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[SPEAKER_00]

Hei og velkommen til podkasten 'Brennbare bøker: Religion og ytringsfrihet'.

Podkasten produseres som en del av mikroemnet med samme navn, og er et samarbeid mellom bachelorprogrammet i religion, kultur og samfunn ved Institutt for kultur og språkvitenskap ved Universitetet i Stavanger og Ytringsfrihetsbyen Stavanger, et prosjekt i regi av Sølvberget bibliotek og kulturhus i forbindelse med byjubileet til Stavanger som markerer at byen er 900 år i 2025.

Emnet utforsker forholdet mellom religion og ytringsfrihet og den ofte vanskelige balansegangen mellom dem.

Vi tar utgangspunkt i ulike religioner, kulturer, historiske tidsepoker og politiske kontekster.

Mitt navn er Henriette Hanky.

Jeg er religionsviter og jobber som førstelektor i religionsvitenskap ved Universitetet i Bergen og Universitetet i Stavanger.

I denne episoden snakker jeg med den uiguriske lingvisten og forfatteren Abduweli Ayup, som har bodd i Norge siden 2019, etter å ha blitt forfulgt og arrestert i Kina.

Uigurene er et folk som hovedsakelig lever i Nordvest-Kina, i det autonome området Xinjiang, som uigurene kaller Øst-Tyrkistan.

Uigurene er hovedsakelig muslimer og snakker uigurisk, et tyrkisk språk, noe som kulturelt og språklig skiller dem ut i Kina.

Uigurene i Kina står i en langvarig konflikt med han-kinesere og kinesiske myndigheter, som de siste ti årene har forsterket undertrykkelsen av uigurene.

Selv om Xinjiang offisielt er et autonomt område, pålegger kinesiske myndigheter uigurene en rekke restriksjoner.

Det er f.eks. forbudt å snakke uigurisk, til og med hjemme.

Menneskerettighetsorganisasjoner, forskere og flere land har anklaget Kina for bruk av overvåking og interneringsleirer, samt overgrep som tvungen sterilisering og tvangsarbeid, og omtaler dette som forbrytelser mot menneskeheten eller folkemord.

I dag skal vi høre historien til Abduweli Ayup og hvordan han jobber for å kaste lys på uigurenes menneskerettighetssituasjon.

Welcome!

I'm going to switch to English now.

[SPEAKER_01]

Thank you.

[SPEAKER_00]

It's a pleasure and it's an honor to welcome you.

[SPEAKER_01]

Thank you for having me.

[SPEAKER_00]

Abduweli Ayup is a linguist and writer originally from Kashgar in Xinjiang, the Uyghur autonomous region in the northwest of China.

He studied in China and the United States and dedicated his life to the preservation of Uyghur language and culture and its transmission to the young generation.

For this purpose, he operated schools and kindergartens for Uyghur children and for that in 2013 he was arrested by Chinese police and detained in a so-called re-education camp for 15 months.

After his release he fled to Turkey.

In 2019, Ayup and his family moved to Bergen in Norway as part of the International Cities of Refuge Network or the ICORN program.

From Norway, he has continued his work of raising awareness of the Uyghur people's persecution and human rights violations in China and advocating for safeguarding Uyghur language and culture.

For these efforts, the Linguistic Society of America and the Committee for Endangered Languages and their Preservation recently awarded him the Excellence in Community Linguistics Award.

Abduweli, welcome to this podcast and thank you for accepting our invitation to share your perspectives with students in Stavanger and our other listeners.

[SPEAKER_01]

Thank you for having me.

[SPEAKER_00]

So let me start with the title of our course.

It's called Flammable Books, Brennbare bøker.

And we look at how books and other forms of expression become the subject of controversy and censorship.

You are yourself a linguist and a writer, so I would like to start by asking you about your relationship with literature.

In your memoir, you describe your childhood in Xinjiang as surrounded by books, but you also recall that some of them were hidden away.

Can you tell us about how your relationship with books and especially with Uyghur literature and language evolved when you grew up?

[SPEAKER_01]

When I was young, we have a lot of books at home, and some of them are reachable because they are red books, and some of them are not reachable.

They were always...

in a secret box because they are yellow books.

The red books, it means that the books were about like socialist literature and communist ideology and Chinese history and Chinese culture or something like that.

And the yellow books are about Western classics,

and Uyghur literature and books about Uyghur culture and about Uyghur music and poetry.

But my father, he always read those books when everything is quiet at night.

And we always, like we are six siblings, we always wait till night to listen to the story because it's a really interesting expression in Uyghur that even walls, they have ears. It means that you always are being listened to by others. So we prefer night to day because at night we can have time to listen to very beautiful stories and very interesting poetry and beautiful melody. So it is related to those books. And when I was young, I didn't really understand why those yellow books were in secret boxes and why those red books always are reachable. Later, I understood because the Chinese government searches for those books and if those books are found at home, you will be prosecuted. And when I was young, I learned the first sad story that in real life that my uncle, my mother's older brother, he got sentenced to 20 years because he said that Uyghurs should have their own books, should keep their own books. They have rights to read and write in Uyghur. And also he said that we are a different nation. Just because we are a different nation, he was sentenced to 20 years. And so I grew up in the... the imprisonment and banned books, even songs. When I was young, like, we have different radio stations. Like, one is from Beijing. It's Central People's Radio Station. And another one is Radio Liberty from Munich. And Radio Liberty always broadcasts songs and international news and poems from Uyghur poets. But the central radio station from Beijing always broadcasts about The Chinese Red Army and red drama and those Chinese hero and so like it's so I always from my young age I grew up with different voices but now I realized It was important because in that case you can compare what is true and what's not, what's real and what's not. For my uncle at that time, it's really sad that the other kids didn't play with my uncle's kids.

