

RYUKYUAN – LINGUISTIC STATUS, PRESTIGE, ENDANGERMENT AND DATA AVAILABILITY¹

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On May 1st, 2004, the European Union markedly expanded, absorbing ten new member states. As a political structure of an entirely new generation, it is seen by many not only as the world's potentially most powerful and technologically most advanced community but also as part of the so-far most advanced intellectually social experiment in mankind's history. As such, it thus raises hopes of dozens of millions that the utopia as old as mankind itself based on the brotherhood of all the people is becoming a reality². State borders conceived to divide and isolate start uniting and what counts are regions and their local peoples.

The basic principle underlying the unprecedented EU experiment is "Unity in diversity", with the stress on the latter. Instead of waging wars for greater sovereignty over larger territories and populations – so typical of the Europe of

¹ This author enjoyed once the privilege and honor to have been invited by Professor Maciejewski to contribute a chapter on the situation of, and prospects for, moribund and endangered languages for his impressive work on the *world of languages* (1999). Hence, it is hoped that the present text will also meet at least some appreciation on the part of our Revered Jubilarian. The paper develops ideas presented at the Fourth International Conference on Okinawa convened at Bonn University in March 2002 and the Fifth International Conference on Okinawan Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in September 2006, and at the International Conference *Beyond Borders: Japanese Studies in the 21st Century. In Memoriam Wiesław Kotański* at Warsaw University in May 2006.

² Cf. Friedrich Schiller's "alle Menschen werden Brüder" from *Ode an die Freude* which with the music of the *Finale* of Beethoven's Symphony № 9 became the EU's 'anthem'.

the past, nations and states decided to *share* that sovereignty in order to, among others, create opportunities for the entire European heritage with all its components, peoples, their cultures, languages, treated as equally important no matter how strong or small they are, to keep developing and be protected.

Though still very imperfect, the European Union of sovereign states with its open societies and democratic principles, with a remarkable variety of languages and cultural backgrounds, with none dominating or dominated as *the principle*, is at present the only such political structure in existence and preferably a model structure for many other regions of the globe – and for the foreseeable future will remain such: multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual, with each individual national heritage and the variety of languages, including these ‘lesser-used’, preserved, protected, developed, and promoted (for this see Majewicz 1999/2000). To fulfill the enumerated functions, the EU has developed numerous institutions, mechanisms and legislative solutions of which at least some could be adopted and implemented to other regions of the globe like e.g. Eastern and South Eastern Asia in view of the current ethnic and linguistic situation of the world and serious dangers it faces.

These dangers forecast on results of extensive research revealing that *more than half* of the number of the 6,500–7,000 languages still in use will disappear from our globe within the coming twenty to fifty years. To minimize this *unpreventable* ecological and civilizational disaster of unprecedented proportions in human, and humane, dimensions at least on its territory, the EU has already implemented measures of legal protection of its endangered ethnolects.

With the expansion of the EU, the number of languages grows dramatically – not only official state languages all of them being also official on the EU level³ but in the first place of minor or, in accordance with the official terminology shaped by political correctness⁴, *lesser-used* languages, most of them needing special protection and many among them endangered. In order to optimize the *legal* protection of all of them in view of the realization that they differ by status and relation to the national cultural heritage, the distinction between them has been made into *regional languages* and *minority languages* and introduced into the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* prepared in 1992 for the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. As the EU political structure itself, also its particular solutions, among them the system of legal protection of languages as irreplaceable intangible components of national heritage, could perhaps well serve as model for regions far beyond Europe, especially where protection of anything with the “minority” label still causes problems.

³ Involving tremendous problems and costs of translation of mountains of documents from almost all official languages individually each time into all other official languages.

⁴ And, in this case, quite to the contrary, by the insistence of France denying in practice the very idea of “minorities” on its territory.

