

Nigerian State and the Palliative System: A Deliberate Weaponization of Poverty against the Masses

Adamson Duncan Ganiyu¹, Michael Daniel¹, Halima Abdullahi Godowoli², Usman Salihu¹

¹Department of Political Science, Kogi State University, Kabba, Nigeria

<http://orcid.org/0000-000218391885>

E-mail- gdadamson@ksukabba.edu.ng,

damichael@ksukabba.edu.ng susman@ksukabba.edu.ng

²Department of Political Science. University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri, Nigeria

halimahaabs@gmail.com

Corresponding authors: gdadamson@ksukabba.edu.ng

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Abstract

While there are significant volumes of studies on state and palliative system, little or no intellectual attention has focused on how palliative system has weaponized poverty among the masses in Nigeria. This paper explores how the Nigerian state deliberately weaponize poverty against its citizens and how the palliative system gives an idea of the weaponization of poverty that is endemic in Nigeria. It draws on the attention on how the widespread of poverty in Nigeria is webbed around a culture that situates people and their offsprings in a particular social stratum and engenders certain norms and practices that ensure that they not only remain there but accept their situation as normal. Like gun-wielding terrorists, the political class in Nigeria has consistently exploited the widespread poverty in the country to perpetuate themselves in power through palliative and crumbs, while the masses, who truly have the electoral power, have been made to groan under heavy suppression and oppression. Although, the danger or harm of the palliative system has reduced Nigerian masses to animals where Nigerian citizens are seen scooping rice with sand on bare floor, this is happening when we are not at war, the study found that the term "palliative" has taken on a deeper, more cynical meaning, becoming emblematic of the government's carrot and stick approach to managing the masses. Palliatives, once intended as temporary relief measures during times of crisis, have evolved into a tool of governance, a method of pacifying the population while maintaining control.

Keywords: Poverty, Palliative, Weapon, Nigerian State, Political Class

Introduction

Since the return to democracy in 1999, politicians in Nigeria have continued to cajole the electorates and Nigerian masses into giving them mandates using different exploitative cum inhuman strategies. Hitherto, the callous strategy of exploitation has contributed negatively to the development of democracy in Nigeria. Politicians display lackadaisical attitudes after assuming offices only to show up during election period with several palliative items and huge financial war chests to take advantage of the poverty of the electorates, the politicians themselves have deliberately facilitated for such a time as the electioneering period (Wasike, 2004).

In this connection, one segment of the Political class where there has been intense interaction between the masses and organised political actors in Nigerian cities and towns is the palliative system. Economic

hardship in Nigeria has fuel desperation and pushed the Nigerian masses to the edge of desperation by soaring food prices, unemployment and a plummeting standard of living, Nigerians are demanding urgent action. Recent research has indicated that economic situation in Nigeria seems to be getting out of hand in Nigeria, and the way people are now scrambling for food items wherever they can find (them) is a testimony to what is happening in the economy, instructively, we have witnessed deaths in places where food is being distributed as a result of stampedes and this is telling us that the policies of government might not be working. According to authorities, food and transportation costs in Nigeria have skyrocketed, more than tripling in just 23 months of the Tinubu administration, deepening the hardships faced by millions. A once-affordable bag of rice is now a luxury for many households, daily transportation fares have soared beyond what most people can pay. These rising costs have squeezed families already grappling with inflation, forcing many to abandon school commutes for children or skip meals entirely (Kefason, 2019).

Due to the political class eagerness to assure the masses of their performance, the political class devise a means to assuage hunger temporarily through the distribution of palliatives to the masses. Unsuspecting masses who live in abject poverty do not understand anything that will not bring immediate relieve to their hunger infested bellies. Any true politician, regardless of how noble his intents are, becomes a noisemaker before these electorates the moment it becomes clear to them that he may not meet their immediate needs of placating their hunger (Kefason, 2019).

However, because this hunger informed the decision of a larger chunk of the electorates, it has become a tradition among political class to abandon the electorates to wallow in wants until election approaches so that the politicians can comeback with enough palliative to sway minds directed by their stomachs into making favourable decision for these politicians. Poverty of the people is now a political weapon for politicians. And because poverty is a weapon, most politicians would not want to be disarmed of this weapon by ensuring the poverty among the populace is perpetrated and perpetuated. It is responsible to why the country, states and constituencies cannot enjoy sustainable development, because development will mean disarming the politicians of the weapon of poverty (Kefason, 2019; Asabor, 2025).

