

CHAPTER 1 WHAT IS HISTORY?

Objectives

At the end of this chapter, students should be able to:

- define the term “history”;
- identify the major features of history;
- give reasons for the teaching of history.

Introduction

History has been identified in various ways by historians and non-historians alike. For this reason, there seems to be no precise definition for history. This chapter will examine the meaning of history, its major features and the reasons for teaching history.

1.1 Definition of History

The term “history” is derived from the Greek word ‘historia’ which means enquiry or to know. In this sense, history seeks to know the truth of what has happened in the past.

It also means that human beings from the distant past had been interested in knowing about their origin and events that took place before their own time. Such efforts to understand the past is not a waste. The reason is that the past is firmly connected to the present and to the future. So a good knowledge of the past will help to understand the present and to have a direction for the future.

Therefore, as a discipline, history is an organized study of past events aimed at understanding the present in order to have a better future. For instance, the study of Nigerian history will help us to know Nigeria’s past as well as the achievements and challenges she has faced as a country. Such knowledge will place us in a good position to avoid repeating certain past mistakes.

History has a number of basic features. One is that the focus of history is human beings and their actions. Also, natural occurrences, like floods and droughts, are studied as far as they affect human activities.

History studies past events and its lessons are used to understand the present.

1.2 Reasons for the Study of History

i. Understanding of cultural origins

History is taught to enable each generation know its roots as well as relationship with other societies in the past. In this way, history exposes each generation to its cultural heritage.

ii. Understanding the changing environment

History is the study of social change that takes place in the society in such areas as the economy, politics, science and technology. An understanding of these changes and the reasons behind them is important for the individual to make rational decisions in order to be relevant and useful in his society.

Students are therefore taught history to help them understand and cope with their rapidly changing environment.

iii. Production of future historians

History is an academic discipline like law, economics, biology and chemistry. History is taught to equip learners with the necessary historical knowledge and skills to be historians. Historical skills involved among, other things, include; sourcing information from pictorial, written and unwritten sources.

History students develop these useful skills as they undertake courses in history.

iv. Promotion of national consciousness

The teaching of history makes the learner to be aware of the unique nature of his country and to tolerate the diverse groups that live in it. A study of Nigerian history reveals that the various groups, such as the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, Ijo, Igala, etc. These groups had a very rich past and maintained close relationships with one another through trade. The knowledge of this will help to promote national consciousness and unity.

A historical study of the traditions of origin of the various groups also shows their inter-relatedness and close affinity. For example, Benin tradition of origin indicates a close relationship with Oyo. In this way, a learner will see other Nigerians as brothers and sisters.

By studying the contributions of our past leaders to national development, a learner will be inspired to identify with Nigeria and work for her development.

In all these ways, history can contribute to developing national consciousness among Nigerian groups.

v. Promotion of international understanding

History exposes the learner to other countries and peoples outside his own country. As he learns the culture of other people and their challenges, he will begin to understand why such people behave the way they do and will now be in a better position to relate with them,

History helps to illuminate the major causes of international conflicts and wars and also practical ways of avoiding them. For example, the formation of such international organizations, such as; the United Nations and the African Union, was to avoid the repetition of preventable international conflicts. Indeed, knowledge gained from history of wars can be used to persuade nations to live in peace.

vi. Development of critical thinking and judgment

History prepares the mind for critical reasoning, so that statements would not always be swallowed ‘hook, line and sinker’. Students of history learn to find out the truth by verifying available data.

Conclusion

History is very important for human and national development. The reason is that without the knowledge of the past, societies pay the costly price of repeating past mistakes.

History equips the learner with national consciousness, tolerance and critical minds.

Summary

- History seeks to know the truth of what happened in the past.
- History is an organized study of past events aimed at understanding present and future situations.
- History is concerned with human activities as well as how the natural environment affects human lives.
- History helps an individual to understand social change that takes place in his society.
- By studying history, an individual develops a critical mind necessary for survival in dynamic society.
- History promotes national consciousness and unity.
- Students develop historical skills through the study of history.
- History promotes international understanding

Revision Questions

Objectives

1. History is the study of _____.
 - A. past developments
 - B. future developments
 - C. rock formation
 - D. road construction
2. History is concerned with _____.
 - A. human activities
 - B. wild life
 - C. highway development
 - D. predicting the future
3. History promotes national consciousness by emphasizing _____.

- A. the relationship that existed among Nigerian groups
 - B. our rich cultural past
 - C. achievements of past leaders
 - D. differences that exist among the various groups
4. One important role of history is to promote _____.
- A. insecurity
 - B. national consciousness
 - C. poverty
 - D. ethnic consciousness
5. History develops in the individual a/an _____.
- A. critical mind
 - B. uncritical thinking
 - C. subsequent mind
 - D. doubtful mind
6. History is better used to promote _____.
- A. international peace
 - B. international wars
 - C. national crises
 - D. intergroup conflict
7. A student of history can develop the important skill of _____.
- A. sourcing and organizing information
 - B. buying and selling imported goods
 - C. building bridges
 - D. repairing vehicles
8. Knowledge of history makes an individual to be _____.
- A. hateful
 - B. tolerant
 - C. xenophobic
 - D. fearful
9. The study of past events is _____.
- A. useful and rewarding
 - B. a waste of time
 - C. unprofitable
 - D. useless
10. The study of history aims at understanding _____.
- A. present situations
 - B. past developments
 - C. future situations

D. past, present and future situations

Essay Questions

1. Define the term 'history'.
2. What are the reasons for the study of history?
3. In what ways does the study of history promotes national consciousness and unity?
4. Outline the features of history.
5. Explain how history ensures international understanding.