

# A Study on Vadakkan Pattu

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## Abstract

The *Vadakkan Pattu* are folk ballads of North Kerala that embody a tradition of hero worship. Originating in the regions of North Malabar such as Kadathanad, Kolathunadu, and Wayanad—well known for their *kalaripayattu* training—these ballads narrate the lives of warriors from renowned families like Puthooram and Thacholi, celebrating their valor and achievements. Composed in the form of folk songs, the *Vadakkan Pattu* were spread across the land by the *Panans* (wandering bards), as the ballads themselves attest. Over the years, many Malayalam films have been produced based on the themes and stories of these heroic songs.

## Introduction

The *Vadakkan Pāttu* (Northern Ballads) celebrate and portray some of the legendary heroes of ancient Kerala. This body of narrative songs is believed to have originated around the time of Ezhuthachan, who lived until the late sixteenth century. These ballads recount the heroic deeds of the brave warriors who lived in North Malabar, especially in Kadathanad and the surrounding regions.

They vividly describe *kalaripayattu* (martial training) and methods of warfare. The stories mainly revolve around the valorous men of two famous families—*Thacholi Manikoth House* and *Puthooram House*. Notable among them are Thacholi Othenan, Thacholi Chandu, Aromal Chekavar, Aromalunni, Palattu Koman, Aringodar, Karumparambil Kannan, and Puthunadan Kelu. Alongside these warriors stand celebrated women of courage such as Kudarmatala Konki and Attumanamel Unniyarcha, who were considered the pride of Kerala in their time. The respect and recognition these heroes and heroines enjoyed from their communities and rulers are clearly reflected in the songs.

The main stage of their adventures was Kolathunadu, Kadathanad, Wayanad, and Vadakara. Even kings would seek the help of the *chekavars* (warriors) to discipline enemies whom they themselves could not subdue.

The *Vadakkan Pāttu* resound with heroic and wondrous emotions. Their distinct features include a pure folk idiom, directness and clarity of narration, and a style of singing accessible even to those without formal musical training. The imaginative beauty and tender charm of the poet's vision are striking, as in the awe-filled exclamation: “*Are there women like this anywhere else on earth?*”

## Background

The *Vadakkan Pattu* (Northern Ballads) have been passed down orally from generation to generation for centuries. Though minor additions or omissions may have occurred over time, they have largely survived without major damage. These ballads are believed to have been composed in the 17th or 18th century, though the characters themselves might have lived earlier.

The principal figures belong to two prominent families: the *Puthooram Veedu* (a Thevar lineage) and the *Thacholi Manikoth Mepayil* (a Nair lineage). Most *Vadakkan Pattu* revolve around the heroic stories of these houses. Thus, two main collections exist: the *Thacholi songs* and the *Puthooram songs*.

Heroes and heroines like Thacholi Othenan, Aromal Chekavar, Unniyarcha, Palattu Koman, Palattu Kunjikannan, Aromalunni, and Payyampalli Chandu feature prominently in these ballads. In addition, several independent songs exist outside these collections, focusing on figures such as Poomathe Ponnamma, Mathileri Kanni, Kuruli Chekon, and Thacholi Kunjichandu.

These heroic characters of Kerala often remind us of the medieval knights of Europe.

### Classification

The *Vadakkan Pattu* are generally classified into three groups: *Puthooram songs*, *Thacholi songs*, and *single/independent songs*.

### Puthooram Songs

The *Puthooram songs* celebrate the warriors of the Puthooram family, a Thevar lineage of Kadathanad, renowned for their martial valor during the sixteenth century. These songs glorify heroic figures such as Aromal Chekavar, his sister Unniyarcha, and Kannappanunni.

Among them is the famous story of Aromal Chekavar—his participation in the *ankam* (duel) at Puthariyankam, as well as his tragic death. The tale narrates how Aromal, after defeating Aringodar Chekavar in a duel fought to settle a family feud, was treacherously betrayed and murdered by his relative and companion Chandu Chekavar.

