

# Plazas and ferias of Ambato, Ecuador<sup>1</sup>

Christoph Stadel  
Department of Geography  
Brandon University  
Brandon, Canada

Luz del Alba Moya  
Centro Ecuatoriano de Investigaciones Geográficas (CEDIG)  
Quito, Ecuador

## INTRODUCTION

Market locations (*plazas*) and their principal periodic markets (*ferias*) are major elements of the urban landscape and commercial activities of Ecuador. Markets (*mercados*) such as Ambato are the most significant link and expression of economic and social interchange between countryside and city, among the urban centers, and in the diverse ecological and economic regions of the country.

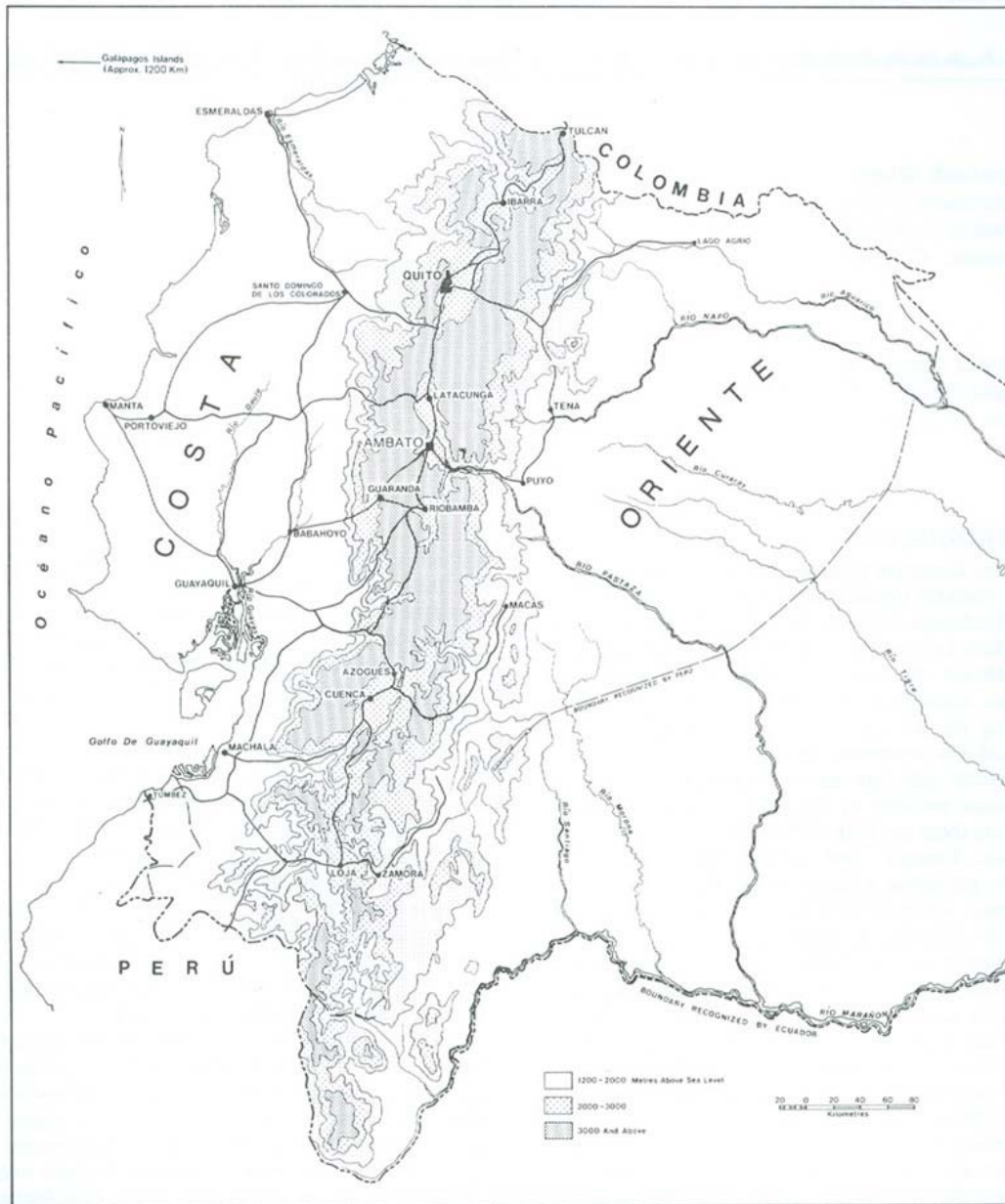


Figure 1

Several scholars have conducted research on highland markets in Ecuador, including Ambato. Among them are Sick (1963), Bromley (1975), and Wilkie, Lentnek, and Carroll (1983). In 1982, Bauer presented a thesis on the Plaza Pachano of Ambato. Most recently the co-author of this paper, Luz del Alba Moya, investigated various aspects of the market city of Ambato in a thesis (1986) and in several as of yet unpublished papers. Stadel, the other co-author of this paper, examined in 1986 and 1987 the socio-economic situation of *campesinos* in the province of Tungurahua, and in the summer of 1987 investigated the structure and activities of the major *plazas* of Ambato.

