Valuing Built Heritage through the Promotion of Oral Heritage via Participation in the Digital Age

Feedback from the Stories of the Old City of Kairouan

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Abstract— As part of the tools of the recent global boom in the democratization of knowledge, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have been giving growing support to participation in cultural heritage. This paper presents "*Ahkili Aliha*", an event during which tribunes of speech were open to the inhabitants of Kairouan, Tunisia, serving the (re)promotion of the patrimonial site of Kairouan through the promotion of oral heritage and collective memory. Based on the *Ahkili Aliha* event case study, the main objective of this research is to examine the relevance and contribution of participation and ICT for the promotion of oral heritage and consequently the promotion of built heritage of patrimonial sites. The study presents critical analyses of the linearity of the patrimonialization process in old Tunisian cities and considers the role of participation and ICT in resuming paused or incomplete patrimonialization processes.

Keywords- participation; ICT; oral heritage; built heritage; patrimonialization; collaborative action research.

I. INTRODUCTION

Two perceptions of the heritage seem to be often in opposition: while researchers perceive the heritage as a testimony of the history and a necessary element to preserve the memory of the past, the people perceive the heritage as buildings and territories to be lived in according to living arrangements today [1]. At the same time, another opposition is existing between tangible and intangible heritage. Eichler [2] emphasizes the existence of patterns of neo-colonialism that may subject communities to complementary power asymmetries that jeopardize their authoritative voices throughout intangible cultural heritage practices: neo-colonial relations become apparent in a variety of ways, encompassing written versus oral heritage, material versus intangible heritage, disadvantaged regions under the UNESCO umbrella and ultimately competing State alliances played out to the detriment of the Global South. The main objective of this article is to examine (1) the capacity of participation and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to promote oral heritage, and (2) the capacity of oral heritage promotion on built heritage. We focus on how intervening in collaborative action research makes possible and activates the feeling of belonging of participants, allowing them to retrace the history of the city and better promote the oral and built heritage. For this purpose, the article is based on feedback from the collaborative action-research project *Ahkili Aliha*. This project aimed to involve young people in the promotion of the historical center of their city by creating an immersive journey through stories told by the inhabitants retracing the memory of places and buildings. The specificity of this project was to promote the patrimonial site of the old city of Kairouan through activities carried out by youth and non-experts in cultural heritage and history while involving experts and researchers in these fields. The aim was to maintain links of dialogues without hierarchal distinction between institutional knowledge and non-institutional knowledge and between tangible heritage and intangible heritage, in this case, oral heritage. The article first describes the frameworks we used to carry out our study: the context of the feedback project *Ahkili Aliha*, its approach: the collaborative action research, and the theoretical framework: the process of patrimonialization of Tunisian old cities. Then, it exposes the research design through a presentation of the research problem, the research methods, and the case study of *Ahkili Aliha*. The overview of the results allowed us to validate the role of participation and ICT in heritage promotion through the examination of the different components of the project *Ahkili Aliha*. The study presents critical analyses of the linearity of the patrimonialization process in old Tunisian cities and considers the role of participation and ICT in resuming paused or incomplete patrimonialization processes.

II. RESEARCH FRAMEWORKS

A. Research context: Ahkili Aliha project

The researchers of Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium (ULB) and the members of Edifices & Mémoires, Tunisia (E&M) defined the *Ahkili Aliha* project in line with mobilizing young people to fight against the destruction of cultural heritage. *Ahkili Aliha* means in Arabic "tell me about it/her". In this context, *Ahki* can also be translated as narrate, tale and yarn. The targeted objectives were to enrich a collective memory around multiple and shared values and to contribute to the feeling of common belonging: living together. Kairouan, known as one of the oldest UNESCO sites in Tunisia and referred to as the fourth holy (or sacred) city of Islam and the first holy city in North Africa, has witnessed several activities related to violent extremism in recent years. The Medina of Kairouan has problems with security and delinquency and several young people have been radicalized. To tackle this issue, *Ahkili Aliha* project aimed to promote a sense of identity and belonging in youth in their city. The funding of *Ahkili Aliha* was obtained from the "Prevent Violent Extremism" fund from the United Nations, co-funded by the Government of Canada.

