
The Land-Diving Ceremony in Pentecost, New Hebrides

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The land-diving ceremony in Pentecost, New Hebrides

BY D. ATTENBOROUGH

[Plates 29 and 30]

The men of several villages, on the northern tip of Pentecost Island, had built a tower 80 feet high. Its core was a lopped tree, around which had been constructed a rickety scaffolding of poles tied together with vines and stabilized by long guy-ropes of lianas. From the front face of the tower projected twenty-five platforms, the lowest 30 feet from the ground, the highest a few feet from the top. The outer end of these platforms, which projected horizontally some eight feet into space, were supported by several thin struts. From each platform, a pair of long vines dangled almost to the ground, which fell away steeply from the foot of the tower.

On the morning of the ritual, the villagers assembled behind the tower. For an hour they danced and sang. Some carried sprigs of red croton leaves. Unobtrusively, a young boy left the ranks of the dancers and climbed up the tower. Two older men followed him. When they reached the lowest platform, the men pulled up the two vines and bound them to the boy's ankles. The boy advanced slowly to the end of the platform and raised his hands above his head. Below, the dancers ceased countermarching and turned to face the tower at the same time changing their chant to a rhythmic stabbing yell. The boy threw a bunch of croton leaves into the air, crossed his arms in front of his chest and slowly toppled forward. When his falling body was only 10 feet from the ground, the vines around his ankles whipped tight. With a crack, the thin supports of the platform broke, so that the platform itself hinged downwards, absorbing some of the shock of the diver's fall. Before his head hit the ground, the slightly elastic vines, stretched to their limit, snatched him backwards and flung him towards the foot of the tower where he landed on his back.

The jumping continued all afternoon, from platforms higher and higher up the tower. The mother of one of the boys who was due to dive was among the dancers at the foot of the tower. In her arms, she was carrying what appeared to be a baby. But as her son dived, she threw away this bundle, which proved to be no more than a piece of cloth.

Perhaps this was a clue that the ceremony had originated as a *rite de passage*. If this had once been so, the ceremony was now a distorted one, for men of all ages took part and some had done so many times before. Indeed, the last man to dive, who leaped from the highest platform of all at the top of the tower, was a white-bearded elder.

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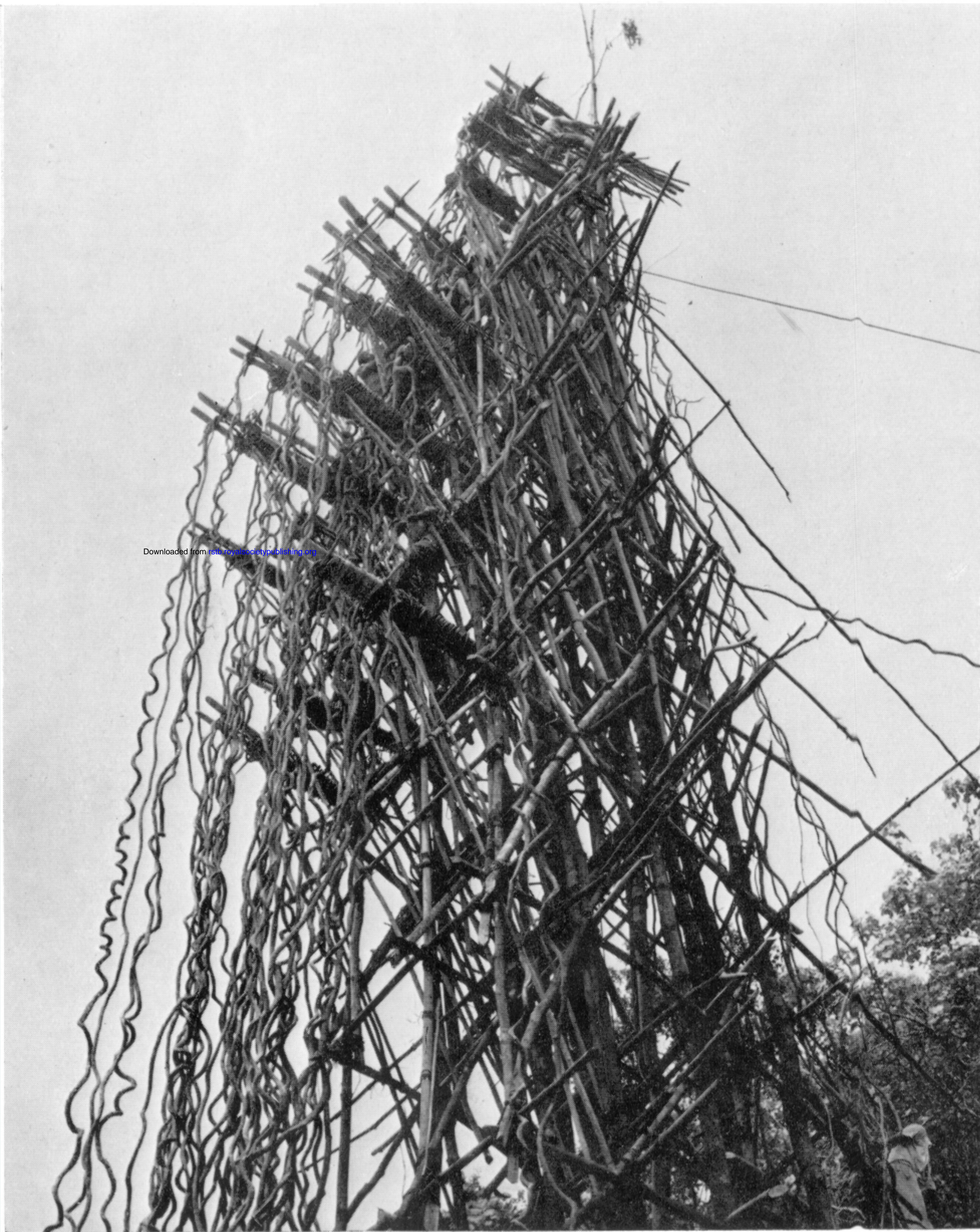


