Some Notes on The Iqta‘ System in Mamluk Period

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyse the problems of Iqta‘ system in Egypt during the Mamluk period especially 50 years before the fall of kingdom. This article found that several human factors affected the Iqta‘ system during that time which affected the level of agricultural productivity.

Key words: Iqta‘ • Mamluk • Egypt

INTRODUCTION

The iqta‘ [1-5]1 was the land (or rarely the taxes) allocated by the great amir or sultan to soldiers in return for military service [6-10].2 In exchange for the benefits derived from the iqta‘ the muqta‘ (i.e. iqta‘ holder) had a number of responsibilities. These included military duties such as supplying troops in times of war and a number of non-military functions such as the supervision of cultivation and irrigation, in addition to some personal services to the sultan [11-12]. The muqta‘ also paid the soldiers under his command and paid for their equipment and supplies from the revenue from his iqta‘ [13].

The sultan, who was the supreme ruler and the head of all branches of the government, owned the lands with the highest yield as his iqta‘. These lands were known as al-khass al-sultani [14]. The amirs, on the other hand, were conferred an iqta‘ based on their rank and favour with the sultan [15].2

For the purpose of distribution and allocation of the iqta‘, the cultivated lands in Egypt were divided into twenty-four qirats (qirat simply means a twenty-fourth part). In the early Mamluk period, four qirats were in the hands of the sultan including his Mamluks (al-mamalik al-sultannyya), ten were in the hands of the amirs and the last ten were in the hands of the ajnad al-halqa (a free corps) [16-18]. These proportions were subsequently changed as a result of the hasami rawk (cadastre survey) [19] in 697/1298 and the nasiri rawk in 715/1315 [20-22].4 In the latter rawk, the sultan received ten qirats with the remaining fourteen qirats being reassigned to the amirs and the ajnad [23].

It is clear from the above that the main objective of Sultan al-Nasir Mu’ammad was to strengthen his position by two means, firstly by weakening the power of the Mamluk amirs by decreasing the extent of their iqta‘ holdings and secondly by cementing his own power by increasing the area of his al-khass al-sultani [24-26].5 In addition, al-Nasir is reported to have conferred a large area of iqta’s on his family and his loyal amirs. Thus, it was reported that he conferred an iqta‘ on amir Yashbak and that its annual yield was more than the yield from the iqta’s belonging to seven amirs and seventeen tabalkhana.

There is no official rawk mentioned by historians after the nasiri rawk until the fall of the kingdom. The data provided by the rawk al-nasiri were copied without modification from its register until the end of fifteenth century or even later. However, Ibn Iyas mentions that the sultans during the period of 872-922/1468-1517 occasionally confiscated the iqta’s belonging to the amirs and the Mamluks [27].

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Problems in the Iqta' System: The period under discussion was subject to the impact of the changes in the iqta' system in Egypt. The abolition of the hereditary character of the iqta' forced a number of muqta's to abandon their agricultural lands or at least to make no effort to maintain them. This was simply because the land could not be transferred to their heirs. Moreover, the muqta's were only concerned to get as much revenue as they could while still in possession of their iqta's [28]. Thus, in order to obtain the maximum revenue they imposed high taxes on the peasants. In this environment, the peasants could not be productive labourers and some of them fled [29].

Some of the muqta's also successfully avoided their lands being taken away by the sultan [30] by converting them into waqf-land (pious endowments). In this way, the lands continued to benefit their descendants [31]. The consequence of this transformation of agricultural land from iqta's to another category of land tenure like waqf affected the kharaj (land tax) that was one of the main sources of income for the state treasury (bayt al-mal) at that time [32-33].

Another factor which affected the iqta' system was the geographical scattering of iqta's. From 715/1315, the Mamluk sultans conferred upon the amirs iqta's scattered over many provinces of Lower and Upper Egypt. This was intended to reduce the influence of the muqta in his iqta and to prevent any move towards independence or rebellion. However, the distance from the muqta's residence, which was normally in the vicinity of Cairo and his iqta had the undesirable effect of encouraging him to make little effort to manage his lands [34]. The muqta also needed to employ a separate agent and staff of clerks in each part of his iqta' [35] and the cost of their salaries, as well as the frequent dishonesty, affected the revenue derived from the iqta'. This state of affairs was untenable and did not benefit the small iqta' holder [36]. At the same time, the iqta's which were situated in the countryside and far from the city were exposed to the pillaging of the Bedouin. As a result of these developments, Sultan al-Nasir Faraj created the diwan al-musta'jarat wa al-himaya (The Bureau of Lease and Protection) which was intended to give protection to the iqta's. The muqta had to pay a tax (dariba al-himaya) to this diwan for the service [37].