In Japan, persistent fear of the very idea of any ethnic diversity of the population inhabiting the country led to the schizophrenic insistence on the “homogeneity of the nation” with “one race / one culture society”, despite mounting evidence from interdisciplinary research to the contrary. Involved were even the top politicians and intellectuals, with the ideology reaching perhaps its climax with the (in)famous statements of none else than Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone about the inferiority (of course, in relation to Japan) of education levels in the USA due to the Negro (black) and Hispanic components in their society and about his “having thick eyebrows” indicating that “probably he himself had some Ainu blood in his veins”. At that time Japan, clearly growing into a post-industrial economic superpower on the global arena, was simultaneously failing to catch up intellectually with the other states with the comparable level of development as it had one of the poorest records in ratifying international human rights treaties⁵. In 1980 the Japanese government even officially informed the UN that there were no minorities in Japan as understood by Article 27 of the International Convention on Human Rights.

It became clearer and clearer that this shameful situation in case of the country like Japan⁶ could hardly be maintained towards the end of the 20th century but only intensive collective pressure from international communities could encourage and trigger the necessary involvement from within the Japanese society in stipulating the changes and harbingers of such changes, actually a matter of the latest decade, and it came, among others, from academic circles in the form of publication titles like e.g. *Multilingual Japan* (Maher and Yashiro 1995), *Japan's Minorities – the Illusion of Homogeneity* (Weiner 1997) – titles unimaginable before. Shibatani's *Languages of Japan* of 1990 took into account only two languages, Japanese and Ainu, appearing too early to be as brave as Maher and Yashiro in the inevitable trend: what for the former constituted merely “Ryūkyuan [*sic* !] dialects” opposing “mainland dialects” of Japanese deserving a very modest seven-page section (189–196) in his over-400-page book, for Akiko Matsumori in the latter became “the group of vernacular languages spoken in the southern islands of the Japanese archipelago from Amami-Ōshima near Kyūshū down to Yonaguni-jima, located adjacent to Taiwan” (Maher and Yashiro 1995:19).

In fact, from the point of view of general linguistics both the distinction between a “dialect” and a “language” as well as the question whether a particular language has the status of a separate language or is only its subclassification (its dialect, local dialect, subdialect, Russian *зона*, dialect cluster, etc.) are of zero importance and interest. Linguistics made no serious attempt ever

⁵ Literature on the subject is abundant, especially that related to the Ainu, and it is considered unnecessary here to refer to even the most representative sources; thus, the reader interested is referred only to some highly selected readings, such as BKK 1984, BKK 1984a, NFOC 1994, Davis 1987, Hook & Siddle 2003, Kayano 1994, Lee and De Vos 1981, Nishide 1986, Siddle 1996, Walker 2001, Weeramantry 1979, Weiner 1997.

⁶ Which this author, to make things crystal-clear, treats with due reverence and well-motivated affection.

at defining the distinction, treating it as subject to extralinguistic considerations and solutions, usually pertaining to language policy and language planning. What has been proposed instead as a way out of a potential idle dispute about the status of a particular group of idiolects considered homogeneous is the term *ethnolect* covering any such group be it a “dialect” or a “language” (Majewicz 1989:10–11).

Seen from this perspective, Ryukyuan constitutes a cluster of ethnolects strongly diversified due to the insular character of the region, with numerous rather small islands separated in many cases by a considerable distance of rough seas frequently tormented by powerful typhoons and due to the “conservative nature” of predominantly peasant and fisher islanders and their strong emotional ties with their tiny homelands. Ryukyuan ethnolects differ from one another, at times significantly, not only linguistically (especially in local lexicon, but also in grammar, and in language behavior) but also as far as the numbers of users of particular ethnolects are concerned. Some insular communities consist of less than one hundred but also even less than fifty individuals (Hatomajima, located north of Iriomotejima, at one time, namely 1996, counted only 42 permanent individuals with six pupils, five in primary and one in junior high school-levels, in the only local school there). Small linguistically distinct pockets exist also on larger islands, neighboring or encircled by larger and stronger local dialects. In the case of such smaller language communities, the local ethnolects face danger not only from the powerful Japanese but also from the neighboring stronger local Ryukyuan ethnolects, eventually being swallowed by them (cf. Karimata 2001). Moreover, small insular ethnolects are exposed to serious danger now inherent in the communities of their own users: children have to leave for higher education and adult males have to temporarily at least migrate, usually to Japan’s mainland industrial areas, for jobs. In the new surrounding, they have to master the language often very different from theirs and have hardly opportunities to use their own mother tongues. Returning home, they bring along already strongly rooted features of the language of their stay and, since they as a principle are *dominant family members*, they influence (“infect”) the speaking habits of their relatives and compatriots who did not move from the island.

