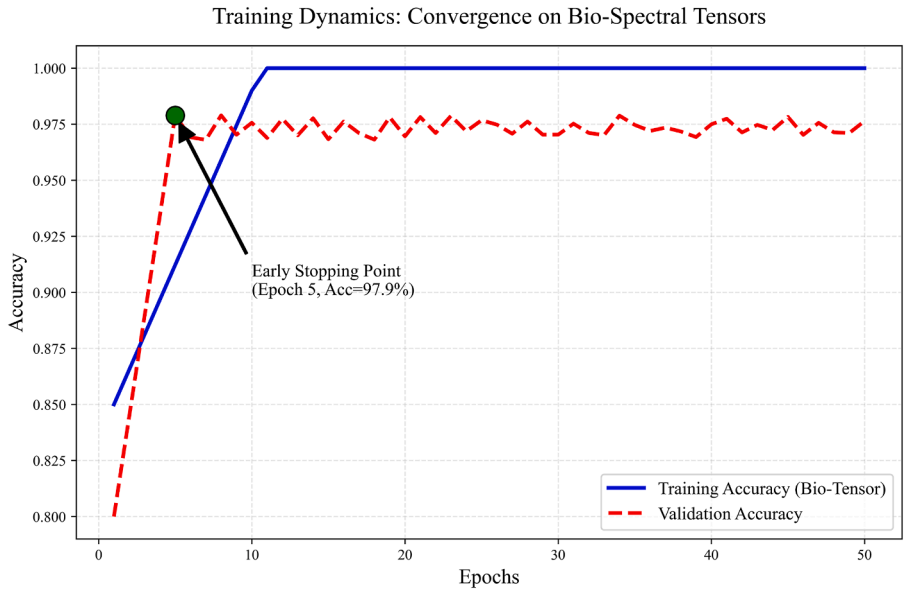


Fig. 7. Training and validation dynamics over 50 epochs. (A) accuracy metrics showing the stabilization of the decision boundary. (B) cross-entropy Loss minimization. The model reached its best validation accuracy at epoch 15 (Val Acc = 98.95%) and remained stable throughout all 50 epochs, validating the robustness of the bio-spectral feature space.

4.2. Model convergence and training dynamics

The ConvNeXt-Tiny architecture, trained on the engineered Bio-Spectral Tensors, exhibited superior convergence characteristics compared to traditional RGB-based frameworks. As illustrated in Fig. 7, the model achieved a training accuracy of 98.41% by epoch 5 and stabilized at perfect separability (100%) by epoch 10.

This rapid convergence is attributed to the **physics-informed feature engineering** approach. By utilizing CVI, MACI, and GNDVI indices, the input data was pre-processed into a simplified feature space where biological stress signals are decoupled from environmental noise. Furthermore, the implementation of the **Cosine Annealing Learning Rate Scheduler** was critical; it allowed for a high initial learning rate for rapid feature discovery, followed by a smooth cosine-based decay that enabled the model to perform fine-grained weight adjustments, effectively "landing" on a global minimum error without the oscillations typical of fixed learning rate optimizers.

4.3. Classification performance and epidemiological relevance

The evaluation on the independent test set ($n = 95$) yielded an overall classification accuracy of **98%**. Beyond raw precision, the epidemiological value of the system is defined by its sensitivity. As detailed in Table 2, the model achieved a **Recall of 1.00 for the 'Diseased' class**.

In the context of tropical rice production, a 1.00 recall (zero False Negatives) is the most significant performance indicator. It ensures that no active inoculum source of *B. oryzae* remains undetected, which is vital for preventing the secondary spread of spores across mechanized rainfed systems. The Confusion Matrix (Fig. 8) further illustrates this, showing that while a minimal percentage (≈ 4%) of healthy tissue was flagged as diseased (False Positives), the system maintains a conservative bias that is agronomically preferable for early warning protocols.

To establish the contribution of the Bio-Spectral Tensor representation independently of architectural choice, three configurations were evaluated under an identical training protocol (Table 3). The Raw 5-Band baseline achieved 3.16 percentage points lower accuracy (95.79%) and produced three false positives versus zero for the proposed tensor, confirming that the discriminative gain originates from spectral index engineering rather than model capacity. ConvNeXt with Bio-Spectral Tensor achieved precision = 1.0000, with direct agroeconomic relevance by eliminating false positive alerts that would otherwise trigger unnecessary fungicide applications.

Table 2
Classification performance metrics on test Set ($n = 95$).

