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(54) **SEMICONDUCTOR WAFER INCLUDING CRACKING STOPPER STRUCTURE AND METHOD OF FORMING THE SAME**

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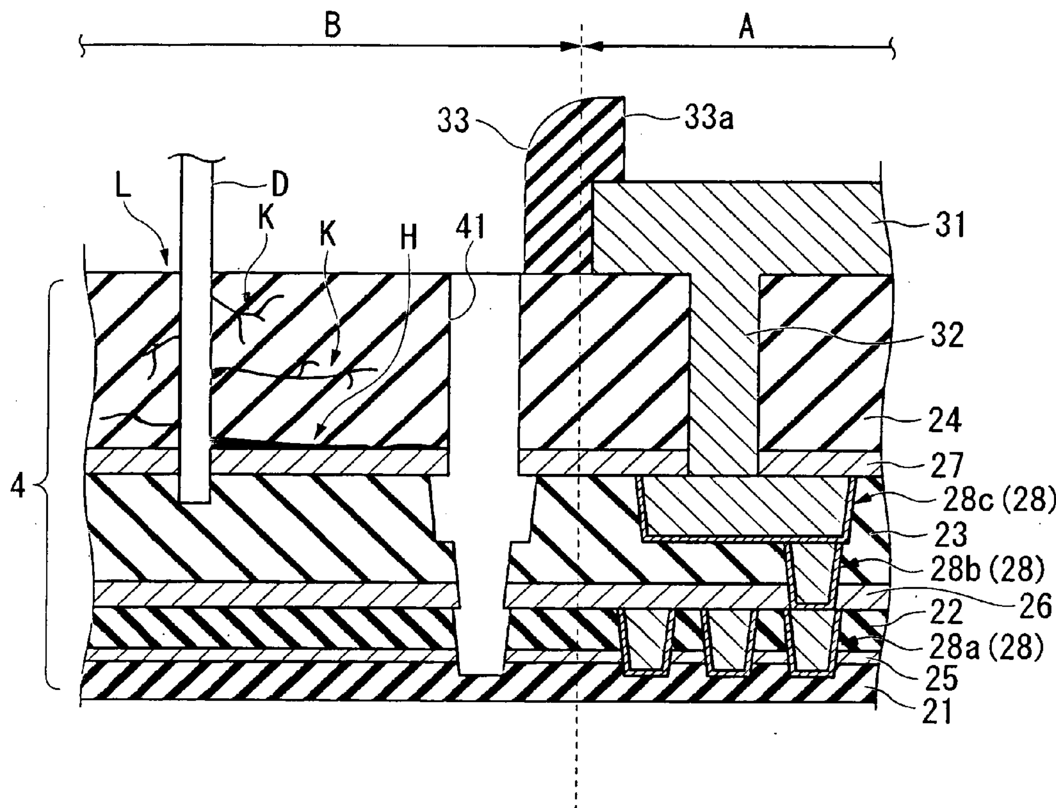
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A semiconductor includes a semiconductor substrate having a main face, the semiconductor device having a device region and a dicing line and a stack of insulating layers over the semiconductor substrate. There is a multi-level interconnection structure in the stack of insulating layers. A passivation film covers the semiconductor substrate, the passivation film having an opening. The stack of insulating layers has a groove which extends from the opening and penetrates at least one of the insulating layers, the groove is positioned between the device region and the dicing line, and the groove is narrower in width than the opening.



