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Letters

On maternity and mortality

In "Parents don't always know best" (SN: 7/6/85, p. 9), it is implied that malnutrition due to unusually late weaning and sudden introduction to adult foods—at around 18 months of age—is a major cause of infant mortality in Africa, and that African families need to learn better family planning involving spacing and timing of pregnancies.

Although there have been few careful investigations into African maternity practices, they suggest that lactation amenorrhea—suspended ovulation the result of nursing—is employed by African women as a child-spacing device. In marginal nutritional conditions, ovulation may not resume for many months even after nursing has ceased. The longer the nursing period, the longer it will be before ovulation resumes. In the traditional frame of reference, therefore, late weaning may be said to improve

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rather than reduce the chances of child survival.

As for introducing children suddenly to adult foods, what other choice is there? Attempts to introduce Western baby foods into Africa would worsen the dependency syndrome of these societies and probably meet with the sort of opposition visited upon Nestle's powdered baby formula.

African societies need to address the question of whether traditional family planning strategies—as well as traditional family structural patterns in which polygyny affords a collective regulation of fertility—could, or should, be reconstructed.

Ronald W. Davis
Professor of History
Western Michigan University
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The same old song

Brian Belet insists (Letters, SN: 7/13/85, p. 19) that our appreciation of certain associated sonic frequencies of specified ratio is a learned response, i.e., without primordial basis. Why, then, do wild birds in widely separated areas (e.g., the forests of southeast Asia, the treeless plains of the southwestern United States) sing in our familiar, tempered, diatonic scale?

H. M. Davis
Chapel Hill, N.C.

Rust to dust

Environmentalists must be overjoyed to learn ("The Bugs of Rust," SN: 7/20/85, p. 42) that stainless steel process and power plants are biodegradable.

Charles M. Hart
Cranford, N.J.

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