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## Nocte kinship system, terminologies and its affinity to PTB roots

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**Abstract:** Kinship terms and systems are considered to be one of the most resistant parts of language which are constantly in a threat by dominant language. Through these terminologies, we can find out how language not only defines but tries to explain the world view of the native speakers. The kinship terms can also be used to identify and group the specific language with other languages with which it shares its common features under a common phylum. This paper is a study of the kinship terms and systems of Nocte, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Arunachal Pradesh. It has also been established as an endangered language. In this paper we look into Nocte Kinship terms, the system, the social structure and its affinity to the Proto-Tibeto-Burman roots.

**Keywords:** Nocte, Kinship terms, Proto-Tibeto-Burman

**Subject Specialization:** Nocte (Endangered Language)

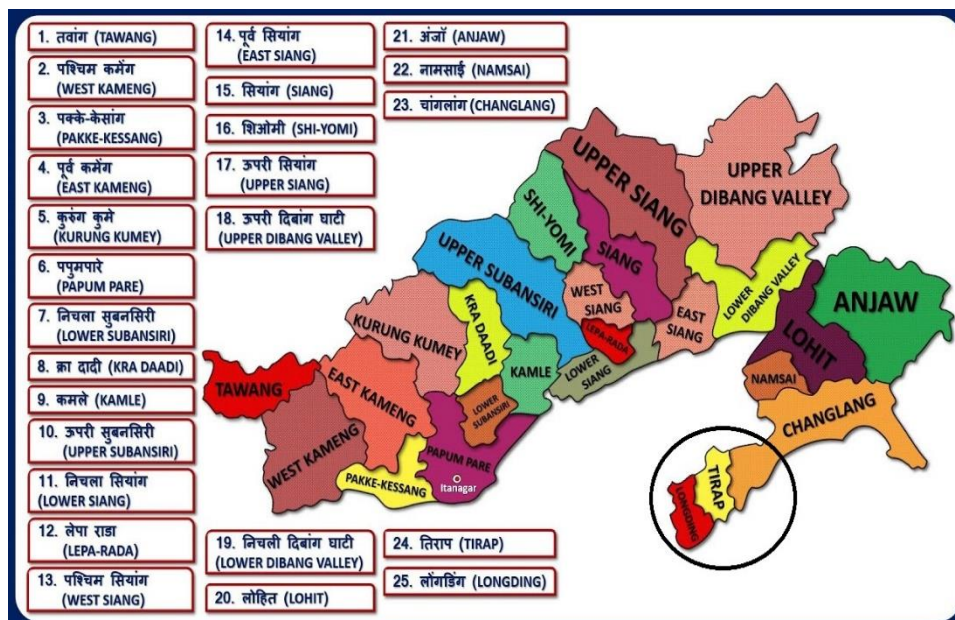
### 1. Introduction

Nocte is a Tibeto-Burman language, generally spoken in the Tirap district and in some parts of Changlang and Longding districts in Arunachal Pradesh. The Nocte speaking districts share boundaries with neighbouring states of Assam and Nagaland and international boundary with Myanmar. Other speech communities residing close by are: the Tangsas, the Wanchos, the Singphos, the Assamese, and the Konyak Nagas. The Ethnologue groups Nocte (ISO 639-3 njb), Tase/Tangsa (ISO 639-3 nst) and Wancho (ISO 639-3 nnp) as different languages under the Naga language. The UNESCO places Nocte along with most speech communities of Arunachal Pradesh under the *endangered language* category.

According to the 2011 census published by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh the Nocte population is around 33,680. The literacy rate (in Assamese, English and Hindi) is 47.2% (male 60.0 and female 34.6%). Nocte has been classified under different groups: Benedict (1977) placed it under the sub-group Boro-Konyak-Jingphaw (Benedict, 1977). Burling (1982) classified it under the Sal languages / Northern Naga / Bodo-Garo-Northern Naga and Burling (2003) reclassified it under the Boro-Konyak-Jingphaw subgroup (Burling, 1982; Burling, 2003). Ethnically related to the Konyak Naga, their origins may be traced back to the Hukong Valley in Myanmar, where they might have migrated between the 1670 and 1700. The term 'Nocte' is a given term. The speakers themselves are divided when it comes to explain how the term came to be used. One opinion is that it was actually *nok<sup>th</sup>e* where *nok* means 'tribe/language/village' and *th*e means 'one (1)'. Together it stands for people of one tribe. According to Fishman (1991)'s level in evaluating the vitality of a language, Nocte can be placed as "Unsafe which means that most but not all children or families of a particular community speak their language as their first language, but it may be restricted to specific social domains (such as at home where children interact with their parents and grandparents)" (Fishman, 1991). According to Dutta (1979) the Nocte language has nine varieties: **Hakhun, Khapa, Hawa, Dadom, Chaniyak, Jope, Phonthing, Domlak and Laju**. In this study the Dadom variety is discussed. The kinship terms of other Nocte varieties may slightly differ but the overall system remains the same in all varieties. This paper is an attempt to study the kinship terms in the Nocte language because it is believed that kinship relations form an important structure in our society which gives affinity and statuses to our