The vision of the project was to help ward off violence and extremism is to help youth speak up and/or act. To do this, the research over nine months (April to November 2019) had brought together different partners:

- Key civil society organization: Edifices & Mémoires (E&M), a Tunisian nongovernmental organization working for the preservation and promotion of the Tunisian architectural and urban heritage through communication between scientific research and citizen action. It aims to bring together several disciplines related to the appropriation of heritage to go beyond simplistic museification in favor of a global, contextualized, and multidisciplinary reflection on heritage and the awareness of collective memory. E&M considers that the challenge is to move from a "frozen" heritage to a heritage designed and lived by all.
- Scientific partner: research unit AIA Architectural engineering, BATir department, Ecole Polytechnique; Université libre de Bruxelles. The unit is specialized in participatory approaches and the study of citizen actions in favor of collective intelligence.
- Institutional partner: National Heritage Institute, Tunisia. The immediate partner was the regional office of the National Heritage Institute in Kairouan.
- Local civil society organizations: the main local civil society organizations are: We Love Kairouan, Junior Chamber International of Kairouan, UNESCO, ISESCO, ALECSO Club

of Kairouan. These organizations helped reach a big number of the population, especially young people, for the implementation of the project.

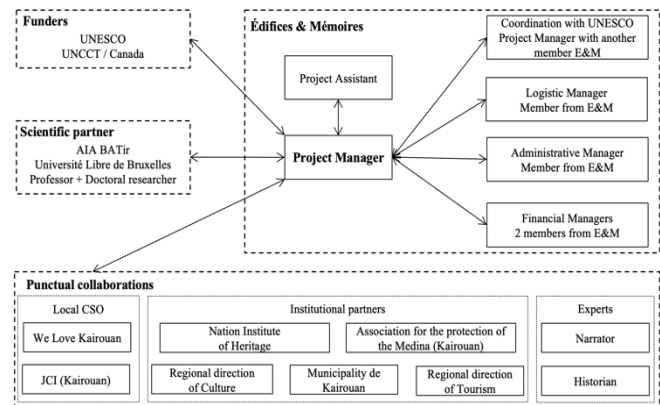The complete organigramme of *Ahkili Aliha* is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Ahkili Aliha organizational chart

In previous work "in press" [3], we classified participation actors into three groups: actors by knowing, actors by knowledge, and actors by action. In *Ahkili Aliha* project, actors by knowing are represented in the local civil society organizations as well as inhabitants who participated in the project. Actors by knowledge are represented in the scientific partner, the experts, as well as the managers from E&M since they are all architects and experts in built heritage. Actors by action are represented in the funders and the institutional partners in Kairouan. The project manager played an important and crucial role in the project implementation. The financial, logistic, and administrative managing was guaranteed in collaboration with the different officers from E&M. Born and raised in the city of Kairouan, the project manager had ease to connect with the local civil society organizations for the punctual collaboration. The scientific partners cooperated with the project manager to guarantee the scientific application of the participatory approach followed in *Ahkili Aliha*. A regular contact with funders was established between the project manager and the administrative representative of UNESCO and the "Prevent Violent Extremism" fund. Since the project manager was also an architect and a doctoral researcher in ICT use in heritage promotion, she was an actor by knowing and an actor by knowledge at the same time. Collaborative action-research was the approach followed in *Ahkili Aliha* and the framework for the interactions between actors.

