Graham Connah postulated that a bone tool found at Daima might have been an awl used in basketry and noted an ethnographic example used by Kikuyu men for making coiled winnowing baskets. This led him to suggest that “…the Daima examples [had] something to do with basketry or mat-making” (Connah 1981:130-31). Today residents of Borno State continue to use grasses, shrubs, palm fronds and other plant fibres for shelter, fencing, cordage, mats, baskets and other objects (Ayuba, Aji, & Msheliza 2003).
Wendrich (1991:1) comments on the lack of attention by both archaeologists and ethnographers to basketry and suggests that ‘although basketry is clearly a part of material culture, the importance of this class of artefacts as a potential source of information has yet to be generally accepted’. Even when ‘basketry [is] found in excavations’ it is paid less attention than other artifacts, especially lithics and pottery (1999:1, citing Trigger 1989:276).

It is my aim in this paper to convince you that there is in Wendrich’s words a “World according to Basketry” that repays archaeologists’ attention, one in which the nature and variation in typology complements – and does not merely repeat – those evident in pottery, lithics and other domains of material culture. It is a world into which archaeologists have more access than they perhaps suppose.
I focus on basketry in the Mandara Mountains where both men and women make (and use) baskets but employ different techniques of manufacture. The examination of these techniques, raw materials, tools, work space, uses and related objects reveals the complexity of basketry production. I reference basketry in other parts of Africa in order to enlarge the range of meanings and uses of baskets.
Wendrich defines basketry as a ‘class of artefacts made out of vegetable fibres of limited length or with a shape which is specific to the raw material’ (1991:4). Consequently many objects may be defined as basketry: baskets, bags, mats, awning, brushes, brooms, wattle-and-daub constructions, sandals, hats, belts. In the Mandara Mountains, as it will be seen, there is also a range of architectural basketry: granaries, granary caps, granary covers, and large mats used for walling and roofing. Wendrich identifies three primary techniques of basketry. Her system is based on the identification of active and passive elements which form the structure of the basket. The stake and strand technique comprises a number of passive elements (stakes) and active elements (strands).

Coiled basketry involves a passive element or bundle which is held in place by the active element or wrap.
In plaiting there are three or more active elements.
Two basket making techniques are found in the Mandara Mountains, coiling and continuous plaiting.
Coiling

The majority of the women who make coiled baskets are Mafa, the dominant ethnic group in the Mokolo region and the most numerous ethnic group in the mountains. Coiled baskets are made only by women who learn the craft as girls from mothers and other female relatives. The basket is constructed from a bundle of dried grasses around which strips from sorghum sheath or the bark from two different bushes are wrapped. All women have access to these raw materials. The only tools required for making a coiled basket are an awl and a small sickle, the two being frequently combined in a single tool.

The work can take place anywhere, in exterior or interior courtyards, on a terrace or when the sun is strong beneath a shelter in a nearby field. The basket maker may be alone or work along with friends and children. Baskets are made in a variety of sizes. It takes about one week’s work to make a small basket, two weeks for a medium sized basket, and three weeks, usually spread on a part-time basis over two to three months, to make a large one.
The coiling technique is used by Mafa women of both the farmer and potter castes. Large coiled baskets are used by women and men for transporting the harvest from field, to farm to granary. Smaller tightly coiled baskets were used for serving or drinking beer. In many parts of the region boys use the same technique to make straw hats, and in a few instances men make coiled mats to serve as the base of a plaited chicken carrier. Women of several other Mandara ethnic groups also make coiled baskets, however there is not much information available. Coiling is also widely practiced by nearby Fulbe, Kanuri and Hausa women.
Continuous plaiting

Mafa men do not normally make baskets of any kind. The majority of baskets used for agricultural tasks by non-Mafa are made by the continuous plaiting technique and always by men. Of the twenty-five ethnic groups for which I have found information twenty-four make some form of plaited basket.
A stiff coarse grass is used for the basket body. Cordage plaited from local grasses in varying diameters is required for wrapping the belt, attaching a belt to the basket body, and for finishing the base and rim. Another type of cordage is used to attach a frame to the belt. The wood of an unidentified bush is used to make the belt frame and is softened by wetting and burial in a dung hill. The frame is made of the wood of two different bushes. Cotton and goatskin are used in the head pad and the thorns of desert date fix the goatskin to the pad. A curved iron basketry needle is used for sewing. While all men know how to make these baskets there are some that specialize in their manufacture.
Plaited basketry cannot be understood without reference to other objects made using the same technique. Throughout the region women take their chickens with them to the fields, often transported in plaited carriers. Chicken coops are made of a stiff grass loosely plaited - essentially a bottomless basket placed upside down on the ground. Among other plaited objects for household use are small mats, sleeping mats, closed containers, rain capes, and mats used as doors.
An important category of plaited materials is associated with architecture. The granaries of many ethnic groups in the region have plaited caps to cover the tops and a plaited cover to protect the upper body. In some settlements roofs of the rooms that make up the house have plaited tops and covers.
A final category of plaited object is the large mat that is often used to delimit houses and courtyards and as the roof of the latter. They are made locally in the Mandara Mountains for use and for sale. The products of this plaited technique are found among the Fulbe, Hausa, and Kanuri well beyond the mountains and outside north Cameroon and northeastern Nigeria. I do not yet know the distribution of the plaited basket forms described, however I have not found similar forms outside the region.
I’ve found few references to ritual or symbolic uses of baskets in the Mandara region. During the Guduf bull sacrifice a coiled basket is used by a sister to bring a gift to her brother. Dark brown horizontal coils in the upper body of the basket are said to indicate the number of times her brother has sacrificed bulls on behalf of their father. At Sirak I was told that an unfinished plaited basket, one without the frame and belt, can be used during the harvest. However if it remains in the house unfinished following the new year celebration it might kill the women of the house. Similar Sukur baskets kept in houses of women of child bearing age must have belts - otherwise sterility or possibly miscarriage could result. In the houses of post-menopausal women and the chief, basket belts are not required.
Kapsiki and Sukur make special granaries that are in many respects large baskets. Among the Kapsiki a man skilled at plaiting is commissioned to make the metres long strip of plait that will be wrapped around the granary and sewn in place. Once this is done its ‘initiation’ can take place. The granary is decorated with bands of cattle dung that are compared with the red ochre worn by boy initiates. The sex of the granary is determined by its shape (van Beek & Avontuur 2005). At Sukur men are prohibited from having sex before working on such a granary. It is not initiated but an offering of water and flour and the blood of a sacrificial animal is poured over a basket of grain that is set in its opening. The Sukur also make granary covers and caps on the plaza outside the chief’s house during a ceremony the function of which is to provide ritual protection for the upcoming harvest. The granary caps are placed on two rock shrines and the covers are for the chief’s granaries.
A sample of African basketry by ethnic group, technique and gender of maker