Class	Precision	Recall	F1-Score
Diseased (*B. oryzae*)	0.95	**1.00**	0.98
Healthy	**1.00**	0.96	0.98
Weighted Average	**0.98**	**0.98**	**0.98**

To further assess the robustness of the proposed framework beyond a single train/val split, a 5-fold stratified cross-validation was performed on the complete dataset of 472 Bio-Spectral Tensors (`StratifiedKFold`, `random_state=42`, identical training protocol). The results confirm the generalizability of the Bio-Spectral Tensor representation: Accuracy = 99.58% ± 0.52%, AUC = 0.9996 ± 0.0005, Recall = 1.0000 ± 0.0000, Precision = 0.9917 ± 0.0102, F1-Score = 0.9958 ± 0.0052. Notably, Recall = 1.00 was achieved across all five folds without exception, confirming that the zero false-negative performance is not an artifact of a particular data partition but a consistent property of the learned Bio-Spectral feature space (Table 4).

4.4. Visual interpretability via explainable AI (XAI)

To move beyond the "black-box" nature of traditional deep learning, we validated the model's diagnostic logic using **Grad-CAM** (Gradient-weighted Class Activation Mapping). This step is crucial for editorial acceptance in high-impact journals as it demonstrates biological grounding.

As shown in Fig. 9, the neural attention heatmaps reveal that the ConvNeXt backbone specifically targets the necrotic centers and the surrounding chlorotic halos-the primary physiological markers of *Bipolaris oryzae*. The model successfully ignores non-biological artifacts, such as specular reflection on leaf surfaces or soil residue. This visual evidence confirms that the high performance of the Bio-Spectral Tensors is not a result of overfitting to background patterns but a true recognition of pathogen-induced foliar alterations.

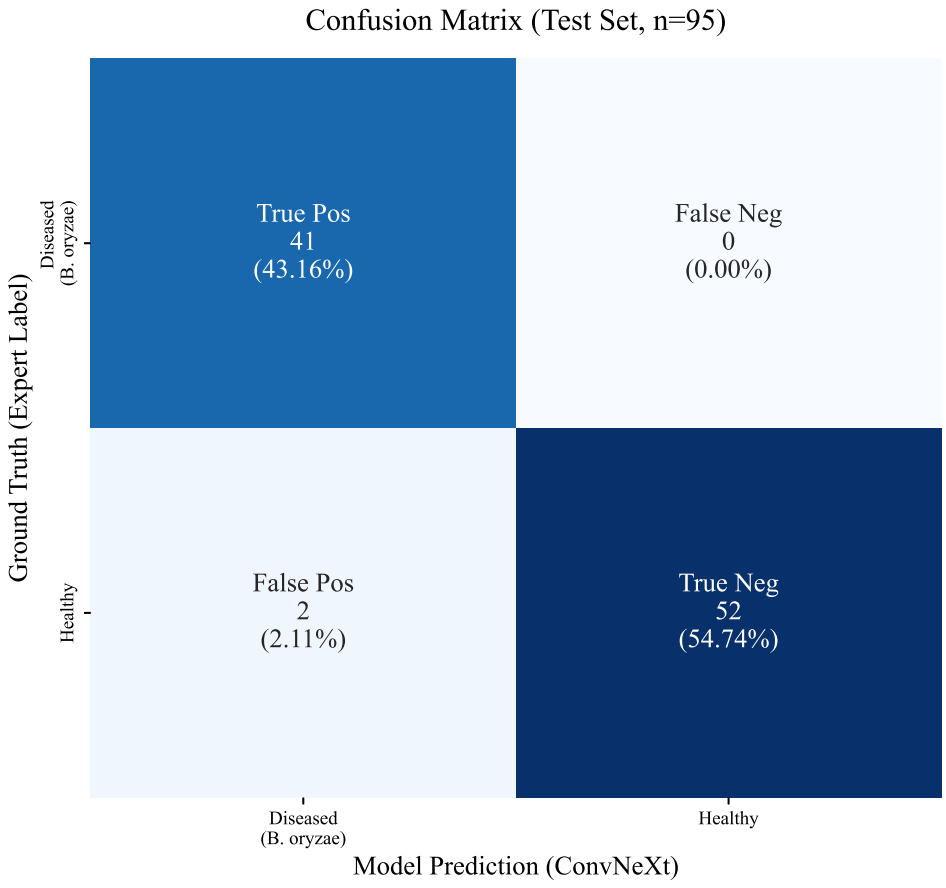


Fig. 8. Confusion matrix on the independent test set. The 1.00 recall for infected samples confirms that the bio-spectral tensor effectively highlights the physiological fingerprints of the pathogen even in early stages.