Ambato may be the largest periodic agricultural market and the most important interregional agricultural distribution and supply center of Ecuador. It has a national area of influence and a high degree of specialization, located within a rich and diversified agricultural region in the Sierra with relatively easy access to the lowlands of the Costa and the Oriente (Figure 1).

#### THE MARKET FUNCTION OF AMBATO

In 1982 Ambato had 101,236 people within its urban area and 131,809 people within its region of influence (Table 1). It is the capital of the province of Tungurahua, one of the smallest provinces of Ecuador but the third most important in agricultural production behind Guayas and Manabí (Table 2). The city is situated in the basin of the Ambato river, which is found in the upper Pastaza river drainage.

Table 1. Tungurahua population (1982)

Province of Tungurahua	326,777	
Canton Ambato	220,477	
Ambato (urban area)	131,809	
Ambato (city)	101,236	
	123,054 (1987)	
	184,807 (2001)	Projections
	206,171 (2006)	

Source: *Plan de Desarrollo Ambato* (based on Census), 1987

Table 2. Volume of major garden vegetables produced in the Ecuadorian Sierra in 1980 (metric tons)

Province	Onions	Garlic	Cabbage	Lettuce	Carrots
<b>Northern Sierra</b>					
Carchi	210	40	540	204	100
Imbabura	82	–	1,045	228	5,525
Pichincha	1,663	16	4,382	771	–
Cotopaxi	559	132	898	184	144
SUBTOTAL	2,484	188	6,865	1,387	5,769
Percentage	8.3	9.8	27.7	24.2	62.4
<b>Central Sierra</b>					
Tungurahua	12,600	623	1,080	1,352	228
Chimborazo	11,431	549	5,616	1,276	2,082
Bolivar	954	–	3,753	80	156
SUBTOTAL	25,985	1,172	10,049	2,708	2,466
Percentage	83.0	61.4	40.6	47.2	26.7
<b>Southern Sierra</b>					
Canar	744	–	3,450	450	260
Azuay	680	45	3,773	927	546
Loja	505	504	379	52	20
SUBTOTAL	1,959	549	7,702	1,429	826
Percentage	8.7	28.8	31.7	28.6	10.9

Source: CENDES, Banco Central del Ecuador, 1982.

Many crops are produced in the immediate hinterland of the agricultural market center of Ambato, including tropical and subtropical products (*naranja*, *babaco*, tree tomato, citrus fruit) in the Patate and Pastaza valleys; garden vegetables, fruit, and flowers in the Ambato basin; and onions, garlic, corn, potatoes and other tuber crops on the higher, cooler slopes near the city (Figure 2). Agricultural production is enhanced by the fact that Tungurahua has many *minifundia*, which favors high

rural population densities and agricultural diversity.

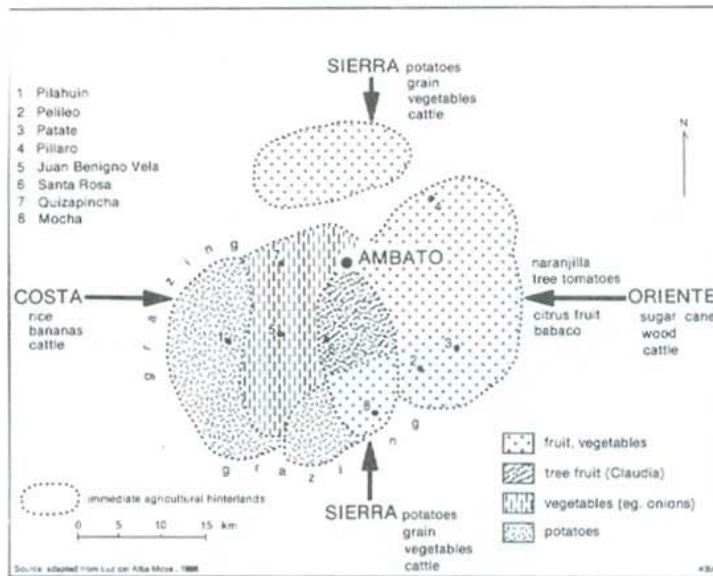


Fig. 2. Immediate and national agricultural hinterlands of Ambato.