[SPEAKER_00]

Right.

[SPEAKER_01]

because at the time he was sentenced for protecting the culture and the official term is rightist and nationalist.

Rightist and nationalist.

I don't know, maybe Chinese Communist Party more prefer left or leftist.

They accuse my uncle as rightist and nationalist.

And like... Yeah, like their kids were always alone, they played together.

And they couldn't play with other kids.

And...

Like, even we were really reluctant.

That's why we prefer night, because at night we can play together with them.
No one can see.
And sometimes they come to our home and we play together.
And we listen to that Radio Liberty from Munich.
And, like, it's because of my father.
My father, he...
He did a great job.
He had a good radio set.
I don't know why he did this.
He allowed us to listen to that radio at home.
But he always said, don't tell anything about these songs and these stories and those books.
If you do that, I'll be the second one as your uncle.
And because we know we have seen our uncle in jail, so we are really afraid.
Like when I was young, I didn't understand what jail is.
Like my father always talked about jail.
like cage and cage something and so when he like he always uh tells story to us and when he tells about the bird and the cage I always...
All of us stop him to talk about cage and birds because we don't want to listen to cage.
When I was young, my father talked about that if you tell those stories and if you talk about those books at home and if you talk about those...
Azatlıq Radiosı. It's a really beautiful word in my life, Azatlıq Radiosı, because it means liberty.
The radio liberty, Azatlıq Radiosı. So I feel really thankful that Azatlıq Radiosı, because they give us the chance to listen to... We have a different world, actually.
We have a different reality.
Like... So...
It is important to share maybe at the time, maybe 1970s, 1960s, some people shared their story in Munich like us and they told the story, something different and that's why we,
like me, the Uyghur intellectuals and Uyghur, the new generation grew up with a different idea, prefer freedom, liberty, and democracy.
If we don't do that, if we couldn't have that access to free voice, we will not have expectation to the freedom yeah so I'm really thankful what my father did and yeah what my uncle did to the community and yeah so I hope my daughter will do the same to follow these steps

[SPEAKER_00]

I mean, you are definitely working towards that.
I mean, what you did was you became a linguist, you became a scholar, and then you decided to open a kindergarten to pass on the Uyghur language and culture to the new generation, right?
So it must have had a great impact on you, your childhood, the books, the radio, for yourself to go that way.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, like actually when I was young, I didn't really feel that way, that my father influenced me that strong.
Like my wife also told me that, like, you didn't tell me about your father, but suddenly you are talking about your father a lot.
What happened to you?
Like, yes, in exile, I recall a lot.
And I recall that why I love this language, those Uyghur stories and poems and why. I think because of my father, like he told me, and those stories.
Like about this linguistics, like the language and linguistics.
We had a tomb of a Uyghur scholar who lived in 11th century.
His name is Mahmoud Kashgari.
And also my father told the story of that linguist and how he got trained in Baghdad in the 11th century.
How he stayed 15 years in Baghdad and he wrote books in Arabic.
At that time because of the religion Islam, people preferred Arabic not Uyghur and he said that no, yes, if Arabic is sacred language Uyghur also the same it's also the sacred language because at that time there is I don't know no other scholars to say that He's the first one who said that, no, Uyghur is also a sacred language.
It's the same as Arabic, as sacred as Arabic.
So you shouldn't ignore Uyghur because of Arabic is the language of Quran.
He wrote the book.
He defended his idea with a lot of evidence.
And he's the first one, actually, to protect the language.
And my father, at the time he told us the story that, look, this is our flag.
to be united, to learn and to communicate.
So you should protect your language like this.
At the time, I thought, oh, being a linguist is important.
If you are a linguist and people come to your tomb and celebrate you and pray for you and follow you.
And so that was the first time I...
I thought that I can be a linguist in the future, like him.
And then I studied linguistics in the United States and in China.
And then I started my language project, like having a kindergarten in Kashgar and Ürümqi, and also become a writer.

[SPEAKER_00]

And you also told me this opening of the kindergarten and your wish to pass on your language and culture also had to do with you becoming a father and your daughter and passing on the knowledge.
Is that right?

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, it is.
It is just like we are repeating something.
Actually, I changed my mind because I felt disappointed in 2000 because the Chinese government banned Uyghur language in universities and community colleges and professional schools.