It is not an exaggeration to opine that in Nigeria that the term "palliative" has taken on a deeper, more cynical meaning, becoming emblematic of the government's carrot and stick approach to managing the masses. Palliatives, once intended as temporary relief measures during times of crisis, have evolved into a tool of governance, a method of pacifying the population while maintaining control (Asabor, 2025). Thus, since Man has often been described as insatiable and that is because a man may not always have enough resources to cater for himself. Not that he is greedy or has always refused to be satisfied but in truth, resources are often limited and so cannot serve the populace. Man is a social animal and tends to derive from the society what it can offer; however, in a country like Nigeria where the institutions are weak and political structures unbalanced, the populace tends to suffer the ills of the political class the more (Samuel, 2022; Asabor, 2025).

Previous studies have examined the poverty in Nigeria from tactical, strategic and technical angles and the reasons why there is poverty from the policy making angle (Lenshie, 2021), there has been little or no intellectual attention on the use of palliative as weapon by the political class against the Nigerian masses. This study explores the nexus between poverty and the palliative system been used by the political class to control the Nigerian masses. The study explains that, simply because a few people that can be described as political elite in the Nigerian state loot the wealth of their nations at the detriment of the larger populace, politicians all over Nigeria are self-serving, greedy, and corrupt, or perhaps if there is a worse word than corrupt it can be used to describe them. Political class in Nigeria are high and mighty and they tend to weaponize poverty on the masses at every given time. And that is partly because they control the resource and so can assign what they deem fit as enough to the populace (Samuel, 2022).

The methodology used in this study is qualitative. It heavily depends on observation, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). The documented data from academic and grey literature complemented field data. The analysis was thematic. The study uses socio psychological effect theory to assess the weaponization of poverty against the Nigerian masses. This study examines how the Nigerian state (political class) deliberately weaponize poverty against the masses through the palliative system. The study is organised as follows: the review of literature on poverty as a weapon in the hands of the political class, the study's context and methodology, How the political class weaponize poverty, palliatives and the

politics of poverty alleviation, palliative politics: the carrot and stick approach in the hands of political class, and the study's conclusion.

Study Context and Methodology

To investigate the complex dynamics of interactions between Nigerian State and the palliative system, this study used the qualitative technique to collect the data from key informant interviews and written documentation. Using a snowball sampling technique, stakeholders were interviewed for primary data collection through a referral process between January and June 2025. The sampled population for this study totaled 18 participants, including peri-urban and rural people, community representatives, government representative, security experts, security personnel from the military, police and the immigration service, and traditional rulers in some selected state and LGA.

The participation of these stakeholders in the data collection process was entirely voluntary and followed the principles of availability, accessibility, and anonymity. The participants requested to be anonymous, and for ethical reasons, their identities were not disclosed. This study generated documented evidence from academic and grey literature to support field data. Continuous comparative techniques were used to compare primary and recorded data to establish validity and dependability. When it was required to supplement material unavailable in the study's public space, valuable isolated data were employed.

The Review of Literature on Poverty as a Weapon in the Hands of the Political Class

Poverty may be seen as a situation where people spend one third of their income on food (Eitzen & Zinn, 1989). However, this conception of poverty is seriously inadequate since it may not aptly describe the measurement or incidence in developing nations where food is a major consumer of people's income.

The extant literature presents poverty as a tool used by the political class to underdeveloped the Nigerian masses through the palliative system. It explains that poverty as a fact of social existence has always existed in Nigeria and in any other society for that matter. What is new about poverty in Nigeria now is the fact that more and more Nigerians are daily becoming pauperized. Hence, Nigeria has a case of mass poverty.

Amadi (2023) noted that the Nigeria Poverty Map (NPM) shows about 133 million people which is about 63 per cent of the country's population are multidimensionally poor. Out of this, about 86.1 million of them representing 65 percent are said to be in the North, while nearly 47 million others representing 35 percent are said to be in the South. With these statistics it means that over half of the population of Nigeria are multidimensionally. The multidimensional poverty, according to the NBS, is higher in rural areas, where 72 percent of people are poor, compared to 42 percent of people in urban areas.