For over twenty years I have been involved in observing developments in the situation of the Ainu of northern Japan in relation with the discovery of wax cylinder phonographic records of Ainu folklore taken by Bronisław Piłsudski on Sakhalin and Hokkaido in 1902 and 1903 but my interest in the Ainu had also a larger dimension, it was a part of a broadly designed research project labeled *Hokkaido and Ryukyu – two poles of the Japanese ethnosphere*⁷. There-

⁷ While the project is believed to substantially contribute to the study of the northern pole thus comprehended (Hokkaido and adjacent areas), in the case of the southern pole it was in the first place a recipient, a beneficiary of the contribution of other researchers rather than a contributor.

fore, for the sake of comparison in 1996 I undertook a long trip to Japan's southernmost islands, Haterumajima and Yonagunijima included, to obtain first-hand information on the state of preservation of ancient Ryukyuan ethnolects and prospects of their survival. Details on the trip and its purposes were presented at the 1996 Hokkaido Ethnological Society Annual Meeting in Otaru (Majewicz 1996) and results of interest to me during the 4th International Conference on Okinawan Studies in Bonn in March 2002 (Majewicz 2002). The overall conclusion was rather sad that in view of what I had witnessed, and in spite of rather significant differences in the situation of both Ainu and Ryukyuan, however small, but very important part of Japan's cultural heritage was seriously endangered and faced irreversible extinction on *both* the northernmost as well as the southernmost recesses of the country.

The death of an individual language occurs with the break in its trans-generational transmission: such transmission break between generations dooms a language to extinction and no case is known to scholars of a successful resurrection of a dead language⁸. And what I observed in the Ryukyus was the tendency of the youths on most territories visited to drop the language of the grandparents in favor of the language of television and school classes, with no developed or organized local education in the vernacular except for singing and dancing. "Japan has *never* been completely "monolingual" and "monocultural" and only becoming such may become its genuine tragedy: the lack of an entry ticket to the globally internationalizing world" were the words of warning ending my 2002 paper referred to above.

The Ryukyuan ethnolects of Japan undoubtedly are seriously endangered, hence the invitation *hic et nunc* to examine whether any of the EU measures, especially the idea of the legal status of a *regional language*, could not decisively secure the future of the ethnolects. Incidentally, the very same idea could be an equally decisive instrument in an ultimate *linguistic* solution of the linguistic status of Ryukyuan ending thus the futile speculations whether the label covers (a) separate language(s) or subclassification(s) of Japanese. What is then a regional language in the *European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages*?

An attempt at defining the notion of *regional language*, or *regiolect*, as understood by the EU law makers led to assembling the following ethno-linguistic and extralinguistic features distinctive for what stands for the notion:

- close genetic relationship to the majority language of the state; regiolects are often regarded as being "only" dialects of the majority/state language;

⁸ The notorious example of Hebrew is but a misunderstanding: in not a single moment in its long history Hebrew ceased to be transmitted from generation to generation – not only in speaking but also in reading and writing, hence literacy was common among Jews even at the times when even ruling classes were illiterate, and important philosophical and religious issues were never discussed in Jewish communities in any language other than Hebrew – what we have to deal with in the case of Hebrew was its "selective use" excluding it from banal everyday conversations.

- relatively long history of common development, especially sociopolitical, of the regional and the corresponding majority language;
- lacking or not fully shaped feeling of separateness within the national majority of speakers, but based on strong regional and/or ethnic identity, with the language being the main constituent of the identity;
- relatively high dialectal differentiation within the regiolects, which can thus be and often are classified as dialect clusters or language complexes;
- lacking a uniform literary standard, or the standard being *in statu nascendi*; one often speaks of variant literary traditions of a language (e.g. in the case of the Latvian literature, one literary tradition in the Latvian language and the other in the Latgalian language);
- rich, often very ancient literary tradition of dialectal/regional literature;
- relatively low social prestige of a regiolect, often lower than in the past;
- sometimes association with a confessional separateness of the regiolect speakers;
- opposition within the group against being perceived and officially treated as national minority group, often a paradoxical resistance against being seen as minority group at all (the so-called “nested identity”) (see Wicherkiewicz 2004, cf. also Šatava 2004)⁹.

