Voodoo, an Anchor, Rises Again
By DAN BILEFSKY

IT was past 3 a.m. in a dim basement in Flatbush, Brooklyn, and Jack Laroche, a Haitian-American computer engineer, nervously awaited his bride: a voodoo spirit named Ezili Freda who believers say has the power to lavish love and wealth and render wayward spouses impotent.

As four drummers pounded rhythmically, voodoo priestesses in bright-colored dresses danced in ecstatic circles, dousing the floor with rum and chanting, “Ayibobo!” — the voodoo “amen.” The bride’s dramatic entrance was signaled when a priestess in a shimmering pink silk dress started trembling violently, her eyes rolling toward the back of her head before she fainted. When she came to, apparently possessed by Ezili Freda, she took Mr. Laroche’s hand and nibbled on his ear coquettishly before the happy couple exchanged vows in French.

Long misunderstood and maligned in Western popular culture, voodoo has become a spiritual anchor in New York City’s vast Haitian community and in Haitian enclaves across the country as practitioners look for comfort after the devastating earthquake in the impoverished Caribbean nation last year.

In New York, where there are roughly 300,000 people who were born in Haiti or are of Haitian descent — the largest concentration in the United States — richly painted basement voodoo temples are sprinkled around Harlem and in parts of Brooklyn and Queens. Mambos, or voodoo priestesses, say they can barely keep up with “demann,” or prayer requests; spiritual love recipes to lure recalcitrant lovers are the most popular. Voodoo prayer circles in which practitioners meet to commiserate have also proliferated, with a notable intensity in the months since the earthquake.

But the world of voodoo has fallen under an unwelcome spotlight in recent weeks
as a result of two episodes in which the authorities say voodoo played a central role — a fatal five-alarm fire in Brooklyn and the coming trial in Queens of a woman accused of severely burning her daughter.

The fire, in a building in Flatbush in February, was ignited by candles surrounding a bed during a ceremony in the apartment of a voodoo priest who the authorities said was hired by a woman to chase away evil spirits. The fire killed a 64-year-old woman in another apartment and left dozens of tenants homeless.

In Queens, a Haitian immigrant, Marie Lauradin, 29, is to go on trial this summer because prosecutors say she performed a voodoo exorcism ritual two years ago during which she lighted a flammable liquid in the form of a circle on a floor and placed her 6-year-old daughter, Frantzcia, within it, engulfing her in flames. Ms. Lauradin is charged with assault and endangering the welfare of a child.

The child’s grandmother Sylvenie Thessier, 72, whom prosecutors accused of doing nothing while her granddaughter was burned, was sentenced last week to one to three years in prison after pleading guilty to reckless endangerment.

The episodes have shaken the tight-knit and largely secretive voodoo community in New York, and practitioners say they were aberrant acts perpetrated by ignorant people who were abusing the religion.

Dowoti Desir, a Haitian-American voodoo scholar who has a temple in her home in Harlem, said the episodes were contributing to the demonization of voodoo and forcing people to practice it underground.

“Voodoo practitioners are in the closet for fear of being hounded or suffering reprisals,” she said. “The truth is that voodoo has been a source of empowerment for generations of Haitians.” (Many practitioners and scholars prefer alternate renderings of the word “voodoo,” like “voudou” or “vodun,” which they say more accurately reflect its origins.)

Some people are turning to voodoo in response to financial hardships caused by the recession. And among younger Haitian-Americans, voodoo is a means to reconnect with their roots.

Mr. Laroche, 35, nattily dressed for his marriage ceremony, said he had decided
to exchange vows with his spirit bride in search of cultural affirmation, career advancement and protection from affliction, financial or otherwise. “There is a misconception that if you practice voodoo you can turn your friends into goats,” Mr. Laroche said. “But voodoo is about getting back in touch with the past.”

In voodoo, a healing-based religion that was brought to Haiti by slaves from Western and Central Africa, followers commune with one God — Gran Met — by worshiping potent and sometimes temperamental lwas, or spirits, believed to hold sway over love, morality, reproduction and death.

