Ketchimale Mosque

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The immaculate Ketchimale Mosque is one of the oldest Muslim shrines in Sri Lanka

Ketchimale in Beruwala is a mosque of miracles, the biggest of which is that all religions and races mingle there with the same devotion.

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A religious lesson is delivered by the
Mawlawi

The sky and seas were blue. The white foam crashing against the rocks on the shore, however, matched the clear white of Ketchimale Mosque, our destination. It’s a building standing on a promontory, like an anchored ship. It is almost surrounded by the ocean, and has a fishing harbour on one side.

If you look down on the harbour from the mosque, you'll see it crowded with colourful boats, like part of an English seaside village.

The mosque painted white is solid, though not big. Its roofs are crowned with much ornamentation, including many crescent-and-star signs. The origins of the place go back to the 12th century, when seven royal princes from Aden (Yemen's former capital) landed on our shores. Though the Sinhalese king extended warm hospitality to them, these princes, led by one Ash-Shaikh Ashraff Waliullah, wanted to lead a life devoted to their religion, and therefore moved to this beautiful piece of land in Beruwala. Once Waliullah passed from this life he was buried here.

Upon entering the mosque, we were led to the prayer hall, the biggest room in the complex. Each person who comes to pray must enter this space after ritual ablutions in the bath in the porch of the mosque. Garbed in long robes and skullcaps, the congregation that day was led in prayers by a distinguished Yemeni *'Mawlawi'* (religious scholar). The sonorous, rhythmic praying voices rose gradually in unison. The room they were praying in had a feel of order and devotion. From the checkered roof hung a chandelier, and on the walls were framed prayers in Arabic. The men and boys were praying facing the glittering afternoon ocean, visible through the open windows.

After being privy to the prayer session, we were shown to the holy of holies in the mosque: Waliullah's tomb, surrounded by holy books.

It was not just the fact that Waliullah was buried here that exalted Ketchimale to holiness. There is more to the story. Some time after Waliullah's death, the chief of the Maradana Jumma Mosque in Beruwela was clearing the tomb when a thorn pricked him and he fell asleep. While asleep, the priest was approached by Waliullah who asked him to allocate the land to him. The first mosque thus built was a cadjan.

It was during Dutch times that Ketchimale became a reputed shrine. Some Dutch soldiers were attempting to demolish a part of the mountain where the building stood, when an unknown person scared the soldiers and made them flee.

It was following this incident that the mosque began to be regarded as miraculous. To this day it retains that reputation and Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Christians come here to receive blessings.

Ketchimale is not exclusive to Islamic devotees. It is one of those shrines, like Adam’s Peak, where the faiths mingle. Many Buddhist and Christian fishermen come here, and it has become a stopover forpilgrims on their way to popular destinations such as Kataragama. During the almsgiving called ‘*kanduri*’, when every visitor is given food to fulfillment, one day is allocated for devotees of other faiths.

A miracle is told of the mosque during British occupation. Governor Sir Arthur Hamilton-Gordon was passing Beruwela on his way to Galle his horse, all of a sudden, refused to move. All Sir Arthur could do was to set the horse free. The animal, badly agitated, calmed down only after reaching the holy grounds of the mosque.

The awe-inspired governor gave the entitlement of the land to the then caretaker of the holy place, one Abdul Cader bin Shaikh Yoosuf. Until then the land had technically been crown property. Many other miracles are recounted of Ketchimale, the most recent of them about the Boxing Day tsunami, when waves as high as six metres failed to damage the shrine.

As the peace of evening gradually crept over the Ketchimale mosque, it was time to bid adieu to its Moorish charm. Bats wheeled, the sun was disappearing, and we hurried down, leaving behind the white monument which we hoped will survive for another 700 years: a bulwark against ethnic or religious friction.