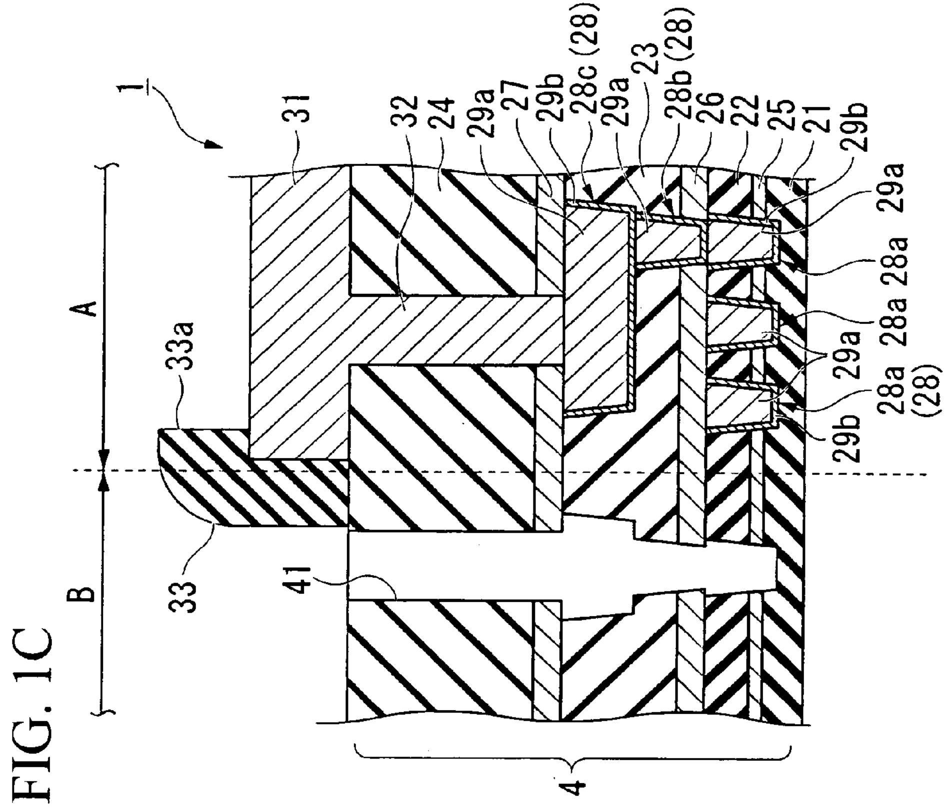


FIG. 1C

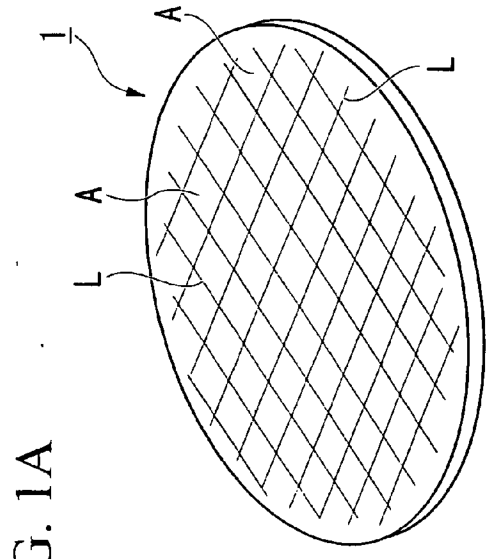


FIG. 1A

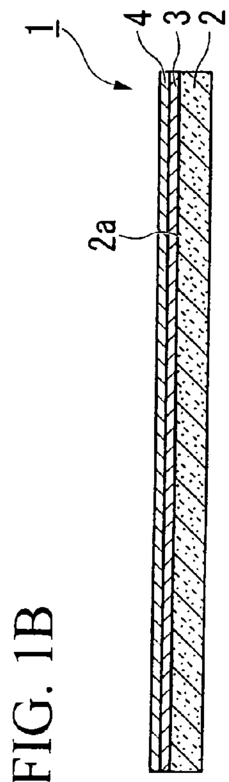


FIG. 1B

FIG. 2

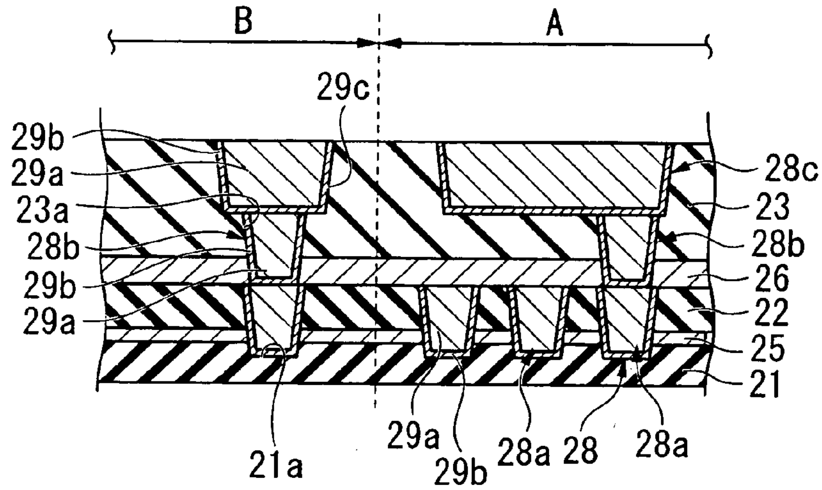


FIG. 3

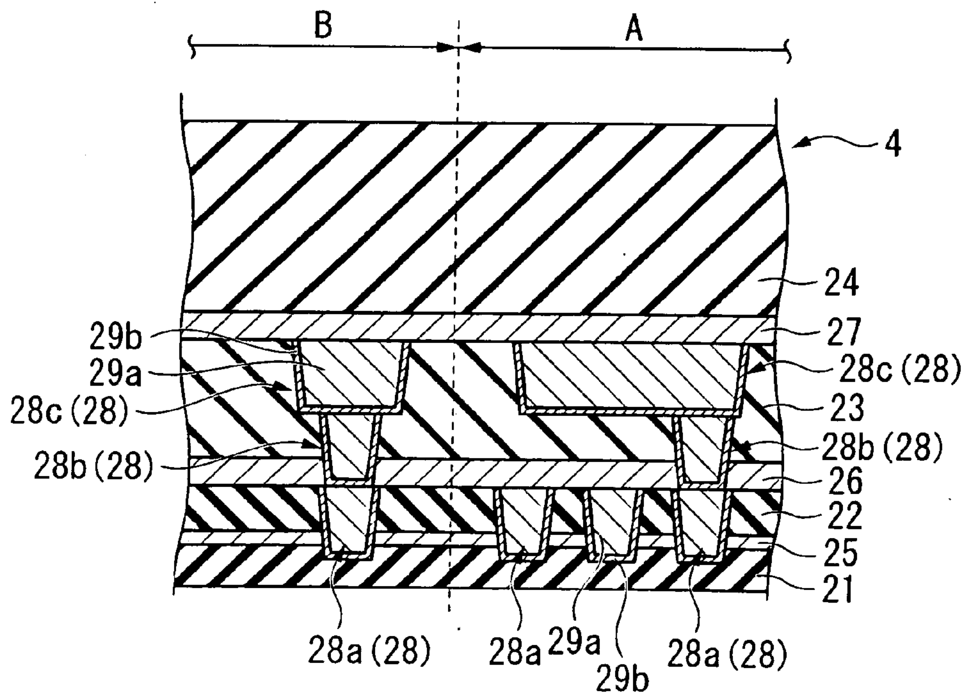


FIG. 4

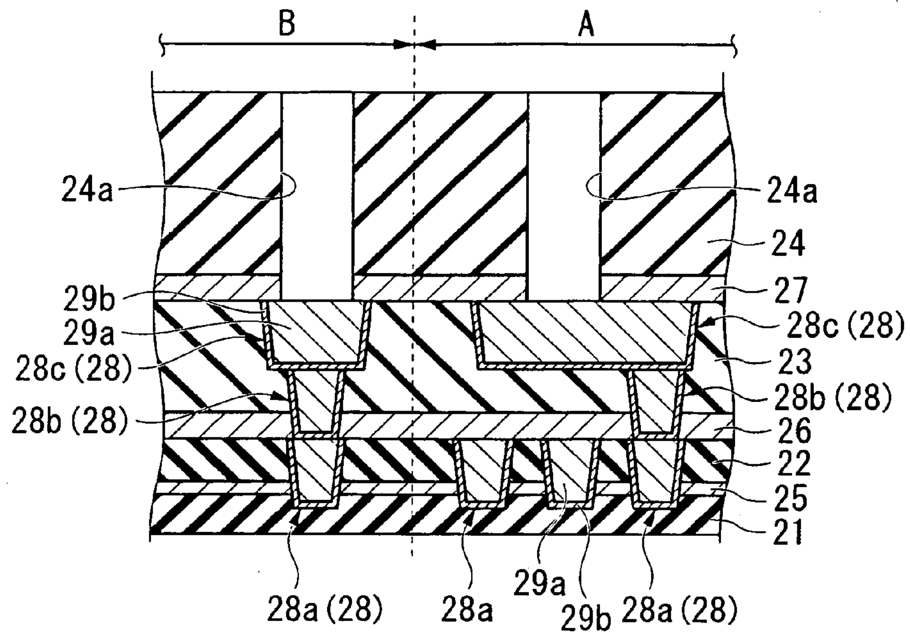


FIG. 5

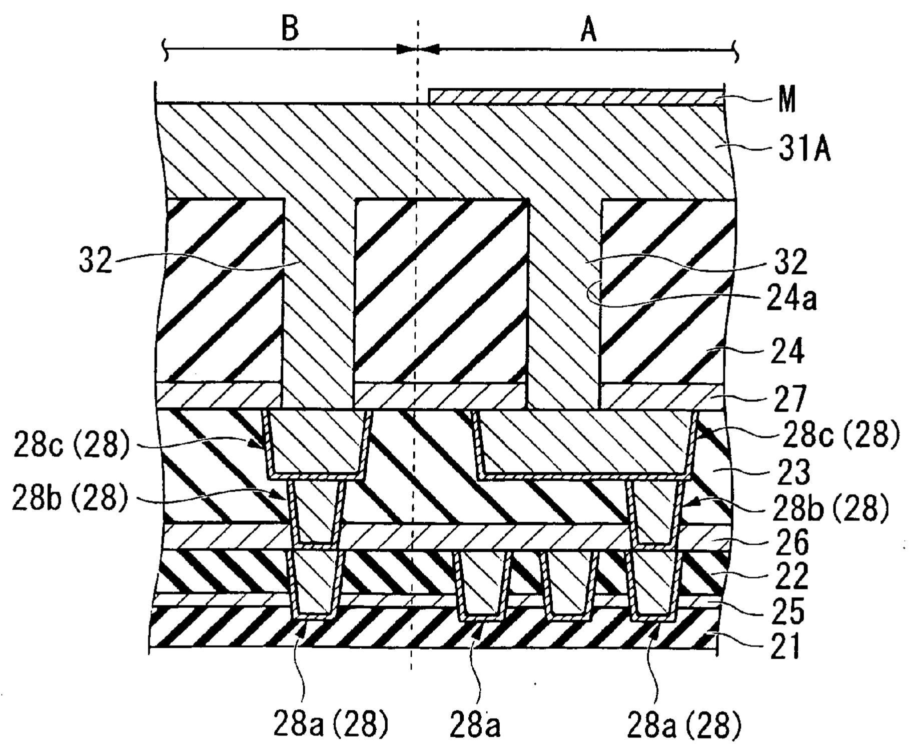


FIG. 6

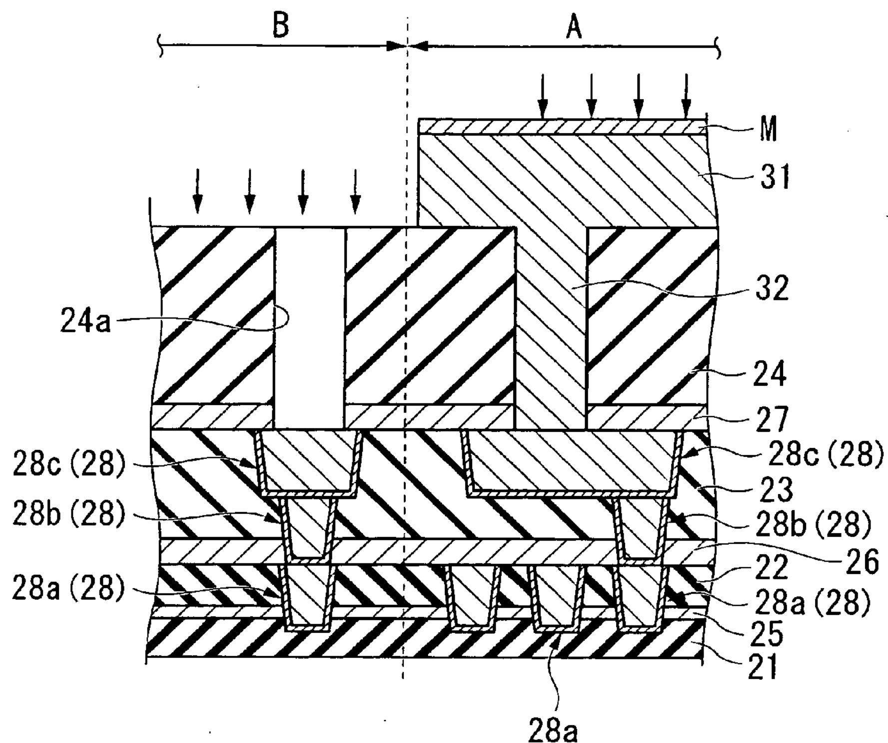


FIG. 7

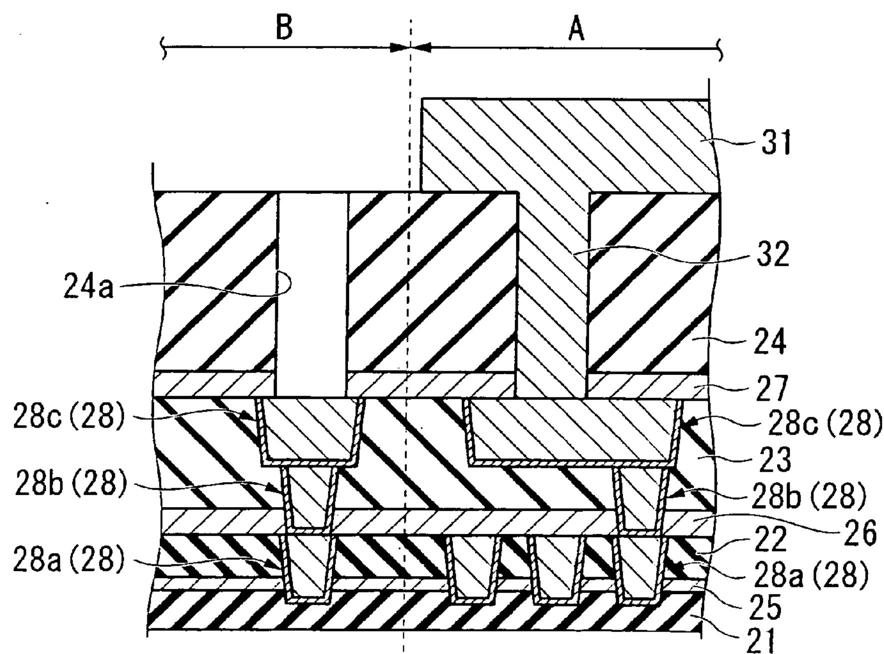


FIG. 8

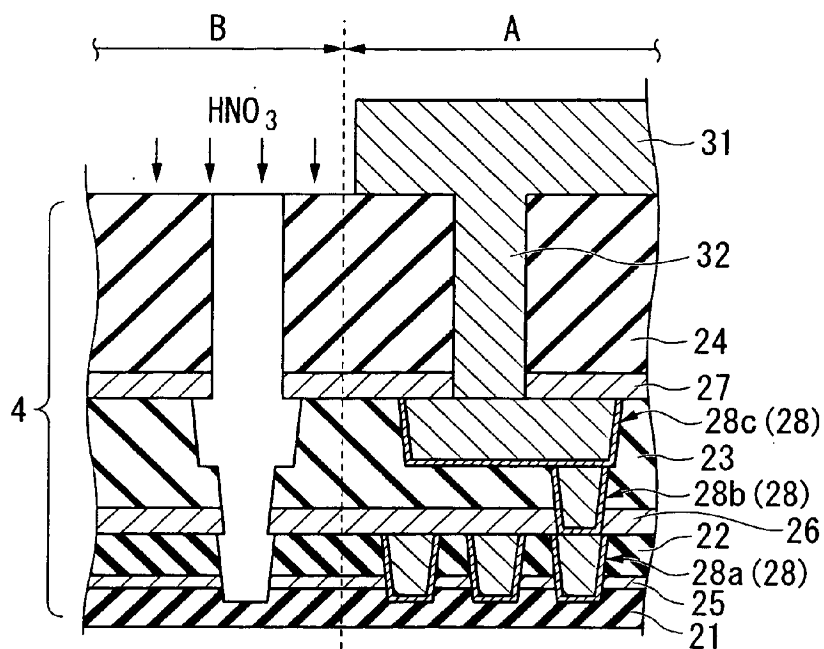


FIG. 9

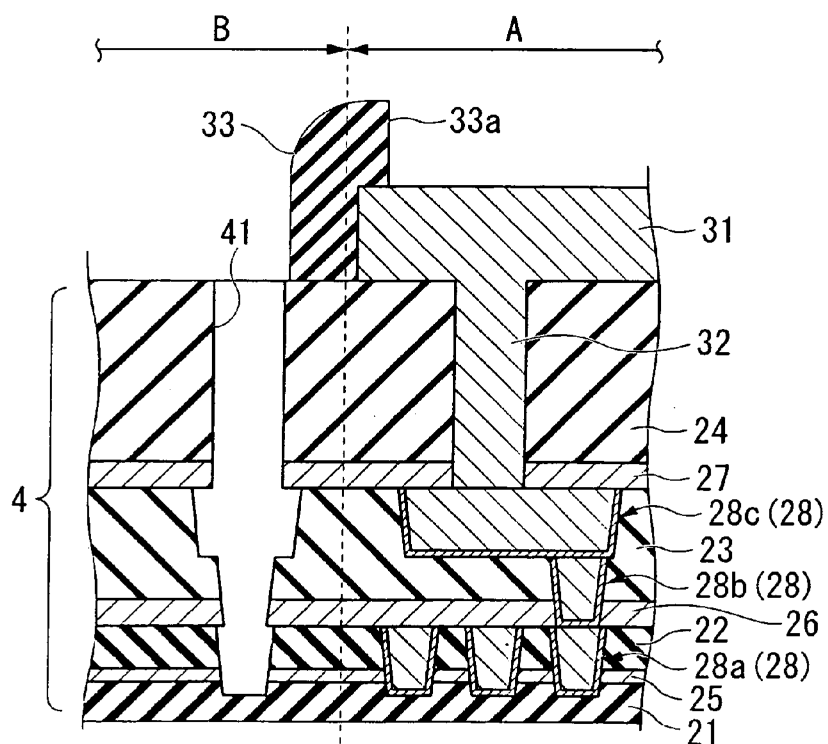
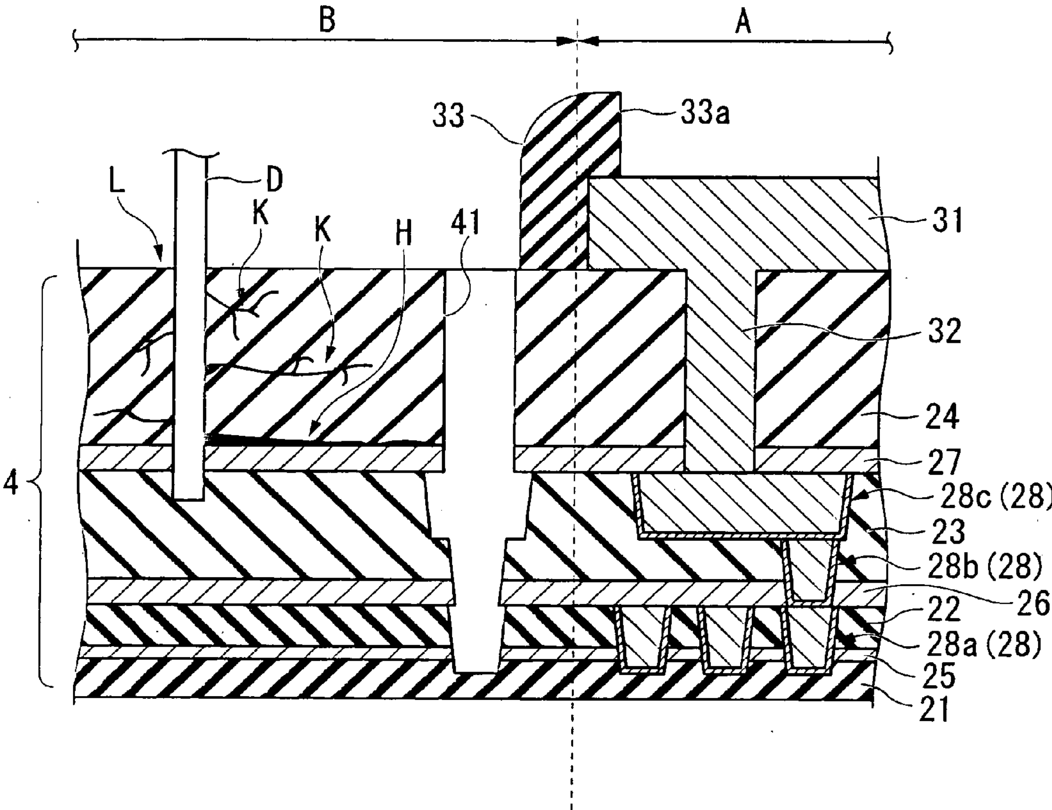


FIG. 10



SEMICONDUCTOR WAFER INCLUDING CRACKING STOPPER STRUCTURE AND METHOD OF FORMING THE SAME

[0001] The present application is a Divisional Application of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 12/314,010, having a U.S. filing date of Dec. 2, 2008, now U.S. Pat. No. ______.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] 1. Field of the Invention

[0003] The present invention generally relates to a semiconductor wafer and a method of forming the same. More specifically, the present invention relates to a semiconductor wafer including a cracking stopper structure and a method of forming the same.

