

**Figure 14.4.**

Princes ( <i>mpanjaka</i> )								Slaves ( <i>andevo</i> )							
<i>alokala</i>	<i>alohotsy</i>	<i>adalo</i>	<i>alasaady</i>	<i>adabara</i>	<i>tareky</i>	<i>asombola</i>	<i>alotsimay</i>	<i>aliksiy</i>	<i>alakarabo</i>	<i>alakaosy</i>	<i>reniliza</i>	<i>alibiavo</i>	<i>karija</i>	<i>alimizandà</i>	<i>alaimora</i>
•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Malagasy divination figures based on one or two seed elements arranged by fours, with their vernacular name and their classification into princes and slaves.

In proceeding with the divination, particular figures are set up by randomly choosing piles of seeds, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, and additional figures are computed by applying formal operations to be explained later. Thereafter, figures obtained in this way are read according to some basic rules related to their predefined classification. A principle for interpreting the randomly generated data given by the seeds is that princes are more powerful than slaves. In her seminal article of 1997 on *sikidy* divination, which is the starting point of our works on the subject, Ascher gives an example of a divination session related to illness that makes use of this relationship (Ascher 1997: 389). When the client appears to be a slave while the illness is a prince, the former is dominated by the latter so that the illness is considered to be serious.

The mathematical criterion that distinguishes princes from slaves among the figures is the evenness of their total number of seeds. It is easy to verify in Fig. 14.4 that princes can have four, six, or eight seeds, each of which is an even number, whereas slaves can have five or seven seeds, each of which is an odd number. During fieldwork it appeared to be difficult to establish such a relationship between the native classification into princes and slaves and the mathematical property of evenness. When asking questions such as: ‘What is particular concerning the number of seeds of the princes?’, the answer always was: ‘They can have four, six, or eight seeds’, with no mention of the particular property of evenness shared by these numbers. In fact, how do we express such an abstract concept as evenness? I have made many attempts to do so in the context of fieldwork, but did not succeed until the answer came up in an unexpected way, as we will see.

One day the diviner we were working with put all the princes on the ground and said, ‘I will show you something.’ The elements of the figures consist of one or two seeds and the diviner grouped the seeds by two in each prince containing isolated seeds. At the end all the princes were reduced to pairs, and he concluded that the result is *tsy ota*. Then he put all the slaves on the ground and grouped the seeds by two in the same way, but as the number of seeds was odd he removed one remaining seed in each of them. He said that the result was *ota*. The English translation for *ota* is ‘sin’ and *tsy ota* means ‘no sin’. The diviner’s comment suggests that the grouping procedure succeeded in the case of princes (no sin) because all the isolated seeds have been grouped by two, whereas it failed in the case of slaves.

The diviner’s procedure may be considered as a mathematical definition of evenness. In this context the expressions *ota* and *tsy ota* can be translated into the English words ‘odd’ and ‘even’ respectively. It is interesting to note that there is a negative connotation associated with the numerical notion of oddness. The same holds in English, where ‘odd’ can mean bizarre and may also be used to indicate something not paired properly (‘an odd glove’). A similar remark can be made in French where the word *impair* (‘odd’) can be used as a noun with the meaning of a blunder.

It is obvious that in such cases the recording of the mathematical meaning of the terms involves more than the simple recording of example words or sentences. It relies to some degree upon the detailed recording of the corresponding gestures. In this example, the ethnographer is expected to have learnt about the use of the pair of fingers for grouping seeds and noted it by tracing a precise diagram in their notebook, or taking a