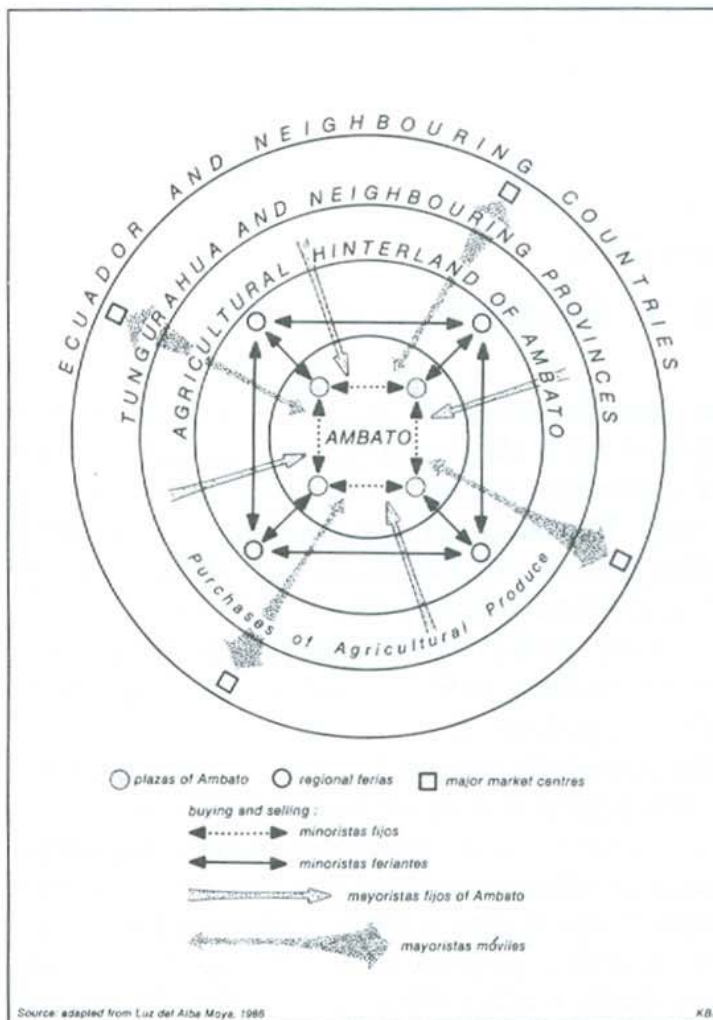


Fig. 3. Typology and trade areas of Ambato merchants.

The market function of Ambato is strengthened by its favorable regional and national transportation location, ensuring that the city has excellent links with other parts of the country and other agricultural regions as well as other major market centers. The Panamerican Highway connects Ambato with the northern and southern parts of the Ecuadorean Sierra and its cities. Paved highways also link Ambato with the major agricultural regions and cities of the western foothills and the Costa. To the east, Ambato is the Sierra center with the best connection to the Oriente via the Ambato-Baños-Puyo-Tena highway. Ambato is the focal point within the regional transportation system for numerous secondary roads and bus lines. This provides the farmers with relatively ready access to the market and allows the wholesalers and middlemen to easily reach the producers.

The market role of Ambato has old roots. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, Ambato had an agricultural wholesale market (*feria mayorista*) for products of the Sierra and Costa. Since that time the importance of the market of Ambato has steadily increased as measured by the volume and diversity of products traded, its area of influence, and the number of people attracted to the market. The number of market days (*ferias*) and market locations (*plazas*) has increased. By 1914, Ambato stood as the largest periodic market of Ecuador.

### THE MARKETING PROCESS AND LOCATION

Four different types of commercial people can be distinguished in Ambato:

1. the mobile large traders (*mayoristas móviles*);
2. the stationary large traders (*mayoristas fijos*);
3. the stationary small traders (*minoristas fijos*); and
4. the mobile small traders (*minoristas móviles*)

Each category of traders has its own social status, economic situation, mobility, territory, and strategies of trading. Figure 3 offers a model of the typology of merchants and the hierarchy of their trade areas.