And then we tried, but we didn't succeed.
We tried to restore it, but we didn't succeed.
So I got disappointed.
I said, no.
I should follow my own work as a linguist, just study theory of languages.
I focused on sociolinguistics and general linguistics, and I just wanted to do my work as a job.
Not as something I should cherish or something.
I said, I couldn't do it.
It's big.
It's too big to solve the problem.
And then I just focused on my linguistic study.
But when I had my daughter, I was thinking, where should I send her?
And I'm searching.
But I couldn't find any Uyghur kindergarten.
All of the kindergartens are pure Chinese language, Mandarin.
And kids failed at the first step.
They speak Chinese from the beginning in the kindergarten.
That's why Uyghur has become shrinking.
And then I said,
No, I shouldn't do this because like how can I face my father and like wow, no, and then I started to do some research and then I talked to my friends but actually I didn't get support in 2017.
I spent one month to search and to talk to the people and do interviews.
Oh, yeah, but they can understand.
The kids can understand.
They don't speak, but they can understand.
No, they will lose their language.
No, yeah, you are overdramatic.
And then I moved to the U.S.
with my family.
Okay, like you guys, if you are satisfied, why it's my concern?
And then I left.
And then in the U.S. I stayed and then I studied.
During the time, a big protest happened.
And then tragedy followed up.
Almost 200 people died.
More than 10,000 people being arrested.
I think about 90 people went missing.
We don't know what happened to them.
And then...
internet, the Chinese government shut down internet for 10 months.
And then I realized that, like, no.
Like in 10 months, actually, it changed my mind.
No, I can't live without my community, without my people, without my language.
I should do something.
Like in 10 months, I thought a lot.

It happened a lot to me in 10 months.
I went to a psychologist.
I couldn't sleep.
And I even missed my way going to school.
I wanted to go to school, but I went somewhere I don't know.
And then one friendly American, he drove me back home.
And yeah, it's really sad.
I couldn't even remember what happened.
I was doing for a living.
And then I started writing about what we should do.
I wrote that we should start with the legal way because, yes, public education banned Uyghur.
But at the kindergarten level, there is no such restriction.
We have English kindergartens in China.
We have Japanese kindergartens in China.
We have Korean kindergartens in China and why shouldn't we have Uyghur kindergartens there.
We are legal citizens and why shouldn't we have and like quote unquote it's an autonomous region. Where is the autonomy? And I'm thinking about this and also because of like in the US I talked with the professors and they told me: Actually, you guys had autonomy, but you didn't ask to implement it.
Tell me the evidence.
When did you ask to have this autonomy?
Where is the evidence?
I searched.
No.
There is no evidence that people stood up to ask autonomy.
We want this autonomy.
No.
And then I read about the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, junior.
And he's a good thinker, actually.
People always feel that he is a good activist and advocate, but his writing is really good.
Actually, he is a good writer.
He is a good thinker.
I read his books, and I thought,
Yeah, why should we?
Why should we ask equal citizenship as Chinese?
Equal rights for Uyghur language as Mandarin?
Why don't we do this?
Then I started writing about this in Uyghur.
But suddenly, I didn't expect so many people to read it.
After 10 months, the shutdown, a lot of readers followed me.
I have more than 100,000 followers on the Internet.
Like, every day I'm excited writing because of so many people sending messages and writing emails to me.
Why, why, why, why, why are you stopped?
So, like, I remember that in 2011, the New Year's Eve, people are celebrating.

I'm just sitting at home and writing because of excitement.
People love to read.
And then I found that that was a chance to talk about my plan, about my kindergarten, my vision.
I talked about it.
We should have a kindergarten.
A lot of people thought, oh, this is a good idea.
And then I returned in 2011.
But actually, my professor didn't like my idea.
He said, no, you are too naive.
It's impossible.
She stayed in Ürümqi, the Uyghur capital, for about two years.
And she speaks Uyghur really well.
And she said, no.
And I asked again.
I wrote her a long email to explain my idea, to defend my point of view.
Her last email is, are you sure?
But you were.
Yeah.
And I said, definitely.
That's the last conversation between us.
And then I returned.
And when I returned, people...
Picked me up and they were really happy because they wanted me to implement my idea, to do what I promised to do.
And I had my kindergarten in Kashgar first.
It was really successful.
And then people asked me to give a lecture in different cities.
I visited 16 cities.
I visited 16 cities to give a lecture.
I always, like my suitcase, would always be ready.
I always go.
Because it's important to have a kindergarten.
And another thing that like, it's important to train my competitors.
Because I don't want to be like one only having that kindergarten.
I should have a lot of kindergartens.
And then in that case, like we have, we will have a good like
it's a good business model also so like I encouraged the Uyghurs in for example in Khotan we had a kindergarten in Khotan and that... my friend also escaped, he's in Sweden right now.
And we had a kindergarten in Ürümqi and in other cities as well and
And then we planned to have a kindergarten in Ürümqi.
We planned to have a big one.
And it's about 450 square meters, big four-floor buildings we try to have.
And we can have, I think...
1,000 students, kids.
We had a big plan to have it.

But we were stopped by Ürümqi municipality.
And then one of my friends, he posted all to social media.
And then we have, it's astonishing, we have 1.5 million followers online.

[SPEAKER_00]

Wow.

[SPEAKER_01]

My friend posted that because of the Ürümqi municipality ban,
And they rejected our request and they refused our application.
And he posted online and it became a social movement.
And people said, why?
Why do you restrict?
Why do you ban?
And we're being questioned.
My friend also posted that online.
Yeah, Abduweli is being questioned.
And we're being arrested.
Yes, we're being arrested.
He keeps posting, he keeps posting, posting everything about us.
And then we got international attention and Radio Free Asia and those, like New York Times and they started to send me emails.
But I didn't respond to any of them.
I just deleted them.
I didn't respond because I know, it will be dangerous.

[SPEAKER_00]

At this point, you were very much aware that you were in danger with your work?

