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Metalorganic chemical vapor deposition growth and thermal stability of the AlInN/GaN high electron mobility transistor structure

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Abstract

The Al₁ₓIn₁₋ₓN barrier high electron mobility transistor (HEMT) structure has been optimized with varied barrier composition and thickness grown by metalorganic chemical vapor deposition. After optimization, a transistor structure comprising a 7 nm thick nearly lattice-matched Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier exhibits a sheet electron density of 2.₀ × 1₀¹³ cm⁻² with a high electron mobility of 1₅₄₀ cm² V⁻¹ s⁻¹. An Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier HEMT device with 1 μm gate length provides a current density of 1.₀ A mm⁻¹ at V₉S₅ = 0 V and an extrinsic transconductance of 2₄₂ mS mm⁻¹, which are remarkably improved compared to that of a conventional Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N barrier HEMT. To investigate the thermal stability of the HEMT epi-structures, post-growth annealing experiments up to 8₀₀ °C have been applied to Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N and Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N barrier heterostructures. As expected, the electrical properties of an Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier HEMT structure showed less stability than that of an Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N barrier HEMT to the thermal annealing. The structural properties of Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N/GaN also showed more evidence for decomposition than that of the Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N/GaN structure after 8₀₀ °C post-annealing.

Some figures in this article are in colour only in the electronic version

1. Introduction

III-nitride-based semiconductor high electron mobility transistors (HEMTs) have attracted much attention for high frequency and high-power microwave applications, even in higher temperature environments [1]. In recent years, the HEMT epitaxial structures and devices using a thin Al₁In₁₋ₓN as barrier have been proposed, based on a theoretical calculation for significant improvements in drain currents and transconductances compared to those of Al₁Ga₁₋ₓN barrier HEMT [2–5]. One advantage of the Al₁In₁₋ₓN barrier is that it is lattice matched to a GaN buffer for an indium composition of approx. 17%, which avoids the drawbacks of an in-plane strain formed in the Al₁Ga₁₋ₓN/GaN heterostructures. At this indium composition, an Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N/GaN heterostructure can generate a higher two-dimensional electron gas (2DEG) charge with a much thinner barrier layer than that in an Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N/GaN heterostructure, due to the stronger spontaneous polarization effect and the larger band gap in the Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier [2]. The decrease in barrier thickness is very important for the HEMT device to operate at a small-signal high frequency by suppressing the short channel effects [6].

Although excellent device results have been reported from Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier HEMT devices recently [7, 8], the thermal stability of the HEMT epitaxial structure has not been
investigated extensively [9–11], which is a crucial property for electronic devices operated at high temperatures. Because the melt point of InN is around 1400 K, which is much lower than that of GaN (∼2500 K) and AlN (∼3000 K) [12–14], the thermal stability of ternary AlIn1−xN alloy is expected to be inferior to that of Al1−xGa1−xN.

In this work, we studied the effects of the growth temperature and thickness of an AlIn1−xN barrier on the electrical properties of HEMT structures. Furthermore, the thermal stability of the Al0.83In0.17N barrier HEMT epitaxial structure was investigated as a function of the post-annealing temperature in comparison with the conventional Al0.3Ga0.7N barrier HEMT structure.

2. Experimental details

The samples in the present study were all grown on a c-plane sapphire (Al2O3) substrate in a low-pressure metalorganic chemical vapor deposition (MOCVD) reactor (AIX 200/4 RF-S). Standard trimetylaluminum (TMAI), trimethylindium (TMIn) and ammonia (NH3) were used as the precursors for Ga, Al, In and N, respectively. For the AlIn1−xN/GaN heterostructures, the growth was initiated with the deposition of a 25 nm AlN buffer layer at 1150 °C, followed by ∼1 μm thick undoped GaN layer. This growth process results in a semi-insulating GaN film with high crystalline quality [15, 16]. Therefore the electrical characterizations of the HEMT structures should not be influenced by parasitic conduction paths. A thin AlN interlayer was then grown on the GaN buffer in most cases in order to reduce alloy scattering. The wafer was cooled to temperatures ranging from 780 to 850 °C for the growth of the AlIn1−xN barrier without any cap layer. The AlIn1−xN barriers were grown using 26.5 μmoles min−1 TMAI, 72 μmoles min−1 of TMIn, 1.5 lpm of NH3 and 8.0 lpm of N2 carrier gas. The reactor pressure was kept at 50 mbar during AlIn1−xN growths. The influence of the AlIn1−xN barrier growth temperature and thickness on the electrical properties was investigated through two sets of samples. The schematic cross-sectional view of the AlIn1−xN barrier HEMT and the scanning electron microscope (SEM) image from a selected epitaxial structure are shown in figures 1(a) and (b), respectively. For comparison, a conventional AlGa0.7N/GaN HEMT structure was grown using the same MOCVD reactor, as described in the literature [16]. In this AlGa0.7N/GaN HEMT, the AlIn1−xN barrier was replaced by a 25 nm thick Al0.3Ga0.7N, keeping all other layers and growth parameters identical. All of the epitaxial layers in the HEMT structures were unintentionally doped.