The number of different markets occupied by traders in Ambato has increased to a total of 16 distinct locations (*plazas*) in the past century. Each plaza has its own identity in terms of location, layout and structure, specialization in products offered, typology and origin of traders, and principal day and peak hours of commercial activity.

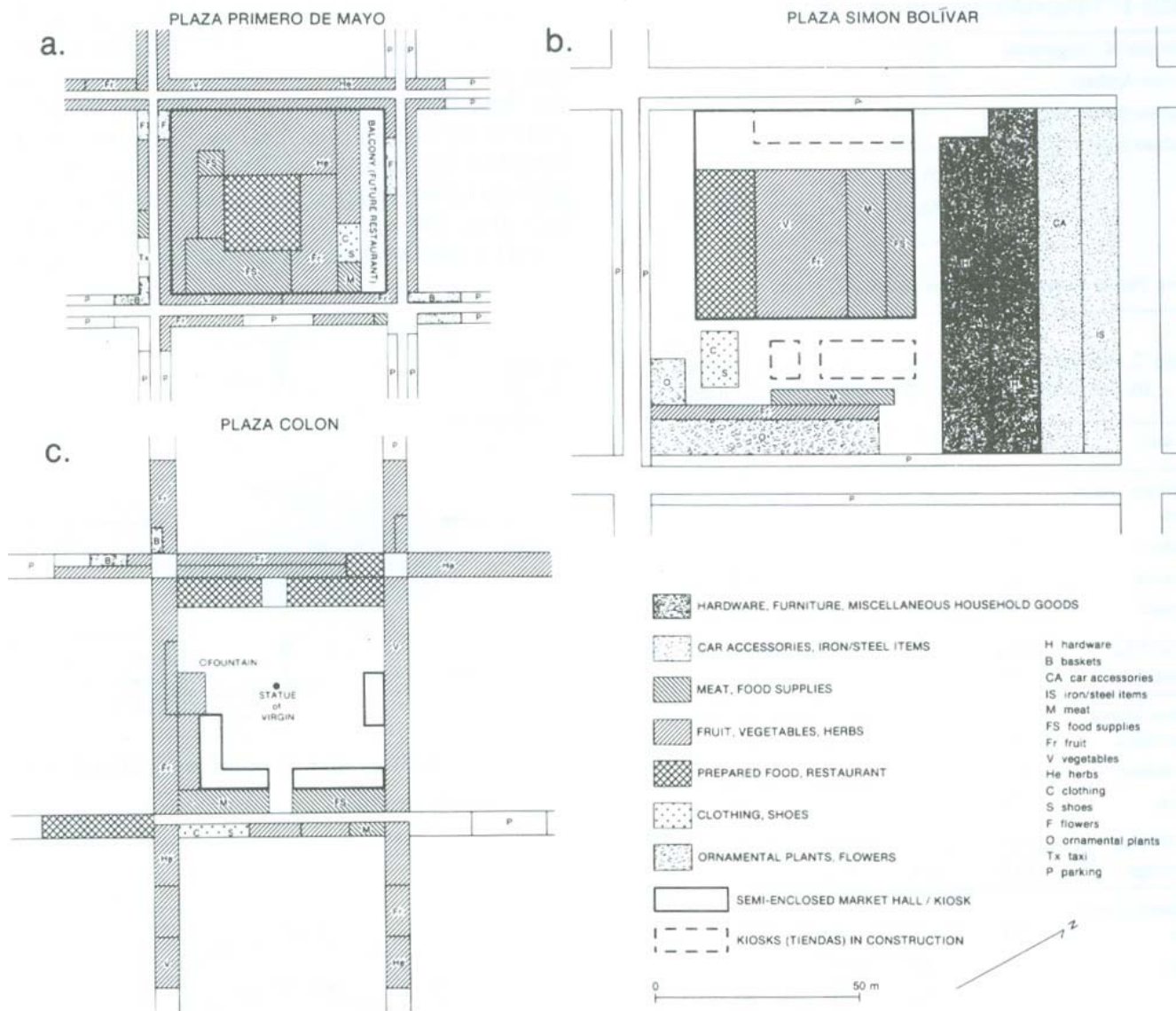
A number of similarities and differences are apparent in the location, structure, and function of the major *plazas* of Ambato. The plazas are distributed throughout the urban area (Figure 4). The market building of the Mercado Central, the covered market hall of the Mercado Colombia, and the three major plazas (Urbina, Primero de Mayo and Colón), and the principal market street (Avenida Cevallos) are all found in the commercial center of Ambato on the lower terrace to the east of the Ambato river. The central location of the markets is favored by most visitors and Ambato business people.