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, yeah, yeah.
Because, look, when I came in 2011, June 2nd, I had my first... I remember really clearly that I had my first SIM card on June 16th.
And then...
Immediately, I found that my phone is not normal.
Like, there's always echo on my phone.
Somebody sharing with me the conversation.
And then I realized, oh, they are listening to me.
So I know.
Always the sound, the one...
the big brother always following me so like that's why i did everything really carefully because I'm with the cell phone and uh it means that I'm with the Chinese government all the time with me so like I always... being careful and being cautious for whatever i do and so like...
When they arrested me, they told me that "we know everything.
We know who you are and we know everything about you."
I didn't say anything and I didn't feel surprised because of my phone.

And that's why they recorded everything.
So we were stopped, and investigated, and interrogated.
Whenever I answer the phone, I know that they were listening.
And wherever I go, they know where I was living.
So I always feel that, like, that feeling also exists now.
Like, I don't feel, like, even at home, I don't feel that I am alone.

[SPEAKER_00]

Right.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, always something is, like, with me and, like, following with me.
But that's why that, like, we bothered.
But I think it's important to keep doing because they didn't do one thing.
I asked them again and again.
They wanted me to stop.
From the beginning, first I was interrogated in 2011.
I think in October, it's official interrogation.
Like the phone calling is always, but like first interrogation is October 2011.
Like three police came from national security.
No, state security.
Like in China, there are two branches, national security and state security.
Both of them are in charge of something like politics or something like that.
And the state security came.
And I still remember his name.
His name is Enver.
And he came and he just asked me, what you have done, blah, blah, blah, those things,
what you are doing.
And even he copied my students' names and their parents' names.
And I said, yes, you can copy.
And then...
So, I know something will happen, but I always ask one thing.
Guys, if you want me to stop, you should tell officially.
You should send me the red notes or you should say that we will stop Abduweli Ayup
because he violated blah blah law or blah blah policy or blah blah regulation.
But you can't stop me by calling me or interrogating me or questioning.
Because I am a legal citizen.
And how can I explain to the people, to my followers?
But they always asked me to stop.
They said that you should say that I'm sick.
You should say that I'm not going to do it anymore.
You should say something else.
You should fabricate something else.
I said, no, I can't lie.
I can't lie to those innocent people because they are following me because it's the right
thing to do.
And why should I lie?

Because you guys...
trying, trying so hard to stop me.
And it's your responsibility to tell the people that we are trying to stop Abduweli.
And we are not happy with what he is doing. It's your responsibility to do that. It's not my responsibility to tell lies and to tell the people that I'm not doing it anymore. No, like they forced, tried to convince the people who sent their kids to me.
And the authority talked to the people who rented their place to me.
And they forced my staff not to work with me.
I said, what are you doing?
They always come to tell me this happened, that happened.
What are you doing?
Just publish the red notes that this is illegal.
Like Uyghur is illegal or having a Uyghur kindergarten is illegal or teaching in the kindergarten is illegal.
Don't always put pressure on my staff and my like landlords or those people.

[SPEAKER_00]

You really stood up to them.

Yeah.

But when they finally arrested you, on what charges did they do that?

[SPEAKER_01]

It is in 2013, August 19.

At the time, I was at my kindergarten, and because it was a modern language movement, my kindergarten became just like a tourist attraction.

A lot of people always visit and see, because I decorated really well.

I did a great job to decorate the place, because...

When I was young, I didn't like my school because it is really crowded.

57 kids in the same classroom.

57.

Very crowded.

And the color is always yellow and red.

Yellow is the color of the Chinese flag, those stars.

The stars are yellow.

And the flag is red.

That's why we grow up with yellow and red, and yellow and red all the time.

So I want my school very beautiful, not that simple two colors in life.

So I decorated it really well.

And I invited the designer who studied in France.

And I asked him that Uyghur kids have the same rights as French kids designed by kindergarten, as beautiful as the most beautiful kindergarten in the world.

[SPEAKER_00]

So it became an attraction, and people wanted to see.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, because they have never seen such a kindergarten in their lives.

We have a stream inside the kindergarten it's like flowing and we have like a garden with the trees.

Actually, it was a school.

But because of family planning, the population decreased.

And then those schools became empty places, deserted, the school.

And then they wanted to sell it.

The government wanted to sell it.

And I signed the contract to buy it.

And I paid 120,000 RMB for the first payment.

I think it's 10%.

I should pay continuously.

That's a good place, and I can change, I can decorate.

So I tried, but at the time, there are about more than 100 people coming.

They are talking, and they are helping, and they are talking and having good conversation.

And then the Black Santana came, Volkswagen Black Santana came, and then three guys came,

came out from the car in the same clothes, but not in uniform.

They are, because they are state security and national security, they don't wear uniform.

They belong to Secret Service.

But they wear similar eyeglasses, black ones.

And they wear white masks and white gloves.

I know who they are.

And when they came out, I said, I told my friends and then.

Yeah, they are parents.

They are going to send their kids to our kindergarten and I'm going to meet them.

Actually, I went to them and I got into their car.

They didn't come to just arrest me because I know if they come to arrest me, the conflict would start with my friends and with the police.

The three of them will pay the price heavy price but at the end those people and their family members and their relatives will pay the heavier price, so I said it's better to solve the problem peacefully I went to get into their car. It's about two o'clock in the afternoon 2013 August 19th

It was a sunny day, not cloudy as Bergen.

Kashgar is always sunny and we have very little rain.

It's dry.

So...