B. Ahkili Aliha as action-research project

Training in the safeguarding and in the promotion of cultural heritage and encouraging and supporting creativity among youth was among the aims of this action-research project. Action research is a proactive strategy in which research has political and social relevance. Action research in

architecture and design is a form of learning through doing/making, which chimes both with Paulo Friere's conceptions of learning during action [4], and importantly with a core tenet of participatory design, mutual learning [5]. In action research, it is important from an epistemological point of view to clearly identify the difference between the research question targeted by researchers and the action expected by the people. In *Ahkili Aliha*, the researchers aimed to validate the role of participation and ICT in valuing oral heritage to promote built heritage, while the action fulfilled by the inhabitants, elder people and youth especially, was to organize the event of *Ahkili Aliha*, as a day where both oral heritage and built heritage from aside, and both institutional knowledge and non-institutional knowledge are celebrated.

C. Theoretical framework: Patrimonialization of Tunisian old cities

In this section, we build a theoretical framework for patrimonialization based on the works of Emmanuel Amougou [6] and Zeineb Youssef [7] to discuss later in this paper the roles that participation and ICT can play in the patrimonialization process. In the book "The patrimonial question", the process of patrimonialization creates links, requirements, and implications according to Amougou. Among these elements, we cite (1) the social global links (the emergence of the question of heritage and its (re)definition, (2) the institutionalization (the mechanisms of diffusion of the patrimonial legitime values), (3) the professionalization (confirmation invention of agents on object, knowledge speech, practices and techniques of legitimation), (4) new social links appearing to redefine objects from new social challenges) and (5) the practical traductions (applications of different dispositions such us restoring, renovation, etc.).

Youssef [7] emphasizes that the process of patrimonialization is linear and composed of phases sub-composed of steps. Thus, as said by Youssef, the construction of the patrimonial profile for Tunisian medinas is possible within 6 different scenarios according to the steps they are composed of. The process of patrimonialization is composed of 3 phases: identification, conservation, and exploitation. The first phase of identification is composed of awareness and selection. The second phase of conservation is composed of protection and conservation. The final phase of exploitation is composed of exhibition and valorization. Different scenarios can result from the presence and/or the absence of steps in each context. The following table explains each scenario according to the patrimonialization steps achieved.
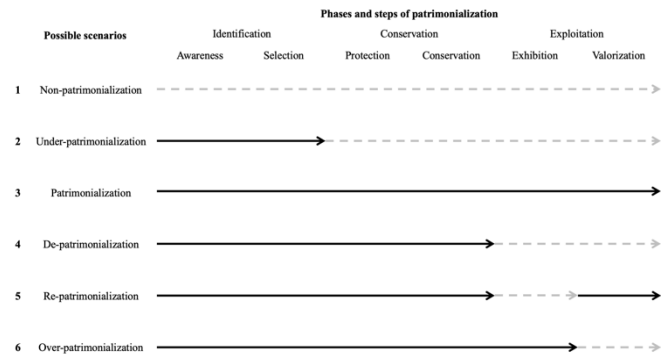

Figure 2. Phases and steps of patrimonialization adapted from Youssef [7].

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research problem

In the *Ahkili Aliha* case study that we analyze in the following pages, we shall examine the capacity of participation and ICT to promote oral heritage, and therefore, the promotion of built heritage. We focus on how intervening in collaborative action research makes possible and activates the feeling of belonging of participants, allowing them to retrace the history of the city and better promote the oral and built heritage.

B. Research methods

The research design is based on two techniques involving collecting qualitative data and adapted to action-research projects. While the first part consists of the research design aims to reconstruct the *Ahkili Aliha* project process through documents analysis, the second part is based on participant observation carried out during the first participatory workshop and meetings with the E&M team. Since participant observation didn't take place during the entire project, it was completed by the documents analysis technique. Thus, it can be said that this study uses grounded theory methods composed of two different techniques to achieve comprehensive and authentic data collection.

1) In-Depth documents analysis

Document analysis is often used in combination with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation 'the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon [8]. Drawing upon multiple (at least two) sources of evidence; that is, to seek convergence and corroboration using different data sources and methods. Apart from documents, such sources include interviews, participant or non-participant observation, and physical artifacts [9]. The documents that we analyze in our study are produced before, during, and after the project, mainly project submission documents, periodic reports to funders, and emails between the people involved in the project.