kinsmen. Every linguistic community has specific terms for their kinsmen which marks their relationship with them. It is an important feature of a language because it gives us an insight into a community's origin, culture, genealogy etc. Kinship systems go as far as the family system and therefore it has been preserved by the community through the ages. This gives an idea that this system is resistant to change. As Morgan (1859) said "Language changes its vocabulary, not only, but also modifies its grammatical structure in the progress of ages; thus eluding the inquiries which philologists have pressed it to answer; but a system of relationships once matured, and brought into operation, is, in the nature of things, more unchangeable than language – not in the names employed as a vocabulary of relationships, for these are mutable, but in the ideas which underlie the system itself."



Map 1 Map of Arunachal Pradesh

### 1.1 The objective of this study

The objective of this paper is to study how language navigates its underlying layer of understanding the human relationship, its kith and kin through the terminology used to refer one's relatives. It is also an attempt to look into the genetic affiliation of the Nocte language in the Proto Tibeto-Burman (PTB) language phylum using the kinship terms.

## 2. Nocte Kinship System and Terminology: Some descriptive analysis

According to Wardhaugh (2002: 408) "One interesting way in which people use language in daily living is to refer to various kinds of kin. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is a considerable literature on kinship terminology, describing how people in various parts of the world refer to relatives by blood (or descent) and marriage. Kinship systems are a universal feature of languages, because kinship is so important in social organization. Some systems are much richer than others, but all make use of such factors as gender, age, generation, blood, and marriage in their organization. One of the attractions that kinship systems have for investigators is that these factors are fairly readily ascertainable. We can therefore relate them with considerable confidence to the actual words that people use to describe a particular kin relationship".

### 2.1 The basic structure

The structure of Nocte society is patriarchal and the descent is traced from the male line. The females enjoy a favourable position but are not considered as equals. The whole kinship terminologies of the Noctes revolve around who can marry whom. Besides this, Nocte is a clan-based society. Several clans group together even though they might not have any blood relations. Inter-marriage among the same clans is not permitted. According to Benedict (1942) some Tibeto-Burman languages resemble the Omaha-type distinguishes when it comes to generational kinship. The Nocte kinship system too displays some form of Omaha system:



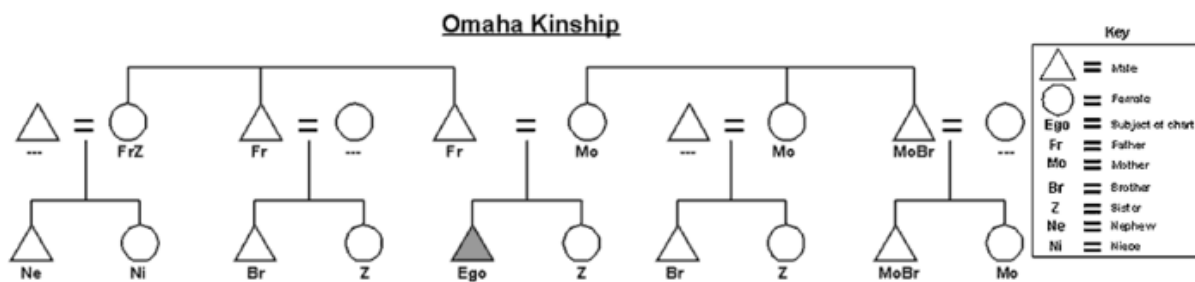


Fig 1 Omaha kinship pattern

In Omaha kinship system female siblings of Ego’s mother are all referred to as mother and father’s male siblings are all father. Grandparents on both maternal and paternal sides are the same. Table 1 below shows the terminologies used in Nocte:

