The suffixes -$fu$ and -$vu$ in Swahili: a preliminary analysis

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The suffix -$u$ in Swahili indicates a state, and it is primarily used with intransitive verb roots and stative stems with pre-final {k}. Some transitive verbs may have both {u} and {i} ~ {aji} derivations applying to nouns $m$- and $wa$- classes (persons of Classes 1 & 2) focusing on state or activity respectively, e.g. -$angalia$ (take care) $\rightarrow$ mwangalivu (careful/attentive person) and mwangalizi $\sim$ mwangaliaji (caretaker, overseer, guardian). The suffix -$u$ with nouns of classes 1 and 2 express the possessor of a state, and with nouns of $u$- class (Class 11) it expresses the state itself (Polomé 1967:78). The -$u$ is realised as -$fu$ and -$vu$, or -$ifu$ and -$ivu$, and rarely as -$u$.

In a few cases -$u$ occurs also in nouns of $ma$- class (Class 6) (Ashton 1944:326), e.g. maumivu (pain, pains) $< kuumia$ (be injured/hurt) $< kuuma$ (to cause pain, to hurt/injure/bite). Some adjective stems with -$fu$ or -$vu$ are derived from verbs (Ashton:46 “deverbative adjectives”):

-bivu (ripe) $< kuiva$ (to ripen)
bovu (rotten) $< kuosa$ (to rot)
-kuu (great) $< kukua$ (to grow)

Some verbs are derived from adjectives with -$fu$ suffix:

-chafu (dirty) $\rightarrow$ -chafuka (become dirty)
-chafu (stormy) $\rightarrow$ -chafuka (become stormy)
-refu (long) $\rightarrow$ -refuka (become long)

A few items appear as “pure” adjectives:
-ovu (evil)
-vivu (lazy, idle)
-wivu (jealous)

According to Ashton (op cit.:286):

Verbs ending with two vowels > Noun ending in -vu
E.g. kulegea (be loose/lax) > ulegevu (slackness, weakness)

Verbs ending with -ka > Noun ending in -fu
E.g. kupunguka (be reduced) > upungufu (decrease, deficiency)

Consonant assimilation follows the following rules (Ashton ibid:323):

Unvoiced consonants /p/ & /k/ + /u/ > /fu/
Voiced consonant /w/ + /u/ > /vu/

“Apparent anomalies like -tovu (lacking) < -toa (lack), -nyamavu (quite) < -nyamaa (be quiet), are due to a submerged -w- and -l- respectively in the parent verb stem” (ibid).

Ashton (ibid.) observes that “These suffixes are inconsistent and overlap to a considerable extent,” e.g. kuokoa (to save) > mwokofu ~ mwokovu (saviour), wokofu ~ wokovu (deliverance, salvation), and kuchoka (be tired) > mchofu ~ mchovu (weary, one who gets easily tired), uchofu ~ uchovu (weariness)

Polomé (op cit.:46) also notes that “Unpredictable alternations occur in certain phonemes: (1) neutralization of the contrast voiced : unvoiced for some obstruents, e.g. kufuka ~ kuvuka ‘to give out smoke’, uchofu ~ uchovu ‘tediousness’; ...” Other alternations found in colloquial speech and dialects are:

-vukuta ~ -fukuta (burn without flame)
vukuto ~ fukuto ~ vuguto (burning on skin, heat felt in the body)
-voromoa ~ -poromoa (knock down, rush down, cause to fall)
-voromoka ~ -poromoka (glide/slip/fall down ie of water etc)
voromoko ~ poromoko (waterfall, avalance)
vundarere ~ fundarere (a kind of snake)
-vinginya ~ -finginya (wriggle), also -vinginyika ~ -finginyika, vinginyiko ~ finginyiko

As a general rule, Arabic loan verbs take -ifu (-ivu in a few cases of extended verbs) to form nouns:
The suffixes -fu and -vu in Swahili

-amin (believe, trust) > mwaminifu (trustworthy person) > uaminifu (trustworthiness, trustfulness)

-haribu (destroy) > mharibifu (destructive person) > uharibifu (destruction)

-sahau (forget) > msahauliful-ivu (forgetful) > usahauliful-ivu (forgetfulness)

In some adjectives and nouns, the final -fu is part of the root in Arabic loans, e.g. ashirafu (noble), dhafiu (weak), hafifu (of low quality), maarufu (famous) and mwarifu (knowledgeable person).