Yeah, I still felt that hot, not hot, like sunny and dry season and those trees and those flowers.

Of course, those kids playing there.

But yeah, then I was arrested and they drove me to...

my home. And I was inside the car, I can see outside but from the outside no one can see me because that's a special car and then they... It's interesting

When they drove me there, my apartment, the entire apartment, was surrounded by armed police.

The Chinese call it SWAT, the Special Forces, walkie-talkie, everyone holding a rifle.

And just walking around and armored vehicles stopped very close.

It was a white one, that side, and greenish one, another side.

[SPEAKER_00]

That must have been terrifying.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, of course.

Of course.

And then, like, very serious.

Like, everyone is talking.

Everyone is talking.

And then, like, surrounded.

And I felt, whoa.

They...

Actually, when I got into the car, they just put that black hood on my face.

And then my hands were handcuffed and my feet were chained.

But when they arrived, they just put off my black hood.

I could see from the window what's happening.

And I had seen that my daughter, she's playing with another kid.

Like, I made a sandy place you know like for kids they are playing in front of the apartment and like and then I found that my wife came out with my second daughter. At that time she was five months old

No, six months old.

Yeah, six months old.

And then it took about two hours.

And then they came to me, said, there is nothing in your home.

There is nothing in your home.

I said, what do you expect?

I didn't have anything to hide.

And then they drove me to my office.

They also searched my office.

And they snatched my laptop and also my office's laptop.

And they also arrested one of my staff.

And then they drove me to the detention camp.

Where I stayed one day.

And then the next day we flew to Ürümqi with the airplane.

It's interesting.

Actually, they are afraid of the people.

They didn't put that handcuff when we were on the airplane, when we were at the airport.

I know they are like, I know those people are walking around just like normal passengers, but not, and in the airplane also, they are not normal passengers.

I know from their eyes, like look, look, and then, yeah.

And then we came to Ürümqi and also they did the same thing.

They didn't do anything.

I just wear my normal uniform and normal clothes and took off the plane.

And when they put me in the car, it's a different story.

Put that black hood and did everything.

[SPEAKER_00]

When nobody else is seeing it.

[SPEAKER_01]

Nobody else is seeing it.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

So I'm still hopeful because they are afraid, actually.

They can do whatever they want, actually, in 2013.

They're afraid of people's reaction.

And then...

In Ürümqi, they drove me to the police station first.

It's really scary.

In Kashgar, the interrogation happened in the building.

The building is just not underground.

In Ürümqi...

That interrogation room is underground.

Three floors underground.

Like, it's interesting.

Like, all of them.

One floor, second floor, and the third floor.

All of them are underground.

And then it's really scary.

Like, every floor there's a gun and people just standing with the... What's the...?

[SPEAKER_00]

Helmet?

[SPEAKER_01]

Helmet, yeah, with the helmet, with the gun.

And, wow, it's scary.

And they questioned me again.

I think those, like, in Kashgar, they used electric stick twice.

And then... And abused.

And then, like, in Ürümqi, they hanged me.

It's different in Ürümqi.

I have seen that there are two rings up on the ceiling.

I'm just curious why they hang two rings.

Actually, that's the one that hangs you up.

Yeah, they hang you.

They hang you up or like food deprivation and sleep deprivation and you know like you have seen from the documentary. The only reason is that they want you to confess that you are

going to lead the people to separate the country, to promote independence, and to incite terrorist activity.

That's what they want me to confess.

I wasn't afraid.

One is because they know everything about me.

Because of the phone.

They know.

They recorded everything.

So, I wasn't afraid because you know like you don't need to question me. Like everything you are talking about, you know it's fabricated, I know it's fabricated. Why should I confess that I have done those things, the perfect story you already made up and you asked me to sign to say yes, to agree. I didn't.

[SPEAKER_00]

That is really impressive.

I mean, it's very tough to hear what you had to endure and that you stayed strong and stayed with what you had in mind.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yes, of course, as a human being, I thought a lot to say yes.

[SPEAKER_00]

Yeah, of course.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, I thought a lot to say yes, and I thought a lot to report my friends,

People who helped me.

Yes, I thought.

But I couldn't.

Because what I have experienced, like, the electric stick is a really scary thing.

Like, the human body is a miracle.

Like it can recover itself without any treatment, without any medicine.

But it will take time and during this time it will hurt.

Like when they put that electric stick and then your skin burns and then it will recover in a month to have a new skin.

So it will take time.

The time, like, you feel pain because you need to wear clothes.

But if I report someone, if I say yes, if I confess I have done, yes, I'm going to lead Uyghurs to be independent.

I'm going to incite people to take violent action.

But...

Like, there are more people involved.

And there are more people who experience the same torture as me.

And I have, like, people, the next door, listen to, like, because, like, the interrogation room is not, it is several ones.

One line, one building, all of them are interrogation rooms.

And you can hear people are crying, shouting, and begging or something.

And if I, like, as they forced me to do, if I report someone,

And they will face the same cruel treatment like me.

And not only themselves, their family members, their relatives, their friends also face the same problem.

[SPEAKER_00]

Right.

[SPEAKER_01]

So, yeah, I chose not to.

But it is... But, like, I learned something new.

Like, because everything... We can, like, human body can... Like, we are very, like, miracle creator.

Like, human body can recover.

Can defend yourself, actually.

Like, for example, that they always beat your palm.

