

Rezension

Fritsch, Katharina. 2022. *The Diaspora of the Comoros in France. Ethnicised Biopolitics and Communitarisation*. Abindgon/ New York: Routledge. 236 pages. ISBN 978-0-3676-2794-2

Reviewd by

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In the French context, the existence of (post)colonial racism and the experiences of racialised communities have historically been suppressed as opposed to the egalitarian idea (p. 1) of French Republicanism (Stoler 2016). Recently, activists, artists, and academics who do engage with racism and intersectional power relations in France have been facing increasing structural marginalisation up to criminalisation as “Islamist-leftist” (Noël 2023). Mame-Fatou Niang calls out this silencing of critical debates, not only as undermining the French enlightenment ideal of freedom of expression, but as a “smothering of possibilities to ask a question” (Niang 2022: 12:20-12:25) about racism in France that ultimately becomes complicit to physical violence against ethnicised communities and individuals.

With *The Diaspora of the Comoros in France: Ethnicised Biopolitics and Communitarisation*, Katharina Fritsch has written a book that shines a light on these vital issues. Her declared aim is it to contribute “to current debates on the importance of addressing ethnicised power relations in postcolonial France as they shape the governing of diasporic communities as well as diasporic groups’ political and cultural self-governing” (p. 2). Through an

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ethnographic approach to the *dispositif* of communitarisation, Fritsch has not only managed to explicate the workings of racist-colonial structures, but also to compellingly capture the complexities and ambivalences in power relations that govern ethnicised diasporas in postcolonial France.

The book weaves together a number of Foucauldian approaches to power that include, but also go beyond the state and thereby unveil the advantages of a political science perspective on (ethnicised) community building in postcolonial France. The focus on the *dispositif* of communitarisation and ethnicised biopolitics shows how institutions, discourses, practices, and subjectivations respond to socio-political and economic urgencies through top-down governing and bottom-up self-governing of diasporic groups in France. Fritsch further enriches this *dispositif*-analytical and biopolitical approach with performative processes of diasporisation as outlined by Avtar Brah as well as with works by Judith Butler, Stuart Hall, and Homi K. Bhabha. This explicates the workings of ethnicised power relations in a context of neoliberal multiculturalism and assimilationist Othering in the French Republic.

On the methodological level, Fritsch skilfully demonstrates how an ethnographic focus on events can be fruitful for analysing political questions. Her *dispositif*-analytical ethnography focuses on three cultural and two political events in Marseille in order to capture the workings of the *dispositif* of communitarisation in ethnicising discourses, practices, institutions, and subjectivations. In doing so, she has managed to include diverse levels and perspectives through expert interviews with event organisers, managers, and representatives of Franco-Comorian associations; through episodic interviews with artists; through observation protocols of events and their preparation; and through secondary material like newspaper articles, policy material or advertising material. In addition, the analysis was informed by the author's involvement in the film project *Histoires de Twarab à Marseille* (Carvajal et al. 2016). In this line of thought, Fritsch also unveils how she engaged with the unease of her privileged positioning in a postcolonial research context by negotiating her role between activist and researcher as well as between outsider, potential ally, and accomplice to ethnicising, colonial-racist power relations.

The Diaspora of the Comoros in France identifies three dimensions that demonstrate how processes of (self-)governing constitute the *dispositif* of communitarisation for the Comorian diaspora in France: spaces, cultural markets, and politics of communitarisation.

With regard to spaces, Fritsch demonstrates how spaces are connected to racialised, ethnicised, and classed biopolitics that govern communities in terms

of which spaces they can occupy and which discourses and policies exist about these spaces. She establishes that, on the one hand, state institutions govern diasporic communities through ethnicised bordering as racialised and classed urban policies as well as criminalising Othering discourses fix Franco-Comorian communities in the Northern – peripheral – districts of Marseille. On the other hand, Fritsch shows how communities govern themselves in relation to these ethnicised biopolitics: Franco-Comorian associations exert a (post)colonial translocal broker role between event halls and locality-based associations by negotiating belongings through strategic essentialism as coined by Gayatri Spivak. However, Fritsch unveils that Franco-Comorian communities also contest their fixing at the periphery, for instance, through the presence of twarab¹ posters in areas from which they are supposed to be excluded for gentrification purposes. At the same time, the analysis shows how cultural politics and dominant discourses follow colonial logics as they promote certain spaces and artists as manifestations of cosmopolitan “mixing” that should contribute to the image of France as a “tolerant nation” (p. 93).

With regard to cultural markets of communitarianisation, Fritsch outlines two types of events that indicate postcolonial (self-)governing. First, twarab events are entangled with ethnicised and economic self-governing: Despite its various sources, twarab is attributed to Comorian customs and tradition by a re-traditionalisation process that is related to the ethnicization of Comorian communities in opposition to a multicultural (French) centre. On the economic side, twarab events are organised for the purpose of infrastructural fundraising for Comorian localities but marginalised in the dominant French cultural market. Thereby, twarab answers urgencies of Franco-Comorian identity building as well as translocal fundraising for Comorian localities. Against this background, twarab artists engage in ethnicised entrepreneurship that draws from customs and (re-)produces gendered, aged, ethnicised, and classed relations, for instance through a hierarchical public-private and productive-reproductive task division between male and female artists. In addition, Comorian artists experience ethnicising biopolitics as their subjectivations are communitarianised in ways that facilitate their physical mobility to the postcolonial metropole, while fixing their artistic work with twarab music practices.