The following are examples from among lesser-used ethnolects of Europe that have been classified as regional languages in accordance with these postulates: Occitan and Franco-Provençal with further subdivisions in France, Latgalian (Upper Latvian) in Latvia, Scottish English and Scotts (Lallans) in Great Britain, Võro in Estonia, Asturian and Aragonese in Spain, Mirandese in Portugal, Samogitian (Lower Lithuanian) in Lithuania, Kashubian in Poland, Plattdeutsch (Low German) in Germany, Piemontese in Italy, Limburgian in the Netherlands (cf. Wicherkiewicz 2004:7–8).

If one knows what linguistic situations and realities stand behind every of the enumerated linguonyms, one immediately understands that the term *regional languages* used in this context characterizes a situation when one language can reasonably be, and usually (~”normally”) is, perceived at the same time either as a subclassification of another language *or* as a language different from the other language but genetically closely related to it. Thus, in spite of intentions, a *regional language* is clearly regarded as *inferior* in confrontation with the other language. “Inferiority” necessarily implies the “lack of prestige”, a factor that actually *dooms* an ethnolect while the struggle is in fact for its *upgrading*.

In Japan, Ryukyuan, a typical ethnolect (~ dialect) cluster, has as a rule been classified as a “dialect” (or “dialects”, *hōgen* 方言) of Japanese but terms

⁹ One has to be aware, however, of potential terminological confusion as the term *regional languages* is well established in linguistics with at least two more meanings (as a majority language in a minority region, as e.g. Welsh in Wales in Great Britain, and as a language of regional international sphere of influence, as e.g. German in Central Europe, Arabic in North Africa and Middle East, or Russian on the vast territory of Eurasia one under direct rule of or indirect dependence from the tsarist Russia or USSR).

like *ryūkyūgo* 琉球語 and *okinawago* 沖縄語, instead of the much expected *ryūkyū-hōgen* 琉球方言 or *okinawa-hōgen* 沖縄方言, started appearing in the titles of dictionaries that soon after their appearance in print gained reputation of standard reference sources (like Kokuritsu kokugo kenkyūjo 1975, Nakamoto 1981, Handa 1999). And, in my opinion, the publication of the dictionary of the Okinawan *language* rather than *dialect* by the Institute of National (i.e. Japanese) Language (Kokuritsu kokugo kenkyūjo 1975, first edition 1964) had a symbolic significance. Terminological policies can thus evidently play decisive roles in language preservation policies.

As indicated above, from the standpoint of general linguistics it is not at all important and neutral whether Ryukyuan ethnolects are treated as subclassifications (dialects) of Japanese (~“Japanese proper”?) or as (an) ethnolect(s) with the status of (a) separate language(s) but the latter seems to be not a bad option from the point of view of “gain or lose” (diversity is richness) and sound arguments for the latter could easily be found in the postulates defining *separate regional languages*. Although the term *regional languages* has been coined on the basis of the sum of European experience and the linguistic situation of Europe hardly seems typical of the global linguistic situation, the case of Ryukyuan exceptionally well responds to the postulates of its definition as well as definitions provided in Article 1 “Definitions” of the *European Charter*¹⁰. Doubtlessly, it is genetically closely related to Japanese and its record (the masterpiece poetry of *Omorosōshi* and the rich *ryūka*¹¹ creativity included) nowadays is part of Japan’s inheritance. Although seriously endangered, it still is *by no means* a small language and the indigenous inhabitants of the entire Nansei Archipelago, conscious of their ethnic identity – simultaneously separate and at the same time nested in the Japanese nation, are very proud of their own distinct cultural legacy and cherish it very much, especially its music and dance component. But folklore alone may be far from enough to preserve the language of the forefathers, as gradual japanization of even their songs in their contemporary performances is clearly detectable, and – perhaps – a closer look at EU solutions in combination for example with the very Japanese tradition of treating living persons as cultural monuments, as “living national treasures” (*ningen kokuhō* 人間国宝; cf. Majewicz 1999¹²) could bring about a hope and the language shift reverse?

¹⁰ See its text appended.

¹¹ A specific genre of ‘Ryukyuan songs’.