The late MKO must have strongly believed that poverty is man-made and can be eliminated with thought-out social and economic policies. But while the Hope '93 manifesto rightly fetched him sufficient votes to win the presidential poll, he never lived to achieve his poverty eradication agenda for the teeming Nigerian voters whose hopes for complete freedom from the heavy stronghold of criminal dictatorship were cruelly dashed. A famous civil rights activist, Jesse Jackson, once said that poverty is a weapon of mass destruction, institutionalised poverty has over the years become the greatest tool and asset of an average political class in the Nigeria. However, as explained by scholars, it is over 32 years now that Moshood Abiola, whose campaign inspired much hope, died, but the mission to free Nigerians from the claws of rampaging rulers has remained a mirage, while the country has continued to sink deeper and deeper into the abyss of poverty (Amadi, 2023). Between 1993 and now, the country has painfully emaciated like a child battling Kwashiorkor, as the so-called democrats who came after Abiola, instead of reducing the rising poverty, have consistently weaponised it to perpetuate themselves in power through the use of peanuts and palliatives. The people, who should hold the democratic power, wallow in the murky pool of poverty. Consequently, instead of brimming with abundance, the country, over the years, has notoriously become the poverty capital of the world (Kefason, 2019; Asabor, 2025).

Amadi (2023) in his article titled '*palliatives for who? NASS or the Masses*', he explained a perfect example on how the poverty situation can be likened to the old Russian empire dictator, Joseph Stalin, who one time offered what could be seen as a vivid description of how the Nigerian ruling class weaponise widespread poverty to consolidate political advantages. The Russian dictator had painted the picture when he gathered his closest advisors one time ago to show them how easy it was to control a person who had already been

conquered. He began the storyline by bringing in a live chicken, which he then proceeded to pluck until it was naked and bleeding. Stalin Noted

Now, watch where the chicken goes,” Stalin said as he put it on the ground. And finally freed from its torturer’s grasp, the chicken wasted no time getting away. However, when it failed to find an exit, it readily returned to Stalin and attempted to warm itself between the dictator’s legs. Stalin then took out some grain from his pocket, which he fed to the chicken. The chicken ate the grain despite the pain. When Stalin started to walk around the room, the chicken timidly followed him, leaving a small trail of blood wherever it went. “So, you see,” Stalin said to his advisors, smiling. “People are like chickens. You pluck them, and then let them go. Then you can control them,” he added (Nye & Welch, 2011 p.15).

When compared to the Nigerian situation, the chicken can be seen as an average hunger- stricken Nigerian, with the Russian dictator being a typical Nigerian political class, while the grains depict the lump sum of money and palliatives the political gladiators often throw to the people to cow them into submission during and after election period.

In the civilized world, poverty can be caused by laziness or the unwillingness of an individual to find a paid job. Interestingly, this is not usually the case in Nigeria, however, that is not to say that there are not Nigerians that are lazy and unwilling to work. But the majority of Nigerians are hard-working as have been proven by their exploits in foreign countries when they find a way to elope the continent. Poverty in Nigeria is often caused by the cluelessness, greed, inefficiency, of the political class, and their will to institutionalize poverty across the continent. And one means they have used to institutionalize poverty is palliative and illiteracy. Politicians in Nigerians are like oligarchs who don’t ever want to hand over power to any other person other than their cronies and their children. If you visit the Northern part of Nigeria illiteracy of the masses becomes more glaring (Samuel, 2022).

This way, leaders from that part of Nigeria have cemented that their places in the society. They deprive the masses of education because they fear that if they (the masses) are educated they will have better chances of being rich and that will break their (the political elite) grips over them.

A Theoretical Discourse on the Socio-psychological Effects

The socio psychology theory’s central premise is that language describes and mirrors social realities and changes them in an iterative and non-static manner (Butler, 1999). Offering the socio-psychological effects of the anomaly, a columnist with the West African Pilot, Okey (Oduma) Chidolue, explained that, weaponised poverty turns many people into brutes, makes them make poor rational choices and remoulds them into willing tools in the hands of desperate politicians, with devastating effects on the society. He explained further that in Kenya, their political class provide employment opportunities to their youth and adult population alike. But in Nigeria, the elites provide palliatives, poverty and unemployment to unsuspecting youths and adults. That way, they cannot think right or think at all. And, this is the kind of toxic environment that enables so-called political class to hold onto power. According to him, The Nigerian state weaponization of poverty and political class rascality are bad. But judicial rascality is deadly. It is the beginning of the end for any democracy because no democratic government can survive judicial rascality and indiscretion, particularly in this day and age of social media.