[0004] Priority is claimed on Japanese Patent Application No. 2007-315051, filed Dec. 5, 2007, the content of which is incorporated herein by reference.

[0005] 2. Description of the Related Art

[0006] In general, most of the semiconductor devices may include a semiconductor substrate, a device layer, and a multi-level interconnection layer. The device layer may be disposed over the semiconductor substrate. The device layer may include semiconductor elements such as transistors. The multi-level interconnection layer may be disposed over the device layer. The multi-level interconnection layer may include interconnections or wirings at plural different levels. In recent years, the multi-level interconnection layer may often have a damascene structure. In some cases, the multi-level interconnection layer with the damascene structure may include plural inter-layer insulators, barrier layers, metal interconnections, and via contacts. At least one of the inter-layer insulators other than the upper most inter-layer insulator may include a lower dielectric region that has a dielectric constant of less than 3.9. The lower dielectric region may be positioned at a level where the damascene structure is used. The barrier layers are disposed between the plural inter-layer insulators. The metal interconnections may typically be made of Cu. The metal interconnections may be formed in grooves of the inter-layer insulators. The via contacts may extend in the inter-layer insulators and between the metal interconnections at different levels. Typically, the via contacts extend in a direction vertical to the surface of the semiconductor substrate. In some cases, the inter-layer insulator may be made of, but not limited to, SiCO which is different from silicon oxide in that some Si—O bonding of silicon oxide is substituted with methyl groups. In some cases, the barrier layer may be made of, but not limited to, SiCN.

[0007] Adhesiveness is low between the SiCO film as the inter-layer insulator and the SiCN film as the barrier layer. The low adhesiveness between the inter-layer insulator and the barrier layer may cause that the inter-layer insulator and the barrier layer are peeled from each other in the process of dicing the semiconductor wafer, thereby deteriorating the moisture resistance of the semiconductor chip. A countermeasure to the possible peeling between the inter-layer insulator and the barrier layer is to provide a cracking stopper to the wafer. The cracking stopper is a groove which extends along the circumference of the semiconductor chip. In some cases, the cracking stopper groove has such a depth that the bottom of the cracking stopper groove is just above the first level interconnection.

[0008] The semiconductor manufacturing processes may include a process for forming openings in an uppermost passivation film, wherein the openings are positioned directly over bonding pads. The process for forming the openings in the uppermost passivation film can be carried out by an etching process using an etching mask that is disposed over the uppermost passivation film. This etching mask is also used to form the cracking stopper groove. Namely, the openings and the cracking stopper groove are formed in the same etching process. Such a wide width of the groove as a few micrometers will be necessary to obtain a deep depth of the groove by the single etching process. Increase of the width of the groove will decrease the effective or useful area for the chips in a single wafer, thereby decreasing the number of chips obtained from the single wafer.

[0009] If it is intended to reduce the number of used masks to the minimum number, a mask has to be disposed on the passivation film, thereby causing a residual on the dicing line, wherein the residual is of the material such as polyimide for the passivation film. The residual of the material such as polyimide will shorten the lifetime of a dicing saw.

[0010] Japanese Unexamined Patent Application, First Publication, No. 2005-260059 discloses that grooves extend on dicing regions entirely. Namely, the dicing regions are entirely etched. This method makes it unnecessary to use the additional mask over the passivation film. The dicing regions may often include a pattern of terminals for wafer test. The dicing regions are entirely etched, while the pattern of terminals is also etched, thereby making it difficult or impossible to conduct the wafer test.

[0011] Japanese Unexamined Patent Application, First Publication, No. 2006-516824 discloses that an interconnection portion of the dicing region is removed by a wet etching process to selectively form a groove structure, while a pattern of terminals for wafer test is also removed.

SUMMARY

[0012] In one embodiment, a semiconductor wafer may include, but is not limited to, the following elements. A semiconductor substrate has a device region and a dicing region. A stack of inter-layer insulators may extend over the device region and the dicing region. Multi-level interconnections may be disposed in the stack of inter-layer insulators. The multi-level interconnections may extend in the device region. An electrode layer may be disposed over the stack of inter-layer insulators. The electrode layer may extend in the device region. The electrode layer may cover the multi-level interconnections. A cracking stopper groove may be disposed in the dicing region. The cracking stopper groove may be positioned outside the device region.

[0013] In another embodiment, a semiconductor wafer may include, but is not limited to, the following elements. A semiconductor substrate has a device region and a dicing region. A device layer may be disposed on the semiconductor substrate. The device layer may extend over the device region and the dicing region. A multi-level interconnection layer may be disposed on the device layer. The multi-level interconnection layer may extend over the device region and the dicing region. An electrode layer may be disposed on the multi-level interconnection layer. The electrode layer may extend in the device region. The multi-level interconnection layer may include, but is not limited to, the following elements. A stack of inter-layer insulators may extend over the device region and the dicing region. Multi-level interconnections may be

formed in the stack of inter-layer insulators. The multi-level interconnections may extend in the device region. An electrode layer may be disposed over the stack of inter-layer insulators. The electrode layer may extend in the device region. The electrode layer may cover the multi-level interconnections. A cracking stopper groove may be disposed in the dicing region. The cracking stopper groove may be positioned outside the device region and inside a dicing line of the semiconductor wafer. The cracking stopper groove may include a portion having a shape that is defined by removing a multi-level interconnection structure in the dicing region.

[0014] In still another embodiment, a method of forming a semiconductor wafer may include, but is not limited to, the following processes. A stack of inter-layer insulators may be formed, which extends over a device region and a dicing region of a semiconductor substrate. First and second multi-level interconnection structures may be formed in the stack of inter-layer insulators. The first multi-level interconnection structure may be positioned in the device region. The second multi-level interconnection structure may be positioned in the dicing region. An electrode layer may be formed over the stack of inter-layer insulators. The electrode layer may extend in the device region. The electrode layer may cover the multi-level interconnections. The second multi-level interconnection structure may be removed to form a cracking stopper groove in the dicing region.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0015] The above features and advantages of the present invention will be more apparent from the following description of certain preferred embodiments taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which:

[0016] FIG. **1**A is a schematic perspective view illustrating a semiconductor wafer in accordance with a first preferred embodiment of the present invention;

[0017] FIG. **1**B is a cross sectional elevation view illustrating the semiconductor wafer of FIG. **1**A;

[0018] FIG. **1**C is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating the structure of the multi-level interconnection layer included in the semiconductor wafer of FIGS. **1**A and **1**B in accordance with a first preferred embodiment of the present invention;

[0019] FIG. **2** is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating a semiconductor wafer in a step involved in the method of forming the semiconductor wafer in accordance with the first preferred embodiment of the present invention;

[0020] FIG. **3** is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating a semiconductor wafer in a step subsequent to the step of FIG. **2**, involved in the method of forming the semiconductor wafer in accordance with the first preferred embodiment of the present invention;

[0021] FIG. **4** is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating a semiconductor wafer in a step subsequent to the step of FIG. **3**, involved in the method of forming the semiconductor wafer in accordance with the first preferred embodiment of the present invention;

[0022] FIG. **5** is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating a semiconductor wafer in a step subsequent to the step of FIG. **4**, involved in the method of forming the semiconductor wafer in accordance with the first preferred embodiment of the present invention;

[0023] FIG. **6** is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating a semiconductor wafer in a step subsequent to the step of FIG. **5**, involved in the method of forming the semiconductor wafer in accordance with the first preferred embodiment of the present invention;

[0024] FIG. **7** is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating a semiconductor wafer in a step subsequent to the step of FIG. **6**, involved in the method of forming the semiconductor wafer in accordance with the first preferred embodiment of the present invention;

[0025] FIG. **8** is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating a semiconductor wafer in a step subsequent to the step of FIG. **7**, involved in the method of forming the semiconductor wafer in accordance with the first preferred embodiment of the present invention;

[0026] FIG. **9** is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating a semiconductor wafer in a step subsequent to the step of FIG. **8**, involved in the method of forming the semiconductor wafer in accordance with the first preferred embodiment of the present invention; and

[0027] FIG. **10** is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating a semiconductor wafer being cut by a cutting saw, while cracks and peel being caused.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0028] The invention will be now described herein with reference to illustrative embodiments. Those skilled in the art will recognize that many alternative embodiments can be accomplished using the teaching of the present invention and that the invention is not limited to the embodiments illustrated for explanatory purpose.