No dictionary gives all the -u, -fu or -vu items found in the language. Some dictionaries give the -u items only as adjectives, or as both adjectives and nouns of Classes 1-2, though they can only be used with persons in Classes 1-2; and in most cases the item is given also in nouns of Class 11, e.g. KAMUSI (1981) in which the *-marked items are not included:

- adilifu (upright, righteous) (mwadilifu)*, uadilifu (righteousness)
- angalifu (observant) (mwangalifu), uangalifu (carefulness)
- aminifu (trustworthy) (mwaminifu)*, uaminifu (trustworthiness)
- arifu (well informed) (mwarifu)*, (uarifu)* (state of being well-informed)

- halifu (disobedient, rebellious) mhalifu, uhalifu (disobedience, rebellion)
- shupavu (brave, fearless) mshupavu, ushupavu (bravery)
- badhirifu (wasteful) mbadhirifu, ubadhirifu (wastefulness)
- potovu ~ potofu (wayward, pervert) mpotofu (mpotovu)*, upotofu (upotovu)*
- potevu (wasteful, prodigal) (mpotevu)*, upotevu (wastefulness)
- zoevu (familiar, habitual) (mzoevu)*, uzoefu ~ uzoevu (familiarity)
- (-kubalifu)* (accepting) (mkubalifu)*, ukubalifu (acceptance)

The following additional terms with -fu or -vu have been collected from colloquial Swahili and corpus other than dictionaries, and they are not included in KAMUSI (1981):

Class 1-2: mbashirifu (one forsees only negative things)
mbukufu (one who discloses secrets)
mwunifupu (one who is inventing falsehood/lies)
mchelevu (one who is ususally late)
mchungufu (one who discloses secrets)
mchunifu (one who is always nagging, who is provokingly insisting)
mjubufu ~ mjubuvu (one who forces others to do things)
mwogofu (one who is easily frightened)
Adjectives:  
- *chakafu* (worn & torn)  
- *rovu* (wet, humid)  
- *teketevu* (combustible, inflammatory)  
- *maarufu* (famous)  
- *mafu* (e.g. *maji mafu*, low tide, ebb)

Nouns:  
- *kiowevu* (sponge)  
- *msafu* (row/que, also safu/msafa)  
- *uerevu* (smartness, cleverness, usually werevu)  
- *umaarifu* (knowledge/intelligence, usually maarifa)  
- *unyang’anyivu* (robbing/robbery, tendency to rob)  
- *usahaulivu* (forgetfulness)  
- *ustahimilivu* (patience)  
- *utiivu* (obedience)  
- *utakatifu* (holiness, purity, sanctity)

Quantitative breakdown:

- 53+ inherited items have -*vu* suffix.  
- 78+ inherited items have -*fu* suffix.  
- 14+ items have -*fu* and -*vu* alternation (including a couple with Arabic roots).  
- 30+ adjectives and derived nouns of Classes 1-2 of Arabic origin have final -*fu* (or pre-final -*f*) as part of the root or stem.  
- 68+ other words ending in -*fu*, including a few ending in -*vu*, e.g. *jivu* (ash), *matomvu* (sap), do not ‘on the surface’ express any state or possession of a state.  

There are no inherited verbs ending in -*fu* or -*vu*. All verbs ending in -*fu* are Arabic loans.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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Author’s addenda
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Overlapping of -fu and -vu suffixes

In the Swahili usage of senior native speakers of the Kihadimu/Kikae dialect of Makunduchi and Kizimkazi in southern Unguja island, some alternatives with -vu have a nuance of emphasis or intensity, e.g. mwokofu (saviour) but mwokovu (great/real saviour), mchofu (tired) but mchovu (weary, exhausted).

In all the dialects of Zanzibar, the adverbial duplicated forms rovurovu and vuruvuru are met with, e.g. alirowa (he became wet) but alirowa rovurovu (he became completely wet), alivuruga mambo (he messed up things) but alivuruga mambo vuruvuru (he made a complete mess of things).