To investigate the thermal stability of the as-grown HEMT structures, the selected HEMT wafers were diced into 1 × 1 cm² squares for the post-annealing experiments. The diced samples were subjected to annealing at temperature ranging from 400 to 800 °C for 30 min under N2 ambient. The structural properties and indium compositions in AlIn1−xN layers were characterized by high-resolution x-ray diffraction (XRD) using a Rigaku-Smartlab system. For the electrical characterization, room temperature (300 K) and low-temperature (77 K) Hall measurements using Van der Pauw geometry were carried out. Atomic force microscopy (AFM), Veeco di-CP II, was used to evaluate the sample surface morphology by the contact mode. SEM graphs were taken using a Raith e-LiNe electron beam lithography system.

3. Results and discussion

Figures 2(a) and (b) show the AFM images of the typical as-grown HEMT structures with Al0.83In0.17N and Al0.3Ga0.7N terminated surface. Al0.83In0.17N and Al0.3Ga0.7N barriers were grown at 830 °C and 1075 °C, respectively. The two samples have a similar root mean square (RMS) surface roughness, which was measured as 0.38 and 0.32 nm over a 5 × 5 μm² area, respectively. Although the Al0.83In0.17N barrier is nearly lattice matched to the GaN buffer, the surface of the Al0.83In0.17N shows the high density of small hillocks with a diameter of 20–50 nm and height of ∼1 nm, which is significantly different to the well-developed step-flow Al0.3Ga0.7N surfaces. It is possible that these small hillocks are associated with the low motion of the Al atom on the growing surface at a relatively low growth temperature and N2 ambient, or with indium segregation similar to the phenomenon observed in the thin InGaN layer on a GaN template [17].

Figures 3(a) and (b) summarize the room temperature (300 K) electrical properties of the AlInN barrier HEMT as a function of the growth temperature and the thickness of the barrier. The 2DEG carrier density, mobility and sheet resistivity were measured by the Hall effect using van der Pauw geometry. The variations in growth temperature from 780 to 850 °C result in AlIn1−xN layers with indium compositions decreasing from ∼25% to ∼12%, which were determined by XRD characterizations and Vegard’s law. As shown in figure 3(a), the 2DEG carrier density rises with the growth temperature as the polarization effect is enhanced with Al composition increasing in the AlInN barrier. The highest mobility and lowest sheet resistivity are achieved simultaneously when the growth temperature is 830 °C. At this point, the indium composition in the AlIn1−xN barrier was measured as ∼17%, which is nearly lattice matched to the GaN film. The effect of the AlInN thickness on the electrical properties of the AlInN barrier HEMT structures is shown in figure 3(b).
properties of the AlInN/AlN(1 nm)/GaN heterostructure was further investigated, keeping the indium composition as \( \sim 17\% \) in the AlInN barrier. As shown in Figure 3(b), the sheet resistivity drops sharply with the Al\(_{0.83}\)In\(_{0.17}\)N thickness increasing from 1 to 5 nm. Then it keeps stable at about 200 to 210 \( \Omega \text{ sq}^{-1} \) as the Al\(_{0.83}\)In\(_{0.17}\)N barrier increases further to 14 nm. When the Al\(_{0.83}\)In\(_{0.17}\)N thickness is 7 nm, the highest electron mobility of 1540 cm\(^2\) V\(^{-1}\) s\(^{-1}\) (4260 cm\(^2\) V\(^{-1}\) s\(^{-1}\) at 77 K) is achieved with a 2DEG density of \( \sim 2.0 \times 10^{13} \) cm\(^{-2}\). Our experimental results show that the optimized thickness of the Al\(_{0.83}\)In\(_{0.17}\)N barrier for an HEMT structure is much lower than that of conventional Al\(_{0.3}\)Ga\(_{0.7}\)N/GaN HEMT, which is generally thicker than 20 nm, in turn indicating potentially superior transistor performance for small-signal high frequency operation by alleviating the short channel effects [6].

Sample HEMT devices were fabricated from the epistructures of the Al\(_{0.83}\)In\(_{0.17}\)N barrier and the conventional Al\(_{0.3}\)Ga\(_{0.7}\)N barrier HEMTs. Ti/Al/Ni/Au (20/200/40/50 nm) was deposited for the source and drain Ohmic contacts that were annealed at 850 °C for 30 s under nitrogen ambient.

