For Monica Tetzlaff, IU South Bend associate professor of history, a Fulbright fellowship to teach and conduct research for 10 months in Ghana was her first academic venture abroad. In Legon, Tetzlaff co-taught seven classes in history and interdisciplinary studies at the Institute of African Studies. Her research into the human rights of people accused of witchcraft carried her to the northern reaches of the country. Originally a historian of America, especially African American history, the route to committed internationalist was an indirect but inevitable one.

Tetzlaff grew up in a white community in Florida, “pretty much unaware of racial issues. Teachers were uneasy dealing with the Civil War because it was so controversial. They kept peace by avoiding difficult topics. College really opened things up for me. I was searching spiritually, and courses in African American literature and history helped me to know my own growing up in a different way.”

In graduate school, she turned her focus to the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. “I thought early on as a child that war was wrong, but how did we do with the peace? The chance that Reconstruction brought was lost as we abandoned African Americans to racist organizations, sharecropping, and the like. I came to worry more about the way violence was done during the peace.”

This interest in civil rights movements, especially as they relate to African Americans, spurred Tetzlaff to look for context beyond U.S. borders. Her
colleague in South Bend, Associate Professor of Education Kwado Okrah, was born in Ghana and was researching movements in Ghana to eliminate witchcraft accusations. He invited her to join his study and especially to provide the historian's perspective.

Tetzlaff cites a Gallup statistic that 77 percent of Ghanaians believe in “witchcraft,” an imprecise English term for the existence of spiritual powers for malevolent ends. “All cultures have spiritual beliefs to explain misfortune. Anthropologist Vincent Boi-Noi, bishop of a diocese in Northern Ghana, explained to me that Africans, when bad things happen, ask who, not why or how. Who is responsible for this misfortune?” Witches are believed to injure, sicken, or kill their victims at night. Their envy or anger is considered the motivation for the attack.

“My interest is not why witchcraft accusations happen, but what people are doing to help those accused. As I study the civil rights movement in the U.S., so in Ghana I studied the things people are doing to protect human rights. Those accused of witchcraft are often banished to small villages in rural areas where their powers are kept in check by a traditional priest. Although anyone can be accused of witchcraft, women are the most likely to suffer. Men will fight back; more men are educated and have much more awareness of their rights. In the end, you have the most vulnerable women banished to these villages, and 80 percent of these are widows. They’re told to go away because their families or neighbors are afraid of them and their power. Often children, mostly girls, are sent with them because the older women can’t survive on their own; they need children to work for them.”

At the national level, Ghana has passed laws that offer substantial protection and has ratified the U.N. conventions on the rights of children and the elimination of discrimination against women, more than the United States has done. However, a government short of money and the lack of police have made enforcement at the local levels difficult. “NGOs and community-based organizations take on the witchcraft issue as one of several women’s issues.”

Tetzlaff’s teaching and public lectures focused on the African diaspora. Thus, slavery was a common and ever-present topic. She visited the Slave Camp at Pikworo, in the far north of Ghana. “Enslaved people were tied and placed upon rocks where they were said to have eaten their meals. In each place, there were wells, either dug by the enslaved or occurring in the rocks.”

The Gambaga Outcast Home, village for those banished by accusations of witchcraft. The residents of the adjacent village “are generally not afraid of the women because they see their ‘human faces’ every day.”
Work must be done at several levels, Tetzlaff explained. “Improved living conditions, more available health care, more access to education—all would help. These are long-term solutions.” Activists have undertaken micro-interventions that do have a more immediate effect. “After things calm down, human rights workers make visits to the home village to see if a woman can be repatriated. Sometimes families come and take their relative home. Reintegrating takes a lot of work and may not be possible. Some women stay and die in the outcast village.”

To change public opinion, “activists use the radio, put on dramas, and recruit village youth into anti-witchcraft accusation groups. They organize durbars—calling everyone together, providing some food and entertainment (usually singing), and then talking about the issue.”

In the villages themselves, activists teach self-sufficiency skills and provide seed money for agriculture and setting up business ventures in soap making or necklace beading. “At first closing the camps sounded like a good idea, but very quickly I learned that the women themselves were saying, ‘Please do not close the camps; we fear for our lives.’ We hope the outcast homes will no longer be needed in 10 or 15 years, but the priority is the safety of the accused women.”

“Real change comes as people implement national policies,” Tetzlaff comments. “The thing that surprised me the most is the complexity of the solution; it touches all aspects of their lives. International perspective is important as well. There clearly is a problem: 500 to 1,000 women have been banished to camps. But consider the number that the U.S. has jailed unjustly. Ghana has problems, and we have problems. But this is not the only fact I want to take away. I will remember also the beauty in the people’s lives that I am studying.”

Tetzlaff now teaches a new course in modern Africa. “There hasn’t been anyone at IU South Bend teaching African history for a long time.” And although she has no immediate plans, she would go back. “I miss my friends there so much it hurts; they are so far away, and it will be a long time before I see them again.”
THE FAMILY ABROAD

The sojourn in Ghana was a family affair. Husband Brad Laird did volunteer work while there, organizing training for low-cost, biologically friendly water filters, and assisting the Quaker Meeting in Accra. Five-year-old daughter Hannah attended an international school with classmates from all over the world. “My goal was to have Hannah love Ghana,” Tetzlaff said. “She made friends easily. Having a child there opened up a whole different world of friendships for me as well. I would not have had such a wonderful year if it had not been for my family being there.”

“Hannah had a close friend whose mother sold fruit near our house. Abigail [left] was a little older than Hannah [right] and sometimes helped her mother wash and peel fruit after school. Hannah liked to join in, but what she really wanted to do was sell the fruit, which she wasn’t really ready to do at five years old. She carried boxes on her and generally imitated and enjoyed being part of the big people’s work. Mostly though, Abigail came over to our house and played with Hannah. Here the girls are playing ‘sails,’ a traditional Ghanaian game, outside our living quarters on campus.”

Read more of Tetzlaff’s Ghana experiences in her blog at mtetzlaf.wordpress.com.

ACTIVIST ORGANIZATIONS AGAINST ACCUSATIONS OF WITCHCRAFT

• ActionAid Ghana
• Anti-Witchcraft Accusation Campaign Coalition, Kenneth Addae, coordinator
• Pan-African Organization for Research & Prevention of Violence against Women and Children
• Witch-hunt Victims Empowerment Project, Simon Ngota, director
• Tiyina, Bawa Yakubu Abdulai, director

Left: Kenneth Addae, Activist