D\textsuperscript{uring the dry, dusty winter of 2008, a rumor caught fire in Malawi but quickly burned out. It was said that in the Southern district of Zomba, a new sexually transmitted disease was spreading. This disease, called \textit{mphutsi}, meaning maggots, reportedly infected the genitals of its victims. Those with the disease would die rapidly—within a week or month—if they were not treated with the liver of a cow. Fear of the disease spread beyond the immediate environs of Zomba, the area believed to be at the epicenter of mphutsi infection. According to rumor, a group of men in the centrally located capital city, Lilongwe, had begun publically shouting at and tearing the clothes off prostitutes there, accusing them of spreading the disease.

Meanwhile, in the Northern district of Rumphi, a group of young Malawians arrived from various districts across the country to conduct interviews for a survey project. Some talked about mphutsi as they gathered for work. Among these survey interviewers was one of my informants, Hastings Mkandawire. He and his wife rented space to some of the people brought to work on the survey but later found out that the “wife” of one of the men they housed was not a wife but a prostitute. Hastings described a conversation that took place among himself, his wife and Charity (whom he called “the hired girlfriend” of the survey worker). Hastings’ wife was concerned with the women who had traveled from other regions to work on the project. She worried that Hastings might become entangled with some of those
girls. Charity’s discussion of a new disease did little to calm her fears. Charity explained what she had heard on the radio and why people greatly feared the spread of this particular disease:

“AIDS is now the story of the past, nobody this time fear[s] AIDS, Mphutsi is more fire!” Charity commented. “The advantage with AIDS is that it takes a longer time before somebody kisses the ground, unlike this newly discovered disease,” continued Charity who seemed to be worried very much with the disease. (Hastings Mkandawire research journal, July 2008)

The disease was believed to be inevitably fatal and incurable. Some said infected women die within a month and men within a week. Charity explained to a puzzled Hastings that women could more easily treat the disease and thus survive longer because they could place the cow’s liver used for treatment inside the affected area. When Hastings chatted with a group of male research interviewers the next day, they were also talking about mphutsi. Hastings wrote that talk of the disease was “the food of everybody that day.” One of the men named Bright explained what he heard from a friend:

“My friend phoned me yesterday, he was telling me about the same disease. He told me that at first the Malawi government through its Ministry of Health was against [acknowledging] the spread of the disease, but now it has agreed about the presence of the disease.” (Hastings Mkandawire research journal, July 2008)

The same young man went on to explain that after he heard the stories about mphutsi from his friend he collected his salary but decided not to go spend it at the bottle store (bar) where he was likely to run into bargirls, that is, prostitutes. “...[M]en have to run away from bargirls, they want to protect their lives.” He explained that in town there is a problem of men shouting at bargirls, saying, “We know you bar girls and prostitutes, you have got worms, we don’t want you, you can kill us.” Mphutsi, he explained, has been bad for the business of prostitution.

Around the same time Malawi’s Ministry of Health published a press release in the weekend edition of The Nation (a nationally circulating newspaper). In their statement written to clarify facts about “a rumour of a strange disease,” they began by explaining the characteristics of the sexually transmitted infection (STI):