Before modern materials became available, cordage was the most widely used fastener in ancient Hawai‘i. Many naturally occurring fibers were collected and processed into cordage. ‘Ie‘ie roots, fibers from coconut husks (pulu niu), hau bark fibers, and even hair were gathered and spun into twine. Certain plants provided fibers that had special properties that made the cordage made from them more suitable for particular uses. Cordage made of hau fibers, for example, is resistant to degradation by water. Olonā provided the strongest fiber that was available in ancient Hawai‘i making olonā fiber based cordage particularly desirable and useful.

Cordage had many uses and was an important part of the Hawaiians daily life. Cordage provided food in the form of fishing lines (aho) and nets (‘upena), and tools like adzes (ko‘i) and pump drills (nao wili). Rope was used to secure the structural beams and thatching of the traditional hale, and to lash together the various parts of a canoe (wa‘a). Cordage provided the base layer for rain capes (‘ahu lā‘i), feather cloaks (‘ahu ‘ula), lei (lei hulu, lei niho palaoa), and helmets (mahi ‘ole). Cordage also had its place in war in tripping (pīko‘i) and strangling (ka‘ane) weapons. Cordage even had its place in entertainment and was used for games like tug of war (hukihuki or pā‘ume‘ume), ball and loop (pala‘ie), and for string figure games (hei).

Kōkō are knotted cordage nets that were used to carry or hang containers made of ipu gourds (‘umeke pōhue) or of wood (‘umeke lā‘au). Kōkō puā‘alu were simple net carriers for commoner’s use, nets that were to be used for chiefs were more elaborately decorated and were called kōkō pu‘upu‘u. Kōkō that were to be used to carry poi would also have been more elaborately prepared than those that were made specifically to carry containers of water. Kōkō and their respective containers filled with food or water were carried slung on the ends of a shoulder pole called an ‘auamo, or māmaka.

Traditionally, kōkō were tied using a “knitted slip knot” that was similar to a hangman’s noose, or by using an “overhand knot.” Kōkō are comprised of three basic parts. The kākai are the long strings that are used to suspend and hang kōkō, the hānai is the net like body that extends up and around the carrying container, and the piko is the base of the kōkō where the hānai connects back upon itself. There are specific names that are used to describe several different types of kōkō. “Plain” kōkō have kākai, hānai, and piko of the same material. Kōkō paukū have a piko and lower hānai of coconut fiber (‘aha) and an upper hānai and kāka‘i of wauke. Kōkō ‘ōni‘oni‘o have two or more materials that alternate to form the hānai.


Begin the Piko by doubling up a length of rope and tying an overhand knot.

Connect the Hōnai to the Piko by forming loops and passing ends through.
Connect the rest of the Hānai to the Piko, secure the Hanai with overhand knot.

After securing all the hānai strings, cross over two adjacent hānai strings and secure to start forming the hānai body.
Continue crossing over and securing with overhand knots to form base row of the hānai.

Continue process until hānai is large enough for container.
Secure Top with overhand knot

Add container