The Ni/Au (40/100 nm) Schottky gates were then metalized. The gate length \( L_G \), gate width \( W_G \), distance between the source and drain \( L_{SD} \), and distance between the source and gate \( L_{SG} \) of the HEMT devices were 1, 250, 3 and 1 \( \mu \)m, respectively. Figure 4(a) compares the direct current (dc) current–voltage \( (I_d–V_d) \) output characteristics of the two kinds of devices with the same size. As shown in this figure, both of the two devices operate with good pinch-off characteristics due to the high resistance of the GaN buffer. When the gate bias was 0 V, the maximum drain current densities were measured as \( \sim 1.0 \) and \( \sim 0.6 \text{ A mm}^{-1} \) for the Al\(_{0.83}\)In\(_{0.17}\)N barrier HEMT (black square) and Al\(_{0.3}\)Ga\(_{0.7}\)N barrier HEMT (red square frame), respectively. The remarkable higher output conductance from Al\(_{0.83}\)In\(_{0.17}\)N barrier HEMT was attributed to the lower sheet resistivity of the epi-structure, resulting from the increase in the 2DEG carrier density. At the large drain biases and high current levels, negative differential resistance can be observed in both of the devices, which might be caused by the low thermal conductivity of the sapphire substrate. Moreover, the peak extrinsic transconductance was measured as about 157 and 242 mS mm\(^{-1} \) for the
Figure 4. DC—IV output characteristics (a) and extrinsic transconductance (b) of the conventional Al0.3Ga0.7N barrier HEMT and Al0.83In0.17N barrier HEMT.

Table 1. List of the AlGaN and AlInN barrier HEMT epi-structures with main structural parameters characterization results: 300 and 77 K Hall-effect measurements as a function of the post-annealing temperature ranging from 400 to 800 °C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Barrier thickness</th>
<th>AlN spacer</th>
<th>Annealing temperature (°C)</th>
<th>Mobility (cm² V⁻¹ s⁻¹) 300 K</th>
<th>Sheet carrier density (× 10¹³ cm⁻²) 300 K</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Al0.17In0.83N barrier HEMT</td>
<td>10 nm</td>
<td>1.0 nm</td>
<td>As-grown</td>
<td>1130</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400</td>
<td>890</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>500</td>
<td>695</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>600</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>700</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>800</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al0.3Ga0.7N barrier HEMT</td>
<td>25 nm</td>
<td>1.0 nm</td>
<td>As-grown</td>
<td>1700</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400</td>
<td>1710</td>
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<td>500</td>
<td>1700</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>800</td>
<td>1035</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Al0.3Ga0.7N and Al0.83In0.17N barrier HEMTs, respectively, under VDS = 8 V. The combination of high current density and high transconductance in a single Al0.83In0.17N barrier HEMT is promising especially for high frequency and high-power applications.

The properties of the III-nitride-based HEMT are sensitive to the post-annealing conditions, such as annealing temperature and time [18–20]. Table 1 summarizes the Al0.17In0.83N and Al0.3Ga0.7N barrier HEMT structural parameters and the electrical properties as a function of the post-annealing temperatures. For the Al0.83In0.17N barrier HEMT, sheet carrier density increases remarkably from 2.7 to 3.4 × 10¹³ cm⁻² after the samples are annealed at temperatures ranging from 400 °C to 700 °C. In another report, Nie-Chuan Chen et al [18] attributes a similar phenomenon of the AlGaN barrier HEMT to the surface states enhancement caused by thermal annealing. Because the III-nitride device was normally grown on foreign substrates, such as sapphire, SiC and Si, there exists high density of threading or point defects in the epi-structures. Therefore, the growth conditions significantly influence the density of defects and electrical properties of the HEMT structure. In our experiments, the sheet carrier density of the Al0.3Ga0.7N barrier HEMT remains nearly constant at about 1.0–1.1 × 10¹³ cm⁻² through the studied annealing temperature ranging from 400 °C to 800 °C, which is possibly due to the improvement of crystal and surface quality of the epi-structure by applying high temperature AlN template [15, 16], while the enhancement of sheet carrier density after thermal annealing in the Al0.83In0.17N barrier HEMT is attributed to the relative low crystal quality and thermal stability under high temperature. In addition, for the Al0.83In0.17N barrier HEMT, the sheet carrier density at 77 K is remarkably lower than that at 300 K, while the sheet carrier density nearly does not change for the Al0.3Ga0.7N barrier HEMT at 77 K and 300 K. It is due to the relatively higher defect density in Al0.83In0.17N/GaN heterostructure and the electron defect trapping effect at low temperature. When the annealing temperature further increased to 800 °C, the room temperature sheet carrier density and mobility sharply dropped to 0.39 × 10¹³ cm⁻² and
Figure 5. XRD 2θ-ω scans of the (0 0 0 2) reflection for the HEMT structures thermally annealed at various temperatures for 30 min. Two kinds of the HEMT structures are shown with (a) Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier and (b) Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N barrier.