The close proximity of the *plazas* to the commercial center of town allows for easy social and commercial interaction among producers, consumers, and traders. The buildings and courtyards of the *mayoristas fijos* around the plazas also provide storage for agricultural produce. The large number of visitors to the markets greatly stimulates the business and professional core of Ambato but also causes traffic congestion.

Because of the congestion, it is not surprising that the Development Plan of Ambato proposes a relocation of the centrally located markets to the southeastern periphery and an integration of the dispersed market location into a large modern market complex. A similar proposal has been made to move the major cattle market (Mercado de Ganado Mayor) from its present location at the northern edge of the commercial core to the northern periphery of the city, by the new industrial park close to the Panamerican Highway. This move would also separate middle class residential areas from the cattle market. Despite their apparent benefits, these proposals have been met with scepticism and even resistance, as relocation to the periphery could disrupt traditional social and economic relationships and interactions within the city and would make access for visitors from certain rural areas more difficult.

### PHYSICAL STRUCTURE AND LAYOUT OF MARKETS

Figure 4



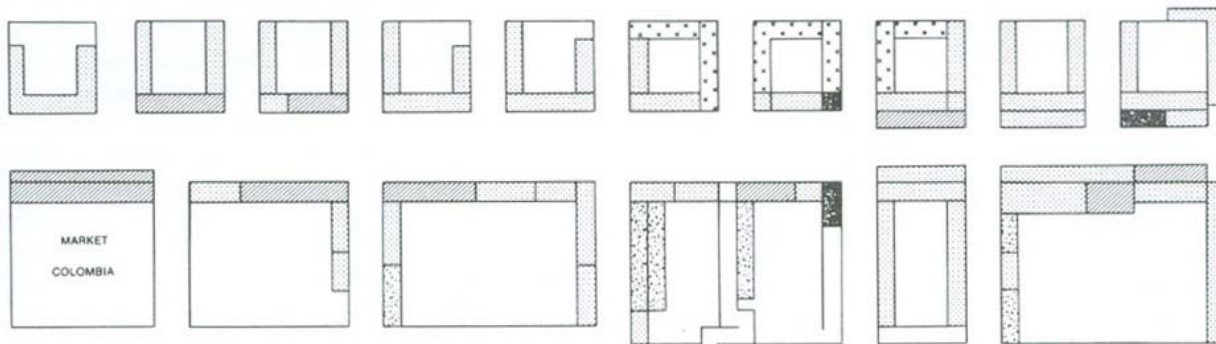
Source: fieldwork, 1987

In the physical structure and layout of the markets (See Figures. 4a-c and 5a-b), the following types may be distinguished: 1) enclosed market buildings (*mercados cubiertos*) such as the Mercado Central and Mercado Colombia; 2) semi-enclosed markets (*mercados semicubiertos*), a roofed structure without side walls, the largest being the plazas Primero de Mayo and Simón Bolívar; and 3) open markets (*mercados abiertos*), which do not contain a major central structure, with the exception of some stalls (*bodegas*) where certain products and prepared food are sold. These *bodegas* can be found in the form of rows of simple wooden shacks or firmer stone or concrete structures. Both the Plaza Urbina and the Plaza Colón include a significant number of *bodegas*.

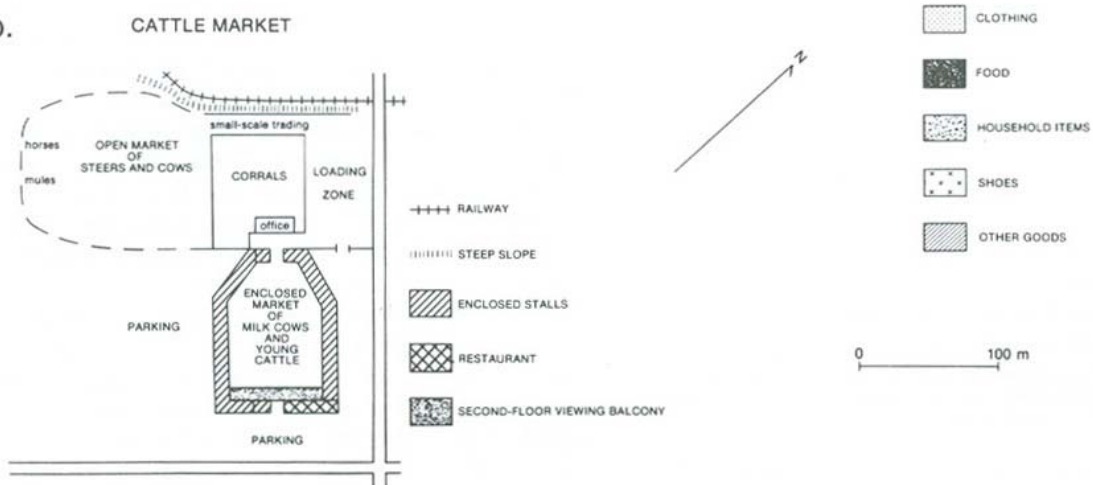
In most cases, a combination of these three types of market structures is common in Ambato. A special category are the markets for animals. The major livestock market (Mercado de Ganado Mayor), located in close proximity to the abattoir, is a combination of an area for young cattle (*novillos*), surrounded by enclosed stalls, an adjacent corral area where cattle are sorted out and loaded onto trucks, and a large open plaza for cattle, mules and horses. In the case of all the plazas, physical delimitation is difficult to establish because the market and market-related activities spill into neighboring streets and buildings.

