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Ohmic Contact to p-Type GaN Enabled by Post-Growth Diffusion of Magnesium

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Abstract—We demonstrated the formation of excellent Ohmic contact to p-type GaN (including the plasma etchingdamaged p-type GaN which otherwise exhibited undetectable current within ±**5 V) by the post-growth diffusion of magnesium. The specific contact resistivity on the order of 10^{** $−4$ **}** Ω **.cm² (extracted at V** = 0 V) was achieved on the **plasma-damaged p-GaN with linear current-voltage characteristics by the transfer length method (TLM) measurement. The improvement in current by a factor of over 10⁹ was also obtained on the plasma-damaged p-n junction diode after the same Mg-treatment. These experimental results indicate a great potential of post-growth diffusion of Mg to overcome the bottleneck of forming a good Ohmic contact to p-GaN.**

Index Terms—Diffusion processes, doping, gallium nitride, magnesium, Ohmic contacts.

I. INTRODUCTION

GaN is a wide-bandgap semiconductor that experienced
rapid development in optoelectronics and power elec-
transies since the first demonstration of n tune conduction [1] tronics since the first demonstration of *p*-type conduction [1]. Until today, magnesium (Mg) is still the only dopant available to produce *p*-type GaN [2]. However, because of a high ionization energy (∼200 meV), the hole concentration is rather limited in even heavily doped *p*-GaN [3], [4]. Furthermore, the common and unavoidable plasma etching process easily introduce N-vacancy as compensating donor which reduces the hole concentration of the surface *p*-GaN and makes it act like lightly-doped *p*-GaN, leading to the increased difficulty of obtaining Ohmic contact to *p*-GaN [5]–[7]. As a result, a good Ohmic contact to *p*-GaN has become the bottleneck to improve the performance of related electronic devices such as merged PiN Schottky diode, *p-n* junction diodes, bipolar

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transistors and *p*-channel unipolar transistors (MISFET and HEMT) [8]–[14].

Doping by the post-growth diffusion is a common practice in semiconductors like Si. It produces a decaying dopant profile where the top of semiconductor was heavily doped with the dopants under constant source diffusion. Such degenerate semiconductor layer satisfies the regime to achieve the fieldemission-induced carrier tunneling through the Schottky barrier and is critical to form a good metal-semiconductor Ohmic contact [15]–[17].

Post-growth diffusion by thermal annealing of Mg at high temperature and long time was reported to render *p-*type GaN [18]. In principle, the diffusion at low temperature and short time should be sufficient to build up a thin p^+ contact layer above existing bulk *p*-GaN to promote Ohmic contact, which could also subdue the compensating donors induced by plasma etch. Since the restoration of Ohmic contact to plasmatreated *p*-GaN is desired in the device processing stage, the post-growth diffusion of Mg with low annealing temperature and short time, if feasible, could also exhibit compatibility to a broad range of processing techniques.

In this letter, we demonstrated excellent Ohmic contact to *p*-GaN by post-growth diffusion of Mg at relatively low temperature and short time such as $550 °C$ and 10 min, even on the plasma-etched *p*-GaN. Furthermore, after the same Mg-treatment was used to recover the compromised Ohmic contact to *p*-layer of a GaN *p-n* junction diode (PND), the superior forward conduction further highlighted the good feasibility and effectiveness of the approach.

II. EXPERIMENTS

The epi-layers consisting of ∼400 nm-thick *p*-type GaN with $[Mg] = 7 \times 10^{18}$ cm⁻³ and 2.5 μ m-thick *n*⁻-type GaN with $[Si] = 7 \times 10^{16}$ cm⁻³ were grown by MOVPE on the ∼400 μm-thick 2 inch-diameter *n*+-GaN substrate having free electron concentration of $\sim 10^{18}$ cm⁻³. The top *p*⁺ contact layer was not grown. The wafer was diced into dozens of small samples.