2) *Participant-observation*

Participant observation can be used to explore the entire range of themes and topics that qualitative research methods are generally used for and may be particularly useful whenever the aim is to understand a phenomenon or a setting from the perspective of those who live, experience, and/ or are affected by it. It is also a research approach that may be exploited in participatory action research [10]. We were able to observe the interactions between the people involved in the project during the project and after that. In the next section, we describe the two participatory workshops which took place in the beginning and in the middle of the *Ahkili*

Aliha project, since they were the major occasion where different actors had the opportunity to meet and design together.

C. *Choice of components of* Ahkili Aliha *Project*

The phases of the collaborative methodology of the *Ahkili Aliha* project had been specified to ensure the participation of the partners in all the phases of the project. Table I details each component (first column) by specifying the different steps that have been given and prepared (second column) and the activities realized (third column) with the partners involved (fourth column).

TABLE I.   COMPONENTS OF THE *AHKILI ALIHA* PROJECT

Components	Steps	Activites	Partners included
I. Promotion of the collective memory of a place, *the route*	**Taking contact**	- Town and neighbourhood visit - Identification of historical buildings - Selection of the lead narrator	- Édifices & Mémoires - Local CSO
	Participatory workshop	- Study of selected buildings to identify the main elements of the route: history, architectural value, personal value, choice of place - Identification of locations (including the location of the central stage) according to the potential of the place to convert it into a stage, the proximity of the different places with the length of the route, the accessibility - Checking the coherence between the selected buildings and the main narrative told on the urban scene - Identification of related activities - Route design	- Édifices & Mémoires - Lead narrator - Local CSO - Scientific partner
	Realization	- Dissemination of the event and its publication - Preparation of related activities (local products booths) - Preparation of guided tours - Preparation of music concert by local musicians at the end of the route	- Cultural Professionals (artists, experts in cultural management and in mediation) - Édifices & Mémoires - Local CSO - Scientific partner
	Simulation	- Design an urban scene in the city (also starting point for the guided tours)	All partners
II. Promote the individual memory of a place, *the box*	**Taking contact & workshop**	- Meet the young people interested in the project through local CSO - Select Profiles - Identify the stories to capture in the box - Define the place where the box is set up	- Professionals in video capturing and processing - Édifices & Mémoires - Lead narrator - Local CSO - Scientific partner
	Training	- Prepare young people to conduct an interview with the people to be interviewed in the box	
	Box design & installation	- Choosing the van where the filming will take place - Customizing the van with the parameters of visibility, its identity image, its intimacy as the filming place and the security of the equipment contained therein	
	Concretisation	- Filming and capturing - Processing the captured data	- Professionals in video capturing and processing - Édifices & Mémoires - Narrators - Local CSO - Scientific partner
	Simulation	- Test the feasibility of the projection and the equipment at the selected locations along the route	
III. *Ahkili Aliha* **narration & route event**		- Urban storytelling event: guided tours provided by the young people who participated in the workshops: screening of the catches, exhibition of local products, discovery of the built heritage of the city - Musical concert on stage	All partners

IV.   RESEARCH RESULTS

A. Participation to promote the oral heritage

1)   Participation to promote the collective memory of a place, the Route

The participatory workshop that took place at the beginning of the project allowed the participants to express their relationships with the heritage of their city as well as engage in participatory reflections to choose together the route and the delimitation of the area of activities. This co-design of the event encourages formal and informal moments of exchange, by mixing all the partners, which allowed a better appropriation of the project by the participants. The co-creation of the route allowed the reshaping of the collective memory of the city that the participants have in common.

Figure 3. The partners during the participatory workshop.