[Semiconductor Wafer]

[0029] FIG. **1**A is a schematic perspective view illustrating a semiconductor wafer. FIG. **1**B is a cross sectional elevation view illustrating the semiconductor wafer of FIG. **1**A. A semiconductor wafer **1** may include, but is not limited to, a semiconductor substrate **2**, a device layer **3**, and a multi-level interconnection layer **4**. The device layer **3** may be disposed over a main face **2***a* of the semiconductor substrate **2**. The multi-level interconnection layer **4** may be disposed over the device layer **3**. The device layer **3** may include, but is not limited to, isolation structures, and semiconductor devices such as transistors and capacitors. In some cases, the semiconductor wafer **1** may include, but is not limited to, semiconductor chips having dynamic random access memories DRAMs. In this case, the device layer **3** may include, but is not limited to, memory cells having each a transistor and a capacitor. The multi-level interconnection layer **4** includes interconnections for the semiconductor devices included in the device layer **3**.

[0030] FIG. **1**C is a fragmentary cross sectional elevation view illustrating the structure of the multi-level interconnection layer **4** included in the semiconductor wafer **1** of FIGS. **1**A and **1**B in accordance with a first preferred embodiment of the present invention. With reference to FIGS. **1**A and **1**C, the semiconductor wafer **1** may include, but is not limited to, an array of device regions A, each being defined by a dicing region B. Two adjacent device regions A are separated by the dicing region B from each other. The device regions A correspond to main parts of the semiconductor chips diced from the semiconductor wafer **1**. Memory cells and other semiconductor devices are integrated in the device layer **3** in the device region A. The dicing region B surrounds the device region A.

The dicing region B may have a dicing line L for allowing the semiconductor wafer **1** is diced along the dicing line L into the semiconductor chips each having the device region A.

[0031] With reference to FIG. **1**C, the multi-level interconnection layer **4** in the semiconductor wafer **1** may be formed by a damascene method. The multi-level interconnection layer **4** extends over the device region A and the dicing region B. In some cases, the multi-level interconnection layer **4** may include, but is not limited to, first, second, third and fourth inter-layer insulators **21**, **22**, **23**, and **24**, and first, second and third barrier layers **25**, **26** and **27**, and first-level, second-level, and third-level metal interconnections **28**. In general, at least one of the second and third inter-layer insulators **22** and **23** may include a lower dielectric region that has a dielectric constant of less than 3.9. The lower dielectric region may be positioned at a level where the damascene structure is used. In some cases, the second and third inter-layer insulators **22** and **23** may each have a dielectric constant of less than 3.9. The first barrier layer **25** may be disposed over the first inter-layer insulator **21**. The second inter-layer insulator **22** may be disposed over the first barrier layer **25**. The second barrier layer **26** may be disposed over the second inter-layer insulator **22**. The third inter-layer insulator **23** may be disposed over the second barrier layer **26**. The third barrier layer **27** may be disposed over the third inter-layer insulator **23**. The fourth inter-layer insulator **24** may be disposed over the third barrier layer **27**. The first-level interconnections **28***a* penetrate the first barrier layer **25** and the second inter-layer insulator **22**. The second-level interconnection **28***b* penetrates second barrier layer **26**. The combination of the second-level and third-level interconnections **28***b* and **28***c* penetrates the third inter-layer insulator **23**.

[0032] The first-level interconnections **28***a* are buried in the first and second inter-layer insulators **21** and **22**. The combination of the second-level and third-level interconnections **28***b* and **28***c* is buried in the third inter-layer insulator **23**. The third-level interconnection **28***c* is positioned directly over the second-level interconnection **28***b* so that the third-level interconnection **28***c* contacts with the second-level interconnection **28***b*. The second-level interconnection **28***b* is positioned directly over the first-level interconnection **28***a* so that the second-level interconnection **28***b* contacts with the first-level interconnection **28***a*. The third-level interconnection **28***c* is connected through the second-level interconnection **28***b* to the first-level interconnection **28***a*. A set of the first-level, second-level, and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b* and **28***c* penetrate the second and third inter-layer insulators **22** and **23**. Each of the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b* and **28***c* may include, but is not limited to, an interconnection metal layer **29***a* and a metal barrier layer **29***b*. The metal barrier layer **29***b* covers the side and bottom walls of the interconnection metal layer **29***a* so that the metal barrier layer **29***b* separates the interconnection metal layer **29***a* from the first, second or third inter-layer insulators **21**, **22**, and **23**.

[0033] The first-level interconnections **28***a* are formed in first-level grooves. The first-level grooves penetrate the second inter-layer insulator **22** and the first barrier layer **25** and reach the first inter-layer insulator **21**. The metal barrier layer **29***b* is formed on the inside walls of the first-level grooves. A seed layer is formed on the metal barrier layer **29***b*. The seed layer is not illustrated. The seed layer is used as an electrode in a plating method, to form the interconnection metal layer **29***a* on the seed layer that is disposed on the metal barrier layer **29***b* in the first-level grooves.

[0034] The second-level interconnection **28***b* is formed in a second-level groove. The second-level groove penetrates a lower portion of the second inter-layer insulator **22** and the second barrier layer **26** and reach the first-level interconnection **28***a*. The metal barrier layer **29***b* is formed on the inside walls of the second-level groove. A seed layer is formed on the metal barrier layer **29***b*. The seed layer is not illustrated. The seed layer is used as an electrode in a plating method, to form the interconnection metal layer **29***a* on the seed layer that is disposed on the metal barrier layer **29***b* in the second-level groove.

[0035] The third-level interconnection **28***c* is formed in a third-level groove. The third-level groove penetrates an upper portion of the second inter-layer insulator **22** and reach the second-level interconnection **28***b*. The third-level groove is wider than the second-level groove. The metal barrier layer **29***b* is formed on the inside walls of the third-level groove. A seed layer is formed on the metal barrier layer **29***b*. The seed layer is not illustrated. The seed layer is used as an electrode in a plating method, to form the interconnection metal layer **29***a* on the seed layer that is disposed on the metal barrier layer **29***b* in the third-level groove.

[0036] Thus, the first-level, second-level, and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c* can be formed by the damascene method as described above.

[0037] In some cases, the second and third inter-layer insulators **22** and **23** may each be realized by, but not limited to, a low dielectric film that has a dielectric constant of less than 3.9. The low dielectric film may be made of, but not limited to, SiCO. The first, second and third barrier layers **25**, **26**, and **27** may preferably prevent diffusion of metal atoms from the interconnection metal layer **29***a*. In some cases, the first, second and third barrier layers **25**, **26**, and **27** may have a dielectric constant of not greater than 5.5. The first, second and third barrier layers **25**, **26**, and **27** may be made of, but not limited to, SiCN. The metal barrier layer **29***b* may preferably prevent diffusion of metal atoms from the interconnection metal layer **29***a*. In some cases, the metal barrier layer **29***b* may be made of, but not limited to, Ta. The seed layer may preferably be made of the same material as the interconnection metal layer **29***a*. The interconnection metal layer **29***a* may preferably be made of a highly conductive material. In some cases, the interconnection metal layer **29***a* and the seed layer may be made of, but not limited to, Cu.

[0038] A metal layer **31** may be disposed over the fourth inter-layer insulator **24**. The metal layer **31** extends in the device region A. The metal layer **31** may perform as a bonding pad and a test terminal. In some cases, the metal layer **31** may preferably be made of a metal that is highly resistive to wet etching as compared to the interconnections **28**. The metal layer **31** may be made of, but not limited to, aluminum which is highly resistive to an etchant of a nitric acid.