Fig. 1 (a)–(g) schematically illustrates the key steps in the fabrication flow for the *p*-GaN transfer length method (TLM) test structure and *p-n* junction diode. All the samples were annealed at $T = 700$ °C and $t = 10$ min in N₂ as a common step for *p*-GaN activation. Photolithography was utilized in (b) , (d) , and (f) . Four paths were divided among the samples: I (blank): (a)-(b)-(f)-(g); II (Mg treatment only): (a)-(b)-(d)-(e)-(f)-(g); III (plasma treatment only): (a)-(b)-(c)-(f)-(g); IV (dual plasma and Mg treatment): $(a)-(b)-(c)-(d)-c$ (e)-(f)-(g). As shown in Fig. 1 (b), the Cl₂-based ICP-RIE was used for mesa etch (etching depth: ∼800 nm, hard mask: \sim 3 μ m photoresist) for the TLM test structure and the circular

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Fig. 1. (a)–(g) Schematic illustrations of the key steps of the fabrication flow for the p -GaN TLM test structure and p -n junction diode with plasmaand Mg-treatment. (h) Schematic plan-view of the TLM test structure and the mesa structure and anode of p -n junction diode. (i) Thermal cycle for all the annealing process mentioned in this letter with the defined variants of temperature (T) and time (t).

vertical *p-n* junction diode on the same sample (Fig. 1 (h)). For path III and IV designed to evaluate the effect of postgrowth diffusion of Mg on the plasma-treated *p*-GaN, part of the samples were subject to the plasma treatment including $Cl₂$ ICP-RIE (ICP power: 150 W, bias power: 30 W, etching time: 30 s) followed by CF4 RIE (bias power: 100 W, etching time: 2 min) which represent the most commonly used plasma etch methods in GaN processing technology (Fig. 1 (c)). Then, metallic pure Mg (50 nm) was patterned onto the *p*-GaN by sputtering except the blank samples as shown in Fig. 1 (d), followed by the annealing process in N_2 with the variants of temperature (T) and time (t). All the Mg-treated samples were cleaned by acid (HCl: H_2O_2 : $H_2O = 1:1:4$) at 80 °C for 10 min to remove the residue metallic Mg and acid-soluble Mg compounds (Fig. 1 (e)). Finally, Ni (20 nm)/Au (150 nm) was E-beam evaporated onto all the samples at the exact same region with Mg and the alignment precision was within 1 μ m, followed by thermal annealing with $T = 525 °C$ and t = 5 min in O₂ (Fig. 1 (f) and (h)). Al (∼180 nm) was sputtered onto the backside of all the samples as the cathode for the PNDs (Fig. 1 (g)). In addition, a few samples underwent steps (a) - (d) - (e) (except that for (d) , Mg was deposited on the entire sample surface) were measured by Secondary Ion Mass Spectroscopy (SIMS) to investigate the diffusion profile of Mg into GaN. In particular, these samples were polished and thinned to ∼1 μ m before being sputtered from the backside during the SIMS to circumvent the possible interference of the topmost compound layer with high Mg content on the accurate determination of [Mg] in the underneath *p*-GaN layer.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fig. 2 (a) is the *I-V* characteristic of the samples undergoing path I and path II with varying T. Both the path I sample (blank) and the path-II samples ($T = 400 °C$ and 500 ◦C) did not exhibit Ohmic behavior. In stark contrast, the samples with 550 $°C$, 600 °C, and 700 °C exhibited excellent Ohmic behavior with fully linear *I-V* characteristics and the 800 °C sample also exhibited slightly degraded linearity. The transition between non-Ohmic to Ohmic occurred within 500 °C–550 °C, which was further revealed in Fig. 2. (b) featuring finer T steps. When T increased from $500\degree C$ to 550 ◦C, the linearity of the *I-V* curves gradually improved. Furthermore, despite that 500 ◦C and 10 min led to non-Ohmic behavior, the sample with 500 ◦C and 60 min developed

Fig. 2. (a) The $I-V$ characteristics (contact spacing: 15 μ m) of the blank sample and path II-samples with varying T (from 400 \degree C to 800 \degree C) and $t = 10$ min in the Mg-treatment process. (b) The *I-V* characteristics (contact spacing of 15 *µ*m) of the path II-samples with T from 500 ◦C to 550 °C, t = 10 min, and T = 500 °C, t = 60 min.