2)   Participation to promote the individual memories of a place, Stories from the Box

The box installed open to the public served to capture the stories of the city through the testimonies of its inhabitants. This box was a van equipped with cameras, microphones, and light. The van was rented and decorated on both sides and from behind with a catchphrase written in Tunisian dialect to attract the attention of passers-by. The project took the same design of the van's skin for the banner to keep the same visual identity. The banner was fixed on the rampart of the old city in the Martyrs Square where the billboards of the major cultural events and citizen actions of the city are fixed. It is also used to warn passers-by, when the van is not parked, of the date and time of the opening of the studio. The van was parked all week of registration in the same square, which gives access to the Medina. It was the liveliest square with the most frequented cafés by most of the people who live or have lived in Kairouan and who present the project's target for the interviews. In front of this square, there is a commercial district and the cultural complex of the city which are frequented rather by young people. The studio is open every day at the Martyrs Square from 6pm to 10pm to avoid the daytime heat and to have the presence of the inhabitants who frequent the square to drink a coffee, meet

their friends or take a walk in the old city. In the mornings, the van recording team went to people who could not move to the Martyrs Square and with whom they have made appointments in advance to interview them. Therefore, this was an opportunity to go around the city to have more visibility and make the project known.

Figure 4. The van designed for recording the stories.

In the box, one could thus enter it to tell in complete intimacy the aspect of the city they want to share (urban legend, historical fact, a story about an important personality, significant event, etc.). This Box allowed people who have oral narratives around the history of the city, the neighborhood, a character, event, and even legends to tell and share them. All these catches were processed and then disseminated on the day of the event in various places that were visited and open to the public as part of the route organized. Recording interviews was the major step in the project. It made it possible to create all the social and historical content for the programming of the event and the visit route of the monuments.

Figure 5. A person telling their memories in the box (left) and a person telling their memories indoors (right).

B. ICT and media use to promote the heritage

In cultural heritage, people draw upon the digital technologies of social media to represent their heritage independently of museums and archives [11]. In this regard, the activities performed by people can be individual practices, social media presence and the organizational network of NGOs, local traditional media, and public archives constitutes the crowdsourced heritage [12]. In *Ahkili Aliha*, both "conventional" media like Radio and ICT like social media were used to promote the event and engage more people. Social media accounts managed by E&M were used to encourage participation, while radio was used to promote the event.

1) Social media event teaser

A mobilization video was broadcasted via the Edifices et Mémoires Facebook page. The date chosen to lunch the teaser was August 10, 2019, a day before Eid (a religious celebration for Muslims). While the Eid is celebrated across Tunisia, where it's an official day off, it represents great importance for Kairouan due to its Islamic heritage. The event teaser published was accompanied by a text in Arabic and French communicating the concept of the *Ahkili Aliha* project and specifying the dates and the place of recording of the interviews. To reach a maximum number of people, the *Ahkili Aliha* project members chose three influential people to tell the story that links each one of them to the heritage of Kairouan. This aimed to show that heritage belongs to everyone and is not reserved for an elite or experts and to ensure high visibility of the event and encourage people to participate in the recordings. These people appearing in the teaser represent a variety of profiles, including:

- First person: a septuagenarian who lived in the Medina of Kairouan for several years. His testimony presents a "social proof" to encourage the less young and the inhabitants of the Medina to come and tell their stories.

- Second person: a basketball player who is an emblematic figure of Kairouan. His appearance in the video represented a surprise to his fans who expected an interview about a basketball game or his sports career. In the video the player sent a message to the inhabitants of Kairouan to safeguard this heritage that presents their identity. His appearance aroused the interest of young fans of this player in the heritage of Kairouan.

- Third person: a young woman active on social networks. After telling her story, the woman launches a call for participation in the *Ahkili Aliha* project. In the teaser, not putting a recognized expert in the video was decided by the *Ahkili Aliha* project designers (1) to show that heritage is not only limited to experts and (2) to confirm that oral heritage is also cultural heritage

that can be shared and promoted thanks to the contributions of the inhabitants.

2) Radio

The concept and objectives of the project, as well as the funding agencies and partners, were presented by the project manager in a morning radio show in August 2019. The purpose of the radio talk for the *Ahkili Aliha* project members was to invite listeners to participate in the week of recording interviews and to announce the date of the closing event. The use of Radio was also to reach an audience who is still using the conventional media channel.