The short duration of control of the muqta' over his iqta' also had an effect on the level of agricultural productivity. A stable ownership system would provide a stimulus for improving cultivation, while on the other hand, rapid changes in ownership inevitably resulted in negligence. Statements in contemporary chronicles reveal that an iqta' sometimes tended to pass rather rapidly from one muqta' to another [38]. This was especially the case during the fifty years before the fall of the kingdom, when five sultans reigned in a short period. The situation became worse during the outbreaks of plagues in this period, when one iqta' could have several owners in the course of a few days [39]. Other reasons for the rapid transfer of iqta's included the arrest or execution of muqta's [40-41].

During Qaytbay's reign, several iqta's no longer yielded the sums recorded in cadastral surveys decades earlier. A number of iqta's had been so subdivided in order to provide allotments for new officers that they now produced insufficient yields for the amir's needs [42]. Ibn Ilyas mentions that in Dhu al-Hijja 893/November-December 1488 an impoverished Amir of Ten whose iqta' no longer produced its stated yield, petitioned for a new grant by pleading the poverty of his family and retainers and hanged himself when his request was refused [43]. In describing the iqta's belonging to the awlad al-nas, al-Sayrafi remarks:

their iqta' yielded them no protection money (himaya) nor cultivated produce... Indeed, some officers) sought to deprive some of them of their rights since they no longer yielded any [tax]. The accountants (mubashirin) did not know whether their land was productive or unproductive. Even if some owned estates, they still resembled these wretched [landless] types [44-47].

CONCLUSION

Some of the human factors were indentified as affected the Iqta' system such as the abolition of the hereditary character of the Iqta', the transformation of agricultural land from Iqta' to another category of land tenure, the geographical scattering of Iqta' and the short duration of control of the Muqta' over his Iqta'. All of these factors caused the decrease of the level of agricultural productivity.
The term *iqta* in the plural is *iqta‘at* or *aqati‘* and the *iqta* holders were called *muqta‘un* (plural of *muqta‘*), *arbqab al-iqta‘at* and *atu al-iqta‘at*. The Mamlaks were not the first government to introduce the *iqta* system in Egypt. al-Maqrizi implies that this system was introduced under the Ayyubids by Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi. When the Mamluks came to power, they inherited the Egyptian *iqta* system as it had developed under the Ayyubids. Nevertheless, they made changes to it by abolishing its hereditary character. When the *muqta* retired, died or was dismissed, his *iqta* would be returned to the sultan to be conferred on another *muqta*.

Carl F. Petry defined *iqta* as a revocable allotment of revenue yield from a tract of agrarian land to provide an officers with resources to support his troop contingent and personal expenses.

The amir received an *iqta‘* consisting of one to ten villages, each of the *mamalik al-sultaniyya* received one or a half village, and each of the *qinad al-halqa* received the land yielding least revenue. This allocation was not, however, permanent and was always changing, especially the *iqta* which was conferred on the amir.

The *husami rawk* was instituted by Sultan Husam al-Din Lajin and the *nasiri rawk* was instituted by Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad.

This was sultan's bureau overseeing his personal fund that maintained the court, distributed gifts and purchased arms.

These *waqfs* were also exempt from taxes.

The number of *iqta‘s* which were transformed into *waqf* lands increased at the end of the Mamlik period. According to Muhammad Muhammad Amin, ten *qirats* of the Egyptian land were found in the *waqf* category when the Ottomans occupied Egypt.

According to Sato Tsugitaka, these agents or staffs were often covetous of revenue without considering the conditions needed for successful cultivation (‘*imara*).

In Ramadan 897/June-July 1492, Ibn Iyas says that even allotments freed by plague deaths and held in reserve could not satisfy the recruits, since their maximum annual output now rarely exceeded 30,000 *dirhams*.

REFERENCES