While calling for sustained information campaigns, community action and locally enforceable public commitments to collectively shun palliatives distribution strategies and other clandestine tendencies of the Nigerian political class, Hoffmann said: “Political actors who share palliatives should be made to face stringent consequences. In his article entitled ‘Political Corruption and Poverty in Nigeria’ published in the African Journal for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, a lecturer in the Department of Behavioural Studies, Redeemer’s University, Ede, Osun State, O.O Faloore, said to reduce poverty, immunities of political class should be scrapped, while law courts should be strengthened to adjudicate without fear and favour and public annual declaration of assets of political office holders should be made compulsory.

The socio psychological effect thesis effectively decouples the Nigerian state and its political class. The analysis provides a realistic picture of how the Nigerian political class and elite sets priorities on how to use poverty as a weapon to distribute palliatives and impoverished the Nigerian masses the more. As the

country aches at all fronts, other observers have said the only way out is for the oppressed masses to keep speaking the truth to those at the corridor of power, just as they call on the government to take the people out of the current boiling point by cutting the cost of governance for the betterment of the hungry and angry Nigerians, saying if the government blocks all leakages and channeled public funds into meaningful development; the country would be better. But will this admonition be taken seriously by the Nigerian Masses, only time can tell.

Palliative Politics: the Carrot and Stick Approach in the Hands of Political Class

It is not an exaggeration to opine that in Nigeria the term "palliative" has taken on a deeper, more cynical meaning, becoming emblematic of the government's carrot and stick approach to managing the masses. Palliatives, once intended as temporary relief measures during times of crisis, have evolved into a tool of governance, a method of pacifying the population while maintaining control (Asabor, 2025). Today a holistically look the palliative system gives us an idea of the weaponization of poverty that is endemic in Nigeria. It is a fact that the Nigerian state deliberately weaponize poverty against the masses.

As opined by Afe Babalola a renowned legal luminary palliative measures are merely superficial solutions that fail to address the underlying economic challenges facing the nation. What Nigeria needs is not just temporary relief, as asserted by Babalola, "but sustainable solutions that uplift the people out of poverty, not keep them in perpetual dependence on government handouts. These concerns resonate with many Nigerians who have come to view palliatives as a distraction from the government's failure to implement meaningful economic reforms. The temporary relief provided by these measures often fades quickly, leaving the deeper issues of poverty, unemployment, and inflation unaddressed.

Oby Ezekwesili, a former Minister of Education, shares Babalola's sentiments. She has long criticized the government's reliance on palliatives, viewing them as symptomatic of a broader failure in governance. Palliatives are not a substitute for good governance, they are a symptom of a government that is reactive rather than proactive, one that fails to plan for the long-term welfare of its citizens. She emphasizes that the distribution of palliatives, while necessary in times of crisis, should not be the cornerstone of any government's strategy for managing the economy. Instead, she calls for policies that promote economic growth, job creation, and social equity, policies that provide Nigerians with the tools they need to build better lives for themselves, rather than relying on government handouts.

In addition to been deemed incapable of lifting the masses out of poverty, palliative bring in more poverty to the masses. Mass poverty in Nigeria in this democratic dispensation can be traced to the introduction of palliative system, which heralded the introduction of the neoliberal policies programme, which is far from facilitating economic recovery push Nigerians, with the exception of the political class, further down the ladder of penury.

Without a doubt, research revealed by renowned experts in various human endeavors have unanimously condemned palliatives, saying that it should not be a substitute for economic reform. In fact, not a few Nigerians versed in economic and economic disciplines have weighed in on the debate, urging the government to focus on structural economic reforms rather than short-term fixes, unanimously noting that palliatives should be a last resort, not a first response as they are a temporary measure to address immediate needs, but they should not be a substitute for the hard work of economic reform.

