Missionary local language texts in portuguese timor from the late to the early 20th century: europe-centric minstranslation and its social and intellectual impact

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Observers of Timorese culture have long maintained a preoccupation with the term Lulik. Its meanings have fluctuated in the past one-and a half centurie with prominent associations including idolatry, the sacred or prohibited, black magic, Timorese animist expression, or the core of Timorese culture.But Timorese have also commonly used the word as an adjective. This paper attempts to trace the origin of the bifurcated usages of the word Lulik through a reading of early missionary efforts to translate Portuguese religious texts into Tetun since the 1870s. In the early European missionaries ethnographic reports, Lulik was identified as the Other of Catholicism, the opponent to be suppressed. It was adopted as the translation of idolatry in missionary Tetun texts. However, it was impossible to maintain the singular pejorative meaning of Lulik, as the Timorese preferred to call Catholic priests nai lulik (Lord Lulik). A Timorese collaborator on Bible translation further took advantage of the missionaries ignorance of Timorese culture and language: Jesus was called Maromak Oan (the ritual ruler in Wehali) and liurai (the indigenous executive authority), while Caiaphas became the head sacerdote (the Portuguese word for priest) and Pontius Pilate was called Em-Boot (the title for a Portuguese governor). The upshot was that an attempt to present Catholicism as a European religion failed in Tetun, and the Passion became a story of an innocent native who was executed by the colonial and religious authorities. The missionaries Europe centric mistranslation of Lulik and the Timorese cosmology, however, strongly influenced the way the academic discourse on Lulik has developed in the following generations