The present work proposes to make a systematic, constructive and critical study of the religious philosophy of the Meeteis of Manipur. Hinduism is of comparatively recent introduction in this land. The Meeteis have adopted the tenets of Chaitanyaite Vaisnavism but they retain many characteristics inherited from their prehistoric ancestors. It is believed by many Western and Indian scholars that before the advent of Hinduism, the Meeteis were animists. The aim of the thesis is to reject this view and show how the ancient Meetei seers developed a full-fledged religious philosophy.

The Meeteis had a script of their own. They had religious texts (puyas) composed by the wise men of the land. During the reign of Pamheiba (1709-1748), when Vaisnavism became the official religion of the state, ancient Meetei script was replaced by the Bengali script and many sacred manuscripts concerning the old faith were destroyed. Our study of the traditional religion of the Manipuris is based on those ancient texts which are available today. Some of them are in the archaic script, while others are rendered into modern Manipuri. Mention may be made in this connection of the royal chronicles, the Cheitharol Kumbaba. This book traces the history of the Meeteis from A.D. 33 up to modern times. A second set of chronicles, the Ningthourol Lambuba, contains many aetiological legends and supplements the Cheitharol Kumbaba at various points. There is, however, little documentary evidence for
some beliefs and practices and consequently information concerning them is collected from maibas and maibis, the priests and priestesses of the traditional religion.

The thesis is divided into nine chapters. The introductory chapter deals with the evolution of ancient Meetei society and examines the different theories of the origin of the Meeteis. Chapter II describes the nature and function of the various deities (lai), rejects the naturalistic interpretation of the Meetei pantheon and exhibits the monotheistic tendency in the ancient faith. The Meetei thinkers were not unmindful of the philosophical problems of the origin and development of the world. Chapter III deals with the theory of creation of the world as described in different puyas. In chapter IV an attempt is made to reconstruct the image of man as revealed in the religion of the Meeteis. Chapter V brings out the significance of different traditional festivals of the Meeteis and special attention is paid to the Lai Haraoba which has produced one of the most beautiful schools of religious dancing in the world. Chapter VI describes the various rites associated with the indigenous faith and indicates the moral and religious beliefs of the people. Chapter VII turns to the ethics of the Meeteis and examines their belief in the divine law in the preservation of order in nature as well as in moral life of man. In Chapter VIII an attempt is made to show the transition from the traditional faith to Vaishnavism. In this connection parallels are drawn at so many points between Hinduism and the Meetei religion. The conclusion puts in a
nutshell the results of the discussion.

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