Fig. 3. The TLM results of the path-II samples with Mg-treatment $(T = 550 °C, 600 °C, 700 °C, 800 °C)$ and $t = 10$ min, the resistance $(R = dV/dI)$ was extracted at $V = 0$ V at steps of 25 mV.

TABLE I THE SHEET RESISTANCE AND THE SPECIFIC CONTACT RESISTIVITY OF THE MG-TREATED (PATH-II) SAMPLES

T and t	R_{sh} [kΩ/ \square]		ρ_c [Ω .cm ²]	
550 °C, 10 min	$V = 0V$	87.2	$V = 0V$	2.59×10 ⁻⁴
	$V = \pm 5V$	70.5	$V = ±5V$	5.21×10^{-5}
600 °C, 10 min	$V = 0V$	57.6	$V = 0V$	8.40×10^{-3}
	$V = \pm 5V$	64.4	$V = ±5V$	2.86×10 ⁻⁴
700 °C, 10 min	$V = 0V$	46.4	$V = 0V$	1.29×10^{-2}
	$V = ±5V$	51.5	$V = \pm 5V$	1.33×10^{-3}
800 °C, 10 min	$V = 0V$	24.6	$V = 0V$	1.51×10^{-1}
	$V = ±5V$	32.1	$V = \pm 5V$	1.45×10^{-3}

improved Ohmic behavior with quasi-linear *I-V* curve. The fact that increasing the time could complement the otherwise insufficient temperature needed to form the Ohmic contact implied that diffusion of Mg in GaN was responsible for the observed Ohmic behavior.

Fig. 3 compares the TLM results (extracted at $V = 0$ V, step = 25 mV) of the path-II samples with $T = 550 °C$, 600 °C, 700 °C, and 800 °C and Table I summarizes the sheet resistance and the specific contact resistivity which were extracted both at $V = 0$ V and ± 5 V (step = 25 mV). It is worth mentioning that the resistance $(=dV/dI)$ tends to decrease gradually with increasing V. As a result, the specific contact resistivity exhibits lower value in general when extracted at higher voltages, and that extracted at $V = 0$ V represents an upper-bound value. It is concluded that with increasing temperature the sheet resistance decreased but the specific contact resistivity increased, which held true both for $V = 0$ V and ± 5 V. The observed increase in the specific contact resistivity at higher temperature may be accounted for by the compound layer (chemically inert, insoluble in acids or alkalis) formed by interdiffusion of Mg and GaN on top of the

Fig. 4. (a) The SIMS profiles of Mg and Ga at varying annealing temperatures (T = 500 °C, 600 °C, 700 °C, 800 °C) and $t = 10$ min. (b) The temperature dependence of the extracted diffusion coefficient.

p-GaN which was thickened and coarsened with increasing T from 400 \degree C to 800 \degree C.

Fig. 4 (a) compares the diffusion profiles of Mg measured by the backside SIMS at varying annealing temperatures. The intensity of Ga decreased from 20–30 nm near the surface, corresponding to the compound layer featuring a mixture of GaN and Mg. The diffusion length L and total amount of diffused Mg increased with increasing T. The diffusion of Mg altered the previous distribution of [Mg] in the bulk *p*-GaN as more Mg diffused into *p*-GaN at higher T, thus giving rise to the hole concentration and decreasing the sheet resistance. On the other hand, the concomitant thickening of the parasitic compound layer on top of *p*-GaN gave rise to the specific contact resistivity in the same manner as did in the non-Ohmic range (400 \degree C to 500 \degree C) where the diffusion of Mg was insufficient to form the p^+ -GaN layer. Compared to 500 \degree C, significant amount of Mg diffused into GaN for $T = 600 °C$, 700 °C, and 800 °C, forming p^+ contact layer in a top-down manner, resembling that by the bottom-up epitaxial growth of p^+ -GaN. Based on the fitting of diffusion profiles with complementary error function for T = 600 \degree C, 700 \degree C, and 800 \degree C, Fig. 4 (b) estimated the pre-exponential factor D₀ and the activation energy for diffusion E_a by Eqn. (1):

$$
D = D_0 \exp\left(-\frac{E_a}{kT}\right) \tag{1}
$$

The low value of E_a (0.58 eV) in this range of T implied that the process was dominated by interstitial-dominated diffusion wherein most of diffused Mg atoms did not act as effective acceptors, and only a small amount of substitutional Mg_{Ga} contributed to the p^+ -GaN layer [19]–[21].