104 cm² V⁻¹ s⁻¹, respectively. This phenomenon is caused by the decomposition of the Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier and collapse of the Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N/GaN/AlN/GaN heterostructure, as confirmed in the following experiments. In contrast, the electrical properties of the Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N barrier HEMT show more resistance to the post-growth thermal annealing. The room temperature mobility of the 2DEG was kept at ~1700 cm² V⁻¹ s⁻¹ until the annealing temperature up to 700 °C. Then, it reduced to 1035 cm² V⁻¹ s⁻¹ with the annealing temperature further increasing to 800 °C.

Two observations are apparent from the examination of table 1. Firstly, the Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier HEMT structure is less resistive to the increase in thermal annealing temperature than the Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N barrier HEMT due to the indium combination and lower MOCVD growth temperature. Second, the mobility is more sensitive to the increase in annealing temperature than the sheet carrier density for the Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N HEMT structure.

Shown in figure 5 for each of the HEMT structures is a series of XRD 2θ-ω scans of the GaN (0 0 0 2) reflection. For both of the HEMT samples shown in figures 5(a) and (b), neither the barrier peak intensities nor the line widths change significantly after annealing up to 700 °C, in turn indicating that the Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N/GaN and Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N/GaN structural integrities are maintained up to this annealing temperature. When the XRD peaks of the samples are examined after annealing at 800 °C, it shows almost no XRD peak for the Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier, while the Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N HEMT sample keeps a 75% barrier intensity of the original. A stronger decrease in the XRD intensity of the Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier compared to that of the Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N barrier sample is observed, indicating the relatively low structural thermal stability of the Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N/GaN heterostructure.

The AFM images of the annealed HEMT structures are shown in figure 6. The Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier samples annealed at 700 and 800 °C are shown in figures 6(a) and (b), respectively. The Al₀.₃Ga₀.₇N barrier samples annealed at 700 and 800 °C are shown in figures 6(c) and (d), respectively.

When the annealing temperature is lower than 700 °C, both of the HEMT epitaxial structures do not show remarkable change in the surface morphologies (not shown here). For the Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier HEMT, the measured RMS roughness in the as-grown sample is 0.32 nm, as shown in figure 2(a), and increased to 0.47 nm as shown in figure 6(a). Note that when the annealing temperature is 800 °C, the surface of the Al₀.₈₃In₀.₁₇N barrier suffered from some decomposition, which is characterized by the high density of truncated cones. The measured RMS roughness increased remarkably to 3.03 nm as shown in figure 6(b). The average height of the cone is approx. 30 nm, which is much larger than the
as-grown thickness of the Al$_{0.83}$In$_{0.17}$N barrier. In contrast, the atomic smooth step-flow surface was retained with an annealing temperature up to 800 °C for the Al$_{0.3}$Ga$_{0.7}$N barrier HEMT structure. The measured RMS roughness was marked in each of the AFM image. The AFM experimental results show that, in comparison to the Al$_{0.83}$In$_{0.17}$N/GaN heterostructure, the Al$_{0.3}$Ga$_{0.7}$N/GaN shows more thermal stability. The Al$_{0.83}$In$_{0.17}$N/GaN heterostructure collapses after thermal annealing at 800 °C, which is rather consistent with the XRD characterizations.

In summary, we optimized AlInN barrier heterostructures with varied barrier composition and thickness grown by MOCVD. The optimized HEMT structure comprising a 7 nm thick nearly lattice-matched AlInN barrier exhibits a sheet electron density of 2.0 × 10$^{13}$ cm$^{-2}$ and an electron mobility of 1540 cm$^2$ V$^{-1}$ s$^{-1}$. AlInN barrier HEMT devices fabricated with a 1 μm gate length provide a current density of 1.0 A mm$^{-1}$ at $V_{GS} = 0$ V and an extrinsic transconductance of 242 mS mm$^{-1}$, which are remarkably improved compared to that of the conventional Al$_{0.3}$Ga$_{0.7}$N barrier HEMT. The effects of thermal annealing on the HEMT structures have been investigated by AFM, Hall effect measurement and x-ray diffraction. The experimental results suggest that both the electrical and structural properties of an Al$_{0.83}$In$_{0.17}$N barrier HEMT structure have less stability than those of the Al$_{0.3}$Ga$_{0.7}$N barrier HEMT to the thermal annealing.

References