FIGURE 2. A diver from a medium height platform.

FIGURE 1. A finished diving tower on the eve of the great ceremonial. From the end of each platform hang the pairs of vines which will be tied to the divers' ankles.

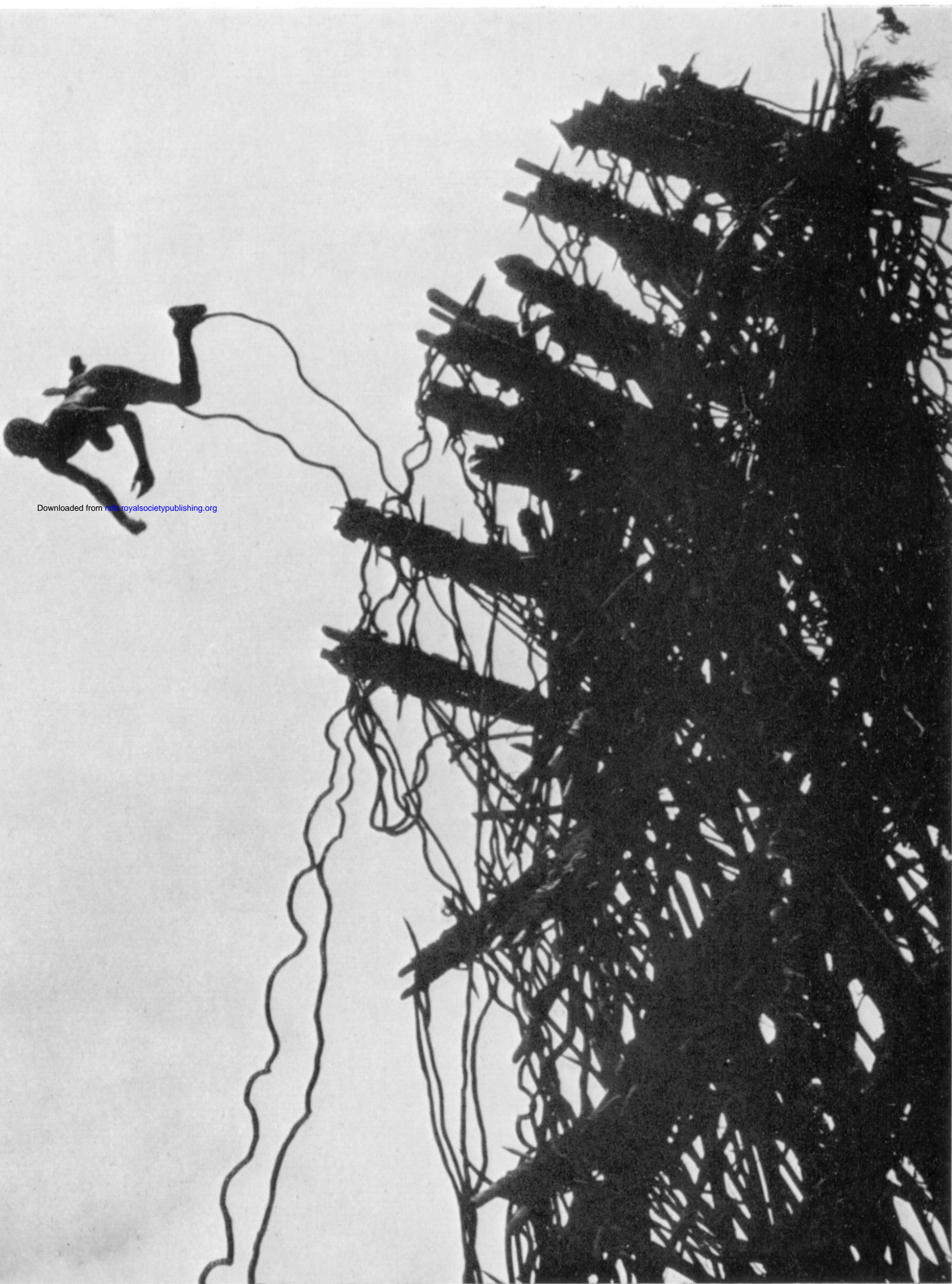


FIGURE 3. A diver in his forward fall from the platform.



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