[SPEAKER_03]

Mm-hmm.

[SPEAKER_01]

And then if you bear with it two hours, and then it will become...

[SPEAKER_00]

Swell?

[SPEAKER_01]

Swell, yeah.

It will swell.

After swell, you can't see any pain.

You just bear with two hours.

That's really important.

In two hours, it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter how do they beat you, how do they torture.

It doesn't matter because you can't feel it.

So...

I learned. At the beginning it is really hard.

But then I learned how to deal with it.

[SPEAKER_00]

How to endure it.

[SPEAKER_01]

How to endure it.

Just, Abduweli, try.

[SPEAKER_00]

Willpower.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, just stay with two hours.

Just stay with two hours.

And then you can't feel anything.

And you just stay with that.

And it is...

Like I always questioned human nature when I was looking at them.

Like why human beings can be evil like that?

Like looking into eyes and they are doing this.

I have never seen those people.

And I haven't done anything to them personally.

Why are they doing this?

We are speaking the same language.

We are sharing the same culture.

Why?

And another thing that we have, there is a Chinese, always two Uyghurs, one Chinese.

This is their pattern.

And three cameras, one is front, another is back, another is this side.

Three cameras are watching you.

Maybe it's because they're also being watched.

And I learned something new.

Uyghur guards are more cruel, more brutal than Han Chinese interrogators.

At the time I was thinking, why?

Another thing that because they speak Uyghur, they harm you more directly than Chinese.

Because they can use many derogatory words in Uyghur.

They directly hurt your feeling.

But in Chinese...

No, because if you say something, it's just like, yeah, some words flowing into your ears, from right ear to left ear, it will disappear.

But in Uyghur, it directly hurts your feeling because it's your own language.

Another thing, that's the language I want to protect.

They are using that as a tool to hurt me.

They were.

[SPEAKER_00]

But they are probably also under pressure, and they're told to be cruel.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, actually, I convinced myself why the Uyghurs are more cruel, more brutal, more violent than Chinese interrogators.

It's because they want to show their loyalty.

Like, if you are Chinese, you don't need to show you are Chinese.

You don't need to show you are loyal to the government, to the party, to the state.

But because you are Uyghur, you always feel that you are not loyal enough.

You are not qualified enough if you don't do that more harsh, more brutal way.

And they told me that they want to be promoted.

They wanted to be promoted.

[SPEAKER_00]

Right, there are also incentives.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yes, they wanted to be promoted.

I said, don't you know anybody who came from the U.S.
like you?

Don't you know anybody who...

trained you in the U.S., or they came with you, or do you know anybody who wanted to
work with you?

I said, no.

I have only three business partners, and you arrested all of them.

I don't have anyone more.

[SPEAKER_00]

So when they released you eventually after 15 months, was it because you did not
confess?

[SPEAKER_01]

No, all of them were released.

[SPEAKER_00]

Because there was no confession from you?

[SPEAKER_01]

No, all of them were released.

All of them, three of us, all of us were released.

One is, they are just pure businessmen.

My accountant...

He has his own accountant company in Ürümqi.

He's the top accountant in Ürümqi because he's educated in a Chinese prestigious
university.

And he's the top accountant.

And another is my lawyer.

He studied law at a Chinese prestigious university.

And like I said that...

Yeah, like they are businessmen.

Yes, they started their own business before I did.

They are really successful businessmen.

I said, no, they have nothing to do with me.

They are like just businessmen and we come together because we are doing business.

Yes, actually it happened.

We set up our own company.

I didn't even do anything.

They just organized everything.

About the business part, they were in charge of it.
About training teachers and like,
designing the model and developing the model and like...
That part I'm in charge of.
I didn't know how much money we have because I just know my salary and I do my job,
but I don't know.
Even I don't know how many staff we have in Kashgar, in Ürümqi because I'm not the
one.
I'm not the manager.
I'm just a founder.
And I know I'm the leader.
I just want to lead my group there.
But I don't need to know every step and every like, yeah, my two business partners, they
are really successful.
They are doing a great job.
So like I didn't, I said that, you know, you recorded everything.
You told me.
Like when you arrested me, you said, we know who you are.
We know what you have done and you already know what I have done and you already
recorded everything about me.
And how do you ask, how do you force me to confess what I haven't done?
What's the problem with it?
But...
the human body is a miracle and like recovered everything.
And like I always tell my friends that, yes, criminal minded people are there, but also
they are so kind people.
Lovely people also there.
Like every time when you walk very unstable inside and you can see some of the people
crying.
You can see their eyes.
They are crying.
And you can see they are smiling.
And you can see that they can give you their clean, like, towel to wrap up your palm
because it bleeds.
Or is swollen, they like help you to cover your hands and help you to cover your butt too
because it is swollen so like you can see those people it doesn't matter like what ethnic
group they are from but they are the people who are very nice, very kind, very lovely, so
like it helps you a lot
Like people will know, will understand who you are from your behavior, from your eyes,
they can learn.
So it helped me a lot.
Like I got help from Chinese prisoners and Uyghur prisoners and the Kazakh guards and
they helped me a lot, but in my memoir I am sorry I didn't write about them because it
will be dangerous for them, but they helped me a lot. Even like a smile.
For us in normal life, it is a very ordinary thing.
But in jail, in detention camp, it takes great courage to do that.

Like, I still remember that when I was in Ürümqi, like, in the town detention center, one policeman just called my name and smiled at me.