“The art of basketry in Africa is structured and perceived along gender lines. It is generally correct to say that women coil while men weave, but cases disproving this rule exist. … If men may coil, women may weave.” (Silva 2004:21)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETHNIC GROUP</th>
<th>TECHNIQUE</th>
<th>GENDER OF MAKER</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle Egypt</td>
<td>coiled, plaited</td>
<td>female, male</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Nubia</td>
<td>coiled, plaited</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>coiled, stake &amp; strand</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>male, female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gurensi (Ghana)</td>
<td>stake &amp; strand</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konkomba (Togo)</td>
<td>plaited, stake &amp; strand</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>coiled</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sukur (Nigeria)</td>
<td>plaited</td>
<td>male</td>
</tr>
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<td>Goula (Chad)</td>
<td>coiled, plaited, stake &amp; strand</td>
<td>female, male</td>
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(See References Cited, Sources for Table)

If we look further afield what else can we learn from baskets? Do women primarily make coiled baskets, while men use plaited and stake and strand techniques? This table lists basketry techniques by gender in a few of the ethnic groups surveyed for this paper.
Zulu coiled baskets
• made by men in pre-colonial times
• taken over by women as men migrated to find work
• now a growing cottage industry practiced by women and some men

There are more examples of women using coiling, however in Zululand women have taken over this technique from men and in Africa generally all three techniques are used by both genders.
A sample of African basketry by ethnic group, technique and gender of maker

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In Middle Egypt men make sewn baskets of plaited strips, and also twined and woven matting. Women make baskets by coiling. While women might on occasion ‘assist in making plaited baskets’, the suggestion that ‘men could also make coiled baskets was met with horror’ (Wendrich 1999:401). In New Nubia women make both sewn plaited mats and baskets, as well as coiled food covers. It does appear that where both genders make baskets they do not use the same technique, although in West there are some of examples of the coiling technique made and used by men to make shields and war helmets (Hahn 1996).
Nubian men do not make basketry, but for use in their fields purchase sewn Egyptian baskets made of plaited strips produced by the technique shown in this slide. Wendrich noted that both coiling and plaiting techniques can be readily put down and picked up, the only preparation needed being soaking the fibres, and keeping them moist (1999).

Basket makers may be full-time professionals, part-time professionals or non-professionals. In many parts of West Africa all men know how to make baskets but few make the entire range of baskets of their ethnic group.
In the past basket making was an integral part of being a Harari woman in Ethiopia (Silverman 1999). She began to make simple coil baskets as a girl and by the time she married she would have proudly produced her own dowry baskets. Certain of these baskets were for display, for to be a good housewife was to know how to properly display them. Later when her son married, a bread basket made by her daughter-in-law would be hung in its designated place (Zekaria 1999).
Over the years as lifestyles changed women had less access to the raw materials and other types of containers came to replace baskets. Few young women now know how to make baskets and a very few women specialize in making dowry baskets. However some innovations have taken place, acrylic fibre baskets are decorated with traditional geometric designs, silver beadwork is used on plain coil baskets for tourists, and bright acrylic yarns cover other coil baskets. Some women now employ young men to apply beadwork to their baskets (Asante 2005).

Somali women make a variety of baskets: milk and water containers, and loosely woven stake and strake baskets to transport and protect water carrying baskets. The caption to a Somali wedding basket on display in the Smithsonian Institution tells us that foods are sewn into the basket which is then covered and stitched shut. During the wedding ceremony male relatives of the groom must successfully untie the stitching. The basket is the bride (see also Fullerton & Adan 1995 and Talle 1993).

Geary suggests the study of Aghem-Fungom basketry in Cameroon may shed light on ‘the articulation of the relationship between men and women, and gender-specific ritual expression’ (1987:42). Here the majority of baskets were made by women and were women’s constant companions around the house and in their fields. Women’s rites of passage are also marked by the use of baskets, and in her final rite of passage a large basket used in the funeral preparations is smashed and put into her grave.
I have shown that Wendrich’s ‘world according to basketry’ is one of great interest and that this material culture domain does not merely duplicate information provided by ceramics, lithics or other realms of material culture. It carries information about gender, economic and other activities and may be rich in meaning. I know that basketry is difficult to identify and reconstruct in the archaeological record, but there are often clues -- impressions on pots and burnt clay, basketry tools that may well show particular patterns of wear and polish, and not least the evidence, in the form of phytoliths and pollen, of the grasses themselves. As Connah said ‘We have clear evidence that at least [mat-making] was practised, from some of the Daima I pottery, and, with all those tall, tough firki grasses available, the Daima I people must surely have made baskets?’ (1981:131).
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