Scholars (Ezeibe, etal, 2017; Lenshie, 2021, Kefason & Asabor, 2025) argues that the over-reliance on palliatives reflects a lack of political will to tackle the more difficult challenges facing the nation, such as corruption, inefficiency, and the need for diversification of the economy. They call for a comprehensive approach to economic management that includes investment in education, infrastructure, and healthcare, as well as the promotion of entrepreneurship and innovation. Without sounding hyperbolic in this context, the voices of Babalola, Ezekwesili, Kefason, and other versed Nigerians resonate in the fact government's reliance on palliatives is unsustainable. They variously noted that carrot and stick approach, offering temporary relief to avoid unrest while imposing harsh economic measures, has created a vicious cycle of dependency and dissatisfaction.

For many Nigerians, palliatives are seen as a form of control, a way for the government to keep the masses in check without addressing the systemic issues that keep them in poverty. The carrot, in this case, is the

temporary relief of palliatives; the stick is the austerity measures, rising prices, and lack of opportunities that keep the people in a constant state of economic insecurity.

In fact, breaking this cycle requires a fundamental shift in the government's approach to economic management. Palliatives should not be the cornerstone of any administration's strategy for managing the economy. Instead, the focus should be on implementing long-term reforms that address the root causes of poverty and inequality, ensuring that all Nigerians have the opportunity to thrive.

As Afe Babalola and others have pointed out, the real solution lies in creating a sustainable economy where the people are empowered, not pacified. Until then, the carrot and stick approach will continue to be a symbol of the government's failure to provide true leadership and vision for the future of Nigeria.

How the political class weaponize poverty?

A poor man does not use palliative as a weapon. But it is obvious that in the present times the Nigerian masses have chosen to accept palliative as a weapon from the political class. While the masses are trying to overcome our economic weakness by using the weapons of the economically strong, weapons which the masses do not possess. Thus, by the Nigerian masses' thoughts, words, and actions it appears as if we have come to the conclusion that without palliative, we cannot achieve what we are aiming as collective Nigerian masses. It is as if the Nigerian masses have agreed that palliative is the basis of development. The Nigerian political class have made the masses to understand and accepted as *fait accompli* that without palliative there can be no development.

The notion of the political class in Nigeria is that they believe the distribution of palliative can solve all their electoral promises. Both the Presidency, the state Governors and other government officials, all put great emphasis and dependence on sharing palliative to the masses. The party leaders, and the party members themselves and other national institutions think, hope, and pray for the distribution of palliative by the political class. It is as if all Nigerians have all agreed to speak with one voice, saying, 'if we get palliative we shall develop, without palliative we cannot develop'.

In Africa, Mutiso and Rohio (2007) notes that when a member of parliament says that there is a shortage of water in his constituency and he asks the government how he intends to deal with the problem? he expects the government to reply that it is planning to remove the shortage of water in his constituency with palliative. When another member of parliament asks what the government is doing about the shortage of roads, schools, or hospitals in his constituency? he or she also expects the government to tell him that it has specific plan to build roads, schools, and hospitals in his constituency but, the government must first distribute palliative to his or her constituents. When union officials ask the government about its plan to deal with the low wages and poor housing of the workers, they expect the government to inform them that the minimum wage will be increased and that better houses will be provided for the workers but, palliative will have to be given to the workers first. In summary, over times for every problem facing Nigerian state, the solution that is in the political class's mind is the provision and distribution of palliative to the masses.

Palliatives and the Politics of Poverty Alleviation

Nigeria is caught in the politics of choosing the appropriate palliatives, to address the socioeconomic impacts of the abrupt removal of subsidy on Premium Motor Spirit (PMS). Before the presidential election of February 25, 2023, all the major presidential candidates had promised to remove subsidy on PMS, but with variations on what comes before and after. There seems to be a national consensus against petrol subsidy. Although one can argue that the consensus is more elitist, and that that removal, by understanding the economic case against subsidy. The case against subsidy is that it is inefficient. The standard argument is that the price of any good or service should be determined by its demand and supply. Demand and supply of the goods or service will reflect the true costs of its production, and the real value it has for consumers. When the right price prevails, there is incentive for the right kind of investment in the production of goods or services. Price control of all sorts distorts the market of products and ultimately deprives consumers of value. For sustained economic growth, it is important to allow right prices to prevail in the market. This is the standard argument of the anti-subsidy group (Amadi, 2023).