Table 1 Ego’s Paternal Kinship Terms

Relation	Kinship terms and gloss
Great grandfather/mother	<b>pu/wu dien pi/wi dien</b>
Grandfather	<b>pu/wu</b>
Grandmother	<b>pi/wi</b>
Mother	<b>mu/njon</b>
Father	<b>pa/wa</b>
Paternal uncle elder (father’s older sibling)	<b>padon</b> ‘father big/elder’
Paternal uncle elder’s wife	<b>mudon</b> ‘mother big/elder’
Paternal uncle younger (father’s younger sibling)	<b>padi</b> ‘father small’
Paternal uncle younger’s wife	<b>mudi</b> ‘mother small’
Father’s older sister	<b>adon</b>
Father’s younger sister	<b>adi</b>

In Table 1, we can see that Nocte makes a limited generational differentiation only till two generation above the Ego. And since all the paternal male relatives are referred to as father and their wives as mother their children will be considered siblings. Hence marriage between the Ego and his first parallel cousins is not permitted. However there is a distinction when it comes to the Ego’s paternal aunt, therefore cross-cousin marriage is possible. Similarly when we look into the maternal relation as given below in Table 2:

Table 2 Ego’s Maternal Kinship Terms

Relation	Kinship terms
Great grandfather/mother	<b>pu/wudien pi/widien</b>
Grandfather	<b>pu/wu</b>
Grandmother	<b>pi/wi</b>
Mother	<b>mu/njon</b>
Father	<b>pa/wa</b>



Maternal uncle elder	<b>hudonj</b> `uncle big/elder'
Maternal uncle elder's wife	<b>adonj</b> `aunt big/elder'
Maternal uncle younger	<b>hudi</b> `uncle small'
Maternal uncle younger's wife	<b>adi</b> `aunt small'
Mother's older sister	<b>Mudonj</b> `mother big/elder'
Mother's older sister's husband	<b>padonj</b> `father big/elder'
Mother's younger sister	<b>Mudi</b> `mother small/younger'
Mother's younger sister's husband	<b>padi</b> `father small/younger'

In the case of maternal relatives the Ego's mother's female siblings are all mothers and their husbands are fathers, hence their children also will be siblings. Whereas mother's male siblings are uncles and their wives aunts which make it possible for a cross cousin marriage from the maternal side as well. In Tables 1 and 2, we have looked into the consanguineal relations as well as affinal relations from the Ego's point. Now we will look into the extended affinal relations also in Table 3.

**Table 3** Ego's Extended Affinal Kinship Terms

<b>Relation</b>	<b>Kinship terms and gloss</b>
Grandparents-in-law	<b>pu/wu pi/wi</b>
Father-in-law	<b>hudonj</b>
Mother-in-law	<b>adonj</b>
Wife's/husband's younger sister	no term
Wife's/husband's younger brother	no term
General term for elder brother/ brother-in-law	<b>donj/tje/p<sup>h</sup>u</b>
General term for elder sister/ sister-in-law	<b>k<sup>h</sup>u</b>
Male Ego's brother's son or daughter	<b>t<sup>h</sup>a</b>
Male Ego's sister's son or daughter	<b>hiak</b>
Female Ego's brother's son or daughter	<b>hiak</b>
Female Ego's sister's son or daughter	<b>t<sup>h</sup>a</b>

From Table 3, we notice that the term for mother-in-law and father's sister is the same which is **adonj**. The term for mother's brother and father-in-law is also the same which is **hudonj**. Therefore we can safely assume that



the kinship terminology does not only provide consanguineal relation information but it also informs the Ego whom he/she can/cannot marry or whom the Ego’s children can or cannot marry.

### 3. Detailed analysis

In the subsequent sub-section detailed analysis has been done on the Nocte Kinship system based on Gender differences, Relative age differences, Generational kinship terms etc. According to Radcliffe-Brown (1950:1-81) Kinship systems depend on the social recognition and cultural implementation of relationships derived from descent and marriage and normally involved in a set of kinship terms and an associated set of behavioural patterns and attitudes, which together, make up a systematic whole. All societies distinguish various categories of relationship by descent or consanguinity and relations by marriage (affinity) are distinguished as well. The use of the term system implies that there is a complex relation of interdependence between the component parts.

