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Nonvolatile memories using deep traps formed in Al 2 O 3 by metal ion implantation
Nonvolatile memories using deep traps formed in HfO$_2$ by Nb ion implantation

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We report nonvolatile memories (NVMs) based on deep-energy trap levels formed in HfO$_2$ by metal ion implantation. A comparison of Nb- and Ta-implanted samples shows that suitable charge-trapping centers are formed in Nb-implanted samples, but not in Ta-implanted samples. This is consistent with density-functional theory calculations which predict that only Nb will form deep-energy levels in the bandgap of HfO$_2$. Photocurrent spectroscopy exhibits characteristics consistent with one of the trap levels predicted in these calculations. Nb-implanted samples showing memory windows in capacitance–voltage (V) curves always exhibit current (I) peaks in I–V curves, indicating that NVM effects result from deep traps in HfO$_2$. In contrast, Ta-implanted samples show dielectric breakdowns during the I–V sweeps between 5 and 11 V, consistent with the fact that no trap levels are present. For a sample implanted with a fluence of $10^{13}$ Nb cm$^{-2}$, the charge losses after $10^4$ s are $\sim$9.8 and $\sim$25.5% at room temperature (RT) and 85°C, respectively, and the expected charge loss after 10 years is $\sim$34% at RT, very promising for commercial NVMs. © 2011 American Institute of Physics. [doi:10.1063/1.3554444]

I. INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades the demand for nonvolatile memory (NVM) devices has grown rapidly, especially for applications associated with portable electronics. Most of these devices are based on floating gate transistors whose characteristics are modified by charge stored on the floating gate. The use of discrete charge-traps prevents the catastrophic charge leakage that can occur in conventional poly-Si floating-gate memories due to local breakdown of the thin tunneling oxide and offers scaling advantages, including lower-voltage operation, faster program/erase (P/E) speeds, lower power consumption, and longer data retention. Nanocrystal (NC)-based charge-trap flash (CTF) memories are promising candidates for next-generation NVMs.$^1$$^3$ However, only a few NCs can be included in each memory cell as the devices are scaled to nanometer size, thereby limiting the number of electrons stored per bit and compromising device reliability, multibit operation, and charge retention.$^4$$^5$ Moreover, optimal performance requires that NCs have diameters of $\sim$3 to 5 nm and are uniformly distributed with a density exceeding $10^{13}$ cm$^{-2}$, a technologically challenging requirement. Alternative strategies based on charge trapping at native defects have proven very successful for materials such as silicon nitrides$^5$ and have been studied in high-$k$ dielectrics such as Y$_2$O$_3$, La$_2$O$_3$, and Tl$_3$O$_3$.$^6$$^9$ as a means of scaling devices to smaller dimensions. However, the use of native defects is limited by the fact that they are uniformly distributed throughout the dielectric layer, and have a density that is process-dependent and difficult to control. We have previously proposed the ion-implantation of impurities as a means of forming deep traps in the bandgap of Al$_2$O$_3$ and have demonstrated the feasibility of this method for CTF NVMs.$^{10}$

In this paper, we report charge trapping effects in Nb- and Ta-implanted HfO$_2$. The charge traps are characterized by photoconductivity (PC), capacitance-voltage (C–V), and current-voltage (I–V) measurements, and the results are compared with density functional theory (DFT) calculations.

II. EXPERIMENTAL

For the fabrication of metal–oxide–semiconductor (MOS) memory devices, a 5 nm SiO$_2$ layer was first grown on a p-type (100) Si wafer by conventional thermal oxidation. A 25 nm HfO$_2$ layer was then grown on top of the SiO$_2$ layer by atomic layer deposition. These Si/SiO$_2$/HfO$_2$ structures were implanted at room temperature (RT) with 60 keV Nb ions and 90 keV Ta ions to nominal fluences (n) in the range from $10^{12}$ cm$^{-2}$ to $10^{13}$ cm$^{-2}$ for Ta ions to $10^{15}$ cm$^{-2}$. The ion-range and damage distributions, calculated using the SRIM code,$^{12}$ are shown in Fig. 1(a) and 1(b), respectively. The samples were subsequently annealed in a rapid thermal annealing apparatus at a temperature of 600°C for 5 min under a nitrogen ambient.