[0039] A contact plug **32** penetrates the fourth inter-layer insulator **24** and the third barrier layer **27**. The contact plug **32** reaches the third-level interconnection **28***c*. The contact plug **32** connects the metal layer **31** and the third-level interconnection **28***c*. Namely, the metal layer **31** performing as a bonding pad and a test terminal is electrically connected through the contact plug **32** to the multi-level interconnections **28**. The contact plug **32** performs as a metal interconnection.

[0040] A passivation film **33** may be disposed over the fourth inter-layer insulator **24** and the metal layer **31**. The passivation film **33** may have an opening **33***a* which is positioned directly over the metal layer **31**, so as to allow the metal layer **31** to perform as a bonding pad and a test terminal.

[0041] With reference to FIG. **1**C, a cracking stopper groove **41** may be disposed in the dicing region B of the multi-level interconnection layer **4**. The cracking stopper groove **41** can perform as a cracking stopper. In some cases, the cracking stopper groove **41** can be formed by removing multi-level interconnections **28** and a contact plug **32** in the dicing region B of the multi-level interconnection layer **4**. In plan view, the cracking stopper groove **41** may surround each device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** may extend along the circumference of each device region A. The dicing line L may surround the cracking stopper groove **41** that surround each device region A. The dicing line L may extend along the circumference of the cracking stopper groove **41** that extend along the circumference of each device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** may extend inside the dicing line L and outside each device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** may extend between the dicing line L and each device region A. In vertical view, the cracking stopper groove **41** penetrates the fourth inter-layer insulator **24**, the third barrier layer **27**, the third inter-layer insulator **23**, the second barrier layer **26**, the second inter-layer insulator **22**, and the first barrier layer **25**, and reaches the first inter-layer insulator **21**.

[0042] When the semiconductor wafer **1** may be diced by a dicing saw along the dicing line L, it is possible that any crack is caused at the dicing line L in the multi-level interconnection layer **4**, and/or that any peeling is caused at the dicing line L between the first, second, third and fourth inter-layer insulators **21**, **22**, **23**, and **24** and the first, second and third barrier layers **25**, **26**, and **27**. The crack and/or the peeling may propagate in horizontal directions that are parallel to the surface of the semiconductor substrate **2**. The propagation of the crack and/or the peeling can be terminated by the cracking stopper groove **41**. Namely, the cracking stopper groove **41** stops further propagation of the rack and/or the peeling to each device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** can protect each device region A from the crack and/or the peeling.

[0043] When the cracking stopper groove **41** is formed by removing the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the dicing region B of the multi-level interconnection layer **4**, the cracking stopper groove **41** may have a width that is substantially the same as the widths of the multi-level interconnections **28** in the dicing region B. In some cases, the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the dicing region B are formed in the common processes to the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the device region A. In this case, the position of the cracking stopper groove **41** in the dicing region B is determined at the same process for forming the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the device region A. Usually, there appears to be risen no problem of alignment margin between the groove **41** in the dicing region B and the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the device region A.

[Process of Forming Semiconductor Wafer]

[0044] A method of forming a semiconductor wafer **1** of FIGS. **1**A, **1**B, and **1**C will be described with reference to FIGS. **2**-**9**. The method of forming the semiconductor wafer **1** of FIGS. **1**A, **1**B, and **1**C may generally include, but is not limited to, a process for forming multi-level interconnection layers, a process for forming an electrode layer, a process for forming a cracking stopper groove, and a process for forming a passivation film.

(Process for Forming Multi-Level Interconnection Layers)

[0045] The process for forming multi-level interconnection layers may include, but is not limited to, forming, a multi-level interconnection layer **4** over the main face **2***a* of the semiconductor substrate **2**. The multi-level interconnection layer **4** may include, but is not limited to, first, second, third and fourth inter-layer insulators **21**, **22**, **23**, and **24**, and first, second and third barrier layers **25**, **26** and **27**, and first-level, second-level, and third-level metal interconnections **28**. In general, at least one of the second and third inter-layer insulators **22** and **23** may include a lower dielectric region that has a dielectric constant of less than 3.9. In some cases, the second and third inter-layer insulators **22** and **23** may each have a dielectric constant of less than 3.9. The multi-level interconnection layer **4** can be formed over the main face **2***a* of the semiconductor substrate **2** by the damascene method.

[0046] With reference again to FIG. **1**B, the semiconductor substrate **2** having the device region A and the dicing region B is prepared. After the device layer **3** is formed on the main face **2***a* of the semiconductor substrate **2**, the multi-level interconnection layer **4** is formed on the device layer **3**.

[0047] With reference to FIG. **2**, a first inter-layer insulator **21** is formed over the device layer **3** that is formed over the main face **2***a* of the semiconductor substrate **2**. A first barrier layer **25** is formed over the first inter-layer insulator **21**. A second inter-layer insulator **22** is formed over the first barrier layer **25**. The second inter-layer insulator **22** has a dielectric constant of less than 3.9. Grooves **21***a* are formed which penetrate the second inter-layer insulator **22** and the first barrier layer **25** and reaches the first inter-layer insulator **21**. One of the grooves **21***a* is positioned in the dicing region B, and the remainder three grooves **21***a* are positioned in the device region A. A metal barrier layer **29***b* is formed, which covers the side and bottom walls of each groove **21***a*. A seed layer is formed on the metal barrier layer **29***b*. The seed layer is not illustrated. A plating process is carried out by applying a current to the seed layer, thereby forming an interconnection metal layer **29***a* on the metal barrier layer **29***b*. A chemical mechanical polishing process is carried out to planarize the interconnection metal layer **29***a*, thereby forming first-level interconnections **28***a* in the grooves **21***a*.

[0048] A second barrier layer **26** is formed over the second inter-layer insulator **22**. A third inter-layer insulator **23** is formed over the second barrier layer **26**. The third inter-layer insulator **23** has a dielectric constant of less than 3.9. Grooves **23***a* are formed which penetrate the third inter-layer insulator **23** and the second barrier layer **26**. One of the grooves **23***a* is positioned in the dicing region B, and the remainder groove **23***a* is positioned in the device region A.

[0049] A metal barrier layer **29***b* is formed, which covers the side and bottom walls of each groove **23***a*. A seed layer is formed on the metal barrier layer **29***b*. The seed layer is not illustrated. A plating process is carried out by applying a current to the seed layer, thereby forming an interconnection metal layer **29***a* on the metal barrier layer **29***b*. A chemical mechanical polishing process is carried out to planarize the interconnection metal layer **29***a*, thereby forming second-

level and third-level interconnections **28***b* and **28***c* in the grooves **23***a*. The second-level interconnections **28***b* extend through the deeper portions of the grooves **23***a*. The third-level interconnections **28***b* extend through the shallower portions of the grooves **23***a*. The third-level interconnections **28***b* are positioned above the second-level interconnections **28***b*. The third-level interconnections **28***b* contact with the second-level interconnections **28***b*. One of the second-level interconnections **28***b* in the device region A is positioned over one of the first-level interconnections **28***a* in the device region A. One of the second-level interconnections **28***b* in the device region A contacts with one of the first-level interconnections **28***a* in the device region A. The remainder one of the second-level interconnections **28***b* in the dicing region B is positioned over the first-level interconnections **28***a* in the dicing region B. The remainder one of the second-level interconnections **28***b* in the dicing region B contacts with the first-level interconnections **28***a* in the dicing region B.

[0050] A set of the first-level, second-level, and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b* and **28***c* penetrate the third inter-layer insulator **23**, the second barrier layer **26**, the second inter-layer insulator **22** and the first barrier layer **25** and reaches the first inter-layer insulator **21**. The set of the first-level, second-level, and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b* and **28***c* constitutes the interconnections **28** that penetrate the first, second, third and fourth inter-layer insulators **21**, **22**, **23**, and **24**.

[0051] The set of the first-level, second-level, and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b* and **28***c* is formed in each of the device region A and the dicing region B. In plan view, the set of the first-level, second-level, and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b* and **28***c* in the dicing region B surrounds the set of the first-level, second-level, and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b* and **28***c* in the device region A. In plan view, the set of the first-level, second-level, and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b* and **28***c* in the dicing region B is positioned inside the dicing line L and outside the set of the first-level, second-level, and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b* and **28***c* in the device region A.