[SPEAKER_00]

That meant a lot.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, that meant a lot.

And I realized, I just smiled and I said, yeah, they are with me.

They know what's right and what's wrong.

They are defending me, actually.

And then, like...

When I was in the second detention camp, the police gave me, because you can't have anything, they gave me underwear, clean one.

And you can buy it.

It's interesting.

They just throw it from the hole.

There is a hole.

Just throw it inside.

But he called my number.

My number is 751 when I was in the second detention camp in Ürümqi.

He called my name and gave it to me.

He didn't throw it to me.

He just gave it to me and smiled at me.

So like even one staff,

in the corridor he just hit me and I fell down. When he was trying to help me up, he showed his cell phone look this is your picture, this is your picture, people are protesting for you, this is your picture and then just yeah

[SPEAKER_00]

So you learned that people on social media, they were mobilizing to free you.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah.

Not inside, outside.

[SPEAKER_00]

Yeah, right.

[SPEAKER_01]

So it helped me a lot.

So like, yes, there are criminal minded, there are evil people in prison, but most of the people are kind but like the majority is silent. A few of them, they are brave, they can show they will support you, they can show they will not take you down and they will encourage you, so I like I keep telling my friends and my audience that yes, there are millions of people being arrested.

Yes, I know your family members being arrested, but now it's different.

When I got arrested, there are criminals.

It's in 2013.

There are some criminals.

But now, since 2017, the people are arrested because of their belief, because of their knowledge, because of their culture.

All of them are nice and kind and good people.

So they can build invisible community.

No one can stop you smiling.

No one can stop you crying.

No one can stop you from hinting at your help.

So believe in yourself.

This time, because of all of them facing the same problem, the same persecution, so they feel that way, and that kind of feeling, how people will...

endure what's happening there.

[SPEAKER_00]

Right.

Just for our listeners, in 2017 that you're mentioning, there were these mass arrestations, right?

And since 2017, and I think like over a million people were arrested from that year, right?

[SPEAKER_01]

Yes, you are right.

Since 2017, over a million people being arrested.

And it is the...

largest amount after second world war in the world, like yeah during the second world war yes, there are like massive incarceration, it is the second massive incarceration after holocaust

[SPEAKER_00]

And this is not the only thing that has become worse after you left the country, right?

In 2015, the children that are sent to boarding schools away from their families is one thing.

Mosques that have been destroyed, many of them, right?

Maybe you can talk a bit to our listeners about how the situation has changed after you've left the country.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, like just we talked that there are different statistics, like the Pentagon said up to 3 million people being arrested, and the United Nations statistics is up to 1.8 million people being arrested.

And the State Department, it's over 2 million.

But yes, it's... But according to Chinese, it's interesting that Chinese said that we trained more than 5 million people.

And they became normal citizens.

It's Chinese statistics.

So we don't know which one is correct.

But over one million is true.
And according to Chinese statistics, that...
More than 500,000 people were sentenced.
The Chinese national statistics bureau claimed that.
It is like 30% of world verdict or something like that.
Yeah.
Since 2014, I left something because we had that boarding school before, but it's not that easy.
We can't say popular.
It's not that everywhere.
Like since 2017, because of millions of people being arrested, and then there are a lot of kids left behind.
And then the Chinese government sent them to boarding school.
Now there are three types of boarding school.
One is in China, like Chinese government sent Uyghur kids to Chinese provinces to stay in a boarding school.
Another is boarding schools in the Uyghur homeland.
And the third type is orphanage.
It's everywhere.
Like Uyghur kids, because both of the parents are being arrested, and those kids sent to orphanage.
And they are in orphanage centers around Chinese provinces.
And I collected evidence about the boarding school.
I interviewed four kids who stayed in boarding school and
The four of them lost their language.
Two of them, they sent, one is four, another is six years old, and they were released after 20 months because they are Turkish citizens.
And I met them in Turkey, and they lost their language in 20 months.
I couldn't communicate with them in Uyghur.
They can only speak Chinese.
And then I met another two in 2022.
One is 11, another is nine.
The two of them speak only Chinese.
And I asked one question.
Do you celebrate Uyghur festivals?
They said that we don't celebrate Uyghur festivals.
We celebrate our national festivals and Xi Jinping's birthday.
Wow.
No, not Xi Jinping's, Xi Yéye's birthday.
It means like Grandpa Xi's birthday.

[SPEAKER_00]

Yeah, so in these cases, from a Chinese perspective, the re-education has been quite successful there.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah.

[SPEAKER_00]

Really trying to erase the Uyghur language and culture.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah.

[SPEAKER_00]

On a large scale.

[SPEAKER_01]

Like, I feel really sad because of innocent kids.

One is nine, another is 11, and they said, Xi Yéye's birthday, Grandpa Xi's birthday.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, I felt and then like I tried to contact and I tried to talk to their mother. Their mother stayed in the camp for two years and then she refused to talk to me. And then I asked the people they told me that she's doing business, she's importing Chinese goods to sell in Istanbul.

And I realized that, yes, the re-education worked.

Like you stayed in the camp, you worked as a forced laborer, and then you are still importing Chinese products to Turkey, selling in even opened Asian market.

She's selling those products yeah so it worked.