PC spectra were measured by using a coplanar, two-probe geometry with Al electrodes of 4 mm length and 2 mm separation to characterize the energy levels of traps in the bandgap. The PC spectra were measured at 80 K in a LN$_2$ refrigerator using a xenon lamp as the light source and under a bias of 1 V, which is within the linear range of I–V characteristics. The power density of the incident light on the sample surface was in the range of 20 $\sim$ 290 mW/cm$^2$.

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depending on the photon energy, and spectra were corrected
for such variations over the measurement range of 2 ~ 5 eV.
Al electrodes with a diameter of 200 μm were deposited on
the samples in a vacuum for I–V and C–V measurements of
MOS capacitors. I–V and high-frequency C–V measurements
were performed using an Agilent 4156C precision
semiconductor parameter analyzer and Agilent 4284A preci-
sion LCR meter with a frequency of 1 MHz.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 2(a) compares PC spectra for MOS cells fabricated
with unimplanted HfO₂, and with Nb- and Ta-implanted HfO₂.
The spectrum from the cell with unimplanted HfO₂ shows a
monotonic increase in photocurrent with increasing photon
energy and no obvious emission peaks. A similar response is
observed from the Ta-implanted sample. In contrast, the cell
implanted with Nb ions (1 × 10¹³ cm⁻²) shows a broad peak
centered at around 3.2 eV. This suggests that Nb implantation
produces defects with energy levels ~ 3.2 eV below the con-
duction band minimum (CBM) of HfO₂.

Periodic spin-unrestricted DFT calculations using the
B3LYP functional¹³ were performed to predict the energies
of the defect levels introduced by Nb and Ta impurities in
monoclinic HfO₂. The predicted bandgap for the bulk (unim-
planted) HfO₂ lattice using B3LYP was 6.15 eV, which is in
excellent agreement with experimental results.¹⁴ Calcula-
tions for Nb predicted defect states at energies of 1.12 and
3.29 eV below CBM, both of which are unoccupied, as shown in Fig. 2(b), while similar calculations for Ta pre-
dicted no defect states in the energy gap of HfO₂. The PC
peak shown in Fig. 2(a) for Nb-implanted HfO₂, located at
around 3.2 eV, is consistent with the calculated defect level
at 3.29 eV.

Figure 3(a) shows C–V hysteresis loops for a cell
implanted with Nb (10¹³ cm⁻²) for various sweep voltages.
All C–V curves show counter-clockwise hysteresis loops,
indicating electron injection from the Si substrate to the
charge-trapping layer containing Nb ions. As shown in
Fig. 3(b), the memory window (∆V) increases from ~3.6 to
~4.95 V with increasing implant fluence (over the range from
10¹² to 10¹³ Nb cm⁻²) under a sweep voltage of ±15
V, consistent with an increase in the density of charge-trap-
ing states. In contrast, cells implanted to fluences ≥10¹⁴
cm⁻² showed almost no hysteresis (zero memory window),
even though they exhibited well-defined C–V curves. From
ion-range and damage simulations in Fig. 1, it is clear that
the implantation creates defects throughout the dielectric
film and into the Si substrate. The resulting electrical
response will reflect contributions from doping and defects,
with partial annealing of the defects expected during the
600°C anneal. The defect contribution is expected to
increase with increasing ion fluence, which explains why no
memory window is observed for fluences ≥10¹⁴ cm⁻².

The cell with unimplanted HfO₂ showed no significant
memory window for sweep voltages in the range from ±9
to ±15 V. This demonstrates that memory effects are attri-
buted to the charge traps produced by the Nb ion implanta-
tion, not by natural defects in HfO₂ or the HfO₂/SiO₂
interface states. Samples implanted with Ta did not exhibit
well-defined C–V curves.