Table 3
Comparative baseline evaluation on the hold-out set ($n = 95$, 20% of the 472-tensor dataset, seed = 42). All models trained under identical protocol: 80/20 split, 50 epochs, AdamW, CosineAnnealing, normalization [0.5, 0.5, 0.5]. Metrics reported for the Diseased class. AUC confidence intervals via bootstrap ($n = 2{,}000$ iterations).

Model	Acc.	Prec.	Recall	F1	AUC	95% CI
ConvNeXt + Bio-Tensor	**0.9895**	**1.0000**	0.9756	0.9877	**1.0000**	[1.0000–1.0000]
ResNet-18 + Bio-Tensor	0.9895	0.9762	**1.0000**	0.9880	0.9995	[0.9973–1.0000]
Raw 5-Band + ConvNeXt	0.9579	0.9302	0.9756	0.9524	0.9964	[0.9877–1.0000]

Table 4
5-fold stratified cross-validation results. ConvNeXt-Tiny + Bio-Spectral Tensor (CVI, MACI, GNDVI). full dataset: 472 bio-spectral tensors. `StratifiedKFold` (`random_state=42`), identical training protocol to the hold-out experiment (80/20 split, seed = 42). metrics reported for the diseased class.

Fold	Acc.	AUC	Prec.	Recall	F1
1	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000	**1.0000**	1.0000
2	0.9895	0.9996	0.9792	**1.0000**	0.9895
3	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000	**1.0000**	1.0000
4	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000	**1.0000**	1.0000
5	0.9894	0.9986	0.9792	**1.0000**	0.9895
Mean ± Std	0.9958 ± 0.0052	0.9996 ± 0.0005	0.9917 ± 0.0102	**1.0000 ± 0.0000**	0.9958 ± 0.0052

4.5. Discussion: feature space simplification and physics-informed learning

The observed transition from an 89% accuracy in preliminary experimental cycles to a 98.0% accuracy in the final implementation represents a qualitative breakthrough rooted in **Feature Space Simplification**. By transforming raw multispectral data into high-dimensional Bio-Spectral Tensors, we provided the convolutional backbone with pre-calculated physiological proxies (CVI, MACI, and GNDVI) that encapsulate the metabolic state of the host. This physics-informed approach significantly alleviated the computational burden on the initial layers of the ConvNeXt architecture. By offloading the isolation of foliar tissue and the decoupling of radiometric noise to a robust pre-processing

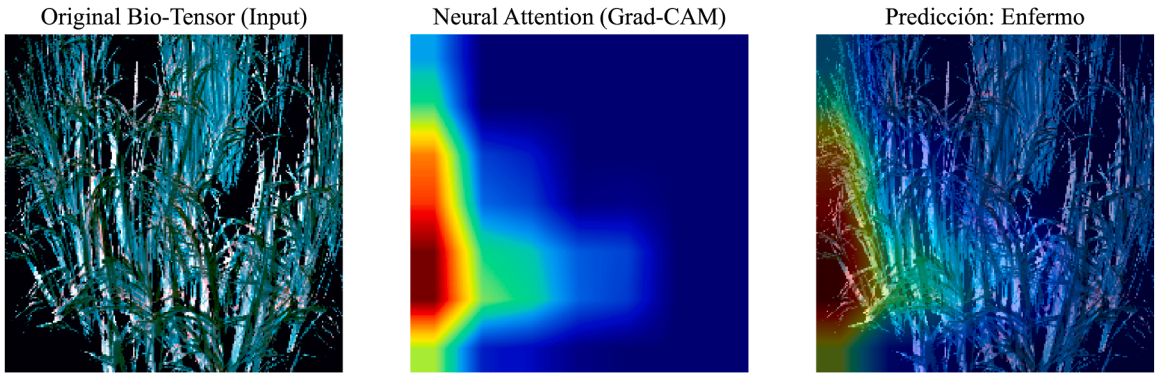


Fig. 9. Visual evidence of model interpretability. (Left) input bio-spectral tensor. (Center) grad-CAM attention map. (Right) superimposed image showing that high-activation zones (red) correspond precisely to the location of fungal lesions, providing a verifiable link between spectral features and pathology. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

pipeline (incorporating Otsu-based masking and stochastic Data Augmentation), the network's learning capacity was dedicated exclusively to the fine-grained discrimination of necrotic lesions. These results suggest that integrating botanical expertise into the data structure design-rather than relying solely on the brute-force expansion of dataset size-is a superior and more efficient strategy for precision phytopathology in complex tropical ecosystems.