C. Oral heritage promotion for built heritage promotion

Interactive visit routes have been set up, in close collaboration with the partners, highlighting the lived and told stories of the selected neighborhood. Through the visits, 2 main objectives were targeted: First, raise awareness among people of the rich oral heritage being a gateway for a better appropriation and promotion of their built heritage. And second, in the longer term, fight against the destruction of cultural heritage through training in the safeguarding of cultural heritage.

Figure 6. Visitors exploring the old city during the *Ahkili Aliha* event day.

Local musicians performed a concert at the end of the guided tours. Some stalls were set up to sell and promote regional products or local crafts. The aim of the event day

was to create an opportunity to transmit the collective memory from one generation to another.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Non-linearity of Patrimonialization process

The medina of Kairouan is a UNESCO heritage since 1988. To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria. The old city of Kairouan meets five out of the ten selection criteria of UNESCO. We emphasize that the old city of Kairouan has reached at least the step of conservation for two reasons: (1) due to its UNESCO heritage classification and the national and regional efforts to preserve the old city, and (2) the institutionalization, the professionalization, and the practical traductions are confirmed. This leads to four possible scenarios when it comes to the patrimonialization of the old city of Kairouan: either it is in full patrimonialization process, in a de-patrimonialization scenario, or in re-patrimonialization or in an over-patrimonialization scenario.
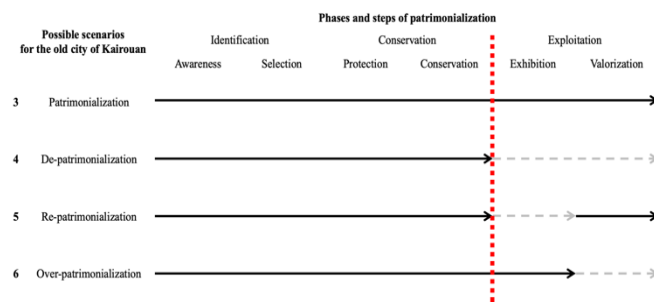

Figure 7. Phases and steps of possible patrimonialization scenarios for the old city of Kairouan.

Based on the participant-observant method, we found out that "celebrating" the city, is a common feeling among its inhabitants on specific religious occasions, such as the month of Ramadan and the celebration of the birthday of the prophet Mohamed. This temporary, but strong connection to the old city is widely present and shared among the participants of *Ahkili Aliha* project. While in the rest of the year, participants said they experienced feelings of belonging to their city, these feelings seem to be not as strong as during the special occasions. This helps us deduct that the patrimonialization process of the old city of Kairouan, is not a constant linear phenomenon. In fact, it seems to be a variant cyclical phenomenon, that depends on different factors, such as the times and the occasions of the connection that the inhabitants feel toward their heritage, and therefore the practices they have in the city and other political events that tend to value, even "glorify" the cities. We cite here the example of the designation of Kairouan as the Islamic Culture Capital for 2009 by The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, ICESCO. Once a step is achieved the patrimonialization process is done, it can be

also withdrawn or broken if the factor behind it is not present anymore. Hence, we represent the patrimonialization process as a succession of phases, such as Youssef [7]. Every step takes the form of a circle, to represent two scenarios: (1) with the horizontal arrow to signify that the step may lead thereafter but directly to the next step, or (2) with two circular arrows, to signify that the step may be withdrawn and lead to the previous step.
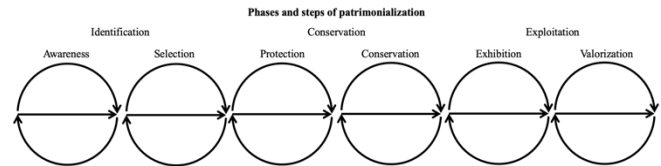

Figure 8. Patrimonialization process in nonlinear representation

While the absence of the steps of the phase of exploitation does not cancel the patrimonialization process, we emphasize that participation and ICT can be a tool to fill the gaps of the missing steps in uncomplete or broken patrimonialization process scenarios.