¹² The aim of that short communiqué was to introduce the very notion to the European audience of specialists assembled at the European Congress on the Rights of Minorities and the Peoples, KEADEA (*Ευρωπαϊκό Συνεδριο για τα Δικαιώματα των Μειονοτήτων και των Λαών ΚΕΑΔΕΑ*) in Athens, Greece, in December 1992 with the suggestion at its implementation in Europe as a means of strongly endangered language protection; it turned out, however, that Europe seemed intellectually immature to imagine even living human beings as “important cultural assets” or “national treasures”.

The upgrading of the status of Ryukyuan ethnolects to that of *regional language(s)* is, on the basis of experience gathered elsewhere (e.g., in Kashubian, Basque, Welsh, Rumantsch communities, cf. Majewicz 1996a, 1998), expected to bring about drastic positive changes in the attitudes towards these ethnolects – and here crucial is triggering the attitude of appreciation of the ethnolects among the youths to the level when expert proficiency becomes trendy, *swanky* in the most positive sense, impressing for instance and attracting representatives of the other sex. The usage of such ethnolects as a principle are limited to “informal”, “domestic”, “in-family” situations, to contacts between usually elder family members, neighbors, inhabitants of the same village, working team, etc., and youths are usually shamed for by teachers as well as peers and ashamed of speaking “the dialect” perceived definitely as “inferior”. These ethnolects thus need *prestige* overtly supported by officialdom – and the status of the *regional language*, especially when backed by material gains (like the glorious idea of *ningen kokuhō* applied to model speakers of endangered languages), seems to be not a bad strategy selection and solution to warrant this indispensable prestige.

Experience accumulated thus far on this matter also reveals a clear dependence between the ethnolect prestige in its own community as well as nationwide and the presence of the ethnolect in *prestigious* media. Such presence markedly strengthens language prestige even when it is manifested through local media but it is extremely important not only to secure the awareness *on an international scale* of the very existence of an ethnolect with the aim to secure *its future*: secured has to be also, or perhaps even in the first place (as even this awareness just mentioned is best secured in this way), a ready *access* to concrete linguistic data prepared for practical applications – either by linguists as illustrative material in their argumentation or just enthusiasts probing the reality of the ethnolect by trying to learn it e.g. out of curiosity.

In this respect Ryukyuan ethnolects are exceptionally handicapped. Try to learn any of them – even in Japan and even in Okinawa! Try to detect Ryukyuan in countless handbooks of linguistics!

Until very recently one could hardly recommend anything resembling a practical teaching aid for Ryukyuan even to university students of Japanese seriously interested in grasping some communicative knowledge of it (save e.g. Iha 1916 on the one hand, and Nakamatsu & Funatsu 1988 or Takihara 1994 on the other) and equally curious linguists illiterate in Japanese were shocked being referred to sources like Chamberlain 1895, Clifford 1818, or even earlier. A real novelty was an impressive all-*kana*-syllabary handbook over 540 pages thick (Yushiya 1999) but – again: try to learn the language from any of the enumerated aids. Whatever their documentary and/or explanatory value assumed, from the point of view of foreign-language-teaching methodology (glottodidactics) they are very far from being model glottodidactic aids.

Unfortunately, from the same point of view the situation is hardly better with Ryukyuan dictionaries. While one cannot deny the existence of splendid comprehensive dictionaries of certain Ryukyuan ethnolects which are documentary in character and thus of great academic value (like e.g. Kokuritsu kokugo kenkyūjo (eds.) 1964, Osada et al. 1977–1980, Nakasone 1983, Hokama et al. 1995, Ikema 2003, Miyagi et al. 2002, or smaller, like Karimata 2003¹³), equally splendid dictionary and dictionary-like publications presented in specialized journals (especially *Ryūkyū-no hōgen* – cf. e.g. vols. 11–12 for the Yonaguni ethnolect, vol. 1977 for the Miyako Ogamijima ethnolect, Kajiku 1983–92 for the Hatoma ethnolect, Nakama & Nakamoto 1988–2001 for the Nishihara Miyakoan ethnolect), or much less academic word lists (like e.g. Yanagida & Iwakura 1977 for the Kikaijima ethnolect or Kiku 1985 for the Yoronjima ethnolect), no *Hornby-like learner's dictionary* seems at sight. The relatively recent Handa 1999¹⁴, all the more that it contains also the other-way – Japanese-Ryukyuan – part extending for almost three hundred pages and a few appendices, one with geographical names in the local Ryukyuan provided, could be closest to the Hornby-type aid, were it not the hardly understandable application of a very clumsy and non-standard rendering (in Roman characters!) of the Japanese material. A large Okinawan-English dictionary by the late (1928–2001) University of Hawai'i Professor Mitsugu Sakihara, himself a native of Naha, still remains in manuscript (over 1,300 pages) although work is continued on its preparation for print harbingered by the release in 2006 of a sort of its preliminary concise Okinawan-English-Okinawan version. The same fate concerns the famous 1,200-page manuscript dictionary compiled in 1920s by the Russian linguist and polyglot Nikolai Nevskiy (1892–1937)¹⁵.