[0052] With reference to FIG. **3**, a third barrier layer **27** is formed over the third inter-layer insulator **23** and the interconnections **28**. A fourth inter-layer insulator **24** is formed over the third barrier layer **27**. The multi-level interconnection layer **4** extends over the device region A and the dicing region B.

(Process for Forming Electrode Layer)

[0053] The process for forming an electrode layer may include, but is not limited to, a process for forming an electrode layer **31** that extends over the multi-level interconnection layer **4** in the device region A, wherein the electrode layer **31** is connected through a contact plug **32** to the interconnections **28** in the multi-level interconnection layer **4**. The electrode layer **31** can perform as a bonding pad and a test terminal.

[0054] With reference to FIG. **4**, an etching process is carried out using a resist mask to form penetrating holes **24***a*, which penetrate the fourth inter-layer insulator **24** and the third barrier layer **27**, so that the penetrating holes **24***a* reach the third-level interconnections **28***c*. The penetrating holes **24***a* are provided in the device region A and the dicing region B. The penetrating hole **24***a* in the device region A reaches the third-level interconnection **28***c* in the device region A. The penetrating hole **24***a* in the dicing region B reaches the third-level interconnection **28***c* in the dicing region B.

[0055] With reference to FIG. **5**, an electrode film **31**A and contact plugs **32** are formed by an evaporation method or a sputtering method. The electrode film **31**A extends over the fourth inter-layer insulator **24**, while the contact plugs **32** are formed in the penetrating holes **24***a*. The contact plugs **32** contact with the third-level interconnections **28***c* in the device region A and the dicing region B. The electrode film **31**A and the contact plugs **32** may be made of, but are not limited to, Al. The electrode film **31**A is electrically connected through the contact plugs **32** to the third-level interconnections **28***c* in the device region A and the dicing region B. A mask layer M is selectively formed, which extends over the electrode film **31**A but in the device region A. It is optional that an adhesive layer TiN may be formed between the electrode film **31**A and the fourth inter-layer insulator **24**.

[0056] With reference to FIG. **6**, an anisotropic etching process is carried out using the mask layer M that covers the device region A, so as to selectively etch the electrode film **31**A and the contact plug **32** in the dicing region B, while leaving the electrode film **31**A in the device region A. As a result of the anisotropic etching process, an electrode layer **31** is selectively formed over the fourth inter-layer insulator **24**, wherein the electrode layer **31** extends over the device region A, without extending over the dicing region B. Namely, the electrode film **31**A and the contact plug **32** in the dicing region B are removed, so that the penetrating hole **24***a* is again made in the dicing region B, and the third-level interconnection **28***c* in the dicing region B is exposed.

[0057] With reference to FIG. **7**, the mask layer M is removed from the surface of the electrode layer **31**.

(Process for Forming Cracking Stopper Groove)

[0058] With reference to FIG. **8**, a cracking stopper groove **41** is formed in the dicing region B by removing the contact plug **32** and the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c* in the dicing region B. Removal of the contact plug **32** and the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c* in the dicing region B to form a cracking stopper groove **41** in the dicing region B can be carried out by, but not limited to, carrying out an etching process using the electrode layer **31** as a mask.

[0059] The etching process can be realized by a wet etching process using an nitric acid as an etchant. The etchant can be selected from chemicals that dissolve the materials of the contact plug **32** and the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c*, without dissolving the electrode layer **31**. Typically, the electrode layer **31** may be made of Al, while the contact plug **32** and the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c* may be made of Cu. In this case, the nitric acid can be used as an etchant for wet etching process. The nitric acid dissolves Cu, while the nitric acid does not dissolve Al, wherein the surface of Al becomes a passive state that can not be dissolved by the nitric acid. The wet etching process is carried out using the nitric acid as an etchant and using the electrode layer **31** as a mask, so that the surface of the electrode layer **31** of Al becomes passive state and the electrode layer **31** is not etched by the nitric acid, while the contact plug **32** and the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c* of Cu in the dicing region B are dissolved and removed by the nitric acid, thereby forming the

cracking stopper groove **41** in the dicing region B. In plan view, the cracking stopper groove **41** may surround each device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** may extend along the circumference of each device region A. The dicing line L may surround the cracking stopper groove **41** that surround each device region A. The dicing line L may extend along the circumference of the cracking stopper groove **41** that extend along the circumference of each device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** may extend inside the dicing line L and outside each device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** may extend between the dicing line L and each device region A. In vertical view, the cracking stopper groove **41** penetrates the fourth inter-layer insulator **24**, the third barrier layer **27**, the third inter-layer insulator **23**, the second barrier layer **26**, the second inter-layer insulator **22**, and the first barrier layer **25**, and reaches the first inter-layer insulator **21**. The cracking stopper groove **41** may perform as a cracking stopper.

[0060] In the above-described wet etching process, the electrode layer **31** covers the multi-level interconnection layer **4** in the device region A. The electrode layer **31** protects the multi-level interconnection layer **4** in the device region A from the etchant of nitric acid. Namely, the electrode layer **31** prevents the etchant of nitric acid from being infiltrated into the multi-level interconnection layer **4**. The electrode layer **31** prevents the etchant of nitric acid from etching the contact plug **32** and the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c* in the device region A.

[0061] It is optional that the adhesive layer of TiN may be interposed between the electrode layer **31** and the fourth inter-layer insulator **24**. The dissolution rate of TiN to the nitric acid is not greater than about 1 nm/sec. The adhesive layer of TiN also protects the multi-level interconnection layer **4** in the device region A from the etchant of nitric acid. Namely, the adhesive layer of TiN prevents the etchant of nitric acid from being infiltrated into the multi-level interconnection layer **4**. The adhesive layer of TiN prevents the etchant of nitric acid from etching the contact plug **32** and the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c* in the device region A. The combination of the adhesive layer of TiN with the electrode layer **31** prevents the etchant of nitric acid from etching the contact plug **32** and the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c* in the device region A.

(Process for Forming Passivation Film)

[0062] With reference to FIG. **9**, a passivation film **33** is selectively formed on the surface and side walls of the electrode layer **31**. The passivation film **33** may be made of polyimide or silicon oxynitride. An opening **33***a* is formed in the passivation film **33**. The opening **33***a* is positioned directly over the metal layer **31**, so as to allow the metal layer **31** to perform as a bonding pad and a test terminal. As a result, the semiconductor wafer **1** is obtained.

[Process of Dicing Semiconductor Wafer]

[0063] With reference to FIG. **10**, a dicing saw D is positioned on the dicing line L of the semiconductor wafer **1**. The dicing saw D cuts the semiconductor wafer **1** along the dicing line L. The dicing saw D moves down relative to the semiconductor wafer **1** along the dicing line L, so that the dicing saw D cuts into the semiconductor wafer **1** along the dicing line L, while cracks K and/or peeling H may often be caused at the dicing line L as shown in FIG. **10**. The cracks K may often be caused in the fourth, third, and second inter-layer insulators **24**, **23**, and **22**. The peeling H may often be caused at the interface between the fourth inter-layer insulator **24** and the third barrier layer **27**. The peeling H may also be caused at the interface between the third barrier layer **27** and the third inter-layer insulator **23**. The peeling H may also be caused at the interface between the third inter-layer insulator **23** and the second barrier layer **26**. The peeling H may also be caused at the interface between the second barrier layer **26** and the second inter-layer insulator **22**. The peeling H may also be caused at the interface between the second inter-layer insulator **22** and the first barrier layer **25**. The peeling H may also be caused at the interface between the first barrier layer **25** and the first inter-layer insulator **21**.

[0064] The cracks K will propagate through the fourth, third, and second inter-layer insulators **24**, **23**, and **22** in the horizontal direction mainly. The propagation of crack K from the dicing line L will, however, be terminated by the cracking stopper groove **41**. No further propagation of the crack K beyond the cracking stopper groove **41** toward the device region A is caused. The cracking stopper groove **41** prevents the cracks K to propagate into the device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** protects the device region A from the propagation of the cracks K.

[0065] The peeling H will propagate through the interfaces between the fourth, third, and second inter-layer insulators **24**, **23**, and **22** and the third, second, and first barrier layers **27**, **26**, and **25** in the horizontal direction. The propagation of peeling H from the dicing line L will, however, be terminated by the cracking stopper groove **41**. No further propagation of the peeling H beyond the cracking stopper groove **41** toward the device region A is caused. The cracking stopper groove **41** prevents the peeling H to propagate into the device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** protects the device region A from the propagation of the peeling H.