AVENIDA CEVALLOS

a.



b.



Source: fieldwork, 1987

KBA

Fig. 5. Avenida Cevallos and major cattle market, Ambato.

In the general layout of a plaza, several distinct zones of commercial and market-related activities may be distinguished. First is the central area of the plaza, the preferred location of producers selling their merchandise and of mostly small traders. Where there is a semi-enclosed market structure, a distinct spatial organization of products offered and commercial activities may be discerned. Usually a substantial section of the building is occupied by people selling a variety of prepared food, frequently with seating areas around it. Commonly, basic staple food items such as grains, noodles, flour, sugar, eggs, and meat, are sold in the market building. In addition to this merchandise, specialized products for the particular plaza are offered. Because the vendors selling their goods in the enclosed or semi-enclosed buildings have to pay higher taxes for their stands and cannot avoid them by evading the tax collector, these merchants tend to be more affluent than many of the small vendors outside the building.

The plaza surrounding the market building is occupied by vendors and traders offering a variety of agricultural products but primarily those goods in which the plaza is specializing. In addition to the agricultural produce, new or used clothing and shoes, snacks and refreshments, household items and a variety of other goods are offered on makeshift stalls or are simply laid out on the ground. This type of activity spreads into the area adjacent to the plaza proper. The streets surrounding the plaza are the preferred locations of the large mobile traders (*mayoristas móviles*), who are loading or unloading their products or selling the produce directly from their trucks. The area surrounding the plaza is also the location for the regional buses and the pickup trucks that provide transportation to the agricultural hinterland of Ambato.

The buildings in the area surrounding the plaza are occupied by stationary large traders (*mayoristas fijos*), who store agricultural products in adjacent buildings and courtyards and serve as wholesalers for other bulk food products such as rice, flour, noodles, sugar, grains, and implements. In addition to the wholesalers' houses, a variety of stores (*tiendas*) and basic restaurants that serve rural visitors are found in close proximity to the plazas.

A special type of market is the market street. Foremost of these in Ambato is the Avenida Cevallos, the major street leading into the commercial core of the city from the north. On the days of ferias it becomes transformed into a mile-long, traffic-clogged periodic street market. On both sides of the wide avenue, between the sidewalks and the traffic lane, ambulant merchants display their goods, impeding traffic flow, parking, and access to the stores.

The mercados and plazas of Ambato can also be categorized according to the type of merchandise in which they are specializing. This in turn largely determines the origin of the producers or traders visiting these markets. Primarily, a distinction can be made among the multi-functional market halls (*mercados cubiertos*), the markets for agricultural produce, the markets for farm animals, and the streets and plazas for non-agricultural products.

The market halls are characterized by permanent daytime market activity with peaks reached on the mornings of the major Monday, Wednesday, and Friday ferias.