In a second, neoliberal multicultural context, Fritsch identifies linkages between ethno-preneurialism and the dispositif of communitarianisation in the talent show *Etoiles Rasmi*. The show promotes self-governing towards ethno-preneurialism in

¹ Twarab refers to a practice of music played during events that are organised by Franco-Comorian associations with the aim of infrastructural fundraising for localities on the Comoros.

which younger generations perform hyphenated, Franco-Comorian identities while still drawing on and at the same time valorising traditionalised, e.g. gender, roles of reproductive cultural transmission. The author highlights the ambivalent effects of ethno-preneurialism that leads to a commodification of culture through neoliberal (self-)governance, but also opens possibilities for claiming rights in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism. Fritsch shows instances of self-governance on the side of Franco-Comorian youth who attempt to re-connect themselves to Comorian culture and traditions through music. At the same time, performances of Frenchness require Franco-Comorian youth to commodify their ethnicised origin as resource within a neoliberal multicultural market while fixing the customs their music is related to in the(ir) past. Thereby, a French narrative of progress comes into play in which diasporic actors leave their ethnicised origins behind in order to adhere to French Republican values.

As a third dimension of the *dispositif* of communitarisation, Fritsch elaborates on ethnicised biopolitics and (self-)governing that mobilise notions of origin and culture in the domain of politics during the municipal elections 2014 and departmental elections 2015. This happens in a context in which any mobilisation based on categorisations like ethnicity is defamed as *communautarisme* and thus as opposed to the French nation and republicanism. The author identifies these mobilisations as responding to the urgencies of assimilationist secularised integration discourses and the need for (political) representation of ethnicised communities. Relating politics of communitarisation to Bhabha's concept of postcolonial mimicry, Fritsch shows how mimicry unfolds in governing Franco-Comorian actors through "assimilationist citizenship practices and Othering as well as ... in negotiations of French Republicanism and notions of Frenchness on the part of members of ethnicised and diasporic communities" (p. 171). An important form of subjectivation in that regard is that of the (post-colonial) "broker" as Franco-Comorian politicians act as intermediaries between French state actors, Franco-Comorian associations, and elites. They engage in postcolonial mimicry by assimilating to the French political system while also contesting the colour-blind myth of French republicanism as they unmask the normalising of the white French population and the failure of French Republicanism that the need of ethnicised parties represent.

Fritsch sees these three dimensions as indicative of the urgencies of ethnicised (self-)governing of the Comorian diaspora that emerges at the intersection of diasporic networks and necessities on the one hand, and the racializing French postcolonial context, on the other hand. As a final conclusion, the author emphasises the value of the *dispositif* of communitarisation, ethnicised biopolitics and (self-)governing for unveiling the ambivalent relationship of French republican-

ism and ethnicization processes as well as the resistant potential in processes of communitarisation that unfold within postcolonial (assimilationist) contexts.

Through these insights, Katharina Fritsch has written a book that presents significant contributions to studies on postcolonial African diasporas, to Foucauldian theories and their implementation in translocal and postcolonial contexts, and to methodological considerations in postcolonial research settings.

Researchers interested in postcolonial African diasporas will benefit from this book's analysis of diasporic embeddedness in translocal postcolonial power relations as manifesting in cultural and political events. Empirical examples and various quotes from interactions and protocols create a lively vision of cultural markets and political mobilisations in Marseille. Through their power-sensitive analysis, Fritsch demonstrates clearly how imperative it is to consider the colonial legacies and racist structures that shape the realities of postcolonial diasporas in contemporary France. In addition, regular references to more recent events and occurrences like, for instance, the reinforcement of gendered and racialised divisions on the French labour market throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, make us see how what happened between 2013 and 2015/16 is still relevant and persists until today.

Moreover, Fritsch dismantles apparent contradictions in the discourses on and practices of ethnicised (Comorian) diasporas in France by unveiling their ambivalent and complex relations to power. Her dispositif-analytical implementation of Foucauldian theories explicates the workings of discourses, practices, institutions, and subjectivations in "cleavage between Republicanism and *communautarisme* as a result of postcolonial power relations" (p. 6). At the same time, Fritsch refrains from homogenising representations and shows the hierarchies and contestations that happen within the Comorian diaspora, for instance, along the lines of gender, generation or locality. While the author does acknowledge the institutional intersection of gendered and racialised power inequalities as, for instance, in access barriers to the job market in Marseille, a more continuous analysis of this on the state level could have added complementary insights to the book's thorough intersectional analyses on the community level. However, its focus on diasporic communities and individuals also contributes to destabilising a dominant focus on the French Republic.

Exactly this primary concern for diasporic actors points to a third, powerful contribution that Fritsch provides with her book. Her empirical and analytical reflections go beyond the obligatory description of her own positioning and scrutinise her influence on specific research interactions and interpretations. Thereby, Fritsch has employed a high level of – sometimes searingly honest –

self-reflexivity and accountability. In doing so, she shows a remarkable level of transparency on decisions during the research and writing process. These reflections do not aim at shielding her against critique but unveil the moments in which privileged researchers struggle to navigate power inequalities in their research encounters. This innovative openness lines up beautifully with the increasing importance of post- and decolonial research ethics in social sciences.

To conclude, with *The Diaspora of the Comoros in France*, Fritsch offers an intervention that responds to socio-political and academic urgencies in postcolonial France, as she offers important topical, theoretical, and methodological contributions to a context where racialised groups are invisibilised and critical academics are increasingly under pressure.

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