#### 3. 1. Kinship terms based on gender distinction

Nocte people have distinct kinship terms according to gender. The distinctions that are made apply to elder siblings, parents, uncles and aunts, grandparents and great grandparents. Grand children and great grandchildren share the same term. This is illustrated in Table 4 below:

**Table 4** Kinship terms based on gender difference

Relation	Male	Gloss	Female	Gloss
Children	<b>lalat<sup>h</sup>a</b>	Male child/son	<b>lahiak<sup>h</sup>t<sup>h</sup>a</b>	Female child/daughter
Siblings	<b>phu</b>	Brother (elder)	<b>nja</b>	Sister (elder)
Parents	<b>pa</b>	My father	<b>mu</b>	My mother
Parents’ siblings	<b>pa-donj</b>	Paternal uncle	<b>adonj</b>	Father’s sister
	<b>hu-donj</b>	Maternal uncle	<b>mu-donj</b>	Mother’s sister
Grandparents	<b>pu</b>	Grandfather	<b>pi</b>	Grandmother
Great-grand parents	<b>pu-dien</b>	Great grand father	<b>pi-dien</b>	Great grand mother
Grand children	<b>lalat<sup>h</sup>a</b>	Grand son	<b>lahiak<sup>h</sup>t<sup>h</sup>a</b>	Grand daughter

Grandchildren and great grandchildren are referred to as **t<sup>h</sup>a**. Their gender is generally not distinguished, until it is meant to be specific. In that case they are referred to as **lala-t<sup>h</sup>a** ‘boy-child’ or **lahiak-t<sup>h</sup>a** ‘girl-child’ otherwise both males and females share the same kinship terms.

##### 3.1.1 Kinship terms used to show Relative age differences

Among the Nocte people, age distinction is marked among siblings in all generations. The first born son is referred to as **k<sup>h</sup>ap<sup>h</sup>u (t<sup>h</sup>a)** and is bestowed with several privileges. He is entitled to a larger share of the parents’ property and takes a leadership position in the absence of the father. He is also supposed to look after his younger siblings and help them in every way. The eldest daughter is referred to as **njak<sup>h</sup>u**. She does not have the same privileges as the elder son but she has to take responsibility of her younger siblings until she is married. The middle son or daughter are usually not distinguished in terms of reference, they both are called **mi-monj** which means ‘the middle child’. The last born son or daughter is referred to as **natəm** or **nadi**, which means ‘last child’ or ‘young child’. The term **mi-monj** applies to all the children between the first born and the last born.



### 3.1.2 Kinship terms used in case of different Generation

Among the Noctes, kins are grouped into generations. There are the ego’s parents, (1<sup>st</sup> ascending), grand parents generation (2<sup>nd</sup> ascending), and great grandparents (3<sup>rd</sup> generation ascending). After ego the 1st generation descending is that of children, 2nd generation descending is the grandchildren only. There are specific terms for each generation. However, Radcliffe-Brown & Ford (1967:32) points out that terms used for one generation may be applied to relatives of another generation. The term **ṭʰa** (children) is used for both children and grandchildren alike. In case of the same generation, there is kinship or address terms for the older siblings only, the younger siblings are referred to by their names.

### 3.2 Consanguine Kinship terms

A consanguine kin is a relative by birth, a blood relative as distinguished from “affines” (Keesing 1975: 73-97). According to Fox (1967: 33-35) they are referred to as primary kin and include an individual’s mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister. The terms used for consanguine kin are summarized in the table below:

**Table 5** Primary Consanguine Kin

<b>Kinship term</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
Father	<b>wa</b>
My father (F)	<b>apa</b>
Your father(F)	<b>mə-wa (rude)</b> <b>naŋ-wa (polite)</b>
His/ Her father	<b>əti-wa</b>
Mother (M)	<b>mu</b>
My mother	<b>amu</b>
Your mother	<b>mə-nyoŋ</b>
His/ Her mother	<b>əti-njoŋ</b>
An only child	<b>ṭʰa-lan</b>
My son (S)	<b>ŋa-ləla-ṭʰa</b>
Your son	<b>naŋ-ləla-ṭʰa</b>
His /Her son	<b>əti-ləla-ṭʰa</b>
My daughter (D)	<b>ŋa-ləhiak-ṭʰa</b>
Your daughter	<b>naŋ- ləhiak-ṭʰa/</b> <b>mə-ləhiak-ṭʰa</b>
His/ Her daughter	<b>əti-ləhiak-ṭʰa</b>
Brother (B)	<b>adoŋ/atʃe/phu</b>
Your brother	<b>mə-don/phu</b>
His/Her brother	<b>əti-phu</b>
Sister (Z)	<b>njak<sup>h</sup>u</b>
Your sister	<b>mə-k<sup>h</sup>u</b>
His/Her sister	<b>əti-njak<sup>h</sup>u</b>





It is clear that the terms **wa** 'father' and **mu/njoŋ** 'mother' have two forms of referring to the second and third persons. In the first person **apa** 'my father' is used whereas in the second and third person the prefix **mə-**, **naŋ-** and **əti-** is used with **wa** 'father', which acts like a possessive marker. This prefixes are consistent throughout other kinship terms also.