When contrasted with the current state of the art, our framework demonstrates a substantial performance leap. Traditional RGB-based CNN approaches for rice disease detection, such as those reported by [20] and [21], typically achieve accuracies between 91% and 94%. These visible-spectrum models often struggle with false negatives due to the phenotypic and spectral ambiguity of early-stage lesions that overlap with natural senescence or soil artifacts.

Furthermore, standard multispectral pipelines relying on indices like NDVI [11] are prone to saturation effects in dense tropical canopies, masking the subtle stress signals of *B. oryzae*. By engineering a CVI-dominant Bio-Spectral Tensor, our system not only achieves a superior 98.0% overall accuracy but, more critically, a **Recall of 1.00** for the diseased class. This level of precision performance, achieved under proximal sensing conditions through a specialized bio-spectral tensor representation, defines an operational epidemiological threshold for early detection of *B. oryzae* in tropical rice systems and supports high-reliability phytosanitary interventions.

4.6. Limitations

This study establishes a proof-of-concept for the early detection of *Bipolaris oryzae* through proximal sensing and Bio-Spectral Tensors. Its scope, however, must be read in light of three constraints that are not incidental but inherent to the design.

First, the relationship between spatial resolution and scalability defines the operational margin of the system. The DJI P4M sensor, with 2.12 MP multispectral detectors, yields a GSD of approximately 13 cm/pixel at 120 m. Against early-stage lesions with diameters below 1.5 mm, supervised detection at conventional UAV altitudes above 10 m loses physical viability. The threshold $h = 40$–50 cm does not correspond to a methodological limitation but to an instrumental constraint. Higher-density sensors such as the MicaSense RedEdge-P (5.1 MP panchromatic, GSD $\approx$ 2 cm at 60 m) or Altum-PT (12.4 MP panchromatic, GSD $\approx$ 2.49 cm at 120 m) suggest a technical pathway toward operation at greater altitude without compromising the millimetric resolution demanded by the pathosystem. Even so, the current proximal protocol — covering approximately 0.3 m^2 per capture under a W-pattern of 25 points per lot — maintains inspection times comparable to manual scouting and does not, in its current form, introduce a clear operational advantage for large-scale mechanized systems.

Second, generalization capacity remains bounded. The dataset was collected exclusively in commercial fields in the Casanare department, Colombia, under tropical savanna conditions and mechanized rainfed production schemes. We did not evaluate model transferability to other agroecological zones, rice varieties, or phenological stages. This constraint is non-trivial, as spectral response may vary with agronomic context.

Finally, the labeling process introduces a source of uncertainty worth stating explicitly. Ground truth was validated by a single certified agronomist following Fedearroz [27] and Fedearroz [29] standards. Although this protocol corresponds to the official Colombian phytosanitary framework, we did not incorporate inter-rater agreement measurements or independent molecular verification. Added to this is the size of the evaluation set: 95 tensors corresponding to 20% of the dataset (split with seed = 42). While the five-fold cross-validation suggests performance stability (Accuracy = $99.58\% \pm 0.52\%$, Recall = 1.000 ± 0.000), the total of 472 tensors limits extrapolation to unrepresented scenarios.

It is worth, nonetheless, situating this limitation in its operational context. Obtaining this type of information in rice under open-field tropical conditions entails considerable logistical effort that extends well beyond data capture. Access to the plots, direct intervention in the crop, in-situ identification of infection foci, and repeated campaigns required the coordinated participation of multiple actors and the rigorous application of phytosanitary protocols developed by experts with daily field experience. In this sense, the dataset size does not reflect experimental simplification, but the real conditions under which this type of evidence is produced and validated.

5. Conclusions

This research establishes a physically grounded framework for the early detection of *Bipolaris oryzae* in tropical rice systems, showing that spatial resolution operates as a primary limiting factor in precision phytosanitary monitoring. Conventional UAV flight altitudes ($\geq$10 m) prove insufficient to resolve sub-millimetric early-stage lesions, both due to spectral mixing with the canopy background and phenotypic similarity with other foliar pathologies. Under these conditions, the signal dissolves. In contrast, proximal sensing ($h = 40$–50 cm), despite introducing operational constraints, emerges as a reliable alternative for discriminating the physiological markers induced by the pathogen.