### Thacholi Songs

The *Thacholi songs* focus on the Nair family of *Manikkoth Mepayil* near Vadakara in Kadathanad. These ballads mainly recount the heroic exploits of Thacholi Othenan, a legendary warrior of Kadathanad. Alongside him, they also mention other notable warriors such as Thacholi Ambadi, Thacholi Chandu, Payyampalli Chandu Chekavar, Palattu Koman, and Kelumooppa of Ponnappuram Fort.

One of the central stories narrates how, during the *aarattu* festival at Lokanarkavu, Othenan quarreled with Kadirur Gurukkal, leading to a duel between them. Othenan slew the Gurukkal in combat, but while returning to retrieve his forgotten sword from the arena, he was shot dead by Mayankutti, a Mappila marksman. The assassin had been arranged by Parunthunkal Emman Panicker, a close friend of Kadirur Gurukkal.

Othenan was only 32 years old at the time of his death, and this forms the central theme of the *Thacholi songs*.

### Vadakkan Pattu Films

Several Malayalam films have been produced based on the myths and legends of the *Vadakkan Pattu*. The first among them was *Unniyarcha*, released in 1961 by Udaya Studios. In 1978, *Thacholi Ambu*—the first CinemaScope film in South India—was released, also based on the *Vadakkan Pattu* tradition. Another landmark film was *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha*, released in 1989, for which Mammooty won the National Award for Best Actor.

Most of the *Vadakkan Pattu*-based films in Malayalam were scripted by Sarangapani.

### Vadakkan Pattu (Northern Ballads)

The *Vadakkan Pattu* are heroic folk ballads that originated in North Kerala. Their essence lies in celebrating the lives and valor of warriors from families like Puthooram and Thacholi, well-known for their *kalaripayattu* martial training in the regions of Kadathanad, Kolathunadu, and Wayanad. These ballads, composed in the style of folk songs, were spread across the land by wandering singers called *Panans*, as the songs themselves mention.

Many Malayalam films have been made based on the myths of the *Vadakkan Pattu*.

In Malayalam folk literature, the two most important categories of songs are *Vadakkan Pattu* (Northern Ballads) and *Thekkan Pattu* (Southern Ballads). These narrative songs of valor were widely sung among the common people of North and South Kerala over the centuries. Later, several popular films were produced based on *Vadakkan Pattu* stories, though the film narratives often deviated from the original songs. The *Thekkan Pattu*, however, have never been adapted into films. Together, these two groups of ballads form a major part of Malayalam folk literature.

### Thekkan Pattu

The *Thekkan Pattu* are folk songs once popular in South Kerala, especially in the present-day Thiruvananthapuram district and the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu. They were composed in a Tamil-mixed Malayalam, reflecting the cultural contact between South Kerala and Tamil Nadu. These ballads narrate stories of warriors and royal families and were mainly used in the performance art form called *Villadichampattu* (bow-song).

They can be classified into three categories:

1. Songs to appease malevolent spirits.
2. Songs based on local histories.
3. Songs dedicated to the worship of deities.

Underlying them was the belief that brave kings, noble women, and heroic warriors who died untimely deaths could become *madan* or *yakshi* (malevolent spirits), and thus had to be appeased through songs. The *villadichampattu* performances were intended for this purpose.

The *Thekkan Pattu* also drew inspiration from many historical events between the 9th and 18th centuries AD. Some of the major examples include the *Kannadian War*, *Ulakude Perumal Pattu*, *Purushadevi Ammapattu*, *Anchuthamburan Palattu*, *Iravikkutty Pillai's Battle* (the Kaniyamkulam war), *Panchavan Kattuneeli Pattu*, *Chamundi Katha*, *Ramayana Ballads*, *Kunjuthambi Katha*, *Diwan Vetti*, and *Dharma Raja's Rameswaram Pilgrimage*.

Many of these were composed during the 17th–18th centuries, a time when Malayalam had developed into an independent language, though Tamil influence remained strong due to South Kerala's close cultural ties with Tamil Nadu.

### References

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