### 3.2.1 Affinal Kinship terms

According to Fox (1967: 33-35) "Affines are people married to our consanguine kin." So affines refer to kinship through the bond of marriage. When a person marries, he establishes a relationship with the girl whom he marries and also a number of other people in the girl's family. The family members of the person who marries also get bound to the members of the girl's family. But in the Nocte society, cross-cousin marriages are permitted which results in the use of the same kinship terms, for example:

**Table 6** Affinal Terms

<b>Kinship term</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
<b>hudŋ</b>	Mother's brother Father's sister's husband Father-in-law
<b>adoŋ</b>	Father's sister Mother's brother's wife Mother-in-law
<b>hiak</b>	Male ego's sister's son Female ego's brother's son Son-in-law
<b>nəm</b>	Male ego's sister's daughter Female ego's brother's daughter daughter-in-law
<b>nja-k<sup>h</sup>u</b>	Elder sister Female cousin(elder) Sister-in-law
<b>p<sup>h</sup>u-dŋ</b>	Elder male (same generation) Male cousin Brother-in-law

### 3.2.2 Grandparents- Grandchild Kinship Term

In Nocte the kinship term for child and grandchild for both male and female is the same which is **t<sup>h</sup>a** unless it has to be specified whether they are male or female. However if they are to be specified then they would be referred to as shown in Table 7 below:

**Table 7** Grandparents - Grandchildren Terms

<b>Kinship term</b>	<b>Gloss</b>
<b>ləla-t<sup>h</sup>a</b>	Male child/son
<b>ləhiak-t<sup>h</sup>a</b>	Female child/daughter
<b>i-t<sup>h</sup>u-ləla-t<sup>h</sup>a</b>	son's son/grandson (same as daughter's child)
<b>i-t<sup>h</sup>u-ləhiak-t<sup>h</sup>a</b>	Son's daughter/granddaughter



In case of plural kinship terms the grandchildren will be collectively referred to as **tʰui-tʰa** and parents and grandparents as **taŋ-hu-taŋ-ka** which means the entire family.

### 3.2.3 Husband- Wife kinship terms

In Nocte society since the husband is considered head of the family, he is called **taŋ-wa** 'house male' and the wife is called the **taŋ-nu** 'house-female'. The suffix **wa** and **nu** is used to distinguish male and female. For example: **hike-nu** 'female teacher' **hike-wa** 'male teacher'. The husband may introduce the wife as **ŋa-taŋ-nu** 'my family female' whereas the wife formally uses **ni-hum-wa** which means 'our house owner or man'.

### 3.2.4 Endearment - Kinship Term

In Nocte the general kinship terms and endearment terms are differentiated. The endearment terms are only used among close family members such as parents, grandparents and children. The term **apa** is used to address one's father, the general term of father is **wa**, similarly the prefix 'a-' will be used with **apu, api, amu** instead of **wu, wi** and **njoŋ or mu** which means grandfather, grandmother and mother as terms of endearment. The male child is called **a-poŋ** and the female child is called **a-tu**, these terms are only used by parents or relatives.

In light of the above analysis made we would like to compare and place the kinship terms of the Noctes in the Proto Tibeto-Burman (PTB) phylum.

## 4. Nocte kinship term in the PTB

The reconstruction of PTB roots was an attempt by linguists like Shafer, Benedict and Matisoff to categorise all the TB languages under one phylum. The PTB roots used in this study have been derived from Matisoff's Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus (STEDT) database. Nocte, does share the similarities mentioned in the PTB root. However, we do see slight differences or additions to the existing list. To explain in detail we need to first consider the Consanguineal kinship terms **\*ma** and **\*p\*/ba** which are the universally used terms, therefore in Nocte too we can find these terms. However a generalised term **njoŋ** is used for 'mother' both for humans and animals; example: **man-njoŋ** 'cow' whereas the ox is not **\*man-wa** but **man-poŋ**. Moreover the prefix **a-** is used with **mu** and **pa** as an address or an endearment term in case of close family members. . In Table 8, we compare the list of kinship term root from the PTB and Nocte kinship terms:

**Table 8** PTB Roots and Nocte Kinship Terms

PTB	Nocte	Gloss
<i>*ma</i>	<b>mu/njoŋ</b>	'Mother'
<i>*p*/ba, *bo</i>	<b>pa/wa</b>	'Father'
<i>*(y) ay</i>	<b>pu/wu</b>	'Grandfather'
<i>*ta:y</i>	<b>pi/wi</b>	'Grandmother'
<i>*kV</i>	<b>hudon</b>	'Maternal uncle' (elder)
<i>*yay *ʔay,</i>		
<i>*ney*ni(y)</i>	<b>mudon</b>	'Maternal aunt' (elder)
-	<b>padon</b>	'Paternal uncle' (elder)
<i>*ni(y)</i>	<b>adon</b>	'Paternal aunt' (elder)
<i>*tay, *ʔik, *buŋ</i>	<b>don/tʃe/pʰu</b>	'Brother' (elder)





<i>*me</i>	<b>k<sup>h</sup>u/ŋa</b>	'Sister' (elder)
<i>*bur-mə:</i>	<b>na</b>	'Sister' (younger)
<i>*gwa<sup>A</sup>, wa, *pa- *sal, *mi-lo</i>	<b>taŋ-wa</b>	'Husband'
<i>*s-nam, *hm<sup>A</sup>m</i>	<b>taŋ-nu</b>	'Wife'
<i>*to</i>	<b>hudon</b>	'Father-in-law'
<i>*ney*ni(y)</i>	<b>adon</b>	'Mother-in-law'
-	-	'Brother/sister's son'
-	-	'Brother/sister's daughter'
<i>*la (:), *θaa</i>	<b>ləhiak-t<sup>h</sup>a</b>	'Daughter'
<i>*nu, *bu, *ko:</i>	<b>t<sup>h</sup>a</b>	'Child'
<i>*tsa-n *za-n</i>	<b>ləla-t<sup>h</sup>a</b>	'Son'

In Nocte there is only one term for grandparents both in the paternal and maternal side. As mentioned in the Introduction part (page 2) Nocte has nine varieties, among them the Dadom variety uses **p/wu** or **pi/wi** for grandfather and grandmother respectively which is different from the Hawa variety **tete** 'grandfather' corresponding to the PTB root **\*(y) ay**. There is no separate term for the preceding third (3<sup>rd</sup>) and fourth (4<sup>th</sup>) generation which is common to most Tibetan languages (Benedict 1942: 313-333). However for the grandparents from 3<sup>rd</sup> generation and above the suffix **-dien** is used with **p/wu** or **pi/wi** which stands for old grandparents.

The term for younger siblings of the ego, is gender neutral in Nocte which is also the same in case of the Hruso community of West Kameng (Lucky, 2015: 153). The term **na** is used irrespective of younger male or female sibling which does not correspond with the PTB root **\*ko** or **\*bur-mə:**

In case of affinal kinship term of Noctes the list is very limited. Since cross cousin marriages are practised which are considered 'a conspicuous feature in both Tibetan and Chinese cultures' (Benedict, 1942), the term for father-in-law, maternal uncle and paternal aunt's husband is the same, they all are addressed as **hudon** and it does not correspond with the PTB root **\*to**. Similarly, the term for mother-in-law is **adon** which is the same for paternal aunt and maternal uncle's wife and this too bears no affinity with PTB root **\*ney\*ni(y)**. In the same manner the term for son-in-law/male ego's sister's son/female ego's brother's son is **hiak** which is not listed in the PTB. As for parents siblings, father's siblings are all called father i.e. **pa** 'father' **padon** 'father big' **padi** 'father small' and mother's sibling are called as mother i.e. **mu** 'mother' **mudon** 'mother elder' **mudi** 'mother younger' which is common in the Omaha type kinship system usually found in TB languages

## 5. Conclusion

From the data discussed we observe that Noctes use their kinship terms not just to address their kinsmen and relatives but it also provides information to them about who they can or cannot marry. Through these terminologies one can also find an insight into the world view of the community and how language navigates itself in the social structure. The language not only defines them but also explains the community logic behind the terms. For an endangered language like Nocte which is constantly threatened by dominant languages and which finds its way in the language through code-mixing and code-shifting, Kinship terms and system are one of the entity which remains resistant. Therefore it becomes important to state and discuss them and it is also a means through which affinity with neighbouring language communities can be studied. Furthermore we also find that the kinship terms do hold affinity to the PTB roots but not entirely. To provide a clearer picture, all the Nocte varieties need to be compared and studied. However since not much research and studies have been done in all the Nocte varieties, it falls upon future researchers to list and compare them.



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## Does this article screened for similarity?

Yes

## Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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