B. The role of participation and ICT to resume or restore broken exploitation steps in patrimonialization

The new dimensions of cultural practices have generally been articulated around the notions of networking, connectivity, and participation. The new media, such as the ones based on ICT, are a major part of participatory cultural systems [13]. In the patrimonialization process, the actors play different roles in the steps. While the Faro convention puts the people at the heart of the processes of identification, management, and sustainable use of heritage, some steps of the patrimonialization are still exclusive to the actors by action and actors by knowledge (our last work to cite), mainly the protection and conservation steps. While participation guarantees the inclusion of a big number of actors around cultural heritage projects and experiences, it plays an important role in the reconciliation of tangible heritage and intangible heritage. The study case of *Ahkili Aliha* allowed us to show that actors by knowing to contribute more with knowledge related to intangible heritage, such as stories and legends, while the actors by knowledge contribute with their expertise in built heritage, such as information about history and buildings. Participation represents the core concept, with a variety of approaches to follow, in the *Ahkili Aliha* project it is the collaborative action-research. ICT represent the tool that provides a common ground for actors of patrimonialization to meet and share their knowledge. Together, participation and ICT provide an opportunity for cities like Kairouan, to resume and restore their patrimonialization process.
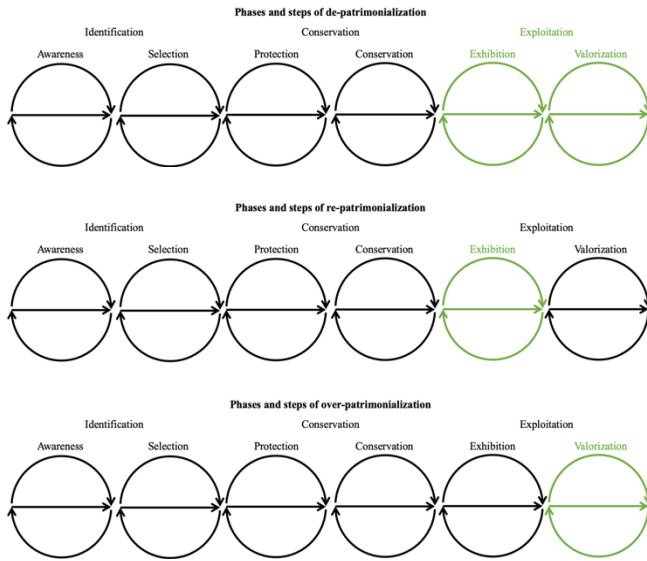
Figure 9. The steps of exhibition and/or valorization (in green) where participation and ICT can play a role to resume uncompleted or suspended or broken patrimonialization process.

VI. CONCLUSION

Contributions. This article has made it possible to highlight the contribution of participation and ICT in a context for the promotion of oral heritage and built heritage in the framework of collaborative action research. It also allowed to underline that the promotion of the built heritage and patrimonial sites cannot be done independently from the promotion of oral heritage and the other constituents of the intangible heritage. The discussion allowed to consider the role of ICT and participation in the steps of exhibition and/or valorization to resume uncompleted or suspended or broken patrimonialization process.

Prospects. A crucial work is to be expected as a result of this project, which consists of analyzing the data collected from the box of *Ahkili Aliha* project. The data captured can represent solid work support for a reflection on patrimonial values of heritage and their links with different actors identified since the heritage value cannot simply be linked to the historical value but its nonquantified values to the individuals and the communities.

When it comes to the future of the *Ahkili Aliha* project, the Regional Commission of Culture had expressed its interest in inviting the project team to present the *Ahkili Aliha* project as part of the Kairouan Intangible Heritage Festival that will take place in April 2020 (unfortunately it was postponed because of the pandemic). The partner associations and citizen volunteers who participated in the *Ahkili Aliha* project also expressed their interest in making the second edition of *Ahkili Aliha* Kairouan in the period of *Mouled*, a religious festivity that the city of Kairouan is known for.

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