The markets for agricultural produce specialize in particular agricultural products, although a variety of other goods is offered. In Ambato, there are six major specialized plazas. The Plaza Urbina (*Feria Mayorista de la Papa*), is the major wholesale market for potatoes and for products of the Costa (rice, sugar, and bananas). The Plaza Primero de Mayo (Figure. 4a; *Feria de las Legumbres*) is in close proximity to the Plaza Colón, specializing in vegetables and fruits as well as aromatic and medicinal herbs. This plaza experiences its greatest activity in the period from January to April when the local tree fruits such as apples, pears, and peaches are harvested in the Ambato region. Plaza Bolívar (Figure. 4b; *Feria Mayorista en Flores y en Cabuya*) traditionally is the major center for the wholesale marketing of flowers, ornamental plants, and for products made from the fibers of the Agave cactus (*cabuya*). The Plaza Bolívar is also the major location for the marketing of fish from the coast. More recently a large section of the plaza has been devoted to the selling of furniture, hardware items, car accessories, iron and plastic goods, electrical supplies, and even used for antique items. The Plaza Bolívar also appears to be the market where most stolen goods are resold. Plaza Colón (Figure 4c; *Feria de las Hortalizas*) specializes in garden vegetables and fruits such as citrus fruits and naranjilla from near Ambato and the Patate and Pastaza valleys. The Plaza Pachano (*Feria de los Granos*) is commonly known as the market for grains, but its major importance today is as the principal wholesale market for onions (*cebolla colorada*) and garlic (*ajo*) which are major agricultural products of the province of Tungurahua. Plaza La Dolorosa, a small market, specializes in the marketing of fruit from the Patate Valley and from the Costa.

The two principal markets for farm animals are the livestock market (Plaza de Ganado Mayor) and the market for hogs and sheep (*plaza de Pueros y Borregos*). The Plaza de Ganado Mayor (Figure 5b), in its present location since 1971, is one of the largest in Ecuador. Approximately 1,000 head of cattle are traded per week with an approximate market value of 70 million sucres (about \$350,000). Each Monday, this market alone is visited by about 4,000 people, half of them traders. The marketing network of this plaza extends from the Costa to the Oriente and across the Sierra. From Ambato, young animals are shipped to the pastures of the Oriente with a return flow of the adult animals to Ambato. Traders tend to purchase animals at the *Plaza de Ganado* in order to resell them at smaller cattle markets in the Sierra. In contrast to the Mercado de Ganado Mayor, the market for hogs and sheep at the southern periphery of Ambato is considerably smaller, with about 800 head of animals marketed on a typical Monday. Animals for this market are supplied from the Sierra and Costa and are sent primarily to the abattoirs of Ambato, Riobamba, and Quito. In addition to these two major animal markets, most plazas are also the location for the selling of small farm animals. It is particularly the Plaza "Y" or Plaza de Carrizos where guinea pigs, rabbits, chickens, and dogs and cats are sold.

Some streets and plazas are primarily devoted to the marketing of non-agricultural goods. In Ambato, the major *feria* for these goods is the Avenida Cevallos (Figure 5a). Clothing items and shoes in particular are offered on both sides of the avenida, and household goods and a variety of other items are prominently displayed. During the major Monday *feria* the market activity spreads into the neighboring streets, especially in its southern parts around the market buildings of the Mercado Central and the Mercado Colón as well as in the area between the Avenida Cevallos and the plazas Colón and Primero de Mayo. This *feria* is one of the most dynamic markets of Ambato, patronized by local residents as well as visitors. The Plaza Bolívar appears to be the most important among the partially non-agricultural plazas of Ambato.

#### WEEKLY RHYTHM OF FERIAS

Monday is the principal day of *feria* in Ambato, which makes it an exception among the market centers of the Sierra. According to Bromley (1976, 226), 81.6 percent of the 163 centers of the Sierra with periodic markets have their principal market day on Saturday or Sunday. Only two centers, including Ambato, have their principal weekly *feria* on Monday. This was not always the case. During the first part of the nineteenth century, all of the weekly markets in the Pastaza Basin except for Patate seem to have been held on Sundays. By the end of the nineteenth century, the largest markets had their major weekly *feria* moved to weekdays (Bromley, 1976b).

In 1868, the Municipal Council of Ambato ordered that the market day be changed from Sunday to Saturday in accordance with earlier changes in Riobamba, Latacunga, and Pelileo. This change was applauded by the clergy because they felt Sunday *ferias* discouraged people from attending mass. Many local citizens and politicians opposed this move because it meant, at least initially, a reduction in market activity. The residents of Pelileo petitioned against a Saturday *feria* in Ambato because they believed it would deal a "mortal blow to the general welfare" of Pelileo. Because of the potential competition from other market centers, it was finally decided in 1870 to establish Monday as the principal weekly *feria* in Ambato. The fact that no other major center in the Sierra has its principal *feria* on Monday has clearly contributed to the importance of Ambato's periodic market.

In addition to the Monday *feria*, Wednesday and especially Friday have become important secondary market days for Ambato. Considering that many people arrive with their goods the afternoon or evening before market day, there are few days in Ambato during which the flow of goods and people and marketing does not characterize the urban life of the city.