According to scholars, up to half of all Haitians practice some form of voodoo, often in conjunction with Catholicism, which intermingled with the belief systems of enslaved West Africans when Haiti was a French colony.

Yet because the religion is often practiced furtively in basement temples, and because of its emphasis on spirits, spells and animal sacrifices, it has been stigmatized as primitive.

But scholars stress that voodoo has played a central role in Haitian history, sustaining people who have endured oppressive governments, grinding poverty and natural calamities.

Ms. Desir, a former professor in the Africana studies department at Brooklyn College, says voodoo has been vilified by Western culture going back to 1791, when a voodoo ceremony helped inspire slaves to rebel against their French colonial oppressors, sparking the Haitian Revolution.

Voodoo’s reputation inside and outside Haiti also suffered during the regime of François Duvalier, known as Papa Doc, who ruled Haiti from 1957 to 1971 and whose ruthless security force, the Tonton Macoutes, misused the religion as a means of repression. Mr. Duvalier even modeled himself after the Baron Samedi, the voodoo spirit of death, affecting a low nasal voice and wearing dark sunglasses to hide his eyes and instill fear and devotion.

After last year’s earthquake, some evangelical preachers, including Pat Robertson in the United States, said the catastrophe was related to Haiti’s “pact with the devil.”
There is no evidence that voodoo ceremonies have contributed in any notable way to fire trends in New York, according to the Fire Department. But Jim Long, a department spokesman, said it was worrisome when alcoholic substances were used for purposes like lighting fires. In many ceremonies, practitioners use rum or a flammable, lemon-scented perfume that can be bought for about $10.

Much as clergy members in other religions accept payments to perform rituals like marriages and baptisms, voodoo priests and priestesses typically charge for their services, in part to help pay for the expensive tastes of spirits like Freda, who favors offerings like pink Champagne, believers say. Prices can range from $300 for a recipe to infatuate a wary lover to $5,000 for a full-fledged exorcism in which evil spirits are transferred from humans to other animals, like pigs.

Mr. Laroche said he paid $10,000 for his marriage ceremony, a price he said was more than justified by the benefits the good will of the spirits would bring.

Ms. Desir said that aspiring voodoo priestesses and priests typically apprenticed with an experienced mentor and that it could take up to five years to master the botany, healing and drumming rituals of voodoo. In the absence of a governing body to regulate the religion, she said, profiteering by an unscrupulous few has made it vulnerable to fraud.

Edeline St. Armand, a mambo who built a voodoo temple in her basement in Canarsie, Brooklyn, said that when she arrived in the neighborhood more than 20 years ago, an Italian family living next door moved away after a few days. “They were afraid and thought that Haitians are witches,” Ms. St. Armand said.

Ms. St. Armand said voodoo rituals at her temple, Société La Belle Venus II, were attracting hundreds of people from across the city, including Wall Street bankers seeking spells to guard against falling share prices and homemakers aggrieved about wayward husbands. She said that because the religion was focused on curing people physically and spiritually, some misguided people were turning to voodoo with the wrong intentions.

“I would never use voodoo to do harm or to kill a merger-and-acquisition deal,” Ms. St. Armand said. “I try and only use it to do good.” She said she had recently helped a repentant convict seeking to overturn his drug-possession conviction, but immediately threw out someone who asked her for a spell to allow him to
have unprotected sex.

For many practitioners, voodoo is a matter of cultural identity. Ms. Desir, 50, recalled that her Catholic mother had been aghast when, as a rebellious young adult living in Queens and studying anthropology at Barnard College, she also decided to study to become a mambo. “I personally don’t hide the fact that I am a voodoo priestess; it is a crown that I wear proudly,” Ms. Desir said. “My role is not to create love potions but to help reconnect with African culture.”

For Mr. Laroche, who came to New York when he was 5, voodoo is a tie to his family’s home in Port-au-Prince. He sees no contradiction between wielding an iPhone and marrying a voodoo bride. During the marriage ceremony, Mr. Laroche said he planned to celebrate his nuptials with his girlfriend, who he said had little reason to be jealous. She had already married Ogou, a virile, cigar-smoking spirit who is said to provide strength and protection.