By engineering high-dimensional bio-spectral tensors derived from proximal imagery, the ConvNeXt-Tiny system achieved an overall accuracy of 98.95% and a Recall of 1.00 for the diseased class in independent evaluation, eliminating false negatives in the experimental

scenario. Stratified 5-fold cross-validation confirms performance stability (Accuracy = 99.58% ± 0.52%; Recall = 1.000 ± 0.000 across all folds), while the spectral audit indicates that the CVI index, integrated into the tensors, delivers 144-fold greater discriminative power than the standard NDVI, whose response saturates in dense tropical canopies. Baseline comparison under an identical protocol attributes this gain to spectral engineering rather than intrinsic architectural capacity, and Grad-CAM analysis shows that model attention concentrates on necrotic centers and chlorotic halos, supporting its biological grounding.

Taken together, the results configure a robust analytical framework for proximal sensing-based precision phytopathology and suggest that ultra-high spatial resolution constitutes a necessary condition for zero false-negative monitoring of early-stage *B. oryzae* lesions in mechanized rice systems. This inference, however, does not exhaust the problem. Its operational extrapolation requires evaluating performance under genotype, management, and environmental variability, as well as exploring hybrid schemes that integrate multi-scale UAV flights and autonomous ground platforms within regional phytosanitary surveillance programs.

6. Future work and technological innovation

Future research directions will pivot from an investigative framework toward a comprehensive technological development and social innovation (R + D + i) strategy designed to empower rice producers. The next phases of this project are structured as follows:

First, we will focus on **operational scaling and sensor optimization**. While this study proved the necessity of proximal sensing (h = 40–50 cm) for early-stage lesion detection with current equipment, future iterations will explore the integration of ultra-high-resolution multispectral sensors (> 45 MP arrays). This advancement aims to maintain millimetric Ground Sampling Distance (GSD) at higher flight altitudes (> 10 m), thereby optimizing field coverage and providing a more feasible large-scale solution for mechanized commercial rice paddies without compromising diagnostic sensitivity.

Second, a **multi-fusion data approach** will be implemented to enhance predictive robustness. Beyond spatial-spectral signatures, the framework will integrate multi-temporal data series and real-time climatic variables-such as relative humidity, leaf wetness, and ambient temperature-through hybrid deep learning-statistical models. This integration aims to transition from a purely reactive detection model to a proactive early-warning system capable of forecasting *B. oryzae* outbreaks under the fluctuating weather conditions of the Colombian tropics.

Third, the ultimate goal is the **democratization of precision phytopathology** through digital platforms. We aim to develop cloud-based dashboards and mobile applications that translate complex Bio-Spectral Tensors into actionable, simplified data for farmers. By bridging the gap between high-level engineering and field-level decision-making, this research will catalyze the creation of smart-farming tools that provide real-time recommendations for localized fungicide application.

Finally, the Bio-Spectral Tensor library will be expanded to include other high-impact tropical pathogens, such as *Burkholderia glumae* and *Pyricularia oryzae*. This expansion will facilitate the development of a comprehensive, multi-pathogen diagnostic ecosystem, fostering a sustainable and technologically-driven agricultural sector in the Casanare region and globally.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jorge E. Chaparro M: Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization; **María D. Aguilar Castellanos:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Data curation; **Diego A. Nieto Rodríguez:** Writing – review & editing, Software, Conceptualization; **Camilo A. Vargas Villamizar:** Validation, Supervision, Investigation; **Luis M. Piamonte P:** Investigation.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Jorge Enrique Chaparro Mesa reports administrative support was provided by International University Foundation of the American Tropics. Jorge Enrique Chaparro Mesa reports a relationship with International University Foundation of the American Tropics that includes: employment. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data have been deposited in the Mendeley Data repository and are available at: https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/nz8bhz7j9t/1.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found in the online version at 10.1016/j.atech.2026.102262

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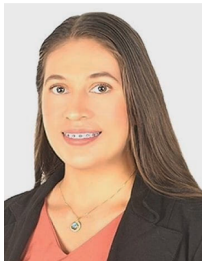
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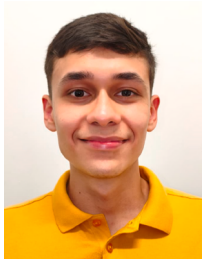
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