But it is particularly on Mondays that Ambato is transformed into one large periodic market. The population of the city roughly doubles as thousands of buses and trucks enter Ambato Sunday night and the early morning hours on Monday. The streets of Ambato become highly congested with people, vehicles, and merchandise as each plaza becomes active. The peak of market activity is approximately between 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. but on some plazas commences as early as 5:00 a.m. or 6:00 a.m. By late morning and early afternoon a large flow of trucks and buses starts out of the city.

Although Ambato is a market center of national importance, its *ferias* are well integrated into the weekly cycle of *ferias* in its region of Ecuador. Traders and customers visit the market in Saquisilí on Tuesday and Thursday, in Pujilí on Wednesday, in Pillaro on Thursday, in Cevallo and Quero on Friday, in Riobamba, Latacunga, and Pelileo on Saturday, and in Salcedo, Patate, and Baños on Sunday.

#### CONCLUSION

The dominant form of market activity in Ambato as in other highland centers of Ecuador is the periodic weekly market (*feria*). The primary *feria* in Ambato is Monday, when the *plazas* and streets of the city are congested with people buying and selling goods valued at millions of dollars. This commercial activity is concentrated in and around the major *plazas* of the city. Each plaza has its own physical, social, and marketing identity, but all acting together they transform Ambato into a large market that changes its urban rhythm of life every Monday.

Whereas Quito and Guayaquil are the major centers of consumption and have the largest daily markets in Ecuador, the major periodic markets in the Sierra with weekly primary and secondary *ferias* are Ambato, Riobamba and Cuenca. Ambato has its own identity and importance because it attracts the largest number of wholesale traders (*mayoristas*) and has the largest number of *plazas* specializing in the wholesale trade of the most important agricultural products of the Ecuadorian Sierra.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Research for this paper was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

#### REFERENCES CITED

Alba Moya, L. del. 1986a. "Ambato 'ciudad' mercado" ponencia para el coloquio 'Ecuador 86.' Centro Ecuatoriano de Investigación Geográfica (CEDIG) (monograph), 1-21.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 1986b. *Estrategias de comercialización y racionalidad económica de los comerciantes de mercados y ferias de Ambato. Aproximación antropológica*. Tesis, Universidad Católica, Quito.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1987. El mercado interno en el Ecuador y el flujo de los productos alimenticios. Manuscrito no publicado. Quito.
- Bromley, R. J. 1974. Inter-regional marketing and alternative reform strategies in Ecuador. *European Journal of Marketing* 8:245-264.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1975a. *El comercio de productos agrícolas entre La costa y La sierra Ecuatoriana*. Quito: Central Ecuatoriana de Servicios Agrícolas (CESA).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1975b. Guía a los mercados y a las ferias semanales de la sierra Ecuatoriana, *Proyecto Planificación Regional Nacional ECU/74/005*, Quito: Planificación y Coordinación Económica.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1975c. El papel de la feria semanal en el desarrollo rural, Estudios sobre mercados Andinos (II). *Proyecto Planificación regional nacional ECU/74/005*. Quito.
- Bromley, R. and Bromley, R. J. 1975. Cambios de los días de feria en la sierra central del Ecuador durante el siglo XIX. *Revista del Archivo Histórico del Guayas* 9:7-32.
- Bromley, R. J. 1976a. Contemporary market periodicity in highland Ecuador. In *Regional analysis*, vol. 1, ed. Smith, C. A. New York: Academic Press.
- Bromley, R. J. 1976b. Periodic and daily markets in highland Ecuador. Ph. D. dissertation. Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms.
- Hanssen Bauer, J. 1982. *Plaza Pachano, market integration and rural differentiation in Tungurahua, Ecuador*. Thesis, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo.
- Municipalidad de Ambato. 1980. *Proyecto: Mercado mayorista de Ambato. Estudio de factibilidad, conclusiones y recomendaciones*. Ambato.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1987. *Plan de desarrollo*. Ambato.
- Sick, W. D. 1963. Wirtschaftsgeographie von Ecuador. *Stuttgarter Geographische Studien*. 73:1-275.
- Stadel, C. 1987. La ciudad mercado de Ambato. Conferencia, Curso Internacional de CEPEIGE. Manuscrito no publicado. Quito.
- Wilkie, R., Lentnek, B., and Carroll, T. 1983. *Urban dimensions of rural development in Ecuador*. Worcester, MA: Clark University, International Development Program.