[SPEAKER_00]

We're approaching the end of our time but I would like to talk a little bit about what you are working on now because you mentioned now that you live in Norway what you're doing at the moment is you collect evidence, right, you mentioned the children and that is part of your of your work. Could you say a little bit about these efforts?

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, like now I'm collecting evidence about boarding school because I have seen that thee brainwashing project worked.

And both kids and their parents.

And now that I'm collecting evidence about those orphanages.

Because...

those kids will immerse in Chinese society because they are everywhere in China.

So I'm collecting evidence, but I haven't yet.

I just heard kids are there, and I received one social media footage

There are Uyghur kids in a Chinese kindergarten in, I think, in Xi'an.

But I haven't collected any evidence on

their numbers and their ages and their names and addresses, no.

So I'm trying to do that.

And now that I'm collecting evidence about now, I'm doing that because of...

Chinese statistics told us that in Ürümqi since 2017, the death rate is much higher than the birth rate.

So I'm collecting evidence about this.

Like now my folks, not the camps, my folks are affected.
The effect of the camps, what the camp, how the mass arrest affected the people, how the mass arrest, the genocide affected the people, the kids, for example, the orphanage, boarding school, the death rate and disease and psychological problems like trauma.
And I'm focusing on those.
And also, I'm documenting transnational oppression.
As I told you that Uyghurs are not safe in Muslim majority countries and Central Asian and African countries.
They are under pressure being deported to China.
So I'm collecting about this.
And in Europe also, I'm collecting evidence about this transnational oppression because people are afraid to...
speak up, also afraid of talking to other Uyghurs, afraid of sending their kids to Uyghur school, and afraid of participating in any Uyghur festivals, because of Chinese pressure far away from Beijing.
So I'm collecting evidence about that.
And also I'm writing books for kids.
Like I published my new one.
I should have brought it today.
Yeah, I added my newest book.
It's the 10th one.
I published nine.
This is the 10th.
I published a new one, and I am writing and publishing books.
My organization is supporting Uyghur writers in the diaspora to write in Uyghur.
We are also training Uyghur mother language teachers around the world, and we hold successful teachers training symposium in Washington, D.C.
This year in July.
And we are holding Uyghur Children Festivals.
And we hold it in Stockholm.
And we are going to hold it next year in Kazakhstan and Australia and the U.S.
And also, I'm instructing in Uyghur language, and I'm encouraging Uyghur language schools around the world, and I'm applying for funding for those schools because we started with volunteers, but now we don't have enough teachers anymore because of Chinese pressure, transnational oppression.
Also, people are afraid, so we need to hire teachers.
And the sad thing at the end, maybe we will hire...
We should hire non-Uyghurs to maintain our schools.
Because Uyghurs are afraid of being teachers.
So it's hard, but we are doing continuously.

[SPEAKER_00]

Continue the work, right?

[SPEAKER_01]

Continue the work.

I'm hopeful because of those kids.

Those kids are learning really well.

We have a Uyghur Kids magazine, and they are publishing their own magazine right now, and they are writing their own story.

And we hold a kids painting gallery in Munich, and we are going to have a Uyghur dance festival in the future.

And so like, yes, like not only hopeless that. The kids are good and they are growing up in a different world.

And so they are doing better than their parents.

And I hope... We can't change their parents' mentality, but we can try hard for the kids, second generation, and they are different.

I don't think our goal is to stop.

to always complain about those people who are silent or who are afraid but we should more focus on the bright part like that their kids and they are different and they are more brave than their parents so like yeah

[SPEAKER_00]

A very hopeful note to end on.

And also we come full circle because your work started with teaching children to keep the culture alive.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah.

[SPEAKER_00]

And you're describing that even though it's in the diaspora, but the culture is pretty much alive with the kids.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, yeah.

Like I will encourage them more.

Like, yeah, because the kids are really different.

Like it's like actually it's their...

It's their luck to hold both Uyghur culture and Norwegian culture, and Uyghur culture and American culture.

It helps them a lot.

Just like when I was young, my radio station from Munich and the radio station from Beijing created me.

Who am I?

The kids now living in the diaspora, having both cultures, will create more brilliant kids in the future.

[SPEAKER_00]

Yeah.

Okay.

Finally, for our listeners who would like to learn more about your work and also the situation of the Uyghurs, I would like to mention two of your recent projects.

First, in 2023, your work has been documented by a short documentary film called “Behind the Mask”, written and directed by Håvard Bustnes.

And it recently won the award for the best short documentary at the Bergen International Film Festival.

So we will link in our notes, we will link to the film and we hope that it will find many viewers.

And also, I hear that you will publish your memoir in English with the title “Black Land: A Story of Genocide, Exile and the Language of Resistance in Modern China.”

So I also hope that published in English, it will find a big readership.

And I hope that many of our listeners also are interested and will read and will pass on your stories and your insights.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, thank you.

[SPEAKER_00]

Thank you so much for sharing your story and your knowledge.

It's very, very precious.

And thank you so much for the courageous work that you are doing.

[SPEAKER_01]

Thank you for having me and thank you for listening to me.

And yeah, thank you.

[SPEAKER_00]

Dere hørte på podkasten «Brennbare bøker: Religion og ytringsfrihet», et felles prosjekt av bachelorprogrammet i religion, kultur og samfunn ved Universitetet i Stavanger og Ytringsfrihetsbyen Stavanger ved Sølvberget bibliotek og kulturhus. Tusen takk for at dere lyttet! Ha det!