The amount of charge stored in the traps can be esti-
mated from the relation Q = C∆V, where C is the capacitance
density and ∆V is the memory window.¹⁵ In this work, C and
∆V are about 1.81 × 10⁻⁹ F cm⁻² (capacitance = 57 pF,
contact area = π × 100 × 100 μm²) and 4.95 V, respectively,
for a cell with Nb ions of 10¹³ cm⁻² fluence. Thus, the
electron density stored in the traps is estimated to be 5.56 × 10¹²
cm⁻², which is comparable to the trap density of silicon-
oxide-nitride-oxide-silicon.¹⁶

FIG. 2. (Color online) (a) Photoconductivity spectra of memory cells with
unimplanted HfO₂, and with Nb- and Ta-implanted HfO₂. The implantation
was done with Nb or Ta ions of 10¹³ cm⁻² fluence. (b) Schematic diagram
showing the calculated trap energy levels for Nb-implanted HfO₂.
Figure 4(a) shows I–V characteristics of MOS cells with various Nb fluences under a sweep voltage of ±13 V. The I–V curves show clockwise hysteresis loops while the bias is swept from 0 to positive and back into negative voltages. The cell with Nb ions of $10^{12}$ cm$^{-2}$ fluence shows clear current peaks both in forward and backward scans. The positive and negative current peaks are known to result from the charging/discharging of electrons into/from charge traps, respectively. In contrast, the I–V curves show much broader current peaks at $n_{\text{Nb}} = 10^{13}$ cm$^{-2}$ and no peaks at $n_{\text{Nb}} = 10^{14}$ cm$^{-2}$ in both scans. For $n_{\text{Nb}} = 10^{14}$ cm$^{-2}$, no peaks were found even for various sweep voltages of ±7 to ±13 V, consistent with the fact that no memory window in the C–V hysteresis is observed at $n_{\text{Nb}} > 10^{14}$ cm$^{-2}$. These results suggest that there is an optimum fluence range for achieving devices by this means. The unimplanted sample shows a very small current peak in the forward scan and a significant current peak in the backward scan. The current peaks in this case are attributed to interface defect states because no memory window is found in the C–V scans, as explained in Si-NC NVMs.

Figure 4(b) shows the I–V characteristics of MOS cells with Ta-implanted HfO$_2$. Cells implanted with different Ta fluences show dielectric breakdowns during the I–V sweeps between 5 and 11 V. Clearly, Ta implantation produces leakage paths through the HfO$_2$ matrix, possibly in the form of shallow defect levels. Significantly, the Ta does not appear to play a role in forming charge traps in the bandgap of HfO$_2$, consistent with calculations and the measured C–V results. As shown in Fig. 1, simulation of the Ta and Nb implants shows that the ion-range and damage distributions extend beyond the dielectric layers and into the Si substrate and that the ion and damage distributions exhibit important differences. The Ta concentration is higher in the dielectric films and lower in the Si substrate than for Nb, while the damage distribution produced by Ta is higher in both the dielectric films and the Si substrate. The defect density for Ta is 30% higher at the SiO$_2$/Si interface and 60% higher at the HfO$_2$/SiO$_2$ interface, which likely accounts for the higher leakage current observed in Ta-implanted samples.

Figure 5 shows retention characteristics of a Nb-implanted cell ($n_{\text{Nb}} = 10^{13}$ cm$^{-2}$) measured at RT and 85°C. The programming and erasing states are defined as those programmed by a pulse of (+13 V, 1 s) and erased by a pulse of (−13 V, 1 s), respectively. The flat-band voltage at the programmed/erased states of the cell remains almost unchanged with time, showing very little charge loss during the retention measurements. The charge losses after $10^5$ s are ~9.8% and ~25.5% at RT and 85°C, respectively, and the expected charge loss after 10 years is ~34% at RT, very promising for commercial NVMs.
IV. CONCLUSION

NVM MOS cells were fabricated using deep-energy trap levels formed in HfO2 by metal ion implantation. Photocurrent spectroscopy exhibited characteristics consistent with one of the trap levels in the bandgap of Nb-implanted HfO2 predicted by calculations. The MOS cells with Nb-implanted HfO2 showed NVM effects in C–V curves for $n_{Nb}$ from $10^{12}$ to $10^{13} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ but no such effects for $n_{Nb} > 10^{14} \text{ cm}^{-2}$, further confirmed by the existence of current peaks in I–V curves. In contrast, MOS cells with Ta-implanted HfO2 showed no well-defined response during the C–V sweeps and only dielectric breakdowns during I–V sweeps, indicating no NVM effects, consistent with the calculations. The MOS cell fabricated with Nb implantation to a fluence of $10^{13} \text{ Nb cm}^{-2}$ showed charge losses of ~9.8 and ~25.5% at RT and 85°C, respectively, after 10$^4$ s and the expected charge loss after 10 years was ~34% at RT, very promising for commercial NVMs.