[0066] The electrode layer **31** is distanced from the dicing line L. Thus, the dicing process does not provide any damage to the electrode layer **31** or does not cut or remove the electrode layer **31**, thereby allowing the electrode layer **31** to perform as the test terminal of the semiconductor chip that has been diced from the semiconductor wafer **1**.

[0067] As described above, the cracking stopper groove **41** can be formed by removing the contact plug **32** and the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c* in the dicing region B. Thus, the cracking stopper groove **41** will have substantially the same width as the widths of the contact plug **32** and the first-level, second-level and third-level interconnections **28***a*, **28***b*, and **28***c* in the dicing region B. Providing the cracking stopper groove **41** will not reduce the effective area of the device region A, and will prevent reduction of the number of semiconductor chips obtained from the single semiconductor wafer **1**.

[0068] As described above, the multi-level interconnections **28** in the device region A are covered by the electrode layer **31**. The electrode layer **31** protects the multi-level interconnections **28** in the device region A from being etched by the etching process. The electrode layer **31** performs as a protective layer that protects the multi-level interconnections **28** in the device region A from being etched by the etching process. The electrode layer **31** performs as a bonding pad and a test terminal after the semiconductor chip has been diced from the semiconductor wafer.

[0069] The dicing saw D cuts into the semiconductor wafer **1** along the dicing line L, while cracks K and/or peeling H may often be caused at the dicing line L as shown in FIG. **10**. The cracks K will propagate through the fourth, third, and second inter-layer insulators **24**, **23**, and **22** in the horizontal direction mainly. The cracking stopper groove **41** stops or terminates any further propagation of crack K toward the device region A, thereby causing no further propagation of the crack K beyond the cracking stopper groove **41** toward the device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** prevents the cracks K from propagating into the device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** protects the device region A from the propagation of the cracks K. The peeling H will propagate through the interfaces between the fourth, third, and second inter-layer insulators **24**, **23**, and **22** and the third, second, and first barrier layers **27**, **26**, and **25** in the horizontal direction. The cracking stopper groove **41** stops or terminates any further propagation of peeling H from the dicing line L, thereby causing no further propagation of the peeling H beyond the cracking stopper groove **41** toward the device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** prevents the peeling H from propagating into the device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** protects the device region A from the propagation of the peeling H. Prevention of any crack or peeling does not deteriorate the moisture-resistance or water-resistance.

[0070] In plan view, the cracking stopper groove **41** surrounds the device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** extends along the circumference of the device region A. The dicing line L surrounds the cracking stopper groove **41** that surrounds the device region A. The dicing line L extends along the circumference of the cracking stopper groove **41** that extend along the circumference of each device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** extends inside the dicing line L and outside the device region A. The cracking stopper groove **41** extends between the dicing line L and each device region A. In vertical view, the cracking stopper groove **41** penetrates the fourth inter-layer insulator **24**, the third barrier layer **27**, the third inter-layer insulator **23**, the second barrier layer **26**, the second inter-layer insulator **22**, and the first barrier layer **25**, and reaches the first inter-layer insulator **21**. The cracking stopper groove **41** can stop or terminate the propagation of crack and/or peeling that is caused at the dicing line L by the dicing saw D.

[0071] The cracking stopper groove **41** can be formed by removing the contact plug **32** and the multi-level interconnections **28** in the dicing region B. Thus, the cracking stopper groove **41** will have substantially the same width as the widths of the contact plug **32** and the multi-level interconnections **28** in the dicing region B. Providing the cracking stopper groove **41** will not reduce the effective area of the device region A, and will prevent reduction of the number of semiconductor chips obtained from the single semiconductor wafer **1**. The multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the dicing region B are formed in the common processes to the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the device region A. In this case, the position of the cracking stopper groove **41** in the dicing region B is determined at the same process for forming the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the device region A. Usually, there appears to be risen no problem of alignment margin between the groove **41** in the dicing region B and the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the device region A.

[0072] The electrode layer **31** is distanced from the dicing line L. Thus, the dicing process does not provide any damage to the electrode layer **31** or does not cut or remove the electrode layer **31**, thereby allowing the electrode layer **31** to perform as the test terminal of the semiconductor chip that has been diced from the semiconductor wafer **1**.

[0073] The electrode layer **31** is used as a mask to etch the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the dicing region B without carrying out any additional process for providing an additional mask. The process for forming the semiconductor wafer is simplified.

[0074] The multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the dicing region B is etched, while the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the device region A is protected by the electrode layer **31**.

[0075] The position of the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the dicing region B is flexible as long as the position of the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the dicing region B is in the dicing region B, or outside the device region A and inside the dicing line L. This may keep high flexibility of layout of interconnections.

[0076] In some cases, the electrode layer **31** is made of Al, and the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** are made of Cu, and an etchant of nitric acid is used to carry out a wet etching process, so that the etchant of nitric acid removes the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** of Cu, without etching the electrode layer **31** of Al. This allows that the cracking stopper groove **41** is formed, while the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plug **32** in the device region A are protected by the electrode layer **31**.

[0077] Instead of the damascene method, the multi-level interconnections **28** and the contact plugs **32** may be formed by a chemical vapor deposition method or a sputtering method.

[0078] As used herein, the following directional terms "forward, rearward, above, downward, vertical, horizontal, below, and transverse" as well as any other similar directional terms refer to those directions of an apparatus equipped with the present invention. Accordingly, these terms, as utilized to describe the present invention should be interpreted relative to an apparatus equipped with the present invention.

[0079] The terms of degree such as "substantially," "about," and "approximately" as used herein mean a reasonable amount of deviation of the modified term such that the end result is not significantly changed. For example, these terms can be construed as including a deviation of at least ±5 percents of the modified term if this deviation would not negate the meaning of the word it modifies.

[0080] It is apparent that the present invention is not limited to the above embodiments, but may be modified and changed without departing from the scope and spirit of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A semiconductor device, comprising:

a semiconductor substrate having a main face, the semiconductor device having a device region and a dicing line;

a stack of insulating layers over the semiconductor substrate;

a multi-level interconnection structure in the stack of insulating layers; and

a passivation film covering the semiconductor substrate, the passivation film having an opening,

wherein the stack of insulating layers has a groove which extends from the opening and penetrates at least one of the insulating layers, the groove is positioned between the device region and the dicing line, and the groove is narrower in width than the opening.

2. The semiconductor device according to claim **1**, wherein the groove surrounds the device region.

3. The semiconductor device according to claim **1**, wherein the multi-level interconnection structure has a damascene structure.

4. The semiconductor device according to claim **1**, wherein the groove comprises a tapered portion.

5. The semiconductor device according to claim **1**, wherein at least a part of the groove is positioned in a region free of an interconnection covered by the passivation film.

6. The semiconductor device according to claim **1**, wherein at least one of the insulating layers is a Low-k film.

7. The semiconductor device according to claim **1**, wherein the groove is positioned in a dicing region of the semiconductor substrate.

8. The semiconductor device according to claim **1**, further comprising an insulating film between the insulating layers, the insulating film being different in material from the insulating layers.

9. The semiconductor device according to claim **8**, wherein the groove penetrates the insulating film.

10. A semiconductor device, comprising:

a semiconductor substrate having a main face, the semiconductor substrate having a device region and a dicing line;

a stack of insulating layers over the semiconductor substrate; and

a multi-level interconnection structure in the stack of insulating layers, the multi-level interconnection structure having an uppermost interconnection which has an opening,

wherein the stack of insulating layers has a groove which extends from the opening and penetrates at least one of the insulating layers, the groove is positioned between the device region and the dicing line, and the groove is narrower in width than the opening.

11. The semiconductor device according to claim **10**, wherein the groove surrounds the device region.

12. The semiconductor device according to claim **10**, wherein the multi-level interconnection structure has a damascene structure.

13. The semiconductor device according to claim **10**, wherein the groove comprises a tapered portion.

14. The semiconductor device according to claim **10**, wherein at least one of the insulating layers is a Low-k film.

15. The semiconductor device according to claim **10**, wherein the groove is positioned in a dicing region of the semiconductor substrate.

16. The semiconductor device according to claim **10**, further comprising an insulating film between the insulating layers, the insulating film being different in material from the insulating layers.

17. The semiconductor device according to claim **16**, wherein the groove penetrates the insulating film.

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