This observation leads to another, more general remark concerning the presentation of the Ryukyuan material in publications containing it. Although it is so that any text in any language can be recorded in and retransliterated or retranscribed into every known writing system or orthography, and thus also texts in Ryukyuan ethnolects could technically be written down and presented in e.g. Old Egyptian hieroglyphs, Hittite Cuneiform signs, Chinese-like Tangut logograms or letters of Arabic alphabet, none among these could rationally be recommended for the said purpose. Ryukyuanists seem to realize it as now most of the texts in Ryukyuan ethnolects in academic literature are represented in Roman-character transcription, although *kana* notation in scholarly publications is still present, and in non-academic publishing it still seems prevailing. How misleading or even disastrous can transcriptions or transliterations of foreign languages in *kana* be for the Japanese is best illustrated by their miser-

¹³ Nakamoto 1981 has been designed for still other purposes.

¹⁴ The 2000 second printing speaks volumes for the demand.

¹⁵ The so-far only more extensive data from his extensive field studies on Miyako were published posthumously in 1978.

able achievements in learning such languages as e.g. French, Basque or Scottish Gaelic, not to speak of Polish or Czech from handbooks in which the Japanese syllabary is the medium through which the target pronunciation is explained and taught.

Linguists interested in Ryukyuan ethnolects who did not read Japanese were in a miserable situation as far as an access to modern up-to-date methodologically and factually data, descriptions, and analyses were concerned as even degree dissertations focusing on them were extremely rare in languages other than Japanese¹⁶. No one will cherish more than them the opportunity created by the Kyoto-based Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim (ELPR) Research Project headed by Osahito Miyaoka, which among its numerous unique publications included Wayne P. Lawrence's English translation of Yukio Uemura's revised 1992–3 materials (Uemura 2003) and the grammatical studies by Atsuko Izuyama and Tomoko Arakaki (Izuyama 2003). The proliferation of such and similar publications, badly needed dictionaries included, would substantially improve access to Ryukyuan linguistic material for linguists outside Japan and thus popularize and upgrade the status and raise the prestige of the Ryukyuan ethnolects – and, in consequence, contribute to their *necessary protection*.

APPENDIX

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages Part 1, “General Provisions”, Article 1 “Definitions”:

For the purposes of this Charter:

- a. the term “regional or minority languages” means languages that are:
 - i. traditionally used within a given territory of a State by national of the State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population, and
 - ii. different from the official language(s) of that State;
 it does not include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants;
- b. “territory in which the regional or minority language is used” means the geographical area in which the said language is the mode of expression of a number of people justifying the adoption of the various protective and promotional measures provided for in this Charter;
- c. “non-territorial languages” means languages used by nationals of the State which differ from the language or languages used by the rest of the State's population but which, although traditionally used within the territory of the State, cannot be identified with a particular area thereof.

¹⁶ But not totally non-existent as it can be exemplified by Ashworth 1973 or Marszewska 2003, both unpublished to the best of this author's knowledge [added in proofs: the latter published as Marszewska 2010 a few weeks ago].

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¹⁷ Giwan Chōho 宜湾朝保 (1823–1876); the text, save the 7-page part by Giwan, is a revision of an earlier (1880, 1882²) source material labeled *Okinawa taiwa* (沖縄対話) published in Naha by Okinawa-ken Gakumuka.

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