Furthermore, subsidy is perceived to ensure inefficiency in two ways. First, it encourages inefficient consumption. Because consumers do not pay the right price, they may be inefficient in consumption of the goods, since someone else bears the cost of the good. The standard theory of economic rationality is that

the price people are prepared to pay for the good or service shows the degree of preference they have for it. So, if the cost is not fully internalised in the price people pay, there will be over (inefficient) consumption. Furthermore, the distorted price may lead to inefficient investment in production activities.

In the case of petrol subsidy in Nigeria, the overwhelming argument of the anti-subsidy advocates is that Nigeria suffers huge fiscal crisis on account of subsidizing petrol. A country that services its debt with close to 100% of its revenue, should not be spending about \$10 billion annually on petrol subsidy, especially when a large quantity of such product is smuggled outside the country and sold for a higher price. In such a situation, Nigeria is also subsidising some fraudulent marketers. The facts of Nigeria's heightened fiscal crisis arising from low productivity, makes it urgent to remove the subsidy to escape acute fiscal crisis.

But removing subsidy removes one of the vital fiscal tools for controlling poverty. The main consequence of income poverty is that many will not be able to purchase many goods and services they need for normal human functioning and for productivity. Under consumption of essentials like energy, healthcare and education has adverse public consequences, which economists refer to as 'negative externalities'. Therefore, it is part of public sector economics that government encourages consumption of households and businesses from the rising energy costs from September 2021 to February 2023, according to report published by Reuters News. Within the same period, Britain and Norway allocated 103 and 8.1 billion Euros, as energy subsidy.

Replacing Subsidy with Palliative

The economics that totally dismisses the utility of subsidy, is not good public sector economics. There is a public interest in guaranteeing consumption of certain goods and services that are important to livelihood and sustained production. Subsidies are not inherently inefficient. But their administration could be inefficient. In the case of Nigeria, the corruption associated with government interventions, and the poor design and targeting of petrol subsidy, make it unaffordable in the current fiscal circumstances. It may be that the administration of petrol subsidy in Nigeria, makes compelling argument against it. The additional fact of a near financial bankruptcy of the Nigerian State, creates the consensus against subsidy as it exists, not necessarily subsidy as a tool of antipoverty.

The real issue now is how to manage the palliatives, designed to cushion the impacts of the subsidy removal. The most important starting point is to separate the impacts of the subsidy removal, and other general issues of poverty in Nigeria. Obviously, the removal of subsidy in petrol, aggravates poverty in its multi-dimensions. But we need to isolate and disaggregate the impacts of petrol subsidy, to effectively mitigate it. The category of poverty in Nigeria, is too broad to be used as the benchmark for effective intervention to mitigate the impact of the subsidy removal. We have chronic poverty; we have ultra-poverty; and we have multidimensional poverty. So, focusing generally on poverty may not be very useful in the specific case of petrol subsidy removal, because the removal has diverse impacts on diverse categories of the poor.

That raises the question, who should be targeted for the palliative? First, the working poor are the most vulnerable, as they will have less disposable income with the rising costs of PMS. The unemployed urban poor, will also be impacted to a great degree. Then the rural poor whose greatest exposure to the impact may be indirect through rising cost of food and other essentials will also be impacted. A palliative strategy that works will design different interventions for different categories of impacted community. For the working poor, palliatives may be in the form of increase in pay, palliatives can be in the form of free access to healthcare, education and such services. Government can also enhance their ability to buy essential foods. Well, delivered cash transfer could achieve these objectives. But it is also more susceptible to corruption and politicization (Amadi, 2023).

Conclusion

Democracy is meant to be a government decided by the people and this unilaterally implies that the masses who govern them and such persons end up as servant leaders. Good governance is the beauty of democracy but in Nigeria, democracy is ugly as leaders often turn to a dictator as soon as they are elected and sworn in and live off the masses.

Thus, the political class have discovered the weak point of many Nigerians. They know that the weak point of the poor man is his stomach. They also know that give a poor man food and he can dance naked in the market square. However, solving the issue of the weaponization of poverty by the political elite will no

doubt be a herculean task but we all can take joy in the fact that if Nigerian youths could pull off the EndSars protest then when they are ready, they will find a way to stop this weapon that has deprived them of the good life.

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