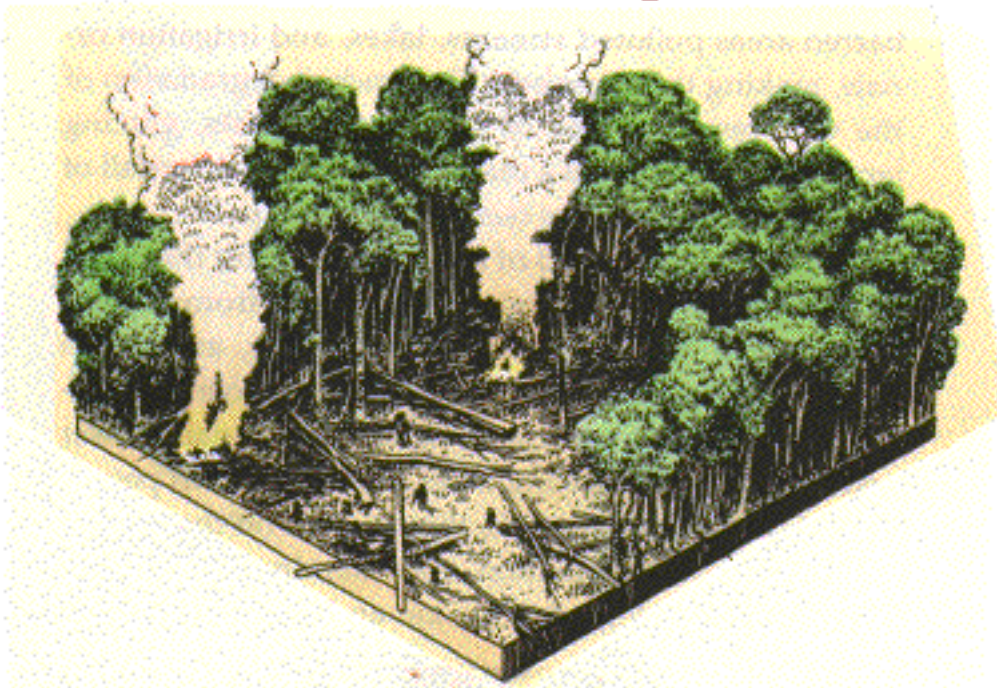


## G&ES 201: Geography of Latin America

**Shifting Cultivation** is one of a variety of names used to refer to a type of agriculture that is practiced in the tropics. In Latin America it is often referred to as *roza* (Spanish) or *roca* (Portuguese).

The agriculture is found in tropical areas in which there is an excess of precipitation over evaporation, resulting in a net downward movement of moisture through the soil. Soil nutrients are leached from the soil, leaving behind an acidic and infertile soil that is often reddish in color.

### Shifting Cultivation



**Leaching**

In spite of the infertile soils, these areas can support tremendous biomass and biodiversity. Tropical rainforests are among the most productive environments on land, supporting thousands of species of plants and animals.

Shifting cultivators will clear vegetation from a field and burn it, scattering ashes on the exposed soil and planting their crops.

Staple food crops are maize (especially in Mesoamerica) and manioc (particularly in the tropical lowlands of South America). Farming is accomplished primarily with hand tools including machetes, hoes, and digging sticks. Shifting cultivators are engaged in a subsistence activity, consuming most of what they produce.

As they farm soil fertility begins almost immediately to decline. Nutrients leach downward through the soil, but now there are no trees with the extensive root systems needed to capture the nutrients and return them to the living biomass. After one to three years farmers abandon their field and "shift" their operations to another location where the process is repeated.

**Ideally, abandoned fields would be allowed to lie fallow for a long enough period of time for tropical rainforest to reestablish itself. In reality, shifting cultivators may transform an area of productive and diverse rainforest into a grassland by repeatedly attempting to clear, burn, and farm an area before it has had time to return to something resembling its natural state.**



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