Fig. 5 (a) compares the *I-V* results of the TLM test samples undergoing path III and path IV. It can be seen that the plasma-treated sample exhibited undetectable current within \pm 5 V (R > 1 T Ω), proving that the Ohmic contact to *p*-GaN was seriously compromised by the etching-induced damages. Then, after Mg-treatment at 550 $\rm{^{\circ}C}$ (10 min), the ideal Ohmic contact with fully linear *I-V* curve was restored, similar to that of the path II-sample in Fig. 3. As shown by the TLM result (extracted at $V = 0$ V, step = ± 25 mV) in Fig. 4 (b), the sheet resistance was 127.5 k Ω /sq and the specific contact resistivity was 3.55×10^{-4} Ω cm². Since the Cl₂ ICP-RIE process also thinned the *p*-GaN by ∼120 nm (etching rate: 4 nm/s, time: 30 s), the ratio of the increased *p*-GaN sheet resistance (127.5/87.2 \times 100% = 146%) well matched that of the reduced *p*-thickness $(400/280 \times 100\% = 143\%)$, which proved good repeatability of the experiments.

Fig. 6 (a) compares the *I-V* characteristics of the PNDs undergoing path I (blank), II (Mg-treated only,

Fig. 5. (a) The $I-V$ characteristics (contact spacing of 15 μ m) of path-III sample (plasma-treated only) and path-IV samples (with plasma and Mg-treatment (varying T and $t = 10$ min)). (b) TLM result of the plasma-treated sample after Mg-treatment (T = 550° C and t = 10 min).

Fig. 6. (a) The semilogarithmic I-V characteristics of the PNDs (blank, plasma-treated only, Mg-treated only, and dual plasma-Mg-treated, respectively). (b) The ideality factor and the forward *I-V* characteristic curves of corresponding PNDs plotted in linear scale.

 $T = 550$ °C), III (plasma-treated only), and path IV (dual plasma-and-Mg-treated, $T = 550 °C$, respectively. Both path II- and path IV-PNDs exhibited similar and drastically improved current compared to path I- and path III-PNDs. As shown in Fig. 6 (b), a low turn-on voltage of 3 V, an ultra-low ideality factor (IF) of 1.3 for GaN PND at 2.9 V, and a high current density J of 1 kA/cm² at 3.5 V (mesa area is taken as device area, diameter: 80 μ m) were obtained on the dual plasma-Mg-treated PND, owing to the excellent Ohmic contact formed onto *p*-GaN [22]–[24]. Compared to path II-PND, path IV-PND showed slightly increased current because of the reduced series resistance of thinned *p*-layer in a vertical PND by the $Cl₂$ ICP-RIE process. This also proved in the vertical current path that the post-growth diffusion of Mg was effective to perfectly restore the ideal Ohmic contact to the plasma-etched *p*-GaN.

IV. CONCLUSION

In summary, we demonstrated excellent Ohmic contact to *p*-GaN by post-growth diffusion of Mg at relatively low temperature and short time, even after it was subject to the plasma etching-induced damages which otherwise exhibited undetectable current within ± 5 V (R > 1 T Ω). The specific contact resistivity as low as $0.5-2.6\times10^{-4} \Omega$ cm²was extracted at the low voltage $(\leq 5 \text{ V})$ by TLM measurement. The superior forward *I-V* characteristics of the *p-n*junction diode further highlighted the benefit of the excellent Ohmic contact to *p*-GaN. The good feasibility and effectiveness of such approach may indicate a great potential in overcoming the bottleneck of Ohmic contact to *p*-type GaN.

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